

*A Lady's
Christmas Waltz*

BRIDGET BARTON

A Lady's Christmas Waltz

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

BRIDGET BARTON

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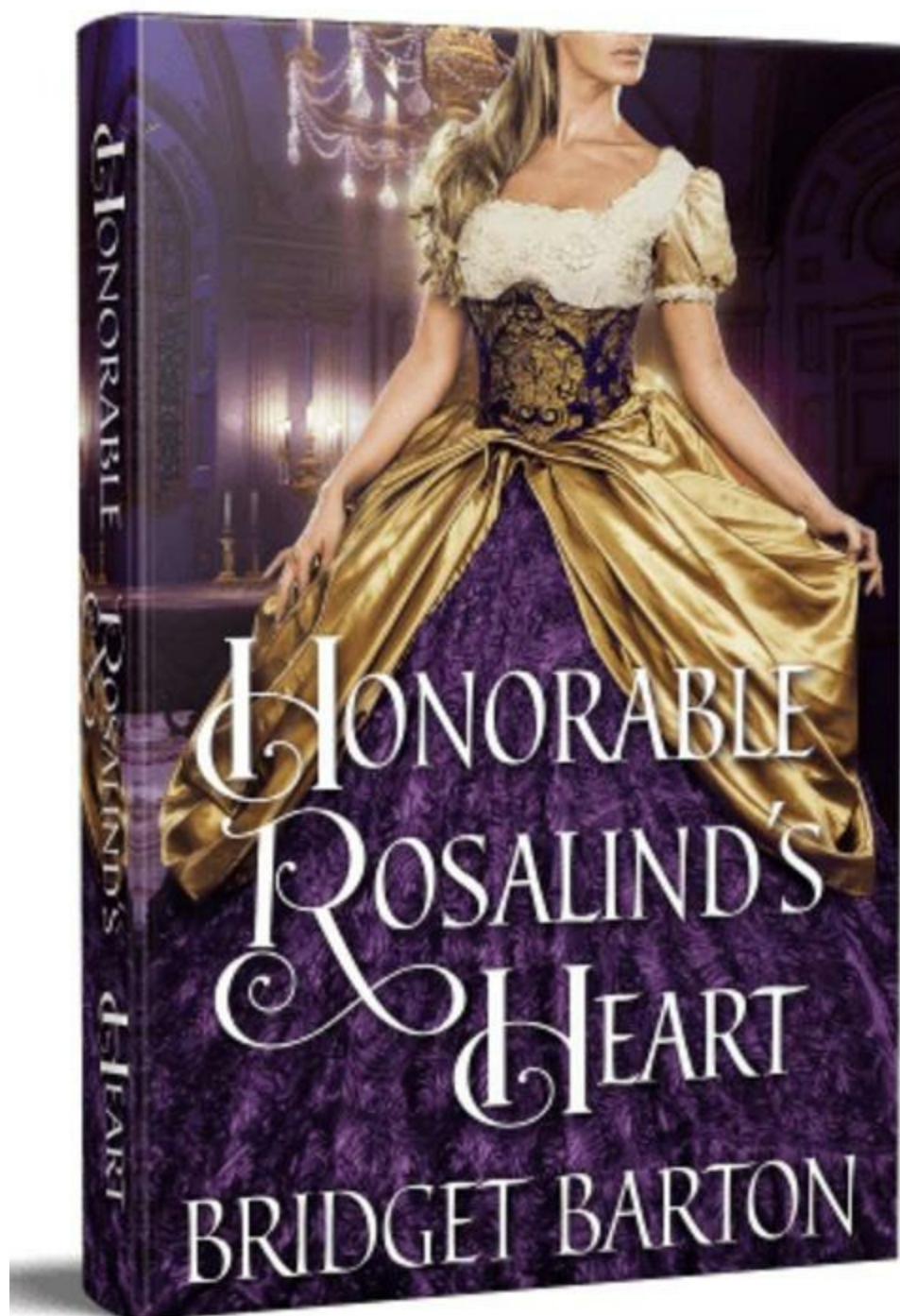
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HONORABLE ROSALIND'S HEART
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HONORABLE
ROSALIND'S
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A Lady's Christmas Waltz

Introduction

Juliana Beaumont's world is turned upside down when a scandalous encounter with her childhood nemesis, Nathaniel, thrusts her into an unexpected marriage with him. Forced to play the role of the perfect wife to salvage her reputation, Juliana deeply grapples with the nightmare of pretending affection for a man she's always detested. As if that wasn't enough, the looming threat of a former suitor adds layers of intrigue to Juliana's struggle to reconcile duty with the unexpected stirrings of her heart.

Can she make the frostiness between them melt, revealing a deeper connection than either imagined?

Nathaniel Harwood, a dashing bachelor unprepared for matrimonial ties, reluctantly embraces the role of dutiful spouse to the spirited Juliana. Beneath the surface of their forced companionship lies a history of shared mischief and stolen glances, mingled with Nate's scars from a past heartbreak. As his façade crumbles, Nate is drawn to Juliana in ways he never anticipated. The dance of societal expectations, coupled with lingering doubts, propels Nate to confront his fears and unveil the emotions hidden beneath the surface.

Can he navigate the complexities of love amidst jealousy and societal gossip, or will he let the past dictate his future?

Together, Juliana and Nate embark on an eventful journey challenging the constraints placed upon them. As their hearts entwine amidst the grandeur of regency balls, moonlit gardens, and wintry escapades, they must confront their shared history. Can they defy convention, and admit that their marriage may be destined for more than mere duty? Or will societal gossip and former flames keep them trapped in a loveless charade?

Chapter 1

Juliana tapped at the door, entering when permitted to. She smiled when she saw the buxom middle-aged woman sitting at her dresser, her maid putting her hair up with what looked like millions of tiny pins.

“Juliana, dear!” The older woman beamed when she saw Juliana in the mirror. Then she reached toward the reflection. “Come here, and let’s have a look at that gorgeous dress of yours. I hope it fits you well.”

“It’s perfect, Auntie.” Juliana entered the room and did a twirl. “Although it feels odd that you’re giving me a present when it’s your birthday. You’re supposed to get the gifts, not me.”

Aunt Betsy scoffed.

“Nonsense! I’m allowed to spoil my niece.” Waving away her maid, she spun smartly on the stool so she could see Juliana better. “Come here, darling. You look absolutely gorgeous.”

Juliana couldn’t help but blush at that. Even though she was complimented by everyone who came into contact with her, hearing it from her aunt made her feel self-conscious and pleased at the same time. There was something about the way Aunt Betsy spoke that said she talked with a lot of honesty.

She was one of those people who said what was on her mind, even if it did end up with her sounding eccentric. It was what her husband found attractive, although the rest of the *ton* couldn’t say the same.

Not that Aunt Betsy cared. She was content with being who she was. Her

husband of twenty-five years had been fine with it, and that was what mattered. Unfortunately, he had passed away more than ten years ago, leaving Aunt Betsy a widow, living with her older brother and his family. But Juliana and her brother hadn't minded. They adored their aunt.

And tonight they were going to celebrate her sixtieth birthday with a party. Her brother, the Duke of Burwood, had been insistent on it.

“Do another twirl for me, dear,” Aunt Betsy said, making a twirling motion with her finger. “Does it fit well enough? I only had your sizes from the last time you went to get yourself fitted, and that was more than a year ago.”

“It fits perfectly fine.” Juliana giggled as she put a hand to her stomach. “Just as long as I don't eat too much, though.”

“Oh, dear, we're going to need to let it out...”

“No, it's fine. I eat too much as it is, so it should be an incentive not to hover by the food table.”

Aunt Betsy laughed. She had an unashamed booming laugh that felt warm and comforting at the same time. It always made Juliana smile.

“There's nothing wrong with having a good time. Although there is a fine line between making sure you have enough food in your belly and gluttony. And people always tip over to the wrong side of said line.” She patted Juliana's hand. “You would never do that, dear. I know you have better self-control than that. You don't want to end up like me.”

“Aunt Betsy! You look wonderful!”

“I’m glad you think so.” Aunt Betsy looked up at her maid before turning back to the mirror. “Let’s finish my hair, Theresa. I want to be ready for when our guests are here. It won’t do for me to still be up here when the party starts.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Juliana drew up a chair and settled beside her aunt as Theresa went back to pinning the older woman’s hair up, her deft fingers moving across the snow-white hair to keep it in place. It looked like she was working her magic. Aunt Betsy smiled.

“I’m so glad that Edward managed to get home in time for this. He said in his letters that he wouldn’t be able to get here, given that he was in another country...Latvia, did he say?”

“I think it was Estonia. He was certainly exploring the far countries on the other side of Europe, so he more than likely went to Latvia as well.”

“They certainly sound exotic, especially in Edward’s letters.” Aunt Betsy sighed. “I’ve thought about traveling, but there was so much turmoil in the surrounding countries that it scared me enough to stay in this country.”

Juliana laughed.

“I know what you mean. There seems to be a war going on every other year. You relax and recover from one war, only for another to jump up. It’s surprising how everyone doesn’t seem to like peace, and they need a war to keep themselves busy.”

Theresa giggled.

“You’re making each individual country sound like a group of children having a tantrum when they aren’t getting the attention they want.”

Aunt Betsy’s booming laugh filled the room again.

“That sounds about right. I do like that comparison.”

So did Juliana. Theresa certainly had a way with words. Her sense of humor fitted well with her mistress’, and they were more like sisters than mistress and maid. It wasn’t conventional, but Aunt Betsy had never been conventional in her life.

Juliana didn’t think she would be able to do the same. She was not brave enough to do that. So she admired her aunt for being relaxed and content with who she was.

“Anyway, I’m pleased that you and Edward are both here. I’m sure your father is delighted to have you two in the same house again.” Aunt Betsy paused. “It has been almost four years since the two of you were together.”

Juliana felt her good mood flickering a little. Four years. Soon to be five in two months. She kept her smile on her face.

“Things have changed now. And you’ve always been a big part of our lives, Aunt Betsy. Neither of us would miss this for the world.”

“Well, from the amount of gifts Edward brought home for me as a mass birthday gift, I think he was hoping to bring the world to me.”

“He did go a bit overboard, didn’t he?”

“Not that I’m complaining. A lady can never have too many presents.” Aunt Betsy looked at Theresa’s reflection as her maid finished with the pins. “Are we done now, Theresa?”

“Yes, my lady. You’re ready for the party now.”

Theresa stepped back, and Aunt Betsy stood up in one graceful movement. Despite her age, she was still very graceful. And she looked healthy as well. Juliana didn’t think she had ever seen her father’s sister look ill at all. She hoped that she would be able to be as strong and healthy as this when she reached sixty.

Her aunt turned to her and held out a hand.

“Shall we, Lady Juliana?”

Juliana giggled and stood up, allowing Aunt Betsy to twirl her a couple of times. That just resulted in the two of them almost collapsing into a fit of giggles, not noticing that the door to the bedchamber was opening, and a tall, silver-haired man entered the room.

“So, this is how you’re spending your evening,” he said with an amused smile. “You couldn’t wait to go downstairs, could you? Shall I bring the orchestra up here for you, Betsy?”

“Oh, don’t be silly, Richard,” Aunt Betsy laughed, approaching her brother and swatting his arm. “I’m just sharing a moment with my niece. Doesn’t she look lovely tonight?”

“My daughter always looks lovely.” The Duke of Burwood gave Juliana a warm smile as he looked her up and down. “That’s the dress you gave her,

isn't it? You haven't lost your taste for choosing the right garment, Sister."

Aunt Betsy beamed. Juliana gave her father a curtsy.

"Thank you, kind sir."

Burwood chuckled and gestured toward the door.

"Shall we go? Miss Parker has already arrived, and she's waiting in the foyer for you, Juliana."

Juliana brightened up.

"Lucy is already here?"

"Isn't that what I just said?" Burwood rolled his eyes. "Off you go. I'll escort your aunt at a more sedate pace. She won't be able to keep up with you for too much longer."

"Oh, stuff and nonsense!" Aunt Betsy scoffed. "You have no faith in me. Just because you're already in your sixties and showing your age doesn't mean that I'm going to be like you."

Burwood pretended to look affronted.

"Such rudeness toward your brother!"

"And? What's wrong with that? It's the truth, isn't it?"

Juliana didn't listen to the brother and sister pair squabbling, leaving the room and heading through the halls toward the stairs. She was pleased that Lucy had already arrived. Now they could stand off to the side and watch everyone as they came in.

It was a pastime of theirs, to observe without anyone noticing. Lucy was just an avid watcher as Juliana, and she always provided amusing commentary that would have had more than a few people raising their eyebrows.

When they weren't being watched by anyone else, Lucy was like a younger version of Aunt Betsy. It was probably why she and Juliana got along so well.

As she reached the stairs and headed down, Juliana thought back to her father and how he was with Aunt Betsy. She was glad that he was in good spirits tonight.

It wasn't Aunt Betsy's fault that she had her birthday in the same week that Juliana's mother, the Duchess of Burwood, had passed away, and normally Burwood would be in a low mood that sucked her in, and it took forever for him to get out of.

This time, it seemed to be different, and he was almost like his old self.

The pain wouldn't go away completely, but he seemed to have made his peace with it.

It had been five years since her mother had died, and Juliana felt the pain of it every day. She could think about her mother without crying now, but it had taken a while. Aunt Betsy had stepped in to help out as soon as she heard about it, and Juliana would forever be grateful.

With her father hiding away in his grief and Edward choosing to grieve in his own way by leaving the country and traveling all over Europe, she needed someone in her life.

Aunt Betsy was like a guardian angel. It was natural to celebrate her.

Lucy was at the bottom of the stairs, her black hair curled so much that her hair looked like it was alive whenever she turned her head, the curls bouncing everywhere. She looked up and beamed when she saw Juliana.

“I hope I’m not too early.”

“Of course not!” Juliana reached her and embraced her, not caring that there were people around. Holding up a proper composure, even in front of servants, was hard work. “You’re right on time. I take it you were too excited to wait until the appointed time?”

“Certainly!” Lucy giggled. “Whenever there’s a party of any kind at your house, I have to be the first here.”

Juliana loved that Lucy’s excitement was contagious. She had certainly been a solid friend in the two years since they had met, and Juliana didn’t think she would be able to cope if they grew apart. Lucy was almost like a sister.

“Come on!” Lucy grabbed her hand. “Let’s go and watch the guests as they come in!”

Juliana’s house had been built almost a hundred years earlier and had been

renovated several times over the years. Her favorite part was the terrace that wrapped around the entire house.

A person could go up the sweeping front stairs, walk down one side of the house, around the back and along the other side to get back to the front and never leave the walkway.

Juliana had no idea why anyone would put that onto a house, but she wasn't about to argue. It had enabled her and Edward to spend hours playing outside, chasing each other until they were exhausted.

It also meant that she and Lucy could stand off to one side, just out of sight while not looking like they were sneaking, and watch people come and go. The view from the front, with the very long and straight driveway that went off into the distance, was pretty spectacular as well.

They leaned on the wall and observed the distant shapes of carriages coming up the driveway toward the house. Even though they were still quite a way off, the sound of horses' hooves on the stones reached their ears like ripples on water.

"I think I just missed the rush," Lucy said. "How many people are being invited tonight?"

"I'm not entirely sure, but from what I saw of the invitation list when Aunt Betsy was sorting it out with Father, it was pretty long."

"Much as I love your aunt, I didn't think she would have so many people to invite. She does put people's backs up with the way she talks to others without a care for anything. She has no reservations."

Juliana shrugged.

“It’s true that she’s very outspoken and doesn’t care what others think, but there are still plenty of people who like her. Also,” she lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “there are guests who are coming to keep in Father’s good books. You don’t want to upset a duke, do you? Even when it’s his sister’s birthday.”

Lucy laughed.

“I suppose having a duke for a father has its perks.”

“I’m not sure about that, but that could just be me being biased.”

While it had its advantages, being a duke’s daughter, it did feel like a double-edged sword. Juliana could get all the offers and invitations that she could want, to the point that she didn’t know what to do with them, but it meant that there would be those who would use her to their own advantage to get to her father.

Trying to figure out who her true friends were and who wanted her for something else was a headache.

At least she knew that Lucy was a genuine person.

“Oh, I forgot to hold onto my shawl!” Lucy said suddenly and shivered as a cold gust of wind whipped around them. “It was surprisingly still warm earlier today, and I felt warm when I came inside.”

“That’s probably because this is the first time you’ve slowed down all day,”

Juliana pointed out.

“More than likely.”

Juliana spied one of the footmen coming out of the house and waved to get his attention.

“Can you bring our shawls out to us, Havers? They should be in the closet.”

“Yes, my lady.”

It didn't take long for Havers to return, carrying their winter shawls. Juliana could feel the cold now prickling at her skin and making her shiver as she wrapped hers around her shoulders.

She had been so excited and hurrying around getting ready that she hadn't really noticed that it was getting cold outside. It was the start of December, and it had moments during the day when it felt like late autumn and not the dead of winter.

“Do you think we'll get snow for Christmas?” Lucy asked, bouncing from foot to foot to get warm. Her breath was now showing in the air.

“We get snow every Christmas, Lucy.”

“Not all the time. I seem to remember it was clear of snow a few years ago. I think I was about ten.”

“I'm surprised you can think back that far. I can't remember much from when I was younger.”

Mostly because the memories she did have involved someone Juliana kept trying to forget. Easier said than done when she wasn't allowed to forget about this person, though. If she recalled something of her childhood, it was either ruined by knowing her mother or another particular person was present.

It left her feeling bereft and alone in one instance, and angry in the other.

“Well, it’s going to need to get colder for that to happen.” Lucy puffed her breath into the air and watched it fade away before her eyes. “I hope we get snow. I love a white Christmas.”

“We’ll probably get some in a few days, so you might just get your wish.”

The sound of the carriages getting closer drew their attention, and they leaned on the stone wall again to watch as the first carriage moved around the edge of the driveway and pulled to a stop at the bottom of the steps. Juliana saw the crest on the carriage, and her heart sank.

Oh, God, she had forgotten about him. Why did he have to be present as well? Sure, he was doing business with Burwood, but to be here after what happened...

“That was a big sigh coming from you,” Lucy commented.

“Hmm? Oh.” Juliana hadn’t realized that she had done so. “It’s Lord Hastings. He’s here.”

“Lord Hastings?” Lucy raised an eyebrow. “I thought there was nothing between you two?”

“No, of course not. But Aunt Betsy would have to invite him as he’s a friend and associate of Father’s.” Juliana grimaced. “I wish I had noticed his name on the list. I might have been able to ask my aunt not to invite him, even if it would look like a snub.”

“She might have said the same thing,” Lucy pointed out. “Also, you don’t want any awkwardness between Hastings and your father, do you?”

“What about the awkwardness between myself and him?”

Lucy didn’t have an answer to that except a shrug of her shoulders. Glad that they were vaguely out of sight, Juliana watched as the tall, lean figure of Gilbert Hastings got out of the carriage, looking splendid as usual. He was certainly a well-dressed, albeit flamboyant, man.

Barely giving the footmen a cursory nod, he made his way up the steps, his cane tapping on the stone. Juliana had no idea why he needed a cane when he was very spritely at the age of thirty. Maybe it was a status thing? She had never cared to ask him.

Looking at him now, the man unaware that he was being watched, Juliana wondered how things would be now if they had actually gotten married. Hastings had courted her for a few weeks, just days after meeting, and then he had jumped quickly toward proposing to her.

Juliana had been shocked that he would do this so fast, and the fact he had jumped incredibly quickly from courtship to proposal without giving her time to get used to the first one still left her reeling. His reasoning was that he wanted it to be a Christmas proposal, a perfect present for her.

Juliana didn’t think that way, though, and she didn’t care for the fact he thought they could get married when she barely knew him. He certainly

didn't know her that well if he thought getting proposed to at Christmas by someone she barely knew would be perfect for her.

Much to her father's annoyance, Juliana had turned him down. Burwood had accepted the fact that this union was not going to happen, but Hastings didn't seem to have done the same. The few times they had been made to interact since had been awkward, Hastings showing his bitterness that she had bruised his ego and humiliated him.

If he hadn't done it in front of several people enjoying the Christmas party Burwood threw every year, then he wouldn't have been embarrassed.

Good-looking he may be, overly charming certainly, but there was nothing about him that enticed Juliana. She couldn't marry someone who didn't make her heart race and her spirits lift whenever they entered the room. That was not how she wanted a marriage to go.

Hopefully, she could avoid him this evening, and then she could spend her time having fun with her aunt.

"Juliana," Lucy hissed, nudging her. "You're going to get caught staring at Lord Hastings if you're not careful."

"What? Oh." Juliana tore her gaze away from Hastings and focused on her friend. "Perhaps that's not a good idea."

Lucy shook her head.

"If I'm honest, I don't think the two of you would have worked well. Lord Hastings is too stern for you. A bit too gray, if you know what I mean."

A bit too gray. He was too boring. Juliana knew what Lucy meant by that, and she had to agree with it.

Although from the few interactions she had had with Hastings since, he didn't think the same way.

Chapter 2

“Are you coming, Nate?” Eleanor asked.

Nathaniel looked up from his book. His cousin was standing in the doorway to the library, dressed for the party, one hand on her hip as she regarded him with raised eyebrows. She was probably looking at him and wondering if he was going to head out in what he was wearing.

“To what?”

“To Lady Farley’s birthday party. We were all invited, remember?”

“And I thought I said that I wasn’t going to attend.” Nathaniel pretended to cough. “I’m not feeling very well. Maybe I’m coming down with a cold.”

Eleanor groaned and crossed the room to him.

“Are you really going to do this? How old are you, Nathaniel? You can’t be pretending to be unwell to get out of celebrating someone’s birthday.”

“Well, I can. I’m sure Mother and Father won’t care that I’m unable to attend.”

“Oh, they will care. Lady Farley is a family friend, and she’s a lovely lady. Why wouldn’t you want to come?”

Nathaniel glared at her. He knew that he was being a brat—something he

shouldn't be doing at his age of five-and-twenty—but when it came to that family, he couldn't help it. It just brought back bad memories for him.

“You know why I don't want to go over there, Eleanor. I'm sure I've spent several birthdays over at that house. I could probably walk through the hallways with a blindfold on, I'm that acquainted with the estate.”

Eleanor sighed. She was younger than Nathaniel, only just turning nineteen, but she seemed to behave far older than her years. She seemed to think she could behave like the older sister Nathaniel didn't want. Much as he loved his young cousin, it was really annoying that she kept doing this.

“You need to stop that, Nate.”

“Stop what?”

“Behaving like a sulky child who doesn't care about what others think when you're told to do something. It's not like you were tormented by the family and are suffering from past trauma.”

“No, but it was close enough.” Nathaniel lowered his book to his lap and sat up. “I had to play with the duke's children. Edward was all right, for the most part, but his sister...God, she was annoying.”

Eleanor rolled her eyes to the ceiling.

“God, you're such a pain. Obviously, you two are not going to get along if you clash with each other. But you're grown up now. And you haven't seen her in a long time. Things should have changed.”

Nathaniel doubted it. He still remembered the hours he spent playing with Edward and Juliana when their respective mothers met up and spent time together. The Countess of Haringdale and the Duchess of Burwood had been great friends before the duchess' death, and being neighbors made it easier for the two of them to meet more than Nathaniel would have liked.

He had wanted to stay on the estate and do something more interesting, but Lady Haringdale had wanted him to spend time with children who were closer to his age.

Eleanor had thought it was bizarre that her older cousin was so introverted as a child that he didn't want to talk to anyone close to his age until he was fifteen. She couldn't believe it.

And it had been in the company of Edward Beaumont that Nathaniel spent most of his young days. He wasn't too bad, but Juliana had been a right pain. She just wouldn't stop bothering him, wanting him to join in with some of her games. Nathaniel had wanted to smack her after a while. Once he got his confidence, he was able to tell her to back off in harsher terms, which had shocked her.

The tension between them had never abated, and she was definitely going to be there for her aunt. Nathaniel didn't want to deal with that.

He started when he felt Eleanor swat his head.

"Ouch! What did you do that for?"

"Because you're doing what you did three years ago. You're moping in a corner again."

“I’m not moping!”

Eleanor sighed.

“You’re hiding in a corner with a book, pretending to be unwell to get out of going to a party where you’ve been invited. You’re moping.”

Nathaniel glared at her.

“And you had to smack me around the head to make a point, did you?”

“Well, someone needs to.” Eleanor pursed her lips. “You know that you’re not going to see her there, don’t you?”

Nathaniel stiffened.

“What did you say?”

“That woman you were enamored with. She’s not going to be there. I don’t think she’s remotely associated with the Duke of Burwood.”

Nathaniel gritted his teeth. He did not want to talk, or even think about the woman who had broken his heart years ago. He glowered at his cousin.

“Don’t speak of her, Eleanor. I don’t want to hear it.”

“Well, if she’s not there, and everyone’s grown up and mature, you have no reason to stay at home and behave like a little boy, do you?” Eleanor folded her arms. “So get yourself upstairs and get dressed in what your valet has laid

out for you.”

“Whistler hasn’t laid out anything for me. He knows I’m not going.”

“Your father told him to. Whistler is waiting to assist you.”

Nathaniel was going to have a few words with his valet. He was supposed to take his orders from Nathaniel, not Haringdale. Eleanor snatched the book out of his hands before Nathaniel could react.

“What are you...?”

“Just stop this, Nathaniel. It’s not a good look on you.” She shut the book with a deciding bang, holding it in her arms as she stepped back. “Now get up and get changed. We’re going to be leaving shortly, and we will be late if you don’t hurry up.”

“Don’t say that to me now.” Nathaniel sniggered as he got to his feet. “I might just drag my feet while I’m getting ready.”

“Are you still behaving like this?”

Nathaniel jumped, and Eleanor smirked. In the doorway was the stout figure of the Earl of Haringdale, his bald head glistening in the candlelight. He arched an eyebrow at his son.

“I thought you would be more mature at your age. Five-and-twenty? More like you’re five years old again.”

“I did say that I didn’t really want to go, Father,” Nathaniel reminded him.

“You said it didn’t matter.”

“I said it didn’t matter what you wanted. You were going to be coming with us. There’s a difference.” Haringdale shook his head. “These are family friends of ours, and we’ve been honored with an invitation. The least you can do is come along and make sure your cousin doesn’t get into trouble.”

“Uncle!” Eleanor protested, but Haringdale just gave her a wink before focusing on Nathaniel.

“Now stop behaving like a sulky little boy and get yourself ready. While your mother would like us to be on time, we can afford to be a few minutes late. Just don’t drag your feet as you were thinking of doing. You’re not too old to be treated like a child.”

Nathaniel felt like he was already being scolded like he was ten years old again. Why were they so insistent that he came along with them, anyway? Were they worried that he was going to do something stupid when they were out, and nobody was there to keep a proper eye on him?

Then he remembered what happened three years ago before he was suggested a tour abroad might be best for him, and he could understand why his father was not going to leave him home alone.

Even so, he didn’t like being treated like this.

“It was three years ago, Father,” he protested. “Aren’t you going to let bygones be bygones on that?”

“I may have let it go, but that doesn’t mean I trust you.”

“Did you just say you don’t trust me?”

Haringdale shrugged.

“So? If the roles were reversed, you wouldn’t trust me. Look, just stop talking and whining about going to the Duke of Burwood’s home. Get changed and meet us out the front. If you’re not ready in fifteen minutes, I’ll be dragging you out myself. It will do you good to meet people and talk to someone who isn’t one of us.”

Nathaniel didn’t know about that. He was happy enough to stay at home with a book. It would mean the evening would be quiet. But he could see that his family was not going to leave him to his own devices.

Given what he had done before when they trusted him, it was going to be a while before they allowed that to happen again.

“Here you go, ladies,” Aunt Betsy said as she joined Juliana and Lucy, pressing mugs into their hands. “Hot chocolate for you. That should warm you up in no time.”

“Thank you, Auntie.” Juliana gave the older woman a smile as she cupped her hands around the cup. “But you’re the hostess. You didn’t need to get the drinks specifically for us.”

“Nonsense! I have to look after my guests, so why wouldn’t I do it? Besides,” Aunt Betsy said with a wink, “I need to be sure that you’re going to warm up properly after you decided to stay outside longer than you should have.”

Lucy's smile was sheepish.

"We were out there a bit longer than we should have been, weren't we? I didn't think the weather would drop that fast."

"It's December, dear. It's going to do that." Aunt Betsy gestured at the rest of the room, the other guests also holding mugs of hot chocolate. "That's an advantage of having my birthday in the winter, I suppose. I can choose what people drink, and this certainly beats champagne."

Juliana couldn't argue with that. Her fingers had gotten so stiff with the cold that she doubted that she could have held a glass right now, especially if the drink was cold. Her aunt's choice to have a hot drink instead at her party certainly went down well with everyone.

Sipping her drink, she looked around. Most of the guests had already arrived, milling around and causing the chatter to be louder than it needed to be. It was like everyone wanted to talk over the group next to them, especially with the small orchestra playing at the far end of the room.

Some guests, who were either not as stiff from the cold as others or just wanted to get warm, were dancing. The dances themselves were livelier than normal, although Juliana had a feeling that was deliberate.

Aunt Betsy often had gay get-togethers, anyway, so it was not really a surprise. Maybe once her toes started to get sensation back into them, Juliana would join in herself. She did love to dance.

"By the way, I saw Lord Hastings come in a while ago," Aunt Betsy commented, glancing at Juliana. "He went straight over to your brother as soon as he greeted us."

“He’s talking to Edward?” Juliana felt something prickling at her skin as she looked around. “I was beginning to wonder where he had gone. He said that he planned to enjoy the festivities.”

“Well, he’s enjoying them talking about business with Lord Hastings in a far corner of the house. Goodness only knows where they are now.”

Juliana wasn’t sure how to think about this. Edward had approved of Hastings. He hadn’t been around when Hastings came by to court Juliana, but their father had told him about the development.

Edward had said he couldn’t see a better match for his sister, so when Juliana told him upon his return that she wasn’t married, and she didn’t accept the proposal, her brother had been surprised.

Despite listing out all the reasons that Hastings would be just right for her, none of it rang true. Juliana just knew that it could never have worked.

Much as he was charming, good-looking, and financially secure, there was nothing that made Juliana smile and feel truly happy. She couldn’t have been happy as Lady Hastings, and her father and aunt had slowly come to accept it. While everyone was a little put out that she was twenty years of age and still unmarried, nobody was forcing her into anything.

Not yet, anyway. That could change in the blink of an eye.

“I’m surprised that he’s actually come here, given the fact he was refused by Juliana,” Lucy commented. “That would have made any other gentleman keep away.”

“He is in business with the Duke of Burwood,” Aunt Betsy reminded her.

“Even so, it must be awkward. He could keep business separate from what happened.”

Juliana sighed.

“You’re never going to build more connections if you don’t socialize. Even if it’s at the expense of your own comfort.”

“Whose comfort are you talking about?” Lucy asked. “Yours or his?”

Juliana didn’t answer. She didn’t really want to talk about Hastings. If their paths crossed tonight, she was going to have to be cordial with him. It was difficult to talk to a man who she had turned down publicly and who clearly harbored resentment toward her for it.

But Hastings had to have known that this wouldn’t have gone well for him. Juliana would have preferred a quiet, private moment to be asked for her hand in marriage. She still would have turned him down, but there would have been less humiliation.

Hastings had brought it on himself. There was some sympathy to be had, but Juliana’s had worn thin toward him after the way he behaved toward her.

“Excuse me a moment, girls,” Aunt Betsy said, squeezing Juliana’s hand before moving away. “We have some other guests arriving, and I must go and greet them.”

She walked away, and Lucy turned to look out of the window. The huge bay window in the ballroom looked out onto the driveway, which was now almost full with carriages. Juliana had always wondered why the drivers didn’t take the carriages home and come back later, but then she surmised that perhaps it

was wise to stay, just in case of emergency.

And it gave the drivers a chance to interact with other people themselves, albeit in colder situations.

“Oh, look!” Lucy leaned toward the window. “It’s the Earl of Haringdale.”

Juliana stilled.

“The Earl of Haringdale?”

“And it seems that he’s brought his family with him. Lady Eleanor did say that they would all be attending.”

Juliana blinked at her.

“When did you meet Lady Eleanor?”

“Earlier this week in town. We ended up being at the assembly rooms together, and we passed the time talking in another room while her aunt was listening to a talk from an explorer who had just come back from Africa.” Lucy giggled. “The talk, from what we could hear, was very boring, but the conversation with Lady Eleanor was a lot more interesting.”

Juliana didn’t know what to say to that. She had encountered Lady Eleanor Harwood as well, and she could tell that the young woman was very pleasant, very nice, and if the situation had been different, they could have become friends.

But being friends with her would mean encountering her cousin on a regular

basis. Lord Nathaniel Harwood, the son and heir. And the bane of her existence. Even though he had been traveling around Europe, much like Edward, for the last three years, Juliana had a fear that he would walk into the room.

He had put her back up far too many times. As children, Juliana had wanted to play with him and Edward when they were made to be together when their parents were talking. Their mothers had been close friends, and that bond was still there despite Juliana's mother having passed five years ago.

Juliana had wanted to follow Edward and Harwood everywhere, but they pretty much dismissed her. Then Harwood had told her, in no uncertain terms, how he felt about her when she was ten. That had hurt, and Juliana didn't think she had been as insulted since.

It was too much to think that he would stay at home and not come along. Aunt Betsy, despite Harwood being despicable, was fond of him, and she had wanted to see him since he had returned three months ago. Which meant they would have to interact again. After three years of respite from the man, Juliana had to see him once more.

Why couldn't he stay in Europe and not come back? Then Juliana wouldn't feel so small and unwelcome whenever she and Harwood were in the same room. He had been so cold to her in the last ten years, sneering at her whenever they had to verbally interact.

Their fathers thought it was stupid that they couldn't get along, but they couldn't do anything about it; both sides were too stubborn.

There had only been one moment when that had not been present, but it had been brief, and Juliana doubted that it would happen again.

“Are you going to be all right with it?” Lucy asked, peering at her friend. “I know you and Lord Harwood don’t get along...”

“I’m sure I can manage for Aunt Betsy’s sake for a couple of hours.” Juliana hoped that was the case. She sipped her drink. “As long as he leaves me alone, things will be fine.”

If she was lucky, he would stay at the far end of the room with a scowl on his face and interact only with his parents and Lady Eleanor. Harwood didn’t care much for parties, and he tried to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

It was a bit pointless, though, seeing as keeping away and scowling just made everyone aware that he was there. He stood out like a sore thumb when that happened.

“In any case, I’m not going to do anything to upset my aunt. She wants this to be a great party, and I would feel guilty if I’m the one to ruin it because of a petty rivalry between us.”

Lucy tilted her head to one side.

“Given what you’ve said about it, I have a feeling that it’s not just a petty rivalry.”

She did have a point there. It was more like all-out hate. Juliana had no idea what she had done for this to happen, but she wasn’t about to entertain the man more than she had to. If she had to at all.

Things would be a lot more relaxed if Harwood stayed away from her.

It wasn't long after Juliana saw the Haringdale family arrive that they entered the ballroom. The Earl and Countess of Haringdale were leading the way, physically looking like the most oddly suited couple Juliana had ever seen.

It should not have worked with the earl being short and stout while the countess was tall and willowy with raven-black hair, but the love between them was clear.

She did feel a little envious seeing the two of them together. She would love to have something like that with another person, but it hadn't happened yet.

Behind them, Lady Eleanor was being escorted by Harwood. Lady Eleanor was petite and slim with pale blonde hair that was smoothed away from her face, her hair pinned at the nape of her neck. Despite her short stature, she stood tall and composed. Juliana could see the confidence from across the room.

And then there was Harwood. Despite her decision to ignore him, Juliana was drawn toward him. He seemed to have grown more since being in Europe, if that was possible, and his skin suggested that he had spent time out in the sun.

It changed the complexion of his face to something that was not unpleasant. His hair was as dark as his mother's, and Juliana was sure that his blue eyes were as icy as ever. He certainly cut a daunting figure as he sauntered into the room.

And yet, despite thinking that he was probably one of the most awful people she had come across, Juliana felt her heart stumble, and she felt lightheaded at the sight of him. Her fingers tingled, and her palms felt sweaty, and that wasn't from the heat from the cup.

She found Harwood attractive, and she hated it.

Chapter 3

Nathaniel was aware of Juliana almost as soon as he entered the room. He hadn't initially caught sight of her, and yet he felt something down his spine. She was watching him from somewhere, but he wasn't about to look around the room to try and find her. That would just lower his mood even more.

Why couldn't he have been more insistent to stay home and away from this? Then he wouldn't have to cross paths with the girl who drove him mad. It was bad enough that he had to be treated like a child by his parents without having to interact with Juliana Beaumont.

Maybe he could escape and find a room to hide in. Several gentlemen did that, he was sure. Perhaps there was a card game going on somewhere. That would be preferable to having to interact with anyone. Even when he had been in Europe, Nathaniel had kept himself away from the big soirees and balls, choosing smaller and intimate dinner parties if he should ever get an invitation.

Mostly, he just wanted to be left alone.

“Harwood!”

Nathaniel turned, and his spirits lifted when he saw Edward Beaumont striding toward him, wearing a grin that didn't seem to have changed at all in the intervening years. His friend looked happier and healthier than Nathaniel had ever seen him.

Excusing himself from Eleanor, Nathaniel approached his childhood friend and clasped his hand.

“Beaumont! When did you get back to England? I thought you were still in Europe.”

“I got back a couple of weeks ago. I wasn’t about to miss my aunt’s birthday, especially with such a milestone.” Edward looked him up and down. “I heard you were in Europe as well. How was it you and I did not cross paths?”

“I have no idea. We could have met up and had some fun.”

Edward groaned.

“Knowing us, we would have ended up extremely drunk or in trouble.”

“Or both,” Nathaniel pointed out with a smile.

When Edward’s mother passed away, Nathaniel had seen his friend pull back and hide away from everyone. It had been a shock for the entire family, and everyone had been in a trance for a while. Nathaniel remembered the Duchess of Burwood as being a kind, compassionate woman.

So when Edward had left abruptly to travel around Europe, Nathaniel hadn’t known what to do with himself.

It was hard to write and keep in touch when his friend was moving around so fast that by the time he wrote back and sent the letter out, he would have moved on, and the letter would just be discarded, never to be read. Nathaniel would certainly have appreciated his friend’s advice after what happened to him with Lady Clara.

His heartbreak might not have been as bad if Edward had been reachable. But

it wasn't his fault; his friend needed to grieve in his own way.

And from the way he looked, it appeared to have done him some good. Edward looked to be in better health than he had been before he left the country. Nathaniel hoped that he looked the same.

“Anyway, we're both back now,” Edward said, his dark eyes twinkling. “And it's coming up to Christmas. I'm sure we'll be able to get up to more trouble.”

“I'm sure we'll have our parents saying that we should remember our manners at our age. We're supposedly older and wiser now.”

“The operative word being ‘supposedly’.” Edward laughed.

Nathaniel smiled.

“I thought it was ‘wiser’. I'm certainly not feeling any wiser.”

“Fair point.”

They began to walk around the edge of the ballroom, keeping away from the rest of the gossiping guests. Nathaniel would be content to lurk out of sight and not talk to anyone, but Edward was an old friend, and they hadn't seen each other in years. This was something that Nathaniel wanted to hold onto for a while.

“What's been going on since we've been away?” he asked, shifting around a gaggle of middle-aged ladies who were hovering at the edge of the dance floor, watching the many couples prancing away to the music. “Nothing of

interest?”

“Well, it would depend on what you would call interesting, I suppose.”

“Like what?”

Edward glanced across the room, his expression flickering a little.

“When I was staying in Poland last year, I was residing there long enough that my family could send me letters without having to chase me all over the continent. And I found out about one of Father’s business associates proposing marriage to Juliana.”

Nathaniel stopped and stared at him.

“What? Someone actually thought your sister was desirable enough to marry?”

“Nate, I know you don’t care for Juliana, but she’s still my sister. Would you kindly not speak about her like that?”

The sudden sharp tone made Nathaniel wince. Chastised, he backed down.

“Forgive me. So, your sister is a married woman now?”

“Actually, no. She turned him down.”

“What?”

Edward shook his head.

“According to her letter, he moved along very fast. Faster than she was ready for. She wasn’t even sure about her feelings before he proposed to her in front of everyone.”

Nathaniel could understand that. While Juliana was confident and could cope in any social setting, she would prefer to keep something personal like that private.

How did he know that when he didn’t care about her, and yet this man was courting her, and he didn’t know her at all?

“I take it she refused him based on that.”

“Among other things. I was surprised when she wrote to me about it. I had approved of him along with our parents. After all, he’s wealthy, has a title, and she wouldn’t be uncomfortable in her life. But Juliana was adamant that she wouldn’t marry someone she barely knew who didn’t truly know her.”

“I do see her point,” Nathaniel grumbled.

Edward chuckled.

“Despite your feelings toward her, you understand her more than Lord Hastings ever did.”

“Wait, Lord Hastings?” Nathaniel stopped and stared at his friend. “As in Gilbert Hastings?”

“That’s him.”

Nathaniel remembered Gilbert Hastings. He had been a few years their senior, and when they were entering Society for the first time, Hastings had made sure Nathaniel and Edward knew about it. He thought because he was older, that he could order everyone around.

It had been annoying. Much as Nathaniel had not wanted to admit it, the man was good at what he did when it came to business. He owned a couple of cotton mills in the North, an export business in Southampton, and he even had a turkey farm in Norfolk. The man just seemed to be busy with so much.

He sounded like a good person to be Juliana’s husband. And she had turned him down. Nathaniel wasn’t sure if he should laugh at Hastings’ demise or be impressed that Juliana wasn’t dazzled by this success.

Why should I even care? Juliana has nothing to do with me. I never want anything to do with her.

Then stop thinking about her.

“That must have been a surprise for everyone,” he commented, looking around the room. “Although it must be awkward for them. Doesn’t your father have business with Lord Hastings?”

“They’re both owners of a mill in Peterborough, so they see each other often. Father was surprised that Juliana would turn down such an offer, but he didn’t push it after a while.” Edward shrugged. “You know my sister. She’s stubborn when she’s made up her mind.”

“Like the rest of the family, isn’t she?”

Edward simply smiled. Nathaniel had known the family for years, and he knew about the stubborn streak that ran through every one of the Duke of Burwood's relatives. Even the old man himself. He hadn't gotten to the age of seventy without being stubborn.

Nathaniel had to admire the duke for that. He had focused on his own life and his many business ventures to the point that marriage had almost passed him by. But then he found love later in life and was able to have a family of his own.

Despite being twenty years older than his wife, it was clear that the two of them had been deeply in love. Lady Burwood had been a good influence on her husband. When she passed, it was a worry among the *ton* if Burwood would die of a broken heart. But five years on, and he was as strong as ever.

It had to be rough to have someone you love pass away like that. Especially when they were so much younger and expected to outlive you. Nathaniel didn't think he would be able to cope if he were in that situation.

"There you are, Edward, dear!"

Nathaniel turned and saw Lady Farley striding toward them, her usual warm smile beaming. There was something soft and inviting about the woman, and Nathaniel couldn't help but smile back in spite of himself. Edward kissed his aunt's cheek.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Aunt Betsy? There are quite a few people here."

"Oh, I'm having a great time. I've just thawed out your sister and her friend. Daft things decided to wait outside and watch the guests arrive with just a shawl on."

Edward laughed.

“I’m surprised they would do that in this weather.”

“Excitement makes us do daft things.” Lady Farley turned to Nathaniel. “Lord Harwood, it’s good to see you. How are you?”

“Lady Farley.” Nathaniel bowed. “Many happy returns. I’m doing well enough, thank you.”

“I’m sure, given the scowl you were wearing when you first arrived,” Lady Farley replied with a twinkle in her eye. “I hope you can stay long enough to spend time with me. It’s not every day that I turn sixty years of age.”

“I won’t argue with that, and I will endeavor to try.”

Lady Farley smiled at him fondly.

“Perfect. Anyway, if you want to go and get some hot chocolate, be my guest. There’s plenty to go around. I must see if anyone in the orchestra want anything to drink. They’ve been playing for a while now.”

And with that, she swept away. Nathaniel arched an eyebrow at Edward.

“Hot chocolate?”

“Do you want to drink something cold, given the weather outside?”

He did have a fair point. Even though he was in the house, Nathaniel could

still feel himself shivering. The cold seeped into his bones faster than he was used to. Maybe he had spent too much time on the continent in warmer climates.

The English weather was now something he wasn't used to.

“Lord Beaumont.”

Nathaniel turned and saw a tall, dark-haired woman with ringlets that bounced around her face approaching them, her stride confident and assured. Edward gave her a smile as the young woman approached.

“Lady Lucy. Are you feeling warm now?”

“Much better, thank you. I think we overestimated how long we could keep warm.” Lady Lucy gave him a curtsy. “I was wondering if you had met Lady Eleanor Harwood. She said that you two hadn't actually met.”

Why was this woman trying to get an introduction for Edward? His friend shook his head.

“I'm afraid not. I only returned recently, and I believe Lady Eleanor has been in London with her guardians.”

“Well, your sister and I were talking to her about your travels, and she seemed keen to learn more. It would be better hearing the stories come from you.”

“Then I hope I can entertain her with my boring travels,” Edward chuckled. Then he gestured at Nathaniel. “This is Lady Eleanor's cousin, Nathaniel

Harwood. This is Lady Lucy Parker. Her father is Baron Westwood.”

Nathaniel had heard of Baron Westwood. He had about seven children, so trying to keep track of who was who was too much for him. He bowed to Lady Lucy.

“My lady. I believe I’ve met one of your brothers. Simon, was it?”

“That’s the youngest of my older brothers.” Lady Lucy rolled her eyes. “Although he was probably drunk when you met him. That seems to be his current state.”

Nathaniel was surprised. No lady would talk this candidly about someone else. But from Edward’s expression, he wasn’t bothered about it. Was this a regular occurrence? It must be if Edward wasn’t batting an eyelid.

His friend must have seen the look on Nathaniel’s face because he started laughing.

“I think you might need to reel in your candid conversations, Lady Lucy. Harwood is not as used to it as I am.”

“My apologies, but it is an honest opinion about my brother.” Lady Lucy shrugged. “He would agree with it himself. If it makes him happy.”

“Lucy...”

“All right, I’ll stop. Anyway, do you want to meet Lady Eleanor? I think you two would get along really well.”

“If you insist.” Edward looked at Nathaniel. “Do you want to join us? Seeing as she’s your cousin, you really should be doing the introductions.”

That was true, but Nathaniel had caught sight of his cousin talking to Juliana, who was looking even lovelier than ever. Nathaniel hated that he was thinking like that when he looked at the woman who had made him hate coming over to the Burwood estate as a child. There was seriously something wrong with him if he found Juliana attractive.

He should be refusing Edward’s request and backing away. Yet he found himself nodding to his friend’s suggestions.

“All right. Just don’t expect me to be pleasant.”

Edward sighed.

“I’m not expecting that. Just don’t be unkind. You know what this week is for us without our aunt’s birthday.”

Nathaniel hadn’t forgotten. The anniversary of the Duchess of Burwoods’ death had been a few days ago. His mother had commented on it and mentioned that she was going to light a candle in church for her. Much as he didn’t want to interact genially with Juliana, he wasn’t so cruel as to be horrible about that.

“I’ll be on my best behavior. I promise.”

Edward’s expression said he wasn’t sure if he should believe him, but he didn’t respond. He held out his arm toward Lady Lucy, and the two of them walked over to Eleanor and Juliana. Nathaniel followed on behind, hoping that he could get through this with minimal interaction with Juliana. Just

being around her seemed to make his blood boil.

Why he had such a hatred for her, he had no idea. Nathaniel had tried to figure it out over the years, but it had never given him a solid answer. Not one that didn't sound ridiculous, anyway. Maybe they were just never meant to be friends of any kind.

And yet, as they walked toward the pair, and Juliana turned in his direction, Nathaniel couldn't help but admire how she had blossomed in recent years. She was tall like her brother and slim, her gown showing off her willowy figure.

Her dark brown hair was piled up on her head, leaving her neck bare and showing the perfect contours of her face. She could have been a model for one of the Greek busts, and Nathaniel wouldn't have been surprised.

How could he find someone he despised so beautiful? There must be something wrong with his head.

Their eyes met as the group approached, and Nathaniel caught sight of those hazel eyes for the first time in years. They widened and then narrowed when she saw him, her lips thinning and her jaw tightening. She kept her composure, but this shift was enough for Nathaniel to know that she wasn't too happy with this.

"Lady Eleanor," Lady Lucy said, not seeming to notice the change in her friend. "Allow me to introduce Lord Edward Beaumont. This is Lady Eleanor Harwood."

Nathaniel saw his cousin's cheeks go a little pink as she stared up at Edward. Then she suddenly shook herself, blinking fast as she dropped a quick curtsy that momentarily wobbled.

“My lord. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Lady Eleanor.” Edward gave her a slight bow, his expression curious as he regarded her. “I hope my sister and her friend are not regaling you about what I might have gotten up to in Europe. They do tend to exaggerate some things.”

Juliana huffed.

“You could give us some credit, Edward. We’re not like that.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Nathaniel couldn’t help but snigger at that, and then Juliana was looking at him again. Their eyes met, and Nathaniel felt something tighten around his chest. For a brief second, he couldn’t breathe as Juliana glowered at him, her cheeks flushing. Then it was gone, and the moment was broken as Juliana looked away from him to focus on her brother.

Nathaniel cleared his throat and resisted the urge to adjust his cravat. It seemed to have gotten tighter in the last couple of moments. God, he never thought hate for someone could make him react like this. It was not comfortable at all.

“If you have any questions about my travels, I’d be happy to answer them.” Edward turned on a charming smile toward Eleanor. “I’m always happy to talk about what I got up to.”

Eleanor blushed and bit her lip.

“If you don’t mind? My cousin has spoken about Europe, and I am fascinated by discovering new things. But if you’re busy being a host...”

“The hosts are my father and aunt. I’m entitled to have a bit of enjoyment myself.” Edward beckoned for the three ladies to follow him. “Shall we go and sit down? I think it will be quieter in the dining room. I’m happy to answer anything you have for me.”

Eleanor looked as if she hadn’t expected this. Lady Lucy smirked and nudged Juliana, who shot her a sharp look. Nathaniel wished he could stop watching her. He should excuse himself and look for somewhere to go where he didn’t have to interact with anyone. But he found that he didn’t want to leave Edward’s side. Like the ladies, he wanted to know what his friend had been up to.

Even if it meant sitting with Juliana Beaumont. That was going to be tough.

“Are you coming along as well, Harwood?” Edward asked as he turned to Nathaniel. “I’m sure you’ve got your own questions. Unless you want to ask a young lady to dance?”

Amusement danced in his friend’s eyes. He knew that Nathaniel didn’t like dancing, and he knew it would annoy him to mention it. Nathaniel resisted the urge to snap back at him, choosing to give him a bland smile.

“Why not? I’d be interested to see if you and I had similar experiences.”

“I’m sure we did.” Edward held out an arm to Eleanor. “My lady? Shall we?”

Her cheeks darkening a little more pink, Eleanor took his arm. She glanced quickly at Nathaniel before looking away, and Nathaniel had to smile.

Eleanor was not normally affected by anyone, but almost immediately, she had become rather flustered with Edward Beaumont. It shouldn't have been a surprise; Edward was a good-looking man, and he was a proper gentleman when it came to manners.

But to see his cousin react like this around Edward was a surprise.

Nathaniel hovered back as he allowed Edward and Eleanor to walk away, Lady Lucy following on behind with a slight spring in her step. Something told Nathaniel that she was always bright and happy with a carefree attitude. That seemed at odds with the personality of Juliana Beaumont.

She was still standing there, staring at him with a stony expression. Nathaniel wished that she would stop looking at him like that. It was too daunting. From the flash in her eyes, she was remembering what happened with them in the past. He couldn't blame her for that, but it was still stirring up memories that Nathaniel would rather forget.

He should have been more forceful when he said he was staying at home.

Nathaniel expected Juliana to say something to him, something cutting that would ignite the discord between them, and then he would feel better retorting back so he could see her react to it. Much as it was childish, he liked seeing how passionate she was with her emotions.

But instead of saying anything, Juliana turned away, her head held high as she strode after her friend and brother. Her posture was straight and stiff, and Nathaniel could see the tension in her shoulders.

Interesting. Before, she never ignored an opportunity to make a rude remark toward him. Nathaniel found that he was slightly disappointed that she wouldn't do that.

What was wrong with him if he was seeking a rude comment aimed at him from someone who drove him mad?

Juliana had been enjoying the party, for the most part. People she had become acquainted with over the years because of her father had been present, along with a few of her friends her aunt had allowed her to invite. She had danced and laughed, and now her feet were hurting. That was good.

What wasn't good was that Nathaniel Harwood had been there. Juliana knew that the Earl of Haringdale would be present, and she was pleased to see the earl and countess, who were lovely people.

But she had been hoping that Harwood would stay at home. Knowing that he was now back in England after disappearing on the continent for three years hadn't been a good feeling, and Juliana knew she couldn't avoid him forever.

But of all the times they had to be reunited, why did it have to be now at Aunt Betsy's birthday? This was meant to be a joyous celebration, not a reluctant meeting with someone who had openly declared that he didn't even like her.

Harwood had no idea how much he had crushed her ten years ago, and Juliana was not about to let him know. She would not show how upset she had been when he turned on her. It was easier to keep up a wall between them, and then Harwood would not know the truth.

Why couldn't he turn ugly while he was traveling? Why did he have to walk in looking as handsome as he had been when he left three years ago? Juliana couldn't help but admire him now, just as she did then. Despite her distaste, she wasn't able to stop herself.

The man was too much for her. How was she going to cope this evening, especially after he and Edward sat with Lady Eleanor, talking about their journeys around Europe. Lady Eleanor had been very interested, and Lucy always loved tales of exploration.

Juliana had heard it all from Edward before, and after a while, she excused herself to join another group of people. It was either that or she would be hanging on the edge of the group with Harwood's eyes on her. Even when he wasn't staring at her, it was like he was watching her. Juliana could only take so much before she cracked.

Now she was exhausted, and she needed a moment's respite from the festivities. Especially when she was aware of Hastings hovering at the edge of the crowd, seeming to be watching her. Juliana knew she would have to interact with him, but she didn't want to.

If she could get away from talking to the man who wanted to marry her, then she would. Her father wouldn't be cross if she ignored one of his business associates.

She knew she had hurt him by turning him down, but what could he expect when they barely knew each other, and they had courted just a few weeks? She hadn't even kissed him, and Juliana felt awkward accepting a marriage proposal when she had barely done anything but hold his arm in a public place.

His over-the-top behavior toward her before the proposal had been a little uncomfortable as well. She didn't mind the occasional flowery flirtation or sweet romantic words, but it was like Hastings had put it all in one sentence and was trying too hard.

How was it that he was at his age and didn't really know how to talk to a woman?

Turning him down with everyone's eyes on them had been embarrassing, but Juliana wasn't about to be bullied into it. Once she had explained it to her father, Burwood had understood and promised that he would respect her decision.

There were a few members of the *ton* who thought she should have accepted him, and that she could have turned him down later. But Juliana was not about to do that; she was not going to do it in private to spare anyone's feelings. Besides, hadn't she been uncomfortable with it as well? Why should she step back and spare Hastings' feelings when hers weren't being respected?

"Where are you off to, Juliana?"

Juliana jumped when Aunt Betsy appeared beside her as she left the ballroom. Juliana pressed a hand to her chest.

"I swear you could be a spy, Aunt Betsy. You're very good at sneaking up on people."

"My apologies. I thought you must have heard me." Aunt Betsy smiled. "People do say that they can hear me coming from a long way off with my voice."

"That's when you're talking. You're more soft-footed than the most discreet servant." Juliana gestured down the hallway. "I'm just going to have a bit of respite away from the party. My feet are hurting, and I need to have some quiet. Do you mind?"

"Of course not. I don't expect you to be around us all the time." Aunt Betsy patted her arm. "Go and have a rest. The cook is sorting out some more hot chocolate for everyone, so it should be fresh when you come back."

“Thank you.”

Grateful, Juliana headed through the house and into the library. She had been tempted to go out into the gardens, which always looked beautiful in the night with the frost on the ground, but it would be far too cold.

Maybe she could open the big door onto the terrace and hover in the doorway for a few minutes. It would certainly cool her down, and she wouldn't get too frozen or get her shoes wet.

Closing the door behind her, Juliana let out a huge sigh of relief. Then she went over to the door and opened it wide. Leaning on the doorframe, she looked out into the gardens with the perfectly geometric flower beds, the grass now dusted with frost and glistening with a silvery sheen in the moonlight. It never ceased to amaze her how fast night fell during winter.

Beyond the wall around the immediate garden, the fields stretched out toward the folly that was built on the hill. Burwood had thought it was amusing that someone would build a folly to claim that it was from the conquest eight hundred years ago, but he never thought to take it down. The walk up to the folly was a nice one, and Juliana could see for miles at the top of the hill.

It was a shame that it was far too dark and the sheep would be out and about; otherwise she would have taken a walk now. Nothing was worse than stepping into something a sheep had left behind and then having to clean it later.

“Are you going to shut the door, or are you going to stand there and make both of us freeze to death?”

Gasping, Juliana spun around. Harwood was sitting in a chair by the roaring fire, slumped down as if he was trying to hide from people. Juliana hadn't

seen him when she came into the room, but she hadn't been looking at anything except where she was going.

Pressing a hand to her chest as her heart stumbled, she glared at him.

“Do you normally skulk around in someone else's house?”

“Who said that I was skulking?”

“You're hiding in someone else's library, and you didn't bother to make yourself known when I first came in.”

“Well, maybe you shouldn't be here on your own.” Harwood sat up and then sat forward, elbows on his knees as he regarded Juliana thoughtfully. “Maybe you should leave, and then I can be left alone.”

Juliana bit back a growl. How dare he talk to her like a child in her own house?

“If someone should be leaving, it should be you. I'm not going anywhere.”

Chapter 4

She was still as fiery as ever. Nathaniel realized that he was pleased with that. If she had become meek and timid, this wouldn't have been as fun. Much as he didn't want to interact with her beyond what was necessary, Nathaniel wanted to have some fire in their conversations. Juliana was not afraid to stand up to him, and she was just as quick with her comments.

Maybe he needed this to make himself feel better about this evening.

"You should," he said quietly. "You're here without a chaperone. If someone was to come in now..."

"I don't think anyone's going to get the wrong idea," Juliana cut him off sharply. "Everyone knows that I don't care for you. Besides, you think I should have a shadow following me around in my own home? That makes it sound like I'm not safe here. Or are you suggesting that I shouldn't feel safe right now?"

It was suggested as a challenge, and Nathaniel smirked.

"Not with me around. If anyone was to hear that we're alone, they would get the wrong idea."

"Only because they have nothing to do," Juliana scoffed. She folded her arms. "People who matter know that I would have to be mad to have anything to do with you beyond a superficial acquaintance."

She had certainly made her words sharper than ever since he last saw her. Nathaniel tried not to wince, tried not to admire how she was confident and

not afraid to stand up for herself. He got to his feet, seeing Juliana's eyes momentarily widen.

“That attitude of yours wouldn't be welcome in Society. How have you managed to get to your age and not figured that out?”

“You think I'm like this all the time? I only keep this behavior to those who rightly deserve it.” She openly looked him up and down. “And when it comes to you, I'm definitely going to be as rude as I want.”

“Is that so?”

“I don't think you've done anything to deserve any kindness from me. Don't you remember what you said to me all those years ago?”

Nathaniel hadn't forgotten. He wasn't likely to forget the pain in a ten-year-old's eyes when he told her that he didn't want her around.

“You still hold onto that after ten years?”

“Well, I know you're holding onto it. You're still as horrible toward me.”

“I thought I was being the perfect gentleman.”

Juliana barked out a harsh laugh. There was a tension practically rippling off her, and Nathaniel could feel it like a cold wall between them. Even as he felt it, he pushed against that wall, wondering if he could knock it down.

“Are you serious? You've never been a gentleman, and you're certainly not perfect.”

“You know how to wound a man, Lady Juliana.”

“Like how you wounded me?” Juliana snapped. “You could have been a bit nicer to me, and all I wanted to do was play with you and my brother.”

“Well, I didn’t want to play with you.” Nathaniel was being honest, but now it sounded hollow to his ears. “You were ten, and I was fifteen. I was not about to play games with a baby.”

“You think a five-year age difference makes me less mature than you?”

“Doesn’t it?”

Juliana’s eyes narrowed. She was getting angry now. Nathaniel wondered how far he could push it before Juliana really lost her temper.

“You made your feelings clear ten years ago, Harwood. I’m not about to tell you that you can’t be friends with Edward, but if you’re going to be friends, and I have to be present, you’re going to treat me with some respect.”

“Oh, am I?” Nathaniel drew himself to his full height. That made Juliana’s eyes widen for a moment, and he wondered at the reaction. “You think I should treat a little brat with respect when she doesn’t respect me?”

“You have to earn it. And you lost my respect when you were horrible to me ten years ago.” Juliana shook her head. “I doubt you’re going to get it back. Especially when you made a comment about me when I was asked to dance. Or have you forgotten it already?”

Nathaniel hadn’t forgotten. A gentleman had approached Juliana and asked

her to dance, to which Nathaniel had commented that the man should watch out for his toes. He still remembered being forced to partner with Juliana when she was having dancing lessons, and she was so clumsy that she was practically dancing on his feet. Nathaniel had refused to be dragged into it after that.

“Well, you were a terrible dancer back then.”

“I was eight years old! That was twelve years ago!”

“And you think you’re any better now?”

Juliana’s jaw tightened. Nathaniel felt a flash of satisfaction knowing that he was getting under her skin. She certainly was beautiful when she was angry.

Wait, where did that come from? Why do I care about that?

“I will have you know that I can dance absolutely fine now. I haven’t trodden on anyone’s toes since that day.” Juliana gave him a tight smile. “Or maybe I was treading on yours because you were terrible yourself. Only terrible dancers get their feet in the way.”

“I’ll have you know that I’m a perfectly good dancer.”

“Then why haven’t you done any this evening?” Juliana challenged.

“I was listening to your brother and how he found Europe.”

Juliana rolled her eyes.

“No, you’re just finding an excuse not to be in a good mood.”

Even though they hadn’t seen each other in years, and Nathaniel didn’t care about her at all, he found it pleasing that she knew him so well. She was aware that he didn’t really care for things like that, that he preferred his own company or a small group of his own choosing. Not that Nathaniel really wanted her to know, though; she was not going to be a part of that circle anytime soon.

He knew that he was being harsh to her, and they should at least try and be civil. But old habits were hard to get rid of, and Nathaniel was sure if he stopped, then Juliana would find out how things had actually changed between them. She drove him insane, just not in the way she thought.

No, that’s not the case. You hate her, and you hate that she has to be around you despite you wanting otherwise. Hold onto that, and you’ll be able to keep her away.

Pushing away his conflicting emotions, Nathaniel approached her. Juliana looked like she was going to take a step away, but she stayed where she was as he came closer. Nathaniel was impressed; she didn’t back down, even though she should.

Maybe he would have backed down if she had moved away from him, but she didn’t. Even with the cold air coming into the library behind her, seeping under his clothes, and making Nathaniel want to shiver, he advanced on Juliana.

He wondered what she would do if he did something daft. Like pull her into his arms. Would she slap him or allow him to do it?

Why was he even thinking of doing that? Being in her presence was making

him go insane.

“Do you think it’s possible for me to be in a good mood when I’m in the same room as you?” he asked as he stood before her, almost close enough to touch. He kept his hands to himself, though. “You have the ability to set my blood on fire, and I don’t mean it in a good way.”

“Over what? Because we were forced to play together as children?” Juliana practically sneered up at him. “You made your feelings clear to me all those years ago, Harwood. I’ve kept away from you since. It’s not my fault that our parents are friends and wanted you to come with them.”

“But you were still present.”

“What did you expect me to do? Disappear into my room?”

“That would have helped.”

Juliana let out a heavy sigh and held up her hands as she stepped back.

“Look, this is just ridiculous. You and I don’t like each other. That’s fine. We don’t have to like everyone. But you could show some respect, especially when you’re in my house.”

“Nobody’s around to tell me to do that.”

“I am.”

Nathaniel saw her flexing her fingers, and curiosity stirred. Was she bracing herself to slap him? That would be very unladylike. But there was no one

around, so maybe she could get away with it.

Before he could respond, the doors opened, and Burwood entered the room. It was so sudden that Nathaniel jumped. The duke stopped when he saw them, looking in bewilderment from Nathaniel to Juliana. Then his eyes narrowed.

“What do you think you’re doing in here, Juliana?”

“I was attempting to get some air, Father.” Juliana gestured at the open door. “Aunt Betsy was aware of me taking some respite.”

“I doubt you let her know that you were going to meet with Lord Harwood, though,” Burwood said sharply.

Nathaniel blinked. What was going on? The duke was normally a very genial person, and he had certainly greeted Nathaniel’s family warmly when they arrived. To see him looking unhappy was surprising. Was meeting with Nathaniel, whether it was unintentional or not, that bad for his daughter?

Juliana looked as perplexed as Nathaniel felt.

“I...I wasn’t meeting with Lord Harwood,” she protested. “Why would I do that?”

“Then why are you in the library without a chaperone?”

“Do I need a chaperone to go around my own house, Father?” Juliana pointed at the open door. “I was just taking some air. I had no idea Lord Harwood was here. Believe me, I have no intention of meeting him for anything willingly.”

Nathaniel winced. She had meant that to be a cutting remark, and it worked. She might as well have slapped him with that. Burwood still didn't look convinced.

"Well, that's not what I heard."

"What you heard?" Juliana frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I heard a few of the guests talking about it just now. How you sneaked away from your aunt's birthday to have a dalliance with a gentleman in the library." Burwood's eyes narrowed. "I had to make sure that you weren't doing anything that could ruin the evening."

Juliana's mouth fell open. Nathaniel swayed on the spot. Did someone know that they were in here? How was that possible? It had only been a few minutes since the two of them had unexpectedly come together. How was it possible that someone could make a rumor about it being illicit so quickly?

"Who on earth would say that?" Juliana gasped. "Are they insane?"

"Well, given what I'm looking at right now, can you blame me for being concerned?"

"But I would never do anything with Lord Harwood? You know I don't even like him!"

Nathaniel wished that he was in another room. This was an argument between father and daughter, and he seemed to have gotten caught up in the middle of it. Then Burwood turned to glower at him.

“What do you have to say for yourself, Harwood?” he asked, his tone clipped.

Nathaniel knew he hadn't done anything wrong, but he still had to swallow under the duke's gaze.

“Lady Juliana is correct. We never intended to meet. It was...unfortunate.”

Juliana's eyes were blazing when Nathaniel glanced over at her, but Nathaniel ignored it. He was more concerned about who had started a rumor so fast.

Burwood surveyed him for so long that Nathaniel wanted to squirm. It was so rare to see the older man angry that he was caught off-guard. Burwood was not the type to get physically angry; he was more subtle about it, but you were very much aware of it. Finally, after what felt like an age, Burwood strode over to his daughter.

“I think you need to get back to the party, Juliana,” he said tightly, shutting the door to the terrace with a loud bang. The cold wind that had been ruffling their clothing stopped, and Nathaniel shuddered as the warmth began to take over. “You've been away from the guests long enough.”

“But I've barely had five minutes, Father!” Juliana cried.

“Sometimes, that's enough to get yourself into trouble.”

“But I wasn't...”

“Don't argue with me, Juliana. You're coming back with me.” Burwood took

her arm. “Stop protesting and get moving. Unless you want me to drag you back, and you know that will look worse for you.”

Juliana looked as if she was going to argue with him, and Nathaniel saw a flicker of fear behind her eyes. She didn’t want to have people think the worst of her. Despite her fire when they were around each other, Juliana was aware of how she would appear to the rest of the *ton*. There were so many people who were willing to gossip about the smallest of things, including an accidental encounter.

He wanted to say something to assure her things would be fine, but Nathaniel realized what he was doing and stopped himself. Besides, if he did say anything in front of Burwood, he would assume that something did happen. God forbid that Nathaniel and Juliana got pushed together.

As father and daughter left the room, both of them looking unhappy, Nathaniel went over to the door and leaned his forehead on the cold glass. Suddenly, the warmth of the room was too much and he could feel his cravat tightening around his neck. This wasn’t how he wanted the evening to go. He didn’t even want to be here, and yet his parents had told him that he must attend.

Now look at what had happened.

Maybe he could get away with leaving early. Haringdale was more than likely regaling his tales to his friends—he did love an audience, and the countess would be engaging herself in conversation with some of the more refined ladies of Society. Eleanor was probably still listening to Edward’s stories with rapt attention. None of them would notice that he had slipped away and gone home.

As Nathaniel looked up, he saw something moving in front of him. It was so sudden that he jumped back in surprise and spun around. There was no one

else in the library with him, but he was sure that he had seen a figure.

It had to have been coming from outside. But the reflection in the glass got in the way. Nathaniel opened the door and stepped out onto the terrace. It was more biting than a moment ago, and Nathaniel shivered as the cold air wrapped around him.

There was more than likely going to be a snowstorm soon if the air was this icy. Squinting into the darkness, all he could see was the gardens stretched before him, looking like it had been scattered with silver under the moonlight.

It was somewhat muted once the garden ventured beyond the limit of the light coming from the house, but Nathaniel could make out some dark shapes. They were probably the bushes the gardeners had been turning into leafy statues.

Was there a shape actually moving? Nathaniel caught sight of something disappearing out of sight, and the sound of footsteps. Someone had been outside, more than likely watching him through the window. Had they seen him and Juliana?

Whoever it was had disappeared now. Nathaniel was on his own and beginning to wonder why he was standing shivering on the terrace when he could be getting himself warm. Retreating back into the library, Nathaniel shut the door and then slumped against it.

He needed to get out of here. Now, he was jumping at shadows and getting paranoid.

Being around this family was not good for him in any shape or form.

The bed was very warm, and Nathaniel did not want to wake up. Someone was shaking his shoulder, and he wanted them to stop. He swatted at whoever was bothering his slumber, but they didn't stop. Growling, Nathaniel swiped an arm, feeling his hand hit something hard.

“My lord!”

Nathaniel cracked an eye open. His valet was standing over him, grimacing as he rubbed his shoulder. Nathaniel groaned and rolled onto his back.

“Go away, Barnes. I'm trying to sleep.”

“I'm afraid I can't do that, my lord.”

“Why not? What time is it?”

“Just after seven-thirty.”

Seven-thirty? Nathaniel blinked his eyes open and rubbed at them, scowling at his valet.

“What are you doing? Seven-thirty? I don't get up this early, and you know it. Why would you rouse me from my sleep like this?”

“Forgive me, my lord, but I wouldn't have bothered you if it wasn't urgent.”

“What's so urgent at this time of the morning?”

Barnes didn't look happy, and that got Nathaniel's attention. His servant was a warm-hearted, easygoing person who seemed more laidback than he should for a man of his social standing. If he was unhappy, then it had to be bad. Nathaniel was more awake now, and he forced himself to sit up.

"Barnes? What's going on? Why are you trying to get me up at this hour?"

"The earl is awake and in his study. He wants to see you." Barnes paused. "Immediately."

His father wanted to see him now? Also, what was Haringdale doing up at this time? He barely got out of bed before nine, choosing to have breakfast in bed with Nathaniel's mother. What was going on?

"Did he say why?"

"No, but I have a feeling it's to do with something that happened at the Duke of Burwood's house last night." Barnes peered at his master. "Did something occur that would get him upset?"

"Not that I know of."

However, Nathaniel knew exactly what could have upset his father. Being alone with Juliana Beaumont. He hadn't gone back to the party, but he was sure that gossip was rife, and it would have taken hold of the fact he and Juliana had been witnessed together without a chaperone.

It was a surprise how a brief encounter that was supposedly not seen by anyone could take hold of people's imaginations and have everyone thinking something outrageous had happened.

Haringdale must have heard something and believed the rumors. Nathaniel was going to have to do some damage control to smooth it all out.

Sighing, he threw back the sheets.

“All right, let’s get me dressed. I’ll see if I can get him to calm down.”

“I’m not sure if you can, my lord,” Barnes said as he went over to the washbasin in the corner of the room. “The earl looked resolute.”

That wasn’t good. Nathaniel had prided himself on being stubborn, but that was something he had inherited from his father. It would be hard to change his mind if it was already set.

It took less time than he thought to get washed and dressed, Nathaniel not bothering with a shave. He could do that later once he had met with his father; an unshaven jaw was less important than what was going on. When his normally calm parent was demanding his presence, he jumped to it immediately.

Fighting back more yawning as he went downstairs, Nathaniel headed toward his father’s study. As he turned the corner to head down the hallway, he almost walked into Pearce, coming the other way. The butler neatly sidestepped him before they collided.

“Forgive me, my lord.”

“Pearce. How is Father?”

Pearce’s stoic expression didn’t give anything away, but there was a touch of

nervousness in his eyes as he glanced over his shoulder.

“I’ve not seen him like this in a while, my lord. I don’t know what’s happened, but he’s not in a good mood at all.”

If the butler was nervous, then it was really bad. All of this over Nathaniel and Juliana interacting alone for more than thirty seconds? Nathaniel sighed.

“I’ll smooth it over. It’s nothing, Pearce. Just a few people who have too much time on their hands.”

“I hope that’s the case, my lord,” Pearce murmured before bowing and walking away.

Nathaniel approached the door to his father’s study and knocked twice. There was a long wait, and Nathaniel tried not to shuffle from foot to foot. This was something Haringdale had done to him when he was a child. If Nathaniel had done something bad, he would have to report to the earl, and he would be forced to wait outside the study until he was permitted to enter.

He was not a child anymore, but Haringdale had an unerring ability to make him feel like one again when he had done something bad. Although it had been a while since this had happened.

Not for the first time, Nathaniel wished that he could go back to the continent. He had found peace there, after deciding that he didn’t want to stay in England. He had gotten away from rumors, away from the news that would have broken his heart.

He’d barely back in England a month, and he was already wanting to leave again.

There was still nothing from the other side of the door. Nathaniel was tempted to knock again, but Haringdale might make him stay out here for longer. Just as he was deciding if it was worth the risk, he heard his father barking out the order to come in.

Nathaniel went in and found his father standing by the window, staring out into the dimness beyond. It was only just starting to get light, so there were candles lit around the room. From the state of the desk and the nearly-empty decanter on top of the papers, along with an empty glass, Haringdale had been here for most of the night.

Clearing his throat, Nathaniel walked over to his father.

“Father. You’re not normally awake this early.”

“I haven’t been to bed yet.”

“Oh? Were you, Mother, and Eleanor back late?”

“It’s not because of that.” Haringdale turned, and Nathaniel saw the anger in his father’s expression. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done, Nathaniel? Your first proper social engagement since returning home, and you’re already causing trouble.”

Nathaniel held up his hands.

“How about you tell me what I’m meant to have done, and then we can resolve it? I can’t respond until I know what’s happened.”

Haringdale snorted.

“You know exactly what you did. You were alone with a young woman. Unchaperoned. And it had to be Lady Juliana Beaumont.”

So that was why he was upset. Nathaniel sighed.

“Father, that was a misunderstanding. We didn’t even do anything except exchange some harsh words with each other, like we always do.”

“Is that right?”

Haringdale’s tone suggested that he wasn’t convinced. Nathaniel folded his arms across his chest.

“I don’t know why you’re so upset about this, Father. You know that Lady Juliana and I don’t get along. I wouldn’t want to be alone with her if I had a choice, but it wasn’t something I anticipated. We were arguing when the duke found us.”

“That’s not what I heard from the guests at the party.” Haringdale scowled. “Your mother and I were abruptly asked about you being alone with our host’s daughter. There was even mention that you two had been in a passionate embrace.”

“A passionate embrace?”

“You were alone with a woman, Nathaniel. You think people are not going to say that?”

The thought of passionately embracing Juliana was not as horrific as Nathaniel thought it would be. Still, that had never happened. He shook his

head and paced away.

“It’s shocking to know that you can have rumors spreading the moment a man looks at a woman. We were barely in there two minutes together, and there were people talking about us already?”

“Either it was more than two minutes, or you were doing something that would result in others talking about it.”

“I swear, Father, I didn’t do anything! Why would I do anything with Lady Juliana, much less embrace her?” Nathaniel threw his hands up in the air.

“The guests at the party were bored, and they just needed a sliver of something out of the norm to talk about. That’s all that happened. I don’t know who started it. Perhaps someone saw us leave the party at different times, put two and two together, and came up with ten.”

That had to be it. There was no chance of having a rumor spread so fast that Burwood would come looking for his daughter when they had barely interacted for two minutes.

Someone must have seen them leave the party separately, maybe not too long after each other, and decided that there was something going on. That was the only explanation for it.

Unfortunately, that didn’t seem to be comforting to his father, who still looked angry.

“Whether or not it was an innocent situation, Nathaniel, you did something wrong. Now, our family is being talked about in a disparaging manner. People questioned your mother about the way she brought you up or if this is

something you learned on the continent.”

Nathaniel bristled.

“That’s not fair. You and Mother have nothing to do with this.”

“Whatever you do affects the rest of the family, Nathaniel. And if it’s affecting us, how do you think it’s going to affect Lady Juliana?”

He did have a point. Nathaniel might think this was awkward for him, but Juliana was going to have it worse. Her reputation was going to be called into question, and no matter what she did or said to say otherwise, it would be picked at until it fell apart. All because they were inadvertently in the same room without a witness.

He felt a pang of guilt for that. He should have left when he realized that she was there. But they had to start arguing again. That seemed more important than remembering proprieties.

“You created this mess, Nate,” Haringdale said sharply, stepping toward his son. “So you’re going to do the right thing and get this sorted.”

“Do the right thing?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

It took a moment for Nathaniel to realize what his father was saying. Do the right thing...

His heart sank. No, he couldn’t be thinking that. Surely, that wasn’t what he

was suggesting. But from the look on Haringdale's face, it was certainly what he was telling Nathaniel to do.

"No, Father. I can't do that."

"You haven't got a choice."

"I'm not doing it because people took what we did the wrong way!"

"Like I said, you haven't got a choice. Besides," Haringdale went on as he walked toward the desk and poured himself a drink, "if I don't tell you to do it, the Duke of Burwood will be telling you instead. Unless you want to end up in a duel at dawn so he can defend his daughter's honor?"

Nathaniel scoffed.

"Duels are illegal, Father. The Duke of Burwood wouldn't go through with that."

"Do you think that's going to stop him? You know you'll be at a disadvantage if you go down that route."

Nathaniel knew that too well. Even though people tended to look the other way when a duel occurred despite it being a crime now, if he ended up winning the duel and the duke died, he would be charged with murder. He was stuck no matter what he did.

Not for the first time, Nathaniel wished he had left and not spoken to Juliana. Then he wouldn't be in this mess.

Chapter 5

Juliana could feel something in the air as soon as she woke up. Then again, she wasn't exactly allowed to wake up naturally. Someone had opened the curtains and then they were shaking her shoulders. Juliana thought it was her maid, Beth, and decided to ignore her, turning over and drawing the sheets up to her chin.

“Oh, wake up, Juliana!”

Juliana gasped as she was pushed face-first into her pillow with one sharp shove, and she scrambled upright. She turned to admonish Beth for being so rude, only to stop when she saw her brother standing by her bed.

“What the...? Edward!” Juliana swatted his arm. “What do you think you're doing? Why are you in my room?”

“Father wants to talk to you, Juliana.”

“Now?” Juliana blinked away the sleep as she looked toward the clock. “But it's barely eight in the morning! Why this early?”

“You think any of us can sleep after what happened last night?” Edward's expression was sullen as he folded his arms. “You do know that you did something wrong, don't you? And you're able to sleep?”

For a moment, Juliana had no idea what he was talking about. Then she remembered. Someone had seen her and Harwood walking away from the party and created a rumor that they were having an illicit rendezvous in the house.

She had protested her innocence and said that she would never do that, but it wasn't working. The only people who appeared to truly believe her were Aunt Betsy and Lucy. It was ridiculous that something could be conjured out of nothing.

Were people really that bored of the party that they had to make something up? Juliana had escaped up to her room once she realized that nobody was paying attention to her protests. People were openly staring at her. How was she supposed to enjoy herself and celebrate her aunt's birthday when everyone was looking at her like she had just committed a crime?

Who would do that to her? How could the same person have seen the two of them leaving at different times and come up with that? Probably two people who saw each of them disappearing, talked and decided that something salacious was happening.

The truth couldn't be any farther from that. The thought of being intimate with Harwood didn't sit well with Juliana. How could she do that when she was aware of how much he disliked her?

Deep down, she would have craved his touch and would accept anything from him, even if it was a brief kiss in a snatched moment. Juliana was embarrassed that she felt like that, especially when she knew it would never happen.

But to have people concoct a story to make it out to be the case? Juliana wanted to scream. Even her own brother didn't believe that nothing happened. He knew of their relationship. Did he not have any faith in his friend at all?

"Anyway, get yourself downstairs," Edward said before Juliana could respond, turning toward the door. "Father wants to speak with you as soon as possible."

“I didn’t do anything, Edward!”

“Unless you want Father to come up here and talk to you while you’re still in your nightgown—”

Juliana grabbed a pillow and flung it at him, catching Edward in the shoulder.

“Why is nobody listening to me?” she screamed. “Does nobody have faith in me that I can’t do the right thing? And with Harwood, of all people? You know I can’t stand him!”

“People change over time, Juliana.” Edward didn’t stop as he approached the door and opened it. “Don’t take too long getting dressed. We’re more than likely going to be having visitors soon.”

Visitors? Who was going to be visiting them? But Edward was gone before Juliana could ask. Her temper flaring, Juliana flung the sheets off her and pushed herself out of bed. The urge to pick something up and throw it across the room was great, just to hear something smash.

Instead of picking up a perfume bottle from the dresser, Juliana picked up her pillow from the floor and smashed it against the bedpost. There was a thud each time she swung, and the pillow didn’t split, but hitting something helped. Just a little.

When she didn’t feel as angry, Juliana tossed the pillow onto the bed and slumped onto the mattress. It had been bad enough when everyone was around her, crushing her as they asked her questions that Juliana had no idea how to answer, but now it felt like that was still there and now it was her family crowding her. Why did people want to know about something supposedly scandalous in such an open way? How could they be so rude?

Juliana had witnessed these rumors target other people before, and while she was ashamed to say she had been involved in the gossip as well when it reached her ears, she had been glad that she wasn't in the center of something like that. Now she was, and she hated it.

She understood why people withdrew from Society when they were scrutinized over every little thing.

Knowing that she didn't have much choice except to face her father, Juliana washed quickly and dressed herself. She was tempted to call for Beth, but that would take more time and Juliana wanted to get this over and done with. Then she could go back to her room and try to calm herself down to deal with everything.

Why did this have to happen on Aunt Betsy's birthday? She had said that she believed Juliana, but Juliana couldn't help but feel guilty for this happening in the middle of her big celebration. Hopefully, Aunt Betsy wouldn't be too upset.

Her heart feeling heavy, Juliana made her way downstairs. She passed the morning room, only to stop when she saw that the door was open, and her father could be seen standing by the window.

His hands were clasped behind his back as he stared out into the cold winter morning. Craning her neck a little, Juliana could see that Aunt Betsy was sitting on the settee having breakfast. She looked as content as ever, as if her brother wasn't nearby radiating tension off his body.

"If you need to remember how to walk again, you put one foot in front of the other and keep on going."

Juliana squeaked and spun around. Edward was standing right behind her, his

expression bemused. Juliana glowered at him.

“Would you stop doing that?”

“Father’s really not impressed with you right now.”

“I can tell. But nothing happened!”

“You can keep saying that, but do you think the chatter is going to stop just because you say nothing happened? You think anyone’s going to believe you outside of this house?”

“Nobody seems to believe me inside the house.” Juliana snorted, folding his arms. “Except Aunt Betsy. She knows me better than my own father and brother.”

“I believe you, but I also think you put yourself in a position that could have been easily avoided.”

“I didn’t go into the room looking for Harwood!”

“You should have left when you knew.”

Juliana wanted to hit her brother. He might say he believed her, but his behavior was saying that it was her fault.

“Why is the responsibility on me to get out of there? This is my house. If Harwood didn’t like it, he should have left. So don’t you dare blame me for something that I didn’t start, and don’t say that it’s my fault that this happened, because I will forget that I’m a lady and I’ll smack you so hard

your ears will be ringing for days.”

She paused to take a breath.

“I don’t care if you’re my brother, you will not treat me like this.”

Edward’s expression faltered, and Juliana hoped that he took this in. He was normally supportive of her, so for him to turn around and not be on her side was really hurtful. It was probably worse than being accused of having a romantic interlude with Harwood.

That was never happening.

“Have you two quite finished?” Burwood’s voice drew Juliana’s attention. “Get in here now.”

He was standing in the doorway, watching Juliana with a stony expression. Juliana felt a flash of panic, and she wished that she could run back upstairs and lock herself in her room. She didn’t know what was going to happen now, but she didn’t like it already.

Burwood turned and walked away before either sibling could respond, and Juliana followed him into the morning room. Aunt Betsy looked up and gave her a smile.

“Juliana, dear.” She held out a hand. “Come and sit with me. I think you’re going to need some tea this morning.”

“Thank you, Aunt Betsy.” Juliana sat beside the older woman, suddenly feeling awkward. How much had her aunt and father heard just then?

“Forgive me for what happened. I didn’t intend for something as ridiculous as this to overshadow your party.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Society is full of people who have nothing better to do than to talk about others. And if it’s something that can be perceived as scandalous and they’re not at the center of it, they’ll jump all over it.”

“It’s all very well for you to downplay what happened, Elizabeth,” Burwood said sharply. “The important matter here is that she got caught alone with an unmarried gentleman. And it had to be Haringdale’s son as well!”

Juliana groaned.

“Why is everyone treating me like I’m at fault here? If anything, I am the wronged party! I didn’t intend to meet Harwood, and I certainly wouldn’t want to seek him out. You know how badly he treated me when we were younger, Father. Why would I want to be around him willingly?”

“People can change over the years, Juliana.” Burwood scowled as he folded his arms, the window behind him and making it hard to see him properly. The sun was peeking through the clouds, which made them brighter than they already were and hurt Juliana’s eyes. “It’s been three years since he left, after all.”

Juliana scoffed.

“That’s not an excuse to me. He hurt me. I was about to leave the room before you came in.”

“Is that what you were going to do? Because he was standing pretty close to you when I came in.”

“He was being intimidating! I don’t back down from bullies like him!”

Juliana knew that she was protesting too much, but she could see that her father disapproved of what she had done. She hadn’t seen him this disappointed in her in a very long time, and it hurt to know that he didn’t believe that the encounter with Harwood was entirely innocent. Juliana would never do that, and she certainly would have chosen a better partner than Harwood.

Someone who didn’t have the ability to break her into several pieces. Harwood would use that to his advantage once he realized that he was capable of doing that to her.

Edward leaned against the wall by the door, his arms folded as he watched her. Juliana shifted on the cushions, taking her cup from Aunt Betsy once she poured out tea for her. She needed something to do with her hands, otherwise she was going to fiddle and twist her fingers until it hurt.

“I don’t know why you won’t listen, Father. Nothing happened between us. I’m sure if you spoke to Harwood about it that you would find out we never even touched. We weren’t even that friendly to each other.”

“It doesn’t matter if you didn’t touch or anything, Juliana. The fact is you were alone with a gentleman, and that is enough for your reputation to be damaged.”

“Just because I exchanged a few words with someone I don’t even like?”

Aunt Betsy sighed.

“I’m afraid things are like that, dear. You know what Society is like. While

we might believe you did nothing wrong, it's what everyone outside thinks about it."

"So what does that mean?" Juliana sipped her tea, hoping that the hot drink would shock her into the real world. This felt like a strange dream that she couldn't wake up from. "What do I have to do to show that this isn't the case?"

"You're going to have to marry Lord Harwood."

Now this did feel like a dream, and Juliana was desperate to wake up again. She took another sip of her tea, feeling it burn her lips. No, this was happening. She was awake, and her father had just suggested that she marry Harwood to repair her reputation.

He had to be mad. This could not be happening to her.

"How..." She lowered the cup and saucer to the tray and turned to him. "How could you even think that saying that is going to make everything better?"

"If you hadn't put yourself in this position..."

"Are you doing it as well?" Juliana pointed at Edward, who was watching her. "You're blaming me for this, too! Father, I'm not the one at fault here, and I shouldn't be the only one blamed for ending up in a position that was not of my doing!"

Burwood's eyes narrowed.

“Did I say that I wasn’t going to blame Lord Harwood as well? He knew that he should have gotten away from you, and yet he didn’t. Both of you are to blame for being in the library alone. If one of you had actually left, then maybe this wouldn’t be happening now.”

“I didn’t know that just two minutes with someone would end up turning into a vicious rumor! Nor did I think that you would be blaming me for it!”

“I’m not...”

“Oh, but you are!” Juliana shot to her feet, glaring at her father. “You said ‘if I hadn’t put myself in this position,’ right? Why am I getting the blame? Because I’m the woman, and I should know better? What about Harwood? Doesn’t he get the blame because he knew I was an unmarried woman and alone?”

“I think you completely missed where Father said that Harwood isn’t completely innocent here, either, Juliana,” Aunt Betsy said gently, taking her niece’s hand. “How about we all calm down and talk about this reasonably?”

“How can I calm down, Aunt Betsy?” Juliana demanded. “I’ve just been told that I have to marry a man I despise. What happened to allowing me to find a man of my choosing? You said that you would respect my choice of a husband, and you wouldn’t force me to marry someone I didn’t want to marry.”

Burwood sighed. He looked exhausted.

“I think you lost that choice when you were alone with Harwood. To restore your reputation, you’re going to have to marry him.”

“But...”

“You have two choices, Juliana. Either you marry Harwood, or you marry someone I choose for you. You won’t get a say in who your husband is because your reputation is more important here.” Burwood’s jaw tightened. “I don’t want to do this to you, and I really wish that I wasn’t doing it now, but this is happening now, and you’re going to do as you’re told.”

Juliana couldn’t believe what she was hearing. How could he say that this was a good idea? Burwood had promised that he would never do this, and now he was going back on his word? Juliana knew that she had put herself in an uncomfortable position, but it wasn’t her fault. Someone had started malicious gossip about her, and she wasn’t able to defend herself. What was wrong with defending her reputation? Did she really have to marry to save it?

The room began to tilt, and Juliana had to sit back down again. How had a good evening ended up turning into a nightmare?

“I can hear a carriage approaching,” Edward said.

Burwood turned and went to the window, looking out into the driveway. His shoulders were tense, and Juliana noticed them tense even more. Whoever had arrived was not someone he was looking forward to seeing.

“It’s Harwood and the Earl of Haringdale,” her father said finally. He turned to Edward. “Would you go and meet them, Edward? Whatever they have to say can be said in front of all of us.”

“Yes, Father.”

Edward left the room. Juliana felt her chest tightening, and she struggled to

breathe. She pressed a hand to her chest and tried to gulp in air, but it wasn't working.

"Juliana?" Aunt Betsy placed a hand on her back. "Juliana, what is it?"

"I...I can't..."

Juliana knew that she was panicking, but she couldn't get herself to calm down. The room was swirling around now, and the edge of her vision was going black. What was happening? Was she about to faint?

Then darkness closed over her, and Juliana couldn't stop it.

Nathaniel was not looking forward to this at all. He couldn't believe that he was actually being forced to do this. His father expected him to go to Juliana and propose marriage to her. The only way they were going to make this better was for the two of them to get married.

Married to her? Nathaniel knew that wouldn't be a good idea. He and Juliana would tear each other apart. They were like barely contained wild animals when they had met the night before, but once they had to live together as husband and wife, anything could happen. Nothing good, he was sure.

Nathaniel hadn't wanted to marry. Not when the woman he truly loved had decided to turn her back on him and get married to someone else. That had crushed him, and Nathaniel didn't think he would be able to recover from it. It was the reason why he left to go to Europe and stay away as long as he did; looking around and seeing people together reminded him of her, and it was too painful. Three years on, and he was only just beginning to feel like he

was back to his old self before he fell in love.

He had sworn off getting married. For now, anyway. It was going to take him time to find the ability to look at women again without wondering if they were going to betray him. His level of trust was not good at all. And his father was expecting him to marry Juliana to stop the rumors swirling around about their families?

This could have been avoided if he hadn't come with them to the party. If Nathaniel had been allowed to stay at home, this wouldn't be happening.

But it had happened, and now Nathaniel was being made to be accountable. And he hated it.

"Come on," Haringdale said as the carriage stopped in front of Burwood's house. "Out. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can move on."

"You do realize that I have to marry Juliana for us to truly move on, don't you, Father?"

His father gave him a hard stare.

"Then you'd better move faster."

Nathaniel tried not to wince. He was not comfortable with how the earl was behaving. Yes, he was upset, but Nathaniel hadn't had him treat him this way since he was a child. They had had the conversation that Haringdale wouldn't force his son into anything. Not yet, anyway.

But this? He couldn't possibly think that they were going to do this.

Knowing that he couldn't delay any longer, Nathaniel got out of the carriage and headed up to the front door. There hadn't been any snow during the night, but with the bite still in the air, it would only be a matter of time before snowflakes began to fall. Nathaniel wouldn't be surprised to see some on the way home.

With his father behind him, Nathaniel was about to knock on the door when it opened and Edward appeared. He didn't look too happy, jerking his head into the house.

"Come on in. We're expecting you."

Nathaniel followed him in, and the three of them stood in the foyer. The butler took their coats, and Nathaniel turned to Edward.

"Forgive me, I didn't plan for any of this to happen."

"I understand that, but you were still alone with her." Edward's mouth was hardened into a thin line. "You keep forgetting that things are different now we're older. And now Juliana has been compromised."

Nathaniel knew that, and he didn't feel happy about it. He shuffled from foot to foot.

"I know she and I don't get along, and I'm sure you're aware of it. But I would never do anything to ruin her."

"Try telling that to the *ton*. They're chomping at the bit to know all the juicy details, I'm sure." Edward turned to Haringdale. "Father is waiting for you in the morning room, my lord. Juliana is awake and present as well."

“Good. The sooner we get this sorted, the sooner we can get back to normal.”

Nathaniel gritted his teeth. He didn't think anything was going to get back to normal. Not when he was going to have to marry a woman who had put him on edge for years.

And from the way she goaded him, Juliana knew exactly what she did to him.

The sound of a crash got his attention, and then Edward was hurrying back to the morning room. Nathaniel followed him, stopping in the doorway when he saw Juliana on the floor, an upended tea tray beside her with china and crockery all over the floor, some of it smashed. Tea was seeping into the rug, and there were remnants of food across the floor.

What on earth had just happened?

“Juliana!” Lady Farley was shifting off the settee and kneeling beside her niece. “Juliana!”

Burwood was standing nearby, looking shocked that his daughter had suddenly collapsed. Nathaniel was the first one to react, hurrying to Lady Farley's side and crouching by the fallen girl.

“What happened?”

“I don't know. She was looking a little pale, and then she just fainted.” Lady Farley looked worried. “I've never seen her do that before.”

Juliana did look very pale. And very still. Nathaniel felt a flicker of fear in his chest at seeing her like this. He was used to her being so lively and there was

always a fire in her eyes. She was passionate. To see her unconscious and unmoving was disconcerting.

Before he knew what he was doing, he slid his arms under the girl and picked her up, cradling Juliana against his chest. There was a chaise by the window at the far end of the room, and Nathaniel carried her over there. She didn't need people crowding her in the middle of the room. Laying her onto the cushions, Nathaniel adjusted one under her head and brushed a stray strand of hair away from her face. Her skin was cool to the touch.

“Can I have a glass of water?” he asked over his shoulder.

A moment later, a glass appeared at his shoulder. Not looking to see who it was who gave it to him, Nathaniel took it and dabbed his fingers into the water. Then he gently drew them across Juliana's forehead. He was tempted to just throw it all into her face, but he had a feeling that nobody would appreciate him doing that.

He dabbed water to her cheeks before smoothing the water away with his thumbs. Nathaniel had no idea what he was doing, but he had seen his mother revived like this once when she had passed out in the garden. But that had been during the summer when the heat was too much. He didn't know if it would work during the winter, but he wasn't about to stop now.

At least he was doing something.

After what felt like forever, Juliana's eyelids fluttered, and then her eyes opened. She blinked up at him, and for a moment, there was nothing in those beautiful eyes, no animosity and distrust that Nathaniel had gotten used to.

Wait, did he just think those eyes were beautiful?

It didn't take long for that to change, though, and Juliana's eyes narrowed, her expression tightening.

“What do you think you're doing?”

“Nice to know you haven't lost your manners at this time of the morning.” Nathaniel grunted as he drew his hand away. “You fainted.”

“And you just happened to be around and decided to play the hero,” Juliana sneered.

“Juliana!”

Both of them jumped. Juliana's eyes widened as she looked past Nathaniel, and he turned to see Burwood standing behind him, his arms folded as he scowled at his daughter.

“Remember that you're in mixed company. I would appreciate if you remembered how to conduct yourself, given the circumstances.”

Juliana looked chastised, wearing a scowl of her own as she pulled herself up. Nathaniel reached out to help, only for Juliana to slap his hand away. The smack of her hand on his seemed to echo around the room. Juliana swung her feet to the floor, clutching onto the chaise as she took a moment to compose herself.

“Forgive me, Father. I didn't intend...”

“It's not your fault that you fainted, dear,” Lady Farley said gently, moving past Nathaniel and settling beside her niece. “You've been through a lot

recently. It's no surprise that this happened."

From the dark flush on Juliana's cheeks, she was not happy about it happening at all. Nathaniel felt some sympathy for her; he couldn't begin to imagine how embarrassing it had to be for this to occur with so many people around.

Then he realized that he was staring at her a bit too much, and he stood up quickly, absently passing the glass of water to Lady Farley. Then he turned and saw his parents watching him from the far side of the room. They were looking solemn, Haringdale giving his son a pointed look.

He was expecting Nathaniel to do what he was supposed to do. Nathaniel had argued with him about it the whole journey over, but his father stood firm. So had his mother; her disappointment was more upsetting than her husband's. Nathaniel hated upsetting his mother, especially. It wasn't her fault that he had put himself in this mess.

All this just because he and Juliana couldn't stop themselves from verbally jousting with each other, away from other people.

Taking a deep breath, Nathaniel turned to Burwood.

"May we speak in private, Your Grace? I think it's best that we discuss things alone."

Burwood looked like he was going to argue, but then he glanced at his daughter, and Nathaniel saw something flicker behind his eyes. Despite his dissatisfaction at the previous night's events, he was concerned for his daughter. Nathaniel wished that he could apologize and then they could keep their distance, but that was not going to work.

He didn't care about his reputation, but Juliana had more to lose from something so innocent. And as he had put her in this position...

God, why did it have to be him?

"We'll go to my study," Burwood said finally. "My sister can take care of things. But my son will be joining us."

Nathaniel wasn't sure how he felt about that. But he nodded in agreement. Burwood then headed out of the room without any ceremony, Edward following him closely. Nathaniel trailed after him, having his father touch his arm as he passed.

"Don't let us down, Son," he muttered.

Nathaniel didn't answer. How could he answer that? He reached the doorway and turned to look back at Juliana. She was still on the chaise, her aunt's arm around her shoulders. She looked close to tears, trying to hide it was her bowed head. Nathaniel felt a pang of sympathy for her, but then he pushed it away. It was definitely not a good time for him to start that. He needed to remember that he didn't like her.

Holding onto that was far easier than giving in.

The three gentlemen entered the study, Edward closing the door behind Nathaniel as soon as he stepped into the room. Now he felt like he was stuck, and the walls were closing in.

"Go on, then, Harwood," Burwood said as he leaned back against his desk. "What was it you wanted to talk about?"

“I...” Nathaniel coughed and started again. “First and foremost, I would like to apologize for putting your daughter in this position. It was not my intention.”

“Whether or not it was your intention, you still did it,” Burwood replied sharply. “My daughter’s reputation is going to be questioned, which reflects badly on me.”

“I assure you that nothing happened between us.”

Edward snorted.

“We may know that, but do you think anyone else is going to listen? The *ton* certainly loves to gossip, and this is perfect for them. We’re not going to get everyone to settle down and realize that it was just a misunderstanding with a simple apology, are we?”

“I understand that, Edward.” Nathaniel gritted his teeth. “I am not taking this lightly, trust me.”

Burwood looked him up and down.

“Well, while I have a feeling I know why you’re here, why don’t you just spit it out and tell me? I’m not in the mood to tiptoe around the main subject.”

“Neither am I.” Nathaniel drew himself to his full height. Even then, he felt incredibly small in front of this man. “I’m here to propose marriage to your daughter, Your Grace.”

There was a short silence, and Nathaniel resisted the urge to shuffle from foot

to foot. God, these two had an unnerving ability to make people wait for their responses when they wanted to. Edward had learned a lot from his father, and now his friend was staring at him with a look that gave away nothing. The boy Nathaniel had played with as a child had really grown up; he didn't recognize much of the old Edward Beaumont.

"I see," Burwood said finally, folding his arms. "So, you're going to marry Juliana."

"I know that the only thing to do in this situation is to marry her. I will do what I can to restore her reputation."

"Even with everything going on between the two of you? We're all aware that you're not on the best of terms."

Did everyone know that they didn't get along? Nathaniel felt his face getting warm. Why did it have to sound so awful? Then again, this was awful. An awful situation nobody wanted to be in.

"I'll do the right thing," he muttered. "I'll even see about securing a special license so we can be married as soon as possible. Whatever it takes."

"You mean whatever it takes to stop people thinking that you're a cad who takes advantage of ladies," Edward grunted.

Nathaniel shot him a sharp look, but his friend didn't seem to care about it. He just stared back. Burwood sighed and rubbed a hand over his face.

"This wasn't what I wanted for my daughter at all. I wanted her to marry someone of her own choosing, someone who would actually love her and not make her feel like it was an afterthought. However, she put herself in a

position where she's being seen differently, and that is going to affect her greatly."

"With all due respect, Your Grace," Nathaniel said quickly, "I'm the one at fault here. Juliana shouldn't be punished for what I did."

Why was he standing up for her? Nathaniel had planned to speak as little as possible, tell the duke what he planned to do, and leave again. So why was he defending Juliana's honor?

Burwood arched an eyebrow.

"Even with what there is between you, you're defending her? Maybe you've matured more than I thought, Harwood."

Nathaniel wasn't sure how to answer that. Burwood looked over at his son, and they exchanged glances.

"However, we can all agree that this needs to be dealt with as soon as possible. Even though it's only been a few hours, the rumors will be strong, and they'll be everywhere. We need to stop them as quickly as we can."

"So does that mean...?" Nathaniel asked.

"I'll agree to this marriage, much as I'm not happy about it. My daughter's reputation is more important than what she wants right now." Burwood didn't look happy when he said that. He pushed off the desk and went over to a cabinet in the corner. "How about we have a drink? We have a lot to discuss."

Nathaniel could feel a tightness around his chest. This was not going to be easy. Now that he had been made to propose marriage, there was no getting out of it.

For the first time in his life, his actions were catching up to him.

Chapter 6

“How are you feeling now, dear?” Aunt Betsy asked as Juliana gingerly nibbled on a biscuit.

“I’m feeling a little better,” Juliana answered, trying not to look at the earl and countess. “I might go back to my room and have a lie-down, though. That rather shook me.”

“Of course. You can do that shortly.” Aunt Betsy paused. “But I think we’re going to have to wait until the other gentlemen return.”

Juliana was surprised that Haringdale was not in the study with her father and brother. Instead, he was standing by the window, hands clasped behind his back as he looked out into the gardens. His body language said that he was not happy, his body rigid. Juliana felt a stab of sympathy for him. He didn’t want to be doing this, either.

“I’m sure it won’t take too long,” Lady Haringdale said gently, giving Juliana a smile. “We can settle this shortly, and then things can go back to normal.”

Juliana doubted that anything could go back to normal after this. Sure, the rumors would die down, but it wouldn’t be normal for her anymore. She would be married to Harwood.

And Juliana felt the dread in her stomach. It made her want to faint again.

How had just a few minutes come to this? All because she chose to stand up for herself against someone who made her blood boil. Now, she had to become his wife.

Juliana felt nauseous. This should not be happening. Why couldn't people leave her alone? Whoever had made a story out of nothing to make it explode out of proportion had a lot to answer for. This had to have been done maliciously. But who would do that?

"Juliana, dear?" Aunt Betsy placed a hand on her niece's back. "Are you all right? You've gone pale again."

"I'm fine, Aunt." Juliana managed a small smile. "I think I must have hit my head when I fell."

"Well, then we'd better call for the physician..."

"No, it'll be fine. I just need to take it slowly for now."

Lady Haringdale glanced at her husband, who hadn't turned away from the window. She sighed.

"Lady Juliana, my husband and I apologize for putting you through this. We did not raise our son to be like this, and we will make sure that he carries out his responsibilities appropriately."

Juliana didn't answer immediately. There wasn't really anything she could say without being rude and going on a verbal rampage about how it wasn't fair that she was being dragged through the mud for something that wasn't her fault. It wouldn't matter how much she and Harwood swore that they had an innocent, albeit fiery, interaction, nobody would believe them.

Normally, Juliana wouldn't care what anyone thought of her, for the most part. She was good at being on her best behavior, and she followed the rules. The one time she did something that she shouldn't, and it felt like she was

being picked apart until there was nothing left. The *ton* occasionally reminded her of a murder of crows when they pecked at the flesh of a body until they couldn't get any further sustenance out of it.

Edward had called it morbid when Juliana had said this once before. Apt, but very morbid.

Now it felt like Juliana had people pecking at her flesh, wanting to draw this misstep out as much as possible until they got bored.

A movement in the doorway drew Juliana's attention, and she looked up to see Harwood entering the room, Edward just behind him. Neither of them looked very happy, their expressions solemn. Edward was the one to speak, clearing his throat.

"Lord Haringdale, Father would like to talk to you in the study."

"Oh. Right." The earl turned, his gaze landing on his son first. "So...is it...?"

"I'll escort you. Father has a lot to discuss." Edward gave Harwood a sharp look before turning away. "We all do."

Juliana saw Harwood wince. The friendship between the two of them seemed to have taken a big hit, and it was a little precarious now. Juliana didn't think she would encounter a time when the relationship between her brother and his childhood friend would be fractured. She wasn't even aware that Edward would be this upset about something that had happened to her, even if nothing did occur.

Her brother and the earl left the room, leaving Harwood standing by the door. He looked like he would rather be anywhere except in front of her right now.

Juliana's mind flashed back to earlier when she came around and found Harwood reviving her with water on her face, his touch surprisingly gentle as he smoothed his fingers across her cheek.

Aunt Betsy had told her that he had carried Juliana after she fainted, which had shocked her. Harwood had willingly looked after her when she was unable to look after herself? What was going on?

This felt like she was in a very strange dream where Harwood was actually being a decent person. What was wrong with her?

"I think we need to leave these two alone," Aunt Betsy said suddenly, getting to her feet and smoothing herself down. "Lady Haringdale, shall we retreat and discuss the Christmas party we're hosting in a few weeks?"

"Of course." Looking grateful for a reprieve, Lady Haringdale got to her feet. "I'm looking forward to it."

Juliana frowned at her aunt.

"We're actually going to have the Christmas party after what happened? Shouldn't we...you know...just cancel it?"

Aunt Betsy wagged her finger at her niece.

"No, dear, that is not going to happen. We don't want to fuel the gossip any further, do we?"

"How would canceling a Christmas party fuel the gossip? I don't understand."

“You will, eventually.”

“What does that even mean, Aunt Betsy?”

“Just stop and talk to Lord Harwood. I think you have a few things to discuss.” Her aunt turned back to the countess. “Come, Lady Haringdale.”

Lady Haringdale followed her across the room, and they settled on the chaise Juliana had been occupying a short while ago. Far enough that they were out of earshot but close enough to watch what the other occupants were doing. Somehow, this made Juliana feel more uncomfortable, instead of comforted. She didn't like having people watching her with every move she made.

Harwood was staring at her, making Juliana feel even worse. If only she could drag him into another room and scream at him for doing this to her. Much as she was willing to admit that this was partly her fault, it couldn't lay at her door completely. The *ton* might have done that to her, but Juliana wasn't about to take all of the blame.

She folded her arms and glowered at the man standing before her.

“So, you've decided to do the right thing,” she sneered.

“You think I want to do this?”

“Well, we're in this position because of you.”

Harwood looked affronted.

“Me? How am I the one to blame here?”

“Because you should have stayed where you were. If you had remained sitting, and I stayed by the door, we might not even be in this situation.”

Harwood scoffed at that.

“Do you really think that’s going to work? I’m not about to be blamed for something that we both played a part in.”

“You make it sound like we actively tried to get caught.”

“Do you know who started this rumor yet?”

Juliana shook her head.

“No, I have no idea. I don’t know if it’s someone who has a grudge against one of us and wanted to cause trouble, or if one of the guests saw us disappearing and decided to start a rumor because they were bored. I’m leaning more toward the latter.”

“You don’t have anyone with a grudge?”

“No, of course not. Do you?”

Harwood shook his head.

“I’ve been out of the country for three years.”

“That doesn’t answer the question, Harwood.”

“What I mean is if anyone had a grudge against me, it would be before I left for the continent, which would make it ridiculous as they’ve held onto a grudge for so many years when I’ve not been present. And, as far as I know, none of my acquaintances who could have a grudge were present.”

So it was beginning to sound more like someone who had gotten bored to get them into trouble because it was amusing. Juliana was getting a headache from all of this.

“If there was any other way out of this,” Harwood went on, “I would take it. I don’t particularly want to marry someone who is going to make my life a misery once she’s my life.”

Juliana snorted. “I was beginning to think the same way about you,” she retorted.

“Maybe if you were actually a decent person...”

“How dare you? Maybe if you weren’t such an odious person who doesn’t care about anyone except yourself, then we wouldn’t be in this position in the first place?”

Juliana saw something flicker behind his eyes, but then it was gone before she could grab onto it. She paced over to the window, staring out into the frosty gardens. It did look beautiful, although it looked as cold as she felt.

How had this happened to her? How had she been put in a position that she couldn’t get out of? And why, of all people, did the man she had to marry have to be Harwood?

There could be worse people, but not to Juliana.

Nathaniel did feel a pang of sympathy for Juliana as she stood at the window, staring out with her shoulders rigid. She looked close to breaking down, and he almost wished that she would. Juliana was not Juliana unless she was showing her fiery side, and Nathaniel wanted to see that.

He could cope with the fire and anger. But he couldn't cope with her distress. That was not a part of her that he was used to.

It didn't help that his mother and her aunt were sitting close by, openly watching them despite talking between themselves. That was going to make this even more awkward. From the way she was behaving, Juliana was more than aware of them.

"Why don't we go for a walk outside?" he suggested.

"What?" Juliana turned and stared at him. "You're suggesting that we go out there?"

"Why not? I think we both need the cold to shock us back to the present." Nathaniel couldn't help himself and smiled. "And it should cool your temper a little bit."

Juliana's eyes narrowed.

"You just can't help yourself, can you?"

"Not really." Nathaniel glanced over at the two older ladies. "Also, I'm sure you want to get away from our audience for a while."

Juliana faltered. But her guard was still up.

“I doubt they’re going to let me out of their sight.”

“Leave it to me.” Nathaniel waved at his mother to get her attention. “We’re going for a walk around the front lawn, Mother. I think Lady Juliana needs some air after her fainting spell earlier.”

Lady Haringdale frowned.

“You’re going outside. But...”

“If you don’t want to come out into the cold, you and Lady Farley can watch us from the window. We’re not going to do anything stupid.”

“You mean no more than we already have,” Juliana muttered.

Nathaniel ignored her, taking her arm and leading her toward the door.

“We’ll be out in the open, and you’ll be able to see us.” He spoke quickly while still moving. “We won’t be long, Mother.”

They were out of the room before Lady Haringdale or Lady Farley could say anything in response, and they collected their outdoor garments from the closet, the butler putting a thick cloak around Juliana’s shoulders.

She was still looking a little pale, although there was more color in her cheeks. Being outside might be good for her, although Nathaniel wasn’t sure why he wanted to spend more time than he had to with the girl.

She was irritating and frustrating. Beautiful, yes, passionate, absolutely, but irritating. Nathaniel should be giving her a wide berth.

And yet he found that he couldn't.

Glad that their fathers were elsewhere discussing their impending marriage, Nathaniel held the door open for Juliana and ushered her outside. The cold hit them in the face, and Nathaniel had to fight back a gasp as it wrapped around him. Even being bundled up and relatively warm, the cold was still a shock.

"We should go onto the lawn," he said, taking Juliana's arm. "Then we'll be seen without anyone wondering what we're doing."

"I can walk on my own, thank you." Juliana pulled her arm away. "I would appreciate if you didn't touch me."

Nathaniel held up his hands and took a step back.

"As you wish."

Keeping her head high, Juliana went down the steps and toward the front lawn. Being just a stretch of grass with two symmetrical bushes standing almost as tall as trees in the middle, the front of the house was not shaded from the weather when it came from the south.

Nathaniel could see all the way to the end of the driveway, far off in the distance. He still had no idea why anyone needed a driveway that was at least half a mile long. That didn't make any sense.

But it wasn't his house, so he wasn't about to pick it apart. Hunching over in

his coat and turning up his collar—snow was definitely going to fall soon—he descended the stone staircase and walked across the gravel to join Juliana, who was standing with her back to him, staring out into the distance. The frosted grass crunched under his feet as Nathaniel approached.

He didn't turn around to see if his mother was looking out of the window at them. It wouldn't matter if she wasn't watching them closely, anyway. Someone was bound to see them. What could he and Juliana get up to outside in the freezing cold?

Don't say that to Burwood or his son. They would give you a list of what you could get up to, and none of it would be polite.

Bracing himself, Nathaniel hovered near Juliana. He wanted to reach out and touch her shoulder, but she would slap his hand away. She was very averse to his touch, from what he could tell.

Maybe that was a good thing. Although it wouldn't be, further into the future.

“Juliana...” Nathaniel hesitated. *How was he going to get through this?* “I must apologize for my part in this. What ended up being innocent became something worse for both of us.”

“You like stating the obvious, don't you?”

“We shouldn't have interacted at all.”

“No, we shouldn't.”

Juliana turned to him. She looked angry, but he was shocked to see the tears

in her eyes.

“This house is my home. I should be able to go wherever I want in my own home without anyone questioning me about what I’m doing. Instead, it becomes clear that I can’t even get some air and open a door in my residence without someone assuming that I’m sneaking away to have an illicit rendezvous. How is that fair on me?”

Nathaniel could see her point. If it had happened to him, he would have been just as outraged. He shoved his hands into his pockets, wishing that his gloves were thicker.

“It’s not fair on you at all. Someone was causing trouble.”

“But I don’t have any enemies, so that doesn’t make any sense.”

“What about your former beau?”

Juliana wrinkled her nose.

“Don’t use that word. It sounds far too flowery, and I hate flowery words.”

“I don’t know what else to call him.” Nathaniel shrugged. “You two were courting, he proposed, and you turned him down. What am I supposed to call him?”

“Lord Hastings. That’s what you call him. He’s not ‘my’ anything.”

Nathaniel conceded that. He was still surprised that Hastings had actually tried to ask for Juliana’s hand in marriage. He would get something out of the

marriage with his new wife being a duke's daughter, but that wouldn't have worked out for Juliana.

Even Nathaniel knew that it wouldn't have worked, and he didn't care to be involved in Juliana's life. He might not care for her, but he knew more about her than Hastings ever could.

Why did that make him feel uncomfortable?

"Maybe he said something. Maybe he saw you leaving and wanted to start a whisper that you were sneaking off with someone else."

"But he is not a child." Juliana shook her head. "Lord Hastings might not be able to judge when a good time is to ask a girl to marry him, but he wouldn't be that petty to ruin my reputation."

"From what I heard, you did turn him down in front of everyone."

"There were less than twenty people in the room, not like the party last night. I know he's resentful toward me because of how I did it, and I admit that I could have done things differently, but being asked to marry someone in front of so many people and having that pressure on me..."

Juliana grimaced.

"It's not something I'm comfortable with. I would rather have a private moment, something a bit more intimate. But look what happened...I ended up with a marriage that I don't want, just because I wanted a moment in private away from prying eyes."

That sounded more like an accusation than anything else. Nathaniel glanced toward the house.

“Look, I know this isn’t something that either of us wants, but we have to go through with it. If you want your reputation to weather the storm...”

“I could have managed that without a marriage!”

“Do you want me to retract the proposal to your father to find that out? I don’t think anyone’s going to be too impressed by it.”

Juliana’s jaw tightened. She turned and paced away, leaving footprints in the frosty grass.

“Now I know how people feel when they’re forced into something that they don’t want. Father said he would never do that to me, and this is what he’s doing now. And don’t say that it’s my own fault that he is doing this now.”

“I wasn’t going to say a word.”

Juliana scoffed.

“You never know when you shut up, Harwood. You like to get people into trouble. And you’ve gotten me into trouble yet again.”

Nathaniel could handle her anger directed at him, although he didn’t like it. But this wasn’t going to get them anywhere. He shivered as a brisk wind whispered around him, sending a shiver down his spine. Whoever thought Christmas would be a good celebration in the middle of winter must have been mad.

“Look, we can go back and forth about this forever, but the fact remains, we have to marry to restore order. Neither of us likes it, and you’re making your feelings clear about the matter, but there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“If only there was.”

“If there was, I would have taken it already.” Nathaniel looked at the ground. “I never wanted to think about marriage again. So to be married to you...let’s just say that it doesn’t sit well with me.”

“What do you mean by that?” Juliana sounded confused, more than outraged. “You never wanted to think about marriage again? What does that mean?”

Then Nathaniel realized what he had just said. He had almost confessed to what had happened to him before. About the real reason he left England three years ago. But that wasn’t something Nathaniel was prepared to tell Juliana.

He moved on quickly before Juliana could ask him more about it.

“We’re going to have to make the most of it. I don’t know how, but unless you want to back out of this and have your reputation questioned to the point you can’t get yourself a marriage that you actually want...”

Juliana scowled at him.

“I hate you,” she hissed.

Nathaniel didn’t respond to that. Deciding that it was far too cold to stay outside any longer, he turned and headed back to the house.

“Where are you going?” Juliana demanded.

“I’m going inside.”

“We’ve only just come out here! You’re going to leave me to freeze?”

Nathaniel barked out a harsh laugh but didn’t stop walking.

“You say you can look after yourself, right? You don’t need me to escort you back into the house. And I’m sure the cold air will clear your head. It might cool you down as well.”

He wasn’t being very gentlemanly right now, Nathaniel was aware of that. He was more than likely going to get a scolding from his parents for behaving like this, but he was past the point of caring. They were being told what to do like they were children, and Nathaniel wanted to have some semblance of control.

Besides, the winter weather might cool Juliana’s temper and make her easier to handle. Although Nathaniel doubted that this would work.

He was just being petty.

Chapter 7

“My lady?”

Juliana looked up to see her maid standing in the doorway. She lowered her book.

“What is it, Beth?”

“Lady Lucy has arrived. You said you wanted to be told about it...”

“Oh, of course.”

Juliana had pretty much forgotten about Lucy coming over to visit. Even though they had been together for several hours the night before, her friend was insistent about coming over the next day so they could discuss what had happened during the party.

Although Juliana had a feeling they were going to be talking about her supposed indiscretion. Lucy knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't do anything indiscreet with anyone, much less Harwood, but the faith of one person didn't match up to the rest of the *ton*.

“I'll be right down,” Juliana said as she closed her book. “I wasn't really reading, anyway. None of the words were making any sense.”

“You've had quite a shock today, my lady,” Beth said, giving her a sympathetic smile. “I understand that this is a struggle for you.”

“Thank you, Beth. I’m glad that someone understands me.”

Her maid gave her a curtsy and left the room. Letting out a heavy sigh, Juliana stood up and tossed her book onto her chair. She had been looking forward to reading that particular book, and none of the words ended up being in an order that she could understand. It was like her head was in a muddle.

And it was. As was the rest of her future. Juliana knew that she shouldn’t be so pessimistic about it all, but how else was she supposed to describe it? She had been told by Burwood many times that he would respect her choice of husband, within reason. She hadn’t even found anyone yet who would make her want to spend the rest of her life with them. And now it had to be Nathaniel Harwood?

If it had been when she followed him around as a child, before he so cruelly pushed her away, then Juliana might have been delighted. She had taken a fancy to Harwood long ago, thinking that he was incredible.

Until he told her that he didn’t even like her and wanted her to leave him alone. That had crushed her, and Juliana wasn’t entirely sure if she had recovered from it ten years ago.

How was she supposed to live a married life with someone she despised? It couldn’t be possible, surely.

Her heart heavy, Juliana made her way downstairs and into the morning room. Lucy was already there, talking to the maid as she poured out coffee for her. She looked up first when Juliana entered the room, and she got to her feet. Juliana didn’t need to say anything. Just the sight of her friend had her bursting into tears. All of the tension and distress had been building up, and then it just broke down.

Lucy crossed the room and put her arms around her, rubbing her back as Juliana sobbed.

“It’s all right. Just let it out.” Her voice was gentle, soothing. “It’s all right.”

It didn’t take long for all of it to come out, and soon Juliana was feeling emotionally drained; her body felt heavy, while her head throbbed. It hadn’t made her feel better, but she was glad she had managed to get it out. At least Lucy didn’t judge her for any of that.

“Come and sit down.” Lucy led her to the settee. “You need to get something warm in you. That will make you feel better.”

“I don’t know about that, Lucy.” Juliana sat down, giving the maid a small smile as she poured out coffee for her. “Thank you, Simons.”

“Do you need anything else, my lady?”

“No, thank you.”

Simons bowed and left the room. Lucy picked up her cup and took a sip.

“I still can’t believe this actually happened. To think that you’re the one, out of us two, who would end up in this situation.”

“That’s a bit harsh on you, isn’t it?” Juliana asked.

“Well, I’m a little more spirited than you are. That’s what my mother says about me.” Lucy shrugged. “I guess she thinks I’m more likely to end up having a rumor whispered about me. But I don’t think even I could have a

rumor get this big so quickly.”

“I didn’t expect that, either.” Juliana cupped her hands around her cup, feeling the warmth seep into her fingers. “I don’t know why that would be the case. Maybe it’s because I’m a duke’s daughter, and that’s enough for people to pay attention. Maybe it’s because I’m related to the host, and it happened at the party.”

“Whatever it is, the rumor must have started out maliciously. Did anyone know where you were going? Or see you with Harwood?”

“I only told my aunt so she wasn’t looking around for me. And she said to take my time. As for the library encounter, we were barely in there together for two minutes before Father found us. Nobody could have seen us unless they were following me.”

Juliana shuddered.

“I don’t like the thought of someone following me around and watching what I do. That just sounds scary.”

“Maybe Hastings was following you around, and he caught a glimpse of Harwood in the room with you,” Lucy suggested. “Then he dropped the wrong thing into the wrong ear just to get back at you for humiliating him.”

Juliana frowned at her friend. Why had she brought him up as well?

“You’re the second person who’s mentioned Lord Hastings today. Why would he do something that horrible?”

“Well, I’ve seen the way he’s been around you since you turned him down. I wouldn’t be surprised if he wanted to get back at you for embarrassing him.”

“He’s a grown man. He wouldn’t do something so petty.” Juliana sipped her coffee. “While he might be a lot of things, I think we should give him some credit and that he would not behave like a petulant child.”

“Well, we can’t rule it out.” Lucy peered at her. “Who also suggested that he might have started the rumor? I was talking to your brother when I came in, and he didn’t say anything about it.”

“Harwood said it.”

“Harwood?” Lucy looked interested. “Now that is curious.”

“How so?”

“That he would go to that. What about someone who wanted to take Harwood himself down?”

Juliana shook her head.

“Harwood’s not been in the country for years, so whatever grudges are being held against him would have been from years ago. I know people can hate for years, but this seems like a child tattling on someone else rather than anything malicious.”

“It is malicious when your reputation is being tarnished as a result,” Lucy pointed out.

Juliana had to concede that. It was frustrating that she was being ruined because of an innocent interaction. Harwood would have been able to brush it off and carry on as normal. But she couldn't. How was that fair?

Now she was being made to marry Harwood to save herself and her family's reputation.

"I hate this, Lucy."

Juliana could feel the heat from the cup beginning to burn her fingers, but she ignored it. She didn't care that she was not holding it appropriately, either; etiquette was not something she was interested in sustaining right now.

"A gentleman can commit an indiscretion, and it's blatant, but he just carries on. There are whispers, and they follow him around, but it doesn't affect him. A lady ends up being in the same room as a gentleman in her own home, and she's considered a harlot, and she must be up to no good.

Plus, it's tied to her family's reputation, which means they get humiliated as well. I don't understand any of it, and I wish it wasn't so harsh on us."

"I know. But that's how Society is. We have to follow the rules."

"And it was the men who made the rules, wasn't it?" Juliana grunted. "That's why they can get away with more, and we can't even look at someone without others around us thinking there's something going on."

"Complaining about how unfair Society's rules are against women is not going to help you now, is it? Nobody's going to listen because you're upset about it."

Juliana felt the lump she had managed to get rid of come back and build in her throat. It was getting harder to swallow now. The burning sensation was getting to be too much, and she put the cup down, flexing her fingers. They were looking a little red now.

“What am I supposed to do, Lucy? How am I supposed to get out of this? I don’t want to marry Harwood. We would be at each other’s throats all the time, and I wouldn’t be able to be myself. He leaves me constantly on edge. Not to mention that he hates me.”

“He’s said that to you?”

“Years ago. From the way he treats me, it’s not gotten any better. How can Father make me marry him?”

Lucy sighed.

“I’m afraid he hasn’t got a choice. You have to go through this.”

“I wish you could give me a better solution. Like maybe suggest that I run away and hide in another part of the country, or even go to Ireland and get out of my father’s reach.”

Lucy smiled.

“That sounds like a plan, doesn’t it? But that’s just going to make the family reputation crumble even more, isn’t it? It would allow them to recover, and people are still going to talk.”

Juliana knew she was right. It wouldn’t matter what she did; if she didn’t

marry Harwood, the talk was still going to be there. Her father and brother would have to deal with it, while she ran off and never came back. That was not fair on them, even though it wasn't fair on Juliana to be treated like this.

Besides, she didn't have the courage to run away on her own. She had a feeling that she would be found as soon as she left the driveway. Juliana had always been bad at playing hide and seek as a child. Leaving with a little money and nothing but the clothes on her back wouldn't make it any easier.

"So, I'm going to have to marry this man." She scowled at the floor. "This is not the Christmas I wanted."

"Maybe it won't be as bad as you think."

"What?" Juliana stared at her. "Did I hear you correctly, Lucy? You think that this will actually work for me?"

"Perhaps." Lucy shrugged. "You're tenacious, Juliana. You don't back down from anything, and I don't expect anything less from this situation. But maybe you'll be able to work it to your advantage."

Juliana felt very confused. How could she work this to her advantage? She shifted around to fully face her friend.

"I think you must have hit your head on the way here, Lucy. How am I supposed to do that?"

"We can think of something. Perhaps you can say if you're married against your will, then you can have something in return. Also, you do get a lot more freedom than I would do."

She did have a point. Married women had a lot more ability to do what they wanted and were less scrutinized than unmarried ladies. She wouldn't need to have someone breathing down her neck all the time.

And, from what Juliana had heard, there were married couples who had their own apartments in the same house and did what they wanted without even passing by each other. They could live their own lives without any intrusion.

Harwood would certainly leave her alone if she told him to. Juliana had no intention of being in the same room as him if she could absolutely avoid it. Whenever they were together, she could feel her whole body shaking, especially when his eyes were on her.

If Harwood found out her feelings toward him, he would certainly keep his distance. Who would want to know that the feelings from years ago hadn't really gone away?

You don't have any feelings for him. Not that kind. You hate him, and you don't want anything to do with him.

I'm going to need to keep saying that over and over until I can properly convince myself.

“Nate?”

Nathaniel turned, tearing his gaze away from the gardens, which were beginning to look like he was in some strange land with all the snow beginning to fall. It had started snowing shortly after he and his father returned home, although it wasn't as thick and hard as Nathaniel had

expected.

The flakes were tiny, settling on the ground before disappearing completely, turning into mush. It had taken a while for it to settle properly, dusting everything in the garden with white.

Eleanor was standing in the doorway, clutching a shawl tightly around her shoulders while keeping out of the snow. She peered out at him.

“Why don’t you come in? It’s getting really cold out there.”

Nathaniel knew that he should. Despite having a coat and gloves on, his fingers felt like ice, and he was shivering. He was going to catch a cold if he stayed outside any longer, but the bite of the cold air on his face and the snowflakes tickling his cheek made him feel like he needed to be punished. This was his punishment for doing something stupid.

Well, it hadn’t felt stupid at the time. But it had started a knock-on effect with everything else, and now Nathaniel couldn’t see a way out of it.

“Nate.” Eleanor looked as if she was going to venture outside but decided against it. “Please. You’re worrying me. I’m half-expecting to look outside and see a snowman on the porch.”

“It’s not that bad, Eleanor.”

“It will be if you don’t come in anytime soon. Please, Nate? It’s getting dark out there as well. Something could happen to you, and nobody would know about it.”

Nathaniel could hear the concern in her voice, and that made him concede that she was right. He did need to come inside. If anything, just to thaw his body out.

Careful not to put his foot down too quickly—the terrace did end up getting slippery if it got wet—Nathaniel made his way back into the house and followed Eleanor into the drawing room.

The fire was lit and burning away strongly, filling the room with a warmth that made Nathaniel's fingers tingle. He tugged off his gloves and managed to straighten his fingers out before curling them again.

"Honestly," Eleanor said with a shake of her head, "I don't know why you do that to yourself. You're behaving like you've taken a leave of your senses."

"Given the situation, that sounds rather appropriate." Grimacing as he handled his wet gloves, Nathaniel managed to shrug off his coat. "Can you ring for someone to come and take these? They're going to drip all over the floor."

"Not that you care about that." Eleanor grunted as she went over to the bellpull by the fireplace and tugged on it. "You're not going to be the one cleaning up the mess."

"It's hardly a mess."

"That just shows that you've never cleaned up a mess of your own in your life."

Nathaniel had a feeling that she didn't just mean dripping melted snow all over the floor. Sighing, he laid his coat and gloves on a chair by the door and

kicked off his sodden shoes. He knew that he shouldn't be walking around with no shoes on, but he was past the point of caring, at this point. Also, his toes were frozen, and they weren't going to get warm encased in leather.

"You make it sound like I can't do anything for myself," he grumbled, padding over to the fire in his stocking feet. "I'm not as bad at that."

"Well, Uncle is having to clean up your mess now, isn't he?"

"I didn't ask him to! And I didn't anticipate someone looking in on us, misinterpreting the situation, and then telling everyone about it."

Nathaniel slumped into a chair by the fire and stretched his feet toward the heat. He could see a line on his socks where they were soaked through.

"The guests were really bored if they took that as something exciting to talk about."

"And you keep telling me to behave myself when I'm in public," Eleanor muttered.

She was now sitting on the settee across from her cousin, tugging the shawl tighter around her shoulders. She looked as worn out as Nathaniel felt.

He wished that he could say something to make her feel better, but he wasn't sure what. Even though he hadn't done anything, this would still affect Eleanor in a way. It was ridiculous, but Nathaniel wasn't about to unravel it. That would just put him into more knots.

"So, you managed to get the special license," Eleanor said. "It didn't take as

long as I thought it would.”

“It wasn’t a special license.”

“What? But I thought that’s what you went to get.”

Nathaniel shrugged. He had thought the same.

“Those are incredibly rare to obtain, and the only difference between a common license and a special license, apart from the price, is the ability to marry anywhere other than a church and outside the hours of eight in the morning and midday.

Also, the special license we would have had to get from the Archbishop of Canterbury while the common license is obtained by the local bishop.”

Eleanor looked curious.

“I had no idea about any of that.”

“Well, you’re not going to be doing something like that, are you? Unless you want to get married and avoid having the banns being published.”

“Whereas publishing the banns and taking your time getting married is cheaper?”

“I have no idea. I’m not going through that process.”

If his cousin was annoyed by his sharp remark, she didn’t say anything. She

settled back against the cushions, stretching her legs toward the fire.

“So either license would work for you.”

“Pretty much. Thankfully, the archbishop’s people were understanding that we didn’t know who our local bishop was and allowed us to obtain a common license from them. I don’t know the major ins and outs of it, but Father preferred paying ten shillings for that instead of thirty pounds.”

“What?” Eleanor squeaked. “A special license costs thirty pounds?”

“Yes. The two licenses essentially do the same thing, with slightly different parameters, so we went with a common license. Burwood has a private chapel on his estate, so Father said we would be getting married there.”

Nathaniel hadn’t liked it when he said that. It felt like everything was being taken out of his hands. He had no control over anything. It had been snatched away from him in the last eighteen hours. Haringdale had told him that it was his own fault when Nathaniel complained about it, and he wouldn’t hear anything else. It had made their journey home from London rather tense.

It really was happening. He and Juliana were getting married, and as soon as possible.

How could it have come to this? Nathaniel wished that he could go back in time and stop this from happening. He didn’t want to get married, and he certainly didn’t want Juliana as his wife. She would make him regret every decision in his life.

If he had been able to marry years ago, none of this would be happening. Or maybe it would, and there would be a rumor that they were having an affair.

Some people really had too much time on their hands.

Whoever had started this and gotten both him and Juliana into trouble would sorely regret it once Nathaniel found the culprit.

“So,” Eleanor pursed her lips, “this is actually happening.”

“It is.” Nathaniel scowled at the dancing flames in the hearth. “I feel like I must have done something bad in another life for this to happen to me now. Someone wanted to punish me.”

“Don’t think about it like that, Nate.”

“How am I supposed to think about it, Eleanor? I’m being forced into a gilded cage, and I don’t like it.”

Eleanor rolled her eyes.

“Now you know how I feel. You think being forced into a gilded cage is going to get any sympathy from me?”

Nathaniel winced.

“I didn’t mean it...”

“I know what you meant, but it doesn’t mean I’m going to like it.” Eleanor sighed. “Maybe you can see the bright side of all this.”

“The bright side?” Nathaniel scoffed. “How can I see the bright side in any of

this?”

“At least they’re not marrying you to a stranger. You know Juliana Beaumont. That must make things a little better.”

“It doesn’t matter if I know Juliana Beaumont already. I don’t like her, and she certainly doesn’t like me.”

Eleanor’s mouth twitched. She looked slightly amused.

“You make it sound like you’re going to kill each other within a few months.”

“I will not be surprised if that happens.”

“Do you really hate her that much? Was she that annoying that you couldn’t stand her anymore when she was a child?”

Nathaniel was about to answer, but then he stopped himself. He had found Juliana annoying when they were children, and he thought that he hated her. But as time went on and they were inadvertently pushed together as they grew up, Nathaniel knew that something had shifted. He wasn’t sure what, but he kept it at arm’s length. It was far easier to say that he hated Juliana Beaumont than admit that he felt differently about her now.

When he fell in love, Nathaniel had thought he had put things behind him. That he could let go of something that had been plaguing him for years and that he had refused to address it. But then he was betrayed, and Nathaniel needed to get away. That should have helped him get a better perspective on things.

And it hadn't worked. He was back from the continent, and what he had been running away from was still there, and it just seemed more intense.

Nathaniel had been lying to himself all these years about Juliana. So this would feel like torture being married to a woman he had tried to keep away from, and now he would have no excuses to keep his distance.

He should have stayed hating her. It would make things a lot easier for him. Sure, he could get through being married to Juliana, but how could he hide that he had stopped hating her years ago? That the thought of making her his wife actually scared him?

Nathaniel wished that he could get out of this. But he couldn't. Because he was a fool to think verbally jousting with Juliana wouldn't come to anything.

Chapter 8

“Are you ready to go, my lady?” Beth asked.

Juliana stood in front of the mirror, staring at her reflection. She was ready, but she didn’t want to go. She wanted to stay in her room and hide away from everyone, hoping that this was just a hideous dream, and that this wasn’t actually happening to her.

But it was. They were going to meet with Harwood and his parents at the park. Even with the snow having settled like a giant white blanket on the world, they were going for a walk in the local park. Well, Juliana and Harwood would be doing that while everyone else kept a close eye on them. It was almost like they didn’t trust the two of them not to do something stupid.

Juliana did want to do something. She wanted to run away.

Her conversation with Lucy the day before was still in her mind, but she couldn’t get herself to settle down. Maybe she could work it to her advantage with her added freedom to move around. Maybe she would be able to live in the same house as Harwood without actually having to lay eyes on him. But that was just a small amount of the marriage itself. It wasn’t just about appearances.

Juliana knew that she wouldn’t be able to manage this without breaking down. Then Harwood would find out the truth, and Juliana would be humiliated.

He could never find out that her heart, while broken, had never forgotten him.

No matter how much she tried to stop herself, everything was still there. And it was close to coming to the surface. That would just make things worse; Harwood had made it clear that he didn't care for her at all.

Living with hate was far easier than living with unrequited love.

Juliana saw a tear trickle down her cheek, and she swiped it away with her gloved hand. God, she needed to get herself together. It wasn't going to help anyone behaving like this. She was backed into a corner, and the only way to get out was to go along with everything.

Even if she just wanted to scream.

"Lady Juliana?" Beth hovered by the door. "Are you ready?"

Making sure that it didn't look like she had been crying, Juliana took a deep breath and turned, giving Beth a smile that made her cheeks hurt.

"I'm ready. Shall we join everyone?"

With everything in her telling her that she could push Beth out of the room and lock the door behind her, Juliana followed her maid out and they headed downstairs. Burwood and Edward were already in the foyer, dressed for their walk. Edward was the first to see Juliana arrive, and he met her at the foot of the stairs.

"We were beginning to think you were never going to come down."

"You didn't have to wait for me, you know."

“You’re the reason we’re going in the first place. You are not being left alone.”

That felt more accusatory than it should have been. Juliana gritted her teeth and managed to smile back at her brother.

“Then I’d better make sure I take as long as possible so you have to wait for me,” she said with a sickly sweet tone. “I can’t be getting into further trouble, can I?”

Burwood shook his head with a frown.

“I wish you would stop with this behavior, Juliana. You’re not a child anymore.”

“But I might as well be, Father,” Juliana shot back. “Because I have to do as I’m told no matter what.”

“We’ve been through this before...”

“Yes, and the outcome is going to be the same. But that doesn’t mean I can put a big smile on my face and pretend that I agree with this. Because I don’t.”

Burwood looked like he wanted to argue back, but he turned away and strode toward the door.

“Don’t take long getting into the carriage. Where’s Mary, by the way?”

“Mary’s just coming,” Edward replied.

Juliana blinked.

“Mary? Why is Mary coming with us?”

“Well, we can’t be with you at all times.” Burwood shot her a sharp look as he stood at the open door, letting the icy cold air into the house. “So we’ve got someone to keep a closer eye on you when we can’t.”

Mary was one of the maids who worked in the kitchens. Juliana knew her; she was close to ten years older and very prim and proper. If she had been a lady herself, Mary would have fitted in perfectly. And she took her duties very seriously. It wouldn’t matter if Juliana wanted to do something; if her father didn’t permit it, Mary would make sure that it wouldn’t happen.

She was stricter than Juliana’s old governess.

“Can’t I have Beth come with me?” Juliana asked. “If I have to have a chaperone, at least let me have my own maid come along.”

Burwood’s eyes narrowed.

“You will do as you’re told, Juliana. I suggest you stop complaining because I’m getting fed up with it.”

Juliana winced. Her father had never spoken to her like this before. Not even when she had gotten into trouble when she was younger. This was not a side of him that she was used to. Before she could stutter a reply, Burwood had left the house and was disappearing out of sight. Edward took Juliana’s arm.

“Come on. Let’s get moving. The sooner we get to the park, the sooner we

can get through this and come home. It's far too cold for this."

"I'm surprised that we're doing this at all. Barely anyone goes to the park at this time of year."

"All the more reason for us to go. It's quieter."

Juliana turned to her brother, slowing them as they neared the door.

"You do know that nothing happened, don't you? Surely you know that I would have nothing to do with Harwood, right?"

Edward tilted his head to one side.

"Initially, I thought that it was someone causing trouble. I am aware that you are too ladylike to strike Harwood. If I had heard that, I would have been more inclined to believe something happened."

"Thank you." Juliana felt relieved. "I'm glad you believe something. The way you're behaving around Father is scaring me."

"However, I then remind myself that people change. You might say that you would never do anything inappropriate with my friend, but then I recall how you were when we were children." Edward's voice was quiet. "It could be a misdirection to get out of the fact you were caught. Either way, you need to take accountability for this."

Juliana had never gone from being relieved to shocked so fast. Her brother might as well have slapped her for what he just said. She stared at him.

“So you think...but I wouldn't!”

“Didn't you follow us around when we were younger?”

“Because we were children, and I wanted to play with my brother and his friend! That was it! And you know that Harwood doesn't like me.”

Edward shrugged.

“People change, Juliana.”

Was he referring to her or to Harwood? Juliana had no idea what was going on anymore. Everything was just spinning around and leaving her dizzy. From what she could tell, Edward couldn't make up his mind what he believed. Or was she looking for something that wasn't there?

Juliana wished that she could go upstairs and get back into bed so she could restart the day. Never mind the day, restart the whole week and go back Aunt Betsy's party before she ended up in this mess.

“Are you two off now?”

Juliana turned. Aunt Betsy was walking toward them, tugging a shawl up around her shoulders as she gave her niece a comforting smile. Edward turned to her.

“We are. Are you sure you don't want to join us, Aunt Betsy?”

“I'm sure. There will be far too many people present, and you don't need that many chaperones for two people.” Aunt Betsy nodded at Juliana. “I'll be here

when you get back, Juliana. Come and find me once you return.”

Hearing that from her aunt made Juliana relax a little. She wanted to run into the woman’s arms like a little girl and refuse to go anywhere. But this wasn’t something she could avoid. And Juliana was too tired to fight more than she already had.

Giving Aunt Betsy a smile, Juliana turned away and strode toward the door, barely stopping to take her coat from the footman’s outstretched hand. She didn’t want to waste time. The sooner this meeting was over, the sooner she could come home.

Then Juliana could hide and pretend that things were not going as she wanted.

“I wish you would stop doing that,” Lady Haringdale said with a sigh.

“What?” Nathaniel frowned at her. “What am I doing now?”

“You’re twisting your gloves around too much. You’re going to end up breaking the stitches if you carry on doing that.”

Nathaniel sighed and stopped, glancing at his father, who was sitting beside his wife, staring out of the window. The earl looked uninterested, but he could see that he was closely paying attention despite his gaze being elsewhere. Haringdale was very good at that.

Nathaniel felt like he was under intense scrutiny. He was sure prisoners got

less attention than he was right now.

Dropping his gloves into his lap, Nathaniel looked out of the window, watching the scenery go past. It was cold and frosty, the snow looking undisturbed on everything. It reminded him of a painting by John Constable, overusing white paint to create a perfect scene at Christmas.

Not that Nathaniel would want to think of how many lives were made to suffer while creating the white paint from a poisonous substance. He had seen a country farm make white paint in the south of France, and the stories from some of the workers about those who hadn't lasted were still with him.

He didn't want to think about death right now. It might feel like he was going to die, but he was just going to meet Juliana.

Even if it made his heart sink.

Nathaniel wished that this wasn't happening. He wished that he had been more forceful in getting his father to believe him, that he hadn't meant for this to happen. But it didn't matter who Nathaniel wanted to blame; he was the one truly at fault for getting into this mess. Now, he and Juliana were going to suffer being married to each other.

Eleanor had been levelheaded about it when they talked about the situation the evening before. Nathaniel was surprised at her practical look at it all. She was right that it could be an advantage that he was marrying Juliana instead of a complete stranger, although Nathaniel did waver on that mindset.

His cousin had also suggested maybe using this as a way to start fresh with Juliana, to begin again, and they might be able to find some middle ground.

In theory, that made sense, and it could work. But Nathaniel knew Juliana's feelings for him. She would not go for this at all. She might agree to take a step back and allow this to happen, albeit grudgingly, but she wouldn't say this would be a fresh start. Juliana Beaumont was not afraid of making her voice clear on the matter.

Neither of them had a choice if they were going to get through this without the reputations of both themselves and their families being tarnished.

The rumors would die down, but they would never really go away. A comment out of place—whether it was a misunderstanding or malicious—had brought them to this.

Nathaniel was still wondering who could have done this. Surely, this had to be malicious. What would anyone get out of this by simply gossiping? Everyone knew how fast rumors spread and how careful a person needed to be with their words. Maybe if he had remained seated, then this wouldn't be happening.

It was too late to change all of that now, unfortunately. No matter what he thought about it, Nathaniel was going to have to go along with this marriage and accept that he was to marry someone he vowed he would never marry.

Now he was going to have to face his emotions regarding Juliana and that scared him.

If you had been able to marry Clara, this wouldn't be happening in the first place.

Nathaniel's gut clenched. He didn't want to think about Clara. It had taken months to recover from that heartbreak and until this year to accept that he needed to forget her completely and move on. For the most part, he had done

that. So, to recall her now when he was about to enter a marriage with someone else...

That was not going to make him feel any better.

“We’re here,” Haringdale said suddenly as the carriage slowed to a stop outside the park gates. “It looks like Burwood and his children are already here.”

“I don’t know why both of you needed to come with me,” Nathaniel grumbled as he waited for his father to get out before following him. “I’m not a little boy who needs a chaperone, you know.”

“We know.” Haringdale reached in and helped his wife out before shutting the door. “We just want to be sure that you’re not going to do anything else that embarrasses us.”

Nathaniel sighed.

“I’m honored that you have so much faith in me, Father.”

Lady Haringdale swatted his arm.

“Don’t be sarcastic, Nathaniel. You’re getting married to Lady Juliana because it’s the right thing to do.”

Nathaniel wanted to argue on that, but he was sure that his parents would ignore him and say that this was not up for negotiation. Shoving his hands into his gloves, he then followed his parents at a distance as they entered the park and approached the Duke of Burwood and Edward, who were standing

on the path watching Juliana.

She was off the path, standing at the edge of the duck pond. It wasn't frozen, and there were ducks out on the water. Her back was to them, but Nathaniel could see the tension in her body.

He had a sudden urge to go over to her and put his arms around her. But he mentally swiped that away as soon as he thought that. Now was not the time to soften toward her.

Edward approached him, huddling in his thick coat.

"She's been there since we arrived," he said, nodding toward his sister. "She's barely said a word since we left."

"Given what's happening to her, I'm not surprised." Nathaniel regarded his friend. "You believe that nothing happened, don't you? You know that Juliana and I..."

"I'm aware of the animosity, but can I be sure that nothing happened?"

Even Edward doubted him. Nathaniel groaned.

"I know you were in shock and upset about the rumors, but I didn't think you would believe them."

"There is always going to be an element of doubt, Nate." Edward gave him a pointed look. "I remember how things were when we were younger. How you used to prank Juliana and get her upset, but she kept attempting to spend time with us."

“I didn’t want your little sister around, that’s all.” Nathaniel shivered as a wind rippled around them. “If I was being dragged around by my mother, the least she could have done was leave us alone. Besides, you told me to stop, didn’t you?”

“I did. And then you chose to tell Juliana that you hated her and you didn’t want her around anymore. I don’t think I’ve seen my sister that upset since.” Edward shook his head. “You were never tactful around her, Nate. Much as I cherish our friendship, I honestly don’t think you’re the best choice for Juliana.”

Now that stung. Nathaniel hated that he had to hear that. Even his friend, who would normally be on his side, didn’t believe that he did nothing.

“You can’t cherish our friendship if you don’t believe me,” he pointed out.

“We haven’t seen each other or spoken to each other in four years. People change in that time.”

“So much for saying that you cherish our friendship,” Nathaniel ground out.

Edward sighed.

“Life moves on. It changes. And while I recall our years together fondly, I can’t be certain that you wouldn’t try anything scandalous with my sister.”

Nathaniel didn’t know what to say to that. He had thought, once Edward had gotten over the shock over what happened, that he would remember his old friend and be on his side. Now, it looked like Edward Beaumont was choosing to distance himself. Like he didn’t want to know Nate properly.

He was losing his friend because of this. And Nate hated it.

Chapter 9

Juliana watched as the ducks swam across the pond, not seeming to care that it was biting cold and there was snow everywhere. They were just happy that the pond wasn't frozen over.

She could see a couple of swans further along, under the spread boughs of a tree on the bank, the long branches touching the water and trailing around on the edge of the pond. It was quite a serene picture.

Juliana didn't feel so serene. She didn't know whether to scream or burst into tears again. But she was too tired to do both. Everything just left her feeling exhausted.

It was not ladylike to behave in either manner, she knew that much. Juliana didn't want to embarrass her father further by breaking down in public, despite the lack of people around. And at the same time, she just wanted to do something, anything, to let out her anger. Something to make her momentarily better, even if it was for a short space of time.

This was not a Christmas present she wanted.

She glanced over at Mary, who was standing a little way off in her thick, sturdy cloak, her dark hair pulled back and pinned at the nape of her neck, watching her openly with a blank expression.

She had sat beside Juliana all the way to the park, and she could feel the coolness practically coming off the maid. Nobody needed to guess that she disapproved of what Juliana had supposedly done. Why did Burwood have to choose her to watch over his daughter?

Hopefully, it was just for this outing, and Juliana wouldn't have to bring her along once she got married and moved to live with her husband. Beth was not as strict, and she would make things more bearable.

The sound of crunching footsteps, moving through the snow, caught Juliana's attention. She was about to turn around to see who was joining her when she felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. It was him. Nathaniel Harwood was here. His party had turned up.

Juliana had been hoping that he wouldn't get here, that they could go home without her having to see Harwood, but that wasn't the case.

Why couldn't they have done this at her home instead? It would be easier for her to leave and block everyone off when she could.

Harwood moved to stand beside her, not standing close but close enough that Juliana could feel the heat coming from him. She didn't look around, keeping her focus on the ducks on the water.

"They look quite happy," Harwood commented. "Almost like they're children having fun."

"I don't know how they can look so graceful when they swim," Juliana said quietly. "They look like it's nothing to them to swim across the pond, and yet they must be working hard where we can't see to keep up that facade."

"It's like anyone in Society, don't you think? We have to keep up with all the expectations and pressures and make it look as if we can do that without any problems." Harwood paused. "I wasn't keen on them when I was younger, and I certainly don't care for them now."

Juliana remained silent on that. But she couldn't agree more. Everyone, especially the younger generation, had to be just perfect to make themselves look desirable for marriage. With women, especially, it was all about securing a marriage that would further her status as well as her own family's. Juliana had done her best to ignore it, trying to be who she was without breaking the silent rules on how to behave.

And it hadn't mattered. Someone had seen her do something as scandalous as being in the same room as a man in her own house, and now it had gotten out of control.

"You know," Harwood went on, "if we're going to be married, the least we can do is actually talk to each other."

"Talk." Juliana turned to him, trying not to give in to the urge to step away. He was a little closer than she had anticipated. "You want us to talk? How do you propose we do that?"

Harwood arched an eyebrow.

"How about we open and close our mouths and see if any sounds that make sense come out?"

"If that was meant to make me laugh, it needs more work."

"Does it look like I'm laughing?"

They glared at each other. Juliana really wanted to air out her fury, just to scream at him. It might make her feel better. However, she was aware of the Earl and Countess of Haringdale watching them from the path. They might have been talking to Burwood and Edward, but Juliana knew they were

watching her.

She didn't want to embarrass herself in front of them. No matter how awful Harwood was toward her, his parents were nice people. They didn't need to see her behave like a madwoman.

"I'm surprised that your father's given you a guard dog," Harwood commented.

"What?" Juliana blinked. "What does that mean?"

Harwood jerked his head over his shoulder toward Mary.

"She's as still as a statue. Are we sure that she's not frozen to the spot?"

"Mary's just a...rigid person."

"That's one way of saying it. Even with your father standing nearby, he doesn't trust either of us."

Juliana swallowed.

"He doesn't trust me."

"You thought he would after this?"

"I think hearing it out loud has made it sink in." Her eyes narrowed. "Anyway, we wouldn't be in this position if it wasn't for you."

“Me?” Harwood looked perplexed. “What did I do?”

“You were where you weren’t supposed to be! And I had to deal with the fallout in my own home!” Juliana put her hands on her hips. “How do you expect it to be anyone else’s fault except yours? You were a guest. You shouldn’t have been in the library in the first place!”

Harwood leaned toward her a little.

“I think you’ll find that we’re both to blame for this. One of us should have left the room.”

“Then that should have been you, seeing as we were in my house.”

“But what are the chances of someone seeing me leave and thinking that something happened because you were in the room when I walked out? It wouldn’t matter if you and I barely interacted and we were in the same space for less than thirty seconds, we would still be in this position.”

He straightened up.

“It’s both of our faults for sneaking away, thinking we could have some respite alone.”

Juliana knew that he was right. It wouldn’t have mattered if they had actually been in a clinch or not. The fact that they had been alone, away from prying eyes, was enough for people to think the worst. Now, she was going to be seen as a wanton woman, and that would follow her around. Harwood could get away with it, and it would fade away for him, but not with her.

She was stuck. Both of them were.

“I can’t believe, out of all the men in the country, you have to be the one I’m mistakenly caught in this situation with.” Juliana turned and paced away. Her shoes were already soaked from standing in the snow, and her toes were frozen, but she didn’t care. “Why couldn’t fate pick someone I could actually find attractive and like?”

“Charming,” Harwood snorted. “You think I’m happy about this situation as well?”

“I honestly don’t care about how you feel.”

“I’ve noticed that. And if we’re being honest with each other, I’m not particularly keen on being married to a harpy.”

Juliana spun around.

“I am not a harpy!”

“You seem to behave like that whenever you’re around me.”

“There’s a reason for that. I hate the fact that I have to share the same air as you.” Juliana swallowed, trying to ignore her racing heart. “I can’t stand being around you, and I’m sure you think the same about me. Why did it have to be you?”

Harwood’s expression was wooden, watching her in a way that made Juliana want to take back what she said and apologize. But she didn’t; she needed to keep firm with her resolve. She was not going to buckle because Nathaniel

Harwood was looking at her.

She could not let him see inside her and how she really felt about this.

“You make it sound like you’re the only one who’s been given a life sentence here,” Harwood said quietly, his eyes steely as he looked her up and down. “You do know that I’m someone with feelings as well, right? And you’re not the special one out of the two of us.”

“I’m not saying...”

“I don’t want to get married to you, either. If I had a choice, I would be moving back to Europe and not coming back so I could get out of being your husband. But we both put ourselves in this position, and we’re both at fault. We can blame each other until we’re exhausted, but at the end of the day, we are both complicit.”

His jaw clenched.

“I don’t want to be married to someone who’s uptight and doesn’t have a sense of humor...”

“I do have a sense of humor! You’re just childish, and I don’t do childish.”

“But I’m going to have to swallow my pride and make the most of it. I suggest that you stop complaining as well about how you’re being punished because it’s making you look more and more embarrassing. It’s bad enough that I have to marry you without you behaving like this.”

Juliana felt the tears prickling at her eyes. Much as she hated to admit it, he

was right. She was behaving like a brat, and she should stop and accept what was to happen. But it was easier said than done when the thought of becoming Lady Harwood sent her into a panic.

“I’m going to hate you for the rest of my life,” she hissed. “I’m not ever going to make this difficult for you.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less, Juliana,” Harwood drawled. “You’ve never been able to make anything easy.”

She needed to get away from him, or she was going to end up doing something inappropriate. Like push him into the pond to join the ducks. That really wouldn’t do any good for the currently strained relations between their families. Storming past him, Juliana made her way up the gentle slope toward the path.

But it was too slippery, and she could feel her feet giving way beneath her. Her shoes were sodden and not as sturdy as they had been when they first left the house.

No, she would not fall in front of Harwood. She couldn’t do that.

But then her foot caught on something, and Juliana stumbled forward. As she tried to catch herself, both of her feet slipped out from under her. She was inches away from falling flat on her face in the snow when she felt an arm around her waist, hauling her away from her impending fate. Juliana gasped as her back hit something hard, the arm tight around her middle. What had just happened?

Then she froze when she heard Harwood’s soft tone, his breath tickling her ear as he whispered to her.

“Be careful. It’s precarious in this snow.”

Juliana remembered the last time he had held her. They had been forced to dance together, Juliana’s dance instructor wanting to show her a new dance that was becoming popular on the continent: the waltz.

Harwood had been drafted in because, in her instructor’s words, but it would not be appropriate for a brother and sister to practice an intimate dance. Back then, he had been so rigid that he was almost made out of stone, trying to keep Juliana as far away from him while having to hold her close. At seventeen and practically a man, he still treated her with contempt.

There was none of that now. Harwood held her differently, but there was something more intimate about it. After the initial grab, he was gentle with her, and his arm lingered. It was almost like he didn’t want to let her go. Juliana was at a loss for words. What was going on?

And why did she want to turn and bury herself further into his arms? She actually wanted to see what it felt like to be held by him.

She couldn’t do that. Not only would that break their feud, it would make it clear how she truly felt about him. And Juliana couldn’t let that happen, not if she wanted to keep her heart intact.

She hated that she still had feelings for someone who didn’t like her. Juliana felt like a fool for having this happen.

Regaining her composure, aware that there were eyes on them, she pushed Harwood’s arm away and turned to him. He was standing closer than she was comfortable with, his eyes on her. There was no harshness in his gaze. Quite the opposite. And Juliana could feel her chest tightening at the sight of it.

Swallowing, she jabbed a finger into his chest.

“I’m going to make the rest of your life miserable,” she whispered.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less of you, Juliana.”

“It’s so gorgeous,” Lucy gushed as she helped Beth to do up the laces on the back of Juliana’s dress. “I can’t believe that you managed to get something this beautiful on short notice.”

“Neither can I.” Juliana stared at her reflection in her mirror, watching as the dress began to take shape. “I swear our local dressmaker has more wedding dresses in her store than any other garment. It’s like she knows that people are going to need them at the last minute.”

“Then it worked in your favor, didn’t it?” Lucy smiled at her in the mirror. “You look stunning, Juliana.”

Juliana tried to return the smile, but it felt strained. She might look stunning, but she wanted to rip up the dress and throw it away. She didn’t want to do this. In a couple of hours, she was going to be married to Nathaniel Harwood. Barely a week after the rumor started, they were becoming husband and wife. It was happening so fast that Juliana’s head was spinning, and she felt sick.

She couldn’t do this. She wanted to run away. Nobody should be forcing her to marry a man who hated her. But then Juliana remembered her father and

what he expected of her. She didn't want to disappoint him.

I've already disappointed him. This is how I redeem myself. Even if I don't want to.

"Oh, Juliana." Lucy's smile faded, and she stepped around her friend to stand before. "Don't cry."

"I'm not."

"I can see that you're moments away from shedding tears." Lucy reached up and brushed a finger under Juliana's eye. "I know this is not what you wanted, and I feel for you. But you can make the best out of it, can't you?"

"I don't know if I can." Juliana gulped. If Lucy kept talking like this, she was going to end up crying, and then she would really be in a mess. "It's bad enough that I have to marry to avoid shame, but that my husband will be Nate Harwood. I feel like things can't get any worse."

"You're both grown up now. He's been away for a while. Maybe you can start afresh."

Juliana snorted.

"That's not going to happen. We still remember the past, and it's there between us."

"Only because you allow it to be. You're going to exhaust yourself hating him so openly, Juliana."

Juliana didn't know what to say to that. Lucy didn't know the truth, that Juliana had been hiding her feelings for Harwood for years. Despite not having seen him in a long time, they were still there, and they were so frustrating because Harwood clearly didn't like her back.

He had said as much ten years ago. Juliana could still remember her ten-year-old self being shocked and scared when the fifteen-year-old Harwood had shouted at her, saying that he didn't want the annoying little brat hanging around him and that he would rather not have to interact with her. He had called her ugly as well.

That had hurt her a lot. Juliana had been miserable for weeks afterward. She couldn't tell anyone why she was upset, although she suspected that Edward knew back then. It had taken a long time to get her confidence back, and she did her best to avoid Harwood like the plague.

When they couldn't avoid it, Juliana used his animosity back at him. It made her feel better that she could match his hostility.

Things might be different now, but their lack of a relationship was still there. Harwood had made her very aware of it when he arrived for Aunt Betsy's party.

That party felt like a lifetime ago.

If Harwood knew that, despite everything, her feelings for him were still lingering, he was going to call her worse than that. Knowing his wife loved him was not going to make his situation any better.

Juliana was getting a headache from all of this. It was a shame that she couldn't claim that she wasn't well and take to her bed.

A knock at the door jerked Juliana out of her thoughts, and she looked around to see the door opening as her aunt entered the room.

“Oh, Juliana!” Aunt Betsy gasped, looking her niece over as Beth finished lacing up the back of the dress, tying a bow at the bottom. “You look gorgeous.”

“Thank you, Aunt,” Juliana mumbled. Swiping at her eyes and hoping that she didn’t look like she was going to break down, she turned to face the older woman. “Am I needed downstairs?”

“They’re just getting the carriage ready. I came up to see how you were.”

Aunt Betsy had not openly discussed her feelings on this situation, but Juliana knew that she could rely on her aunt for support. Both she and Lucy were on her side, people she could look to whenever she needed help. Edward was ambiguous now, and Juliana knew that he was a little upset that she was pulling away from him. As for her father, he wanted this matter settled.

Juliana wanted to make things better, but not like this.

“Oh, come here, darling.” Aunt Betsy crossed the room and clasped Juliana’s hands. “You don’t need to be so miserable. Things are going to be all right.”

“I don’t care for Harwood at all, Aunt Betsy. What happened to allowing me choose my husband?”

“I’m afraid life doesn’t often give us what we want.”

There was a tinge of sadness to her voice, and Juliana knew that she was thinking about her own husband. They had loved each other dearly, and Aunt Betsy had gone to pieces when he died. It had taken a while to pick herself back up again, but she had done it.

Maybe Juliana could do the same. She could learn a lot from her aunt.

“Do you mind if I have a moment alone with my niece?” Aunt Betsy asked as she looked at Lucy and Beth. “I’m sure you need to get over to the chapel yourself.”

“All right.” Lucy squeezed Juliana’s arm. “I’ll see you shortly. And it’s going to be fine.”

Juliana wished that these words had more conviction. Not even Lucy was sure about it, despite her optimism. Aunt Betsy waited until the other two ladies had left the room before turning back to her niece.

“You really don’t want to do this, do you?”

“Am I that obvious?”

“You’ve been obvious since my brother said you were to marry Harwood. I’ve never seen you faint before, and it clearly overwhelmed you.” Aunt Betsy sighed. “I have told your father that maybe this isn’t the way to do things, but he said that the family’s reputation, not to mention your own, has to be repaired, and you need to redeem yourself.”

“But he believes that nothing happened, doesn’t he?”

“I honestly don’t know. I am aware that he wants to believe, but sometimes we don’t know those we truly care about.”

Juliana’s heart sank. She had tried to ask her father about it before, but he always sidestepped the question. To hear that he actually doubted her was painful.

“But you believe me, don’t you?”

“Of course I do, Juliana. I know you’re not like that.”

That was something. Even if Juliana knew it was going to take more than someone believing her to make her feel better.

“Come and sit down, dear,” Aunt Betsy urged, gently leading her over to a nearby chair. “You’re shaking like a leaf.”

“I never thought this would happen to me.” Juliana sat down a little too heavily. “Father said he would allow me to choose, and he would trust my judgment. But that’s never going to happen now because someone decided to create drama.”

“You are just a victim of rumors, and we have to stop them in a way you don’t like, I’m afraid.”

“To my detriment,” Juliana murmured.

Aunt Betsy took her niece’s hands again and leaned toward her. She was doing her motherly persona again, but Juliana didn’t mind. She needed that right now. If her own mother was still alive, would she be scolding her

husband for putting their daughter in a position she didn't want? Juliana wasn't sure, but she would like to think so.

"I know this is too much, and you really don't want to do this, but maybe you can use this to your advantage."

"How so?"

"Well, I'm sure you know by now that the boundaries for married women are a little more relaxed. You're allowed outside of that gilded cage that unmarried girls are put in, and you can have a choice if you want to go back in or not."

Juliana raised an eyebrow.

"Lucy said something about that, but she didn't say it quite like that."

"Also, while this marriage is being done out of duty to your family, you can start afresh. Have a new life of your own."

"But I would have to be married to Harwood," Juliana reminded her. "And I would have gone from being under my father's guardianship to my husband's."

Aunt Betsy smiled.

"There is only so much your husband can do. Trust me, my husband realized that once he married me. It drove him mad, but he learned to accept that he couldn't completely control me."

“You make it sound like you never got along with him.”

“We had our moments. All married couples do. But he loved me enough to trust me with what I wanted to do. He respected me and my choices.”

Juliana wasn't sure what Aunt Betsy was trying to say. Was she telling her that maybe their marriage could end up harmonious? Juliana doubted it; nobody would be able to have a marriage like her aunt's. It had been one of those perfect relationships.

How could she have that?

“You never know,” Aunt Betsy went on, “you might end up falling in love with him.”

Juliana spluttered.

“What? With him?”

“It's possible. I'm not saying that it's a requirement, but if you did...”

“That's not going to happen, Aunt.” Juliana shook her head. “Besides, he hates me. How can I love someone who doesn't return my feelings?”

“Maybe it'll happen, but maybe it won't.” A

unt Betsy squeezed her hands.

“It might make things easier if you did. You can't force it, but if it happens,

you shouldn't fight it. However, most importantly, just keep being yourself, Juliana. Don't let him mold you into something you're not. I don't want to see my niece disappear before my eyes. Be true to yourself. If he doesn't like it, that's on him and not you. I won't expect anything less of you."

All of the words were becoming jumbled in Juliana's head. She swallowed and tried to concentrate on them, but it was making her head hurt. Aunt Betsy's words were wise, that much she knew, but with her panic building at the knowledge she was about to become a married woman to someone who hated her, it was hard to take them to heart.

Maybe when the wedding was over, and she had a chance to hide away on her own, things might be a little clearer, but as it was, Juliana was feeling helpless.

Not an emotion she wanted on her wedding day.

Chapter 10

Nathaniel knew it wouldn't be long before he headed over to the chapel on the Burwood estate. They were getting married at nine exactly, almost as if everyone wanted this over and done with. Nathaniel certainly did.

Not for the first time, he cursed his bad fortune. This wasn't how his future was meant to go. Nathaniel had declared that he wouldn't be thinking about marriage for a long time.

Not after Clara broke his heart and made sure their future didn't happen. True, it wasn't her fault—she couldn't go against her father when he wanted her to marry someone else, someone wealthier than Nathaniel—but that didn't stop him from feeling lost and angry that Clara had to marry someone else.

God, why did he have to think about her now? Nathaniel had managed to put her out of his mind over the last three years, and he thought he could cope with being back in England, knowing that he might end up crossing paths with Clara. But the wedding was making him think about her more and more, and Nathaniel didn't want that.

Now he had to marry Juliana Beaumont. The first woman who caught his attention. Despite being five years his junior, there was something about Juliana that drew him away from what he was doing. When they were very small, playing with her had been all right.

She had just toddled around after him and Edward, her laugh very infectious. For such a small child, she was incredibly kind. Nathaniel remembered scraping his knees when he fell over in the driveway and he had been in tears.

Juliana, only four years old at the time, had come over to give him a kiss on the cheek and a cuddle while they waited for Edward to come back with someone to help. That had made him feel a little better.

It was as he grew up more that Nathaniel didn't want Juliana around. She was a distraction that he didn't want. How would it look to his friends at fifteen, having a ten-year-old girl following him around? That was why he had been horrible to her.

It was to make sure she kept away, and it had worked. A little too well, actually, because Juliana's adoration of him turned into a hatred that surprised even Nathaniel. It hadn't waned in the last ten years, either. She still remembered.

That was the problem. Nathaniel didn't hate her. He had just wanted her to keep away and, in his immature way, went the wrong way about it. He could apologize for it, but it wouldn't magically make things better between them.

Juliana drove him mad, yes, and Nathaniel didn't like being around her with her hostility toward him. But it was of his own doing, and he had to live with it.

This marriage was not going to be one of peace, he was sure of that.

"I see you're trying to wear away our rug before we leave."

Nathaniel gasped and spun round. Haringdale had entered the morning room, watching him with a bemused smile. Nathaniel pressed a hand to his chest as he waited for his heart to stop racing.

"You really should not sneak up on people, Father. You'll make someone's

heart give out one day.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t hear my footsteps through the house. Your mother says that I have a very heavy tread.”

“Well, I do have a lot of things on my mind, Father,” Nathaniel reminded him. He ran his hands through his hair. “I can’t believe that this is happening. That I would be forced into this.”

“It might not be as bad as you think.”

“We both know that Juliana hates me. Because I told her that I didn’t like her. She’s held onto that for years.” Nathaniel shook his head ruefully. “I don’t think this can have anything good coming out of it if she’s going to maintain that grudge.”

Although he wouldn’t blame her if she did. He did hurt her badly.

Haringdale sighed. He was looking less disapproving of his son’s actions, although he didn’t need to; Nathaniel knew his father too well and was all too aware that he was still disappointed with what he had done. That made him uncomfortable; he was too old to be wanting his father’s approval, and now he was desperate to get it back.

God, what was it about parents that had the ability to make their children want to revert back to a time when things were far more simple so they could deal with it all?

“I actually wanted to talk to you about something before we left, Nate,” Haringdale said, gesturing toward the chairs by the window. “Shall we sit?”

Nathaniel wasn't sure if he could sit without wriggling—he had been unable to sit still since he got up after a sleepless night—but he did as was suggested and sat on one of the chairs that were angled to look out of the window. The snow was still present, although it looked fresher than it had the evening before.

More of it must have fallen during the night, and it appeared to be undisturbed. Nathaniel did like the landscape like this, but it wasn't filling him with joy right now.

The earl sat across from him, rubbing his hand over his head. For the first time, Nathaniel saw that his father looked tired. He felt a pang of regret. He was exhausting his parents over a misunderstanding, and he felt bad for it.

“Father, I...I can only apologize. I honestly didn't think this would happen over a stupid rumor.”

“Look, it's in the past, and we're dealing with it now.” Haringdale held up a hand. “What we can do now is make sure that we make the best of what we've got. But that's not what I wanted to discuss.”

“What is it?”

Haringdale took a deep breath.

“Your mother and I...we're going to be moving to Bath.”

Nathaniel stared at him in astonishment.

“What? You're going to move across the country?”

“The house we have there is not used very often, and we have a lot of friends there. There is plenty to do without having to travel a long way in the carriage every time we want to have a cup of coffee in town.”

Haringdale smiled.

“Also, your mother does love going to the beach, and it’s only thirty miles away from the house. Maybe we might sell the Bath house and buy one closer to the sea.”

Nathaniel remembered that his mother had grown up near Devon, in a coastal town where she could look out of the window and see the sea. He had spent holidays by the sea, and he could see the fascination with it. It sounded like it would be perfect for Lady Haringdale.

He looked around the room.

“But what about this house? What are you going to do about it?” He felt a bit of panic building. “You’re not going to sell it, are you?”

“Of course not. It’s the ancestral home. Do you think I’d sell the house our family has lived in since it was built two hundred years ago?” Haringdale snorted. “I think the ghosts of our ancestors would haunt me for the rest of my natural-born days if I did that.”

“Then...”

“I’m giving it to you, Nate.”

Nathaniel blinked. Had he heard him correctly?

“What did you say? You’re entrusting me with this estate?”

“I am. Once the wedding is over, you’ll be in charge. Everything involving the house and the grounds, along with your tenants, is your responsibility.” Haringdale gave him a slight smile. “Consider it a wedding present for you and your new wife.”

Nathaniel didn’t know what to say. Of course, he knew that he would inherit the house eventually, but once his father passed away. He never thought that he would get the house as a wedding gift. He stared at the earl.

“Are you sure about this? You really want to pass the house to me?”

“We’re not getting any younger, Nate.”

“But you’re not old!”

Haringdale’s smile was warm.

“I appreciate you saying that, Son, but your mother and I think it’s best for us. Juliana doesn’t want to be married to you and have to live here with us still present, does she? It’s already an uncomfortable situation without us involved. It’s best that we give you the house, and you get used to looking after the place while your mother and I move to Bath.”

Nathaniel felt his throat closing up. God, what was wrong with him? He was acting like his parents were leaving for good. They were just moving across the country to Bath, where everyone gathered if they weren’t going to London. He could always visit, and he would have his own space.

He was not a little boy anymore. He was a grown man. Which he needed to remember.

“I...” He swallowed. “I don’t know what to say. It’s...it’s a big wedding gift, Father.”

“I know. But it seems only right.”

“What about Eleanor? Where will she go? Is she going with you?”

Haringdale shook his head.

“Goodness, no! I may be her guardian, but she is not attached to me physically. If you are willing, she can remain here as well.”

“Of course.” Nathaniel nodded. “I would like it if she stayed.”

“Perhaps she can be someone Juliana can talk to so she doesn’t feel as lonely.”

Nathaniel had actually been thinking along the same lines. Eleanor and Juliana might only be acquainted, but it might help for everyone if Juliana had someone around. Besides, from the way Eleanor and Edward had been at Lady Farley’s birthday party, Nathaniel had a feeling that Eleanor wouldn’t want to leave anytime soon.

“But I am expecting you to look out for Eleanor as well,” Haringdale went on. “I may not be here, so I’m trusting you to make sure Eleanor doesn’t do anything inappropriate.”

Nathaniel chuckled.

“Eleanor is the last person who would do anything inappropriate, Father. I think you can trust her.”

“All it takes is to do the wrong thing at the wrong moment, and it all blows up in your face. You’re experiencing it now, aren’t you?”

Nathaniel flinched.

“You do believe me now, don’t you? You know that I wouldn’t do something as stupid as that?”

“If it had been with anyone else, I might have believed the worst. When I heard it was Juliana, I was shocked. She’s not made it a secret how she feels about you, and the fact you got that close without coming away sporting physical injuries makes me think that you and she never did anything.”

Haringdale shook his head. “But I did believe it for a while. People can change over the years.”

“Trust me, she hasn’t.”

“But I do blame you for being in the same room without a chaperone or a witness. That was your mistake.”

“Even though I didn’t expect to be interrupted by Juliana herself?”

“It doesn’t matter. It happened, and it’s not just Juliana’s fault. You have to take responsibility as a proper gentleman.”

Nathaniel knew that he was right. No matter how much he wanted to say it was Juliana's fault for not having a chaperone, he was just as guilty. And he had accepted that now. Juliana wouldn't feel better hearing that, but she might soften a little bit.

He slumped back in his chair, unsure how to feel with what he had just been told. He now had a house of his own, one that he had to take care of. Nathaniel knew how to manage an estate, but he had always been at his father's side to learn. How could he do it on his own? Would he be able to cope?

"You never know, Nate," Haringdale carried on, sitting back and crossing his legs, "you might get something good out of this."

"How so?"

"You and Juliana might be able to put your hostility behind you. It won't do either of you any good to be angry and living together. That will not help anyone."

"Maybe you should tell Juliana that. I can't work with what she's throwing at me. She has to agree to it."

"I'm sure she will. She is a logical woman." Haringdale paused. "Although her hatred toward you is anything but logical."

Nathaniel couldn't argue with that.

"I think you might be a little too optimistic on all of this, Father." He sighed and rubbed his hands over his face. "But I'll do my best. I can't promise anything, and I doubt Juliana will be able to put aside her anger toward me,

but I'll do what I can."

Haringdale nodded, leaning over and grasping Nathaniel's knee.

"I know you will. You won't let me down this time."

Nathaniel was more aware of the last two words than the rest of the sentence. This time. He would make sure that there wasn't a next time.

It was slow going for the carriage, the snow thicker than Nathaniel expected. The horses were working hard to get it moving along the road, which looked undisturbed. It was going to look like a slushy mess eventually, the snow turning into a muddy mess while carriages and carts slipped all over the place.

Nathaniel certainly felt like he was on a slippery slope.

They turned into the Burwood's driveway, but instead of going straight up the very long and wide path toward the house, the carriage turned right and went through some trees which had grown almost like a canopy over the path.

There was very little snow on the ground, although when Nathaniel glanced through the window and up at the trees, he could see the snow weighing the branches down. It wouldn't take much to bring the snow down like an avalanche. He didn't want to be underneath it when that happened.

Nathaniel had often wondered why the chapel was so far away from the

house. It was too far to walk to it without getting into trouble if the weather wasn't good. But it did look far older than the actual house. Maybe it was already here when the duke's family bought the land and built the house. It was the only explanation he could think of.

At least they were getting married here and not in the parish church in the nearby village. That meant they would have to invite more people instead of just having their immediate families, and people would be openly staring and whispering at them. Nathaniel didn't mind having people look at him too much, but he wasn't keen on being the center of attention.

His hands felt clammy in his gloves, and it felt like the fabric was sticking to him. He could feel the sweat on his head, and his heart was beginning to race. God, is this how grooms felt when they were about to get married? And they were people who were willingly doing this.

Nathaniel hoped that he wasn't going to keel over and land on his face in the snow. He wasn't sure if fainting on his wedding day was worse than getting married in a soaking wet suit.

Take a deep breath and calm down. You can't change this now, so you need to make the best of it. Focus on that.

"Nate?"

"Hmm?"

Nathaniel blinked. He hadn't realized that the carriage had stopped, and the door was now open. Edward was leaning in, regarding him oddly. His parents were also sitting across from him with raised eyebrows. Nathaniel groaned inwardly. He needed to be more aware of his surroundings.

He climbed out, his feet sinking into the snow. It came up to his ankles. His shoes were going to get soaked pretty quickly. He looked around, seeing how everything was painted with snow.

“It’s definitely going to be a white Christmas,” he commented.

“My aunt’s certainly happy about it,” Edward said as he helped Lady Haringdale out of the carriage. “She’s been planning the Christmas party like mad, hoping that the snow will still be here when Christmas Day finally arrives.”

Nathaniel frowned.

“She’s still going through with it?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t she?” Edward nodded at Haringdale as the earl jumped out and shut the carriage door before turning to Nathaniel. “You don’t expect everything to stop because you got married, do you?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Well, she wanted to keep things as normal as possible. Besides, everyone is arriving tomorrow for the week, so we can’t really contact everyone to cancel now.”

He did have a point. Nathaniel wondered if he would have to attend as well. They were neighbors, and his parents were friends with Burwood and his sister, but before this, he would have thought that he didn’t need to join in if he didn’t want to. Now that he was going to be the duke’s son-in-law, he was more than likely going to have to attend.

Great. He wasn't even allowed to get used to the fact that he was going to have a wife before he was thrown back into the *ton* again. Why couldn't he and Juliana get used to their new norm on their own before seeing anyone else?

Then again, given their position, maybe it would do Juliana some good to be around her family and have something to distract her. Christmas was her favorite time of year, and Nathaniel doubted that had changed as she grew up.

He felt a pang of sympathy for her now. She celebrated her aunt's birthday the same week that her mother died, and now she was going to have it associated with her marriage. Everything felt bittersweet, and it was wrapped up tightly together for her.

Nathaniel hoped that it didn't get any worse. Maybe he could figure out how to make it easier for her. Could he do that? Nathaniel might know a little about his future wife, but he didn't truly know her. He wasn't sure what would make her happy, even just for a little bit.

Slow down again. You're jumping too far ahead. Just get through this ceremony first.

A movement out of the corner of his eye got Nathaniel's attention, and he turned to see another carriage arrive. From this alighted a familiar figure, huddled in a thick coat with a fur collar. He shut the door to his carriage before saying something to the driver. Nathaniel watched him tapping his cane on the snow before swiping at it as if he wanted to make the snow disappear completely.

Hastings. What was he doing here?

"I didn't think Lord Hastings was considered family," he commented.

“Hmm?” Edward turned. “Oh. Father ended up telling Hastings about the wedding a couple of days ago when they were discussing business. He hadn’t meant to invite Hastings, but he pretty much demanded an invitation.”

“Why would the man Juliana turned down want to come to her wedding now?” Nathaniel frowned. “You don’t think he’s going to do anything stupid, do you? Much as everyone knows this is not a love match, I don’t want to have Juliana humiliated further.”

Edward patted his arm.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m going to make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

“How are you going to do that? It might cause more of a scene if you do that.”

Edward smirked.

“You leave it to me. I have a few ideas.”

Nathaniel knew all about those ideas. If they were anything like the ones when they were children, they were more than likely going to get someone into trouble. He watched as Hastings turned and caught sight of them. Then his eyes narrowed, looking Nathaniel up and down as if he had seen something unsightly. Nathaniel resisted the urge to squirm; there was something about Hastings that he didn’t like.

Suddenly, he was relieved that Juliana hadn’t married this man. She certainly wouldn’t have been happy with someone like him.

While she wasn't too happy with her current position, she had to admit that Nathaniel was a better choice. Hopefully. Nathaniel wasn't about to ask.

"Come on, Nate." Edward took his arm as they began to follow the earl and countess toward the chapel. "Juliana will be here soon. We'd better get ready."

Get ready. Nathaniel didn't think he would ever be ready.

Chapter 11

“Congratulations on finding yourself a wealthy husband to latch onto.”

Juliana felt a tickling sensation along her spine when she heard a familiar voice. Oh, no, of all people to be here today, why did he have to be one of them? Keeping a bland smile on her face, she turned round and met the gray eyes of Lord Hastings.

“My lord,” she said stiffly, barely remembering to greet him cordially. “I’m glad you could come to the ceremony.”

“Well, it’s not like I had much of a choice.” Hastings sniffed. “Your father invited me, and to maintain relations with him, I had to accept.”

Juliana gritted her teeth. If she were honest, she didn’t want Hastings to be here, either, but given everything about the wedding had been taken out of her control, Juliana had a feeling that if she tried to take it back, it would be yanked further out of reach. She didn’t want that, and it would just make her more miserable.

She took a deep breath, hoping that she could maintain her composure.

“Well, I’m sure it was worth your while. I saw you and Father talking earlier. Business again?”

“Of course. That’s all that is important.”

Juliana couldn’t help making her next remark, especially when she saw

Hastings' chest start to puff up. He thought himself a worthwhile businessman, someone who should have people looking up to him. It was silly to witness.

“Like it was important to marry your business partner’s daughter so you have some level of control over him?” she asked with a sickly sweet tone.

Hastings stiffened, and his eyes flashed. Now, she had hit a sore spot. Juliana fought back the urge to smile, blinking innocently as Hasting’s eyes narrowed.

“You think you’re so much better than me, do you?”

“Who said anything about being better than you? And, if we are going to discuss that, I am better than you.”

“Is that why you turned my wedding proposal down? In front of everyone?”

Juliana sighed. Not this again, but it was inevitable that it was brought up.

“Like I told you back then, you and I barely knew each other. I wanted to marry someone I was in love with, not because I’m a pawn in whatever game the gentleman is playing.”

“Who said I didn’t love you?”

Juliana scoffed.

“I knew you didn’t love me. You were far too much with your adoration of me. It was alarming. I was very aware that you wanted to marry me so you

could improve business relations with my father. I wasn't about to be treated like that."

Hastings sighed.

"I would have never done that to you."

"Also, if you want to propose to a lady, make sure it's a private moment where all eyes aren't on her for the answer. Either she doesn't love you enough that she'll say no, or she'll be too embarrassed to refuse and say yes, only to say no when it's just the two of you. Either way, you'll be humiliated."

He tilted his head to one side. Why did he have to be so disconcerting, even now?

"It's a shame you were not afraid to be embarrassed and said yes."

"You think I wouldn't have said no afterward?"

"Not if you don't want to upset your father."

Juliana snorted.

"I would have told him no as well. He knows how I feel about things like that, and he keeps me out of business. Marrying me so you can have a better grip on him regarding whatever you do with him isn't going to do you any good."

"He knows how you feel about marriages with someone you don't love."

Hastings tilted his head to one side and sniggered. “And yet you’re marrying someone you don’t love. A bit ironic, isn’t it?”

“Harwood and I are being put in this position by someone who couldn’t keep their mouth shut.”

“Well, if you go and fool around in private...”

“That’s not what happened!”

Hastings shrugged.

“Well, you know that there has to be some truth in the rumors for them to get moving so fast. I’m sure there was something seen that made the rumor start in the first place.”

Juliana really wanted to slap him, but that would just draw attention to them. She was already uncomfortable from standing in front of everyone and saying her vows to Harwood; she didn’t want people to see her acting unladylike on her wedding day. Even if her hand itched to smack the man before her.

“I’m glad to see that you listen to stupid lies, my lord,” she said crisply. “It just goes to show that you have your ear to the ground. You pick up a lot of useful information like that, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. I wouldn’t be the businessman I am now if I didn’t do that.”

“And it’s great to see that sarcasm is still completely lost on you.” Juliana turned away. “If you’ll excuse me, Lord Hastings? I’ve got more important things to do than stand around talking to a man like yourself.”

She didn't look back to see Hastings' expression, she simply walked away. God, he still had no sense of humor, and he didn't know when someone was being facetious with their words. Hastings just didn't realize that he was boring. He had a brilliant mind when it came to whatever business he did, as far as Juliana knew from her father, but he was boring.

It was a shame that his personality didn't match his looks. But Juliana wasn't going to dwell on it. She wasn't interested in thinking about a man who made her skin crawl.

“Juliana?”

Juliana jumped. Lady Eleanor had appeared at her side, along with Lucy. Both were holding glasses of mulled wine. Lady Eleanor frowned at her.

“Are you all right? You look a little flushed.”

“It's nothing.” Juliana risked a glance back and saw that Hastings was still glowering at her. “There are certain conversations that I would rather not get involved in, and with certain people.”

Lucy saw where she was looking and sighed.

“Ignore him. He's just trying to goad you into a reaction that will work out badly for you.”

“He has a habit of doing that.”

Lady Eleanor looked from Lucy to Juliana.

“Forgive me for being rude, but what’s wrong with the man? He seems pleasant enough.”

“I’ll explain later,” Lucy said with a nod at Juliana. “It’s still a bit of a sore subject, and Juliana’s got plenty to deal with right now.”

At least there was that. Lucy could handle that awkward part about Juliana’s previous encounter with Hastings. Although Juliana was surprised that Eleanor didn’t know about what was going on; something like that would have gone around the *ton* very fast.

A proposal refusal, especially one so public, would have been big news that Society would have salivated over.

Then again, Lady Eleanor might just be polite and not mention it out loud. That was more likely. Even so, Juliana was glad that she wasn’t pushing to discuss Hastings; she didn’t want to have him invade her thoughts so much.

“Here, have one of these,” Lucy said, practically pushing her glass of mulled wine into Juliana’s hand. “It’s freezing in here, and this is the only thing that’s stopping our hands from completely seizing up.”

“Thank you, Lucy.” Juliana could feel the warmth seeping through her gloves. Now that felt better. “What about you? Aren’t you going to get cold?”

“I’ll be fine. I can get another drink.” Lucy smiled. “What’s important is keeping you warm. You are the bride, after all. It’s your special day.”

Juliana frowned at her friend.

“I wish you wouldn’t jest with me about that. You know very well what this day is to me.”

“I understand, but I’m trying to keep things upbeat.” Lucy shrugged, adjusting the fur stole around her shoulders. “You never know, this could work out to your advantage.”

“How so? I’m sure one of us will be killing the other within the year.”

Lady Eleanor giggled.

“I don’t think you need to worry about that. Nate is not that sort of person.”

“I know he’s your cousin, Lady Eleanor, but the two of us have a very different relationship.” Juliana sipped at her wine. “We don’t like each other, and that’s made clear whenever we’re in the same room for any period of time. I don’t think that’s going to change now we’ve been made to marry because someone saw something that wasn’t there.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

“What do you mean?”

Lady Eleanor simply gave her a sly smile, raising her glass to her lips.

“Oh, nothing really. But I have a feeling that it’s not going to be as bad as you think.”

Juliana was confused. What was going on? It was like Lady Eleanor had a private secret going on in her head, and she wasn’t sharing.

She felt the air shift, and then warmth brushed the side of her face. Juliana didn't need to turn around to know that Harwood had joined them. Her husband—she was going to struggle to see him as that—was standing beside her. Lucy's eyes widened a little, and then she dropped a curtsy.

“My lord. Congratulations on your wedding.”

“Lady Lucy.” Harwood glanced at Lady Eleanor, his expression softening a little as he observed his cousin. “Eleanor, would you mind entertaining Lady Lucy for a while? I need to speak to my wife.”

Juliana tensed at that. Did he have to say that? It felt like the most uncomfortable endearment she had ever heard.

“All right, Nate.” Lady Eleanor giggled even more. “So, you want to be alone with your wife? I see.”

Juliana was surprised that her jaw didn't hit the floor. Lucy looked bemused while Harwood frowned at his cousin.

“You do not need to speak like that, Eleanor. I just have something to discuss with her, and we don't need people listening in.”

“You're not making it easier for yourself, Nate.” Lady Eleanor patted his arm. “Don't worry, darling cousin. I'll make sure the two of you are not bothered. However, I would recommend that you go and find a room that's a lot warmer than this one. You don't want to freeze like icicles.”

Juliana couldn't believe what she was saying. Those comments were about as salacious as you could get in public. She looked around, grateful to see that nobody was close enough to overhear what the younger lady had just said.

Lucy looked equally stunned, her mouth falling open.

“Do you normally talk like that in public, Lady Eleanor?” she asked. “I...I don’t know whether to be shocked or impressed.”

“Forgive me. I do apologize for the way I spoke.” Lady Eleanor gave her and Juliana a nod. “I’m just teasing my cousin. But it seems to have been a bit too much. That was not my intention to make anyone uncomfortable.”

“Well, you made someone uncomfortable, but not the one you intended,” Harwood said sharply. He turned to Juliana, his face impassive. “Shall we, my lady?”

“Can’t we stay here while you speak to me?” Juliana gestured at the room around them. “I can’t see what you’ve got to say that has to be kept a secret.”

If she was honest, she didn’t want to be alone with Harwood. It would just make her more nervous. Her hands were tingling, and she liked to think that it was from the warm glass she was holding, but Juliana had a feeling it was from an urge to touch Harwood. Now that he was her husband, she didn’t need to hold back.

And that scared her more than she cared to admit.

Nathaniel could tell that Juliana didn’t want to go anywhere alone with him, and she wasn’t about to change her mind. He was too worn out to argue with her, though, so he nodded.

“How about we go and stand in the corner? Will that work for you?”

Juliana audibly swallowed, and Nathaniel saw something flicker in her eyes. What was that about? Before he could grab onto it and figure out what had just happened, Juliana turned and smartly walked to the corner of the ballroom.

Nathaniel watched her go, trying not to admire how incredible she looked in her wedding dress. Her beauty was really accentuated with the dress moving along her curves. All of the gentlemen had given her at least one glance, and Nathaniel wasn't sure how to feel about that. There were a lot of mixed emotions swirling inside him right now.

Mostly because he wanted to whisk her away and not have anyone look at her again. And that was just something he couldn't handle.

“Have you upset my sister already?”

Nathaniel inwardly groaned as Edward joined them. He shot his friend a sharp look.

“How about you entertain the ladies and not bother me with minor problems?” he snapped.

“So I'll take that as a yes.” Edward's mouth curved in amusement. “You're really going to have an interesting marriage, Nate.”

Nathaniel tried not to snarl. Edward was really not helping. Stepping around the small group, he walked across the ballroom to join Juliana. The buffet lunch was in full swing, and Lady Farley had wanted everyone to mill around and be merry instead of sitting down. It was easier to do that in the ballroom

rather than the dining room.

But while it had been some hours since the wedding, Juliana hadn't touched anything except the glass in her hand. She wasn't going to faint from lack of food, was she? Nathaniel hoped not.

Maybe he should make sure that she ate in a moment.

What is wrong with you? Just tell her what your father spoke to you about and walk away from her.

Bracing himself, Nathaniel went to join his wife. Wife. Now that was a title he was going to need to get used to. Especially when his wife was Juliana.

The wedding ceremony had been very awkward. With all eyes on them, and both fathers pointedly watching him so he didn't run off, Nathaniel had gone through his vows and married Juliana. Both of them had sounded rather wooden and stiff, unable to put any emotion into it at all.

The worst part had been the bit when the priest said that he could now kiss the bride, and Nathaniel had simply kissed Juliana's hand. There had been a murmur throughout the guests, and after a moment of surprise, the priest had chuckled and said that someone might need to tell the groom how a first kiss is supposed to go.

Nathaniel didn't want to be treated like a child. And he wasn't about to kiss Juliana in front of everyone.

Especially when the thought of kissing her was so enticing that he couldn't stop thinking about it.

This marriage was going to kill him.

Juliana stood with her body partially turned away from the crowd, her arms wrapped around her waist with her shoulders hunched over. She looked close to tears, and she was fighting to maintain her composure. Nathaniel suddenly wanted to put his arms around her and hold her, even if to hide the fact she was about to cry.

But he stopped himself as he approached her. She would probably push him away, and that would just make everyone talk even more. It was best to give her some space.

Juliana looked up at him, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

“What do you want?” she asked tightly. “What is it that you needed to say to me without anyone listening in?”

“I just wanted to talk to you about something.”

“You could do that in front of my friends.” Juliana absently brushed her hand against her cheek, the wedding ring glinting on her finger. “You don’t need to ask to speak in private.”

Nathaniel smiled.

“Are you worried that we’ll end up in a passionate embrace if we’re left alone?”

Juliana glowered at him.

“If you’re going to be mean to me...”

“I don’t mean that. I just wanted to let you know about something that does pertain to you.”

She looked like she was going to storm off, and Nathaniel would have let her. She didn’t need everyone staring at them more than they already were. He didn’t realize until just then that he was angling his body to the rest of the room, blocking anyone from seeing that Juliana was distressed.

Again, he stopped himself from putting his arms around her. Anything to make her feel better.

Something was really wrong with him.

“All right. Fine.” Juliana sniffed and looked up at him. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Father’s left us the house.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“My parents are going to move to Bath and live in their house there. My mother has always wanted to live by the sea, so they want to make the most of it now. They left the house here for me as a wedding gift.”

Juliana’s mouth fell open.

“They gave you the house?”

“Father said it was about time that I had my own home and that I should be managing the estate.” Nathaniel hesitated. “It means that we wouldn’t need to move far away from your family. You and I can live close to your father and aunt, and you can visit as much as you like without having to travel so far.”

Juliana’s mouth was still open. Nathaniel would have laughed if the situation had been different. It was amusing to see her speechless for once. Finally, Juliana’s mouth closed, and she swallowed.

“I...I don’t know what to say.”

“Also, you know the house from visiting over the years. You’re aware of the layout?”

“Most of it. I didn’t exactly play hide-and-seek in rooms that I wasn’t permitted to go into.”

“I was.”

“Well, you lived there. Guests don’t go snooping around other people’s houses, do they?”

Nathaniel’s mouth twitched. He knew that this was a remark toward him sitting away from everyone else in someone else’s home. At least Juliana hadn’t completely lost her spirit.

“Anyway, Mother did have her own apartment within the house. It’s been there for generations since the house was built. They’re still in good condition, and you can have visitors in your own parlor instead of coming downstairs to the morning room.”

“Are you...?”

“I understand things are not great between us, and I know you don’t want anything to do with me.” Nathaniel took a deep breath. “My house is now yours, and you have your own home inside it. I’m sure you can find ways to stay in your apartment without having to go elsewhere in the house.”

“Just in case I run into you, and we are forced to interact with each other?” Juliana asked, her delicate eyebrow arching just a little.

Nathaniel had never wanted to kiss anyone more than right now. And that left him feeling cold. He cleared his throat.

“If that’s what you wish.”

“What I wish is to stay here and pretend that this is a bad dream.” Juliana let out a heavy sigh and glanced past Nathaniel to look at their guests, who didn’t appear to have noticed they were apart from everyone else. “But, unfortunately, I’m not able to do that without questions being raised. People will still be talking about us, and I would rather get away from it all.”

“I understand.”

She now fully turned to face him, her cheeks darkening in her frustration as she looked up at him with those eyes that kept pinning Nathaniel to the spot. He tried not to stare into them.

“While I’m grateful for you making those accommodations for me, my lord,” she said, and Nathaniel raised his eyebrows at that, “I am going to be staying here for the time being.”

“Why?”

“Our Christmas party is happening this weekend, and I want to help my father and aunt with it all. It’s a special occasion, and I’m not about to walk away from it to...enjoy my new marriage.”

That was said through gritted teeth, which almost made Nathaniel smile. Then he thought about the Christmas party. The duke had been hosting it for years since his sister had come to live with him. She was the driving force behind it, and everyone enjoyed coming and taking part.

Nathaniel remembered them from his younger days—one of the rare occasions that children could join the grown ladies and gentlemen in a social setting—and they had been good fun.

Juliana had loved these. She did love Christmas, and she always threw herself into helping out. Even as a little girl, she was running around after her aunt, taking part in the games, putting up the decorations, and helping with the food. Nathaniel didn’t think that it would be any different now she was a grown woman.

If he wanted to—and he was within his rights to—he could refuse and say that they were going to spend time alone as a newly married couple. They did have a honeymoon to go on, although the thought of being stuck with just Juliana for days when neither of them wanted to be there was not enticing.

But there was already a lot of resentment between them, and if they were going to have to go through this for the rest of their lives, Nathaniel was going to have to pick and choose his battles.

Besides, he could see the hopeful look in Juliana’s eyes. She was hoping that he was going to say yes to what she wanted. She was desperate to stay, even

if for a short period of time. Nathaniel couldn't break her heart more than he already had.

"All right. How about we make arrangements for you to move into our home in the New Year?"

Juliana blinked.

"Really? You would allow me to stay until then?"

"I'm not going to be heartless and take you away so close to one of your favorite times of the year. It's only fair that we stay for a while longer."

Nathaniel wasn't about to point out that they could spend Christmas with her family every year, but he didn't think that she would appreciate that. Then Juliana frowned.

"Wait a moment, you said 'we'. Does this mean you're going to stay as well?"

"Of course. I'm your husband now, aren't I?" Nathaniel raised his eyebrows. "Don't you think it would look rather strange if we married and then immediately went our separate ways? We've already got rumors circulating about us, and separating right now at Christmas time would just make things more uncomfortable for us."

Juliana looked like she wanted to protest. Her hands were now absently rubbing her arms. She looked colder. Nathaniel stopped himself from touching her arm or pulling her to him. Juliana would not appreciate it.

Finally, Juliana nodded.

“All right. I see your point. It would be preferable for us to present something of a united front. I don’t want Father to be upset with me any further.”

“I just need to have some of my belongings brought over from my estate, and I’ll set myself up in one of the guest rooms.”

“I’ll let the housekeeper know to set aside one of them for you.” Juliana shot him a sharp look. “You’re going to be in the family quarters, but as far away from me as possible.”

Nathaniel couldn’t help but smile at that.

“Of course,” he said smoothly. “We couldn’t possibly give everyone the wrong idea more than we already have.”

“I wish you wouldn’t talk like that, Harwood.”

“Seeing as we’re married now, you might as well call me Nathaniel. Or even Nate.”

Juliana snorted.

“I’m not going to do that. That would signify that you and I are on good terms.”

Nathaniel sighed.

“I suppose that was too much to ask, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was.” Juliana stepped around him. “Now, if you’ll excuse me? I’ve got to talk to the other guests.”

Nathaniel watched her walk away, joining Lady Lucy and slipping her arm through the other woman’s. Lady Lucy gave her a smile and whispered something that made Juliana’s face soften, and she smile in return. Nathaniel wished that he could make her smile like that.

He looked around the room. The number of people present wasn’t large, but it still felt like there were too many guests. He wanted to find a moment alone to take a deep breath and calm down. Something to ease the tightness in his chest. That was mainly the reason he wanted Juliana to go somewhere private with him, but Nathaniel hadn’t been able to say that out loud.

Juliana wouldn’t have pandered to him, anyway.

“Nate?”

Eleanor was now standing in front of him, watching him with a curious frown. Nathaniel managed a smile.

“I thought you were conversing with Lord Beaumont about music. That’s what I heard when I was walking away.”

“Well, we were.” Eleanor’s cheeks flushed a little, but she didn’t look away from her cousin. “Are you all right? You’re looking rather pale.”

Nathaniel hadn’t realized that he was looking off-color. He glanced around,

hoping that nobody else had noticed.

“It’s just...a bit warm in here.”

“Are you sure? It’s actually quite cold. Despite the weather, Lady Farley wanted to open the windows and let the sunshine warm us up.”

“I need to get some air.” Nathaniel swallowed. Why did it feel like his cravat was strangling him? “Will you accompany me? I need time away from everyone, but I also don’t want to be alone. I’m sure you understand.”

Eleanor didn’t even hesitate. She nodded and took his arm.

“Come on. Let’s go for a walk outside. Maybe being out in the snow will cool you down a little.”

Nathaniel didn’t know why he was feeling like this, and he hoped that it would pass. Maybe it was the gravity of the situation weighing down on him now, and it was not easy to handle. As Eleanor led him toward the door, Nathaniel caught sight of Hastings.

The man was leaning against the wall, his expression sullen, and Nathaniel had to walk past him. Their eyes met, and something flashed behind Hastings’ eyes. A sliver of a smirk touched his lips, and then he purposefully looked away.

That made Nathaniel momentarily pause. What was that all about? It was like Hastings had his own thoughts on the matter.

Not that Nathaniel was going to wait around to listen. With what Edward had

told him about the man, the less he interacted with Hastings, the better.

If he was lucky, he would not have to see that individual again.

Chapter 12

“Are you ready to join everyone, dear?” Aunt Betsy asked, hovering in the doorway as Juliana looked over herself in the mirror.

“I...I think so.” Juliana smoothed her trembling hands down her skirts. “How do I look?”

“You look delightful. Just like you were when you asked a few seconds ago.” Aunt Betsy sighed and shook her head. “Honestly, you would think that you had never done this before. You’re really jittery today.”

Juliana bit her lip. Normally, the festivities and her aunt’s Christmas party were something to look forward to. Juliana was always excited about being a part of it. But now she felt like she was full of nerves.

She knew why. This year, she was a married woman, and she was going to be facing everyone as Lady Harwood. That title didn’t sit well with her, and Juliana desperately wished that she could go back to her old title. It gave her some confidence, making her feel like she could stand on her own.

Lady Harwood meant that she was connected to Nathaniel Harwood more than she wanted to be.

Looking at herself one last time, Juliana turned away and approached Aunt Betsy, fixing a smile on her face.

“I’m ready,” she said.

“Are you sure?” Aunt Betsy frowned and peered at her. “You look rather...I don’t know...off-balance?”

“Don’t worry about me. Once we get into it again, I’m sure I’ll be fine.” Juliana stepped around her aunt and into the hallway. “Shall we go? I’m sure the first guests will be arriving shortly.”

In fact, she could hear voices downstairs as the guests began to gather. There were so many rooms in the house that they could invite more than a dozen people and still have plenty of space for more. Aunt Betsy did like to fill up all the rooms as much as possible; she loved Christmas.

But while she wanted to maintain things as normal as possible, knowing that she was married and now her home was just a temporary place to live at the moment was still fresh in her mind. Juliana had thought that Harwood wouldn’t allow her to stay, knowing his thoughts of Christmas.

So when he said that they could stay until the new year had finished, she was surprised. That was not something Juliana thought he would say.

Of course, it meant that he had to temporarily move in and pretend they were a proper married couple, so she couldn’t really have any respite from him. But Juliana drew on the fact that she had another month before she had to move to the next estate.

At least Harwood had been given his family home as a wedding gift, and they didn’t have to go far. Juliana didn’t want to have more distance between her and her family home. Burwood would tell her that she was being silly, and it was perfectly normal for a daughter to leave when she got married, but Juliana would counter back with the fact she hadn’t asked for this, and she wasn’t going to bow down to what everyone else wanted.

It would result in her getting chastised by everyone for not behaving as she was supposed to. Juliana didn't want to deal with that. She needed to swallow back her annoyance at the situation and carry on like it didn't bother her.

That was for the family's reputation as well as her own. Given that she had put herself in this position, albeit inadvertently, there was little room for complaint.

Aunt Betsy fell into step beside her, smiling as she put an arm around her niece's waist.

"It's Christmas soon, Juliana. I hope that can lift your spirits, given what has been happening lately."

"I hope so, too, Aunt."

"Then let's go and focus on that. Let's enjoy ourselves."

Juliana hoped that this would be just what she needed to get back into good spirits. They had been low since the night of Aunt Betsy's birthday, since the moment she crossed Harwood's path. Or, rather, he put himself in the way. He was the reason they had ended up being married.

Of course, Juliana knew that she couldn't completely blame him for what happened. She should have left as soon as she realized that he was present and not spoken to him. But it had been her own home, and Juliana thought she had a right.

And it had blown up in her face.

As the ladies reached the top of the stairs, Juliana glanced back toward the family quarters. It had been only the day before that Harwood had brought some belongings over and set himself up in one of the other bedchambers. He was still on the family side of the house but as far away from Juliana as possible.

They didn't need to interact once they were out of sight of the guests, nor did Burwood expect the two of them to move into the suite where they had separate bedrooms but shared a drawing room. Juliana was relieved about that; she needed space from her husband.

Although she wasn't entirely sure if it was for the right reasons.

At least he was not here right now. Edward had taken him out riding to give their horses some exercise; her brother was not so much a consummate host, and he preferred to leave it to the ladies to greet the guests. Same with Burwood, who was more than likely locked in his room.

Thankfully, Aunt Betsy was with her. Juliana was going to need her at her side.

They were halfway down the stairs when the door opened again, and Hastings strolled into the house. Juliana stopped so abruptly that she had to catch herself on the banister before she fell, her body going cold as the wind sneaked into the house and washed past her. Now, her former suitor was standing in the foyer, shaking off the snow as he shrugged out of his coat with a grimace.

"Juliana?" Aunt Betsy touched her arm. "Darling, what is it?"

"I didn't know that Hastings was going to be here."

Aunt Betsy looked. She nodded with a frown.

“Yes, your father said that it was for his business partners, and Lord Hastings is one of those.”

“But after what happened before with that proposal...”

“I did raise it with my brother, but he said that you’re married now, and it’s in the past. The two of you can behave maturely, can’t you?”

Juliana knew that she could, but she wasn’t so sure about Hastings. Especially not after the way he spoke to her on her wedding day two days before. It was disconcerting that they would have to spend this Christmas period together when Juliana had more than enough problems to deal with.

But she couldn’t say that out loud. While her aunt would sympathize, it was too late to revoke the invitation. She would just have to keep her distance from the man and hope that he wasn’t going to make things even more uncomfortable for her. As it was, he had already caught sight of her and was openly staring at her, his face expressionless. That was enough to send a shiver down her spine.

All this animosity because she turned down his proposal? Did he think that he had a right to be upset when he tried to take the choice out of Juliana’s hands? He had to have known that it would go wrong.

“Juliana, dear.” Aunt Betsy nudged her. “Come on. We can’t stand here all day.”

“I know.” Juliana took a deep breath. “I just need a moment.”

“If you want me to greet the guests alone...”

“No, I’ll be fine. I’m not going to let this get in the way.” She fixed a smile on Aunt Betsy. “It’s Christmas, after all. It wouldn’t be in the spirit to be rude toward the guests, would it?”

Aunt Betsy gave a small chuckle.

“Well, it’s not stopped us before, has it? Let’s get moving, and behave.”

“Aunt! Would I do something uncouth?”

Her aunt didn’t respond as they made their way down to the foyer. Hastings was now at the bottom of the staircase, his eyes still on Juliana as they approached. Juliana could feel everything in her wanting to run back up the stairs, but she kept going. She was not going to be intimidated in her own house.

“Lady Farley,” Hastings greeted Aunt Betsy, taking her outstretched hand and bowing over it. “Thank you for inviting me to your Christmas festivities.”

“Thank you for coming,” Aunt Betsy replied, putting on a smile that made Juliana envious that she could put on a facade so easily and it wouldn’t be questioned. “I’m glad you could make time to enjoy this time of year with us.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Hastings glanced at Juliana, but she didn’t move to join them or greet him.

She gripped onto the banister and watched him, seeing how his eyes flicked over her face before glancing at her hand. It looked like he wanted to greet her the same as he did her aunt, but he stopped himself. Instead, Hastings gave her a brief nod.

“Lady Juliana. Or should that be Lady Harwood? It’s going to be difficult to remember your new title.”

“Lady Juliana works well enough, either way, my lord,” Juliana said tightly.

“And your husband? Is he present right now?” Hastings raised his eyebrows. “Or has he chosen to return home?”

“He’s actually out with Lord Beaumont. They’ve gone out riding.”

“I see.” The way he said those words made Juliana shiver. “Well, I hope to see him later on. We have plenty to celebrate.”

Juliana wasn’t sure what to think about those words, nor did she get a chance to respond as Hastings walked away, heading toward the morning room. It felt like she was off-balance, and it was really uncomfortable.

She barely got a chance to recover before her aunt let out an exclamation of delight and headed toward the door where two women had entered the foyer and were shaking off the snow from their coats. Aunt Betsy had a beaming smile on her face.

“Lady Lucan! It’s so good that you could come.” She clasped one of the lady’s hands. “I thought you said you weren’t entirely sure if you could get here.”

“Well, things changed, and now I’m able to be here for the party.” Lady Lucan beamed. “I would be a fool to truly turn this invitation down.”

It took a moment for Juliana to recognize the woman. She had known her as Lady Portia Gideon, a childhood friend of her mother’s. She had married in the last few years to a viscount who was younger than her—something that the *ton* had been salivating at the mouth to talk about—but the love between the two of them was evident. No one should have doubted that they adored each other.

Lady Lucan had been a lovely person. Juliana liked her.

Stepping off the bottom stair, she walked over to join the ladies. Lady Lucan saw her first, and she beamed with a warm smile, her brown eyes sparkling as she watched Juliana approach.

“Juliana! My goodness, dear, is that you?”

“It is, Lady Lucan.” Juliana curtsied. “It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“And you, darling.” Lady Lucan clasped Juliana’s hands in hers. “I can’t believe how grown up you are now. It’s been four years since I last saw you, hasn’t it? You were still running around and climbing trees back then, weren’t you?”

Juliana glanced at Aunt Betsy, who was now watching her with raised eyebrows. Her aunt had been under the impression that her niece had stopped doing that when she was far younger. Juliana cleared her throat.

“Let’s just say those days are behind me,” she mumbled.

Lady Lucan laughed.

“I highly doubt it. If you’re anything like your mother, you don’t give something up lightly.”

“Is your husband here?” Aunt Betsy asked, diverting the conversation away before Juliana started floundering.

“He’s gotten caught by Lord Marsh outside. They’re currently in deep discussion over something that I don’t quite understand.”

Lady Lucan beckoned the young woman to join her.

“Juliana, this is Lady Clara Montgomery, my niece. She was going to be alone at Christmas, so I suggested that she come along with us. Clara, this is the Duke of Burwood’s daughter, Juliana Beaumont.”

“It’s Juliana Harwood now,” Juliana said as she curtsied to the young woman.

Clara looked to be a few years older than her, but still very lovely. Her hair was a caramel color, her skin delicately pale with small, perfectly proportioned features. Her hazel-green eyes seemed to pierce straight through Juliana as she looked at her. She gave Juliana a bow of her head, but she didn’t curtsy in response, almost as if it was pointless to do so.

“Harwood?” Lady Lucan looked interested. “When did you get married?”

“Just a couple of days ago.” Juliana saw that the woman was keen to know the story and hurried on, “It’s a long story. And not something I’m really

prepared to discuss.”

“Oh, of course, dear.” But the older woman’s eyes were now glinting with curiosity. “Anyway, I know my niece wasn’t one of the original guests, so I hope you don’t mind that she’s been included as well?”

“We don’t mind at all,” Aunt Betsy answered before Juliana could. “We have plenty of rooms, and I’m sure we can find somewhere for Lady Clara to sleep.”

“Thank you,” Lady Clara murmured. “That’s very kind of you.”

Juliana wasn’t sure what to make of this. She had been aware that Lady Lucan had a few nieces and nephews, but she couldn’t recall a mention of the young lady before her. But she wasn’t going to question it now; it wasn’t her place to do so.

So she smiled and nodded at Lady Clara.

“Welcome to our home. I hope you enjoy yourself while you’re here.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever get bored of a sight like this,” Edward said as they stood at the top of the hill, looking across the landscape before them. “This is just absolutely stunning.”

“And we both spent years in Europe away from this scene,” Nathaniel pointed out. “So it couldn’t have been that enticing.”

“Maybe I’m just appreciating it more now that I’ve been away for a long time.”

Nathaniel had to admit that Edward was right about the scenery. When it was covered in snow like it was, there was something ethereal and beautiful about it. It was a shame that it was far too cold, otherwise, he would have stayed out for longer than they had planned.

He remembered being in the snow in Europe and how much colder it was the further north he went. Denmark had certainly been the coldest. Nathaniel remembered how he had almost gotten frostbite at one point. Snow was beautiful to look at, but being out in it was something else.

Even so, when Edward had suggested that the two of them go out for a ride to avoid greeting the guests—something he admitted that he wasn’t keen on—Nathaniel had agreed. It meant getting out of the house where he felt the awkward atmosphere settling on his shoulders. He could clear his head and prepare himself for seeing dozens of people who were now going to know that he and Juliana were married.

If he had been that sort of person, he would have refused to be at the Burwood estate and told Juliana that they were going to his home. But Nathaniel knew he couldn’t be that cruel, not when he was partially the reason they were in this position in the first place. And with Christmas holding a special place in Juliana’s heart, he didn’t think he could break her heart any further.

So he was going to have to stay and let her have this Christmas before they returned. Nathaniel wasn’t sure which one was the lesser of two evils.

“Look, there are some of the carriages arriving now.” Edward pointed toward the tiny specks on the horizon, on the very wide driveway up to the house. “It looks like everyone’s decided to arrive at once.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask...why do you have a driveway that long? It seems to go on for miles, and I’ve never understood why.”

Edward shrugged.

“I don’t know. My great-grandfather had the house built, and he designed everything with his own architect. I guess he wanted everyone to know that he was the duke, and he had the biggest everything, including the driveway.”

Nathaniel laughed.

“I can’t see that happening.”

“Neither can I, but from what Father tells me about him, it’s not really a surprise. He always had to compete with someone, even if it wasn’t reciprocated. The man was obsessed with his own image.”

“Sounds like that hasn’t really stopped, then.”

Nathaniel hadn’t meant for that to come out, but he couldn’t stop himself. After all, it was appearances and image that had resulted in him and Juliana getting married. Edward’s smile faded a little, and he sighed.

“I know what you’re saying, and I understand that you’re still upset about it. But I am grateful for it, Nate.”

“What?” Nathaniel frowned. Had he heard that correctly? “What do you mean by that? How can you be grateful?”

“You stepped up and married my sister. Even though nothing would have

occurred between you...”

“I seem to recall that you were under the impression that I did something with Juliana,” Nathaniel cut him off. “You were just as upset as your father. I know you’ve been less strict since then, but you can’t say that you believe nothing happened after being sure that something did occur.”

“I think I was more upset with the fact you had put both yourself and my sister in that position. I thought you would know better, and I didn’t think Juliana would end up in such a precarious position.”

“She was in her own home, Edward,” Nathaniel reminded him. “It was only to be expected that she would be comfortable where she lived.”

“Now it’s not safe for anyone.” Edward grunted. His gloved hands curled more around his reins. “I wish I knew who it was who started up the rumor. It got out of control.”

“So you don’t know who actually started it?”

“No. We just heard it as it was circulating around the room. Nobody seemed to know who saw what they did and started it. Even if they did know, I doubt they’re going to tell us.”

Nathaniel thought about what he might have seen out in the garden that night. He was still sure that it had been a person. Whether they had been looking in or saw something by accident, he wasn’t sure, but Nathaniel was more certain that he had seen someone outside. Could that have been someone who witnessed their interaction and got the wrong end of the stick?

It was a possibility, but until they found out who did it, he and Juliana were

destined to remain married with this tension between them.

Face it, there would be tension between the two of you, regardless of the outcome of this mystery. It's not going to go away because you find the person who started all of this.

Nathaniel wondered what Juliana was doing right now. If the guests were arriving now, she was probably greeting the guests with her aunt and being the consummate host. It was what she was good at, wearing that bright smile of hers and not batting an eyelid at the outrageous requests. Juliana was a lot of things, but she was good at showing that her feathers weren't ruffled when she needed to be like that.

Except around him. She seemed to have her feathers constantly ruffled whenever they were around each other. And Nathaniel couldn't help but upset them even further. He knew that he shouldn't, but he couldn't help it. Seeing that fire and emotion intrigued him.

Now he had several years to do that with his wife, and Nathaniel wasn't sure what to make of it. His emotions were all over the place, and he really didn't know what to think.

Even being married hadn't solved anything. It was just going to make things tougher for the pair of them, although which one would have a tougher time, Nathaniel didn't know. He was certain, however, that it was not going to be boring being married to Juliana.

“I must say that I have to thank you for what you've done, Nate.”

Nathaniel blinked. How long had Edward been talking, and he hadn't been paying attention?

“Forgive me, what...what are you saying?”

“Marrying Juliana when I know you didn’t want to. I’m aware that you two are not on the best of terms, and this has ruined your chance of having a marriage with the woman you love.”

Edward tilted his head to one side as he regarded him.

“That is some dedication to preserving someone’s dignity.”

Nathaniel swallowed. He was not comfortable with this, and Edward’s words made him want to squirm. This was not of his own choice, and Nathaniel knew that if he had refused, then he would have been kicked out and disowned himself.

And there was also that comment about losing a chance to marry the one he loved. That had passed a long time ago. Edward didn’t need to worry about Nathaniel not marrying his first choice when she was already married.

His friend wasn’t aware that Nathaniel had been on the cusp of marrying someone else because he had been in Europe at the time.

Certainly, he knew that Nathaniel had been planning on courting someone special, and he had asked him about it the night of Lady Farley’s party, but Nathaniel had simply said that it didn’t work out.

For now, Edward had no idea of the truth, and Nathaniel didn’t have the heart to tell him the truth. He had spent a long time feeling pity for himself; he didn’t want his friend to be doing it as well.

“I’ll do what I can,” he mumbled, and then cleared his throat.

“I understand that our situation is far from ideal, and I wish that it hadn’t happened. It’s not fair on your sister, and I know she’s going to struggle, given our...history.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to put it to one side?” Edward asked. “I know she’s going to be miserable, but I want to know that you’re not going to hold anything against her.”

Nathaniel winced at the thought of Juliana being miserable. That upset him more than he expected. But he nodded.

“I’ll do my best to look out for her, Edward. I’m not going to hold anything against her for what she’s done. It’s not fair on her to do that.”

“That’s something,” Edward grunted, and Nathaniel watched his breath form in the chilly air. “I know that I haven’t given you any reason to believe me, especially when I first heard what happened, but I trust you to look after Juliana as she deserves.”

Nathaniel didn’t know how to answer that. He didn’t think that he could without sounding like a fool. But he found that he wouldn’t be able to treat Juliana badly, even if he wanted to. He hadn’t cared to do it when they were children; it had merely been a ploy to keep her away from him. It had worked a little too well to the point Juliana hated him now.

Much as he wanted to and tried to show it, Nathaniel didn’t hate her. He couldn’t. But keeping up the facade was far easier than swallowing his pride and admitting it.

“Anyway, shall we get back?” Edward asked, puffing more of his breath into the air as if he were smoking an invisible cigar. “It’s gotten even colder out here, and I think there’s a fog coming in.”

Sure enough, there was a thick mist in the air that had been building while they had been talking. The house was still in sight, but it was slowly becoming a mere outline. They wouldn’t be able to see eventually. Nathaniel urged his horse into motion.

“Then let’s go. The sooner we go, the sooner I can get warm.”

Hot chocolate in front of the fire sounded perfect right now.

Chapter 13

“I’m going to change and join the guests,” Edward said as he dismounted his horse, handing the reins to one of the busy stable lads. “I suppose I’d better show my face now.”

“I might join you eventually.” Nathaniel tugged off his gloves, surprised at how stiff his fingers were despite the thick coverings on his hands. “Once I’ve thawed out, that is. That was colder than I thought.”

“It got us out of being hosts, didn’t it?”

“You’re a host because you’re part of the family. I’m merely married into it.”

“But you’re now classed as part of the family, Nate.” Edward clapped a hand on Nathaniel’s shoulder with a grin. “Then again, I’ve been seeing you like a brother for years, given how much time we spent together.”

“You saw me like a brother, and you barely contacted me in four years,” Nathaniel reminded him.

“Fair point. But now we are brothers, even if by marriage.” Edward slapped him on the back. “I’ll see you later. I need to thaw my body out before I join the guests. They can’t have Jack Frost in the drawing room dripping water onto the rugs.”

Nathaniel laughed.

“I’m sure you would make it far more entertaining.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know, but it would be better to see how quickly you can melt instead of listening to mindless conversations.”

Edward rolled his eyes.

“You would think my suffering was more amusing.”

They entered the house and made their way to the stairs, dripping water behind them and trying not to slip over. They barely remembered to give their outdoor garments to the footman.

Nathaniel wondered if he could get away with having a bath before he joined everyone. He had been out in the snow, and it felt like he was frozen down to the bone. It wouldn’t do to freeze to death in the middle of the room.

And it would give him more of a reason not to be around Juliana. Nathaniel had seen her that morning at breakfast, and she had been so quiet that he almost forgot that she was there. When he did look over at her, she refused to look at him.

All of her attention was concentrated on her food. Nathaniel understood that his wife was not happy with the situation, but speaking out about it in front of her family was just going to upset her, and she would verbally lash out.

This was something they should address in private. Although that was more than likely going to end up as an argument as well. He couldn’t win.

No matter. He would handle it as best that he could. While they weren’t

exactly a united front, he could act it out. More for Juliana's sake than his own.

Never did he think that he would be back in England doing something for Juliana's well-being after trying his hardest to avoid her as much as he could.

They were almost at the top of the stairs when Nathaniel saw two ladies appear, about to come down toward them. One of the ladies was in her forties, handsome with graying brown hair and a slightly plump frame. The other...

Nathaniel stopped short, unable to move. It was Clara.

What was Clara doing here?

And she saw him as well. Her countenance froze the moment she laid eyes on him, her eyes widening and her mouth dropping open. They stared at each other, and they might as well have been alone.

Clara was here. In Juliana's house.

"Edward!" the older woman cried, the exclamation making Nathaniel jump. She beamed as she came down the stairs toward them. "It's a delight to see you again!"

"Lady Lucan." Edward smiled as he kissed the lady's cheek. "It's been a long time. You're looking well."

"I'm in the pink, as always. My husband said he wanted to talk to you, by the way. Something about wanting to hear all about your travels."

Edward laughed.

“I’m sure we can find some time to talk about my time in Europe. Do you remember my friend Nathaniel Harwood, son of the Earl of Haringdale?”

“Of course!” Lady Lucan beamed at Nathaniel. “It’s been a long time, Lord Harwood. I didn’t realize you had returned as well.”

“It was meant to be just for the festive period.” Nathaniel cleared his throat, tearing his gaze away from Clara. “But things have changed now.”

“Oh, that’s right! You got married recently, didn’t you?”

Nathaniel heard Clara’s gasp, so slight that nobody else seemed to have noticed. He tried not to look at her, but he could guess that she was looking at him with a shocked expression. He gave a slight shrug.

“A few things made it...imperative.”

Lady Lucan laughed.

“That’s what all the gentlemen say. They make it sound like they’re doing everyone a big favor, but they’re just as happy as the bride to become married to someone they love.”

Edward made a sound that could have been him hiding a laugh. Nathaniel wondered if he should tell Lady Lucan the truth, but he surmised that she would probably say the same thing. Now he began to calculate how soon he could get out of this uncomfortable conversation. Having Clara close by was making Nathaniel nervous, and he could feel his chest tightening at the mere

sight of her.

“You remember my niece, Clara Montgomery, don’t you?” Lady Lucan said suddenly, beckoning the younger woman to join them.

“I...I remember,” Nathaniel croaked, finally turning to look at Clara again. He hoped that he didn’t look like a fool as he stared at her. “Lady Clara.”

“Lord Harwood,” Clara said in a voice that Nathaniel had thought so beautiful before. She licked her lips. “Congratulations on your marriage.”

“Thank you.”

Of all the times to run into Clara again, it had to be now. Nathaniel didn’t think his luck could get any worse. Then his heart practically stopped at Lady Lucan’s next statement.

“I thought it would be good for Clara to get out and meet other people. With her parents in Spain and her husband sadly passed two summers ago, it’s not easy for her being on her own.”

Nathaniel thought he had misheard. Clara’s husband was dead and had been for a while? Why hadn’t she told him? If he had known...

There was nothing he could do about it now.

“It’s good to be around other people at Christmas,” Edward said gently, giving Clara a nod. “I hope we can give you some Christmas cheer.”

“I hope that’s the case, my lord,” Clara murmured.

She was still looking at Nathaniel, but he wasn't able to look at her, not without a well of emotions coming out of him. How had it come to this that he lost her three years ago, only to meet her again, and this time he was the one who was unavailable? If he had stayed around in England, he would have known about her widowhood sooner.

The knowledge that he had really lost his chance left him shaking.

“Lord Harwood, are you all right?” Lady Lucan frowned at him. “You seem to be...out of sorts. You're even shaking.”

“I...” Nathaniel cleared his throat as he croaked. “We were out riding, and it was...very cold...”

“Oh, what am I doing, then? You need to go and get yourselves warm!” Lady Lucan looked them both over. “I had no idea that you two were dripping wet.”

“We didn't want to be impolite and interrupt you,” Edward replied. He nudged Nathaniel into moving. “Come along, Harwood. Let's go and make ourselves more presentable.”

Nathaniel allowed himself to be taken up the stairs, stepping around Clara. She didn't move to get out of the way, but she did turn her head to watch him go. There was something in her eyes that he couldn't quite decipher, but he didn't stop to figure out what it was.

He needed to get out of there. The tightness in his chest was at the point where he was struggling to breathe, and Nathaniel couldn't get it to ease.

The two friends got to the top of the staircase, and Nathaniel clutched onto

the banister as his knees shook too much to keep him up. Edward let him go, not saying a word as he waited. Nathaniel looked down to the foyer and saw that Lady Lucan and Clara had reached the bottom of the staircase and went heading toward the drawing room.

As they went, Clara glanced up, and their eyes met. Nathaniel felt the pain in his gut again, and he was frozen as Clara slowly looked away, following her aunt into the drawing room.

“Nate?” Edward’s voice was quiet. “Are you all right?”

Nathaniel swallowed hard.

“Did you know that Clara was going to be present?”

“No, she was not on the guest list.”

“But she’s here now.”

“Maybe Lady Lucan didn’t want her to be on her own at this time of year. Aunt Betsy does like people to join us over Christmas. The more the merrier.”

Nathaniel wasn’t sure he agreed with that sentiment. He pushed himself upright, glad that the floor wasn’t swaying underneath him.

“I...I need a moment alone,” he mumbled. “I can’t...I mean...”

“Take your time,” Edward said gently. “If anyone asks, I’ll just say that you’ve got some business to attend to.”

Nathaniel didn't reply apart from a nod in his friend's direction. Then he started walking, managing to get to his bedchamber without stumbling or making himself look like a fool. It was still a struggle to breathe as he got into the room, practically collapsing against the door.

Barnes was laying out clothes on the bed. He looked up when Nathaniel entered.

"My lord?"

"I need a bath, Barnes. I need to get warm as soon as possible."

"Of course." Barnes gestured at the fire. "I made up the fire a short while ago in preparation. Would you like your bath now or later?"

"Now. I can't go downstairs and face anyone right now." Nathaniel drifted toward the fire, lifting his hands toward the flames. He could feel the heat curling around his fingers and sinking into his clothes. "If anyone asks where I am, just say that I'm indisposed with business."

"Will anyone ask?" Barnes questioned. "Do you want me to tell Lady Harwood the same thing?"

Juliana. Nathaniel had momentarily forgotten about her. She was going to wonder where he was by now, and Nathaniel didn't think he could face her. Not after what had just happened.

"Say whatever you want to Lady Harwood. But I don't want to be disturbed right now."

“Very good, my lord.”

Barnes left the room, and Nathaniel slumped to his knees on the hearth-rug, staring at the dancing flames. God, what was he going to do now?

Juliana looked around the room, trying to see Harwood’s face among the guests. But he wasn’t there. She hadn’t seen him since he left the dining room that morning, although he had talked with Edward about going out for a ride in the snow.

Was he still out and about? Surely, he would have returned home by now; the air had gotten far colder, according to the most recent guests. Nobody would have been surprised if it snowed more again shortly.

While Juliana didn’t want to care about him, she didn’t want Harwood to freeze himself to death, trying to keep away from her. That would really not look good for their first few days of marriage.

Already, many people had asked her about the marriage and how things progressed as they did, and Juliana was running out of answers that sounded like a proper answer and moved the conversation along.

She had to find him. There was no chance of her managing this on her own anymore. If there were going to be any more awkward questions about her marriage, then Harwood needed to answer them himself.

Finding her father as he conversed with a tall, thin man with a delicate mustache and a bald head, Juliana touched Burwood’s arm.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes, Father.”

“Very well, dear. Where are you off to?”

“I’m just going to check up on something. I won’t be long.”

Juliana hurried off before her father could reply, not wanting to get into it. Any mention of her husband had people suddenly talking to her about it and how they thought she was never going to find someone to marry. It was like everyone had forgotten that she was only twenty years old. She still had plenty of life in her.

What was with Society’s obsession for ladies to be married as soon as they were of age? They weren’t going to shrivel up and get old if they were not with a husband within six months of entering Society properly. Juliana had a feeling that nobody was going to pay her much attention with that argument, though.

Leaving the drawing room, Juliana made her way up the stairs. She was almost at the top when Edward appeared, looking a little red-faced and wearing a different suit to what he had been wearing that morning. He stopped when he almost bumped into his sister.

“Juliana. Anything wrong?”

“I was looking for Harwood.” Juliana tried to sound nonchalant as she faced her brother. “Do you know where he is?”

“He’s probably still getting ready. We did end up getting very cold.”

Juliana rolled her eyes.

“Well, if you will go riding out in the snow...”

“It cleared our heads, so I’m not about to argue.” Edward paused. “You might want to wait for Nate to come downstairs, though.”

“Why?”

“Just trust me on this, Juliana.”

That didn’t make Juliana feel any better. She now wanted to figure out what on earth was going on. Edward was being decidedly evasive, even though he was trying to hide it.

What had happened between him and Harwood?

Stepping around her brother and ignoring him calling after her, Juliana made her way to Harwood’s room. She could feel her pulse thumping more in her throat as she approached the closed door, unsure of what she was going to say.

How was she going to talk to Harwood and not sound like a nagging wife? They would just result in another argument, and the two of them would end up not talking to each other.

Then their plan to be a united front despite everything would be out of the window.

Juliana was about to knock on the door when it opened, and Harwood’s valet,

Barnes, started to leave the room. He stopped in surprise when he saw her.

“Lady Harwood? Is there something wrong?”

“I was looking for my husband, Barnes. Is he in there?”

“He is, but...”

“Then I need to speak to him.”

“My lady, wait!”

But Juliana pushed past the servant and entered the room, only to stop in stunned amazement when she saw the large tin bath by the fire and Harwood standing beside it, his back to her as he shrugged into a robe. For a moment, she saw the bare muscles of his arms, shoulders, and back, and her mind went blank.

She had never seen a man in any naked capacity before, and she was under no illusions that she would never see her husband like that. But now she had caught sight of what some of him looked like under his clothes...

Juliana wished that she could run back out again and pretend that she hadn't been moments away from witnessing him in the bath, but she couldn't move. It was like her feet were stuck to the floor.

Harwood turned, his expression bemused when he saw her.

“Lady Harwood. Do you normally barge into your husband's bedchamber?”

“I...what...”

Harwood had tightened up the robe, but there was that flash of bare chest that Juliana couldn't take her eyes off. Her face was burning now, and she hoped that the floor would open up and swallow her whole.

“Well?” he demanded. “What is it?”

She really needed to get a grip on herself here. They were married, after all. What was wrong with seeing her husband in this capacity?

Because it's Nathaniel Harwood, someone you've always wondered what he would look like with his shirt off.

I really should tell my imagination to stop imagining things.

“All of the guests are here now,” Juliana said finally, drawing herself up and squaring her shoulders. She would not break now. “I was beginning to wonder where you were.”

Harwood arched an eyebrow.

“You don't need to worry about me, my lady. I will not shirk my duties as your husband.”

He was still giving her that acerbic attitude, something Juliana had been expecting. But what she hadn't expected was to see the agony in his eyes. It was in his expression, but mostly contained. It was like Harwood had experienced something painful in the last few hours.

Juliana found herself softening, and she peered at him.

“What happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re not looking yourself. Did something happen between you and my brother?”

Harwood scoffed.

“You don’t need to worry about it. I don’t need your concern.”

“You don’t think so?” Juliana folded her arms. “What happened, Harwood? Why are you looking like you’ve lost something?”

“Lost something?”

“Yes. It’s as if you realized that you’ve had something taken away abruptly. I’ve not seen you like that, not even when we got married.” Juliana frowned. “What’s wrong?”

Harwood turned away and headed over to the large screen erected in the corner of the room.

“I don’t want to discuss anything with you, Juliana.”

“Who are you going to discuss it with, then? I’m your wife.”

“Not by choice, trust me.”

Juliana tried to ignore the sting of pain when he said that.

“I understand that, but that doesn’t mean you should hide anything from me. If we’re going to be stuck together for the rest of our lives, the least we can do is talk. Even if it means you’re venting about something, you can do it with me.”

Harwood stepped behind the screen, and then he looked over the top at Barnes, who was still in the open doorway.

“Are you going to shut the door, Barnes, or are you going to stand there staring at me?”

“Oh. Right.” Barnes shut the door. “Forgive me, my lord.”

“Help me get dressed. I doubt my wife is going to be leaving anytime soon.”

Juliana could tell that Harwood was trying to dismiss her, and she wasn’t about to let him do that. There was something going on, and it was clearly something that Harwood wasn’t happy about. She wouldn’t budge until he told her the truth.

So while her husband changed behind the screen, his valet passing his clothes when he was told, Juliana sat on the edge of the bed and waited. Harwood thought that he was stubborn and that he could get what he wanted by being steadfast in his choice. He had been like that since they were children, so it was no surprise that he would be like that now.

Well, she could also be stubborn. Harwood was not going to get out of this. If he hadn't shown some torment in his eyes, Juliana would have left him alone. But she had seen something different that belied his current attitude. Something in her wanted to know why he was so distressed.

She had a feeling that she knew the answer, but Juliana needed to hear it.

After several minutes, Harwood came out from behind the screen, adjusting the cufflinks in the cuffs of his sleeves. He stopped when he saw Juliana.

"You're still here?"

"Of course, I'm still here." Juliana stood up. "I'm not going anywhere until we talk."

"You're really going to pressure me to tell you what's wrong with me?"

"You think you can handle this, but I can see that you're barely holding on. It's only going to take something small to make you explode in front of the guests. You keep that bottled up, and that will happen."

Harwood rolled his eyes and started to walk past her. Juliana managed to touch his arm, and that had him slowing to a stop.

"Nate?" She made her voice a little gentler. "Talk to me."

Harwood looked down at her hand on his arm before looking up at her. The distress was still there, and he was barely holding on. Juliana suddenly had an urge to put her arms around him and hold him until he felt better. She stopped herself, though, knowing it was not a good time for her to lower her own

defenses.

Finally, Harwood sighed, glancing over at Barnes.

“Would you leave us for the moment, Barnes? I need to speak with my wife.”

Chapter 14

Nathaniel had had no intention of telling Juliana about Clara. He hadn't wanted to discuss this with anyone at all, not even Edward. But the woman was too astute for her own good, and she had figured out that something was wrong. Now was not the time for her to find out about Clara.

But he knew that he would have to tell her. There was a chance that Juliana was aware of what Clara was to Nathaniel, although from the way she was looking at him right now, she didn't really have an indication of what was going on. Maybe he could have gotten away from it.

And yet he couldn't. Maybe it was because she had called him Nate, something she hadn't addressed him as for several years. Or maybe it was due to the fact she deserved to know about his past. If she found out about Clara from someone else, she might think that Nathaniel had manipulated the guest list to include Clara as well. Then his wife would be suspicious of him, and that was not something either of them needed at this time of year.

He would have to tell her. And Nathaniel wasn't sure where to start.

As Barnes closed the door behind him, leaving his master alone with his wife, Nathaniel pulled away from Juliana and sagged onto the edge of the bed.

"This isn't something I'm really comfortable discussing," he said slowly, trying to form the words as he went along. "But you deserve to know about it."

"Know about what?" Juliana folded her arms. "What's going on, Nate?"

Strangely, Nathaniel liked hearing her call him that. He pushed that away and concentrated on what he was doing.

“You’re aware that I was courting someone a few years ago, right?”

“Were you?” Juliana frowned. “When was this?”

“Three years ago.”

Juliana still looked confused. She pursed her lips and shook her head.

“I don’t remember much about that time. I was still reeling from my mother’s death, and Edward had left for Europe, so I felt like I was alone.”

Nathaniel felt a pang of sympathy for her. To lose people she loved in quick succession, albeit in different circumstances, had to be difficult for her. He wished that he could comfort her now, but if he didn’t get this explanation out, it was never going to happen.

“Well, three years ago, I was in a relationship with a young woman. We were madly in love, and we were going to get married. But then she suddenly left me on our wedding day.”

Juliana arched an eyebrow. If she intended to say something about the woman getting lucky because she got away from him, she didn’t voice it. Nathaniel was glad about that; he didn’t want to deal with her comments right now.

“She had been told by her father that she was going to marry someone else. It didn’t matter that he had already given his blessing for our marriage; he had

changed his mind, and he expected his daughter to do the same thing. I don't know how much she fought him on it, but the first I heard that we weren't going to marry was just as I was about to head to the church."

"So she married someone different," Juliana said slowly.

"Her father knew how much we loved each other, but he didn't care. The man he had in mind was wealthier and had a lot more influence than me. He would get more benefits out of that marriage. In his mind, I had nothing to offer her."

Harwood could see that he wouldn't be able to contend with the older gentleman that Clara's father had picked out, but it didn't make him feel any better. He could still remember the cold that had settled in when he read the letter that Clara had left for him, explaining that she couldn't do anything about it, and he should just forget about her.

"You had plenty to offer her, though," Juliana pointed out. "You loved her, and that would have been far better than whatever money and status could have been given."

"You think so?"

"I've always thought that. I understand that there are marriages made in agreement to some stupid negotiation, and they can be treated like business transactions, but I believe that the best marriages are those where the husband and wife actually love each other." Juliana shrugged.

"If you're going to live for a long time with one person, you need to care about them at least a little bit, don't you?"

Nathaniel had thought about that before, but he hadn't expected Juliana to have that opinion. He had been under the impression that his wife just didn't like marriage at all.

She did have a point. He had something to offer, but it wasn't enough for Clara's father.

"That's why you left for Europe, wasn't it?" Juliana asked quietly as she moved to sit beside him, keeping a small distance between them. "You wanted to get away from the pain."

"And the humiliation. Do you know how embarrassing it is to have people at your wedding, only for the wedding to not happen because someone had been left at the altar? I had a lot of sympathy for not being able to catch the woman I love in matrimony, but it felt condescending and sneering afterward. It was like everyone's eyes were on me, and it got to the point where I couldn't take it anymore."

People would ask him if he was all right, and then they would comment about how awful that she went for someone who was richer. It didn't matter how much Nathaniel said that he didn't want to talk about it, it always came back to it. He had gotten so fed up with it.

"I can't begin to imagine how that was for you," Juliana said. She was hunched over, her hands gripping onto the coverlet on the bed. "Is that why you're struggling now? Because you're remembering someone you lost?"

"Because the person I lost is here in the house right now."

Juliana's head snapped up.

“I beg your pardon? What did you just say?”

“The woman I was meant to marry, Clara Montgomery, is here in the house right now.”

“Lady Lucan’s niece?”

Nathaniel blinked.

“You know her?”

“I was aware that she had quite a few nieces and nephews, but I wasn’t formally introduced to Lady Clara until today.” Juliana swallowed. “You know that she’s a widow now, don’t you?”

“I do. I bumped into her and Lady Lucan a short while ago.”

Nathaniel rubbed at his chest, but it didn’t get rid of the dull ache.

“If only I’d been able to hold on. Her husband had been in his fifties, and he was also in ill health. He had been fat and ate practically everything in sight. If I’d known that he was going to drop dead, I would have been there for her.”

Juliana didn’t say anything for a moment, and Nathaniel realized what he had been saying, and to whom. God, while he and Juliana may not be a happily married couple, there were things you never said to your wife.

But she would have found out sooner rather than later. It was best that he said it instead of someone else. Juliana would appreciate it despite what he had

just said.

“I see.” Juliana didn’t look at him, turning her face away from him, but Nathaniel could see that her jaw was tight. “And if you hadn’t married me, you would have pursued her, would you?”

“You know our marriage is not...”

“I know it isn’t. I don’t even know why I asked when I know the truth now.”

Taking a deep breath, Juliana stood up and walked away, moving toward the fire. Nathaniel watched her, aware that he had insulted her. It hadn’t been his intention, but once he started talking about Clara, it all came out. He should have stopped before now.

Juliana stared into the flames for a while, to the point that Nathaniel thought she had forgotten about him. Then she turned, looking like she was trying to hold herself together. She was doing well, but Nathaniel saw the strain in her eyes.

“You understand that I had no idea about this, don’t you? I wouldn’t have invited your former lover for some sick game of dangling her in front of your face.”

Nathaniel frowned.

“I wouldn’t have thought that of you at all.”

“You seem determined to think the worst of me.”

“Even I know that you wouldn’t be so cruel as to do that. Edward did say that nobody knew she was coming.” Nathaniel held up his hands. “I promise that I won’t do anything untoward with Lady Clara. If you wish me not to interact with her, I’ll do as you say.”

Juliana looked confused.

“Why would you do that?”

“Because there is a history between us, and I’m sure that there are guests here who remember that we were due to be married. While you and I aren’t exactly on good terms, I’m not about to disrespect you.”

She still looked surprised. Had she expected him to say that he was going to get reacquainted with an old flame, and she had no say about it? Nathaniel was a lot of things, he could admit that much, but he wasn’t about to do that to his wife. Juliana deserved more than that.

“I...well...” Juliana shook herself. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Would you rather that I focus my attention on her and not you?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” She smoothed her hands down her skirts. “Lady Clara is a guest, and I have to be a good hostess. While I know you are my husband now, I’m not about to be that woman who controls what her husband does. That’s not fair on either of us, and we’re already in a precarious situation.”

Nathaniel wasn’t quite sure he understood. He stood up.

“Are you saying that you don’t object to the two of us interacting if it happens?”

“If you have to interact, I can’t stop you.” Juliana held up a finger. “But I will say that I don’t want either of you going anywhere alone. You stay in the presence of several people, not just one. We’ve got rumors about us that need to die down first, and we don’t need more surrounding us when you’re caught alone with a former flame.”

“I understand.” Nathaniel felt the band around his chest ease a little. “Thank you, Juliana. I do appreciate your understanding.”

He did mean it. He didn’t know what he had been expecting from Juliana, but this was the best reaction he could have asked for. It was better than Juliana throwing a fit and screaming at him for his betrayal when that hadn’t happened.

Then again, Nathaniel couldn’t blame her for that.

“It’s not about understanding, Harwood,” Juliana said stiffly. “It’s about how it’s going to look on both of us when you seem to be pursuing another woman days after we got married. While ours isn’t a love match, it’s still disrespectful.”

“And I would never do that to you.”

“Are you sure about that? You’ve disrespected me plenty of times before.”

Nathaniel winced. She did have a point.

“I will make sure that doesn’t happen again.”

“Do you promise that?”

Now Juliana looked uncertain. It was like she had lost a bit of her spirit. Nathaniel suddenly wanted to see that again; he didn’t want her to be miserable because of him. And she had every right to be.

He approached her and took her hand, watching Juliana’s mouth fall open as he raised her hand to his mouth. He kissed her fingers, feeling them twitch under his touch. Her cheeks flushed a little, and her eyes darkened just a bit.

Nathaniel had never been more struck by her beauty than he was right now. And he couldn’t keep his eyes off her.

Why did he have a sudden desire to kiss her? That shouldn’t be happening.

A knock at the door made Juliana jump away from him so suddenly that Nathaniel was left swaying. He caught himself before he stumbled and scowled at the door.

“What?”

“Lady Lucy is looking for Lady Harwood, my lord.”

Which meant they were going to be interrupted. Sighing, Nathaniel turned to Juliana, who was dusting herself down, her cheeks still slightly pink.

“I’m coming down, Barnes,” she called. “Just a moment.”

She glanced at him, and Nathaniel was sure that he saw a corner of her mouth twitch. Did she just smile at him? But it was gone before he could see it properly, and Juliana was moving swiftly out of the room.

This Christmas party was going to feel a lot longer than it was.

Juliana stood to one side and looked at the guests milling around. It was a much smaller gathering than Aunt Betsy's birthday party, but it was still full of activity. Everything seemed lighter and brighter than ever, especially with the huge tree that had been erected in the corner of the room. There were so many smiles that it should have lifted her spirits.

But it wasn't happening. She couldn't stop thinking about what Harwood told her about his former lover. Knowing that she was here made Juliana feel very uncomfortable.

Did Aunt Betsy know about this? If Harwood had been about to get married to her, it must have been common knowledge. It was very rare that someone could get married, and nobody knew about it. If she had been aware, she wouldn't have agreed to let Lady Clara stay. And Lady Lucan had to have known about it as well, seeing as they were related.

Juliana couldn't understand why they would agree to let Lady Clara near Harwood when they were aware of their history.

Listen to you. You're sounding like you have a claim over the man.

We're married. I should be permitted to do that.

You are his wife by law. You don't have his heart.

Juliana had a nasty taste in her mouth with that. She hadn't expected anything less, but it still hurt to know that Harwood would pine for someone else and that she was in the way.

Now, that was one way to lower the mood.

"Juliana?"

Juliana couldn't stop herself from gasping when someone touched her arm. Even with gloves on, their fingers felt incredibly cold. Her heart fluttering wildly, she turned to Lucy, who was watching her with a confused frown.

"Are you all right? You've been looking out of sorts since I found you." Lucy peered at her. "What's going on? Are you ill?"

How was she supposed to explain this to Lucy? That her husband had just encountered his almost-wife, and he was upset about it? Lucy would be shocked, but she would be understanding. Juliana needed that right now.

But now was not the time to discuss something so big. She didn't want to lower the tone of the evening for everyone else. So Juliana managed a smile and shook her head.

"I'm just...I'm just tired, that's all. It's been a long day, and I've been really busy."

Lucy's expression said she didn't quite believe her, but she nodded.

“I can understand that. You like to throw yourself into everything when it comes to Christmas. I do worry that you’re going to collapse from exhaustion.”

“I don’t think it’s going to be that bad, Lucy.”

“Are you sure? You’re still rather pale.” Lucy took her arm. “Why don’t we sit down? You’ve been swaying for a while now.”

“Have I?”

Juliana hadn’t noticed. She had thought things were a bit floaty, but that could have been with the candles dotted all over the tree; they seemed to make the room shimmer. But she allowed Lucy to lead her over to a chaise by the closed windows and sat down.

There was a draft tickling the back of her neck, but given how warm Juliana was feeling, it felt like a welcoming touch. She gripped her hands onto the cushions, waiting for the wave of nausea to pass her.

“I think you should retire for the evening,” Lucy said as she sat beside her. “You’re now looking a little green.”

“I’ll be fine. I think I ate a bit too much.”

“You mean you think you ate too little. You barely touched your food at dinner.”

Juliana hadn’t thought anyone would notice. With the number of things on the table and the foliage across the middle with the candles, she had thought

that she could get away with nobody seeing that she had simply pushed her food around her plate.

The only person who could have noticed was Harwood, who had been sitting across from her. But he hadn't said anything. Actually, he had barely said two words to her since they came downstairs a few hours ago.

The interaction in his bedchamber kept coming back to haunt her, and Juliana remembered the moment she felt a jolt when Harwood had kissed her hand. It had been a simple gesture of gratitude, but it had felt far more intimate than it should have been. Juliana had almost given in and thrown herself at him.

But that would have resulted in Harwood pushing her away, humiliating her further. From the way he reacted after he kissed her hand, her husband had been just as bewildered by what he had done.

They were never going to be on the same page or evenly balanced. Juliana was sure of that.

A movement out of the corner of her eye had Juliana turning her head, and she saw Harwood standing with Edward and Eleanor. The three of them seemed to be engaged in conversation, something that made Harwood smile. Juliana felt a pang in her chest.

There was something genuine and relaxed about that smile, something she had never received from Harwood before. Not even when they were children. Never had Juliana had a smile that made Harwood look happy.

A stab of something in her gut gave her pause. It was odd, twisting about until it started to grow. What was wrong with her?

She pressed a hand to her stomach, something that Lucy noticed.

“Juliana?”

“I’m all right,” Juliana croaked. She swallowed. “I must be feeling unwell.”

“Then you should retire for the evening. Given how much you’ve done today, I’m sure your father and aunt will be happy to let you leave the festivities...”

“I can manage. It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

Juliana knew she wouldn’t be able to settle properly, even in her own bedchamber, until the guests had retired for the evening. Even then, she would be aware of the fact she would be spending her last few weeks at home before she moved over to Harwood’s estate.

Despite his promise that she had her own apartment within the house itself, Juliana knew that it wouldn’t be completely hers. That was his home, not hers, and she would be a stranger despite her new title.

She didn’t think she could cope.

Don’t start crying now. It’s not a good idea to break down in tears.

“Juliana?”

Juliana looked up to see her father approaching them. He looked concerned as he came closer. Lucy got to her feet and curtsied.

“Your Grace.”

Burwood nodded at her before regarding his daughter.

“Are you all right? You look like you’re going to faint.”

“I’m perfectly fine, Father,” Juliana lied.

“Are you sure? You can always retire tonight. I know you’ve been busy...”

“I can manage. Thank you for your concern.”

Burwood’s frown deepened. Then he looked at Lucy.

“Lady Lucy, do you mind if I have a private word with my daughter?”

“Of course.” Lucy touched Juliana’s shoulder. “I’ll be with Lady Eleanor when you’re finished.”

Juliana managed a tiny smile and watched as her friend walked away. Lucy reached the group they had been observing and touched Edward’s arm. Juliana’s brother looked around and gave Lucy a warm smile before drawing her into the conversation. The four of them looked relaxed and content with each other.

If Juliana joined them now, she was sure that it wouldn’t be the same.

“Is something wrong?” Burwood asked. He settled onto the chaise beside her. “You’ve been on edge all evening.”

“You mean more than usual?” Juliana quipped.

“You know what I mean.”

She did know. But she didn't think that she could tell her father about Harwood's formerly intended bride being in the house as well. While Burwood would be shocked about it, he wouldn't be able to do anything about it. His sister would be upset that he tried to make a guest leave, and it would cast a cloud over everything.

Juliana didn't want to ruin the festivities with something that couldn't happen. Even so...

No, she couldn't do it. Not with Burwood, anyway.

“It's just a bit...difficult right now,” she said quietly, staring at the floor so she didn't have to look at him. “Knowing that I've only got a few more weeks until I leave the house is weighing heavily on me.”

“I understand.” Burwood's voice was gentle. “It's never easy to move on onto something new.”

“Especially when it's against my will.”

Burwood sighed.

“Look, we've been over this several times. You know that this is not what we wanted for you, but if you will...”

“Would everyone stop blaming me for this, Father?” Juliana couldn't help

but snap when she knew what Burwood was about to say. Now she looked up and glared at him. “I’m not the only one at fault. Harwood shares responsibility for what happened. It’s not just me who needs to behave herself.”

“Did I say I was going to blame just you?”

“You didn’t need to. I heard the tone of your voice.” Juliana shook her head. “It doesn’t matter what you say, I know that you’re going to place all of the blame on me.”

Burwood looked bewildered. Juliana knew that she was going a little too far with her frustration, but it felt like it was boiling over. Although she had enough self-restraint to keep it quiet.

“I...I wasn’t planning to blame you for everything, Juliana,” Burwood stuttered. “Forgive me if that sounded...”

“Are you going to start backing down now, Father? You’re the one who told me to get married because I did something stupid. You don’t get to be gentle and soothe me after what you’ve done.” Juliana took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I have a lot going on emotionally, and what I really want is to be left alone. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“You’re my daughter. Of course, I’m going to worry about you.”

“If you did, you wouldn’t have forced me to marry someone I hate,” Juliana said bitterly.

Something passed across Burwood’s face, but before he could say anything, Juliana got to her feet.

“If you’ll excuse me, Father. There are a few people I need to speak to.”

She didn’t, not really. But Juliana just wanted to get away before she broke down and started off a chain of events that would ruin everything.

That would really be her fault.

Chapter 15

“Nate.” Edward nudged Nathaniel and leaned in. “Be aware that Lady Clara is approaching you.”

Inwardly, Nathaniel groaned. He had managed to avoid Clara so far, but there wasn't much he could do about it now when she was walking toward them. He did contemplate walking away and pretending that he hadn't seen her, but that could draw attention to them, and Nathaniel wanted to keep it quiet.

Then again, it felt like they had plenty of eyes on them already. Nathaniel was sure if he looked around, people would be staring at him. And why wouldn't they? He had just suddenly married and was now in the house of his father-in-law, taking part in the Christmas festivities. That was enough for the *ton* to gossip about without his former lover conversing with him in a crowded room.

Nathaniel thought about what Juliana had said about Clara. She wouldn't be upset if they did cross paths, but she didn't want them to be alone. That would be easy enough for him to follow. Nathaniel would respect her choices.

It wouldn't be fair to her if he snuck away to speak to Clara alone. Juliana didn't need him raising questions about their marriage when they still had to dispel the rumors already flying around.

“Do you want to speak to her?” Edward asked quietly. “I know it's not an ideal situation...”

“Only if I have to,” Nathaniel whispered. He glanced across the room and

caught sight of Juliana, who was standing rigidly by a chaise with her father still seated. “Just don’t leave my side.”

“Whatever you need.” Edward frowned. “Is this something I should be worried about? I remember how besotted you were with Clara.”

Nathaniel wanted to say that there was nothing to worry about, but he didn’t know if he could sound convincing. At least Lady Lucy and Eleanor had moved away now; Eleanor knew Clara, but the pair of them had never gotten along.

Nathaniel had never figured out why, but Eleanor had been rather caustic toward Clara, almost as if she had hated the woman on sight. Clara was just as acerbic in return, so there was no love lost between them.

That was not going to bode well for the Christmas mood. Nathaniel wasn’t too bothered about it, but he wasn’t about to upset the people he now had to see as family. The duke, certainly, wouldn’t be impressed if there was a war of words between two of the ladies.

Even as he told himself to be calm about the situation, Nathaniel could feel his heart racing as Clara reached him, accompanied by Lady Lucan. Clara gave him a warm smile and reached for his arm.

“Nate.”

“That’s Lord Harwood, Lady Clara.” Nathaniel shifted a little so her hand missed his arm. “While we may have been previously acquainted, things have changed now. I don’t want people to get the wrong idea.”

Clara’s smile faded a little, but then it was back.

“Of course. I wouldn’t want to upset your wife. If she’s aware of us, that is.”

“I’m sure that everyone in the *ton* is aware that you left me for someone else, Clara. It’s not exactly a secret.”

Clara flinched. Lady Lucan sighed and put a hand on her niece’s back.

“That couldn’t be helped, I’m afraid, Lord Harwood. My brother-in-law is one of those people who makes up his mind on something, and he’s not about to change it. And he wanted Clara to marry someone else.”

“If he did, then he should have told me when I asked for his blessing to marry his daughter. Instead, he made me go through the embarrassment of being stood up on my wedding day.”

Nathaniel knew that he was being rather sharp toward the two ladies, but the bitterness from remembering how he had been betrayed was coming back. It was twisting around inside him, and Nathaniel didn’t like it. At least both Lady Lucan and Clara were looking a little chastised about it.

“We never meant to hurt anyone,” Clara said, and then she corrected: “I mean that I never meant to hurt anyone. I wanted to tell you in person, but Father said I wasn’t to see you again.”

“Does he know that you’re seeing me now?”

“I believe he thinks you’re still in Europe. He won’t know until I return, and that’s only if I tell him.”

That didn’t make Nathaniel feel any better. He refrained from saying

something that he would more than likely regret, when Edward spoke.

“I’m sure you were aware of Lord Harwood and Lady Clara’s previous relationship, Lady Lucan,” he said.

The older woman nodded, looking a little uncomfortable.

“Of course I did. I was at the wedding, and Clara confided in me about it. Why?”

“If that was the case, why did you invite Clara here for our Christmas get-together? Even if Lord Harwood hadn’t been married to my sister, he might have been present for the festivities. Wouldn’t that have brought some discomfort and discord to the whole visit?”

For the first time, Lady Lucan looked as if she would rather be somewhere else. Nathaniel wondered if she had done this so she could get Clara and Nathaniel back together, and it had backfired on her. That would make sense with her behavior right now. Clara spoke before Lady Lucan could respond.

“It was my fault. I asked my aunt if there was a chance that I could come along. I’ve heard about the Christmas parties your family throws, and I thought Lord Harwood would be here.”

“And you thought this would be a good time to get...reacquainted with him?” Edward asked slowly.

“I just wanted to see how he was getting on. And Aunt Portia is right.” Clara laid a hand on her aunt’s arm. “I should get out and be sociable again. It’s been a few months since I came out of mourning, and it feels like I’ve been out of Society for far longer than a year. I have to start somewhere.”

That sounded so eloquently thought out that Nathaniel could almost believe it. But he had a feeling that Clara hadn't just orchestrated this to get reacquainted with him. Not in an innocent way, anyway. While he had to admire her determination to seek him out again, the thought that she had come here to woo him back left him on edge.

Why that was, he wasn't sure. It didn't make sense that he would be uncomfortable with the woman he loved enough to want to marry. Was it because of his current situation?

"Is everything all right here?"

Nathaniel jumped. He hadn't expected Juliana to join them, and he turned to see his wife approaching them with a smile on her face that didn't reach her eyes. The sight of her walking over made his pulse jump to the point that it made him feel lightheaded.

"Juliana." Edward was the one who answered first. "How are the festivities getting on?"

"As you can tell, they're going on really well." Juliana shook her head at her brother. "You would know if you were helping out as well."

"I am helping out. I'm making sure that your new husband doesn't get into trouble." Edward gave Nathaniel a pointed look. "Isn't that right?"

Nathaniel saw his wife's cool gaze land on him, and he cleared his throat. Why did she have to be so unnerving? It was eerie and beautiful at the same time, which didn't make sense to him. Why would he find her cool demeanor attractive?

He wondered if the cold was making things freeze in his head.

“I’m sure my husband has more important things to worry about.” Juliana slipped a hand through Nathaniel’s arm, maintaining her composure to the point it was frightening. “Is that not the case, darling?”

Darling. It was hard to see how much acid could drip from one term of endearment, but Julina managed it so well. Nathaniel gulped.

“That’s right. Darling.” That was not easy to say, especially when Juliana’s eyes flashed at him. “I was just commenting about it with Lady Lucan, as a matter of fact.”

“I see.” Juliana turned to Clara, giving Lady Lucan a nod before addressing the other lady. “If you’ll excuse me, Lady Clara? My husband said he was going to help me with something regarding the festivities, so I must simply steal him away right now.”

“Well, I can’t stop you from doing that,” Clara said, a little too coolly. “Who am I to get between a husband and wife?”

Nathaniel saw Lady Lucan’s cheeks flush a little, and Edward made a sound that could have been hiding a laugh. Juliana gave Clara a slight nod of her head.

“I’m glad to hear it. Come along, darling. We mustn’t dawdle.”

“But there’s a dance about to happen,” Lady Lucan said, pointing toward the string orchestra as they set up nearby. “Don’t you want to enjoy the dancing? I recall how you were a beautiful dancer as a child, Juliana.”

“I’m afraid I cannot do that,” Juliana said sweetly, pointedly looking at Nathaniel. “I wouldn’t want to step on anyone’s toes. I’ve been told that I’m not as beautiful a dancer as I think.”

Nathaniel knew that was aimed at him, and he tried not to squirm. Juliana was really good at that right now. He wondered if his cravat had tightened itself in the last couple of minutes.

“It was simply made in jest,” he said quickly. “You are a light-footed dancer, for the most part.”

Juliana’s expression flickered for a brief moment, and then it was gone. She gave him that bland smile and led him away from Lady Lucan and Clara. Nathaniel didn’t give in to look over his shoulder to see if Clara was watching; he knew that she would be.

The two of them didn’t speak until they entered the foyer, where there were less people around. Juliana turned to Nathaniel.

“I thought it might be time for me to intervene,” she murmured.

“Why? I thought I would have coped.”

“I could feel the anger radiating off you from across the room. Despite you saying that you can cope, I had a feeling that you were going to snap at her, and we don’t want attention drawn to that.”

Nathaniel hadn’t realized that his body language had been that clear. Had he been about to snap on Clara? Possibly, as there was a lot he needed to ask of her. In essence, he wanted closure for that part of his life. Now he was married, there was no hope of starting again from where they had left off.

Clara had to understand that.

Hopefully, she would understand that they were no more, and she would give him the answers that Nathaniel felt that he deserved, and they could walk away from each other. That was all they could do now. Nathaniel wasn't about to start up anything when Juliana was around.

While there were a lot of conflicting emotions about Juliana, Nathaniel wasn't going to do something that would hurt her. He had done that too many times in the past. Now was not the time to start up again.

“Thank you,” he mumbled, stepping away and adjusting his sleeves. “While I appreciate you helping me, I can take care of myself.”

“Are you sure about that?” Juliana tilted her head to one side before turning away. “Just remember what I said about that woman, please. I don't want to be humiliated in my own home any further.”

“I wouldn't dream of doing that, Juliana.”

If she heard him, she didn't say anything as she walked away. Nathaniel watched her go, suddenly wanting to go after her, just so he could do something to allay her fears. Despite what she had said, Juliana was showing that she wasn't happy with him interacting with Clara at all.

And, if he was being completely honest with himself, neither was he.

It felt ice-cold to Juliana as she began to awaken from her restless sleep. How

long had she been sleeping? It felt like she had only had a few minutes. Rolling over, she rubbed her eyes and peered hard at the clock on the mantel. It was a little after seven. The last time she had seen the time, it had been three-thirty.

Three-and-a-half hours was better than nothing. If only it wasn't so cold. And the fire had gone out as well.

Juliana wanted to burrow down into her covers and wait for her maid to come in and light the fire, but that could take a long time. She had no idea when that was going to happen. Besides, Juliana knew that she couldn't sleep when her head was in such turmoil.

Everything from the previous evening had been going around in her head ever since she had claimed to be too unwell and retired early to her bedchamber, unable to look at anyone without wondering what they were thinking about her current predicament.

It didn't help that every time she turned around, Juliana had seen Lady Clara. She had been talking to several other guests, including Aunt Betsy, and Juliana was shocked to see that her aunt was warm and welcoming to her.

Surely, she must know about her previous relationship with Harwood. Juliana had known her aunt was open-minded and accepted everyone, but this felt like it was pushing the line to become blurred.

Of all the people who came to celebrate Christmas with her family, why did Harwood's former fiancée have to be one of them?

This was not going to be a comfortable Christmas, she knew that much.

After trying to get warm for a while, Juliana gave up and got out of bed. If she was going to shiver, she might as well get up and get dressed. The rest of the house, apart from the staff, would not be up at this point, so it would be nice and quiet. She needed that quiet right now.

After quickly washing herself in ice-cold water, Juliana was trying to do up the back of her dress up, when the door opened, and Beth came in carrying the coal scuttle. She stopped when she saw her mistress already awake.

“Forgive me, my lady! I didn’t realize you were already awake.”

“Morning, Beth. Do you mind giving me a hand?” Juliana winced as something tugged in her back. “I don’t think my arms are meant to bend back like this.”

“Of course.” Setting down the coal scuttle, her maid hurried over and began to do up the fastenings on the back of the dress. “Maybe I should pick out another dress for you, my lady?”

“No, don’t bother. I don’t want to get any colder looking for a dress that requires me to have boneless arms.”

“Forgive me for not coming along earlier. Bathory wanted us to get everywhere downstairs warm first before we lit the fires upstairs, and nobody else is awake yet.”

“It’s fine. Just as long as the room is warm when I get back.” Juliana adjusted the shoulders of her dress and checked it in the mirror. Not bad. “Where’s my coat? The one with the fur on it.”

“It’s still in the wardrobe. Do you want the matching gloves?”

“Please.”

Normally, Juliana wouldn't wear fur, but it was perfect for keeping her warm when it was this cold, and she needed to bring the warmth into her body rather than stand around shivering. She had opened the curtains, and she could see that the snow was as thick as ever outside.

“Has it been snowing overnight?”

“Not as far as I know, my lady,” Beth said, her head in the wardrobe. “I think it's the same as before.”

“It's feeling colder than it was yesterday.”

“Perhaps it's a sign that more is to come? I'm not really sure.”

Juliana wasn't, either. She didn't know if she wanted more snow or not. She loved to look at it, and December was her favorite month, but she could never get used to the cold. Especially when it was inside. It was a shame that it wasn't permanently warm.

“Here you go, my lady.” Beth brought out the coat, which looked bigger than her. “Are you going outside this morning?”

“I thought that I could go out riding.”

Beth looked surprised.

“But...in this weather?”

“I’ve been riding in this weather before. It’s nothing I can’t handle, Beth.”

“I understand...”

Juliana heard the hesitation, and she bit back a sigh. She knew what Beth was thinking: what about her husband? It was like she needed his permission to do whatever she wanted. Harwood would have a hard time controlling her if that was the case.

She wasn’t about to let anyone control her anymore. That was not going to happen, and certainly not with her husband.

If Beth was going to push this, she decided against it. She helped Juliana with her coat, handing over the matching gloves, and picked up the coal scuttle again.

“Have a good ride, my lady. I’ll make sure your bedchamber is prepared for you when you return.”

“Thank you, Beth.”

Juliana left her room and went downstairs. It wasn’t the first time that she had been awake before anyone else in the house, but her footsteps still seemed to echo in the empty foyer as she tiptoed down. It probably wasn’t enough for the rest of the house to wake up, though; they would be dead to the world for another few hours. Especially if it was still dark outside and the sun wasn’t due to come up for another half-hour, at the very least.

Just enough time for her to get away and try to clear her head before she had to deal with the festivities.

Determined to get away for a little while, Juliana waited for her horse to be saddled up and managed to get up onto the beautiful gray mare, Dusty, without any problems.

“Will you be all right on your own, my lady?” Doss, the stable manager, held onto the reins as Juliana got herself comfortable. “With this weather, you shouldn’t go out alone.”

“I’ll be fine, Doss. You don’t need to be concerned.”

“Your father...”

“I’ll not do anything stupid. I just need to get out for a bit.” Juliana took the reins and started to steer Dusty away. “If it gets to eight-thirty and I haven’t returned, you can send a search party out. But I can manage alone.”

Doss looked like he wanted to argue, but he didn’t. Instead, he gave her a slight bow and stepped back.

“Very well, my lady.”

Hoping that he would follow what she wanted, Juliana rode out of the stables and made her way down the driveway at a brisk trot. There was no wind, but the air stung her face, and Juliana wondered if she should go back and get herself a hat, which she had forgotten about. But she decided against it and rode on.

She needed to get away from everything right now. Anything to stop herself from thinking about Lady Clara and how she might have an ulterior motive in coming here. Juliana didn’t want to think too much about it all and get it wrong; that would be too presumptuous and could end uncomfortably. She

needed to take what she believed with a pinch of salt and not see Lady Clara as a threat.

A threat to a marriage that was built on practically nothing. That was a joke.

Also, Juliana wanted to brace herself before she crossed paths with Hastings again. He hadn't approached her after arriving at the house, but Juliana was aware that he had been watching her.

All through the evening, he had been off to one side, and it had felt like he was openly staring at her. Juliana didn't like it, but telling him to stop would mean walking up to him to speak to him, and she didn't want to do that. It would just mean having to deal with the man sneering at her again.

She needed to talk to her father about Hastings. She couldn't do anything about their business relationship, but maybe Burwood could say something to get him to stop. Juliana doubted it, but they could try. It was bad enough that she had to attend this with her husband and deal with feelings she wasn't comfortable with regarding his former fiancée being present without her old suitor causing a nuisance.

This Christmas was not a good one at all. Juliana didn't know how she could have any good emotions about this year.

The sun was just beginning to cast light across the landscape as Juliana took a route off the driveway that took her briefly through the trees and out into open fields. She urged Dusty into a gentle gallop, and they made their way along a makeshift path that slowly climbed higher until they were at the top of a slope.

On the other side, further down the hill, was land owned by the Earl of Haringdale. They had a few borders that blurred a little along the way, and

Juliana recalled that this was one such place.

She could still see the edges of the flowerbed through the snow that she had erected years ago, with the intention of having her own flowers. Her mother had thought that it was odd that she would have flowers growing in a bed so far away from the house, but Juliana had wanted to do something of her own.

She wanted a reason to come and cultivate her own flowers, to get away from the house, and learn how to look after things on her own. Even at ten years old, it was something Juliana had taken seriously.

It was the place she came to after Harwood told her that he didn't like her and wanted her to get away from him because it was annoying. There had been a few more harsh words, some that still rang in Juliana's head whenever she allowed them to. It was frustrating and horrible, and she didn't want to dwell on it any further.

She wouldn't have much of an option if she was now married to Harwood. But at least he had been somewhat respectful toward her in the last couple of days. Maybe they could reach some sort of truce.

Juliana hoped so. Her feelings had been barely contained, and it was getting tougher each time she was around him. And after he kissed her hand...

Her head was spinning. Maybe it was because she was so high up. She needed to get down.

Juliana dismounted, managing not to get her skirts caught in the saddle as she slid down. Soothing Dusty with a pat to her neck, Juliana approached the flowerbed and crouched down, feeling the snow crunch under her boots.

She took off her glove and dusted some of the snow off the bed. She had planted snowdrops a while ago, but they wouldn't be flowering yet, not until the new year. They were her favorite flowers, and Juliana loved to see them bloom through the snow. They did lift her spirits.

If only they were in bloom now. She wanted something to improve her mood. Her home did not feel like her home anymore, and she was about to move a mile away to her husband's house. Juliana felt like everything had been taken out of her hands, and she was floundering in deep water. She didn't like it at all.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she heard the sound of a horse approaching. Juliana groaned. She couldn't have been gone that long, had she? Surely, she should be allowed to roam her family's estate without a chaperone.

Getting to her feet, Juliana turned to face the person bothering her, ready to scold them for bothering her when she wanted to be alone. Only for the words to disappear when she saw Harwood slowing his horse to a trot as he came up the hill, negotiating his way through the snow so easily he might as well have been walking on water.

He got to the top and stopped, regarding Juliana with a bemused expression, arching an eyebrow at her.

"We have to stop meeting like this, Lady Harwood. Someone's going to get ideas about us, and that won't do at all, will it?"

Chapter 16

Nathaniel had been planning on going out for a ride on his own, just to get away from everything. He needed to clear his head. The thought of going back to his estate and spending a few hours away from everyone had been incredibly tempting, but Nathaniel had a feeling that his presence would be missed pretty quickly.

Now that he was, essentially, family and related to the duke, he would be spotted as not being around. He didn't want to deal with all the questions.

A long ride out in the snow should be enough. It was fresh enough that it could clear his thoughts and make him feel like he could handle what was going on. Especially with Clara around. That tied him up in knots.

The fact she was here was tough enough to deal with, but knowing that she wanted to pick up where they left off left him in a cold sweat. Of all the times for her to come back into his life, why did it have to be now? Nathaniel had spent years recovering from the heartbreak and anger of being left behind without any warning, and now she had to come back? Just after he married someone else?

It felt like God thought he hadn't been punished enough and wanted to torture him.

Even as he rode through the snow, it wasn't Clara firmly in his mind. It was Juliana. She hadn't shown much emotion in regard to Clara being around, but Nathaniel could tell that she was a little upset about her presence. She never said a word, though, choosing to be the good hostess. Nathaniel didn't think he would be able to do the same if the roles were reversed.

That had given him pause. Why would he be jealous of someone having had Juliana's affections before him? Although it was not like he had had her affections before. Sure, there was Hastings, and he was prowling around like a caged wild animal wanting to pounce, but Nathaniel felt no threat from him. Probably because Juliana didn't see him as a threat; he could trust her judgment on that.

But if she had been in love with someone and then they were reunited years later despite both of them moving on? Nathaniel didn't think he would be too happy seeing the two of them together.

Maybe it's time to admit now that you have feelings for Juliana. And you always have. You were just too cowardly to admit it, even to yourself.

It's just a coincidence, nothing more.

It's not, and you know it.

Now they were staring at each other, Juliana standing by her old flower bed. Her cheeks were flushed from the wind, and she was shivering a little. Nathaniel wanted to put his arms around her to make her warm again, but he pushed that thought away. She would more than likely slap him for that.

Juliana licked her lips and shoved her gloved hands into the sleeves of her coat.

"I'd say you've got to stop following me, my lord," she said tightly.

"How was I supposed to know that you were going to be here?"

“Maybe you were watching me. You know this was my favorite spot as a child.”

“I seem to remember that it was mine as well.” Nathaniel dismounted, patting his horse’s neck before approaching his wife. “We used to have arguments about it, didn’t we?”

“You weren’t happy when I had a flower bed made, and I started growing flowers.”

“I do recall how I wanted to ruin them and trash the flower bed to make a point that you were encroaching on my space.”

Juliana raised her eyebrows.

“I never knew that.”

“I wasn’t about to tell you about it, was I? Would you tell someone you’ve been antagonizing for years what you’re planning on doing?”

“So you admit you were antagonizing me all these years?”

Nathaniel shrugged.

“I suppose there’s nothing to hide between us now, seeing that we’re husband and wife.” He looked at the flower bed. “I didn’t go through with it, though. Much as you frustrated me, I wasn’t about to hurt you by ruining something of yours.”

“You’ve hurt me for years, Nate,” Juliana murmured. “Ever since you

rejected me.”

Nathaniel flinched. He could remember that day clearly, seeing Juliana’s eyes fill with tears and watching her run off crying. At the time, he had thought that it would stop whatever she thought of him, but something changed. It just seemed to make things worse.

“I was young and foolish. You were a lot younger than me.”

“I know. And you didn’t want a little girl following you around like a puppy.” Juliana sounded bitter about it. “I was an annoying child, I will admit that, but that didn’t mean that you had to treat me badly, especially afterward.”

“You think I didn’t like you?”

“I think you’ve made your position clear.”

Nathaniel shoved his hands into his pockets, looking out across the fields toward his house, which was somehow perfectly standing out from the snow. It wasn’t the conversation he had wanted to have with his wife, but it needed to be done. If it could improve things between them, he would do it.

It was the least he could do.

“It wasn’t the fact that I didn’t like you. I know I said it back then, but I was growing up and trying to find my way. Having a ten-year-old girl following me around and not leaving me alone was annoying, and I didn’t want people to laugh at me because of it.”

Juliana snorted.

“We barely saw anyone else outside of our estates. Who was there to think otherwise of us?”

“I was fifteen, Juliana. I was very sensitive to everything. It didn’t make me feel manly because I had a younger child bothering me.” Nathaniel winced. “I’m sure you understand where I’m coming from. I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that, and I apologize for that.”

“You’re right. You shouldn’t have spoken to me like that.”

Nathaniel sighed.

“You’re just making it harder for me, aren’t you?”

“Well, that apology should have been given ten years ago, not now.” Juliana’s mouth twitched as she looked away. “But you did give an apology, which is a start.”

Nathaniel didn’t know what to say about that. Other than that, Juliana was right; he should have apologized to her long ago. But he wasn’t about to admit that out loud. Taking a deep breath, he turned to her.

“Why did you come out here? I didn’t think I’d see you out in the snow.”

“I needed to get away for a while.” Juliana took a deep breath. She looked troubled now. “I just...I feel like I’ve been displaced. Nothing feels like mine anymore. I want things to be back to normal, where I have my home and nobody is questioning my reputation. I don’t want...this. What I’ve got

now.”

Nathaniel knew he should be upset, but he couldn't bring himself to direct it at her. He understood all too well how she was feeling. It had been similar for him.

“I wish I could go back in time and not put you in that position,” he said quietly. “I should have done.”

“I think we've been through it before. We were stuck either way.” Juliana glanced up at him. “But I appreciate that you're not placing the blame on me now.”

“I wouldn't be a proper gentleman if I didn't take my own responsibility. And I can tell that you're struggling with all of this.” Nathaniel wanted to reach out and brush a stray hair away from her face, but he didn't move. He was sure Juliana would slap his hand away. “I understand that you're not happy with anything right now, but I'll do whatever I can to make sure you're comfortable.”

Where was this coming from? Nathaniel hadn't planned on saying any of this. What was going on with him? It was like Juliana was making him say things that he shouldn't be touching on at all.

From the expression on Juliana's face, she looked just as perplexed as he was with his words. She couldn't have expected that. She licked her lips, and Nathaniel found himself staring at her mouth.

He had noticed before that she had soft lips, and they looked really delicate. It made him wonder what they would taste like if he kissed her, but then he had shoved that away so fast it was like it had never existed.

Why did he want to kiss her now? They were softening toward each other, but not to the point where he could actually kiss her.

And he really wanted to kiss her now.

This was going to get more uncomfortable. Clearing his throat, Nathaniel turned away.

“I think we’d better be getting back. The wind has picked up a bit, and I’m sure we’re going to get caught in the storm before we return.”

“It doesn’t look that bad,” Juliana looked around. “I think we might be all right.”

Nathaniel snorted.

“Do you remember when you said that when you were eight and I was thirteen? We got caught in that storm while we were playing out at the far end of the estate.”

“You mean that storm when the river flooded, and we couldn’t cross it to get back?”

“That’s the one. I don’t think I’ve seen my parents so scared and angry at the same time.” Nathaniel gave her a pointed look. “Now that was certainly your fault. I trusted you when you said it would be fine, and it wasn’t.”

“All right, fine, I’ll take that one. But that doesn’t mean you can’t trust me this time.”

“Well, I’m getting cold, and if I return, but you don’t, people are going to think that I’ve done something to get rid of you.” Nathaniel went over to Juliana’s horse and led the mare over to them. “It’s best that we return at the same time. I don’t want your father getting angry at me because I left you out here on your own.”

Juliana looked like she was going to argue, but instead, she sighed and nodded.

“All right. I’ll listen. But only this time.”

“I’m not expecting you to listen to me because I’m your husband. I just want you to exercise common sense.”

“And I’ll endeavor to do that,” Juliana said with a roll of her eyes as she approached him. “I can get onto my horse alone. I don’t need you to help me.”

“Just humor me, Juliana. The sooner we get back, the sooner we can get warm.”

Before Juliana could say anything to that, Nathaniel put his hands on her waist and lifted her off her feet. Juliana let out a squeal, and she wriggled, causing Nathaniel to stumble and fall. He landed in the snow, the ground beneath it knocking the air out of his lungs.

Juliana ended up on top of him, sprawled across his chest. For a moment, the two of them lay there, and Nathaniel was aware of how cold he was, his back soaking up the cold from snow, and how warm his front was with Juliana still lying over him.

She lifted her head, and their faces were inches apart. Nathaniel saw the darkening of color in Juliana's eyes, and her lips parted. The urge to kiss her now was getting even stronger, and it was even greater than a moment ago.

Then Juliana's eyes widened, and she rolled off him.

"I...forgive me!" She scrambled to her feet and dusted herself down. "I didn't mean to do that! I..."

"It's fine," Nathaniel wheezed, easing himself upright. "You didn't do any harm."

Juliana's nervous expression said she didn't believe him. Nathaniel got to his feet, trying not to grimace at the cold seeping into his back. He gestured at Juliana's horse, who now seemed to be watching them with a blank expression.

"I'll help you into the saddle. Just don't panic this time, or we're going to be here all day. I'm not going to argue on this."

To her credit, Juliana nodded in silence and moved to her horse. This time, Nathaniel managed to get her into the saddle and comfortable before he went over to his horse and mounted easily.

The sooner he and Juliana got home, the sooner he could escape to find solitude on his own. After that moment of closeness and his desire to kiss his wife, Nathaniel felt like things were more and more complicated.

And he wasn't sure how to feel about it.

It took a while for Juliana to change from her riding attire, her hands struggling to bend properly and undo the buttons on her coat. She managed to warm up by standing beside the fire before she changed into a fresh gown that wasn't sodden from the snow, although she couldn't do anything about her flushed cheeks.

Whether it was because of the cold wind or because she had been so close to kissing Nathaniel as they lay in the snow together, Juliana couldn't be sure. She was just certain that she needed to get away from him before she did something stupid.

Being rejected once by Nathaniel had been bad enough. She wasn't about to go through it again by braving herself to kiss him. Things might be a little better between the two of them, but that didn't mean anything. Being married didn't equal being able to kiss him without any repercussions.

It should, but Juliana was sure that Nathaniel would push her away. She didn't want to go through that again.

God, why couldn't she be left alone? Now she wasn't able to do as she wanted in her own marriage without being aware that she was married to someone who didn't love her as much...

As much as you love him?

Juliana pushed that thought away. Sure, she could admit that she had feelings for Nathaniel, and they had never really gone away, but love? That was too much of a stretch, wasn't it? That couldn't possibly be happening.

Things felt like an absolute mess right now. And Juliana had no idea how to go about it.

When she went back downstairs, there were female voices coming from the morning room. It took a moment for Juliana to realize what was going on. Aunt Betsy had been talking about getting the ladies to craft kissing boughs together.

Juliana had thought that this was rather silly, seeing as they made far too many of them, and it just felt like an assault when they were put up all over the place. She had thought it was sweet in the beginning, when she was a little girl, but not so much anymore.

Was that because she was getting too old for something silly? Or because she was married and everyone expected the two of them to kiss each other. They hadn't even kissed properly at their wedding, and Juliana doubted that Nathaniel would want to do it this time.

It was hard to address him so formally. It wasn't something she couldn't carry on doing for the rest of their lives. She was going to have to think of him as Nathaniel, which felt more intimate. It was not ideal, but Juliana didn't think she could keep it up for years.

At least they would still need to be formal in mixed company. Nathaniel would probably have a seizure if he heard her addressing him as anything other than his title.

But you called him Nate earlier. Maybe it's not as difficult as you think.

Knowing that she couldn't avoid the rest of the family and guests, Juliana braced herself and entered the morning room. The ladies were scattered around the room, each of them making kissing boughs and laughing.

Everyone seemed so warm and relaxed, and it made Juliana feel like an outsider. How could she feel relaxed when she was married to someone who could never have the same feelings as her?

She wished that she could be jovial right now.

“Juliana!”

Juliana caught sight of Lucy waving at her, Eleanor sitting beside her. Her friend beckoned her over, and Juliana crossed the room to join them. Lucy patted the cushions beside her.

“Come and sit down here. We were beginning to wonder where you were.”

“I went out riding earlier.” Juliana sat down, spreading her skirts out properly to avoid any creases. “I just wanted some air. Have you all had breakfast yet?”

“Not yet. It’s still being prepared.” Lucy gestured at everyone in the room. “Lady Farley had been planning on doing this after breakfast, but seeing as everyone was already awake, we decided to start on the kissing boughs now.”

“I see.” Juliana looked around the room, trying to see her aunt but not seeing her jump out at her. “Where is she, by the way?”

“I believe she’s gone to see how long it’ll be until breakfast is served. Everyone is up now, and we’re getting hungry.”

“Everyone is awake early,” Juliana reminded her. “This is earlier than when we would normally partake in breakfast.”

“It’s Christmas, isn’t it?” Eleanor asked. “Even though it’s not the actual day, people are too excited to sleep.”

Juliana smiled.

“Getting up early isn’t going to make Christmas come any sooner, Eleanor.”

“I know, but I doubt we’re going to change anytime soon.” Eleanor glanced past Juliana, and her smile faded a little. She leaned toward the other ladies and lowered her voice. “Just to warn you, Lady Clara is coming to join us.”

Lucy groaned.

“Again? She tried earlier as well.”

“What?” Juliana frowned. “She tried to join you before? Did you refuse?”

“We couldn’t exactly refuse,” Lucy said as she made a face. “But once she sat down with us, she began to ask us questions about your relationship with Harwood.”

“Oh, really?”

“She wanted to know how you two met and made a few remarks about how quickly you moved to marriage.” Eleanor shook her head. “We did say that you have known him since childhood, but I don’t think she believed that.”

Juliana wasn’t surprised at that. She was aware that Nathaniel had given limited details on things that he didn’t want to discuss and that had included her. If he had mentioned her to Lady Clara in any sort of life, she would have

been surprised. She was probably wondering what was going on.

Was she planning to see if their marriage was weak enough that she could approach Nathaniel as she wanted? Juliana couldn't see why a former lover of her husband's would want to talk to her, not with the way she had been behaving since Lady Clara had arrived. She was up to something.

Juliana could only hope that she would get bored and leave them alone eventually.

Before anyone could say anything more, Lady Clara appeared right by Juliana, practically towering over her and almost causing Juliana to lean back a little so she didn't have her nose pressed up against the other woman's skirts. Lady Clara beamed at Lucy and Eleanor.

"How are the kissing boughs getting along?" she asked brightly.

"They're coming along well." Lucy held up her own bough. "I think we're nearly done."

"And you, Lady Harwood?" Lady Clara turned to Juliana. "Are you not going to make one for yourself?"

Juliana managed to fix a smile on her face.

"I think there are plenty being made right now. There's no need for me to create one myself."

"I suppose not, seeing as you're a newlywed, and you don't need a kissing bough as an excuse to kiss your husband." Lady Clara sat down beside

Juliana, looking very graceful as she smoothed her skirts down. “I’m surprised you two aren’t sneaking away all the time. That’s what all newly wedded couples would do.”

“Is that what you did?” Eleanor asked, a little too sweetly. “When you got married, did you sneak away to kiss your husband?”

Lady Clara’s cheeks flushed a little, which made Juliana fight back a giggle. Her reaction spoke volumes to her. Before the woman could say anything, Eleanor turned to Juliana.

“Lucy was telling me about some stories you told her about you and my cousin when you were younger, Juliana. It sounds like the pair of you got up to a lot of antics.”

Juliana couldn’t remember any antics that weren’t the two of them arguing and being at each other’s throats, but she felt Lady Clara tense up. Maybe she should play along for a bit.

“It was more my brother and Nathaniel who were getting up to all sorts of trouble. But I would end up tagging along because I was the little sister with nothing to do.”

“Didn’t you two end up going through a crack in the ice on the pond?” Lucy asked. “I seem to remember you telling me about that.”

Juliana did remember that. She had been uncharacteristically kind to Nathaniel in that story.

“Yes. Twelve-year-old me thought I was light enough to skate on the ice, but it wasn’t thick enough. I went through the ice, and Nathaniel rescued me.”

“Really?” Eleanor looked surprised. “Didn’t he get soaked as well?”

“Oh, he did.” Juliana laughed. “And he wouldn’t stop complaining about how wet his clothes had gotten getting me out. But he did carry me inside and made sure that I was safe and warm before he withdrew.”

That was probably the only time in ten years that Nathaniel had shown her any proper kindness. Juliana wished there had been more. It would have made things better for them now.

Lady Clara looked a little surprised.

“Really? Because when I was acquainted with Nathaniel, he never said a word about you. I didn’t realize that you two knew each other before.”

“Oh, we knew each other. Probably going on twenty years now.” Juliana saw the other woman’s eyes widen. “I know our marriage came out of nowhere, and it’s one of those things that can make rumors spring up if there is no explanation, but things like that do happen. Some days it just...occurs, I suppose is the best way to say it.”

That was probably the most roundabout way to say something regarding her marriage without actually saying that it happened because they had done something stupid. Juliana wasn’t about to explain herself to a woman who was asking after her husband and showing genuine interest.

“Nathaniel is always complaining about people,” Eleanor said with a laugh. “He’s constantly grumbling about people. But he’s also the most private person I’ve ever met, so I’m not surprised that this marriage came out of nowhere.”

“Is that so?” Lady Clara asked faintly, her expression skeptical.

“Yes. Ever since he left for Europe, he’s become more withdrawn, choosing to keep his intimate details to himself. I don’t think he wanted to get hurt again after someone took advantage of him.”

Eleanor gave Lady Clara a pointed look.

“I think he sees it as a way of protecting himself. So when he announced that he was marrying, it certainly came out of nowhere, but it’s just how he is now.”

Juliana saw Lucy fight back a wince, and she certainly felt the sting in Eleanor’s sweetly spoken words that were directed at Lady Clara. The widow looked momentarily perplexed, as if she hadn’t expected someone to subtly call her out. Juliana tried not to look over at Lady Clara as she focused on Eleanor.

“Well, it’s done now,” Juliana said brightly. “Now we’re just looking forward to spending Christmas together. I think it’s going to be a good year.”

Although she could only hope that the way she spoke wasn’t looked at too closely, otherwise she was going to end up embarrassing herself if asked to elaborate any further.

“I see,” Lady Clara whispered.

“I’m sure you have plenty of other stories to tell about Lord Harwood,” Lucy said quickly, nudging Juliana. “I don’t think Eleanor knows any of these, either, so maybe we should fill her in on her wayward cousin.”

“He’s not wayward,” Eleanor protested.

Juliana smiled.

“He’s anything but. But I do have plenty of stories about him.”

As she began to regale her friend and cousin-in-law about some of the tamer stories about Nathaniel that would be acceptable, Juliana was aware of the air shifting beside her. She didn’t look around until she felt the presence of Lady Clara leave her side, and then she watched the older woman stride away toward her aunt, her back straight and her shoulders rigid. Whatever she had tried to do, it wasn’t going to happen.

If she was being honest, Juliana didn’t really want to interact with Lady Clara at all. She would not allow herself to be daunted by the other woman, especially when it came to her husband. Nathaniel might still have feelings for the woman he had been so close to marrying, but that didn’t mean that she had to be polite.

Their marriage hadn’t started as either of them wanted, but Juliana was not about to be made a fool by someone else.

Chapter 17

“Your turn, Nate,” Edward said, leaning on his cue. “I think you’re going to have a tough time getting out of that.”

Nathaniel checked his position from several angles around the table. Sure enough, Edward had gotten him cornered behind a couple of his balls, and the only way to get out of it was to knock the white ball against Edward’s, but that would mean his friend got an extra shot.

He wouldn’t have any choice, unless he could get creative.

“You really know how to make my head hurt, do you know that, Edward?”

Edward laughed.

“I have to be good at something. You’re good at beating me at every other game, so now it’s my turn.”

Nathaniel couldn’t complain about that. Edward was a worthy adversary, but Nathaniel was good at winning. His friend couldn’t keep up with him, so now the tables were turned on him, and Nathaniel had no idea how to get out of it. It was irritating.

But he had to hand it to Edward; this was a good distraction. They didn’t really have anything to do, the gentlemen choosing to go about anything they wanted while the ladies made kissing boughs, carrying on from before breakfast.

Nathaniel didn't really want to sit in the same room as the ladies while they were doing that, especially not if Clara was there. Something told him that she would ask for him to try out one of the kissing boughs with her, which would humiliate Juliana.

Then again, the ladies might insist that Nathaniel and Juliana kiss instead, and Nathaniel didn't want to force his wife into something she didn't want to do. Even if he wanted to do it.

That moment earlier in the day, when they had lain in a tangle of arms and legs in the snow, was still fresh in his mind. Nathaniel couldn't get it out of his head, and he wondered what would have happened if he had actually kissed Juliana. Would he have been able to do it without her hitting him? For a brief second, he thought that it was possible.

But it didn't matter. Juliana was being very guarded around him. Since they had returned back to the house, she had kept her distance from him. Nobody else seemed to have noticed, but Nathaniel had. He could really feel the tension between them, and the gulf that was widening. There had been one there before, but it seemed to be getting bigger.

What was he supposed to do about that? Once Twelfth Night had occurred, they would be going to his estate to live together. The two of them couldn't carry on like this forever. And Nathaniel knew that his feelings weren't likely to go away.

If anything, they seemed to be finally making themselves known after years of trying to hide them.

It was not how he had anticipated things going with his wife. Nathaniel had no idea what to do about it, and the only thing he could think of doing right now was to distract himself. It meant that he could get things more lined up in his head.

Then again, maybe it wouldn't. Everything was still a mess.

The door opened, and then closed very quietly. Nathaniel glanced toward the door, only to do a double-take when he saw Hastings. The other man watched him with a sharp glare that made Nathaniel want to leave to get away.

He was not going anywhere. This was not Hastings' domain. If anyone was to leave, it would be Hastings himself.

"Hastings," Edward said casually as Nathaniel tried to ignore him, going around the table and trying to find a better shot. "I thought you were in conversation with my father."

"We've finished that. I've got some time to kill." Hastings' eyes traveled over the billiards table. "You've gotten yourself into a tight corner there, Harwood. But I'm sure you can get out of it. You're pretty good at that, aren't you?"

Nathaniel gritted his teeth. He didn't want to know if there was an implication behind that. He lined up a shot, angling his hand so the cue went down. If he did this, he could get the ball to move without hitting any others. The outcome would be the same if he didn't hit anything with the white ball, but at least he would be away from what Edward had stuck him in.

"You have no idea how lucky you are to be married to Juliana," Hastings said suddenly.

Almost about to take the shot, Nathaniel put the cue away before he hit anything. He glanced up at Hastings.

"I don't need you telling me how lucky I am, my lord," he replied tightly. "I

am perfectly aware.”

“I’m just surprised that she would choose to...settle for someone like you.”

Nathaniel’s eyes narrowed. Edward stiffened.

“Are you saying something about my sister, Lord Hastings? Because it’s not appropriate.”

“Forgive me, Lord Beaumont. I didn’t intend to insult anyone.”

“Oh, but you were,” Nathaniel said. He shook his head and went back to the game. “If you’ve come in here just to talk about how lucky I am Juliana chose to marry me, then you can forget it. I’m not interested in listening.”

“Even from someone who once loved her?” Hastings asked. “And who still loves her?”

Nathaniel scoffed at that.

“I’ve seen the way you two interact, Hastings. If you think the way you treat her is loving, I’d like to know how you would treat her if you didn’t.”

“We were going to get married, you know.”

Nathaniel glanced at Edward, who looked equally perplexed. What was he talking about? Juliana would have said something about that.

“You were going to get married? I seem to recall that Juliana turned you

down when you publicly proposed to her. That's not you two about to get married."

Hastings' cheeks went a little pink.

"We talked about it before then. It just went wrong, and she's not forgiven me."

Edward rolled his eyes.

"I think anyone who knows Juliana would know not to propose to her in such a public way. As for discussing marriage, while I wouldn't have opposed your match, I was aware that my sister was not particularly happy about the prospect."

"If that's the case, why would she court me?"

"Maybe because you pestered her a little too much? Juliana is a nice person, and while her recent actions may say otherwise, she doesn't want to upset anyone. You just pushed it too far." Edward shook his head. "Don't think that she's going to forgive you for doing that. You wanted to put her into a corner, and Juliana didn't like that."

"You mean like Harwood put her in a corner?" Hastings asked slyly, glancing over at Nathaniel. Something glinted in his eye. "After all, that's how they got married in the first place, isn't it? From what I've heard, at least."

Nathaniel growled, wondering if there was a chance he could accurately throw the cue at Hastings' head before anyone could stop him. It would not really be appropriate, but it would make him feel better. Instead, he gripped onto the cue and forced himself to stay still.

“I think you shouldn’t let rumors dictate people’s lives. They can be very damaging to those involved.”

“Well, it would have been damaging to the pair of you if you didn’t get married after being caught together and alone, wouldn’t it?”

“All right, that’s enough, Hastings,” Edward spoke sharply before Nathaniel could reply. “If you didn’t come here for anything else, I suggest that you leave us alone. That is not a topic for discussion, and I certainly don’t want to hear you make disparaging remarks about my sister.”

Hastings arched an eyebrow, and Nathaniel thought that he was going to say something more. Instead, he took a step back and gave both of them a mocking bow.

“Forgive me, my lord,” he said smoothly. “I was just trying to make conversation. I’ll leave you to this game. It’s certainly building a lot of... tension.”

Nathaniel didn’t let out a breath until the man had left the room. He scowled and shook his head.

“What is it with that man? It’s like he’s hovering in the background, waiting for a moment to make me feel like I’m on edge.”

“I don’t know. He’s certainly been acting strangely since you and Juliana got married.” Edward peered at the closed door. “Maybe he really did have feelings for her, and he’s upset that she’s now married to someone else.”

“If that’s the case, wouldn’t he put himself as far away as possible? It doesn’t matter his business connections, his emotions would be more important.”

“Maybe he wants to put some discord between you and my sister?” Edward shrugged. “I don’t know. I just know that my opinion of the man has been changing in recent days, and I’m not sure if his actions are innocent.”

Nathaniel couldn’t agree more with that. Hastings was up to something. He just wished that he knew what it was.

Whatever was going on in the man’s head, he should take it elsewhere. Nathaniel was already uncomfortable with his situation; he didn’t want to make it any worse.

Juliana was relieved when the last plates were taken away from the table. It felt like she had been caught in a bad dream and she couldn’t get out of it. Everyone around her had been going about their own conversations, enjoying themselves and making the laughter ring throughout the room. Her aunt was certainly the driving force behind it all.

And Juliana couldn’t bring herself to enjoy any of it. The interaction with Lady Clara early that morning was still fresh in her mind. It had been with her all day, and Juliana wasn’t sure what to do about it. It was clear to her that Lady Clara was trying to gather information, but Juliana was not going to give her what she wanted.

If she wanted to believe that the married couple weren’t a solid pair, then that was up to her. Juliana would not give her the satisfaction of knowing that she and Nathaniel were not a loving couple and there was a chance for Lady Clara to seduce him.

The fact that a widow was planning on doing that with a newly married couple was shocking. Juliana would have thought that she would have better

common sense not to do something so scandalous.

Being a widow meant having some freedoms that other ladies might not have, but that didn't include seducing a married man mere days after he got married. It didn't matter about the situation between husband and wife; it was not acceptable.

Juliana wondered if Lady Clara would actually stop. She had heard Nathaniel in their brief interactions, and, to his credit, he hadn't been alone with her at all. Juliana trusted him enough that he wouldn't have sought Lady Clara out when nobody else was around, much to her surprise. But it still didn't make her feel any better.

Even if Nathaniel did nothing to encourage it, Lady Clara seemed to be very determined.

Juliana glanced down the table at the woman. She was sitting beside her aunt, listening to something that the older woman was saying. Their eyes met for a brief moment, and Juliana saw something pass between them. There was a steely determination in the widow's eyes, and it sent a shiver down Juliana's spine.

"Juliana."

Juliana jumped when she felt Nathaniel's hand touching hers. She looked around and saw her husband watching her with a frown, his eyes searching her face.

"Are you all right? You've been very quiet throughout dinner."

"I...well..." Juliana swallowed. How could she admit her jealousy to her

husband? He would find it silly and tell her so. “I’ve just had a lot on my mind, that’s all.”

Nathaniel glanced past her, and Juliana didn’t need to look around to know that he was looking at Lady Clara. But almost as soon as she thought that, Nathaniel looked back at her, his expression softening.

“Ignore her. She’s just being a nuisance.”

“She’s determined to get your attention back again,” Juliana whispered. “I know things aren’t as they should be...”

“It’s not going to happen.” Nathaniel squeezed her fingers. “I’ve already disrespected you by putting you in this position. I won’t do that anymore.”

The feel of his hand over hers felt really nice, and Juliana wanted to lean into him to feel the warmth from his body. She wondered what everyone around them would think if she did that. She managed a smile and turned her hand over to take his.

“I know,” she said softly. “I trust you.”

“You do?”

“When it comes to Lady Clara Montgomery, I trust you.”

Something flashed behind Nathaniel’s eyes, but then it was gone, and he gave her a brief nod, almost like one of relief.

“Thank you.” Then his eyes flickered away. “The same goes with you as

well.”

“You mean...” Juliana sighed. “Hastings has been bothering you, hasn’t he?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“He’s been dogging me all day. I’ve mostly kept away, and Eleanor and Lucy have not left my side, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he came to find you instead.”

Nathaniel grunted.

“He certainly did. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s up to something.”

Juliana frowned. Hastings up to something shouldn’t have been a surprise to her, but it was. He couldn’t think that it was appropriate to behave in such a manner, could he? Juliana knew that Hastings was bitter about what had happened, but to behave like a child on the verge of having a tantrum?

It solidified to her that she was right to turn him down. That was not something she wanted to deal with for the rest of her life.

“What do you think he’s planning? Is he going to try and put discord between us?”

“You mean more discord than there is already?” Nathaniel asked.

“I’d like to think that we’re trying to work through that.” Juliana paused. “But it is tentative, that much I can admit. We have a long way to go to make things work properly, but if that gets damaged...”

Nathaniel was peering at her curiously, and Juliana realized that they hadn't actually talked about their situation like this before. They had just been rather stiff, accepting that they had to behave like man and wife when neither of them wanted it.

That's a lie. You did want it. Just not in the way that it came about.

"Of course, I know it's too much to ask," she said quickly. "But I just wanted to say..."

"We'll be fine, Juliana."

"What?"

Nathaniel gave her a smile that made Juliana's heart stutter in her chest. He squeezed her fingers.

"You and I will be fine. I have a feeling that we're not going to be in such a bad situation as you think."

Juliana's mouth had gone dry. She licked her lips.

"Are you sure about that?"

"I'm sure. I know I've not been so good toward you..."

"And I've certainly not been good with you, either."

"But we can make the best of this position. You might not believe it, but I do

admire you.”

Juliana stared at him.

“You...admire me?”

“It takes a strong person to look after an ailing parent, and even more to stand up for what she wants. That fire is an admirable trait in you.”

Juliana grunted and looked toward the end of the table where her father sat. The duke was talking to Edward and Eleanor, both of them listening intently to whatever he was saying.

“I don’t know if my father would agree with that.”

“It’s not a trait that someone can match, but it works on you. And I certainly wouldn’t want to be married to someone who’s boring.”

Juliana sighed.

“You were doing so well in complimenting me up until that point.”

Nathaniel’s mouth twitched.

“You think me saying you’re not boring is me offending you?”

“Something about that offended me, but I’m not sure what.”

Juliana was aware that they were still holding hands on the table, something that wasn't often done, but she didn't care. She liked having Nathaniel hold her hand like that.

“I guess things are a bit confusing for me lately. I didn't enter this Christmas period planning on getting married and knowing that I'm going to be moving once it's over. I thought things would be as normal, and I would have a choice. But as things go on, I begin to realize that the choices I thought I had were never really there, and I'm never going to have them.”

Her chest tightened at the thought. Burwood might have said she could choose someone to marry, but it would have come down to him. It wouldn't have mattered what Juliana wanted; in the end, he had the final say.

She would have ended up in this situation regardless of her feelings.

“Juliana.” Nathaniel's voice was gentle. “You have choices now. You're a married woman, so things are different. You have more freedom. You won't need to answer to anyone.”

“I will have to answer to you,” Juliana pointed out.

“Within reason. While we might not have gotten along all our lives, I like to think we know each other well enough that I can trust your judgment when it comes to what you want to do.”

Juliana wondered if she was hearing this correctly.

“Do you actually mean that?”

“I do. I won’t lie to you, Juliana,” Nathaniel whispered. “I promise.”

He promised. Juliana would hold him to that. She glanced at his mouth and suddenly wondered what it would be like to kiss him just then. It would certainly cause a scene at the table, but Juliana couldn’t help herself from thinking it.

She pushed away the thought. Not a good idea. Nathaniel would push her away, anyway. Just because they were making progress didn’t mean that he wanted to kiss her right then.

Something had certainly shifted between them, and Juliana wasn’t sure how to navigate it without embarrassing herself.

“I think we’re heading into the drawing room now,” Nathaniel said suddenly as he stood up, tugging Juliana to her feet. “I was thinking maybe you could play something for us.”

“What?” Juliana blinked. “Play?”

“You have a piano, don’t you? I seem to recall that you were pretty good at playing anything.” Nathaniel gave her a sheepish shrug. “I might have been annoyed at many things, but I will admit that you’re good at the piano.”

Juliana felt her face getting warm. She cleared her throat.

“I...thank you?”

Nathaniel chuckled.

“Well, how about you play something for us? It will keep us distracted, and Hastings certainly can’t approach you if you’re busy.”

“I suppose not.” Juliana glanced toward the door in time to see Hastings leaving with Lady Clara and Lady Lucan. None of them looked back at them. “How about you be my page-turner and sort out my music? Then you’ve got a reason to not talk to anyone, either.”

Nathaniel’s eyes glinted.

“I like your thinking. Besides, I want to see how your hands work dancing across the keys. I’ve always been curious.”

“Then you don’t need to be curious anymore.” Juliana slipped her hand into his. “Come on, then, husband. Let’s go and make some music.”

Chapter 18

“Are you sure that you don’t want to join us on the pond?” Juliana asked as she picked up her skates.

Eleanor shook her head and smiled.

“No, thank you. I’m fine here watching you from the window.” She held up her book. “And I’ve got something to entertain myself if I get bored.”

Lucy laughed.

“You’re not going to get bored skating on ice, Eleanor.”

“Have you seen my balance lately?” Eleanor shot back. She held out her hand. “I don’t particularly want to get run over, either.”

Juliana peered and saw the thin white scar near her fingers. She knew what that was.

“You’ve been cut by the skates, haven’t you?” She wiggled her fingers in Eleanor’s direction. “I’ve got the same on my fingers. Edward ran over them when I was seven.”

Lucy winced.

“Would you two stop comparing scars? I don’t want to be scared off a favorite pastime by you two talking about how you both nearly lost a couple

of fingers.”

Eleanor laughed.

“I don’t think anything could put you off whatever you’ve put your mind to, Lucy.”

“Don’t be so sure. I hate the sight of blood.” Lucy’s face went a little green. “How did we get onto this again? Can we talk about something a bit nicer?”

Juliana squeezed her friend’s arm.

“Why don’t you go outside and start getting yourself ready to go on the pond? I’ll join you shortly.”

Lucy nodded and left the room. Eleanor grimaced.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have shown the reason why I don’t like ice skating anymore.”

“Don’t worry about it. Lucy won’t mind.” Juliana sat on the window seat beside the young woman. “It’s just blood she’s squeamish about. Besides, you’ve heard a lot of her conversations already. Do you think this is any worse?”

“Fair point.” Eleanor giggled. “I’m surprised that she hasn’t been scolded for some of the things she talks about. It’s not very ladylike. I know my mother would be shocked if she heard what we talked about.”

Juliana shrugged.

“I guess she likes to break the rules. Just not openly.”

Lucy knew when to keep quiet, but when it was just the two of them, things were a little more scandalous. The topics were mostly innocent, but others wouldn't think the same way. The fact that Lucy did it around Eleanor as well showed that she was comfortable enough with Juliana's cousin-in-law to do the same.

“Are you going to be all right on your own?” Juliana asked, looking out of the window at the frozen pond just in sight in the garden. “I know it's cold outside, but you could come and watch us...”

“I'm content on staying in here.” Eleanor's cheeks went a little pink. “Lord Beaumont said that he would come and sit with me. He'll keep me company.”

Juliana bit back a smile. She had suspected since the pair met that Eleanor was quite taken with Edward. And from the way her brother behaved around Eleanor, the feeling was mutual. It was quite sweet to see them together. At least there was someone having good fortune at this time of year.

“Well, I'm sure my brother can keep your attention for more than a few minutes,” Juliana teased, which made Eleanor's cheeks darken even more. She stood up. “I'll see you later. Someone needs to make sure that Lucy doesn't fall over.”

“Who else is going to be skating?” Eleanor asked.

“I don't know. I doubt anyone is going to join us, seeing as it was something Lucy and I were going to do alone.”

“Maybe you should ask some of the other guests to come out? I know my aunt loves to skate, and she did bring them along with her.”

“I think she’s in deep conversation with Aunt Betsy about something. It’s best to leave them alone for now.” Juliana headed toward the door. “But if she does ask and we’re still outside, she’s more than welcome to join us.”

“I’ll let her know.” Eleanor settled back on the window seat and opened her book. “Enjoy the cold.”

Juliana planned to. She did love to skate. When it was this cold, the large pond they had in the garden froze up, and they were always able to skate back and forth until everyone was dizzy. It was one of the few things where Juliana was better than Edward; her brother didn’t seem to have very good balance when it came to skating.

Something happened to him when the boots he had on weren’t spread across the ice, and he couldn’t stay upright. Juliana liked knowing that she could do better than her older brother.

Nathaniel had never had that problem. He was very adept on skates, almost as good as she was. That was one of the few times they had actually gotten on without being harsh toward each other: Nathaniel wanted someone to race, and Juliana was prepared to humble him. There had been a couple of times when Nathaniel grudgingly admitted that she was good, but that was fleeting.

Lucy had suggested asking Nathaniel to join them on the pond, but Juliana had decided against it. Her husband would be talking with his estate manager, who had come over that morning to discuss a few things with Haringdale. And the other guests would be playing Christmas games with her father and aunt. Nobody would mind if they went off and did something on their own.

Besides, Juliana was a little nervous about being in Nathaniel's presence. After last night, when he had shown her some tenderness and assured her that they would be all right, Juliana had been a little out of sorts. This gentle nature from her husband was not something she was used to, and her hand still tingled, feeling his fingers wrapped around hers.

She also wanted to do something to forget the debacle from the previous evening. Aunt Betsy had been delighted that Juliana would play for them, and Nathaniel had been good at sorting out the music, both of them working together without needing to voice anything. Halfway through, Burwood had asked Juliana if she could sing for them as well, and Nathaniel had agreed.

But while Juliana was singing as she played, Lady Clara had joined in as well. The woman had a clear, crisp voice that rang through the room, and soon, she had drowned out Juliana as her voice faded away.

Normally, Juliana wouldn't have minded—she wasn't going to get upset over someone with a better voice taking over—but Lady Clara had not taken her eyes off Nathaniel the whole time.

It was like she was singing solely for him, as if to let him know that she was there and not going anywhere. Nathaniel had ignored her, focusing on Juliana instead and moving the music sheets around, but Juliana had seen the tension in his body and the tightness of his jaw. He knew what Lady Clara was up to.

The atmosphere had changed around the two of them after that, and Nathaniel had excused himself to head to his bedchamber alone. Juliana had wanted to go with him, but he had assured her that he was fine, and she didn't need to worry about him.

But Juliana did worry; he had a former lover telling him that she still loved him and wanted to be with him. It was one step away from effectively saying that she wanted to rekindle her romance with a married man.

Nobody else seemed to have noticed the undertone of the gesture, however. The other guests thought that Lady Clara had a lovely voice, and they had praised her for it. Nobody, other than Lucy and Eleanor, suspected that something else was going on. But Juliana had seen the way Lady Clara had looked at Nathaniel as she finished singing.

There had to be something seriously wrong in her head if she thought this was appropriate.

Hopefully, she was distracted by Lady Lucan, who was introducing her niece to practically everyone. Maybe, on some level, her aunt realized that Lady Clara was behaving a little inappropriately and was finding a more suitable match for her.

Juliana had certainly seen Hastings talking to Lady Clara the previous evening. Somehow, that didn't make her feel better, especially when Hastings kept hovering and staring at her.

He didn't like skating, so he wouldn't be outside. Juliana felt that she could be safe for now.

The snow crunched under her feet as she made her way through the garden toward the pond. It was huge, although calling it a lake would be a bit pointless. The ice was often very thick, and it looked perfect and undisturbed as she looked across the frozen water.

The ducks that spent their days swimming back and forth would be among the reeds, waiting for the ice to melt. None of them were keen on flapping about and falling over.

Oddly, though, there was no sign of Lucy. Confused, Juliana looked around. Where could she have gone? She had come out here first, so she should have

been sliding around on the ice already, but Lucy was not there.

There was someone present, though. Under the tree right by the edge of the pond, a figure was strapping on their skates. Juliana could see that it was a man, and her heart stopped. It wasn't Hastings, was it? He had said before that he didn't like skating, but he could do it. Had he found out what she was doing and followed her out here?

But then the figure stood up and used the branch stretching over the water to carefully get onto the ice. Juliana saw his face more clearly, and it made her heart miss a few beats, leaving her breathless.

It was Nathaniel.

He seemed to have seen her first as Nathaniel skated easily over to her, sliding to an easy stop with a smile.

"I was beginning to think you were never going to turn up," he said.

"Where's Lucy?"

"She's probably inside. I don't know where she's gone, but I know she's not going to be skating today."

"But..." Then Juliana figured out what was going on and groaned. "She set this up, didn't she?"

"I'd say that she did. After all, we don't spend much time alone as husband and wife, do we?"

Juliana could feel her face getting warm. This was not quite what she had in mind. Part of her wanted to run back to the house and not stay out here with Nathaniel. But they were married now, so being alone wouldn't raise any eyebrows. She would more than likely raise concerns if she left Nathaniel now.

Was this what Lucy had been planning? Could Juliana actually cope when it was just the two of them with nobody watching?

You managed yesterday when you were alone in the snow. This is nothing different.

I still want to kiss him, though. That's not good.

Sighing, she held up her skates.

“Give me a moment, and I'll join you. I'm not going to waste this time now that I'm here.”

Nathaniel hadn't planned to come out and do some skating, but when Lucy had approached him to let him know that Juliana would be doing it and hinting that he should join her, he had changed his mind. After the previous evening that had been slightly sullied by Clara, he wanted to completely focus on Juliana.

At least Lucy had suggested it; Nathaniel wasn't sure if he would have gotten a good response from Juliana if he had done it. While she seemed to be softening toward him, there was still some barrier up, and Nathaniel wanted to get past that. That wasn't easy when Clara was about, and Hastings seemed

to be hanging on the fringes of things. He was being creepy, and Nathaniel wished that he could tell the man where to go.

It was only because he didn't want to upset Burwood that Nathaniel kept his mouth shut.

He skated around the edge of the pond, keeping his balance easily, as Juliana put on her skates, using the blanket Nathaniel had brought out to sit on. Then he came over to her as Juliana shifted onto her feet and slowly stepped onto the ice. She gave a little squeal as she nearly toppled over.

Nathaniel laughed.

“For someone who really knows how to skate, you behave like a newborn foal when you're getting onto the ice.”

“It takes a while for me to get my balance,” Juliana snapped, gripping onto the branch above her head. Sighing, she held out a hand. “Can you help me here? I don't want to fall over and get my dress wet.”

Nathaniel skated closer and took her gloved hand. The fabric felt really cold in his grip. Slowly, he drew her away from the branch and skated backward, taking her with him, until they were in the middle of the pond. Juliana was gripping onto both of his hands, still testing out her balance. Nathaniel wondered what she would do if he drew her closer to him right now.

Knowing their luck, they would probably end up on the ice and crack it somehow.

“Thank you.” Juliana tilted her head back and closed her eyes. “It feels so quiet out here. Calmer, somehow.”

“I won’t argue with that.” Nathaniel glanced toward the house. “At least we don’t have someone caterwauling at us.”

“Caterwauling?” Juliana opened her eyes. “Are you talking about Lady Clara? She has a really good singing voice.”

“You’re very generous toward her, given the circumstances.”

“She does have some good qualities. I’m not completely harsh.”

Nathaniel gave her a bemused look. Juliana was just full of surprises. He wasn’t sure if he could keep up with it all.

They were still holding hands, and it seemed that they were getting closer to each other. Nathaniel could feel Juliana’s skirts brushing against his legs, and he still itched to put his arms around her. With the way she was right now, Juliana might allow it.

Or it might go wrong. His emotions were all over the place with his wife. And he had never been this unconfident with a woman before. Nathaniel had no idea why Juliana was the only person in his life who could make him feel like this.

She had been doing it for years, and she didn’t even realize it.

“How about we have a race?” Nathaniel suggested suddenly, pulling back and releasing his wife. “Like we used to when we were children?”

Juliana blinked.

“You think we’re spritely enough to race like we did years ago?”

“Why not? It’s been a long time since I’ve had a worthy opponent.”

Juliana looked like she didn’t know what to say to that. Then she grinned, her eyes glinting as she shifted on her skates.

“All right. Then let’s race. How many times around the pond?”

“How about three laps. And the finish line is the tree?” Nathaniel pointed.
“That good?”

“Yes.” Juliana then started skating away. “Come on, then!”

“What? We’re supposed to start together!”

Juliana’s laugh just floated back on the air, and Nathaniel couldn’t bring himself to be annoyed. This was the most relaxed he had seen her since they had met each other again. He didn’t want that to stop. When she was like this, it made Nathaniel’s mood lift.

If only he could put this in a bottle and keep it.

It took a little exertion to keep up with her, but Juliana was just too fast. Even encumbered by skirts, she was able to keep ahead. Nathaniel wondered what the duke would think if he looked out of the window and saw the two of them racing around the pond. It would make him shake his head.

At least they weren’t fighting.

After three laps of the pond, Juliana slapped the branch as she passed under it for the third time. The remaining snow snapped back and hit Nathaniel in the face. He cried out as the cold slapped him, and he lost his balance, knocking the air out of his lungs as he fell onto the ice.

“Nate!” Juliana quickly changed direction and skated back. “Are you all right?”

“I’ll be fine.” Nathaniel sat up slowly. “They were right when they said the bigger you are, the harder you end up falling.”

Juliana bit her lip.

“Forgive me. I didn’t mean...”

“The only thing that’s hurt is my pride.” Nathaniel gave her a smile as he gingerly got to his feet. “And as you’re my wife, I’ll let you off on that.”

Juliana still didn’t look convinced. But she moved closer as Nathaniel went to the edge of the pond and staggered off. He collapsed onto the blanket and grimaced. He knew that it was going to get wet, but now that he was soaked from his fall, it just made it worse.

“I wouldn’t recommend sitting down,” he said as he began to undo the laces. “Not unless you want to ruin your dress.”

“Then how am I supposed to get my skates off?”

Nathaniel cast her a sly smile.

“I could carry you back to the house.”

Juliana’s eyes widened, and Nathaniel saw a flush across her cheeks. Then she shook her head and used the overhanging branch to get back onto the bank.

“Maybe you should undo my skates, then. You’re the one who said I shouldn’t sit down, after all.”

“It’s nothing to do with the fact I’m your husband?”

“Not at all.”

Chuckling, Nathaniel tugged off his skates and put on his shoes. He was surprised they weren’t as wet as well. Then he shifted onto his knees, grabbing hold of Juliana’s shoes from the blanket.

“You know, when this drama started,” he said as he took off his gloves, “I was not expecting you and I to end up laughing together.”

“I don’t think I did, either.” Juliana paused. “If only we had had some of this when we were younger. We just spent all our time hating each other.”

She did have a point. Nathaniel glanced up at her.

“You do recall that I said before that I don’t hate you, don’t you?”

“I still find that hard to believe.”

“Even now?”

Juliana didn't respond. She just watched him quietly, and Nathaniel didn't push it. She was starting to pull back from him, he could tell, and pushing it would make things worse. This shouldn't be ruined by them broaching their feelings toward each other.

Then again, they did need to have that discussion. It wasn't something they could keep away from. And Nathaniel was absolutely sure that he was falling in love with Juliana.

Maybe he had always been in love with her, and he was only just realizing it now. That didn't scare him as much as he thought it would.

Silently, Nathaniel helped Juliana get her skates off and slipped her shoes on. Then he gathered both sets of skates and the blanket and stood up. Juliana moved out from under the branch, brushing her windswept hair off her face.

“Thank you, Nate. That was really kind of you.”

“Anything to make sure my wife is comfortable.”

Juliana's smile flickered, and Nathaniel wished he could take that back. But he had made that comment, so he needed to move forward. Reaching out, he brushed his bare fingers across her cheek. Juliana gasped, her lips parting as she stared up at him. But she didn't pull away. Nathaniel was sure that she actually leaned into him.

Nathaniel couldn't help himself. He leaned in and pressed a kiss to her forehead. He expected Juliana to pull back, but she didn't. Instead, he heard a little sigh from her, and he straightened up to see her eyes had closed. She

looked the most serene that he had seen her in years.

“I could never hate you, Juliana,” he whispered.

Juliana opened her eyes, and before she could say anything, someone was calling their names. She jumped away so quickly that she caught the back of her head on the branch. Nathaniel flinched when he heard the thud, and he caught Juliana as she bounced off the branch.

“Juliana!”

Footsteps sounded in quick succession, and Nathaniel saw Lady Farley and his mother coming toward them. Lady Farley hurried over.

“Oh, my! Juliana! You silly thing!”

“I’m fine, Aunt,” Juliana said with a grimace, rubbing the back of her head. “It’s just a bump.”

“You’re lucky you didn’t have all the snow topple down on you!”

Nathaniel smiled.

“We’ve already had that happen.”

Lady Haringdale shook her head.

“Looking at your current state, I’m not surprised you’re the one covered in snow. You will come in looking like a snowman.”

“Why give up on something I do all the time, Mother?”

Lady Farley chuckled.

“Honestly, you two! I swear we can’t take our eyes off you without the pair of you causing trouble.”

Nathaniel and Juliana exchanged glances, and Juliana raised a sardonic eyebrow. Was she thinking about how they ended up married in the first place? It had just crossed Nathaniel’s mind. Then she turned away.

“I think we’d better go back inside, Aunt Betsy. It’s getting really cold out here, and I can’t feel my hands.”

“Of course! We were beginning to think that you were out here a bit too long.” Lady Farley put an arm around her niece. “Let’s go and get some hot chocolate. I think that will be perfect to warm up the pair of you.”

Nathaniel watched them walk away. He wanted to hurry after them and walk with his wife, but he couldn’t stop himself from staring. If he moved, he was going to end up falling flat on his face.

It felt like the spell between them had broken, and now Nathaniel felt alone.

“It looks like the two of you are actually getting along.”

Nathaniel turned to look at his mother, who gave him a knowing smile. He didn’t bother to deny it; Lady Haringdale would know the truth regardless of what he said. Nathaniel swallowed.

“I’d like to think we’re thawing out faster than the snow,” he croaked.

“I hope that’s the case. You two deserve to finally put your past to rest.”

“What does that mean, Mother?”

His mother’s eyes glinted.

“You think I haven’t noticed how you two have been around each other. It’s clear that you’ve harbored some feelings for some time. You were just too stubborn to admit it.”

Nathaniel thought about denying it, but he didn’t think he would be that convincing. Certainly not to the countess.

“You got that from the last couple of days?”

“Who said I observed that from recent days?” Lady Haringdale took both pairs of skates from her son’s arms. “I’ll take these back. You bring the blanket. You’re soggy enough as it is, so you can carry that.”

Then she walked away, leaving Nathaniel staring after her in bewilderment. What had she meant by that?

A movement off to his right had Nathaniel turning. There was someone on the other side of the pond, someone who had been observing their interaction. Moving out from under the tree, Nathaniel saw that it was Hastings, buried in a coat, as he stared out across the pond. Had he been watching them the entire time, or was it just a coincidence?

It was a little unnerving that Hastings kept turning up at odd moments. He hadn't really approached Juliana since their wedding day—Nathaniel wished he had intercepted them before that happened—and had just hovered on the edge of the scene, almost like he didn't want anyone to know that he was there. Nathaniel could still recall their own interaction in the game room and how he had wanted to take a swing at the disgusting human being.

How Juliana had thought he was decent enough to be courted by, he had no idea. It was a relief that she hadn't agreed to marry him; they were not a good match at all, no matter what Hastings said.

“Nathaniel!” Lady Haringdale had turned around, the skates dangling from her fingers by the laces. “Come along! You'll catch your death if you don't hurry inside. I don't want my son to turn into an icicle.”

Nathaniel cleared his throat and hurried after his mother. The thought of getting into a hot bath and warming up was a good idea. He could already feel his body seizing up from the cold.

Then, he might be able to get their thoughts in order.

Chapter 19

“Goodnight, Juliana.”

Juliana looked up and smiled as she saw Aunt Betsy sticking her head around the door.

“Goodnight, Auntie. I hope you sleep well.”

“I plan to. It’s been a busy day.” Aunt Betsy came into the room, trying to cover her mouth as she yawned. “I’m really pleased with how this party has been going. I’d say it’s been a success.”

Juliana wanted to point out that it hadn’t been exactly a success when Lady Clara Montgomery was present, but she didn’t want to lower the mood; her aunt was in good spirits, and Juliana wanted to keep it that way.

“I must say, I’m really pleased that you’re doing well with your husband, Juliana.” Aunt Betsy sat on the edge of the bed, making the mattress shift. “I thought you two were going to be at each other’s throats, but it looks like the pair of you have gotten past what you’ve been dealing with over the years.”

Juliana frowned, putting her book down.

“What do you mean by that, Auntie? I don’t understand.”

“I’ve seen how you two have been together over the years. At first, I thought you two genuinely hated each other.”

“We did.”

Aunt Betsy shook her head.

“I don’t think that’s the case. It seems to be more than that. I thought you two were finally acknowledging how you really feel about each other.”

Juliana wondered if her aunt had taken something to make her think this. She had to be drugged to believe that she and Nathaniel had any harboring feelings. She shook her head.

“We’re just having to get along. That’s it.”

“Are you sure about that? You don’t think you’re hiding the fact you’ve been in love with him for years?”

Juliana was glad that she was sitting on the bed, otherwise, she might have fallen over. Her mouth fell open as she stared at the older woman.

“Wait, what...what do you mean by that? I’m not in love with him.”

But Aunt Betsy’s eyes twinkled, and she gave her niece a knowing smile.

“I wouldn’t be so sure to dismiss that so quickly, darling. I know you too well.”

“But...”

“You’ve harbored this for years, and now you don’t have to hide it anymore.

And your husband doesn't need to keep it buried, either."

Juliana was getting confused. She had no idea what was going on anymore.

"What are you talking about, Aunt Betsy? You know that I'm not keen on you talking in riddles."

"I would have thought it was obvious. Harwood has loved you for a long time. He just didn't want to admit it, either." Aunt Betsy shook her head. "He is just as stubborn as you. I know how similar the two of you are, much as you don't want to admit it."

Juliana didn't know what to say to that. It felt like her head was spinning. How could her aunt have known the truth? Juliana had managed to come to terms with the fact that she had feelings for someone who didn't like her, but to say it was love...

And Nathaniel might be nicer toward her now, but he didn't think the same way. There was just no chance of that.

But he's been gentler around you. He's considered your feelings and looked out for you. And don't forget the kiss by the pond.

That was not a real kiss.

If you hadn't been interrupted, it might have been a real one.

"Forgive me for speaking out of turn, Juliana." Aunt Betsy put a hand on her niece's knee. "But I do observe things, and I witnessed how you and Harwood acted toward each other over the years."

“We hated each other when we were children.”

“From the looks I caught when Harwood was giving you when he thought no one was looking, I think hate was the last thing on his mind. He just wasn’t willing to admit it, especially as you two grew up.”

“But he was going to marry someone else!” Juliana protested. “How could he do that if...?”

“I will admit that Lady Clara does have the ability to dazzle anyone she comes across, but if they had gotten married, they wouldn’t have been happy. It would have died down, and then they would be strangers in a marriage.” Aunt Betsy’s expression softened. “With you, however, it’s a different story. At least you two are now beginning to acknowledge how you really feel.”

Juliana really didn’t know what to say to any of that. It sounded like her aunt was talking nonsense, but the sliver of truth was still there. And it left her colder than when she had been out in the snow earlier in the day.

“Anyway, enough of me talking your ear off at this time of night.” Aunt Betsy squeezed Juliana’s knee and stood up. “I need to retire myself. Don’t stay up too late reading, Juliana, or you’re going to be really tired tomorrow.”

“I’ll do my best, Aunt Betsy.”

“You mean you’ll do your best to stay up late, or you won’t?”

Juliana smiled.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, darling.” Aunt Betsy kissed her forehead and headed toward the door. “Don’t forget we’ve got the Yule log festivities tomorrow.”

“I won’t forget.”

The door closed behind her aunt, and Juliana picked up her book again. There was no chance that she was going to get to sleep when her head was filled with what Aunt Betsy had said. She couldn’t believe that this was something her aunt had observed. Had she been that obvious?

Juliana didn’t think that anyone could interpret hate as love. But Aunt Betsy always wanted to see the best in everyone. She didn’t suffer fools gladly, but she did desire for everyone to get along.

If her aunt could sense it, then had everyone else noticed? Juliana felt more like a fool now, and she was on her own.

No, she wouldn’t think about any of that. It would do her no good to get embarrassed when she was on her own. She needed to put it to one side, and then Juliana could deal with it later. It wouldn’t be a good idea to think about it when it was close to falling asleep.

Juliana had been feeling a little tired before her aunt came in. But now, her mind was racing, and she couldn’t stop herself from thinking about Nathaniel. Just when she had managed to stop thinking about him in the first place.

So much for snuggling up with a book before she fell asleep. Hopefully, the book would be enough to make her eyes droop.

But Juliana finished the book, and she found that sleep was not going to come

anytime. She was still wide away, thinking about what Aunt Betsy had said. Why did she have to say that at this time of night? Now Juliana couldn't focus on anything.

Maybe she should get another book. One that was boring and really would send her to sleep.

Slipping out of bed, Juliana reached for her robe. If she was lucky, she could replace her book with another, and then she could go back to her room. There would be nobody to bother her. Hastings would have retired long ago; the man did not like books, and he preferred to keep out of the library. It would be rare for him to be present, especially when it was getting late.

Juliana didn't want to interact with him more than she had to, and certainly not alone. The sooner the man left, the sooner she could feel more relaxed.

Then again, given how things were going with her and Nathaniel, maybe she wouldn't be completely relaxed. Just enough that she didn't feel like she was looking over her shoulder, wondering what other trouble she was going to get caught up in.

There were still candles lit as Juliana made her way downstairs. The servants would still be up, finishing with their final tasks before putting out the candles and going to bed themselves. Even then, Juliana had lit a candle, and the light flickered near her face as she navigated the gloomy halls. Even after growing up in Burwood all her life, the darkness was a little unnerving.

At least it wouldn't be long. The library was comforting, even in the middle of the night.

Juliana reached the library and paused outside the door, remembering the last time she had gone into this room on her own. She had planned for some respite from her aunt's birthday party, only to run into someone she didn't want to encounter. Now, just days later, they were married, and Juliana was more confused about her feelings than ever.

It was startling how quickly things could change over the course of a few days.

Realizing that she was standing there like a fool, Juliana went in. The fire was still lit, flickering in the hearth, so the room was still warm. It illuminated most of the room, casting shadows across the bookcases.

Going to the bookcase where she had gotten her last book, Juliana put it back. Then she began to peruse the shelves. What book would be boring enough for her to drop off to sleep to? She had read pretty much everything in here, so picking out something shouldn't be too hard.

And yet it was making her head hurt?

"I think we've been in this similar position before."

Juliana gasped and spun around, almost dropping the candlestick as she bumped against the bookcase. Nathaniel was sitting in a chair near the fire, a book on his lap. He was in his shirtsleeves, no cravat in sight, with the buttons undone by his throat. He looked more relaxed than Juliana had ever seen him.

Looking at him like this, it made her remember the moment she had stormed into his bedchamber and caught sight of him just out of the bath. The memory surged back to life, and Juliana could feel her whole body getting warm. Nathaniel was currently clothed more than then, but somehow, this felt

different. More intimate, somehow.

There was something really wrong with her if she was thinking that.

She took a deep breath, waiting for her heart to slow down.

“You really need to stop scaring me like that,” she scolded. “Even at this time of night.”

“I thought you would have seen me.” Nathaniel raised his eyebrows. “Couldn’t sleep?”

“Something like that.”

“Neither could I. I thought doing some reading might actually help me, but it isn’t working right now.” He held up the book. “I can’t seem to find something boring.”

Juliana couldn’t help but smile at that.

“That does seem to be a problem in this house. Nothing is ever boring, not even the books.”

“I’m beginning to agree with you.” Nathaniel stood up, closing his book with a snap. “Perhaps I should have Barnes go over to my house and collect a few books that I know are boring.”

“You’re not going to make Barnes do that, are you?”

“Of course not.” Nathaniel smiled. “But I could if I wanted. I’m not that cruel, though, and Barnes needs his rest. He would probably have his heart give out if I told him to do that.”

Juliana laughed.

“You are mean, do you know that?”

“I like to tease.” His smile flickered a little as he approached her. “But I think it went a bit too far with some people.”

Juliana felt a prickling along her skin. She had a feeling that he was talking about her. She couldn’t move as Nathaniel reached up and slotted the book back onto the shelf. He was standing close enough to her that they were almost touching. Juliana moved the candlestick before she ended up burning him, shifting backward until she bumped into the shelves.

What was wrong with her? She could stand up for herself and argue with Nathaniel without batting an eyelid before, but now it felt like her confidence had left her. If only her aunt hadn’t told her that she suspected there was more going on beneath the surface with the two of them, it would make this interaction easier to deal with.

She licked her lips, and she could see Nathaniel’s eyes drift to her mouth, even in the dark. Now her lips were beginning to throb. Her mouth went dry. Was this what Aunt Betsy had been talking about? There couldn’t be any other reason for having the desire to kiss her husband.

“I should never have been so cruel to you all those years ago,” Nathaniel said quietly. He didn’t move away from her. “I was annoyed that my friend’s ten-year-old sister was following us around, and I went about telling you to leave us alone in the wrong way.”

“I think that’s an understatement,” Juliana whispered.

Nathaniel grunted.

“Well, I should have apologized years ago for that. But it was too late. You hated me, and I didn’t think you would accept it as genuine. I ruined it, and my pride wouldn’t allow me to do what I should have done.” He rubbed a hand over his eyes. “As the years passed, I knew that I had messed things up. I just wish we had been able to enjoy our childhood without this.”

“I did bother you and Edward too much. I followed you around to the point that you told me that you didn’t like me and I needed to get lost.” Juliana swallowed. “That hurt, but I understood. I had done too much.”

“I was rude…”

“And I understand, Nate. You don’t need to keep talking about it.” Juliana put a hand to his chest, trying to ignore the fact her hand had pressed against his bare skin. “It’s in the past, and we can just put it behind us. That’s all. We don’t need to do anything about it anymore.”

Nathaniel tilted his head to one side. It was like he couldn’t quite figure out what she was trying to say.

“Is that way of saying you forgive me for how horrible I was toward you?” he asked quietly, his voice a rumble that made Juliana’s body vibrate.

“If I say yes, will you stop talking about it?”

“All right, I’ll stop talking.” Nathaniel took the candlestick and placed it on a

nearby table. Then he gently pulled her toward him. “No more talking.”

Juliana gasped at the touch of his mouth on hers. There was no hesitation about it; Nathaniel was confident, giving as much as he took with the kiss. Juliana was momentarily frozen in his arms, wondering if this was actually happening. Was this Nathaniel Harwood, the man who once said that he didn’t want her around, actually kissing her? Was this really occurring right now?

Why aren’t you doing anything back? Why are you so limp?

Nathaniel broke the kiss, letting out a shuddering breath, and Juliana could feel him emotionally withdrawing.

“Forgive me, Juliana,” he said as he began to pull away. “I shouldn’t have done that. I…”

“Don’t you dare apologize for this.” Taking hold of what little courage was within reach, Juliana grabbed his shirt and tugged him back. “And I didn’t say you could stop.”

This time, she took charge of the kiss, and Nathaniel let her. She was back in his embrace, his hold so tight that Juliana thought that she was going to have the air squeezed out of her lungs. Then he was pushing her against the bookcase, almost lifting her onto her toes as he held her head still in his hands. Juliana was pretty much pinned in place, and she didn’t care.

She just didn’t want this to stop.

The sound of a door slamming made them break apart, Nathaniel jumping away until there was practically a chasm between them. Her heart pounding,

Juliana looked around, but she couldn't see anything. There didn't seem to be any sign of anyone around, and the door was still closed. So were the doors onto the terrace. But hadn't a door just slammed?

Whoever had shut that door had to have swung at it hard if they could hear it.

"Well," Nathaniel gasped, breathing heavily as he rubbed at his chest. "That was...something. I swear someone's spying on us."

"Spying on us?" Juliana's head was still spinning. "You think someone's watching us all the time?"

"I know Hastings is watching us. He keeps his distance, for the most part, but I've seen him watching us when he should be doing something else." Nathaniel ran his hands through his hair. "I wouldn't be surprised if he just saw us and slammed the door to ruin the moment."

Juliana didn't know what to say to that. She just knew that the moment was broken, and she didn't think she could bring that courage back to kiss Nathaniel again. Even though she wanted to. She reached behind her and snagged a book as soon as her fingers curled around a spine.

"Perhaps that should be a sign that we should retire," she croaked and coughed to clear her throat. "This may not be so much of a scandal, now that we're married, but it will still cause some whispers."

"I understand." Nathaniel swallowed. "Juliana, about what..."

"We really need our rest now, especially if we're going to be busy tomorrow. I think we should go our separate ways and try to sleep properly."

Snatching up the candlestick, Juliana edged toward the door, trying not to extinguish the light.

“Goodnight, Nathaniel. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Nathaniel looked like he was going to say something, as if to make her stay, but then his shoulders slumped, and he turned away with his head bowed. He didn’t put up an argument.

Juliana took that opportunity and fled. As she ascended the stairs, she couldn’t help but feel like she had turned into such a coward.

She was going to end up with a broken heart for Christmas, she was sure of that.

Chapter 20

Nathaniel hated himself right now. He couldn't believe that he had let Juliana go like that the night before. Finally, he had kissed her, and Juliana had kissed him back. And yet he had allowed her to practically run away like that.

God, he was such a fool. Why couldn't he tell Juliana what he really wanted, how he really felt? Instead of admitting that he was in love with her, Nathaniel had jumped straight to kissing her. That moment got ruined, and now Juliana could barely look him in the eye during breakfast.

It was like she regretted doing it.

Nathaniel knew he couldn't give up on this. They were going to be together for many years to come. There was no room for any awkwardness anymore. He had to find the confidence that had left him to tell Juliana the truth. If she could find a sliver of love to return to him, he would be happy with that. But if she couldn't...

He was going to have many years living with a woman who couldn't feel the same way. But surely there was something there, wasn't there? It felt like Juliana reciprocated when she kissed him. Or that could have been the heat of the moment. Things like that did happen.

Things were a mess right now. Nathaniel didn't want to go around the rest of the day with his head full of conflicting thoughts. He needed to get this sorted now.

But how was he going to get Juliana to listen to him? How could he admit that he had been hiding his real feelings for years?

As soon as breakfast was over, Nathaniel escaped into one of the smaller rooms near the back of the house. He sagged onto a chaise and buried his head in his hands. God, he had thought it had been bad enough when Clara told him that she was getting married to someone else. It had been gut-wrenching, but this was something different. More intense.

Nathaniel had thought he knew love when Clara had been in his life, but seeing her now and having Juliana as his wife had made him realize that while he had desired Clara immensely, he hadn't loved her. He wouldn't have been able to love her as she wanted.

Juliana had always had his heart, and it was only now that Nathaniel was beginning to realize it. And there was a chance that she could still reject him.

It would be typical that he would get rejected by his own wife.

The sound of the door opening had Nathaniel looking up. Then he shot to his feet when he saw Clara enter the room. She gave him a smile.

"I was beginning to wonder where you'd gone." She closed the door behind her. "This house is like a maze."

"Clara, you need to leave."

"Why? It's been a while since you and I got a chance to talk."

"There's a reason for that." Nathaniel kept his eye on the door, hoping that nobody had seen her come in here. "If someone comes by and walks in on us, we're going to have people talking about us."

Clara's smile was sly.

"And what's wrong with that? We are former lovers, after all."

"And I'm married now! Have you forgotten that?"

"I haven't forgotten. And I'm really upset that you couldn't wait for me."

Clara lifted her chin and approached him.

"You and I were in love before. What happened in the past wasn't something I could dictate, but I can now. I was waiting for you to come back from Europe, and we could pick up where we left off, and then I find that you've gotten married to that little shrew?"

Nathaniel growled, which made her pause.

"Don't you dare talk about Juliana like that. She's not a shrew, and you should have more respect."

Clara sighed.

"All right, I won't call her that. But you can't expect me to like her after she took the man I love from me, can you?"

"There was nobody to take from you," Nathaniel said hotly. "I may have wanted you years ago, but I moved on from it. What I wanted then and what I want now are completely different."

“Is that why you ended up marrying a girl who doesn’t hold a candle to me, Nate?”

Nathaniel gritted his teeth. He was not about to stand here and listen to Clara insult his wife.

“That is none of your business. I married Juliana because I love her. I always have.”

Wait, why was he telling Clara this when he hadn’t told Juliana? This was all backward. He should be talking to his wife about how he felt, not the woman he had been close to marrying. What was wrong with him?

Nathaniel knew that he needed to get out of there. He started to step around Clara.

“Look, I don’t know what you’re intending to do, Clara, but I’m not going to play. Whatever you want from me, you’re not getting it. You’re just my father-in-law’s guest, nothing more. And I would appreciate if you didn’t seek me out in private.”

But Clara followed him, slipping her arms around his as she pressed up against him.

“But don’t you want what you desired all those years ago?” she purred, reaching up to kiss his cheek. “I’m a widow now, and I don’t have my husband watching my every move. We can easily pick up where we left off.”

“What?” Nathaniel stared at her. “Are you mad?”

“Why not? You’re here, I’m here. We might not get another chance.” Clara pursed her lips and rose up toward him. “There are so many opportunities to be alone. Our statuses mean that we can do whatever we want...”

Nathaniel pushed her away before she kissed him. It ended up being a little too hard because Clara stumbled and fell back against the chaise. She cried out and stared up at him in shock. Nathaniel wanted to apologize for it, but then he realized that he wouldn’t be genuine. He just wanted to get away from her.

He pointed at her.

“Don’t you even think about that again.”

His heart was pounding so hard it felt like his head was hurting.

“Don’t you dare say anything about wanting to rekindle our relationship. That was in the past, and it’s not going to happen now. I will not disrespect myself or my wife by having an affair with you, and you shouldn’t disrespect yourself by chasing a married man.”

Clara sat up. She was flushed, her eyes flashing at him.

“You really can’t think that I’m going to let you get away when you know we had something good going on in the past?” she demanded. “You promised your undying love to me the night before we were due to get married.”

“You mean the night before you married someone else?” Nathaniel shot back. “And just because we were about to get married doesn’t mean you can break up my marriage to someone else! You do realize that I can’t divorce her to marry you, right? That means I would be committing adultery, and I’m

not about to do that.”

Clara sniffed.

“You think she’s going to love you now? I know she doesn’t love you.”

“Clara…”

“I know everyone has told me that you two rekindled a romance from before, and that’s why you got married, but I know the truth. Juliana hates you. She wants nothing to do with you, and being married to you is going to be like getting locked up for her.”

Clara smirked.

“You think you can get through the rest of your life married to a woman who won’t look at you like you can hang the moon for her? Would you be willing to put yourself through that?” She got to her feet. “I can give you what she can’t. What’s wrong with that?”

Nathaniel’s chest was hurting. This was far too brazen, even for a widow. Clara had never been this outspoken before, and it was cutting. The words that jumped out at him were the ones that hurt the most. Juliana hated him. That was not going to change.

He was a fool for thinking that he could make this marriage work. Maybe it was a good thing that he had never told Juliana how he really felt now.

Nathaniel turned away and flung open the door.

“Don’t approach me anymore!” he snapped. “Don’t even look at me. Keep your distance while you’re here, and as soon as this Christmas party is over, you are going to go back to wherever you came from, and you’re never going to contact me again.”

“Wait! Nate...!”

“Never call me that.” Nathaniel’s voice was icy as he strode into the hallway. “That’s Lord Harwood to you.”

He was aware of someone watching him as he stormed away, but Nathaniel paid them no attention. He just wanted to get out of there.

Hopefully, whoever heard what had been said would know that nothing untoward had happened. It would be nothing short of a miracle to turn that into something more salacious.

Nathaniel needed to leave. Right now.

The first Juliana sensed that something was wrong was when Lucy came hurrying into the morning room. She looked concerned as she rushed over to Juliana.

“You need to come with me,” she said in a low voice, glancing at Eleanor as she and Edward talked, their heads bent toward each other. “Now.”

Juliana was about to ask what was wrong, but she could tell from the way her friend was acting that now was not the time to ask. Putting aside her book,

she got up and followed Lucy out into the foyer. Lucy shut the door before turning to her, her voice still low.

“I just overheard an altercation. I thought you should know about it.”

“What do you mean? What’s going on?”

“Harwood was just in a room with Clara Montgomery.”

Juliana thought she had misheard. She stared.

“What? Alone?”

“From what I could tell, yes.”

Juliana felt the first stirrings of anger. Nathaniel had promised her that he would never be alone with Lady Clara. She had trusted him to do that, but he had broken that trust. What was he thinking?

“I can’t believe he would do that.”

“Slow down, Juliana.” Lucy held up her hands, her expression concerned. “I think there’s something going on.”

“Of course, there’s something going on! He’s planning on rekindling their love affair!”

“No, I mean something else.”

From the way she said it, there was a lot more to Lucy's statement. Juliana tried to keep her anger in check as she tried to calm down.

"All right, I'll listen. What do you mean by that?"

"I think something bad is happening right now." Lucy looked around. "Gilbert Hastings was near the room they were in."

"Hastings was?" Juliana was confused. "Why would he be there?"

"I wasn't sure. I was on my way past going to the library, and I heard Harwood shouting. He was telling Lady Clara that she needed to stop and that he wasn't going to start up anything again."

"What?"

"I didn't hear her response, but it was enough for Harwood to storm out. A moment later, Hastings went into the room, and they left the door open." Lucy grimaced. "I have to admit that I eavesdropped on their conversation, something I normally wouldn't do..."

"Do you think I care about that right now, Lucy?" Juliana snapped. "Just tell me what you heard."

"Are you sure you want to hear this?"

Juliana groaned.

"Stop stalling, Lucy, and just tell me!"

Lucy took a deep breath.

“From what I can gather, Hastings and Lady Clara are collaborating together. I think they’re trying to cause strife in your marriage.”

“How are they planning on that?”

But Juliana could already guess. Lady Clara and Nathaniel were former lovers. They had been so close to becoming husband and wife. If Nathaniel still had feelings for her, then he might be tempted into having an affair.

Which would leave her humiliated at having her husband seek the solace of another woman when the ink was barely dry on their marriage certificate. That would be incredibly painful.

But if that was Lady Clara’s intention, what was Hastings’ involvement? Was he orchestrating everything? Juliana had no idea what was going on anymore.

A chill went down her spine as a thought came to her. Was this something Hastings had planned on? Was he making it look like Nathaniel was already going back to a former flame?

Anger building again, Juliana stepped around Lucy and strode down the hallway. She could hear her friend calling after her, but Juliana ignored her, focusing on making her way through the maze of halls until she came upon Hastings and Lady Clara.

The two of them were standing in an alcove, the beginnings of another snowstorm starting up outside. Hastings saw her first and straightened up as Juliana stormed over to him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she demanded.

Hastings blinked.

“Juliana, I have no idea what...”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about!”

Juliana knew that she was shouting loud enough to make everyone wince, but she didn’t care.

“You are trying to put discord between myself and my husband, aren’t you? You’re colluding with Lady Clara to make us split apart before we’ve even started.”

She pointed at Lady Clara.

“I know you were waiting for someone to come upon her and my husband in a supposed clinch so you could start the rumors again. Or maybe you were waiting for the right time to find them yourself. But it backfired when my husband left, didn’t it?”

Lady Clara gasped.

“Is that what you think?” She sounded horrified. “What sort of woman do you think I am?”

“There are plenty of words to describe you, but I’m not going to say them out loud.” Juliana shot her a glare. “Not if you stay quiet, anyway.”

The other woman looked like she was about to argue, but she fell silent. Juliana knew that she had been told many times when she was younger that she did look scary when she was furious, and she was pleased to know that it was still effective. She turned back to Hastings, who was now spluttering.

“You were planning something, weren’t you? For what? Because I turned you down? Men get turned down for marriage all the time. What makes you so special that you have to try and ruin things for me?”

She thought that Hastings was going to protest, but then he narrowed his eyes and glared at her.

“You think you can get away with humiliating me like that? In front of our peers?”

“You knew that I wouldn’t appreciate a public proposal, but you did it anyway!” Juliana snapped. “Did you think that I wouldn’t say no if you did it in front of everyone? Was that your plan?”

“And you ruined it.”

Hastings was practically snarling into her face as he leaned toward her.

“You never apologized for what you did. I was declaring my love for you, and you pretty much slapped me in the face. I vowed that I would get my revenge on you. And that’s what I did, especially when I knew that you wanted to marry for love and not because you were forced to.”

Something about that sentence was a little off, and it took a moment for Juliana to figure out what he meant by that.

“It was you,” she whispered. “You were the one who started those rumors.”

“I saw you and Harwood in the library that night. I was outside, and I happened to see you two talking. No one in sight.”

Hastings sniggered.

“I thought it was a perfect opportunity for me to get back at you. To put you in a position that you never wanted to be in. After all, it was your own fault that you were alone with a man who wasn’t your husband. I just...capitalized on it.”

Juliana now wished she could run away. This man, someone who had claimed to love her not too long ago, had planned for her to be humiliated by marrying someone she had shown so much distaste toward. He had put her in this position.

All because she turned him down.

“So you were going to put me into an unhappy marriage, were you?” she said through gritted teeth. “And then what? Hover around me and sneer at my position? If you loved me, you wouldn’t be able to have me.”

“I couldn’t love someone who would throw someone like me away.” Hastings snorted. “You deserved to suffer, to go through the same embarrassment that I did.”

Juliana pointed at Lady Clara, who was now looking as if she wished that she were somewhere else.

“And what about her? Was she part of the plan as well?”

“Not in the beginning. Her being here was a twist of fate.” Hastings shrugged. “She still loves your husband, and I thought if I could make it look like his heart was still with Clara, you would feel even more alone.”

He might as well have slapped her. Juliana had known that Hastings could be ruthless with his business deals—her father had mentioned it many times over dinner—but she never thought that he would turn it around on her. Not like this.

She took a step back from him.

“I want you to leave,” she said coldly.

“What?”

“Get out of this house. Right now.”

Hastings scoffed.

“You won’t be able to get me to leave. Not without ruining my business deals with your father.”

“I’m going to him right now, and I’ll tell him exactly what’s going on. Business deals won’t matter when he finds out that you fooled around with his daughter’s life and took her choices away.”

Juliana turned and glowered at Lady Clara. “I’m going to do the same with you, too. I allowed you to stay due to respecting Lady Lucan, but you’ve

gone too far. You are out as well.”

Lady Clara’s face paled.

“But...all I wanted was for Nate to love me again,” she protested. “He could never love someone like you.”

Juliana slapped her, the sound echoing in the alcove. There was silence afterward as Lady Clara reached a hand to her face, which was already turning bright red. Breathing heavily, Juliana moved backward.

“If you don’t want me to completely lose my temper, I suggest you go to your room and start packing immediately. I’ll have carriages ready to take you two home.”

Hastings’ eyes narrowed.

“You won’t have any authority over it, Juliana. The Duke of Burwood...”

“Keep your mouth shut, unless you want me to do something else unladylike and smack you as well,” Juliana snarled at him. She turned and strode toward Lucy, who was staring at her with her mouth open. “I think we need to notify the servants that we have a couple of interlopers. Will you do that for me while I find Father?”

She walked away, her whole body shaking after what she had heard. How could he do something like that and use Nathaniel as a part of his scheme? There was something seriously wrong with him.

Her father needed to hear about this. And then Juliana needed to find

Nathaniel. He had to hear about this.

She just wanted to tell him that it was going to be all right.

Chapter 21

Nathaniel stood at the top of the hill and looked down at his estate. The storm was picking up, but he could still see his house through the wind and blowing snow. It was looking more inviting the longer he looked at it.

He couldn't wait to get back and hide away from everything and everyone. Barnes would be coming along soon with the luggage, and then they would be able to lock themselves away from the outside world. After his confrontation with Clara, Nathaniel just wanted to get away.

God only knew what Clara was going to say. She might even go to Juliana and tell her what supposedly happened. He had put his hands on a woman, after all, something Nathaniel had never planned to do. Juliana might believe that he could turn on her as well.

Or she might believe that Clara was trying to put discord between them. Nathaniel didn't know what to think. He should have stayed at the house, in the warmth and away from the storm, but in his panic, Nathaniel just wanted to get out of there. He needed to be somewhere that was familiar, somewhere that could calm him down.

His parents were going to think he was a coward for running away like this. He shuddered to think what they would believe if they listened to Clara and thought what she said was true. There were so many people who were going to be disappointed in him.

Most of all, Juliana. She would think that he was a fool for leaving as he did, but Nathaniel couldn't stay. Even if he had a clear head, he wouldn't be able to stay in the same house as Clara. Nowhere was safe, and she would try again until someone walked in and got the wrong idea.

He wanted to go home. He would write to Juliana and explain. She could stay and carry on the Christmas party with her family and join him later. She would understand.

Hopefully. Nathaniel didn't know what to think anymore.

Just as he was about to make his way down the slope toward his property, Nathaniel thought he heard someone shouting his name. It was carrying on the wind, and he thought he must have misheard it. Turning to look around, Nathaniel was surprised to see a horse racing up the slope toward him. It took a moment to realize that it was a woman riding toward him, and he began to panic again. God, Clara hadn't followed him out here, had she? That was going too far.

The rider got to the top of the hill, and the woman pushed the hood of her cloak back. It was Juliana. Nathaniel heaved a sigh of relief. Then he remembered what was going on around them.

"What are you doing out here?" he demanded, raising his voice over the wind.

"I came looking for you." Juliana kept her nervous horse as still as she could as she glared at him. "Why are you out here, Nate? There's a storm coming in, and we're going to get caught in it if we stay here any longer."

"You shouldn't have come out here."

"You disappeared! I was worried that you were going to get hurt."

Nathaniel looked back toward Juliana's home, which was almost invisible as the snow whipped about.

“You need to go back, Juliana. Your guests...”

“You are my husband, Nate. I think you’re more important than anyone else.”

She sounded so certain about it, but Nathaniel couldn’t be sure. He shook his head.

“Juliana, things happened this morning, and I...I understand that you might think ill of me after what you heard...”

“You mean when Lady Clara cornered you and tried to make you look like an unfaithful husband?”

“What?”

Juliana snorted.

“Lucy caught the tail end of what happened, and she told me. Lady Clara is currently packing her bags to leave, for trying to get between us. So is Hastings.”

Nathaniel wondered if he had heard that correctly.

“Hastings is going as well? Why?”

“It’s a bit long to explain, and I would rather that we were in a warm place when I tell you.” Juliana managed to get her horse to move closer, her skirts brushing against Nathaniel’s leg. “Just come back with me, Nate. I don’t want you to freeze out here.”

“I wasn’t going to freeze.” Nathaniel gestured at his estate. “I was going home.”

“Without me?” She sounded stunned. “You would leave me?”

“I...I just panicked. After what happened with Lady Clara...”

“You think I would believe anything that harlot says over you? Do you really know me, Nate?”

She did have a point. Juliana had shown that she didn’t care for Clara, and she would understand what was going on. Nathaniel wished that he had remembered that before he rode out into the snow. His hands felt like they had stiffened around his reins, and he flexed his fingers. Now that hurt. How long had he been standing on the top of the hill without going anywhere?

“Maybe I should have locked myself away in my room,” he muttered.

“You should have come to me as soon as it happened,” Juliana said, almost shouting over the wind. “I was not going to turn on you for some scheming witch and a manipulative man, was I?”

“I thought...”

“You thought I wouldn’t trust the man I love?”

The words hung in the air as they both froze. Nathaniel wondered if he had heard her correctly. He stared at her, but Juliana didn’t look away. Her eyes looked stunned that she had actually said it, but her face was resolute. She didn’t blink.

“Did you...” Nathaniel swallowed. “Did you just say...?”

“That I love you? Yes, I did.” Juliana shivered. “I always have. Thinking that you hated me crushed me, but I couldn’t get my feelings to go away. I’ve been running from them for years, and I don’t want to do that anymore.”

“For years?”

“Yes.”

Nathaniel didn’t think he had heard anything like this before. It felt like music to his ears. Now, he wasn’t feeling as cold as he had been a moment ago. Leaning over, he cupped Juliana’s head and pulled her in for a kiss. Juliana squeaked and grabbed at his arms as her horse shifted, but she didn’t pull away. They were both gasping for air when they broke apart.

“That...I...” Juliana grabbed onto the saddle and righted herself. “That I wasn’t expecting.”

“You have no idea how relieved I am to hear those words, Juliana.”

“You thought I couldn’t say them?”

“With everything between us, do you think I believed you loved me?”

“All right, that’s a fair point.” Juliana adjusted her cloak around her. The snow was settling on her hair, and she looked lovely. Nathaniel had to stop himself from staring. “While I know this isn’t ideal, I want you to know that I can make this work. I’m willing to make it work because I love you. I don’t expect you to feel the same...”

“After our kiss last night, did you believe that I didn’t love you back?” Nathaniel asked.

Juliana’s eyes widened.

“Really?”

“I wouldn’t have kissed you if I didn’t feel something for you. I’ve been trying to tell you since yesterday that I’m in love with you. I don’t know when it hit me, but that’s how it is for me.”

Nathaniel reached out and took her hand.

“If you’re willing for us to have this marriage as a genuine one, then I’m willing as well. I want to be a proper husband for you if you’ll have me, Juliana.”

For a moment, Juliana said nothing. Then she smiled and squeezed his hand.

“I like the sound of that,” she replied. Then she gasped as the wind wrapped around them to the point the noise roared in Nathaniel’s ears. “Perhaps we should go back inside and talk about this? I don’t want to turn into an icicle being out here. It’s not exactly romantic.”

Nathaniel couldn’t agree more. They still had a lot to talk about, and he just wanted to put his arms around Juliana properly without worrying about falling into the snow.

That would warm him up more than a roaring fire out of the cold.

Epilogue

Two weeks Later

Juliana stood at the top of the stairs and watched as Burwood embraced Edward warmly, clapping him on the back. Father and son were beaming, both looking so happy. Beside Edward, Eleanor was bright-eyed and flushed, Lady Haringdale grasping their hands together as she spoke to her niece. It was a beautiful sight, seeing her brother and her new friend looking pleased.

“I was beginning to think that the two of them wouldn’t admit to anything,” Nathaniel commented as he leaned against the rail beside her.

“You figured that they were in love?”

“I knew as soon as I saw their first interaction that there was a spark between them. Edward is very good at evading questions he doesn’t want to answer, so I wasn’t going to get anything from him.” Nathaniel smiled. “Eleanor, though, wears her heart on her sleeve. You know how she feels about something when she’s around.”

“I can’t argue with that.” Juliana looked at the other guests in the foyer, who were congratulating the couple. “It seems appropriate for them to announce their engagement on Twelfth Night and Edward’s birthday. A little fast, I must admit, but very fitting for them.”

“Maybe Edward wanted to do it so he wouldn’t forget the date. You know how bad he is with them.”

Juliana put a hand over her mouth to stop herself from bursting into loud

laughter. Nathaniel did have a point with that. As the rest of the party moved into the drawing room, Edward put an arm around Eleanor's shoulders, and Juliana wondered how this Christmas had managed to turn things around.

Before Christmas, she had been forced into marriage, and she was expecting things to be really horrible for her. Instead, things had changed and shown her that not all was as it seemed. She and Nathaniel had danced around their feelings for years, and this was a way of bringing them out into the open.. If this hadn't happened to them, they might not have come to this conclusion.

The Christmas party had finished on a good note, despite what had gone on, and then Christmas Day had been a wonderful day. Now it was twelve days after Christmas, and in the morning, Juliana would be leaving with Nathaniel to start her married life properly on his estate.

It didn't scare her as much as she thought it would, although Juliana was a little sad that she would be leaving the house she had known as her home all her life. But starting fresh with Nathaniel sounded like a good move forward, something they should have done a long time ago.

"Shall we go and join them?" Juliana turned to her husband. "I know Edward and Eleanor told us before everyone else, but shouldn't we be with them now?"

"We can join them shortly." Nathaniel tugged her toward him. "I want to spend a bit more time with you."

Juliana could feel his smile against her mouth as he kissed her. She wrapped her arms around his waist, his embrace comfortable around her as she leaned against him. They had been doing this a lot lately, just sneaking moments away from everyone else. Being newlyweds, nobody paid much attention to them. Juliana was glad about that; she didn't want any more moments with her husband ruined.

She wanted to savor them from now on.

“I love you,” Nathaniel said when he broke the kiss, resting his forehead against hers. “I’m so glad that I didn’t go through with that wedding years ago.”

“You would have married a beautiful woman,” Juliana reminded him.

“But I would have tired of her once the desire wore off. I realize that now. It was a good thing that her father made her marry someone else.” Nathaniel’s expression was affectionate as he brushed a strand of hair away from Juliana’s face. “Then I wouldn’t be here right now with the woman who should have been in my arms all along.”

“I think Christmas has rotted your brain.”

“Would you rather me be horrible to you again?”

“Not that much.” Juliana shuddered. “It’s going to take me a while to get used to this new side of you.”

“I’m still the old Nathaniel you remember. I’m just showing you how I’ve felt all this time and kept away because I was a coward.” Nathaniel kissed her nose. “I’m not going to do that anymore. You deserve so much, and I intend to make that happen for you.”

Juliana was touched. Nathaniel was trying his hardest to make up for all the years when he had been harsh toward her. She didn’t want him to, but Nathaniel was serious about it. He was determined to make sure that things were even better than she wanted.

At least they would be able to do that without Hastings and Clara hovering around. Both of them had been sent away from the estate in disgrace after Burwood heard what they had been up to. To say he wasn't happy that a business partner tried to ruin his daughter was an understatement.

Juliana had been glad that the fury hadn't been aimed at her. She had never seen Hastings look so cowed, and he had practically run out of the room when Burwood ordered him out.

Clara had been in tears, trying to apologize, but Juliana had ignored her. She had only done it because she had been caught instead of being genuinely remorseful.

Neither of them were allowed back. Lady Lucan had been shocked that her niece would behave in such a manner and had been very apologetic. Juliana couldn't blame her for Clara's actions. That was not on her.

Hopefully, that woman and Hastings would not cross their paths again. Juliana knew that Nathaniel would be more than happy to beat Hastings into a pulp, and hopefully, the man would know that.

She didn't want anything to ruin their time right now.

"Tomorrow, we're going to be leaving for our home." Nathaniel straightened up, rubbing his hands across her back. "Are you ready to be Lady Harwood?"

"I am. And we're not going that far away." Juliana smiled. "I know your house as well as I know my own."

"You'll have your run of the place more now." Nathaniel hesitated. "Also, I am aware that I said you had your own apartment in the house, your own

suite of rooms.”

Juliana remembered that, but she wondered where her husband was going with this. Nathaniel cleared his throat.

“Well, what I’m saying is, do you still want those rooms? I’ll let you keep them or whatever you want to do with them. When I offered them, it was when I thought we were on bad terms. Now that we’re not...”

“I’d like to keep them.”

“What?” Nathaniel blinked. “You would?”

“A wife always needs some time away from her husband. It’s my place of solitude.” Juliana wrapped her arms around his neck. “But only for a short time. For the rest of it, I intend to spend it with you. As much as you want my presence. Do you prefer that?”

Nathaniel’s body sagged, and he picked her up to spin her around. Juliana laughed, and she was still laughing as he kissed her.

“What was that about?”

“I just thought you would...well...” Nathaniel’s face went a little red. “I didn’t want to pressure you into anything...”

“Don’t be daft. We can discuss that when we get home tomorrow.” Juliana kissed him. “Our home.”

“You have no idea how good that sounds when you say it.”

Juliana rested her head on his shoulder, soaking up the warmth from his body.

“I love you, Nate.”

“I love you, too.” Nathaniel kissed her head. “I’ll make sure you know how much once things have settled down after Christmas.”

Juliana had no doubt about that.

THE END?

Can't get enough of Juliana and Nathaniel? Then make sure to check out the [Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...

As Juliana eagerly anticipates the Christmas festivities, what special traditions will she have in store for her growing family?

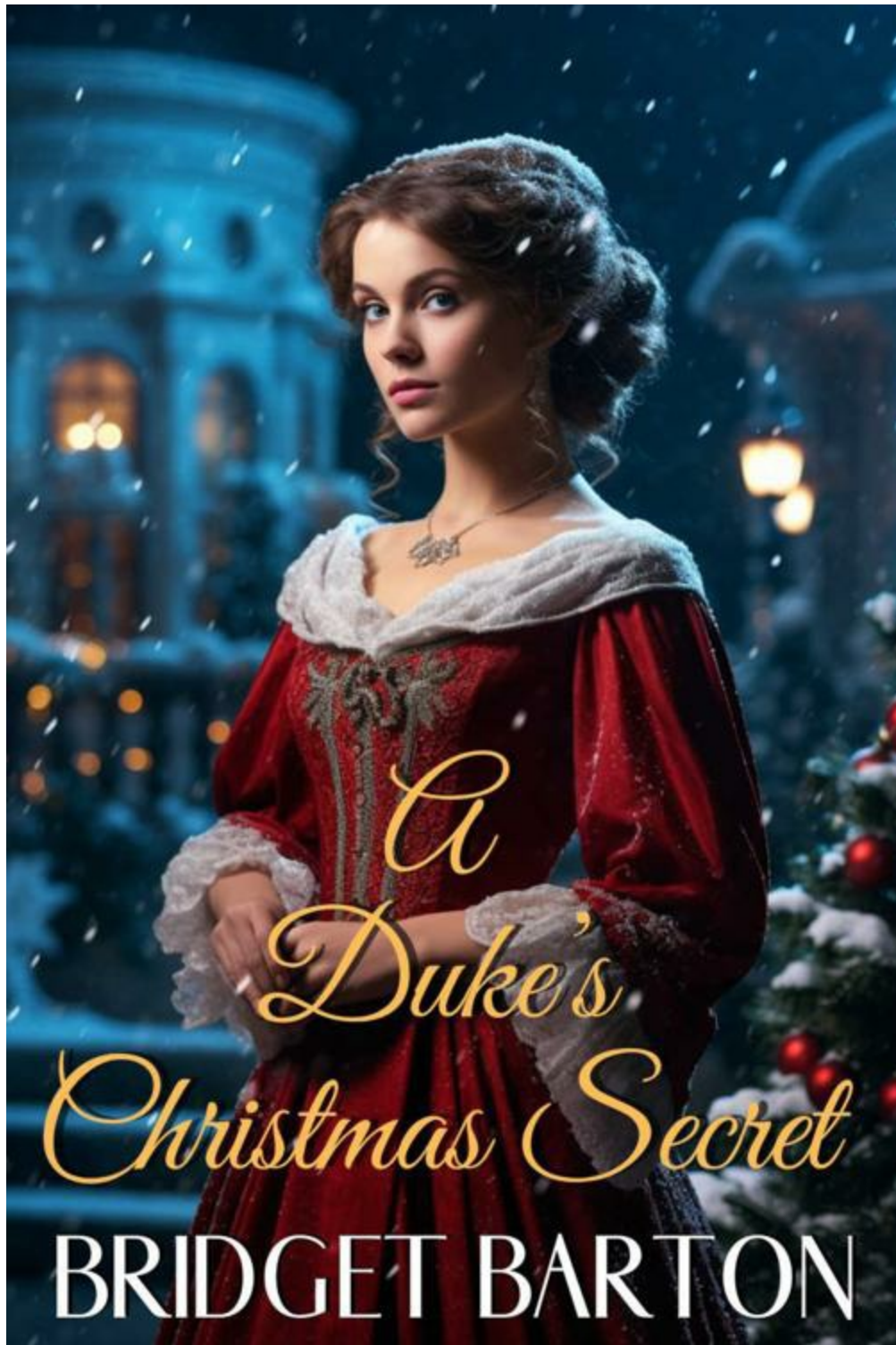
How will the dynamics of the family gathering change as additional guests, Edward, Eleanor, and Alicia, arrive to join the festivities in a future Christmas?

What unexpected changes will have occurred in Nathaniel and Juliana's life three years later?

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://bridgetbarton.com/nate>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from **"A Duke's Christmas Secret"**, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*



*A
Duke's
Christmas Secret*

BRIDGET BARTON

A Duke's Christmas Secret

Introduction

In a world where duty and love clash, Lady Eleanor Robinson, a spirited young woman with a passion for adventure and a heart aching for true love, stands on the precipice of an impossible choice. Her father's financial woes have forced her into the arms of the insufferable Lord Henry Briarhurst, a man she could never love and yet has to marry by Christmas Day. An unexpected twist of fate brings the disowned Duke of Windhaven into her life for the Christmas holidays, leaving her torn between duty and her heart's secret yearning...

As the magic of Christmas draws near, will she discover a love worth fighting for or will she watch it slip through her fingers?

Nathaniel Margrave, the rightful Duke of Windhaven, returns to England with a heavy heart, seeking the inheritance that should have been his. Outcast by society and determined to reclaim what is owed, Nathaniel crosses paths with Lady Eleanor, an unexpected kindred spirit and the only thing that feels like Christmas magic. As he finds himself divided between the quest for his title and the irresistible pull of love, he is faced with a difficult decision.

Can he put his mission for vengeance aside for the promise of a love he never expected to find? Or will he walk away from it, leaving his heart forever torn?

As the holiday season unfurls, secrets unravel, and both Eleanor and Nathaniel must grapple with their desires and the truth about Nathaniel's stolen inheritance. Soon, they'll be faced with a heartbreaking decision that could forever separate them or bind them together in a love that defies all odds and becomes a Christmas miracle. Will their hearts find warmth in the cold of winter, or will their love be yet another casualty of the Christmas Season?

Chapter 1

London, 1815

“You will dance with as many handsome men as possible, will you not?”

“Bea.” Eleanor sighed tiredly with the words. “You do know that should not be your every desire when you are older.”

“Why not?”

Bea’s young face appeared in the hallway mirror behind Eleanor. Ten years her junior, Bea had reached her tenth summer a couple of months before, and her enthusiastic nature was growing by the day, especially when it came to talking of the *ton* or anything concerning Bea’s future life.

“I would dance with every man there if I could.” She took the ends of her skirt and turned around the rather sparse hallway, still managing to nearly bump into the one statue they had left in the room.

Eleanor chased after her younger sister, just managing to catch Bea’s shoulders before such a collision could occur. Lovingly, she turned Bea around the other way so she could continue to dance in the opposite direction.

“I wish I had your optimism,” Eleanor muttered under her breath, so quietly that Bea could not hear her over the happy tune she was humming.

With her hands on her hips, Eleanor moved toward the doorway, watching her sister as she chewed the inside of her mouth and continued to worry about

the night ahead.

Tonight is the night. I must make something happen.

Eleanor took no love or happiness in her goal in life, even though she knew it was necessary. As the eldest, and now of marital age, it was her responsibility to try and secure a wealthy husband—a gentleman of standing in the *ton* who would be able to bring her father out of the pits of debt he had plunged them all into over the last decade.

Eleanor pressed her hands together, wringing them nervously as she looked around the room. Where once there had been great plinths with large marble busts of various scientists and reputed adventurers, there were now empty spaces.

Even the hallway mirror had been replaced with a wooden-framed one, a far cry from the gilt one that used to sit there. The one statue that remained in the hallway was evidently something her father was reluctant to part with.

The marble figure glittered in the last light of the autumnal day, the blood-orange light falling on it through the windows making the white face shine. The statue was of Marco Polo, a testament to his great adventures in the East and across Asia. Eleanor sighed as she looked at the statue, rather envying the freedom the man must have had, knowing he could leave his home life behind and begin such an adventure across the world.

If only the rest of us felt so free.

It wasn't something Eleanor could indulge in. As much as the idea of adventure and the world tempted her, she had responsibilities—and one of them was now dancing toward her again, in danger of bumping into the hall table. She took Bea's shoulders once more and spun her back the other way.

“Please be careful, Bea. If I come home to find you have knocked over all the furniture, I’ll be taking care of you and your bruises for a week.”

“I’m not so bad.” Bea abruptly stopped and folded her arms, pouting firmly.

Her face wasn’t dissimilar to Eleanor’s, with the same pale blue eyes and rounded cheeks, though on Bea, those curves had the tendency to look very young indeed. Eleanor’s cheekbones were a touch more prominent, the slim peak of her chin delicate, and she had a fear that the angle made her lips look rather too full at times. They shared the same pale brown hair, so light that in certain weather it could almost look to be made of honey.

“Well, I am ready.” Another voice joined them. “Let us get this over with.”

“Father...” Eleanor offered a warning tone as her father appeared. The Earl of Wessex, Richard Robinson, was a shadow of the man he had once been.

Eleanor could remember that her father had once been dapper and handsome, full of life and energy, with swaths of golden hair swept back from his head and the same blue eyes that were found in his daughters’ faces. These days, that blond hair was graying, and the eyes didn’t glitter with life as much as they once did.

Yet as she watched him walk down the tiled steps of the house and hurry toward her, adjusting the cuffs of his jacket that he was evidently struggling with now that he no longer employed a valet, there was something Eleanor would be eternally grateful for

After her mother’s death, Richard had dropped into despair, grief, and most particularly, brandy. For seven years, he had dwelled in such a dark place, his good humor fading and his hope in life dwindling with it.

The last three years, however, something had changed. Richard had picked himself up a little, determined to remedy their family's affairs, though it was no easy thing to do. His years of drinking and dwelling in misery had left them quite destitute.

"Here, let me," Eleanor whispered as her father stopped in front of her. She helped him adjust the cuffs of his tailcoat and then the cravat. "There. Very handsome, Father."

He smiled, the lines around his eyes crinkling a little more.

"I am sorry about this, Eleanor." He lowered his voice so only she could hear him as Bea was happily humming and dancing around the room again. "If I could think of another way, something more to do to help us all, I would do it. You know that, do you not?"

"I do." She forced a smile and flattened the lapels of his jacket for him. They had a tendency to stick up at odd angles. He needed a new tailcoat, but they couldn't waste money on such a thing. "Sometimes, life is about duty, is it not?" She tried to keep the sadness out of her voice. "I must accept that."

Her words didn't seem to help matters. He looked down between them, the shadows under his eyes appearing darker and worse than before.

"I'll be happy, Father. Trust me. I'll find a way." She tried to show optimism, to reveal more hope than she truly felt.

To marry for love as my mother and father had done, that would be the true dream! Yet we are not all so fortunate.

Eleanor's eyes darted to Bea as she reminded herself exactly why she was

doing this, going on the hunt for a rich man. If she could marry well and secure the position of her family, then her father's future would be safe, far from debtors' prison, and Bea would have the opportunity to marry whoever she wished to in the future. Her opportunities would be completely open.

For Bea and my father, I must do this.

"Ah, my lord," the butler called from the other end of the room. He stepped into the hall, and nearly colliding with Bea as she danced, he darted around her, appearing more sprightly than his elder years suggested. He smiled rather dotingly at Bea's dancing and hurried toward Richard. "The carriage is prepared to take you to the Briarhurst Autumn Ball."

"Many thanks, Garrison. What would I do without you, eh?" Richard clapped Garrison on the shoulder good-naturedly and offered his arm to Eleanor, ready to escort her to the ball.

Eleanor waved at Bea one last time and departed through the door, stepping out of the house and moving toward the carriage.

"Come back soon!" Bea called excitedly from the doorway behind her, where Garrison laid a gentle hand to her shoulder to stop her from leaping into the carriage, too. "I cannot wait to hear of the men you dance with."

Eleanor and her father sighed together as they stepped into the carriage, sitting beside one another and staring forward. Neither of them said anything for a minute, but both forced smiles for Bea's sake, waving at her through the window before the carriage pulled away down the drive.

Eleanor tried to concentrate on admiring the autumnal leaves, the rich hues of red and orange that danced in the evening breeze on the trees that flanked the driveway.

The Manor of Wessex had been their home for so long. If their finances dwindled until her father was forced to give it up, it would break him almost as much as losing her mother had done.

“By Christmas,” Richard said abruptly.

“I beg your pardon?” Eleanor turned to look at him, wondering if her father had been speaking and she had simply not been paying attention.

“I am thinking aloud.” He looked at her, his pointed chin downturned. “I have done some calculations, had a few more bills this morning from my debtors.”

“Oh.” Eleanor steeled herself, waiting for him to say more as she fidgeted restlessly with her reticule.

“By Christmas, I will not have the money to pay the interim bills. I’d have to sell the estate, and we may face...” He broke off, clearly not wanting to say the words “debtors’ prison.” “I am so sorry, Eleanor, but I fear we must get you wed by Christmas.”

“Christmas? So soon?” Yet Eleanor didn’t disagree or defy him. As she suspected, tonight had to be the night where she truly pushed things forward with Mr. Henry Briarhurst. If she stood a chance of saving her family, she had to persuade him to turn his offer of courtship into an offer of marriage.

God’s wounds, how on earth do I do that?

“What did you say?” Nathaniel stared at the solicitor, Mr. Thackery, certain he had heard him wrong.

Mr. Thackery grimaced behind the thick spectacles he wore, his great gray eyes appearing twice as large as they truly were. The effect was rather like that of a large puppy, staring at Nathaniel with a pleading gaze. He handed over the will for Nathaniel to look at himself.

“I wish I could say it was something else, but it cannot be denied. The proof is there before our eyes.”

Nathaniel tried to block out the stuffy solicitor’s room as he snatched up the will and looked down at the words before him. It was the kind of room he detested, the sort he had been all too happy to leave behind when he had turned his back on England five years ago and left for the Americas.

Full of dark mahogany with closed windows, the corners were shadowy, the ornaments on the desk and above the mantelpiece overly ostentatious, and the Wedgewood pottery that littered the tea tray in front of him felt far too prim and proper.

Nathaniel read the words of his brother’s will, disbelief filling him all the more.

When the letter had first arrived informing him of David’s death after a sudden sickness, Nathaniel hadn’t hesitated to book his place on the soonest ship and return home.

He had not wanted to believe it, refused to do so, yet when he had attempted to reach the family home, he found the driveway blocked and he was refused entry by workmen who declared he was not the master of the house. Angered to not be able to visit his own home, he had had to come to the solicitor to

find out the truth of all that had passed.

The letter about his brother's passing had initially been delayed; poor David had actually passed four months prior. In that time, his will had been executed, the funeral held, and Nathaniel had not been invited.

"You are telling me that I have missed my brother's passing, his funeral, and now, I have nothing to remember him or the family by? Nothing at all?" Nathaniel asked in disbelief, reading the words again.

"I wish I could say something else, but I cannot," Mr. Thackery declared with a rather withering and simpering voice that left Nathaniel disgruntled. It irked him almost as much as Mr. Thackery's incessant bowing had done when he first entered the room. "This will arrived with a letter when your brother was dying, in which he expressed his clear wishes for me to execute the will. Your family lands and fortune have been left elsewhere, Your Grace."

"Hmm." Nathaniel said nothing, reading the will one more time.

I, the present Duke of Windhaven, David Musgrave, being of sound mind, leave my estate to my dearest friend of many years, Mr. Henry Briarhurst.'

The will went on in the greatest of details, saying how Mr. Briarhurst had earned the fortune due to his loyalty to the family and to David. These words most of all felt like a kick in Nathaniel's gut.

I thought David understood me. I thought in our letters, we were at last seeing eye to eye.

Nathaniel was realizing now how mistaken he had been. After the cloud under which he had left the family home five years ago and headed to the

Americas, much had changed. Where David had once agreed with their parents, his latest letters had suggested to Nathaniel that he understood him much more, and that maybe when Nathaniel returned to England, they could start again as brothers.

Clearly, I was mistaken. He has not left me a penny.

Nathaniel turned the pages of the will, checking each and every item in the hope that David would leave him something—a book from the library that he had adored so much, or a single plant from that beautiful garden—but it was not to be. He was given nothing from his family at all, nothing to remember them by.

“All my family’s heirlooms, everything from the dukedom, it is to belong to Mr. Briarhurst?” Nathaniel asked in disbelief, lowering the will to his lap as he sat in the rigid-backed armchair.

It was uncomfortable, nothing like the plush and comfy chairs he had grown accustomed to sitting in the last few years. He supposed Mr. Thackery didn’t choose his chairs for comfort, but those that he probably thought made him look grander, and more suited to a higher class of clientele.

“Not everything, Your Grace.” Mr. Thackery clasped his hands together on the desk between them. “Your title is yours. No duke can be disinherited from that. It is enshrined in law, from the days where such titles were thought to be ordained by God through the king. You are the next Duke of Windhaven.”

I am not sure I wish for that part.

Nathaniel kept his thoughts to himself. Of all the things to inherit, he was getting the one thing that felt stuffy and haughty. He would have been glad to

get his brother's lands, to check on the tenants for himself and see how they were faring. That would have been a better responsibility than an empty title.

"I should thank you for seeing me." Nathaniel stood and buttoned the loose gray jacket he wore, all too aware that Mr. Thackery's large eyes narrowed through his glasses. He seemed to be staring at Nathaniel's attire with wonder.

I know what he's thinking. A duke should dress in a grander way.

The mere idea of defying convention made Nathaniel smile a little.

"Thank you for taking the time to explain everything to me," he said as Mr. Thackery stood, too.

"I am only sorry I could not give you fairer news, Your Grace. Mr. Briarhurst has left a letter for you, to be read upon your return." He proffered forward a sealed envelope, the red wax seal shining up in the fading light of the day.

Nathaniel took the letter rather hurriedly, relieved to see Mr. Briarhurst was not using Nathaniel's family seal. Mr. Briarhurst had everything else, he didn't need that as well.

Dear Nathaniel...

He broke off at once and looked up. There was a time when Mr. Briarhurst had been almost an older brother to Nathaniel, for he and David had been inseparable, keeping each other company at gentlemen's clubs and various gambling halls in town.

At the time, they had all been on first-name terms, but there was something now about Mr. Briarhurst addressing him in such a way that felt wrong, as if Nathaniel had been struck down in some boxing match.

Please believe me when I say that these circumstances were not expected by me or any other. I dearly hope that the wishes of your brother will not sow discord between us. In fact, when you do return, please know that my townhouse is always open to you. Come to the Briarhurst estate in London, in Piccadilly, whenever you can. I would be glad of your company, and very happy indeed to toast the name of your brother with you.

Nathaniel lowered the letter, feeling a sudden determination to see Mr. Briarhurst after all.

“I hope it is of some use to you?” Mr. Thackery said, gesturing down to the letter.

“Oh, it is.” For Nathaniel had noticed something in the letter, something that now niggled away at him, as if ants were crawling over his skin. The letter was dated from before the letter that even told Nathaniel his brother was dead in the first place. Mr. Briarhurst had been informed very early indeed of what fortune was soon to be his. “It seems I have something to ask Mr. Briarhurst. I will visit him at once.”

He nodded his head at Mr. Thackery, and the solicitor bowed flamboyantly.

Nathaniel left the room, his nose wrinkling with distaste at the sheer extent of that bow. If he had his way, no man would bow to a duke or any other who claimed to have a title again.

Chapter 2

“Enjoy yourself quickly before he calls you to his side again.” Lady Sophie Runswick, the daughter of the Countess of Aylesbury, passed a plate of small cakes into Eleanor’s hand. “Hurry, hurry, he is already coming this way again.”

“Oh, calm down, Sophie.” Lady Linora, daughter of a marquess, laughed and placed a comforting hand on Eleanor’s arm. “He is hardly so demanding.”

“You think not?” Eleanor spluttered, not bothering to eat the cake. “Have you not heard him speak? He is a domineering man indeed!”

“You are the one who agreed to court him,” Linora said carefully with a wince. In unison, both Eleanor and Sophie glared at her. “Was that the wrong time to point that out?”

“What was your first clue?” Eleanor said in a wry tone, prompting Sophie to laugh heartily.

Since she had arrived at Mr. Henry Briarhurst’s Autumn Ball, she had been practically glued to his side. Each time she had attempted to step away for a moment’s breathing space, he’d take hold of her wrist or her waist and pull her back again.

“It’s almost as if you are already married,” Sophie mused with a whisper. She nudged Eleanor with her elbow, clearly warning her that Mr. Briarhurst was marching their way once again.

Well, I suppose I should be happy about such a thing.

Eleanor didn't reply. Tonight had all been about persuading Mr. Briarhurst to make that offer of marriage. They had been courting for the last few weeks, yet the more Eleanor was in his company, the more reluctant she was to push him into such a conversation.

She didn't like him very much. In truth, she had serious questions about his character, finding him rather demanding, not to mention he made her uncomfortable any time he placed his hand on her possessively. She supposed he was handsome, in the sort of dandy way where a man wore far too much decoration on his fine clothes, but each time she tried to find some fondness for him, her heart failed her.

"Why Mr. Briarhurst?" Linora asked, elbowing her from the other side.

"What?" Eleanor looked at her, startled by the question.

"Of all men, Eleanor. I know you are eager to marry, and he has just inherited a vast fortune, after all, but why him?" Linora wrinkled her nose. "You are as ill-matched as cheese and mint sauce."

Both Eleanor and Sophie exchanged disgusted looks at the idea.

"Cheese and mint sauce?" Sophie repeated with a laugh. "Have you ever tried such a thing?"

"Why would one?"

As Sophie and Linora fell into a rather humorous conversation, Eleanor

looked away. She loved her friends dearly, and their good humor usually had the habit of cheering her spirits. Sophie, the more elegant of the two, had long blonde hair that was cascaded in perfect curls.

She received attention from a lot of men but batted them away frequently, showing little interest in marrying at all as of yet. In contrast, Linora's beauty was much darker, with rich black hair and dark chestnut eyes that had almost as many men following her. She knew the marriage market well and was being very careful about who she chose to court.

By contrast, Eleanor didn't have such choice.

Why Mr. Briarhurst, she asks me? Does she truly not know?

"I had no choice," Eleanor said suddenly.

"What was that?" Linora asked, breaking off her conversation with Sophie and turning to face her.

"You asked me why I chose Mr. Briarhurst? Well, I didn't. Not exactly." Eleanor shook her head. "He chose me. My first two Seasons, I fear I frightened too many men away with all my talk of books. I am told no man wants such a thing. Mr. Briarhurst is the only man to ever show an interest. That is why I am courting him."

"But..." Linora looked ready to argue the idea, but Sophie coughed rather loudly, and the three of them whipped around to see Mr. Briarhurst had at last reached them through the busy crowd of the ballroom.

Wherever Eleanor looked, the room was alive with hot air and chatter. Ladies laughed and waved fans in front of their faces as gentlemen guffawed and

passed around thick glasses of brandy and claret. The dancers at the far end of the room were in such a state of joy that when couples collided, they merely laughed it off and continued on.

Their host seemed just as happy as his guests. His wide lips spread wider still as he looked at Eleanor and offered his hand to her, his rather pale pallor reminding her of the sallow skin of a lamb.

“Ah, Lady Eleanor, there you are. Come, come, there are some gentlemen I would like you to meet.” He urged her to follow him so abruptly that she nearly dropped her plate and was only saved from disaster as Linora and Sophie scrambled to catch it from the air.

“Our poor friend,” Sophie’s whisper followed Eleanor as she trailed along at Mr. Briarhurst’s side.

“I think you will enjoy meeting these gentlemen,” he said in what she supposed was his attempt at a soft tone. “They are advantageous men indeed to meet.”

She forced a smile, understanding what he actually wanted out of this endeavor. These must be men of business, men of success, and just like every other introduction he had made that night, he was introducing her in order to show her off. As the daughter of an earl, she had a good reputation, and the link to aristocracy was evidently something that Mr. Briarhurst craved.

“There you are, my good men.” Mr. Briarhurst led her to the center of the room, where they stood beneath a vast chandelier, full of candles that glittered between the crystal decorations. “May I present the young lady I am courting. This is Lady Eleanor Robinson, daughter of the Earl of Wessex.” The fact he added her father’s title only reinforced what Eleanor had already suspected was the reason for the introduction.

The three gentlemen before her all bowed deeply as she curtsied. She was quickly introduced to them all in turn and learned one was an investment banker, another a trader in the east, and the final man was a viscount, with particularly extensive lands in Cumbria.

“What a transformation, eh, Briarhurst?” the portly investment banker asked after the introductions were finished. He raised his claret to his lips, his fingers and his cheeks practically the color of the wine he gulped. “A year ago, you were but a man of business. Now you have great lands, tenants, and a fine woman indeed on your arm.”

He nodded his head at Eleanor with these words, though she felt disgusted by it, even as she struggled to hold her smile in place. *I am spoken of as if I am some prize pig at a village fair.*

“Yes, it has been a fortunate year indeed.” Mr. Briarhurst smiled at her indulgently, then his eyes looked over her. Her body stiffened. How could he feel so at ease to gaze at her in such a fashion?

“A toast, then.” The viscount raised his glass in the air. “To your future success, Briarhurst. May the next year be as good as the last.”

The four men all chinked their glasses together as Eleanor looked sharply at Mr. Briarhurst behind her. It struck her that this man had indeed faced sadness this last year. He had lost his dearest friend in the world. She’d heard much of it, from him and what she had read in the scandal sheets. Yet the late Duke of Windhaven was not mentioned now.

I suppose Mr. Briarhurst deals with his grief by choosing not to talk of it.

As the men all lowered their glasses, and the banker started a conversation about the many ladies Mr. Briarhurst had invited tonight, Eleanor stepped

away a little but Mr. Briarhurst moved with her. She could not go anywhere without him following.

“Ah.” Mr. Briarhurst froze with his glass halfway raised to his lips. He looked across the room, over the banker’s head, to the double doors.

Eleanor strained at his side to see what had made him go so rigid. His sallow skin seemed even paler than before now, the hue of milk.

“Are you well, sir?” she whispered beside him, her eyes tracing his dark auburn hair that was slicked back with rather too much wax.

He didn’t answer her but continued to stare over the rim of his glass. It was as if he had seen a ghost.

Eleanor peered past the banker’s shoulder, at last succeeding in seeing what had stunned him so much. There was a gentleman standing in the doorway she didn’t recognize, a man who was clearly having an effect on many in the crowded ballroom as people turned and pointed his way.

It was rather like a stone being plunged into a calm lake, the ripples casting outward. Heads turned, whispers began, and the man who was the cause of it all stood stock still. The only thing that moved were his eyes, darting around the room.

Eleanor stared at him too, taking in his appearance. He was not dressed for a ball but wore a dark gray suit with a slim-fitting waistcoat that accented a rather athletic build and broader shoulders that were not often found in the *ton*. His dark hair curled at his temples, untouched by wax. On his chin was a little stubble.

He had not bothered to shave or to grow a heavily manicured beard and sideburns, as so many men did, including Mr. Briarhurst beside her. Perhaps the most distinctive difference of this stranger was the hue of his skin. He was tanned, as if he had spent long hours out under the sun. It was such a contrast to Mr. Briarhurst that Eleanor's eyes danced over the gentleman, drinking in the sight of him.

"Excuse me." Mr. Briarhurst left Eleanor's side willingly for the first time that night, loosening their arms. He crossed the room toward the man and clapped him on the shoulder, surprising him so much that this tall gentleman jerked his head toward Mr. Briarhurst.

Finding the three men before her were now all staring, agog, at the exchange, Eleanor took her chance to escape. She hurried back across the room to the drinks' table, where Sophie was grabbing another glass of champagne.

"Ah, this must interest you, Eleanor," Linora said knowingly, nodding her head across the room. When Eleanor offered a puzzled look, Sophie pressed the glass into her hand and took another, chuckling to herself. Eleanor didn't bother to drink it.

"You know Linora. She knows everyone in the *ton*, not to mention their friends, their grandmothers, and their third cousins once removed."

"I am not that bad," Linora insisted, flicking her head around so sharply that the loose dark wisps hanging down from her updo whipped her own ears.

"You know everyone," Sophie insisted. "And all their business, too. How many scandal sheets are stuffed under your pillow right now?"

Instead of answering, Linora rolled her eyes and looked across the room at the exchange between Mr. Briarhurst and the incomer.

“Linora, I will never scoff at you for your superior knowledge of the *ton*,” Eleanor assured her. “In fact, I am more than intrigued to make use of it now. Tell me, who is that? Clearly, I owe him a debt of gratitude. He is the first man to make Mr. Briarhurst leave my side all night.”

“He is the man I think most people least expected to be here,” Linora said, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. Eleanor and Sophie stepped closed to hear her, so near that Sophie was in danger of tipping her champagne glass over and Linora had to grab the base to stop it from happening. “That there is the new Duke of Windhaven.”

“I beg your pardon?” Eleanor spun around so fast she nearly knocked the already precarious glass out of Sophie’s hand.

“Between the three of us, I think we’re in danger of destroying all of Mr. Briarhurst’s crystalware this evening,” Sophie said with a laugh.

Eleanor was no longer paying attention. She was staring at the new Duke of Windhaven across the room, stunned at the man before her. He was hardly what she had expected. Mr. Briarhurst had only mentioned once in passing before that his late friend had a younger brother who would inherit the title but not the fortune. The rather cold and icy look this gentleman was now bestowing on Mr. Briarhurst spoke volumes.

“They hardly look like the best of friends, do they?” Eleanor whispered.

“Are you surprised?” Linora snorted into her glass.

“Strangely, Linora, we are not all as up-to-date on the gossip as you are. Care to inform us lesser mortals?” Sophie said, elbowing her on.

“Very well. That there is Nathaniel Musgrave. It’s rumored he left the family home under something of a cloud five years ago. They say he intended to steal the fortune from under their father’s nose. He was wrapped across the knuckles for it and has been in the Americas ever since, swindling other unsuspecting men out of their fortunes,” Linora said, her tone horror-filled.

“You’d think a trickster with such success could afford a finer suit, Linora,” Eleanor pointed out, rather pleased with her own perceptiveness as Linora and Sophie both squinted at the duke across the room.

“Well, I suppose you are right,” Linora whispered. “Anyway, it was a great scandal a few months ago when the late Duke of Windhaven died, for as you know, he left everything to his friend. The two country homes, the estates, the tenants, every painting, every handkerchief, all of it went to Mr. Briarhurst. His brother was left with nothing but the title. After all, a man cannot be disinherited of his title, or they say he would have lost that, too.”

“He must have done something very bad indeed to have upset the family so much,” Sophie murmured.

“Stealing a fortune? That is awful, Sophie,” Eleanor said with sudden passion. “No wonder he has been unwelcome for so long.” Her gaze lingered on the Duke of Windhaven as he spoke with Mr. Briarhurst. Even as the latter smiled and seemed rather eager to engage the duke in conversation, the former gentleman’s eyes continued to narrow. “There’s an iciness to him,” she whispered, as her friends nodded. “Oh no.”

Mr. Briarhurst had turned and was beckoning to Eleanor across the room.

“Your man wants you,” Sophie said with a giggle. “Good lord, he’s demanding. You’d think you were his favorite actress on the stage, come to perform at his whim. Off you go, little actress, perform to your very best.”

“Do me a favor and swap places with me?” Eleanor said with fervor to her friends. Both shook their heads firmly. “Ah, shame. If only.”

When Mr. Briarhurst waved at her even more sharply than before, she was left with little choice. Steeling herself and holding her spine straight, she slowly crossed the room toward the two gentlemen. The closer she grew to the pair of them, the more she found her eyes dwelling on the Duke of Windhaven.

If he was some trickster, some awful swindler, she would have to be careful indeed. Her father was in enough debt as it was, and becoming acquainted with such a man as this could prove costly indeed. She resolved at once to keep a good distance between herself and this man, seeing little good that could come of it.

“Ah, there you are,” Mr. Briarhurst said to her with a tone of surprise as she reached his side, as if he hadn’t been beckoning her madly from across the room with his hand buffeting like the wings of a butterfly. “May I introduce to you the young lady I am courting. This is Lady Eleanor, daughter of the Earl of Wessex.”

Used to the formal introduction by now, Eleanor curtsied.

“Eleanor.” The fact Mr. Briarhurst dropped her title made her shoulders flinch back, startled and irked at the familiarity of it. “This is the Duke of Windhaven, younger brother to my late dear friend.”

The duke bowed deeply and stood straight, his dark eyes finding Eleanor’s. When she looked him in the eye, she found it rather hard to look away. There was that same cool iciness that she had observed across the room now up close, but to her relief, he didn’t simper like the other men did around Mr. Briarhurst, nor did he force a smile or put on any false and flamboyant airs. Instead, he looked straight at her.

Now she was this close, she could see a mark upon his right cheek. It was as if he had been cut by some blade, and it stretched from the crest of his cheek down to his jaw, the white mark shining in the candlelight.

Oh, how inconvenient.

Being this near, Eleanor had to admit something to herself. Even with that scar, the Duke of Windhaven was very handsome indeed. In fact, he was perhaps the most handsome gentleman in the room.

Chapter 3

“A fine woman, is she not?” Mr. Briarhurst asked, gesturing to the young lady before him.

Lady Eleanor looked abashed at the words. She turned her head away, the tall crests of her cheeks blushing crimson red.

At least she has some humility in her.

Nathaniel was struggling to concentrate on anything at this moment. Arriving at Briarhurst’s home to find a ball in full swing was hardly what he had expected, and he was now wrong-footed entirely, finding he couldn’t have the open discussion that he wished to.

“Please, sir,” Lady Eleanor said quietly at Mr. Briarhurst’s side. “Your friend has not come here to talk about me.”

Nathaniel didn’t deny it. She was beautiful, even distractingly so. She had honey-brown hair with streaks that appeared gold in this candlelight, and her light blue eyes were rather penetrating. The full lips were what Nathaniel found the most interesting. They set her apart from others. As opposed to the ordinary beauty of the *ton*, the kind often recreated in paintings on the walls of places like Somerset Gallery, she was much more unique.

Yet Nathaniel hadn’t come here to gaze at a woman’s beauty, nor to talk of her courtship with Mr. Briarhurst, which he didn’t doubt the man wished to crow about.

“I trust you are well, Your Grace.” Lady Eleanor curtsied to him. “I hear you have recently returned from the Americas. You must have had some journey.”

“Yes, a great journey.” He barely answered her properly, shifting his focus back to Briarhurst. She was an unwelcome diversion now. He would be glad to be rid of her so he could deal with Briarhurst alone.

“And you are to stay in England for some time?” She plainly attempted once more to secure him in conversation, one that did not interest him.

“We shall see,” he answered noncommittally, never once shifting his gaze from Briarhurst. This man had everything that by right should have belonged to Nathaniel. It was his, his bloodline’s belongings, not Briarhurst’s. “I would like to stay in my family home in Sussex.”

“Ah, that will not be possible, I am afraid,” Briarhurst said hurriedly. “The place is being renovated at present.”

“So I discovered.”

The news that Nathaniel had evidently been to the house made Briarhurst shift his weight between his feet and pull at his collar, apparently suffering some heat in the room, though Nathaniel wondered if it had more to do with the narrowed glare he was giving.

“You are more than welcome to stay for the ball, though,” Briarhurst said hurriedly. “I would be glad to have you here. We can toast your brother’s memory.”

“It is my brother and his wishes I intended to talk to you about.” Nathaniel

didn't blink as he watched Briarhurst, feeling rather like a bird of prey as he glared at the man. One false move, one hint of guilt, and Nathaniel would jump on it.

Why do I feel as if there is something so wrong about my brother's bequest? There is something I am missing, something I do not know. I must discover everything that happened before David passed.

"Surely you see that this evening is not the event for it," Briarhurst said with ease and gestured to the room. "You must come and visit me soon, and we shall discuss it in great detail. Though forgive me if I am rather busy at present and in the coming days." He gestured to the lady beside him.

Nathaniel's eyes shot to her.

Did she flinch?

She smiled, yet the lines around her lips became rather taut, and Nathaniel couldn't help suspecting that it was a forced smile.

Briarhurst pulled her closer into his side, and she didn't move away.

They do not match.

The thought struck Nathaniel suddenly. He hardly cared who Briarhurst intended to choose for a wife, but when being faced with a woman as beautiful as this, as well composed, it was evident that the two did not fit together. Briarhurst had a rather sickly look to him, with an extensively manicured auburn beard and sideburns that made him look much older than he was. The lady beside him could have turned her attention on any other man in the room and found one more than eager to have her attention.

“But please, do stay for the ball,” Briarhurst said again, gesturing to the room. “I would be glad to have you here with us.”

“Would you?” Nathaniel asked, his voice rather tight. Lady Eleanor’s eyes shot to him, but Briarhurst didn’t seem to notice the shift in his tone.

“Of course.” Briarhurst laughed warmly. “I’m delighted to host your first event back with us in London. Drink, eat, be merry. Even dance if the liking takes you. Speaking of which, if you would excuse me, I have neglected the lady at my side for far too long now.” He offered her his hand and she took it woodenly.

“Let us dance, Lady Eleanor.” He towed the lady away, who offered another one of those tight-lipped smiles. As they walked off, something strange happened.

Nathaniel’s eyes drifted down the lady’s gown. Even as he persuaded himself that meeting Mr. Briarhurst’s sweetheart did not affect him, he was admiring the cut of the pale blue gown, the way it was cinched at her waist, and the delicacy of her neckline and collarbone. She turned back to look at him over her shoulder, and their eyes connected.

What does that mean, my lady?

It was momentary, and she turned away again, led toward the dance floor.

“He has too many hands,” Eleanor muttered to herself as she at last managed to escape Mr. Briarhurst again. She had lost count of how many times he had danced with her that evening. Clearly, he was trying to send a message to

everyone else in the room. He might as well have written his name in ink across her forehead, and it would have made just as clear a statement.

“I must contend with this. I must,” she muttered as she slipped between the groups of people, feeling overheated. She had been here for far too long and only managed a handful of conversations with Linora and Sophie all night. Now tired, both of pretending to enjoy Mr. Briarhurst’s advances and from dancing for so long, she sought out her father.

She found him at the edge of the room, having just finished a conversation with an old friend. She was relieved to see her father had at least enjoyed himself and had a pleasant smile on his face as she reached his side.

“Ah, a successful evening indeed,” he whispered to her. “Do you know, I do not think Mr. Briarhurst looked at another lady all night?”

“No. I do not think he did either,” Eleanor said with rather more disappointment and blew a loose wisp of hair out of her eyes. “Let us leave, Father, please. If I have to dance again with him, I’ll be worn out.”

“Very well.” Her father chuckled. “Yet we must wait for another first to join us.”

“Another?” Eleanor looked around in panic. Surely her father had not invited Mr. Briarhurst to stay with them? It would be mad to think he could leave his ball now. Besides, she and her father had made a concerted effort to avoid drawing Mr. Briarhurst to the house, in case he realized just how far their fortunes had dwindled.

“Who, Father? Surely you do not mean...” She trailed off, nervous of being overheard as a group of ladies passed by.

“Who?” her father asked, clearly confused by her question.

Before she could make a concerted effort to press her father as to the identity of their visitor, a voice called to him.

“Lord Wessex. I must thank you again for this.”

The deep and sonorous tone made Eleanor whip her head around in alarm. Walking toward them was none other than the Duke of Windhaven, with the thick frock coat he had collected from the butler slung over his arm. He didn't carry a top hat in his other hand, as many other men would have done, but a wider-brimmed and lower-lying hat made of black beaver felt.

He bowed to her father in greeting. “It is a kindness indeed.”

Eleanor blinked, looking between her father and the Duke of Windhaven in shock.

“Ah, Eleanor. Have you had the pleasure yet of being introduced to the duke?” Her father gestured toward the man just as those dark eyes slid toward her.

“Briefly, earlier this evening,” she said in a rush. She cleared her throat, hoping to buy enough time to clear her thoughts. “Forgive me, Your Grace, I am confused. Are we giving you a lift somewhere?”

The duke smiled a little, almost a smirk of amusement as he looked at her father.

“I have invited the Duke of Windhaven to stay with us while he is in

England,” her father said off-handedly as he turned and lowered his voice to the butler who had appeared, asking for their carriage to be brought around.

“I beg your pardon?” Eleanor said hurriedly and quietly.

“I am to be your house guest, my lady.” The duke bowed his head to her again. “Your father has been most generous to offer your house for the next month as I am in London.”

“A month?” she repeated.

No, no. This cannot be happening.

“Ah, the carriage is here already. Come, Eleanor. Let us get you home. I am hardly surprised you are tired after all that dancing.” Her father took her arm and led her through the doorway, though she looked back the entire time at the duke, struggling to order her thoughts.

“Yes, Mr. Briarhurst scarcely let you sit,” the duke muttered, looking away as if he was not aware that she was paying any attention to what he said.

Eleanor walked out of the house and down the front steps, clinging to her father’s arm rather tightly and wishing she could whisper in his ear all of her worries. It seemed the trickster, the Duke of Windhaven, had already found his next target. Her father had so little money to spare that if he fell for any of the duke’s lies and games, it could be the end of their family for good.

As they reached the carriage, she stepped inside, followed by her father and the duke, who both sat opposite her.

“Well, while you are staying with us, Your Grace, I’d be delighted to hear more about your travels.” Her father rubbed his hands together excitedly as the carriage lurched forward, making the lantern that was attached to the roof above them swing back and forth. It cast orange light and shadows around the space, sometimes falling on the duke’s chiseled features and making him look more a man of shadows and darkness than light at all.

“I’d be happy to share the stories with you. I must confess myself surprised by your offer,” the duke said, seemingly with care. “You must have noted in that room, most people wished to avoid me.”

“I do not trouble myself with such things as gossip or rumor.” Her father laughed at the idea, waving it off. “I’d rather learn about a man myself than believe such things.”

Yet Eleanor knew there was another reason behind this statement. Her own father had been the subject of such whispers for many years because of his drinking as the fortune dwindled further and further. He would never be the first to cast aspersions against any other man who had fallen on hard times. It was a testament to her father’s goodness and his benevolence of heart that he chose not to believe any of the rumors around him.

As her father engaged the duke in conversation about the ball, Eleanor said nothing. She was on her guard, watching the duke warily as if he were a tiger disguised amongst cats.

Whatever his aim with my father, whatever trick or deception he is hoping to pull, he will not succeed. Of that, I will make certain.

“Father?” Eleanor had her hands on her hips as she stepped into her father’s

study.

So many times over the years had she found him in this same position, sat in the wing-backed armchair beside his fire, staring at the flames. Above the mantelpiece was a portrait of him and his late wife, Emily.

It was a fine portrait indeed, a happy one, and for many years her father had drunk himself into a stupor as he sat beneath it, his fingers trembling around brandy and port glasses until the carafes shook in his grasp and ended upturned on the nearby hearth rug, toppling over the fire screens. These days, he avoided liquor entirely.

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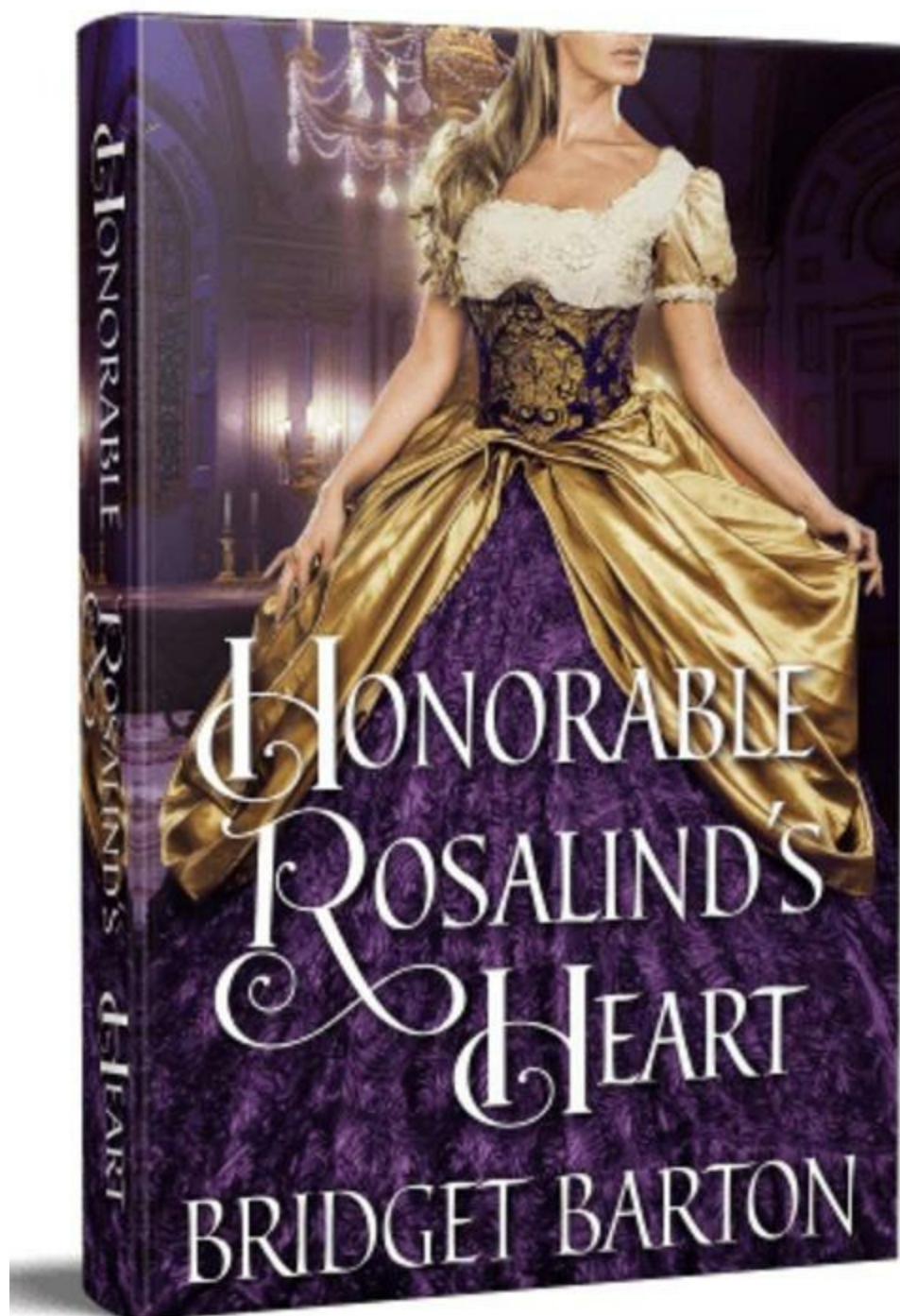
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