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Loving
Lysander

THE HIGHFIELD CHRONICLES

Charlotte Wren

LOVING LYSANDER

The Highfield Chronicles Novella

Charlotte Wren



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Text by Charlotte Wren

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Dragonblade Publishing, Inc. is an imprint of Kathryn Le Veque Novels, Inc.

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Moreno Valley, CA 92556

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Produced in the United States of America

First Edition November 2023

Kindle Edition

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About the Author

*‘And then the moon, like to a silver bow new bent in Heaven,
shall behold the night of our solemnities.’*

From
A Midsummer Night’s Dream
by
William Shakespeare.

*'And then the moon, like to a silver bow new bent in Heaven,
shall behold the night of our solemnities.'*

From
A Midsummer Night's Dream
by
William Shakespeare.



CHAPTER ONE

Present Day

Sallingford House, Cheshire
Thursday, January 1st,
1846

THE ARRIVAL OF His Grace the Duke of Gillingham at Lady Penni New Year's Day gathering caused quite a stir. Understandably, given his fellow hadn't attended any kind of social event since his scandalous marriage eighteen years before.

It certainly never occurred to Catherine that His Grace would put his appearance that day. Not only because of his elusive lifestyle, but because, barely six months earlier, he'd been widowed, his wife dying of consumption.

It appeared, then, that his period of mourning was over. Catherine found it a bit premature, but men, unlike women, were not expected to adhere to such established practices.

Had Catherine known the duke would be present at Lady Penni's gathering, she would have avoided the event. As it was, she now stood in a frozen shock, staring at him across the wide expanse of a marble-tiled floor. He was unaccompanied, yet appeared to be searching for someone, his eyes wandering over the sea of faces, most of which, in turn, were fixed upon him.

Catherine's shock then gave way to a bizarre sort of panic, one that demanded she hide before his focus settled on her. Though it made no sense, she surrendered to it, and moved to stand behind one of the four marble columns that graced the four corners of Lady Pennington's *salon*. There, she pressed a gloved hand to her throat, heart and mind racing. *Eighteen years*. That's how long it had been since she'd last seen and heard from him. Eighteen years and seven days, in fact. Despite the passing of

she couldn't bear the thought of facing him. Not after what he'd done.

When Catherine had last spoken to him, he'd been a mere Marquess of Hawes, specifically. Even then, his title wasn't part rhetoric. *Their* rhetoric. He had called her Cat, she had called him Ly and she had loved him with all her heart. And, at the time, she'd been he felt the same.

An old familiar ache stirred beneath her ribs.

Furtively, she peered out from behind her hiding place, and real the reality of his presence, taking the time to observe him in detail. It the years had not been too unkind.

He looked to be hale, standing tall, head held high, spine and sh straight. No sign of a paunch beneath his finely tailored coat an ngton's trousers. Arms by his side, he stood with feet planted slightly apart, s that the him to his spot as he continued to survey his surroundings. A visible t marriage of silver, at his temples and sideburns, gave testament to his forty-eigh it in an ever. As always, a few errant strands tumbled carelessly over his fo ut also the rest swept back from his dark brows to curl softly where it brus ying of collar. His face, or more accurately, his expression, exuded a certai thought Catherine had known him to possess. The square jaw implied his i here to stubbornness, which surely remained. His mouth, wide and full-lippe not set in his familiar smile, but neither was it firmed in disap ngton's Catherine touched her lips as she remembered his kiss.

Soft. Teasing. Demanding.

She inhaled through her nose, imagining she could detect the subt d floor. of sandalwood and citrus that always used to accompany him. Did th his gaze of she wondered? on him.

And as for his eyes...

Of course, from where she stood, she couldn't gaze into their gray ne that le little But there had been a time when she had done so and found herself cap nassive by the promises they appeared to convey. ; grand

False promises, as it turned out.

As Catherine continued to watch, a woman approached him; you racing. spoken beautiful, with an ivory complexion and hair like spun gold. She of time, vaguely familiar, though her name remained elusive. Her tou

Lysander's arm drew his attention and brought the missing smile to his face – the He bent his ear to her mouth and, judging by the resulting expression of her face, whatever the woman said pleased him. As if to substantiate that, Lysander, her hand and kissed it. Catherine ducked back behind the column, assured sight. Leaning against the cold, hard marble, she closed her eyes. It was as if he'd wasted no time in finding another to warm his bed. Who was she? Catherine frowned, searching her brain for the woman's identity.

absorbed “Goodness, Aunt Cat. Are you quite well?”

seemed Startled, Catherine opened her eyes to see her young niece regarding her with concern. Was it Evie? It might have been Clara. The two daughters looked so alike. Catherine straightened and silently cursed the woman for being so snug and wandering over her face. “Oh, yes, dear, I'm perfectly fine. I just find the room a little stuffy in here, that's all. In fact, I might step outside for a moment to get some fresh air.”

it years “Oh, but it's bitter cold out, Aunt,” the girl replied, glancing at the door and then back at her aunt. “Maybe a walk along the hallway might be better? I'm sure it would be less stuffy there and nowhere near as crowded. I'll go with you if you like.”

in calm “Oh, no, that's not necessary, dear, I'm all right, really. Just a little bit of fresh air. It was a late night, after all.” Catherine managed a smile. “But I appreciate your suggestion and shall act upon it.” She changed the girl's focus. “What are you doing, dear, was it your Mama?”

approval. “Playing cards in the games room. And they're looking for more if you're interested.”

Catherine nodded. “I'll consider it, certainly, but I'll take that suggestion as a hint to go to the hallway first.”

eyes still, Evie, if that's who it was, smiled, nodded, and wandered off. Catherine lingered for a moment before daring to take another peek from behind the column.

depths. Lysander had gone. So had the woman.

motivated Catherine cast a quick glance around the room but saw no sign of the woman. She then silently castigated her behavior, which was unquestionably uncharacteristic and quite unlike her. But then, the wretched man had always managed to bring out an unrecognizable side of herself.

seemed What was she so afraid of? Her connection to Lysander had long since been severed. She'd been young and naive, believing his interest in her

his lips. serious. Something unbreakable and everlasting, forged from love. Catherine on his the engagement ring he'd given her should have meant something, but when he took it, it had only intrinsic value. As a promise of a sacred and lifelong union, it turned out to be worthless.

seemed as she? She'd given him her heart, and he had cast it aside without a care. Silently praying she wouldn't bump into him, Catherine hurried down the hallway and paused to catch her breath beside the life-size statue of a half-naked Roman god. Lysander's appearance had shaken her to core, Evie, that she could have imagined. She eyed the grand staircase, wondering if the twins should simply feign a headache and sneak off to her room.

n flush "I knew you'd be rattled," a familiar male voice said. "The fellow found it a for the night, apparently, which means you'll have to face him sooner or later. At least, I suspect the reason you scurried out here was to try and avoid him."

nearby Catherine regarded her eldest sibling, Henry, who had always been able to read her every mood. "I just..." She winced. "It was such a *shock*, especially if you're seeing him after all this time. I wasn't prepared."

Henry scoffed. "It's been a shock to everyone. The elusive Dorothea Gillingham, in the flesh and unattached. I'm not sure how Lady Penelope managed it, but it's quite the coup, and she's basking in her triumph. "Where unmarried women present, young and not so young, are practically throwing themselves at the man's feet."

players "Not *all* the unmarried women," Catherine replied, with emphasis.

"No, Cat." Henry gave her a sympathetic smile. "Not all of them."

ll along "And besides, it looks like he's already spoken for. There was a woman with him in the grand salon. Young. Very pretty. She seems familiar to Catherine, but she can't place her."

ind the Henry appeared to ponder. "Young? With yellow hair?"

"Gold hair, yes."

"Gold, yellow." Henry shrugged. "Yes, that would be his cousin of his. Halliwell, Lord Stanley's daughter. She's engaged to Lord Fullerton."

foolish, "Oh, yes, of course." Catherine nodded, annoyed by an unexpected relief. Why should she care whether Lysander had acquainted himself with another since Helena's death?

g since "As far as I can tell, the man is making it very clear that he's *not* interested in becoming a wife." Henry regarded her intently. "Much to the disappointment of the man."

certainly, many.”

it in the “Well, it does not signify with me, Henry.” The declaration s
union, it forced, not quite genuine. Flustered, Catherine fiddled with the lace ed
her cuff. “Though I will confess to wondering why he’s here, if se
wife is not his motive.”

out into “I’m sure he has his reasons.” Henry offered his elbow. “Come, n
of some Enough of this foolishness. Let’s rejoin the party.”

e, more Catherine shook her head. “No, I’m afraid I can’t. The thought of
g if sheto face Lysander terrifies me. Please understand. You, of all people,
understand.”

is here “*Terrifies* you?” Henry’s eyes widened. “Why, for Heaven’s sake
oner or happened years ago, and you did nothing wrong. He’s the one who sh
d avoid—”

“*Please*, Henry.” Catherine placed a hand on her stomach as if to c
en able churning within. “I know I’m being foolish, but I just need a little v
Henry, gather myself. That’s all.”

“Oh, very well. I’ll give you fifteen minutes, and then—”

uke of “Thirty.”

nington “*Twenty*. Anymore, and your absence is certain to be noted and p
All the investigated. I guarantee I’m not the only one who thought of yo
rowing Gillingham appeared. In any case, I’ll not allow him to ruin your d
should not allow him to do so. Take a few minutes, by all means, t
come and fetch you. That way, if you *should* run into him, you w
alone.” Henry scratched his jaw. “If he’s still here, of course. He migl
woman weary of all the female attention and leave. You never know.”

r, but I Catherine heaved a sigh. “Oh, I do hope so.”

“Hmm.” Henry gave her an odd look. “So, where will I find you?”

She glanced about. “I don’t know. Somewhere quiet. I’d really p
feign a headache and retire to my room.”

n, Miss Henry shook his head. “No, Cat, you can’t do that. I won’t allow
don’t you spend some time in the orangery? It’s a restful place, separa
ed flare the house, and heated too. I doubt anyone will be there at the moment.
elf with

“The orangery.” Catherine blinked. “Yes, that’s a good idea.”

“Twenty minutes, then, and not a minute more. In my opinion, yo
looking to face him.”

ment of “I really don’t see why. It won’t solve anything.”

“There is nothing to solve. You just need to get it over with, and the sooner the better. If the fellow is out and about in society again, bumping into him is inevitable, don’t you think?”

She heaved a sigh. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“Right. Off you go, then, and find some steel to put in your back, my dear. Henry pulled a fob-watch from his waistcoat pocket. “Twenty minutes longer. I’ll wait here to make sure there are no unwanted interruptions.

having
should



It all CATHERINE STEPPED OUT into the bright, bitter cold day, and hurried along the snow-covered pathway to the orangery. Though only a short walk, her feet, encased in silk slippers, were already turning numb by the time she reached the door. Shivering, she opened it, and stepped into a delicious atmosphere of warm, humid air. Winter sunlight poured through the walls of glass, served to trap the sun’s heat even on the coldest days. That, and a couple of stoves built for the purpose, kept the atmosphere comfortably warm around, plants and trees of an exotic nature created a lush, green and probably safe. Catherine paid them little mind, however. Her thoughts were busy when ruminating over the appearance of Lysander, question after question. *You* through her brain.

When I’ll Why was he there? What would she say, if and when she met him? How might he say to her? Would he even acknowledge her, or would she be a victim of his scorn once more?

Feeling a little less vulnerable, she wandered into the safe depths of the man-made jungle and sat down on a wrought-iron bench. Beside her, atop a carved lily-leaf pedestal, a stone frog spouted a jet of crystal water from its mouth, arcing gracefully into a small lily pond nearby. The soft sound had a mild calming effect, and Catherine settled back, allowing her mind to venture eighteen years into the past. To a few days in the dead of winter. Bitter cold days, much the same as this one. That was the way everything changed, and Catherine’s bright and brilliant future slid from her grasp.

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CHAPTER TWO

Eighteen years earlier

Myddleton House, Derbyshire
Saturday, December 22nd,
1827

THE GRAND HALL clock struck the fifth hour of the afternoon, but on the shortest day of the year, darkness had already crept across the land. Catherine slipped into the space behind her curtains and scraped a spyhole in the woodwork forming on her bedroom window, suppressing a shiver as she peered out into the gardens, a series of indefinable shapes, draped in winter's frigid cloak and a ghostly appearance. Beyond them in the distance, the fledgling crescent of the waxing moon hung just above the horizon. Exquisitely brilliant but not born, it posed no threat to the blackness. If anything, it served to enhance it.

The sound of voices in the corridor drew Catherine's attention. Myddleton House was currently packed to the rafters with guests from all over the county, the Earl, and Countess of Hutton, all there to celebrate the Christmas season. With the previous night being a late one, Catherine, like most of the guests, had retired for a rejuvenating afternoon nap. Now, given that the tea would have been laid out in the Tapestry Room; a refreshing afternoon repast to bridge the gap between luncheon and dinner. Catherine turned to the window, wandered over to her mirror, and gave her candlelit reflection one final, critical inspection before heading downstairs.

A soft buzz of conversation drifted out of the Tapestry Room, named for the collection of rare and ancient textiles covering most of the walls. Catherine entered to find several of the guests already present, and she turned herself to the variety of edibles that had been laid out on several tables. Greetings were made and exchanged before Catherine cast a swift

over the room, seeking one face in particular, and not finding it.

Catherine's eldest brother, Henry, Viscount Fulston, wandered past his plate. "Don't fret, Cat," he said, not bothering to lower his voice. "He'll be down shortly."

There followed a couple of knowing titters from the guests. Catherine scowled at Henry's lack of discretion. She was still scowling minutes later when she spooned a dollop of raspberry jam onto her scone.

"Greetings, my lady," a husky male voice said. "Has that poor scone offended you, somehow?"

Her scowl melted into a smile. "No, my lord," she replied, gazing at the face she'd been looking for. "Not at all."

"Hmm." Lysander Theodore Barton, Marquess of Hawes, helped himself to one of the scones. "It's just that you seemed to be regarding it with some vehemence just now."

She laughed and glanced down at her plate. "Thanks to my brother's teasing. You know what he's like. Did you rest well, my lord?"

"Very well, thank you, my lady." He leaned in as if to tell a secret. "What of my future wife? Did she rest well this afternoon?"

A sweet little tingle ran across the nape of Catherine's neck. "So lovely of Lysander," she replied, softly.

Not exactly true. Excitement over her recent engagement to the new duke had kept her awake for a while. In the end, she'd dozed off in the arms of her imagined embrace.

"Glad to hear it." Lysander arched a brow. "Um, have you finished with that dainty little jam spoon, by chance?"

Catherine regarded the utensil in question, still clutched in her hand. "Oh!" Feeling the warmth of a blush, she handed it to him. "Yes, I have finished."

"Thank you," he said, and winked at her. "Save me a seat, my love."

A short time later, Catherine found herself installed beside Lysander and Henry on one of the settees. The two men had long been friends, having both attended Harrow together. Lysander had been a frequent guest at Mycena. Consequently, Catherine had known him most of her life. She'd always been close to him, but, during much of her childhood, the ten-year difference in their ages had felt like an unbridgeable gap.

As she approached womanhood, however, the intellectual gap narrowed, bringing her closer to him. Close enough to notice the storm-cloud gray

eyes, and the way the little lines appeared at the edges whenever he smiled. Close enough to inhale his scent of sandalwood and citrus at all, filled her with a hidden longing to move closer still, to touch him. Of she did so only in her imagination.

Catherine Whenever he was near, it took an effort to keep her senses abreast. Being in his presence was akin to a sort of intoxication, rendering her dazed, unable to think clearly or articulate properly. At such times she barely recognized herself, and feared others saw what she tried so desperately to hide; that she'd fallen deeply in love with Lysander. It took courage to bring up her heart and occupied her dreams, but it remained unrequited. Or

Whenever he visited Myddleton, he always found time to seek her company. He himself appeared to enjoy her company, but she hardly dared to hope he might do so as she did. For a while, her biggest fear was that he'd marry someone else. She need not have worried.

Lysander made his feelings known before she'd even had her first kiss. Then, with her blessing, he'd gone to Catherine's father and asked for her hand in marriage. The brilliant yellow diamond on her finger now proof of her happiness as Lysander's intended; a dream come true. 'Happy' barely described how she felt. It was as if she'd gained a pair of invisible wings.

"Philip!" Henry's exclamation, and the fact he'd suddenly shot to his feet startled Catherine from her indulgent reverie. She looked over to find in his second eldest brother heading toward them. And, to her surprise and delight, he was not alone. She also rose to her feet, as did Lysander.

"Well, it's about time." Henry set his plate on the nearby table and embraced his brother into a brief embrace. "I was beginning to think you'd gotten lost on your route. Mama and Papa have been a little worried as well."

"There was ice on the roads, or we'd have been here by lunchtime at the latest. At least we're in time for tea," Philip replied. "Greetings Catherine, Lysander and speaking of Mama and Papa, where are they?"

"They'll be down shortly, I should think." Catherine also set herself down while trying not to stare at Philip's mysterious female companion. Though young, she appeared to be in mourning. Her dress of dark gray, aged and edged in black, stood out against the vibrant colors worn by the other

Slender of form, she stood about the same height as Catherine, her narrow, hair styled into perfect ringlets that framed an alluring heart-shaped face with wide, dark eyes. She was, in a word, exquisite. And she had yet

laughed introduced.

“I’m wondering, Philip, if you left your manners in London,” Henry said, echoing Catherine’s thoughts.

“No, not at all. Forgive me. I was just hoping Mama and Papa would have been here.” Philip stepped a little to the side and addressed his guests. “My dear, please allow me to make the introductions. This is my brother, the Viscount Fulston, and this is my baby sister, Catherine Northcott. The gentleman at her side is the Marquess of Handford, a good friend of the family.”

With each introduction, the woman had inclined her head in acknowledgement.

Philip then addressed the others. “My lords, my lady, it gives me the greatest pleasure to introduce you to Miss Helena Elliot.” He smiled at her. “My fiancée.”

Catherine barely managed to control a gasp.

The woman inclined her head again. “I am truly delighted to make your acquaintance, my lords, my lady,” she said, her voice sweetly modulated. “Philip has told me so much about his family and this wonderful house.”

Henry, obviously astonished, appeared to be searching for an appropriate rejoinder. “Well,” he said at last, “this is quite the surprise. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Elliot, and please accept my congratulations on your engagements in one week! There must be something in the air.”

“I echo my brother’s comment, Miss Elliot,” Catherine said. “Welcome to Myddleton House.”

Lysander inclined his head but remained silent.

“Two engagements?” Philip remarked. “Who else?”

“Your sister,” Henry replied, and glanced at Lysander, “and a questionable gentleman right here.”

“Well, it’s about time!” Philip said. “Congratulations, both. And welcome here’s Mama and Papa at last. Come, my dear. I cannot wait for you to meet them.”

“I didn’t see that coming,” Henry said, as Philip and Miss Elliot’s guests wandered off. “She looks to be in mourning. Elliot, eh? The name is unfamiliar to me. I wonder where he found her.”

“I’m sure we’ll soon find out,” Catherine replied, and regarded Lysander as his silence continued. His gaze, it seemed, was fixed intently on the

arrivals, and specifically Miss Elliot. A little twinge of jealousy
ry said, beneath Catherine's ribs.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" she said.

ld have Lysander turned his gray eyes to Catherine. "She's pretty," he said
female Catherine's hand and raising it to his lips. "*Exquisite* would better d
s is mythe woman who has captured my heart."

; Lady Henry snorted. "Nicely done, Hawes. You were heading into dee
awes, athere, for a moment."

Lysander laughed and continued to regard Catherine with eyes tha
ead inheld a promise of forever. "I know what I have, Henry," he said. "I
never do anything to jeopardize it."

me the
roadly.



"MISS ELLIOT'S FAMILY is landed gentry, but have been in India for
ke your Henry said, later that evening after dinner. Catherine listened with
melodic and cast a surreptitious glance at Lysander. He stood beside her, nu
e." glass of brandy in his hand, his focus on Henry. But a moment later, h
ropriateswitched to Miss Elliot, who stood with Philip by the pianoforte. Th
asure to the guests, had gathered in the music room, where the lady in questi
is. Twoabout to show off her prowess on the instrument.

Catherine told herself she was being foolish. Lysander's interest
come to lovely Helena was probably nothing more than simple curiosity. He'
had a wandering eye, nor was he given to frivolity. Yet, it seemed sor
about the lovely Miss Elliot had garnered his attention.

"Charles Elliot was a highly respected official by all accounts,"
to thiswent on. "He and his wife both succumbed to a cholera outbreak
months ago, leaving Miss Elliot, who is an only child, on her own. Sh
d look, longer officially in mourning but is not yet comfortable discard
to meetsemblance of it, apparently."

"Understandable," Catherine said. "It must have been terribly diffi
; Elliot her."

is not "Yes, it was all rather tragic," Henry replied. "Of course, she ha
choice but to return to England. She arrived back at the end of Sep
sander, along with her Indian nurse, and they've been lodging with friends ne
he new

stirred since then. Philip first met her at some private event in Bath not quite weeks ago." He frowned. "This engagement all seems a little bit hurried, if you ask me, though the marriage date has not yet been settled."

Henry, taking "Her Indian nurse?" Catherine repeated.

Henry described Henry nodded. "Practically raised the girl, it seems. Haven't seen her a woman yet, but she's here somewhere. Bit of a strange one, according to Mama. Refused to sleep in the staff wing and insists on taking her alone."

Henry said surely Catherine raised her brows in question. "Then, where is she staying?"

Henry said I would "In Miss Elliot's room. They've put a chaise in there for her."

Henry said "Has Miss Elliot been left without means?" Lysander asked.

Henry said "Not according to Philip, though he didn't elaborate beyond that."

Henry said grimaced. "I'm not sure what Mama and Papa think of it all. I just don't think Philip isn't making a mistake."

Henry said years," Lysander shook his head. "He's no fool, Henry."

Henry said interest "He's besotted," Henry replied, "which means he lacks prudence."

Henry said Lysander frowning. "That's rather cynical of you, dear brother."

Henry said Lysander's gaze "No, actually, he's quite correct." Lysander gave Catherine a fond look. "A case of besottedness addles the brain, and I speak from experience."

Henry said on was "Besottedness?" Catherine chuckled. "Is that even a word?"

Henry said "It is now." He blessed her with a smile and brushed her fingers with his. The subtle caress had an intimacy to it that quickened Catherine's heart. It had never acted as a balm for her unsettled thoughts. Maybe she'd been reading too much into his perceived fascination with Miss Elliot. Maybe, like Henry, she had merely wanted to know more about the mysterious young woman who had been set to marry into the family.

Henry said several "According to Philip, she plays like an angel," Henry murmured, his attention on the activity taking place around the pianoforte.

Henry said Lysander said "Well, we're about to find out if that is true. Let's sit, shall we?"

Henry said Catherine settled onto a nearby settee. Lysander took his place beside her. Henry remained standing.

Henry said A hush fell over the room as Miss Elliot sat at the piano and arranged her skirts. Philip hovered over her, ready to turn the music as required.

Henry said tember, She began.

Henry said ar Bath Philip's claim that the girl played like an angel had not been exaggerated. She was a virtuoso, each and every note perfectly rendered. Catherine

uite six recognized the piece immediately as Chopin's *Nocturne Op. 9*,
ried, if Lysander's favorites. She glanced at him. He appeared to be transfixed
performance.

As the final notes faded away, there followed several moments of
een the and then, in unison, everyone rose to their feet and began to applaud.

ding to "Brava," Henry shouted, his call echoed by others. "Brava!"

r meals Catherine regarded Lysander once more, who, like everyone else,
looking fixedly at Miss Elliot. And then he spoke a single word, in

g?" against the din of continued applause. But Catherine read his lips with
"Remarkable."

Not an inaccurate observation, yet an unwelcome touch of j
' Henry soured Catherine's stomach.

st hope Miss Elliot played two more pieces with equal flair before begg
abeyance. She and Philip wandered the room for a while before
coming to sit with Catherine, Lysander, and Henry.

"You play beautifully, Miss Elliot," Catherine said. "Truly."

"Thank you." The woman smiled and glanced around. "But plea
d look me Helena. I am to be part of your family, after all."

" Absolved of formalities, the conversation flowed a little easier. Ca
played her part as required, intent on hiding the silly suspicions and fe
with his fluttered in her stomach. Lysander appeared to watch and listen, bu
part and little, and his gaze frequently fell upon Helena's face. Yet no one else
ing too to notice anything untoward, which made Catherine question he
nry, he perception.

ho was "Philip tells me your family seat is in Nottinghamshire, Lord F

Helena said, drawing Catherine's attention. It was the first time the
ed, his had addressed Lysander directly.

"That is correct, Miss Elliot," Lysander replied. "Malvern Hall is
l we?" about twelve miles south of Nottingham."

de her. "It's a spectacular house," Catherine said. "The entire es
magnificent."

ged her "I'm sure." Helena's gaze flicked to Catherine and then back to Ly

"And not too far from Rosemount, I imagine, which is located j
twenty or so miles further south, in Leicestershire."

gerated. "Rosemount." Lysander raised a brow. "Your father's estate?"

atherine "Yes." Her smile faltered. "That is, it's mine now. Until I ma

one of course. The land is still being worked, but the house and some of the buildings are in need of reparation, apparently. I will be going there at New Year to see exactly what is required.”

silence, “The house was left empty while you were in India?” Catherine asked.

“It was tenanted for a while, and much of the land still is.” Helena gave a slight shrug. “But the actual house has been unoccupied for the past several years, though my father employed a caretaker to oversee its maintenance. It just needs modernizing, I think.”

ease. Henry addressed Philip. “Do you plan to live there after the wedding?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Philip replied, frowning. “My practice is in Bristol.”

“Nothing to stop you opening an office elsewhere, Philip.” Lysander took a sip of his brandy. “Solicitors are always in demand.”

finally Philip grimaced. “Something to consider, I suppose,” he said, and looked at Helena. “We’ll see.”

Helena said nothing.

Later, when most of the guests had gone to bed, Catherine had the opportunity to speak to Lysander in a secluded corner of the music room. She’d told herself that she was imagining his strange mood and his fascination with Helena. But she couldn’t resist digging, just a little.

“Is everything all right, Lysander?”

He blinked. “Everything is fine, my love. Why do you ask?”

“You’ve been a little quiet tonight, that’s all.”

“Have I?” He stroked an errant strand of hair from her forehead. “I’m aware.”

woman Catherine simply couldn’t help herself. “What do you think of Helena?”

A frown appeared as he pondered. “I can’t really fault her,” he said.

located last. “What is your opinion? Do you think they’re suited, her and Philip?”

that what you’re worried about? I agree with Henry, that it all seems a bit hurried.”

“No, I’m not worried at all. It’s just—”

sander. “You two look like you’re hatching a plot,” Henry said, approaching with perhaps a glass of something in his hand.

“We are, actually,” Lysander replied, straight-faced. “We’re planning to elope tonight. You know, Scotland and all that. But don’t tell anyone.”

arry, of “Lysander!” Catherine pressed a hand to her mouth, catching her breath.

the farmlaugh.

Henry's jaw dropped. "You had better be joking, Hawes, or by
swear I'll—"

"Henry, of course he's joking," Catherine said, still trying not to la

Henry scowled. "Well, it was *not* funny, Hawes. Not in the least."

Lysander grinned and squeezed Henry's shoulder. "Your lack of
basicme is troubling, my friend," he said. "Catherine was just asking me
thought of Philip's intended, that's all. Want to share your opinion?"

An odd expression flitted across Henry's face, too brief to interpre
e is innot sure I have an opinion yet. I suppose I have to trust Philip's judg
despite what I said. Time will tell, I suppose, if he's made the right cho
ler took



glanced

SLEEP WOULD NOT come that night. Catherine tossed and turned, mullin
all that had happened that day. She couldn't quite figure out why she
had anunsettled. Lysander had all but put her fears to rest. She actually
room.measure of guilt for doubting him. So why did she still feel disconcerte
nd his At last, weary of tossing and turning, Catherine slid from her bed,
robe, and slippers, and wandered downstairs, candle in hand. The clock
hall showed twenty minutes after one, and a mumble of male voices c
heard coming from somewhere. The games room, she thought, her su
confirmed moments later, when she heard the distinctive clatter of
wasn'tballs colliding.

Treading quietly, she made her way to the back of the main stairc
ena?" took the servants' stairs down to the kitchens. She was no stranger
said, atservants' domain. As a child, she'd often sneaked down in search of
ilip? Istreat, a freshly baked scone, perhaps, or a sugary biscuit.

She was greeted with a mewl from Sadie, the kitchen tabby ca
sauntered over and proceeded to wrap herself around Catherine's legs.

"Shouldn't you be catching mice?" Catherine set the candle do
ng withstooped to pet the animal. "Or maybe you'd prefer some milk. Just
minute, and I'll fetch it." Standing on tiptoes, she grabbed a glass
ning tosaucer from the large dresser and placed them on the table. Th

wandered into the cold-room and brought out the milk jug, to be gre
stifled

several chirps of excitement from Sadie. Catherine splashed some milk on the saucer. "Here you are," she said, and crouched to place it on the floor, dropping it with a clatter when the cat suddenly hissed and arched her back. "Sadie, what on earth...?" As she straightened, a shape loomed out of the darkness in the hallway beyond. Catherine let out a cry and pressed a hand to her chest, her heart doing somersaults when a shadowy figure appeared in the doorway. A black silhouette. Indefinable.

"Please forgive me, ma'am," a voice said, heavily accented. "I do not mean to frighten you."

The figure moved into the candlelight; a woman, small in stature, perhaps of middling years, clad in a muslin *sari* of rich indigo blue with a pale blue trim. The cat hissed again, drawing the woman's attention. Scowling, she spoke to the animal, her tone sharp, the words for Catherine. The cat backed away, flicked its tail, and vanished into the shadows.

Catherine, still shaken, drew her dressing gown tightly about her. "That startled me," she said, her heart rattling against her ribs. "You should not sneak up on people like that. Who are you?" This latter was a superfluous question, since Catherine had already guessed the woman's identity.

"I beg your forgiveness, ma'am. I did not mean to frighten you," the woman moved closer, her features becoming clearer in the candlelight. She had a face that was neither young nor old, with a smooth complexion, dark eyes, and a prominent nose and chin. Her hair was a rich black, combed into a neat chignon, and pinned in place. "My name is Anjali and I am the *Ayah* of Mr. Northcott's daughter, Miss Elliot. And you are the sister to Mr. Northcott, are you not?"

Catherine ignored the question. "What are you doing here?"

"Miss Elliot is in need of a soothing drink, ma'am," she replied, nodding toward the milk jug. "As are you, it seems."

Again, Catherine ignored the comment. "Why do you not light a candle?"

"I have no need of one, ma'am. My eyes are well accustomed to the dark."

"Is that so?" Catherine, now feeling more irritated than shocked, perhaps a little foolish as well, filled her glass with milk.

"If you are finished, ma'am, may I also avail myself?" the woman asked. "I do not like to keep Miss Elliot waiting."

ilk into Catherine drew a calming breath. “Yes,” she replied, and mar
e floor, smile. “Of course.”

back. The woman inclined her head, took a glass from the dresser, and s
t of the table. Then she reached into a fold of fabric across her breast an
hand to out a small linen pouch.

d in the “What is that?” Catherine asked.

“Just a few herbs, ma’am,” she replied, opening the pouch. “I add
did not to Miss Elliot’s milk to help her sleep. Perhaps you would like to try so

“No, thank you.” Clutching her drink, Catherine moved toward th
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Catherine gave a nod and began to turn away, but then paus
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rfluous The woman smiled. “I told her to mind her manners, ma’am.”

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asked.

Catherine drew a calming breath. “Yes,” she replied, and managed a smile. “Of course.”

The woman inclined her head, took a glass from the dresser, and set it on the table. Then she reached into a fold of fabric across her breast and drew out a small linen pouch.

“What is that?” Catherine asked.

“Just a few herbs, ma’am,” she replied, opening the pouch. “I add a pinch to Miss Elliot’s milk to help her sleep. Perhaps you would like to try some.”

“No, thank you.” Clutching her drink, Catherine moved toward the door. “I have what I came for. Please return the milk jug to the cold room when you’re finished.”

Anjali inclined her head. “I’ll see to it, ma’am.”

“Thank you. I hope Miss Elliot has a restful night.”

“I bid you the same, ma’am.”

Catherine gave a nod and began to turn away, but then paused and regarded the woman once more. “I’m curious,” she said. “What did you say to the cat?”

The woman smiled. “I told her to mind her manners, ma’am.”



CHAPTER THREE

*Myddleton House,
Derbyshire
Christmas Eve,
1827*

SNOW CRUNCHED BENEATH booted feet, cheeks bore winter's rosy glow, and the woods echoed with lively conversation and bouts of laughter. The undoubted occasions when such a cacophony would have been considered quite improper. But not this occasion. The hunt was on for Christmas decorations, specifically holly, conifer, and mistletoe. In seeking the decorations, the hunters—each and every one a resident or guest of Myddleton House—had spread out through the bare trees, putting space between them and communication, then, had to take distance into account. The cold air conveyed sound with startling clarity.

“There's some holly over here,” came a female cry.

“With berries?” a masculine voice responded.

“No.”

“Then look about you, my lady,” the same gentleman suggested. “There'll probably be another tree with berries nearby.”

“I'll come and help you,” another lady called.

Conventional behavior, too, had less dominion out here in the woods of Derbyshire. Catherine's gloved right hand had been enveloped in Lysander's leather-clad left hand since they'd entered the woods a half-hour since.

“There may be hidden obstacles beneath the snow, which could cause your fiancée to stumble,” Lysander had pointed out, in response to Catherine's disapproving frown. “I am obliged, therefore, to provide her with my assistance and protection.”

“Very chivalrous of you,” Henry replied, rolling his eyes heavenward. Catherine's smile accompanied a squeeze of Lysander's hand. He ;

down at her, wearing a smile of his own.

“If you start to feel chilled, tell me,” he said. “I mean it.”

“I will,” she replied, but doubted very much that it would be necessary. Not only was she well-wrapped, but the sheer warmth of her spirit was to keep winter at bay. On this, the day before Christmas, she was in ease with herself. The previous day, also sunny and cold, had passed with walks in the gardens, parlor games, and more music. Lysander had Helena little mind, much to Catherine’s relief. Only her meeting with remained as something out of the ordinary, mainly due to the way she reacted. But then, Anjali was a stranger. Perhaps that was why she behaved the way it did. In any case, Catherine hadn’t mentioned the matter with Helena’s nurse to anyone. Helena had made no reference to it either now, and
As for today, the lady in question was off in the distance with Philip and Henry, leaving Catherine and Lysander to wander more or less considered
Unbeknownst to Lysander, Catherine had a destination, a place she’d visited since childhood. Gradually, they drifted further away from the other side of their prey, they came at last to a large clearing, where a single linden tree reached its branches to the sky.

Lysander gazed up at the tree, his eyes widening. “I say! Is that...?”
“Mistletoe, yes,” Catherine replied, shading her eyes with a glove as she regarded the telltale clumps clinging to the branches. “It always grows here.”

“Does it now?” Lysander regarded her with a stern expression. “Correct in thinking that you led me here knowingly, my lady?”

Catherine tutted. “As if I would, my lord. It was purely by accident.”

“Hmm.” He squinted up at the mistletoe. “Haven’t climbed a tree before. I was a lad, but I think I can manage it.”

“What?” Catherine felt a stab of alarm. “You will do no such thing. My lord’s safety might fall.”

“No, I won’t.” Still looking up, he wandered over to the tree, and reached for one of the lower branches. “Trust me.”

“Lysander!” Catherine stumbled after him and grabbed his coat. “Please, I’d never forgive myself if something went wrong. We can use some sticks and try to knock some of the mistletoe down.”

He regarded her for a moment, his expression thoughtful. “We won’t be quite as much fun, but it might work. There’s something I

do first, however.”

“And what might that be?”

Smiling, he looked up to where a clump of mistletoe hung from a branch bound “Come here,” he said, and held out a hand. She took it, allowing him to draw her closer. Then he cupped her face, his leather gloves warm against her cheeks. Catherine, knowing what was to come, held her breath and gazed at his eyes, which seemed to speak of feelings that words could never express. “Do you have any idea how much I love you?” he said. “And how much I have loved you? That I get to spend the rest of my life with you is the greatest blessing I cannot begin to accurately describe. But meeting you is nothing I want more than a future with you, Catherine.”

Then he lowered his head and touched his lips to hers, softly, tentatively, as if awaiting permission, perhaps, to take it further. Catherine responded by lifting up on her toes and wrapping her arms about his neck, anchoring herself to him. Lysander made a sound deep in his throat, his arms folded around her, drawing her closer still. His tongue teased the corner of her lips, and she opened instinctively, tasting peppermint and brandy. He deepened his kiss. The sensation of his mouth against hers, his power against hers, was utterly intoxicating. She parted with a soft whimper of delight.

As if starved of air, Lysander immediately broke away, his chest heaving and falling as he regarded her. “God knows, I do not want to stop,” he said breathlessly, “which is precisely why I must.”

“But I do not want you to stop, Lysander,” Catherine replied, her arms still wrapped around his neck.

“Which is also, my love, precisely why I must.” He pressed a light kiss to her forehead, and gently untangled himself from her embrace. “If you’re not going to allow me to climb the tree, how about we find some sticks and start throwing them at this...” He scratched his jaw and looked at her. “...at this pagan paradox.”

Catherine laughed. “Why do you call it that?”

“Stop,” he said. “Because it is a plant that has long been associated with romance, but many parts of it are poisonous.”

“Mmm, I suppose that is something of a contradiction.” Catherine, still delirious from her first kiss, heaved the happiest of sighs, and glanced at him. “All right let’s find some—” She inhaled sharply at the sight of Helen

standing on the edge of the clearing, watching them, her dark garb creating an oddly ominous silhouette against the winter backdrop.

branch. “What the hell?” Lysander muttered. “I wonder how long she’ll be here to draw there.”

ier cold Even as he spoke, Helena turned away, showing no sign she’d seen them. Catherine suppressed a sudden shiver. “How strange,” she pressed. “And rude, frankly. She must know we saw her.”

very long I Lysander shook his head. “I cannot get the measure of that woman... Hean enigma.”

out there Catherine felt a mild twinge of unease. “Does it matter?”

“No, of course it doesn’t.” Smiling, he gazed up at the tree again. “Almost my love, let’s find those sticks.”

Catherine

his neck,

as his



ie seam BY DINNERTIME THAT evening, the sweet scent of evergreens and Christmas foliage, permeated the air at Myddleton, blending with the delicious aromas of roasted pheasant and beef. The house glowed with candlelight. Fireplace mantels were laden with sprigs of holly and polished ivy, while hearths crackled with burning coal. The genteel hum of conversation flowed unhindered beside a harp. He said, serenade. And, here and there, sprigs of mistletoe, felled from their branches by some well-aimed sticks, hung from chandeliers.

er arms Gifts were exchanged after dinner, and then Lord and Lady excused themselves, and went below stairs to distribute gifts to the honing staff. The rest of the family and guests spread themselves through the

“Now, accordingly. Lysander and Catherine found a cozy spot on a settee in the parlor, where a fire burned brightly in the massive hearth.

ked up. Lysander took the gold fob watch from his pocket and flicked it open. “It is precisely twenty-seven minutes past ten,” he said, and the case closed again.

, yet all Catherine laughed. “Are you going to be doing that for the rest of the evening?”

ne, still “Undoubtedly,” he replied, waggling a brow at her. “It gives me plenty to do so.”

a Elliot

ating an “I’m glad you like it.”

“I love it.” He tucked the watch back into his pocket. “It’s the perfect. I shall treasure it always.”

Catherine regarded the emerald bracelet encircling her wrist. “And neither do likewise,” she replied. “It’s magnificent.”

He said. Lysander didn’t answer. His attention had shifted to an approaching footman, carrying a salver. “A letter has arrived for you, Lord Hawke. She’s man said, presenting the tray.

Frowning, Lysander took the missive. “At this hour?”

“Yes, my lord. The man is still here, awaiting your response.”

“Right, A prickle ran across Lysander’s scalp as he broke the seal. He opened the letter and began to read. By the time he reached the end of the brief his life had changed completely. Stomach churning, he read the words absorbing them.

Understanding them.

He felt slightly sick, he got to his feet. “Tell the man I’ll be with you shortly,” he said. The footman gave a nod and departed.

“Lysander?” Catherine rose and stood at his side. “What is it? Is something wrong? My goodness, you’ve gone quite pale.”

“It’s my father,” he said, clenching his jaw as he folded the paper and tucked it in his pocket. “He’s had a stroke, they believe. He’s gravely ill, but expected to recover. It’s recommended I return to Malvern immediately.”

“Oh, dear God.” Catherine clasped her hands, prayer-like, beneath her chin. “I’m so sorry, my love.”

“The letter was written yesterday. I can only pray he’ll still be alive when I get to Malvern. I have to go, Cat. There’s a coach waiting for me.”

“I understand, of course.”

“I love you.” He bent and kissed her cheek. “I’m sorry to leave you, but I’ll write.”

Not twenty minutes later, after a hail of farewells and good

Lysander, along with Finney, his valet, clambered into the waiting carriage and went off into the winter’s night.

pleasure

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“I love you.” He bent and kissed her cheek. “I’m sorry to leave you like this. I’ll write.”

Not twenty minutes later, after a hail of farewells and good wishes, Lysander, along with Finney, his valet, clambered into the waiting carriage, and went off into the winter’s night.



CHAPTER FOUR

*Malvern House
Nottinghamshire
January 3rd, 1828*

LYSANDER OPENED THE office door, paused on the threshold, and cast his eyes around the familiar room. Inhaling deeply, he savored the familiar scents of beeswax, old books, tobacco smoke and, surely, he did not imagine the lingering scent of his father's cologne. The curtains were still open, offering a view of the gardens beyond, though the perfectly trimmed lawns and flower beds were not visible through the ferocious blizzard that had swept in from the northwest almost an hour ago.

He turned his attention back to the office, where shadows, cast by the candlelight and the flickering flames of the coal fire, danced across the paneled walls and portraits of those who had gone before. His father's portrait hung over the fireplace, the shimmer of light giving the impression of movement, as if the painted eyes had come to life, and were watching him.

Nostalgia, overwhelming in the extreme, washed over him when he finally came to rest on the huge, carved oak desk that dominated the room. More than any other item, anywhere in any of the Gillingham properties, Lysander associated this particular piece of furniture with his father. This was not just a place of business, it was also a retreat, a place where his father would sit by the fire, enjoying a nightcap or reading a book.

Not anymore. Though the duke had still been alive when Lysander finally arrived at Malvern, he had not been conscious. Lysander had held his father's unresponsive hand and whispered his goodbyes to ears that no longer heard. Death had come mere hours later.

A lavish funeral had been tempered by the bitter weather, and the Duke of Cornelius Barton, the sixth Duke of Gillingham, had been laid to rest in the family mausoleum with a little less ceremony than might otherwise have

possible.

A sudden and fresh sense of loss brought the sting of tears to Lysander's eyes. In his mind, he saw himself as a child, stealing into the office and clamber into his father's leather office chair. At the time, he could barely reach over the top of the mighty desk, but he'd play at being duke, giving orders to imaginary visitors, pretending to write important letters, and signing documents.

There was no pretending now. The desk, and everything it represented of the past and present, belonged to him. Not that he feared the responsibility. Since infancy, he'd been groomed and educated, prepared for what was to come. Today, though, he'd decided any official business could wait. His gaze on the responsibility would be of a personal nature. Once seated in that leather chair, he would take up his gold pen, and write a long-overdue line to his future duchess.

Heaving a sigh, he closed the door behind him and wandered over to the desk. Before he'd even sat down, a knock came to the door and a woman entered, salver in hand.

Lysander groaned inwardly. *What now?*

"You have a caller, Your Grace," the man said, and presented the silver tray, upon which sat a calling card. "Apparently, the lady is in need of your father's assistance and is hoping she might be allowed to stay here the night. I have permission to bring the lady in the front parlor but have not said you are available."

The lady?

Lysander took the card, eyes widening as he read the embossed name. "Good Lord. Miss Elliot is here?"

"Yes, Your Grace," Pinksen replied. "The lady is not unescorted. There is another woman with her. Her maid, I believe. And a coachman."

Lysander glanced at the window and specifically the snow, then looked horizontally across the garden. "Damnation," he muttered.

Pinksen's brows lifted. "Your Grace?"

Lysander gave his head a slight shake. He was in no mood to talk to Helena Elliot and her ever-present nurse. He was in no mood to talk to anyone. Given the conditions, however, he could hardly turn them away. Theodore struck him as rather odd that they'd sought shelter at Malvern rather than in the taking rooms at a coaching inn. They'd obviously made a detour from the intended route, and for some reason, that situation bothered him.

As he continued to ponder, the clock struck four, and Lysander resolved himself to the inevitable. Whether he liked it or not, he knew there could be only one course of action.

"I'll see the lady, Pinksen," he said, heaving a sigh. "Arrange for orders to be made, will you? And ask Mrs. Gates to prepare a guest room in the east wing. One room only, and as far away from my apartments as possible. The coachman can take a bed in the coach house."

The hint of a smile came to the man's face. "Right away, Your Grace." Lysander made his way to the parlor. The door stood slightly ajar, and he was able to hear a quiet conversation taking place between Helen and Anjali. He understood none of it, of course. As he pushed the door open, the conversation ceased, and Helena rose from her place on the settee. She remained seated with her hands clasped in her lap.

"Your Grace." Smiling, Helena Elliot held out a gloved hand. "It is not an inconvenience. We were on the road from Clifton when the snowstorm began, and by the time we reached the coaching inn, it was already full. I was in a bit of a fix when it occurred to me that Malvern was that far, so I decided to make a small detour and throw myself on your mercy. I really didn't know what else to do. And may I offer my sincere condolences on the death of your father." A softness came to her dark eyes. "I know it is to lose a parent."

He shook her outstretched hand. "That is very kind of you, Miss Elliot. And it's not inconvenient at all. Sit, please. I have sent for some tea." She retook her seat, and Lysander settled himself into a nearby armchair.

The tea was served, and the time passed not unpleasantly. Miss Elliot chatted animatedly about her childhood in India and inquired politely about Lysander's life and duties. Perhaps an hour or so later, she and Anjali were shown to their room, and notified that dinner would be served at eight o'clock.

When the time came, Lysander readied himself. Being in mourning, he donned the applicable black attire and made his way downstairs to the dining room, trying to summon up some enthusiasm. He'd be glad when they came, he told himself, and silently prayed that the weather would not deter his unexpected guests any longer.

Miss Elliot and Anjali were already in the dining room, and before the meal was served. Conversation throughout the meal carried

signed pleasantly enough.

ould only “I have something to confess, Your Grace,” Miss Elliot said, as the dessert plates were being cleared. “While we were waiting for dinner, I took the liberty of exploring some of the rooms in this magnificent house. I noticed you have a music room.”

le. The Lysander smiled, already aware of where the conversation was taking place. “Indeed, I do, Miss Elliot.”

ice.” “And in that music room,” she continued, “is a Bösendorfer piano.” Lysander inclined his head. “It belonged to my mother.”

a Elliot “Ah,” Miss Elliot responded. “Well, I was wondering if you would open it for me to play it. I was so tempted to do so when I first saw it but thought I should seek your permission.”

“You have my permission, certainly,” he said. “Whenever you’re ready, we can remove it.”

en the Miss Elliot nodded. “I wonder, also, if I might trouble you for some tea. I enjoy a cup in the evening. It is a habit I acquired in India.”

wasn’t “Of course,” Lysander said, and dispatched the order.

mercy. Soon after, he stood beside the pianoforte, ready to turn the music over to Miss Elliot. Though not normally an evening habit for him, he also allowed himself a cup of the tea that had been ordered. Anjali, serving as the ever-present chaperone, took a seat by the door.

Miss Elliot. Truth be told, Lysander found himself relaxing, even enjoying the music. Miss Elliot had naturally taken some of his mother’s music, so the piece she played aroused many fond memories of his childhood.

s Elliot “You really have a gift, Miss Elliot,” he said. “Listening to you play is extremely pleasurable.”

li, who “Thank you, Your Grace.” She took a sip of her tea and signaled to Anjali to bring her some more. “I wish we could dispense with the formalities, however. I’d much prefer it if you called me Helena.”

ing, he A small voice in Lysander’s head told him to refuse, albeit politely. Instead, he surprised himself by agreeing. “If that is what you wish, Your Grace,” he replied. “But in that case, I must reciprocate. Please do not hinder me.”

“Thank you.” She briefly touched his hand with hers. “That’s much more pleasant, don’t you think?”

l along Lysander nodded and looked down at his hand, questioning why she had done so.

just felt. Had she actually touched him?

as the “Which is your favorite?” Helena asked. “Choose it, and I will play it for you, I took you.”

and I “Actually, you played it at Myddleton,” he said. “Chopin.”

“Ah. Well, that happens to be my favorite as well, Lysander. I can play it by heart, so why don’t you sit down and relax?”

“As you wish,” Lysander said, amiably. He felt movement at his side as he watched as Anjali filled his teacup and handed it to him. For a moment she met his gaze and held it, her expression intense. Then she smiled and disappeared allow away.

“I confess, Helena, I wasn’t exactly happy when you arrived at the house,” he said, ignoring an odd little voice in his head that told him something was ready, very wrong. “But now, I’m glad you’re here. This evening has been enjoyable.”

“And it is not yet over,” Helena replied, her voice sultry. “Sit down, Lysander. Let me serenade you.”

She began to play, the notes rising into the air with exquisite beauty. Lysander closed his eyes, feeling rather like he was floating on air. His dreams, that night, were unlike any he’d ever had. A present entanglement of limbs, the feel of soft, warm flesh in his hands, the heated scent of arousal. He was erect and eager, desperate to find comfort in himself. It all felt so real. So incredible. Unable to stop, he drove himself to the edge, wondering who had given herself to him, whose cry he heard when she entered her.

And then he saw her face in his dream. She was the one. The one he wanted. The one he loved. As he tumbled into a sparkling pool of ecstasy, he called out her name.

“Catherine.”

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just felt. Had she actually touched him?

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“Catherine.”



CHAPTER FIVE

*Myddleton House,
Derbyshire
January 20th, 1828*

CATHERINE SAT BY the hearth and stared into the flames, her right hand clasp- ing a letter. It was her letter to Lysander; signed, sealed, and delivered... and then returned, unopened.

Since he'd left Myddleton on Christmas Eve, she had not heard from him. She knew the old duke had passed away. It had been reported in *The Times*. The weather had prevented them from attending the funeral. Letters and cards of condolence had been sent, none of them returned.

So why this one?

At that moment, the door opened, and her father, Lord Hutton, entered, carrying a copy of *The Times*.

"I don't understand, Papa," Catherine said, regarding the envelope. "Would it have been returned? Even if he wasn't home, they'd have kept the letter." All at once, she sat up straight. "Or maybe he's on his way back. That still doesn't explain why the letter was returned, though."

Her father cleared his throat and sat across from her. "Catherine, now I have some news."

The tone of his voice and the look on his face sent a chill of apprehension down Catherine's spine. "What news? Is it about Lysander?"

"Yes," he replied. "It's about Lysander."

"What about him? Has he been hurt?"

"No, not hurt." Her father heaved a sigh. "I'm so sorry, my dear. I hate to have to tell you this, but it seems Lysander is married."

Catherine stared at her father and had a sudden and bizarre urge to cry. "Married," she repeated. "Lysander is married."

"Yes, my dear. Just over a week ago." He showed her the new

“The announcement is right here.”

She looked at the paper, the words upon it blurring into an indecipherable mass. “That’s not possible, Papa. They’ve made a mistake. They’ve got the name wrong.”

“There’s no mistake, Catherine. I’m so sorry.”

At that moment, the door burst open and Philip stormed in, his face twisted and angry. “I’m going to kill the bloody bastard,” he said, his teeth gritted. “I swear it. I’ll take him apart, limb by limb.”

Lord Hutton rose to his feet. “I’m of a mind to do that myself,” he said simply. “I simply cannot fathom it. Whatever possessed him to do such a thing?”

A chill took hold of Catherine, as if someone had opened a window and let in winter air. She began to tremble. “Who did he marry, Papa?”

Philip made an odd sound and looked at his father. “You didn’t tell me.”

“Who?” Catherine cried. “Who did he marry?”

“Helena.” Philip’s mouth quivered. “He married Helena.”

“No.” Catherine shook her head. “It’s not possible. He would never do that to me. He would *not*.”

Hurried footsteps could be heard coming along the hallway. A moment later, Henry appeared, clad in his coat. He looked around the faces and

his head. “Well, it would appear I’m too late,” he said, regarding Catherine.

“Why didn’t you bring the newspaper in your hand?” he asked. “You’ve already read the announcement.”

“You almost did,” Lord Hutton said. “We only got the paper a half hour ago.”

“How did you hear about it?” Philip clenched and unclenched his fist.

“From Lord Simmons. He was in London last week and announced that Gillingham’s wedding is the talk of the town. Every major town in England should think.”

Gillingham.

Catherine felt a stab of pain at the mention of Lysander’s duchy. Blurring her eyes again, she looked down at the diamond on her finger.

“Where is Mama?” she asked.

“In her sitting room,” her father replied. “She’s very upset by all this.”

“Go to her, Cat.”

“Actually, Papa,” Henry said. “I’d like a moment to speak to Catherine alone, if I may.”

“Certainly.” Lord Hutton gestured to Philip. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Sit down, Cat,” Henry said, once they’d gone. She took her seat at the table.

“I can’t believe he’s done this, Henry,” she said, her voice quivering. “I just can’t believe it. It’s as if someone has reached into my chest and torn my heart out.”

“Having trouble believing it myself,” he said. “The thing is, there are rumors already circulating, which is why I wanted to speak to you. I’m not sure they’re appropriate for your ears, but I just want you to be aware, in case you overhear some of what is being said.”

“What is being said?”

Henry took a breath. “That Lysander was drunk and seduced Heler. Being so, he had little choice but to marry her.”

“Oh, dear God.”

“I’m so sorry, Cat. The man’s a fool.”

Catherine regarded the envelope for a moment and then threw it into the fire. “Well, there’s nothing I can do. Whatever Lysander and I had, whatever moment we shared, it’s over.” Sobbing, she dropped her head into her hands. “It’s over, Henry. It’s over.”

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CHAPTER SIX

Present Day

Sallingford House, Cheshire
Thursday, January 1st,
1846

CATHERINE WAS HERE, somewhere. At least, that's what he'd been told. Far, Lysander's search for her had been unsuccessful, and hindered by constant interruptions. He'd half-expected it, however, and had taken time to acknowledge each and every offer of condolence. As for the glances and fluttering eyelashes, those he politely ignored. Only one interested him, and she was proving damnably difficult to find. He paced the hallway, hands on hips, and heaved a sigh. "Where are you, Catherine," he muttered.

"She's in the orangery," a male voice said, startling him. "Hidden from you, actually."

Despite the passage of time, Lysander recognized Henry's voice immediately, and turned to see him seated in a chair nearby. The man stood and approached. Lysander struggled to maintain a neutral expression, but he long regretted the loss of the friendship they'd once shared. "Fulstons," he said, "it's been a while."

"It has, indeed," Henry replied. "My condolences on the death of your wife, Gillingham."

"Thank you." Frowning, Lysander looked along the hallway. "Where is she from me?"

Henry gave a nod. "Said she wants nothing to do with you."

"Can't say I blame her," Lysander replied. "And yet here you are, telling me where to find her, which begs the question why."

Henry smiled. "A fair question." He paused. "There was a time

wanted to beat you to a pulp. And it's probably a blessing Philip is .
seem to remember him wishing you an extremely violent death."

"I did Philip a favor," Lysander said. "Believe me, Fulston, he's be
with the wife he has."

"Perhaps. He seems happy, right enough." Henry regarded him
moment. "Maybe you did Catherine a favor too. But you hurt her
process, damn you. Nearly destroyed her, in fact."

"I know, and if it means anything at all, it almost destroyed m
Lysander grimaced and rubbed at his temple. "And if Catherine fe
strongly about *not* seeing me, it might be best if I leave."

"It might," Henry replied, "but I think she also needs the answer
only you can provide. The thing is, I'm not sure what led up to your d
with Helena. Certainly, there were some strange rumors flying around
But so . . .
red by
he time
demure
woman
used in
erine?"
time. Knowing you as I did, your actions seemed to be out of character
being so, I've always tended to give you the benefit of the doubt, th
kept it to myself. As for what you're hoping to achieve by coming
trust it's because you want to try and right a wrong."

"That is the *only* reason I'm here," Lysander replied. "There wa
truth in those rumors, Henry."

"Hmm." He looked dubious. "I doubt you'll ever persuade my s
that. She's always been convinced that you were guilty on all counts."

"Like I said before, I can't really blame her."

Henry's eyes narrowed. "She was devastated."

"Yes." Lysander released a sigh. "I know."

"Just be careful how you approach her," Henry said. "Don't m
regret what I'm doing."

"If she asks me to leave her alone, I will." Lysander went to turn
but hesitated. "I'm curious. Why has Catherine never married? I can't
she hasn't had offers over the years."

"She's had several and refused them all," Henry replied. "And do
need to explain why?"

Lysander swallowed over a sudden tightness in his throat b
nothing. He merely nodded, turned on his heel, and made his way do
hall. Breath clouding, he stepped out into the chill night air, pausing v
saw the trail of footprints in the snow, leading toward the orangery.

when I
Catherine's footprints.

away. I “Please God,” he said, following where she’d trod. “Give me a c
Preoccupied with what lay ahead, he barely noticed the cold. Apprel
etter offknotted his stomach as he approached the door, and his stride slo
doubt weighed on him. Was it wise to resurrect the past after sc
n for aPerhaps this was a bad idea after all. Perhaps he should simply let thi
in theHe halted.

Said she wants nothing to do with you.

ie too.” *Why has she never married?*

els that *Do I really need to explain why?*

Was it wrong to assume it was because she still loved him? He
ers thatneed to ask *himself* if love could endure over the years. The answer to
alliancein his own heart, untouched and unchanged by time. But what of Cat
d at theWhat might he hear in her voice, or see in her eyes?

er. That The imminent reality of facing her left him breathless. He had drea
rough Ithis day. Longed for it yet feared it at the same time. Still, it had to b
here, I“Get on with it, then,” he muttered. Drawing a deep, slow breath, he
the orangery and closed the door quietly behind him.

is some For a moment, he stood still in the humid air and squinted into the
jungle-like depths of the foliage. From somewhere within came the s
ister ofrunning water. A fountain, undoubtedly. Lysander moved forward, fo
the direction of the sound, halting when at last he saw Catherine, seat
bench. She appeared to be deep in thought, head down, hands foldec
lap.

She had not heard his approach, which had likely been masked
ake meeternal trickle of water. Lysander took a moment to observe her, absor
that she was. Eighteen years could not pass without leaving an impr
1 away, but they had not been unkind. She was still slender, the alluring silhou
believeher body perhaps a little thinner than he remembered. Dappled s
played on the gold in her hair, which had been adorned with small
I reallyflowers. As he watched, she parted with a sigh and closed her eyes. V
thinking, he spoke her name.

ut said “Catherine.”

own the With a gasp, she lifted her head, eyes widening as she recogniz
when he“But how did you...?” Shock showing plainly on her face, she rose to
and glanced about as if seeking an escape. “What are you doing here?”

Lysander held up a hand. “Please, Catherine. I mean no harm

hance.” desire...” His voice sounded strange to his ears; strained. Desperate
hension “May I approach?”

wed as There followed a few moments of silence, then her shocked exp
o long? disappeared, replaced by one that showed disappointment. “Did He
ngs lie. you where I was?”

“Yes, but he meant well. I just...” Lysander took a breath, determ
keep his wits about him. “I just need to speak with you.”

“I doubt we have anything to say to each other,” she said, lifting h
a notch. “And my brother had no right to interfere.”

e didn’t Lysander took a tentative step forward. Seeing her, being this close
that lay was doing things to his insides that he hadn’t felt in years. “Please, giv
herine? chance. That’s all I ask.”

Her gaze swept over him from head to toe, and then she spoke v
imed of deference. “As you wish, Your Grace.”

e done. Lysander gave a soft, humorless laugh. “That is *not* necessary, Cat
entered She assumed a bewildered expression, quite obviously feigned.

how, pray, shall I address you, Your Grace?”

e sunlit, “The way you always used to,” he replied, moving to within a
ound of reach. “By my *name*.”

llowing Her eyes, with their intriguing golden flecks, were as beautifu
ed on a remembered. They narrowed a little as she regarded him. “That woul
l in her appropriate, Your Grace.”

“But it is what I wish.” He curled his fingers to stop himsel
by thereaching out and touching her. “Lysander. My name is Lysander.” *An
bing all love you, damn it.*

ression, She glanced away momentarily, as if pondering. “My condolences
uette of loss of your wife, Your Grace,” she said, facing him once more.

sunlight He bit back a sigh. “Thank you,” he managed, her refusal to sp
, white name souring his stomach. This was not going well at all. Wor
Without anticipated, in fact. Then again, he had hardly expected her to fall at hi

She gave him a grim smile. “You must miss her.”

The remark took him aback. To affirm it would be false. To
ed him. sounded heartless. He regretted Helena’s demise, but it had not plung
her feet into melancholia. “I am coping,” he said. “In the end, death was a b

’ Her Grace had suffered enough.”

. I just An expression he couldn’t quite read flitted across Catherine’s fa

...even doubt,” she replied. “So, what is it you wish to say to me?”

“I wish to explain everything.”

“About what, Your Grace?”

“About what happened when I returned to Malvern eighteen years

Catherine threw him a look that, had it been a punch, would have

knocked him on his arse. “Oh, but I already *know* what happened,” she said, a telltale sheen coming to her eyes. “You seduced my

father and was obliged to pay the honorable price, while Philip and I suffered

the ultimate betrayal. I am so thankful he is not here tonight, having to face me after what you did.”

“I did *not* seduce Helena.” Lysander clenched his fists. “She seduced

me. Or rather, that nurse of hers did. I swear, the woman is a witch with

her potions and herbs. She put something in my drink that night that

made me lose all sense of—”

“Good Lord.” Catherine’s laugh held no trace of humor. “I confess I

wasn’t sure what I expected you to say in your defense, but it wasn’t so

implausible – as utterly *ridiculous* as that! An apology for making my

father a complete fool out of me might have served a little better. Not that I

have accepted that either. But instead, you’re actually attempting to

blame at your dead wife’s feet, which is cowardly and contemptible. It

is not extreme. Especially since the poor woman is no longer here to defend

herself. The truth is, you were attracted to Helena from the start, and do not

deny it. I can still remember the way you looked at her. You were *not* looking at her.”

Lysander gasped and raked a hand through his hair. “If I showed any

do? But I made it very clear that she would be my wife in name on that she cared. She got what she wanted, after all, which was the title.”

Catherine huffed. “So, you seduced her and then made her s ago.” loveless marriage.”

d have Lysander groaned. “Christ help me, I did *not* seduce her, and l, Yoursuffered at all, it was only because of what she herself created. I will Helenawithout remorse, that I did not love her, but I was never willfully cru red thewanted for nothing, had the freedom to do as she pleased, and ir ce you,herself accordingly.”

“None of which matters to me, Your Grace,” she said. “What ha ced *me*.between us is no longer of any consequence. I put it all behind me long a witch, He shook his head. “I don’t believe that.”

, which “I don’t care what you believe,” she countered. “I don’t even kno you’re here, telling me this.”

s, I was *Because I still love you, Catherine. Only you. And if, as you sa nothinghappened between us is of no consequence, then why...?*

aking a “Why have you never married, Cat?”

ould She flinched, and he instantly regretted the question.

lay the “Please forgive me,” he added, quickly. “I should not have asked.”

e in the “No, I’ll tell you why. When you...” She closed her eyes for a r herself.and drew breath. “When the man I loved betrayed me, I swore I woul dare toagain put my heart at risk. And I never have. To this day, I answer *always*myself and am quite happy. So, if it is absolution you seek, you may h.

He winced. “That is not why I’m here.”

interest “Then why *are* you here, Your Grace?” she demanded, her voi becauseedged with emotion. “What do you want from me?”

behind “I want to turn back time.” Lysander scrubbed a hand over his face help me, Cat, I want things to be as they were between us.”

She gasped. “Have you completely lost your mind? You must l ot whatyou think for one moment that I would even *consider* entertaining s idea. You abandoned me, Lysander, without a word. You tossed me a marriedanother and made me look like a fool. I could *never* trust you again. N do you understand? I’ve heard enough. I must go. Please step aside.”

through At last, she used his name, though not in the way he needed to hea up hiscould almost taste the bitterness of her words. But he wasn’t quite reac could Iher go, and held out an arm, blocking her way. “No, Catherine, wait. I

ly. NotHe shook his head, inwardly cursing the desperation in his voice. ‘
never stopped loving you. If you’ll just think about what I—’
ffer a “Let me *pass*, damn you!”

Jaw clenched, Lysander dropped his arm and stood back. With a s
if sheskirts, Catherine all but ran from him, leaving her familiar floral scen
l admit,wake. He inhaled it greedily and closed his eyes against the del
iel. Shememories it invoked. Moments later, he heard the unmistakable sou
ndulgedsob, followed by the solid slam of the door.

In truth, he could hardly blame Catherine for not believing hi
ppenedexplanation did sound ludicrous. Desperate, even. *If only*. Ah, the
g ago.” cursed little words. If only his father had not fallen ill, and Lysanc
stayed at Myddleton. If only it hadn’t snowed. If only he’d refused
ow whyHelena and her wretched nurse when they’d turned up at Malvern.

His presence here today had all been for naught. If anything, I
y, *what*regretted that as well. Any hope he had for a reconciliation with Ca
had just been snuffed out like a candle.

He headed for the door and opened it. Ahead lay a trail of footp
the snow, his and Catherine’s, overlapping. Her latest footprints le
from the orangery. Away from him. He wouldn’t follow them thi
nomentThere was no point. Tears stung his eyes as a familiar sense of des
d neverwashed over him.

only to He headed around the back of Sallingford, toward the stables, in
ave it.” summoning his valet and his driver. If he left now, he’d be at the co
inn at Uttoxeter by nightfall. Tomorrow, he’d return to Malvern and
ice stillhis reclusive lifestyle.

He’d become used to it, after all.

e. “God



ave, if

such anCATHERINE RAN ALL the way back to the main house. Once inside, she
side forand put a hand against the wall while she caught her breath. She
ot *ever*,though she was trapped in an outlandish dream. The passing of the y
longer meant anything. They had all been swept aside in minutes. V
ir it. Hethat had taken so long to heal now lay open and bleeding. But beneath
ly to letpain and heartache lay something more torturous. And that was the lc
just...”

"I have still flowed through her veins, as fierce and as pure as ever, desperate and required. She had a terrible need to run back to Lysander, to tell him she believed him and that all was forgiven. And that she had never wished of loving him, either. But she couldn't. She didn't dare.

"Catherine, what happened?"

Choking back a sob, Catherine glared at her brother. "You betrayed Henry, that's what happened. Why would you do such a thing? You didn't want to see him, to face him."

"I thought he deserved a chance." Henry shrugged. "And I thought I did, too. I happen to believe the rumors, Cat. I've always suspected something untoward happened to him."

"That he was given some kind of... of strange potion and then was beside Helena?" Catherine scoffed. "If that were truly the case, he would never have married her."

"He had to marry her. He had no choice."

"How can you—?"

"No, just let me finish." Henry took her hand and pressed it between his fingers. "Had he refused to marry Helena after what occurred, would you have married him, under the circumstances?"

Catherine frowned. "Of course not."

"No, of course not. And even if you *had* agreed to it, Mama and Papa would never have allowed it. Lysander did the honorable thing, but he never believed he did it willingly. I believe there was treachery involved. There had to be. In all the years I've known him, I have never seen him get drunk. Not once. He was always a man who could hold his drink. He was a man who knew when he'd had enough. The idea of him being drunk and seducing Helena, without being aware of it, is bloody ridiculous, frankly."

Catherine pressed her fingers to her temple. "But we'll never know for sure, will we? And even if we did—if *I* did—I have no future with Lysander. It's so different for men, Henry. He's ten years older than I, yet he is so confident he felt as to marry and have children, whereas I..." Tears stung her eyes. "What if I am bound to be a childless spinster. The choice was mine, of course, but it is what it is."

Henry sighed. "You couldn't at least give him the benefit of the doubt and become friends again?"

Catherine gasped. "I cannot believe you would even suggest such a thing."

te to beThe answer is no, I could not, Henry. It would be too painful, a c
im shereminder of a wonderful dream that never came true.”
stopped



red me,*Two weeks later*
knew IMyddleton House,
Derbyshire

ght you

spectedCATHERINE AWOKE TO darkness, wondering if she'd imagined the sound
name being called. It had been a woman's voice, oddly familiar. She l
woke upstraining her ears, hearing nothing but the sound of her own breath
wouldlively tick of the carriage clock on her mantel. It must have been a drea
that did not include Lysander for a change.

Of late, it was a rare night when he did not come to her in drea
rouse her from sleep. Seeing him, being so close to him on New Year
een his,had awoken so many memories, so many feelings.

u have By all accounts, the man had retreated back to Malvern, rep
refusing any and all attempts to entice him to subsequent social

Catherine, in contrast, had only declined one invitation in the past fo
id Papaand that had simply been due to a matter of preference. Despite her
ut I'vesorrow, she had no intention of spending the rest of her life hiding a
volved.another month, Henry and Frances were heading to London for the
n in hisand she had accepted their invitation to go with them.

was also This time, Catherine thought, she might even consider purs
ink andcourtship. She was well past what would be considered marriageable
ly.” course, and she was under no illusion about finding love. But perl
ow forunattached older gentleman might take interest in her, someone who
sander.nothing more than companionship from a marriage.

till able The mere concept of such an arrangement made her feel slightly d
ereas Ithough she wasn't quite sure why. Perhaps because she had experience
ut therefelt the power of it, the immortality of it. And now she was considerin
where the absence of love would be acceptable. Was that wrong? It ha
e doubtwrong.

From downstairs, she heard the hall clock strike three. Such a lon
a thing.depressing hour. Maybe, after all, she was simply tired and overwro

constant need of a distraction. Something sweet, perhaps. She threw off the bed shivering as she donned slippers and dressing-gown. Then, lighting the lantern, she padded downstairs and headed for the kitchens, intent on the larder.

To her surprise, it seemed that someone was still up. The small stove had been lit, and the tea kettle upon it was already blowing steam from its spout. On a nearby table, a lantern flickered, and a tea-tray had been set out.

Puzzled, Catherine glanced around, seeing no one. Yet a prickle of her spine as she squinted into the darker corners of the vast kitchen. "Anyone here?" she called, softly.

In response, a dark figure stepped silently out of the shadows. Catherine parted with a soft cry of alarm.

"Do not be afraid," a voice said. "There is nothing to fear."

A woman's voice that sounded oddly familiar. It was accented, carried the timeworn timbre of old age. A memory stirred in Catherine's brain, unclear and unsettling.

"Who are you?" She raised her lantern. "Show yourself."

The woman moved into the candlelight, her ancient face wizened with time, her once-black hair now stark-white beneath the burgundy silk draped over her head. Catherine gasped. "Anjali?"

"Lady Catherine." Anjali placed her hands together, prayerlike, in front of her chest, and bowed slightly. "It has been many years."

"But, how...?" Catherine, her heart thudding solidly against her ribs, pulled her dressing gown tightly around her. "What are you doing here at this age, of did you...? I mean, who let you in?"

The hint of a smile appeared. "How I came to be here is not important, ma'am, but my reason for being here is if you will permit me to explain. I shall not take much of your time. Will you take some tea?"

Catherine, still not quite able to grasp the reality of the situation, pressed the back of her hand a hard pinch, which hurt. And nothing changed.

"You are not dreaming, ma'am." The woman poured hot water into a pot. "I am quite real."

"But I don't understand." Catherine set her lantern down. "It seemed as if we were expecting me."

"I was, ma'am."

discovers, “But how can that be? I was asleep till ten minutes ago.” Lysing her declaration rang out in Catherine’s head. *I swear, the woman is a* raiding Catherine doubted the existence of such creatures, but there was de something unsettling about this woman. “And I insist you tell me how you had got in here.”

curved Anjali heaved an audible sigh. “The questions you ask are set for consequence, ma’am. I do not have much time. I wish only to say what I have to be said, then I must take my leave of you.”

ran up “None of this makes sense,” Catherine said. “Why are you here in the middle of the night? What is this about?”

Anjali set a steaming cup of tea down in front of Catherine. “It is about the truth, and telling the truth.”

Catherine frowned. “The truth about what?”

“About a marriage that took place eighteen years ago. A marriage led and about by lies and deception. A marriage that should never have been.” Catherine’s heart missed a beat. “What are you talking about? I don’t understand.”

Anjali gestured to the cup. “Drink, ma’am,” she said. Catherine drank and withdrew. *She put something in my drink that night, which made me feel a sick pallusense of...*

“Of what?” Catherine muttered, to herself.

at her “It is Darjeeling, ma’am,” the woman said, in a mistaken response. “The finest.”

er ribs, Catherine raised a questioning brow. “Then why do you not drink it now? How?” Anjali frowned, filled her cup, and took a sip. “The duke told you the truth, ma’am,” she said. “About that night.”

portant, Catherine gasped. “How do you know what the duke told me? I don’t know. You know he even spoke to me?”

She shrugged and took another sip of tea. “Again, you ask questions that are not important. You may do what you wish with what I am telling you. I am not doing this for your benefit, or for his. I am doing it for *mine*. I am making a teamistake, and my conscience must be cleared.”

“You made a *mistake*.” Catherine’s heart pounded in her ears. “How do you admit that you tricked the duke into seducing Helena, forcing her to marry her, and you call that a *mistake*?”

“She wanted him,” Anjali’s hand trembled visibly as she set the cup down.

ander's down. "I knew it was wrong, and not just for the duke, or for you, or
witch. Northcott. I knew it was wrong for Helena. But she wouldn't list
definitely wanted the house, the wealth, and the title, and I helped her get
ow you Anjali's face crumpled. "In the end, though, the thing she missed mo:
was the one thing she'd never considered."

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, then? love. Helena knew it, too. But it was not meant for her, and ther
alchemy in the world that can create love where it is not meant
s about Lysander's love was meant for another, and he safeguards it to th
waiting for her to claim it."

Catherine closed her eyes and put a steadying hand on the table. "I
brought telling me the truth," she said.

"Yes," Anjali replied. "And you must decide what you will do w
I don't truth. As for me, I have said all I needed to say. Now I must go."

"Where are you going?"
looked "Back to India." She smiled. "I cannot abide this climate."
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down. "I knew it was wrong, and not just for the duke, or for you, or for Mr. Northcott. I knew it was wrong for Helena. But she wouldn't listen. She wanted the house, the wealth, and the title, and I helped her get them." Anjali's face crumpled. "In the end, though, the thing she missed most of all was the one thing she'd never considered."

Catherine puzzled over the words. "You mean children."

Anjali gave her a sharp look. "No, not children! I am speaking of his *love*, ma'am. Oh, I knew the man had love in his heart; a powerful, indestructible love. Helena knew it, too. But it was not meant for her, and there is no alchemy in the world that can create love where it is not meant to be. Lysander's love was meant for another, and he safeguards it to this day, waiting for her to claim it."

Catherine closed her eyes and put a steadying hand on the table. "He was telling me the truth," she said.

"Yes," Anjali replied. "And you must decide what you will do with that truth. As for me, I have said all I needed to say. Now I must go."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to India." She smiled. "I cannot abide this climate."



CHAPTER SEVEN

Malvern House
Nottinghamshire

THE SOUND OF wheels on gravel drew Lysander's attention. Seated at his desk, he lifted his head from the ledger and looked out at Malvern's portico to see a carriage pulling into the columned entry. From where he couldn't quite make out the crest on the carriage door, but the faint impression of a crest implied a visit from a peer.

He heaved a sigh.

Since his appearance at Lady Pennington's gathering, he'd been inundated with invitations of all sorts. And he'd refused every single one. Since he hadn't invited anyone to Malvern, he could only assume that the lady was hoping for some kind of personal audience. The sheer audacity of the request forced a curse from his lips and lifted him to his feet.

As he watched, a lady descended from the carriage, her form partially obscured by one of the columns. Odd, that a lady would descend first. Was she her escort? Lysander waited, only to see the footman set a valise on the ground.

"What the devil?" he muttered.

In his mind, he went back eighteen years, to a cold winter afternoon when another coach had arrived at Malvern. That coach, too, had transported only women. Through trickery and treachery, one of them had become his wife, and his future had been forever changed. Such a thing would never happen again.

"Whoever you are, you can get back in the bloody coach and leave," he muttered, and returned to his seat.

It wasn't long till he heard footsteps along the hallway. The door opened and Pinksen appeared, balancing a silver salver on his right hand.

"Your Grace, you have—"

“Tell her to bugger off, Pinksen.”

The man’s eyes widened. “Your Grace?”

“You heard me. Whoever she is, I’m not interested. Get rid of her.”

“Are you sure, Your Grace?”

“Positive.”

The servant stood there for moment, as if uncertain of what to do.

Grace, I really think—”

“Are you deaf, man?”

“No, Your Grace.”

“Then do as I say. Get rid of her.”

l at his “Very well, Your Grace. Um, I wonder, though, if I might at lea
’s great the lady some refreshment before sending her on her way.”

he sat, Lysander heaved a sigh. “If you must. But I will *not* see her.
ct there clear?”

“Very clear, Your Grace.”

“Good.” He reached for his pen and bent over the ledger once r
d been was only a matter of minutes before the butler returned. It was all L
ple one could do not to hurl the inkwell at him. “What?” he snarled.

e caller “Your Grace, I made it clear to the lady that you do not wish to s
ty of it and she said she understands completely. She declined my o
refreshment and is, as we speak, getting ready to depart. But she aske
partially give you this, and I saw no reason to refuse.”

Where The man set something on the desk and stepped back. Fro
: on the Lysander leaned forward and picked up the item between finger and th

A sprig of mistletoe.

He stared at it, hardly daring to believe what it implied. It coul
ernoon, Not after what had occurred in the orangery.

sported But then Pinksen spoke. “The lady said to tell you it is a parado
me his Grace. A contradiction. Not unlike what happened to her and to you. S
d never you would underst—”

“Out of the bloody way!” Lysander all but vaulted over the desk
ve,” he out into the hallway. “She mustn’t leave. Cat, wait, please. I didn’t l
was you!”

opened He ran like the Devil was after him, slowing only when he app
the open door and saw the silhouette of the woman he loved, standing
threshold. Breathless, he halted a stride away, but never said a word.]

done so would have meant giving freedom to the tears that welled in his

’ Instead, he lifted the sprig of mistletoe above his head. Cassie regarded it for a moment, her mouth curving into a smile. Then she stepped forward and into his arms.

Where she belonged.

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EPILOGUE

LYSANDER AND CATHERINE were married on the 11th of April 1845 in Myddleton. As society weddings went, it was a small affair, with only family and close friends in attendance. There were those who questioned the match. Lysander, after all, had no direct heirs, and Catherine was considered by some a little old to be having children. But they loved each other deeply and had waited a lifetime to be together. Neither could imagine spending the rest of their lives with anyone else.

The End

This short story is connected to characters who will feature in my new Victorian Romance series entitled 'The Highfield Chronicles'. My inspiration for this tale came primarily from Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream", where the lovers are paired with the wrong partners. Thank you for reading!

May all your dreams for the New Year be bright!



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