

The
RELUCTANT
LORDS

Once and Again
with the
Viscount

ANDIE
JAMES

ONCE AND AGAIN WITH THE VISCOUNT

THE RELUCTANT LORDS

BOOK THREE



ANDIE JAMES

D&G BOOKS LLC

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For Erin, the best sister a girl could ask for

CHAPTER 1



Cliff House, Dorset, England—September 1820

It's unsettling to feel overwhelming happiness for one's friends while also being unbearably envious.

Angeline took in a deep breath of the salty air to settle herself, observing the friends and family that surrounded her. She had arrived at Cliff House that morning with her brother, Fitz, and his wife, Moira. Staying for a week on the estate of their friend Reid, the Earl of Weston, everyone was there to celebrate his marriage to Angeline's friend Elise. The residence sat perched atop a bluff on the Dorset Coast, providing an unmatched vista from the balcony where her friends had gathered. She was enjoying the view, even as she felt somewhat detached from the proceedings around her. Moving back from the others, she crept toward the railing.

Angeline knew this week of festivities would prove difficult, as such occasions often were since unexpectedly losing her husband, Phillip, two years ago. But she had come anyway, wanting to celebrate her friends. What she had not anticipated was the unsettled feeling, as if her equilibrium was off center, when noticing that her friend Grace, Duchess of Carrington, was expecting her first child.

Grace had not officially shared the news with Angeline, but the small bump she carried from the child growing within her was unmistakable. Walking around Cliff House, even the well-draped material of her skirt could not hide her newly

prominent form as it shifted with every movement. Seeing Grace's glow and realizing her friend was about to become a mother sent a stab of pain through Angeline's heart, knowing motherhood remained forever out of her reach.

Regardless, Angeline was looking forward to the week and spending time with her friends. While she joined a few of the events last Season, tentatively stepping back into polite society after her period of mourning, this week would be different. She *felt* different now, like a new version of herself after her life was irrevocably altered two summers ago, and being in society was no longer as enjoyable as she had found it previously. But here, now, spending a few days with only those she felt she could be the new version of herself around, she hoped she might figure out how to be around others again within this new reality.

“Angie, is that you?”

Startling at the familiar voice, Angeline turned from her place at the edge of the balcony, already knowing who she would see, as she would recognize his voice anywhere.

Sidney.

Despite her melancholy, Angeline couldn't help the small smile that formed upon seeing him. Though not a sunny day, he still appeared illuminated with the fiery strands of his strawberry-blond hair shining in the cool autumn light. As he approached, her eyes traced a path up the many freckles across his cheek until reaching his brilliant blue eyes. They shone as he looked at her, a smile breaking across his face, fitting his name, Mr. Sidney Bright.

Sidling up to her, Sidney reached over and placed his hand over hers where it rested on the balcony railing. Even through her glove, his touch sent a shock up her arm and she had to fight the impulse to pull her hand away.

Angeline was startled by her strong reaction. She had not responded to anyone's touch in that manner since Phillip, and she certainly hadn't expected to feel anything like that again. Maybe it should not be shocking that it was Sidney to illicit such reactions from her once more, as he had been the object

of her childhood infatuation. Still, she had not thought of Sidney as more than a friend since falling so deeply in love with Phillip ten years prior. A very dear friend, yes, but nothing more. Perhaps she was just more sensitive in her current emotional state.

“It’s good to see you, Sidney,” Angeline said after a few quiet moments watching the tide come in. “You’ve been so busy with your Parliamentary work that you hardly attended any events last season.” He turned and looked at her as she spoke, and she felt a blush start to creep up from his regard while confessing that she had missed him. The reaction seemed completely out of place since Angeline had known Sidney her entire life, his family’s estate bordering that of her own family. She hadn’t blushed in his presence since fancying herself to be in love with him as a new debutant, so she had no idea why his gaze made her feel warm now in the chilled air.

“There was much work to be done with the election and the passing of the King, and you know I am trying to make my place within Commons.” He seemed almost bashful speaking of his role as the elected member of Parliament for their part of Kent, a position he’d only held for a few years, and in which he was trying desperately to be taken seriously.

“I’m proud of you,” she said sincerely. “I know you struggled for a while to find your place, but you are working to make a difference, and that matters.”

“Thank you,” Sidney replied quietly, head downcast, almost bashful in light of her praise. “But now the session is over, and I plan to spend some time back at Ravenswood with my brother.” Sidney brightened while speaking of his family’s estate. “It’s been too long since I had quality time with my niece, and I miss the old place.”

“We shall be neighbors then,” Angeline informed him. “I’ve just moved in with my brother at Geffen House.” She had mixed feelings about returning to her childhood home and relying on the hospitality of her brother. While she knew she was loved and welcomed by Fitz and Moira, not seen merely as a responsibility, it felt like a step backward. After living with Phillip for so many years and being mistress of his estate,

it was somewhat humbling to move back into another's household. She was happy to be closer to her family and spend time in her role as aunt, spoiling the children, but she would not feel as independent. Now, knowing Sidney would be nearby, she felt lighter at the prospect of returning to Kent. Maybe it wouldn't be such a hard transition after all if she knew she would have a friend nearby.

"You have decided to leave the estate in Hampshire?" Sidney asked, his brow furrowing with uncertainty.

"It's time," she sighed. "Phillip's family has been so kind in letting me stay this long."

"It's your home."

"Yes, but with Phillip gone, I have no claim to it. His cousin, Patrick, is now the viscount and will come into his majority soon. He and his parents will be moving in as he takes over managing the estate, and the last thing they need is for me to be hanging around and haunting the place."

Angeline knew she would be allowed to stay if she wished to continue living in her husband's home. Phillip's family had embraced her from the start and wanted her to stay connected with them after his unexpected loss. But with Patrick nearly old enough to take on the full responsibilities of the title, she would feel out of place if she remained. Not having produced an heir, she had no claim to be able to stay, and relying on the goodwill of Phillip's cousin did not sit well with her, even though she knew they still considered her part of the family.

"I am happy to come back to Kent and spend more time with my brother, and I am glad you will be nearby." Sidney gave her such a bright smile that it was almost blinding.

"And I am happy I'll get to see more of you. What do you say, shall we join the others?" he asked as dinner was announced. Extending his hand, Angeline felt a small thrill as she placed her hand in his. Smiling up at him, she followed him back into the house for dinner and realized she felt better for his presence.

CHAPTER 2



Sidney was reluctant to let Angeline go once they entered the dining room, but he had no claim on her and did not wish any hint of impropriety. At least that was what he told himself as he released her hand. Really, he did not want to give himself ideas that their friendship was anything more than it was, no matter how much he might hope that it could be.

He watched Angeline walk toward her sister-in-law, Moira, Countess of Geffen, and although she was smiling as she rejoined her family and friends, he still sensed an air of sadness around her. It was what had prompted him to approach her earlier, seeing her separate herself as if she still felt uneasy around others who were so happy. Sidney wanted the ability to banish that sorrow and see the carefree, inquisitive young woman he fell in love with all those years ago again, but he didn't know how to bring her out of her grief.

For most of his life, Sidney had seen Angeline as Fitz's pesky younger sister. With only two years separating them, he and Fitz had been great friends while growing up along the Kent coast and marshes. Sidney had looked up to the older Fitz and followed him with an almost hero's worship as they ran around together on the land that joined their family's estates. At six years younger than himself, Angie had seemed like a nuisance when they were teenagers. Fitz, being a good brother who could deny his little sister almost nothing, allowed her to tag along and she thrived on their adventures.

While Sidney could admit that she was cute and admired her ability to keep up with them, her constant presence had

irritated him. She stole Fitz's attention and prevented them from pursuing more daring escapades Sidney lived for when she accompanied them. Idolizing his older friend, Sidney wanted to hold the attention of the boy he looked up to, and Angie only got in the way.

Things improved when he went away to school and at last joined Fitz at Eaton. Though Sidney was a younger son and not set to inherit, making others treat him with less deference, Fitz immediately brought Sidney into the fold alongside him and his friend Henry. With Fitz being the heir to the Earldom of Geffen and Henry having clout as the grandson of a duke, Sidney became protected. Other boys at the school who might try and give him a hard time left Sidney alone and treated him with begrudging respect. Finally having a feeling of security in Fitz's friendship, he no longer saw Angie as someone he needed to battle when they were home over school holidays.

By the time Sidney had left Cambridge and taken his grand tour, he returned home to find Angeline had grown into a beautiful young woman. His heart raced when he first encountered her again, as he suddenly saw her in an entirely different light. For the first time, he appreciated her friendship outside of, and independent to, his relationship with Fitz. He valued her tenacious spirit, which used to annoy him, and found he was eager to be in her presence.

The Season had just started, and at eighteen, Angeline was making her coming-out. She dazzled at every gathering, and her brightness and beauty attracted everyone to her, men and women alike. Her stunning red hair was a crown of glory and highlighted her hazel eyes that shifted from green to golden brown depending on her mood. As a young man of only twenty-four, Sidney had not thought about marrying yet, but Angie transfixed him, and he knew he wanted to spend his life with her.

But then the unthinkable happened and Sidney's father, Viscount Hasting, died suddenly. Sidney was pulled away from the social scene for mourning and hid away from everyone in his grief. And by the time he returned as an active member of the *ton*, it was too late.

In his absence, Angeline had been a sensation during the season and met and fell in love with Phillip Spencer, the soon-to-be Viscount Eastland. Sidney was crushed to learn of their engagement, but he concealed it from those around him, burying the feelings deep. He had never spoken of the new love he had discovered for Angie, and more than anything he now wished to keep those feelings secret, not wanting to risk possibly ruining the friendships he held so closely. It might have been different if it were a match made for strategic reasons, as so many *ton* marriages were, but Sidney could see how much Angeline truly loved Phillip. And Phillip was a good man. Sidney had known him some at university. While Sidney had always been a bit of a free spirit, thoroughly enjoying himself at Cambridge, Phillip was studious, knowing he would be viscount someday and taking his responsibility seriously.

Even though Sidney's heart was breaking, he could see how happy Angeline was. Sidney genuinely loved her and wanted nothing more than her happiness. He knew he needed to sacrifice his own desires so she could marry the man of her dreams and have the life she deserved. Attending her wedding had been a unique kind of torture, but he had done it with a smile on his face. His ability to hide his true feelings for so many years had allowed him to keep her in his life, and they remained friends through everything that was to come.

Watching Angie across the room now, Sidney wondered if time was beginning to soothe her heartbreak, making it less present. She had taken a few small steps back into polite society, and with her decision to return to Geffen House, he hoped she may be ready to start a new chapter, taking tentative steps forward. He was glad he would be nearby for the foreseeable future to support her in whatever she chose to do next.

Startled from his thoughts, Sidney broke his gaze away from Angie when Henry stood from his place at the table, drawing everyone's attention.

"Not to overshadow on this special occasion," Henry interjected as the voices around him died down, "but I have an

announcement of my own I'd like to share with our friends while we are all gathered together." Sidney watched as Henry turned and reached out a hand to his wife, pulling her up from the table to join him. He noticed the happiness radiating off them both, while out of the corner of his eye he observed Angeline quickly duck her head. "Grace and I are pleased to announce that we will soon be welcoming our first child."

Exclamations and congratulations were offered all around, but Sidney could do nothing other than watch Angeline as the happy news of the new possible heir to a dukedom was shared. After a moment she lifted her head and offered a watery smile, and Sidney's heart shattered a little more, even as he admired her bravery.

Angie's heightened emotions on the balcony now made more sense. He understood why this week of festivities might make her sad, but her melancholy this afternoon had been more pronounced than he was expecting. She must have either already known about Grace's pregnancy or guessed, for now that he looked more closely, it seemed obvious that she was indeed with child. More than anything he longed to stride across the room and gather Angie in his arms, letting her know she was safe with him. He knew she was happy for her friend; he could see the smile she offered at the news was genuine. But he could also see the slightly haunted look lingering behind the delighted expression, and knew she must be hurting as well.

While Angeline had never spoken to him about her struggles to have children—such things were not discussed in general, let alone with a man—the absence of a child after eight years of marriage was proof enough. Though Sidney suspected, had Phillip lived, Angeline's love for him may very well have been enough. They could have spent a happy life together with just the two of them.

However, he also knew how much Angeline loved children and remembered how she had spoken of her desire to be a mother when they were younger. Previously, he had seen the pain in her eyes when she watched her niece and nephews play, and he could only imagine what she might feel in the

future watching this child of Henry's, as well as the children Elise was almost certain to have.

Forcing himself out of his thoughts, Sidney made his way over to Henry and embraced him with a slap on the back in congratulations. But his eyes were still on Angeline, drawn to her of their own volition as he watched her slip quietly from the room.

CHAPTER 3



Up early the next morning, Angeline made her way downstairs to find a cup of tea. She was feeling more herself this morning after time to process Grace and Henry's good news, and a night spent with the sea air lulling her into deep rest.

She had left the group rather quickly after dinner last night, feeling Sidney's eyes tracking her after Henry's announcement. He was too observant. He had obviously sensed her unease yesterday which was why he had approached her before dinner. Then with the news Grace was expecting, Angeline knew the moment Sidney had put two and two together. Unable to take the empathy in his gaze, she fled the room to have an unobserved moment alone.

Entering the breakfast room and finding herself alone, Angeline wandered over to the sideboard arranged with pots of coffee and tea while footmen bustled about bringing in trays of food. After pouring a cup and adding some sugar to brace her for the day, she settled down and waited for the others to rise and join her. Enjoying the moment of solitude, she reflected on the surprising way she had responded to Sidney's touch, and why he would be the first person to make her feel something again in over two years.

Sidney had been a constant presence in her life for as long as she could remember. As the boy next door and only two years younger than her brother, he was always around as a natural playmate. Angeline knew that when they were younger, she had annoyed him more than anything. At eight years younger than Fitz, he must have found her presence

cumbersome, but as the good brother he was, he often allowed her to tag along with him and Sidney. She loved and looked up to both of them, and as she got a little older, she wanted to prove herself and show she could be tough just like they were. She followed the two young men around relentlessly, through adventures within the grounds of the neighboring estates and into the nooks and crannies of every property within their combined lands.

It wasn't until the boys left for school and Angeline missed them terribly that Sidney grew to almost mythic proportions in her mind. She longed to spend time roaming with them again and hated that her mother was pushing her toward more "womanly pursuits" to tame her wild spirit. There was nothing more boring to Angeline than a morning spent embroidering, and she missed the boys terribly, turning memories of their previous adventures into grand tales within her mind. After a while, the lines between reality and imagination began to blur, and Sidney became the hero of her heart. She developed a massive fascination of him that only grew each time he returned home to Kent on a school break.

By the time Angeline was ready to make her debut, Sidney had finished his university days at Cambridge and was just returning from a shortened grand tour, as travel on the continent was hindered by the continuing clashes with Napoleon. He was a bit rowdy and had clearly enjoyed his freedom, as young men of wealth were known to do. But underneath, Sidney was still the sweet boy who had always allowed her to tag along and watched out for her, no matter how much he may have grumbled about it.

Angeline knew her feelings for him were not necessarily based in reality, but she could not stop the draw she felt to him through logic alone. He had grown into an extremely handsome young man even though his looks were somewhat unusual, with distinctive features. His hair was neither red nor blond yet somehow managed to be both at the same time. Some called him a ginger while others argued that the hue was more golden. His complexion was pale and liberally sprinkled with brown freckles across his face. But it was his brilliant

blue eyes sparkling with joy and mischief that caught and held one's attention.

Angeline had hoped that she would be able to catch Sidney's attention and make him see her as a woman when she joined polite society for the Season. Her new wardrobe, created for her debut, showed her at her best and highlighted that her body had changed into that of a woman. While still maintaining propriety, she tried to emphasize the new curves which had appeared in the last years, and which she believed would appeal to Sidney as a young man. But before she had the chance to make her campaign, his father died, and he was ripped away from London and the functions of the Season.

Angeline was devastated and vowed to not make a match, but to wait for Sidney once he was out of mourning. In the brief time they had together before his bereavement, Angeline had thought she may have felt a shift in his interest in her, and she was determined to see if time would make that true. Her mother, however, would not hear of it. While Angeline never spoke specifically about her love for Sidney, she was sure her mother was fully aware of her girlhood crush, as she had not been subtle with the longing looks she threw his way whenever he had turned up in Kent over the years. Though Angeline was despondent at his absence, her mother forced her to attend countless *ton* events and make her name in the Season. And then one day she met Phillip.

Phillip asked her to dance at a ball held by the Duke and Duchess of Carrington, a notoriously fancy yearly soiree, and for the first time in weeks since Sidney had departed, Angeline enjoyed herself. He had such a lovely countenance and was easy to be around and converse with. Angeline loved that Phillip showed genuine interest in what she was reading and learning about and wanted to know what made her happy. He saw her as her own person and not simply someone who could bring him standing as the daughter of an earl with a healthy dowry. And Phillip himself was a good man. As the future Viscount Eastland, he took his responsibilities seriously and had been a dutiful student while at university, and now worked closely with his father to learn everything he could about managing their estate. He was kind and well-regarded by his

peers, and Angeline could not understand the reason he focused in on her as the object of his affection.

She hadn't meant to fall in love with Phillip, it had just happened. Angeline's affection and admiration for him grew so naturally that she was immersed in feelings before she even realized it. What she felt for Phillip was deep regard and respect, not to mention a healthy dose of attraction. And because those feelings were returned, it made what she had felt for Sidney seem like a childish infatuation. She had built up an image of Sidney over the years that made him perfect for her in every way, but that image was based on her imaginings more than reality, and he saw her only as Fitz's little sister. It was difficult for her to let go of the dream she had held for so long, but she had truly fallen in love with Phillip, and the life he was offering her was real. When Phillip proposed at the end of the season, she didn't hesitate to accept even though she knew she would always hold affection for Sidney as well.

Sidney remained a friend, but as her love for Phillip grew deeper when they started their life together, he remained only that in her life, a good friend. Angeline's life with Phillip was based on a mature love which had grown from their understanding and respect for who the other was as a real person, whereas her love for Sidney had been childish and based on a dream. She still cherished the feelings she had had for him, but she now understood them for what they had been and was able to let them go completely and view Sidney in a new way, as a longtime friend who knew her well and thus would always share a special bond with her.

Angeline shook her head, trying to release the memories from long ago. What had thrown her yesterday as much as the baby announcement was how she felt about Sidney in the few moments they had spent together. While for so many years he fit perfectly in the friend category where he had settled, she had begun to experience stirrings of the old feelings of affection that were more than simply platonic. Since losing Phillip, Angeline had not felt drawn to anyone in a romantic way, but Sidney's touch and awareness of her emotions had made her feel stirrings of something beyond the friendship she had known from him for so long.

Were these resurfaced feelings something she should indulge? Angeline didn't know if she was ready to think of another man affectionately. There were complications to starting a new relationship with anyone, let alone a close family friend. Perhaps she should just enjoy the week and get to know Sidney as the man he was now. While he had remained a good friend, since her marriage ten years ago, she had not seen him nearly as often. While time and distance would never lessen their bond, forged as it was so early in her life, she couldn't claim to have intimate knowledge of who he was now. He had matured and become engrossed in politics over the past few years, finally stepping up and being a responsible member of society, rather just languishing away as a wealthy young man.

Before she could dwell on her confusing feelings any further, Grace entered the room with Henry not far behind. Smiling at the couple, Angeline offered her congratulations. "I'm sorry I didn't say this last night, but I'm so happy for the both of you. I know you'll make excellent parents." She rose to embrace Grace.

"Thank you," the duchess responded before whispering in Angeline's ears, "I'm sorry if we overwhelmed you announcing it like that. I saw you leave not long after. Should I have told you in private first?"

"No. The last thing I need is for everyone to feel like they need to treat me with kid gloves. I won't pretend I didn't feel some personal sadness at the announcement, but I'm adjusting with time. And with my return to Kent, I think it's time to move forward. I am genuinely thrilled for you and anxious to be an auntie once more."

"Good." Grace released Angeline's hand with a squeeze before going to gather her breakfast. As more of her friends began to trickle in, Angeline turned her mind toward the day ahead.

CHAPTER 4



It was a glorious afternoon, the sun shining in the final gasp of summer and warming the small strip of beach below the cliffs. It had been an enjoyable few days with only close friends of the bride and groom in attendance, and Sidney was loath for it to come to an end. The fun and relaxed atmosphere could not last forever, though, and more wedding guests were expected to arrive in just a few hours for the main event the next day.

Stretching after the game of lawn bowling the gentlemen had been attempting to play in the sand, Sidney grinned as he saw the ladies traipsing down the path from the cliff to join them. He was relieved to see Angeline enjoying herself over the last few days after the initial evening of the gathering.

Breaking off from the others, Angeline looked his way and smiled upon seeing him. Sidney's pulse quickened as she headed his direction. She was always beautiful, but seeing her with a smile on her face again did something to Sidney's that he was reluctant to examine too closely.

"What have you all been up to out here?" Angeline asked as she approached, looking at the balls skeptically.

"We were attempting to lawn bowl, but it wasn't very successful."

"I imagine not," she replied with a laugh. "I should think sand is a bit of a different consistency than grass."

He gave her a sheepish smile while shrugging. "It was worth a shot, and we had a good time anyway."

Before he realized what was happening, they were walking down the beach together. It was wonderful spending time with only her. They had never spent much time alone over the years. Before, either Fitz joined them, or she was with Phillip when everyone was gathered together. Sidney relished this new phase in their friendship and getting to know Angeline all over again as the woman she was now.

“This is nice,” she said, echoing his thoughts. “We’ve never spent much time together, just the two of us. I’ve enjoyed the past few days.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” he said, turning toward her with a grin. “We’ve always been friends, but this week feels the start of a different phase of our friendship.”

“Yes, it seems like you actually want to spend time with me now. I’m not simply the irksome little sister trailing along and interrupting time with your real friend.” Her tone was teasing, and Sidney could see a glint in Angeline’s eye as she said these things, but he sensed an underlying insecurity.

“I never thought of you as a pest, Angie. I admit I was sometimes frustrated that your presence hindered our adventures, but I always liked you. You grew on me.”

“I think you’re just being kind,” Angeline said as she ducked her head. “I know how young boys are. You wanted to be off testing yourselves and doing dangerous things, like climbing the steep rocks near the river.”

Sidney laughed. “Yes, I did desire to do such foolish things, and your presence probably saved your brother and I from a few injuries over the years.” He stopped and turned to her, taking her hand in his. He could feel the shiver that went up her arm at the contact and felt the impact of it himself. “Angie, listen to me. You are not a bother. Nor did I feel like you were tagging along. Where is this coming from?”

Angeline was looking down at the sand, refusing to meet his eyes, but she didn’t let go of his hand as she slowly answered.

“I think moving back in with Fitz has me feeling a bit insecure. I know it’s the right move, but I can’t help but wonder if I’m inserting myself into his life as I did back then.”

Seeing such a normally confident woman’s insecurities come to the surface tugged at Sidney’s heartstrings. “Listen to me, Angie. Fitz loves you. I know we complained about having you along back then, but the truth is, we wouldn’t have had it any other way. He’s always enjoyed having you around, and that’s no different now. And I personally am looking forward to spending more time with you when we all return to Kent in a few days.”

“Do you really mean that?” Angeline asked, lifting her eyes.

“I do. You’ve always been someone special to me, and I’m happy we’ll have the opportunity to get to know one another in a whole new way. We’re both different people now”—he saw as that truth made her eyes mist over and reached out to brush a finger under her eye— “but at the heart of everything, you’re still the same person who wormed her way into my heart and never left.”

Sidney knew he needed to be careful and not say too much, but he wanted to reassure her, letting Angeline know she was not now, nor had her presence ever been, a burden. She was a blessing.

“Thank you, Sidney.” She was smiling with such affection he had to force himself not to step forward and kiss her. She wasn’t yet ready for such affections, and he wasn’t sure if she would ever be able to see him as anything other than a friend, but he knew this was his second chance. With her return to Geffen House, he needed to use the opportunity that had been presented to him, and see if in time, she might be ready for something more.

Sidney’s intuition about the week proved correct: Cliff House wasn’t nearly as fun once the remaining wedding guests

arrived, and he had to brace himself for inane small talk before coming downstairs for pre-dinner drinks. The room was filled with guests dressed in their finest as he waded through the crowd toward the sidebar.

“Well don’t you look delicious,” a voice purred into his ear while he poured a dram of whiskey. Startled by the feminine form suddenly wrapped around his side, he fumbled the tumbler in his hand, nearly splashing out the precious brown liquid.

Laughing in delight at his clumsiness, the woman laid her hand on Sidney’s chest as if to claim him before he even had the chance to turn around. Closing his eyes and taking in a calming breath, he knew regardless of who she was, a piece of his past was back to cause him trouble.

The woman pulled away from him slightly, allowing Sidney to turn and see who was there creating problems. Recognizing Lady Catherine, he groaned internally. She was a young widow whom he’d had an affair with a few years prior. Though Sidney was now a responsible elected member of the House of Commons, his previous fast lifestyle still caught up with him from time to time, and Lady Catherine was one of his most persistent reminders.

“I was so happy to learn you would be attending the wedding,” she said, still clinging to his arm. “I’m at the end of the hall on the third floor. Why don’t you join me there this evening? I did so enjoy our time together before, and I could use your special brand of satisfaction this evening.”

Shuddering away from her touch, Sidney looked up to see Angeline eyeing the two of them from across the room, curiosity in her gaze. Knowing without a doubt that she was the only woman in the room he held any interest in, he shook the widow off him, feeling cheapened by her touch.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible, but I do hope you enjoy yourself at the wedding,” Sidney said politely before turning to find any available friend to keep him occupied and away from such situations.

Looking around the room for Fitz or Henry, Sidney was chagrined to see there were a few other past lovers in attendance, and more than one of them were eyeing him appreciatively. It was his own fault. After coming out of mourning for his father and realizing he had lost Angeline in the meantime, he'd not reacted in the healthiest manner. Trying to keep the pain suppressed, Sidney had become a bit wild in the intervening years and attempted to lose himself, keeping his thoughts distracted by having as much fun as possible with a string of dalliances. As a second son with a married brother, he felt freer to spread his wings and explore life away from the family estate. His brother would produce his own heir, making Sidney even less necessary, so he did not feel guilty for his foolhardy behavior, losing himself in drink and women from time to time to try and forget Angeline. But in the end, it didn't make him feel better, and he never forgot that the woman he loved found happiness with another man.

After years of trying to drown out his feelings, the time spent in debauchery began to grow stale and life felt wholly unsatisfying. The women and the whisky meant to fill the empty void in his chest fell short, and he was left still feeling exposed and hollow, his usual tricks not easing the ache any longer. Sidney had already started to pull away from the empty indulgences, determined to find a new purpose for his life, when he learned Phillip had died. His heart ached for Angeline, knowing how much she genuinely loved him and understanding how hard it was to live without the one you loved beside you. But hearing the news, he was also hopeful that he and Angie could have a future together after all, and he hated himself for having the thought. Regardless, the idea had planted itself firmly in his mind, and Sidney spent the next two years trying to make himself into the best man he could be, one worthy of Angeline.

Over the past few days, he'd started to believe that he might have another chance with her if he took his time and eased back into their friendship first. He just hoped he could make it through the rest of the wedding events without the other ladies foiling his plans.

CHAPTER 5



“I’m so happy for you,” Angeline whispered to the bride while fighting the tears that were stinging the back of her eyes. Releasing her hold of Elise, now the Countess of Weston, she quickly made her way out of the room, trying to avoid the embarrassment of breaking down in front of the other wedding guests. Up until now she had been able to pass off the telltale sheen in her eyes as happy tears, not unheard of on such occasions, but Angeline felt her resilience beginning to falter after suppressing her emotions all day.

Moving quickly, she passed the other guests without acknowledgment on her way to the balcony and gulped in the fresh sea air as she tried to calm herself, managing to keep the tears at bay for the moment.

Weddings were always difficult events, but after being with everyone this past week, Angeline thought she was prepared to handle this one, being genuinely thrilled that Reid and Elise had found such love and happiness with one another. But the beautiful service unnerved her.

Feeling more stable now that she had a moment to herself and could finally let her guard down, Angeline leaned against the stone railing of the balcony and took in the sight of the sea surrounding her. Closing her eyes, she enjoyed the breeze off the water. The gust was chillier than it had been for the past several days, and the bite heralded the promise of autumn.

Hearing a door open, she turned to see Sidney following her out. Although she hadn’t wished for company, Angeline

felt comforted by his presence and didn't mind when he strode forward to stand next to her.

Brow furrowed in concern, he asked, "Are you well? I saw you leave rather quickly, and I wanted to make sure you were alright."

"I'm fine," she assured him, touched by his attentiveness. "It's just been a full day and I needed a moment to clear my head."

She suspected he didn't quite believe her based on how he was studying her, but after a moment, he nodded, and the intensity of his gaze softened. Sidney had known her long enough to understand that he shouldn't push her and to just be there as a friend. Standing next to her, looking out at the waves, he didn't say a word.

"It was a lovely wedding," she offered after a moment. "They seem truly happy together, and I'm so glad Elise's reputation was able to be repaired."

Sidney chuckled while looking at the stretch of rocks and sand below them. "Reid would have married her regardless. I walked along that very beach with him when he came up with the plan to restore her name," he shared while gesturing to the coastline. "He was devastated at the thought he might lose her due to the ridiculous ideas of the *ton*. I've never seen Reid so distraught. It's amazing how love can change someone whom you think you know so well."

"Yes," Angeline agreed quietly. "Love can certainly make one feel and act in ways they did not think themselves capable of." She fought back her tears once more as they threatened an appearance, Sidney's words reminding her of how differently she had felt when she first fell for Phillip.

"I'm sorry," Sidney said, frowning slightly as he noticed her downcast state. "I'm sure days like today cannot always be easy for you."

"It can be difficult to keep the memories at bay sometimes. I am so truly happy for Elise and Reid, but seeing such

happiness can sometimes be a reminder of what I once had and what is now missing.”

“Angie, you must have things in your life that still bring you joy,” Sidney said. “It would break my heart if I thought you didn’t have some happiness of your own.”

“I do,” she rushed to reassure him. “I have Fitz and Moira and my sweet niece and nephew. And good friends,” she added, taking his hand and giving it a squeeze. “I did not mean to sound so despondent—I promise I am well. Some days are just harder than others.”

“And today is a hard day.” Sidney said it as a statement, but his eyes made it seem like a question as he peered at her intently.

“In part, but it is also one filled with joy.” Angeline gave him a smile so he wouldn’t continue to worry about her, and it was easy to do because she spoke the truth.

“And do you think dancing might bring you joy?” Sidney asked with a smirk. “The band has just started up and a few brave souls have begun dancing before dinner is to commence. Would you care to join me?” He extended a hand to her with an exaggerated bow, succeeding in making her laugh, successfully shaking off the dour mood which had temporarily overtaken her.

“Such a gentleman, I would be honored.” Angeline took his hand and followed him into the ballroom, once again feeling tingles shoot up her arm from the contact. As they walked toward the dance floor, she could feel the eyes of more than one woman trailing them, many looking envious that she was the one who currently held Sidney’s attention.

“I think we are causing a bit of a stir,” she whispered to Sidney as he pulled her into his arms, setting the frame for the waltz that was just beginning. “Several women here are wondering what on earth you’re doing dancing with me of all people.”

“And why wouldn’t I want to dance with the most beautiful woman in the room?” he said, looking at her intently.

Angeline knew that was the kind of answer any charming gentleman would say in such a situation, but the light in his eyes made her feel like he truly meant the sentiment. Thinking he could be sincere; a shiver went up her spine. Sidney pulled her closer, mistaking her tremor for being cold, and she reveled in the feeling of being held once more.

Testing the boundaries of the situation, Angeline couldn't help but press a bit more and see how Sidney would react. "You flatter me, but that's hardly the case. There are several beautiful and, I dare say, more engaging women here who seem to desire your attention." She was not naive. She knew Sidney had developed a reputation over the years, though rumors of his womanizing tendencies had slowed considerably since he took office. Angeline was almost certain that he'd had an affair with at least one of the women staring them down.

"Angie, I have always found you enchanting, and I promise there is no one else I would rather be with right now."

She knew she had no claim to Sidney, but his words warmed her regardless. It was nice to feel like the object of one's affection again—to be the focus of Sidney's adoration, no less.

Sidney reluctantly released Angeline from his arms and led her off the dance floor after the song ended. He hoped Angeline felt reassured she was the only one who held his attention, and that he could care less about any of the other women in the room who may be vying for his time. He didn't want to flit from woman to woman any longer. He only wanted to be with her.

Startled from his thoughts, Sidney broke his gaze away from Angie at the sound of a clinking glass as the room quieted.

Only half listening as several guests gave speeches toasting the new couple, Sidney finally tuned in when it was time for Henry's, as he was standing up with Reid today. After

clearing his throat, Henry began. “Friends and family, thank you for coming together today to help celebrate the marriage of Reid and Elise.” Sidney watched as the newlywedded couple looked at one another adoringly. Reid had his arm wrapped around Elise’s shoulders and was gazing at her with such love that Sidney choked up. He would give anything to be able to look at Angie with such open affection.

“Reid is the best of men, and the greatest friend anyone could ask for,” Henry continued. “He is the type of man I would follow anywhere, and he knows that’s true since I spent years under his command traipsing about the continent after Napoleon.” Laughter came from the surrounding crowd as this was said with a smile and obvious affection. “We could not be happier that he has at last found his true match in Elise. We would not part with him for anyone less worthy, and I know you will be able to keep him in line. More importantly, we know you will be a wonderful partner and support for him as you both work for the good of those around you.”

It was a good speech, and Sidney agreed with every word. While he had not been in the army with Reid, the man had been instrumental in showing him the ropes in the House of Commons. Much of Sidney’s growing success in the House was a direct result of Reid’s influence and leadership within the Whigs, even though Reid was now a member of the House of Lords rather than Commons after inheriting his title just over a year ago. Though Sidney had no desire for the responsibility of a place within the peerage, he could not help but be envious of Reid today as he was so obviously besotted with his new wife, a feeling Sidney would like to experience himself one day.

“So, let us all raise a glass to the happy new couple—the Earl and Countess of Weston,” Henry finished.

“To the Westons,” was echoed throughout the small gathering as everyone shared smiles with the celebrants and one another.

CHAPTER 6



Slamming her book closed, Angeline had to stop herself from hurling it across the room in sheer frustration. But even agitated that she could not sleep, there was never a good excuse to abuse such a precious and beloved volume. She closed her eyes in exhaustion as she slumped against the wall from her position perched in the windowsill. The celebrations ended hours ago, and while her body was wrung out from the day's emotions, Angeline could not stop her mind from endlessly turning as she begged it to quiet so she could finally rest. But it was futile.

She hated that feelings of envy were tainting her happiness for her friends. Angeline felt like a villain for being anything other than purely joyful at Elise's union and Grace's happy news. But she couldn't ignore the cavernous hole in her chest that ached for what she had lost, both Phillip and countless pregnancies over the years.

And more than anything, Angeline hated the pity from others. She had felt it from those gathered all day. It oozed in the awkward silences when happy marriages were discussed, then quickly stumbled into hushed conversation, as those gathered saw her approaching. She felt the glances and saw the heads shaking in sadness as they all knew such a day would inevitably bring up memories for her. She could handle the comforting words of her family and friends, knowing they were offered out of genuine care for her; it was the acquaintances and their well-meaning, but almost patronizing, remarks that really chafed.

More than once throughout the day Moira glanced at her questioningly but left her alone when Angeline had given a nod, assuring she was alright. Her brother also hovered more than usual, though his presence was more of a quiet form of support that she found reassuring. Sidney, however, could see through her completely and had known she was not alright, no matter how much she feigned indifference to the day's events. The only respite all evening had been dancing with him. Being held once more, knowing she had his attention and friendship, was thrilling.

Now, hours later, Angeline remained restless. More than anything, while she did not want to see other's pity, she also did not want to be alone. She was so tired of being alone. After knowing the joy of spending her life with someone, it was exhausting to know she would forever need to take on the world by herself. The strength to do so existed within her, she knew she could survive on her own just as she had for the past two years, but some days she just wanted to feel the comfort and security of another. Even though she had fled from him earlier, more than anyone it was Sidney's company that she craved. He had stirred something within her.

Still unsettled, Angeline decided to make her way to the kitchen for a snack. Wrapping her best dressing gown over her night rail, she quietly made her way through the halls of Cliff House and down the stairs with only the light of a single candle to guide her. She desperately hoped she did not become lost or turned around in the still unfamiliar home, not wishing to cause a disturbance or get stranded in a far-off room. Turning the corner into what appeared to be the kitchen, she stifled a scream as she ran straight into a hard chest and felt arms grab her.

Sidney desperately clutched at the form shrouded in the darkness before him and reached for the candle before it could be upended in the tumult. Regaining his balance, he

straightened and lifted the candle to see who it was he had collided with.

“Angie?” he uttered in disbelief. “What are you doing up and about at this hour?” Sidney was always happy to see her, but she looked rather disgruntled as she straightened her dressing robe and pulled it closer to her form, concealing her nightwear.

Agitatedly brushing hair off her brow with an impatient flick of her hand, she looked up at him with stormy eyes, glowing gold in her irritation. “If you must know, I was hungry and trying to find the kitchen for a snack,” she huffed. “What are *you* doing up?”

“Pretty much the same thing,” he told her with a grin. “Take it down a notch and follow me. I’ll get you taken care of—I know the secrets of this kitchen.” With a glare at his observation of her feisty mood, she took hold of his arm without a fight and let him lead her toward the kitchen he had just left himself. As she sat down at a large table in the middle of the room, he relit his own candle that had been doused in the scuffle and made his way into the pantry to grab some food.

Reemerging with a loaf of bread and a plate with slices of ham and cheese, he locked eyes with Angeline as she glared at him, still flustered from their violent meeting in the hallway. “I’m sorry I startled you,” Sidney said as a peace offering. “I didn’t know anyone else was up and I did not see you as I rounded the corner.”

Angeline’s features softened at his admission, not able to hold on to her anger as she calmed down from the upset. “It’s not your fault,” she said rather sheepishly. “At least not *entirely*,” she quickly added. He was glad her fighting spirit was still intact, letting Sidney know he had not frightened her too deeply. “Give me some of that, I’m starving.” She motioned for the food and he quickly passed her a plate, watching as she began assembling a sandwich. “How do you know your way around down here?” she asked through a mouthful.

He chuckled at the picture she presented, recognizing her casual manner as a sign of comfort with him as she would never act in such an un-propitious manner in front of just anyone. “I know you barely ate any dinner, which must be the reason for your current gluttonous display,” he teased. She blushed and brought her hand up to cover her mouth as she chewed a large bite she had just taken. Knowing he spoke only in jest however, she continued to eat with relish. “To answer your question, I’ve spent a few long sessions here over the past year with the men, trying to make plans to advance the Whig agenda. The days spent debating were often long and frequently ended with raids on the larder.”

“Of course,” Angie said after swallowing. “I know Fitz was here for many of those gatherings. I’m grateful for your incursions since you were able to assist me with this excellent sandwich.” Lifting what remained of her meal in a salute to him, she took another bite and moaned in happiness.

“Thrilled to be of assistance,” Sidney replied. “You were quiet at dinner,” he added softly. “Are you well?”

She stiffened slightly at the question and paused her chewing before letting out a breath through her nose and slumping into a more relaxed position again, relenting to the questions she knew were to come. “I’m fine,” she replied, which Sidney knew meant she was anything but. “Today was a lot ... and I couldn’t take anymore of everyone’s pity.”

He watched her quietly in the flickering candlelight, contemplating how to say what he wanted to without upsetting her further. “I don’t think it’s pity, Angie. For me it’s almost a sense of sadness knowing that someone I care for deeply is hurting.”

She swallowed and looked up at him after brushing off her hands over the plate. “I know you all mean well, and it doesn’t come across as malicious from my close friends. But I can’t tell you how many times conversations abruptly ended with my approach. Everyone feels like they need to tiptoe around me, like they can’t speak about what happened directly.”

She took in a ragged breath, eyes closed as a pained expression crossed her face. “My husband died,” she said bluntly, reopening her eyes. “It happened, and I just wish people wouldn’t act otherwise. By not mentioning anything to do with Phillip, it’s like he didn’t exist. And I don’t want him to be erased simply because someone is worried they might upset me ... Yes, weddings and celebrations can be difficult reminders, but I’m not that fragile. It’s been two years and I’m trying to move forward with my life—I wish everyone would let me.” The last was said with a bit of fire and obvious frustration.

“You’re right,” Sidney offered. “People die all the time, and we should not dishonor Phillip by avoiding mentioning him. But, Angie, such losses are not always as significant.” She looked up at him, a question in her eyes at his statement. Reaching across the table, he took hold of her hand, and began brushing his thumb across the back of it in a soothing gesture. “You know how most *ton* marriages are, but everyone could clearly see how much you and Phillip loved one another. That kind of loss leaves a mark.” Her eyes filled with tears at this last statement, and he wanted to kick himself for being so open, but it was what she had asked for.

They were both quiet for a few minutes, though the silence was not uncomfortable, before Angeline spoke up and just about ripped Sidney’s heart out with her next words.

“Did you know I was with him when he died?” she asked rhetorically. “It was so sudden ... It was a beautiful early summer day, not too hot yet, and we were out for an afternoon walk, arm in arm.”

Angeline stared at a spot over Sidney’s shoulder, seeing something he couldn’t in the darkness as she shared her memories of that day with him.

Sidney had not known any of the specifics of how Phillip had died, only that it had been very sudden and unexpected, making the loss that much harder to comprehend, so he listened to her with great interest. “I cajoled him away from his desk where he had been at his books all day. He grumbled about it at first but was happy for the reprieve as we stepped

out into the fresh air. I remember we were laughing over something silly ... I can't recall the particulars no matter how hard I try." She forcefully expelled a breath and shook her head, eyes squeezed tight, obviously frustrated that the details of such an important moment escaped her. "But we were laughing, and he let go of my arm to pick a small daisy for me that was growing in the grass. He leaned over and kissed my temple before walking toward a patch of wildflowers ... I believe to pick even more for me."

Angeline paused, looking pained while still staring unfocused into the unknown behind Sidney. "I wasn't really paying attention—still laughing over whatever it was when I noticed as he was walking away that he suddenly ... stopped. He stood still for a moment; his back was to me so I couldn't see his face ... but there was just something about his movement—he seemed off somehow. His gait had stopped too abruptly, and he seemed to lean ever so slightly to the right. The posture was all wrong and I felt cold, scared. I called out to him just as he collapsed." A sob broke through and she finally stopped staring into space, instead lowering her gaze to the table. "I rushed over, but before I even touched him, I could tell he was gone."

Angie shook her head with her eyes still downcast so he could not see her expression. Sidney continued stroking the back of her hand, maintaining the tiny connection but letting her say what she needed to before moving to comfort her. "He looked like stone, pale, with nothing behind his eyes ... just a blank. I remember picking up his hand and noticing the ink stains on his fingers from the bookkeeping he had been doing just a half hour before. Everything felt surreal. I must have screamed because some people joined us a few moments later—I don't know who. It must have been staff because they felt familiar, and I let them pull me back even though I didn't let go of his hand." She snapped her head up and looked at Sidney. "Isn't it mad—that I can recall a detail like the ink on Phillip's fingers but not remember those who helped me?"

"No," he said after a moment, when he saw she genuinely wanted an answer. "I think that grief does strange things with our memories. Some things it sharpens and others we forget,

or they become muddied.” She nodded in agreement, still focused on him, like he could help her make sense of the most terrible moment of her life.

It sounded to Sidney like some kind of apoplexy, but different from what he knew of them at the same time. He desperately wished he could provide her with an answer, sure the unknown quality of why Phillip left so suddenly had to haunt her, making the loss that much more difficult.

“I just wish I understood ...,” she said, her voice breaking as her tears unleashed, flowing down her face.

“Angie ...,” Sidney said, practically leaping across the table as he rushed to pull her into his arms. She burrowed her face into his chest and gripped his shirt as if the material would keep her from drowning. He rocked her gently back and forth like one would do to sooth a child, running his hand through her hair. As her crying slowed and her breathing began to even out, he loosened his hold on her and pulled back far enough to kiss her forehead.

“I’m sorry I don’t know how to make it better,” he whispered. He relished the feeling of her in his arms and hated himself for having the thought as she was clearly in distress. Burying his nose into her soft red hair, he breathed in her delicate lavender scent, savoring the moment as he knew it would be brief.

“I don’t mean to scandalize,” she spoke into his chest, “but do you think you could hold me a little longer?” Angeline barely peeked up at him as she finished her question, her cheeks flaming.

Sidney pulled back so he could look into her eyes and spoke to her from his soul. “Angie, always. You can always come to me if you need anything.” He lifted his hand and brushed the stray lock of hair from her brow once again. “I will always be here for you, and you never need to be afraid to ask me anything.” She nodded her understanding and a look of relief and gratitude passed over her face as she visibly relaxed, settling back into his embrace. They stood together for several minutes before she eventually pulled away.

“Let me clean this up and then we can head back upstairs.”
Angeline nodded in acknowledgment and sat quietly while Sidney made short work of returning the pilfered items to the pantry. Picking up the candle, he took her hand, and they quietly made their way back upstairs to the guestrooms.

CHAPTER 7



Angeline awoke enveloped in warmth. For just a moment, reality was suspended in time and she thought she was lying in bed beside Phillip. But as the dream faded, coming more fully alert, she realized she was lying on a chaise in the library, and it was Sidney's arm around her. He was still asleep, so she took a moment to take in his peaceful face and thought about the rash decision she had made last night.

When she and Sidney had reached the top of the stairs, she couldn't bring herself to return to her room all alone and pled for him to take her to the library and read for a bit. She didn't regret it—in fact falling asleep while he read to her from the Austen's last published work had been the best night of sleep she'd had in ages. Regardless, she knew it would be wise not to dawdle here with him. She should probably get up and sneak back to her room before anyone became aware of the situation.

The problem was that she didn't want to move. For the first time in two years, Angeline felt safe and content. And while Sidney had been a perfect gentleman, this morning, leaning against his solid frame, her body felt like it was on fire. The first stirrings of arousal she had thought might lay dormant forever were beginning to work their way through her body. For just a moment she had the reckless idea to kiss him, simply to remember what it felt like to be a woman who could physically express her love.

Just then, Sidney stirred from his cramped position on the chaise beside her. Eyes still closed, he instinctually turned

toward her and nuzzled into her hair. Humming in appreciation, as he shifted closer, she could feel his morning arousal press against her hip. She thought she might burn up from the thoughts the feel of him conjured. As Sidney came to, Angeline feigned sleep to avoid embarrassment. She must have pretended well enough, for a moment later, after shifting back to give her more space on the cramped seat, she felt him gently trace a finger down her cheek and jaw line.

“So beautiful,” he murmured.

Scared her blush would give her away, she gave a small stretch to make him think it was his touch which had awoken her. Lazily opening her eyes and yawning, Angeline looked at him before offering a small smile.

“Good morning,” she said shyly. “I’m sorry I fell asleep on you. I forgot how well I sleep when I have someone beside me.”

“I’m glad you were able to rest well,” he said while gazing at her from his side, his head lying on his arm. Sidney’s familiar face was so handsome, and Angeline felt the pull of desire rising within her again. Utterly flustered, she sat up quickly, straightening her gown as she stood from the too small settee.

“I’d best be off before the household wakes and we raise questions,” she said while avoiding looking his direction. She didn’t want to give away what she was feeling at that moment, a mix of gratitude and want. Reaching the door, she forced herself to turn halfway so she could acknowledge what he had given her by staying by her side. “Thank you, Sidney, for always being a friend I can count on.” Slipping out the door, she fled before hearing if he responded.

Padding down the hallway as quietly as she could, Angeline made her way back to her room, trying valiantly not to be caught creeping around in the early hours of the morning. She thought she was in the clear but froze at the sound of a voice just as she reached her bedroom door.

“And just where are you coming from?”

Angeline breathed a sigh of relief as she spotted Moira and motioned for her to follow her into the room, quickly shutting the door behind them. Sinking onto the edge of the bed, Angeline buried her face in her hands, unable to look at Moira and decipher what her expression may be.

“This is a still made bed, my dear. Where on earth did you creep in from?” Looking up and peeking through her fingers, she could see Moira looking at her with one eyebrow raised quizzically. There was no judgment, just curiosity, and Angeline’s shoulders relaxed infinitesimally at Moira’s initial reaction.

“It’s not what it looks like,” she started, praying her complexion didn’t redden and raise suspicions.

“And what if it was?” Moira asked. “I’m not one to judge. I would have a hard time saying goodbye to the joys of married life too.”

While happy to learn Moira only wanted to support her, Angeline had to repress a shudder knowing the joys she spoke of were in reference to her brother. “More than I needed to know, Moira. But thank you.”

“So what did happen, if it’s not what it looks like?” Moira asked, the side of her mouth twisted in amusement.

“Yesterday was harder for me than I had anticipated,” Angeline admitted. “I couldn’t sleep, so I went downstairs for a snack and ran into Sidney. We only talked, but it left me emotionally drained, and I didn’t want to be alone. I asked him to stay up with me in the library, and we fell asleep reading.” She shared this in a straightforward manner, but what she didn’t share with Moira was how unnerved the evening had left her.

“I’m glad you were able to find some comfort,” Moira said. Brushing Angeline’s hair off her shoulder, her expression was more serious than Angeline expected. “Just be careful with Sidney.”

Confused, Angeline asked, “what do you mean?”

Moira pursed her lips, weighing her words carefully, before answering. "I believe Sidney has always cared for you. While I am glad you are starting to reach out and ask for the comfort you need, be cautious that you don't give him ideas you may not be ready to follow through with."

Angeline could only stare at Moira, mouth agape. However, along with her surprise, a thrill ran up her spine, causing her to shiver. It's true that right around the time of her debut she thought Sidney might be viewing her differently. She had changed drastically in the years he had been away on his grand tour, and when he returned, she was no longer a schoolgirl but a young woman. Angeline sometimes wondered if she had imagined the change in him, for when he returned from mourning, she perceived nothing from him other than friendship. Was it possible that what Moira was insinuating was true? Could the feeling she once suspected have been real, and Sidney chose to hide them after she had met Phillip?

"It's possible that he may have had feelings for me before I married," Angeline said, "but he's always been respectful, and I've never felt anything from him other than friendship."

"All I know," Moira replied, "is that you were already married to Phillip when I first met Sidney. While he's never actually said anything about a fondness for you, I've always felt an undercurrent when the two of you are in the same room. It's the way he looks at you when he thinks no one is watching."

Angeline was dumfounded. Her emotions tangled within her as she tried to make sense of everything she had felt over the last day alongside Moira's revelations. In one way, she was thrilled that the awakening feelings she had felt when around Sidney may have been reciprocal, and they might not have come from out of nowhere as it had seemed. Maybe she was feeding off feelings from him that she had not recognized.

On the other hand, Angeline did not know if she was anywhere near ready to contemplate another relationship with a man, even if that man was Sidney. If Moira was right, she needed to be cautious that she did not give him false hope

moving forward until she could better understand her own heart.

“I hope I’ve not caused trouble with my impulsive actions.”

“Please don’t worry yourself over it,” Moira said. “I probably shouldn’t have mentioned anything, as it is truly only a feeling I’ve had from time to time. And the last thing I want to do is stifle you as you begin to stretch your wings again. We all love you, Angeline, and we want nothing more than to see you happy.”

“I know that,” Angeline reassured her. “And I’m so grateful that you and Fitz are allowing me to move in with you and the children. It’s time for me to move forward, but I don’t believe I’m ready to live on my own. I need your little angels to keep me company.”

With a snort, Moira said, “Angels they are not, let me assure you. But I know they will be happy to have their Auntie Angie around. And we are too—you know you are always welcome, and you can stay with us as long as you like. Stay forever if you feel so inclined.”

While hearing the words of affection warmed her heart, Angeline felt an inexplicable sadness when she considered remaining a widow, forced to live with her brother for the rest of her life. Glad to have the support and never wanting to take it for granted, she still couldn’t help but wonder if living with another’s family would ever be enough.

CHAPTER 8



Sidney raised up his arms and rolled his shoulders, tensing them to give a good stretch and release before lowering them after his long ride. Working his way across the backyard toward the house, he reflected on how nice it was to be back at Ravenswood. He had settled in a few days ago, and while he was enjoying the time with his brother and niece, his mind consistently wandered to the neighboring estate and Angeline.

It had been a week since Reid's wedding, and Sidney couldn't stop thinking about how it had felt to hold Angie in his arms when she had needed comfort. He knew better than to make more of it than what it had been, but his thoughts returned to that evening again and again. It wasn't even their close proximity that stayed with him, though he had certainly enjoyed it, but more the intimacy of the entire day with her. Their conversations at the wedding were some of the most profound they had shared in years. Sidney hoped that it was the start of a more intimate and meaningful relationship.

Entering the house, he swung through the kitchen and grabbed a scone that was laid out to cool, angering the longtime cook, Mrs. Thompson.

"Off with you now, Mr. Bright," the woman scolded. "I knew it would be trouble having you back in the house. Never could keep your fingers out of my food when you were growing up."

"Come now," Sidney teased with his most charming smile, "you know you're secretly glad I'm here." She grumbled and put on a good show, but Sidney could see the smile she was

trying to hide. He took off before he could get into more trouble and went in search of his brother.

Knocking on the study door, Sidney began opening it even before his brother uttered a perfunctory “enter.”

“You could have waited for me to acknowledge you before barging in, you know,” Nick said from behind his desk, head still bent over his task. Sighing, Nick sat back and rolled his shoulders, an echo of the movement Sidney had performed just moments ago. Observing Sidney as he polished off the last of the scone, Nick gave a grunt. “I see you’ve wasted no time in reacquainting yourself with the kitchens,” he said while gesturing to the crumbs Sidney was leaving on the carpet from brushing his hands together.

“I’ve never been able to resist Mrs. Thompson’s baked goods—you know that,” Sidney replied. “Looks like you could use one yourself. How long has it been since you’ve taken a break?”

Sidney’s brother, Nicholas Bright, Viscount of Hasting, was dedicated to his work. Sidney had always admired his brother and how responsible he was. He supposed that came with being the eldest and carrying the weight of the title. As a second son, Sidney held much more freedom, and had taken advantage of it for many years. But when he began to feel empty in his frivolous life, it was Nick whom he had thought of and tried to imitate. In Sidney’s opinion, there was no better man.

“I actually could use a break, and I’m glad you’re here. I’ve something I need to talk with you about,” Nick said. “Let me just ask for tea to be sent in—I do want one of those scones.” Sidney smirked at how well he knew his brother while Nick found a staff member and arranged for the tea.

Sitting back down behind his rather imposing desk, Nick asked, “How are you settling in? Hazel sure is excited you’ll be here for a while.” Sidney smiled at the mention of his niece, for whom he was inordinately fond and loved dearly.

“It’s nice to be here. I do enjoy my work, but with all the upheaval lately, it’s been exhausting. I’m enjoying having a bit

of a break before things start winding back up for the next session.”

Nick leaned back and smiled at Sidney. “I’m really proud of you, you know,” he said. Sidney reddened at the praise from his brother; it meant a lot coming from him. “There’s nothing wrong with enjoying your freedom and testing your limits, but I’ll admit that there was a brief period where you scared me a bit, Sid.”

Sidney dropped his head in shame. “I know ... I scared myself—that’s why I cleaned up my act. I had to find something else to fulfill me because that life wasn’t doing it for me anymore.” Remembering how hollow he had felt for so long, he was glad he had found a way to productively fill his life after so many empty years. “I feel a sense of purpose that I never had before, and I’m grateful to my friends for showing me how to make my way in Parliament. For once I feel like I may actually be doing something good in the world.”

The truth was that Sidney had needed to find a way to be whole and fulfilled even without Angeline or anyone else. It was ironic that it was not two months after Sidney decided to make a change once and for all and had placed himself on the ballot to represent Kent that Phillip had died, making Angeline available again. If things were changing between them, he was glad to know that while he would always be happy to have her, he did not need her to be content. Sidney also hoped that he was now a man worthy of her love, should she ever offer it to him.

“But enough about me,” Sidney said, clearing his throat to shake off the emotion that hung in the air. “You said you had something to discuss?”

Just then, a footman entered the study carrying a tray loaded down with treats and a steaming pot of tea. The brothers waited for everything to be arranged and the footman to withdraw before Nick was ready to talk with Sidney.

“I’ve decided to marry again,” Nick said, causing Sidney to nearly spit out his first sip of tea.

“You’ve what?” Sidney spluttered. Utterly taken off guard by Nick’s assertion, he hastily set down his cup and saucer so he wouldn’t spill in his agitated state. “I can’t have heard you correctly. After Anne died, you said you would never marry again.”

Nick’s wife, Anne, and mother to his daughter, Hazel, had died five years ago from an infection after losing a child she’d been carrying. Nick had been distraught, and Hazel was only three at the time. A marriage that had been arranged by their parents, Nick and Anne had not been in love at the time they married, but they were fond of and genuinely liked one another. After spending a few years living together and the birth of Hazel, a deep affection had grown between the two and love crept up on them over the following years. Anne’s loss had been deeply felt by everyone, as they had all grown to love her and she had become an integral part of their family.

“I know what I said,” Nick replied, “but the reality is that Hazel could use the influence of a mother figure. She’s become incredibly attached to her governess in a way I’m not sure is healthy, and the woman needs to leave us after the holidays. I know Hazel will be devastated. She has clutched onto her governess so tightly because she has no other women in her life to fulfill the role a mother would. You should see the way she clings to Moira whenever we see her and Fitz and their children. She’s starved for motherly affection.”

“Surely Hazel isn’t lacking for love and attention?” Sidney said. “You are an exceptional father.”

“Yes, but it’s not the same. Hazel knows I will always be there for her and that she can count on me, so she takes it for granted. What I have to offer her does not fill the void she’s seeking, and as she grows, it would be helpful for her to have a woman to emulate.” Nick sighed and leaned back in his chair, rubbing a hand over his face in exhaustion.

Sidney examined his brother carefully, and he couldn’t help but press him on the issue. “I understand how this could be beneficial for Hazel, but is it really what you want?”

“The fact is I need an heir—unless you are suddenly ready to step up and take on the mantle of the title,” Nick replied with a pointed look.

Sidney colored slightly. His brother knew he had no interest in being in charge. Nonetheless, he was still wary of Nick’s change of heart. “Just how committed to this plan are you? Is it only an idea, or do you have someone in mind?”

“I do, as a matter of fact,” Nick answered. “Lady Ephegenia Tarlton. I’ve met her several times through Davenport, as she is good friends with his wife. She’s a widow and has shown interest. Though her marriage to Lord Albany was short, she is well-regarded in high society as a dowager marchioness and is all that is elegant and refined. She could be a good example and teacher for Hazel when she is ready to enter society herself.”

Sidney stiffened at the tenuous connection. Lord Davenport was his brother’s best friend and the salt of the earth, but Sidney had never cared for his wife. If Nick’s prospective bride was close with her, it did not speak well of the lady, dowager marchioness or not. Regardless, he could not fault his brother’s logic and needed to show his support no matter his reservations.

“Then I am happy for you, brother. When can I meet this woman who has captured you?” Sidney made sure to offer a genuine smile.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Nick said. “I’m not in love with the woman. She’s beautiful, to be sure, but I’m more concerned with what she can do for Hazel than for myself.”

“You never know how feelings may develop,” Sidney said, thinking of Angeline.

“That is very true,” Nick said, staring at his plate while absentmindedly crumbling remnants of the scone that lay there. Sidney was certain that he was thinking of Anne. Shaking his head, Nick brought his attention back to Sidney. “Let’s go and see your niece, shall we?”

CHAPTER 9



“Auntie, will you read me another story?” Emily asked. Angeline couldn’t help but smile down at Emily’s upturned face as the little girl sat snuggled in her lap.

“One more, but it must be a short one. I promised your mother I would get you settled into bed.” Squealing in delight, Emily hopped off her lap and scrambled over to the low shelf, selecting another book.

Here, in this moment, Angeline was glad she had decided to move back into Geffen House. It felt good to be surrounded by her family and the children’s unbridled joy. For too many months, she had kept herself sequestered away at the Eastland estate, finding it too difficult to engage with others while deep in her grief. But it was time to live fully again. She had made some steps back into society during the last season, mainly in support of her friends Grace and Elise who were both re-entering society after long absences. It had been neither pleasant or defeating, and Angeline had to get used to feeling like a different person within the same world. Being here with family was healing, and she wished she had not stayed away for so long.

Emily climbed back onto the bed beside her, and Angeline read the third story of the night. About halfway through, Emily’s eyes began to droop, and by the time Angeline had finished the book, the child was fully asleep. Standing gently, she bent down and placed a soft kiss on her niece’s forehead, breathing in the clean scent that only seemed to belong to

freshly washed children. Heart aching, she tiptoed out of the room before quietly closing the door.

Life was hard to understand sometimes. Just as she had been relishing how nice it was to be back in Kent, moments like this reminded her why she had stayed away. For so long, the fear of pain in such moments had kept her distant, no matter how much good came along with them. Angeline thought it was sign she was truly starting to heal that she was now willing to accept the hollow ache because, overall, being around the children provided her with more happiness on balance. That was not to say that she didn't still feel the hurt acutely in the moments it came.

Descending from the nursery level of the house, Angeline could hear Moira playing the piano in the main drawing room. She paused in the doorframe to listen and observed her brother looking upon his wife adoringly; entranced, as Moira lost herself in the music. There were so many examples of love around her. Knowing what it felt like to truly love a partner, she recognized it in Fitz and Moira, her friends Grace and Henry, and in the newlywedded Elise and Reid. Wondering if she would ever experience such a feeling again, an unbidden image of Sidney flashed through her mind. Feeling her cheeks warm at the thought, Angeline turned to leave, but Moira caught sight of her before she could.

Abruptly stopping the song, Moira asked, "Did she go down alright?"

"Yes, after three stories," Angeline replied with a chuckle.

"That does sound like our girl. You are so good with her, and she loves having her Auntie Angie around." Moira offered a smile. "Would you like to join Fitz and I for a drink?"

A little unsettled from all the thoughts that had been dancing in her head that evening, she declined. "I'm actually feeling a bit restless, I think I'll go for a walk in the garden while it's still warm enough in the evenings." Angeline saw the critical way her brother looked at her, assessing if she was well or trying to escape them. As it was a bit of both, she

hoped she could fool him into thinking all was well. "I won't be out long," she reassured them.

Stepping out into the backyard, Angeline wrapped her shawl closer around her. It was cool, but the fresh air was a blessing and she breathed in the scents of the plants around her as she strolled toward the small woodland that stood between the family estate and Ravenswood. Angeline had always loved this part of the property. A large lake lay just beyond the trees, and a view of Ravenswood, Sidney's family estate, could be seen through the trees as it stood just beyond the water. She made her way that direction, knowing the sight would be stunning this time of evening as the sun set across the water, highlighting the leaves that were beginning to turn gold and red as autumn set in.

Just as she broke through the trees, Angeline saw Sidney striding in her direction. It had been just over a week since they had seen each other, but she instantly recalled the feeling of waking up next to him. She saw a smile light up his face as he noticed her, and she couldn't help but smile back.

"I was just making my way to Geffen House," he called out. Picking up the pace of his strides, he soon mounted the small crest up to the trees where Angeline was standing. "What luck that I've found you," he added, now in front of her.

"Are things not entertaining enough for you at Ravenswood?" she teased. "You had to come seeking new distractions from the other side of the fence?"

Sidney let out a full-throated laugh and shook his head at her. "I have missed you, Angeline. You never fail to amuse."

"Walk with me?" she asked. After he nodded in ascent, she started back down the path he came from, turning to make a loop around the pond. They didn't speak for quite a while, but it was a companionable silence. It was lovely to feel so at home and comfortable with another man again. In a way, Sidney had always been such a presence in her life.

"What's occupying that mind of yours? I can practically feel you thinking," he said.

“I suppose that’s the danger in you having known me for so long,” Angeline said. “My mind seems to be all over the place this evening. I guess I’m trying to feel out what may be best for me moving forward—what my next step should be.”

“You’re not content to remain at Geffen House with Fitz?”

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly. “I realized tonight that I stayed away for so long because it would have been too painful to see the family being happy together when my shock at losing Phillip was so fresh. Now, I still experience that pain from time to time—I think that’s inevitable—but there is more good in being around those I love. Still, I’m not sure if remaining here long term will be best for me either.”

Sidney was looking at her intently, taking in what she was saying. “Why would being with family not be good for you?”

“It’s not that ... of course I want to be with my family. I suppose I’m wondering if I will be content to live under another’s roof for the rest of my life and not have my own home.”

Angeline paused, unsure how to express the next part of what she was thinking in a way that would not give Sidney false hope if Moira’s suspicions were true. Looking down at the path before her, she said, “Maybe I’m starting to wonder if I will be happy for the rest of my life without a partner to share it with. I know what passion and connection feel like. For the past two years I couldn’t even contemplate experiencing that with anyone other than Phillip. But now ... I’m only twenty-nine years old. I’m not sure if I want to go through the rest of my life never experiencing that feeling again.”

Daring to look at Sidney again, she saw a look of such undisguised longing on his face that it made her catch her breath.

“You deserve to feel that again, Angie.” He stopped walking, so she stilled as well and turned toward him. Stepping closer, he reached up and cupped her face in his hands, looking at her intently.

Angeline sucked in a breath at the sensation, and before she even knew what she was saying, she asked, “Will you kiss me?”

Sidney looked just as startled as she was at the question. “What?”

Thinking about it for a moment, she continued, “I need help discovering what it is I want. As my friend, you are a safe person to test my limits with.” It was a reasonable thought, and Angeline knew she would use it later to justify her reckless actions.

“Are you sure?” Still searching her face, she saw a mixture of trepidation and hope in his own.

Looking deep into Sidney’s eyes, she gave him an almost imperceptible nod. Angeline knew he had seen it when his pupils flared wide with desire.

Still holding her face, Sidney leaned down and gently pressed his lips to hers. He applied firm pressure but was not aggressive. After a second’s hesitation, Angeline leaned into him and returned the kiss. Feeling her give way, Sidney let out a low moan and dropped his hands, wrapping his arms about her back to pull her close. All she could feel was warmth as she was pressed against his firm chest, and what felt like sparks started to lick their way up her spine. Wanting to be closer, she pushed up onto her toes and grabbed the back of his neck, holding him securely to her. They kissed each other over and over again, and after what could have been one moment or ten, she parted her lips, silently asking him for more.

Sidney didn’t hesitate and she felt his tongue slip inside her mouth, slowly exploring. The kisses began to have a drugging effect and time lost all meaning. Angeline began to feel almost vertiginous, but in the most delicious way. Eventually, he pulled away and rested his forehead against hers, catching his breath. She felt electrified and knew without a doubt that she could not live the rest of her life without experiencing such a moment again. Willing her heart to calm down, she pulled away and gave Sidney a long, considering look.

“I’m not sure whether to thank you or curse you for that,” she told him.

“You didn’t enjoy it?”

“I think you’ve awakened something in me and now I won’t be able to go without it.” Sidney gave an arrogant smirk, and she swatted his arm. “Don’t let it go to your head. How would you feel if you hadn’t kissed anyone in over two years?”

“As a matter of fact, I haven’t,” he said.

Angeline stared at him in astonishment. “What do you mean? I don’t wish to be indelicate, but I have heard rumors about your conquests over the years, you know.”

Sidney winced slightly at her pronouncement and hung his head. “I was not always careful with my affections in the past, it’s true. But about two and a half years ago I decided I needed to take charge of my life, and I’ve been focused on other things since then.”

“When you ran for office,” Angeline thought aloud, making sense of the timeline. She knew he’d been working hard, but had she been so lost in her own world that she had not seen just how much Sidney had matured and changed? Had he really not been with a woman since then? “I’m sorry. I’ve been so lost in myself that I didn’t notice you,” she said.

“You had no reason to,” Sidney replied.

“Still, you are my friend, and I should have seen just how much effort you’ve made in trying to be a force for good. It used to make me sad thinking you were wasting your potential. I know what a good heart you have, and I’m glad you don’t seem so lost anymore.” Angeline saw him wince once more and decided she should probably leave the topic alone.

“Thank you, Sidney,” she said again. “I didn’t mean to get carried away tonight, but I appreciate that you are someone who I know will take care of me.”

Finally, a genuine smile emerged from him. “It was truly my pleasure. Let me know if you ever feel the need to

experiment again.”

With another smack to his arm, they began to make their way back to the house as night had fallen. He escorted her to the back door of Geffen House before giving a small bow and disappearing back down the path toward Ravenswood.

CHAPTER 10



In the few days since his kisses with Angeline, Sidney couldn't stop smiling. Nick noticed and asked what had put him in such a good mood.

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with, dear brother," he affably retorted. "Can't a man simply be happy?"

"Of course he can," Nick answered, "but it seems to be quite the mood change, so you can't fault me for making note of it."

No, he certainly could not. Sidney knew not to get his hopes up, but he couldn't help it. Kissing Angeline had been incendiary. He felt her deep in his bones as he embraced her. Nothing in his life had ever felt so right.

"Would this uplift in your mood have anything to do with a certain beautiful widow who has recently returned to the neighborhood?" his brother asked. Astonished, Sidney gaped at him. "What?" Nick said. "You didn't think I knew that you've been in love with her all these years?"

"I didn't think anyone knew," Sidney replied honestly. "I've never spoken of it to anyone."

"You didn't have to. I know you, and it wasn't hard to figure out. Ever since right before father died, you get a moony look on your face whenever she's nearby. Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"She was a married woman, there was nothing to say." Sidney should have guessed that he couldn't hide the truth of his feelings from everyone in his life. He knew he didn't have

the best poker face, even at the best of times. With Nick's revelation, he wondered who else might have clued into his love for Angeline over the years.

"You still could have talked about it with me, it might've helped to have someone to share your misery with," Nick said sympathetically. "She's been alone for a few years now, do you plan to do anything about that?"

"I don't know," Sidney sighed. "I'm still not certain she's ready for someone new. Angie really did love her husband. But she's intimated lately that she's not sure she wants to be alone forever."

"Then you should make your move, brother. Don't wait until it's possibly too late. You don't want to lose out on love again."

"Says the man who is about to make a move on a woman for practical reasons," Sidney shot back.

"I already had my chance and my love, now I need to think of my daughter and future children," Nick said solemnly.

Sidney still wasn't sure how he felt about the prospect of his brother marrying again only for duty. He understood from a practical perspective that he needed an heir, and Nick was nothing if not rational, but it still grated, feeling wrong. Sidney was too much of a romantic and had decided long ago when he lost Angeline that he would not marry for anything other than love. With such feelings, he was lucky to be a second son. It allowed him the freedom to stay single and not feel the pressure to continue the family line and keep the title secured and was the reason he had made it to thirty-five and never married.

Nick did not have that same level of flexibility, and without his heir needed to marry again. Sidney would have to reserve his judgment on the situation until he met his possible sister-in-law. Lady Tarlton—or Lady Effie, as she liked to be called—was expected at the house shortly along with the Davenports. They would spend the afternoon at Ravenswood, allowing Lady Effie the chance to get to know Hazel, and then the group would head over to Geffen House to dine with Fitz's

clan. Nick had arranged the day, and if all went well, he planned to draw up a marriage contract and ask the lady for her hand.

A short time later, the Davenport's carriage pulled up the drive. Sidney watched as an ice-blond woman in her early thirties descended from the conveyance. Upon seeing Sidney, her eyes widened slightly, but she quickly turned her attention toward Nick with a smile plastered on her face.

"My Lord Hasting, *so* good to see you again. I was so pleased by your invitation," Lady Effie's greeting was given in the falsely polite tone that many women of the *ton* used. The affectation was meant to seem flattering, but Sidney had to contain his annoyance. Too many women had used such tricks on him in an effort to charm over the years, and he saw right through it. He much preferred Angeline's sincerity and honesty.

"Lady Effie, allow me to introduce you to my brother, Mr. Sidney Bright." As Nick made the introduction, she turned toward him and gave an assessing glance up and down. Sidney thought he detected a subtle heat in her eyes. Cringing, it made him worry what she may have heard about him in the past. He was saved from the awkward moment when Davenport ambled up to him.

"Sidney!" the lord exclaimed. "Good to see you back around the place, it's been too long." This was accompanied by a vigorous series of thumps on Sidney's back, and he had to put effort into keeping himself upright. He fought back a grin and returned the gesture, delighted to see his brother's best friend again.

"Davenport, what have you been up to, you cad?" Laughing, the two walked into the house, his brother trailing with Lady Davenport and Lady Effie.

That, however, had been the last pleasant moment of the afternoon. What followed was an excruciatingly uncomfortable hour in the front parlor as Hazel joined them for tea. Lady Effie put on a pleasing smile and made an effort, but the little girl was smart enough to see through her façade

and could tell that her interest was not genuine. Much to Sidney's dismay, Nick seemed either ignorant of this or was deliberately choosing to see only what he desired the situation to be, ignoring everything else.

Sidney watched Hazel closely to see how she felt about the woman, since it was mainly for her benefit Nick was proposing such an arrangement. Lady Effie was clearly aware of what was in the offering and tried to make a good impression on the girl, but it fell flat. Her questions to Hazel were not appropriate for her age of eight years, leading to a stilted conversation. Hazel had been interested at first and perked up seeing two elegant new ladies in the room, but he watched her pull into herself over the course of tea as neither interacted with her genuinely.

Hazel's governess came to fetch her after about an hour, and Sidney immediately saw what Nick had been worried about. Hazel clung to the woman the second she entered the room. Maybe Nick did need to find a new mother figure for her. Sidney decided to keep an open mind as the day progressed.

Moira was in a state making sure everything was ready for dinner before their guests arrived, and Angeline watched in amusement as she went back and forth with the housekeeper, debating whether the children should join the adults for supper.

"I know you're used to dining with your own children, my lady," the housekeeper said patiently, "but many are not used to such practices and may find it disconcerting."

"I understand, but part of this entire day was for Lord Hasting to observe how the guests interact with the children. That will not be possible if they are separate from us the entire time."

Both women looked about ready to combust, so Angeline interjected, "Why don't the children join us all in the drawing

room for predinner refreshments, and then they can enjoy supper on their own in the breakfast room?” She tried to hide her amusement when a look of relief passed over both women’s faces. A compromise meant that neither of them had lost the disagreement. Neither had won either, but that was beside the point, what mattered was that it couldn’t be used over one or the other of them in the future.

Angeline was both excited and nervous for the evening. It had been quite a few years since she’d seen Sidney’s brother. Being a few years older than Fitz, Nick hadn’t been around as much when Angeline was younger, and she had scarcely returned to Geffen House over the last few years. While she’d met Hazel before, she had been much smaller at the time, and Angeline was sure the little girl would not remember her. The thought of seeing Hazel made her smile, but her stomach flipped as she contemplated what she’d say to Sidney after the other night.

Completely overcome by the riot of emotions the kiss made her feel, Angeline was torn over how to proceed. Part of her wanted to celebrate being able to feel such passion again and to indulge in the sensation once more, while her more rational half wondered if such indulgence could end up hurting Sidney. Either way, tonight was certainly not the time to dwell and figure it out.

As the guests arrived by carriage out front, Angeline thought how ridiculous it was for the party to ride over rather than walk when the two houses were so close together. Sidney seemed to have the same thought, exiting the carriage with an exasperated expression on his face.

Quickly making his way over to Angeline’s side, she could hear him muttering under his breath.

“Most ridiculous thing I’ve ever done. Whoever heard of riding in a carriage for less than a quarter mile?”

Smiling, she couldn’t help but goad him. “And was it really so difficult? You arrived in one piece.”

“It was the whole production of it. When Nick started heading toward the back of the house to walk over, you would

have thought he was doing it naked, for the shock it created. The ladies simply could not walk such a distance in the heat and arrive dusty and warm.” Sidney shook his head in agitation. “And besides,” he added in a tone that was clearly an imitation of the women, “coming in a carriage is the only *fashionable* way to arrive.” He shook his head in disgust.

A laugh escaped her, Angeline couldn’t help it. Sidney shot her a glare but kept his mouth shut as introductions were being made.

Angeline had not formally met Lady Tarlton, as they did not run in the same social circles, but she had seen her before at *ton* events. She knew Moira felt for the lady, as she had wed the late Marquess of Albany, an older gentleman Moira’s father had once thought would be a good match for her. Thank goodness Fitz snatched her up before that could happen. Now widowed for several years, Lady Effie, she had asked to be called, was clearly on the hunt for another husband. Angeline could see that she was beautiful, but there was something disingenuous in her expression that took away from her attractiveness.

Introductions complete, the group made their way inside with the children running ahead. Lady Effie looked on disapprovingly at their enthusiasm, causing Angeline and Sidney to shake their heads. With an hour before dinner service, everyone gathered in the drawing room and Fitz prepared drinks for the adults while Angeline poured lemonade for the children.

“My father says I’ve met you before, but I don’t remember you.” Angeline looked down at Sidney’s niece as she spoke. The girl shyly sidled up to her and thanked her politely when Angeline handed Hazel a glass of lemonade.

“He is correct, we have met before. I think you were only three or four years old, so I can understand why you might not remember me.”

Hazel puzzled over this new piece of information for a moment. “That makes sense. I was three when my mother died, and I don’t remember her either.”

Angeline's heart broke at her perfunctory statement. Looking up, she could tell from the expression on Sidney's face that he'd overheard. When the children ran off, he came to stand beside her.

"Maybe it is best for Nick to marry again. I wasn't sure at first, but he's right that my niece needs a mother." Sidney looked lost in thought as his eyes tracked Hazel across the room.

"Nick will be glad to have your support," Angeline offered.

"He's always had it," Sidney said. "I only wish he might look for some other candidates. I'm not entirely convinced by Lady Effie."

In the end, Moira and the housekeeper's disagreement hardly mattered because the children entertained themselves while the adults talked. Angeline observed the youngsters and couldn't help but smile at their antics as they were creating a story to enact. While Miles and Emily were younger than Nick's daughter, they all got along well. It was clear living next door had bonded them in friendship the same way it had for Fitz, Angeline, and Sidney when they were growing up.

A bit of a disagreement seemed to arise between Emily and Hazel, and before anyone could intercede, Lady Effie took it upon herself. "Children, hush!" she snapped. "Has anyone ever told you that children should be seen and not heard? You are interrupting others' conversation."

The room fell silent. Moira pursed her lips, clearly displeased that someone outside the family was chastising her child. And the children hung their heads in shame, making Angeline furious. They had only been playing and gotten a little loud as they disagreed over something, it was hardly cause for such reprimand.

Nick cleared his throat uncomfortably before addressing the children. "Perhaps you could do something else that would be a bit quieter," he suggested.

“Auntie Angie could read to us,” said Emily. “She’s very good at doing the voices.”

“I would be happy to, my dear,” she answered. Angeline saw many of the others sigh in relief. As she walked over to the corner of the room where the children were, Lady Effie offered a strained smile, placated that she was not the one lowering herself to entertain the children.

Angeline sat in the middle of the sofa and Miles brought her one of his books. He settled on the ground at her feet while the girls sat on either side of her. As she began to read quietly, she felt Hazel cuddle up to her side as if she were starved for affection. Moved by the young girl and remembering what Sidney had said about her needing a mother, Angeline wrapped an arm around her as she continued with the story.

Feeling eyes watching her, Angeline looked up on a page turn and saw Sidney staring at her. A look of undisguised longing was on his face, and in that instant, Angeline knew that Moira was right. He cared for her, and she was beginning to suspect that her own childhood infatuation may not be as solidly in the past as she had believed. Eyes locked with his, she could feel her cheeks starting to warm and was lost to everything around her.

A tug on her skirt brought her back to the moment as Miles impatiently waited for her to continue. Clearing her throat, Angeline started reading again, but her mind wasn’t on the words she was saying. Instead, she focused on how it felt knowing with certainty that she could have a partner again should she want to.

CHAPTER 11



Eventually the meal was called, and the children's governess took them away for their dinner while the adults filed into the dining room. An excellent menu was presented, but Angeline was too distracted to really appreciate the food.

"Are you well?" Sidney asked her, leaning over and whispering in her ear. His breath on her neck made her shiver. "You are hardly eating, and from what I recall, you have always loved well-prepared food."

His face was still close as she turned toward him, and she fought to keep her hand on her fork rather than tracing a line through the freckles on his cheek. "Yes, I am well. Just a bit distracted this evening with new company in the house."

With her answer, he leaned back and began eating again. But it seemed like his chair was a bit closer than it had been before, and Angeline was aware of his presence beside her throughout the remainder of the meal. At one point he looked over at her and smiled while squeezing her elbow, as if to reassure her.

A little later, the women retreated and left the men to their port and cigars. Sitting in the drawing room, both Lady Davenport and Lady Effie wanted to gossip and quickly turned to Angeline to learn more.

"I understand that you are also a widow," Lady Effie said to her. "How long ago did you lose your husband?"

"A little over two years ago," Angeline replied. "Early in the summer of eighteen."

“And you have not thought of remarrying?” asked Lady Davenport.

“No, not really.” Angeline was hardly about to share with these women that very recently her mind had begun to turn to such thoughts. “I loved my husband very much and my grief over losing him was deep. I’ve only now left his estate and moved here with my brother.”

“You are still young enough, you’ll find someone else sooner rather than later,” Lady Davenport said dismissively.

“What about Hasting?” Lady Effie said with feigned innocence. “Growing up next door, you must have known him for a long time. Surely he makes an enticing prospect.”

“I’m afraid I’ve never considered such a thing. He’s always seemed like another older brother to me.” Angeline certainly did not feel that way about his younger brother, but Sidney was another matter entirely.

Continuing her interrogation, Lady Effie asked, “How long were you married to Lord Eastland?”

“Eight years,” she replied succinctly.

“Eight years!” Ephegenia exclaimed. “And no children?”

Now seething, Angeline bit out, “No, no children. If you will excuse me.” She’d had enough. Angeline wasn’t going to let these women continue interrogating her and make her detail the painful struggle to conceive and hold onto a pregnancy. Quickly exiting the room, she wandered blindly down the hallway and nearly stumbled into Sidney. Without thinking, she grabbed his hand and pulled him into the nearest room.

As the door closed, she pushed him against the wall and threw herself at him.

Sidney didn’t know what had come over Angeline, but he wasn’t going to question it. Wrapping his arms around her, he returned her passionate kiss. Something had fired her up, and

Angeline was practically devouring him. Her hands clutched at his waistcoat, and one snuck up to the nape of his neck, sinking into his hair. He knew she had been off all night, but now there was a sense of desperation about her as well.

As she pulled back slightly for some much-needed air, common sense briefly returned to Sidney and he moved her further, allowing more space between them. His movement seemed to break her trance, and Angeline backed away.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I don’t know what came over me. I was upset and I shouldn’t have used you that way.”

“Darling, you can use me any time you would like, but are you alright?” he asked. Angeline’s hands were now covering her face and she was shaking her head. Sidney stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her, but this time he simply held her until she was ready to tell him what was bothering her.

“I really don’t like those women,” she said quietly, but with conviction. Before he could stop himself, Sidney laughed. “It’s not funny,” she said, hitting his arm. “They are odious gossips and I’m not sure what Nick is thinking.”

“Unfortunately, neither am I. What happened?” She nestled a bit closer into his chest and he tipped his chin down to kiss the top of her head.

“I’m probably being oversensitive. They were just asking questions trying to get to know me better. Some of the questions were a bit personal and hit a little too close.” Angeline pulled away and walked toward the window, wrapping her arms around herself. He had to strain to hear what she said next as she was speaking so low. “They seemed shocked that after eight years of marriage I didn’t have any children.”

Bloody hell. Sidney knew how desperately Angeline had wanted children, and she would be an excellent mother. Earlier in the evening, he’d almost forgotten himself and nearly ran across the room to kiss her after watching how she handled Lady Effie and read to the children. When Hazel curled up into

her after only knowing her for an hour, he'd thought his heart might burst.

How dare those women bring up such a delicate subject. After losing his sister-in-law due to complications from a lost pregnancy, Sidney had learned never to ask about children or when people might be expecting. You never knew what kind of hurt they could be experiencing. Unfortunately, with the way the aristocracy worked, lineage and the begetting of heirs was an obsession for many, and the topic was often given undue weight and discussed as gossip.

"I'm sorry." It was all he could think to say, not knowing what else would be fitting or appropriate in the moment.

"I'm alright, it's just that I was already on edge and all the questions broke me." She turned around to face him again but stayed on the other side of the room. "I'm so embarrassed I attacked you like that. I don't know what came over me. I just ... I needed to feel better, and you make me feel better."

"It makes me happy to hear that," Sidney said. "I always want you to feel your best, Angie." Her eyes filled with tears, and Sidney was horrified, not knowing what he had said to upset her. "What's wrong? What did I say?" He rushed forward and grabbed her arms, but she wouldn't look at him. "Why were you upset during dinner?" He was getting worried something much larger might be wrong.

"I don't want to hurt you, Sidney," Angeline choked out.

"How on earth would you hurt me?" He was truly bewildered. When had the conversation moved from gossips upsetting Angeline to her being worried about him?

She turned away and smoothed her hands over her glorious red hair. She was so beautiful it was distracting, but he knew he needed to focus because whatever she said next felt important.

"Because I've been reckless with you and your feelings. I'm not sure what I want or am ready for, but I still asked you to kiss me when I knew it might mean something to you and confuse you. And just now..."

“That’s why you were upset at dinner? You were worried about my expectations?” Sidney asked.

“I feel like I acted selfishly, only concerned with how what I wanted from you would affect me, but you’re involved too. Ever since we arrived at Cliff House, I’ve loved connecting with you again and growing closer to you. But in the end, I don’t know what this could be. And that’s not fair to you.”

Sidney didn’t know what to think. He relished that they were getting closer—and yes, it may have raised his hopes—but he understood if she needed time, and it was something he was more than willing to give her. “Angie, I don’t want you to worry about me. Focus on figuring out what you need and let me know if there is any way I can help you do that.”

Angeline came forward and, stretching onto her toes, placed a kiss on his cheek. “Thank you, Sidney. I have to figure out how this all works together moving forward.” With that, she gave him a watery smile and left him alone in the room.

CHAPTER 12



It had been two days since the dinner party, and Angeline was still a mess of emotions. Having had almost two weeks to think about Moira's suspicions, part of her wanted to explore if something more was possible with Sidney. But if he did feel more for her than friendship, she feared the damage she could do by exploring her own reawakening feelings before she really knew if she was capable of a new relationship with someone other than her husband.

Swinging between feeling elated about Sidney's possible affection for her while fearing their friendship may be irreparably changed left Angeline wrung out. It was gratifying to know she may have been correct in suspecting his feelings had changed before her debut, and if circumstances had been different, she may have spent all these years with him if she had held out through his mourning period as she had planned.

She ached at the lost possibility but at the same time she could not be sad about how things had turned out.

Angeline wouldn't change her life with Phillip for anything. It had brought her so much happiness. Even with their constant struggle for children and the strain it placed on them every time she lost a pregnancy, their love and focus on one another never changed. Losing him so suddenly and without explanation had been such a gut punch. For months, she didn't know if she would find a way through.

It was still hard to contemplate the idea of loving someone else, but it was different with Sidney. She had loved him before Phillip; it was as if he existed on a different plane from

everyone else. She wasn't loving someone new, because the love was already there, just awakening in a different way. She now knew that the way she had felt for Sidney when she was sixteen really had been more of an infatuation. But it did not negate the very real feelings she'd had, and always would have, when it came to him.

But was she ready to contemplate opening her heart fully again? And would it be fair to Sidney to try something if Angeline wasn't completely sure her heart could handle it? Losing someone again would break her, and she didn't know if she was willing to take that risk. There was also the fact that she most likely would never be able to give him children, nor was it a good idea for her to try having a child again.

Head aching with lack of sleep and heavy thoughts, Angeline stepped out onto the back patio and breathed in the air. She loved this time of the year. Autumn had always been her favorite season. The vibrant colors of the leaves all around were comforting in their tones: deep red, bright yellow, burnt orange. The still bright but overcast skies provided the perfect light, allowing the leaves to show themselves best in the new hues they sported for a short time. She loved that it was neither too warm nor too cold, just cool enough to need another comfortable layer for coziness. Settling down in a chair with a wool blanket, Angeline soon fell asleep.

It was the soft voice of her brother that all too soon brought her back to reality. "Angie, wake up. It's starting to drizzle, and I don't want you to get wet and fall ill." Fitz gently shook her shoulder until she opened her eyes with a groan.

"That was the first good sleep I've had in days, you know," she grumbled.

"Yes, I noticed that." Fitz was undeterred, pulling her to her feet. "Want to tell me what's been bothering you?"

Angeline sighed, smoothing her skirts. "Yes and no," she answered. "I suppose it might help to talk it through with someone, try to straighten out my thoughts and feelings."

“What else are brothers for?” Fitz said with a smile. “Come on, let’s get inside and then we can talk.”

Settling into comfortable armchairs in the library, Angeline was glad they came here rather than Fitz’s study. There was something soothing about being surrounded by books that lifted her spirits. And she would need all the comfort she could get before endeavoring to have this particular conversation with her brother.

“So,” Fitz said, making himself comfortable, “what is it that has you so out of sorts? Has moving here been too difficult?”

Angeline hastened to reassure her bother that wasn’t the case. “Not at all. It’s been wonderful to be here with you and Moira and the children.”

“But ...,” Fitz prompted. He knew her well enough to know there was more.

“But it’s also difficult sometimes. Too much of a reminder of how differently my life turned out compared to how I thought it would go.” Hanging her head, Angeline took a moment before looking at Fitz again. “I feel like a horrible person for having such thoughts. Overall, I have led a blessed and privileged life. I shouldn’t have any complaints or want things that are out of my control.”

“And this is what has been bothering you?” Fitz asked.

“In part, yes. But that hasn’t been the main thing on my mind the past few days.” Taking a deep breath, Angeline decided it was now or never, and she wanted her brother’s insight as he knew Sidney in a different way. “I’ve been spending more time with Sidney lately and it’s made me question whether I might want to find a partner again. Moira also mentioned she’s suspicious he might have feelings for me, and now I’m seeing everything differently. It has me feeling uncentered, and I’m not sure how I should move forward with him.”

Fitz expelled a large breath. “I’ve suspected for a while that Sidney may have feelings for you, but I didn’t know

Moira felt the same. Has he said anything to you?”

“Nothing specific. But he’s been very attentive and supportive, and I feel like I’ve picked up on something in the way he looks at me from time to time.” Not to mention the way he’d kissed her, but Angeline didn’t want to bring that up with her brother.

“How are things different between you now from before?” Fitz’s brow was furrowed, showing the deep line above his nose that always appeared when he was concerned about something.

“I don’t know. We’ve always been friends, but it feels like that’s changing into something deeper since Elise’s wedding. After dinner the other evening, I told him I needed some space to make sense of how I was feeling,” Angeline said.

“And how *are* you feeling?” Fitz let the question hang in the air as Angeline struggled to put her thoughts into the right words.

“I don’t know. I’m conflicted,” she answered truthfully. “In some ways it’s immensely flattering to know that the boy who once occupied so many of my thoughts and daydreams now may feel the same. It’s just eleven years and one husband too late.”

“I always knew you liked him when we were in school and university, but I wasn’t aware those feelings had lingered.”

“I’m not sure they ever fully went away, they just changed and were superseded,” Angeline mused aloud. “I feel like I’m just now starting to emerge from the shroud of grief I’ve been under, and with Phillip no longer consuming all the space in my heart, those feelings for Sidney are beginning to peek back through.”

Fitz stared at her. “Well, that was profound.”

Reaching over, Angeline smacked the side of her brother’s head. “Don’t tease me, I’m struggling. I don’t know what I’m doing or feeling, and I have no idea how to explain it.”

Seeing her distress, he immediately turned serious. “I’m sorry Angie. I’m not trying to make light of the situation. If

you do think there could be something with him, why not pursue it? No one would be happier than me to see you in love again.”

Fitz really was the best brother Angeline could ask for. He'd always acted as her protector growing up and had been thrilled for her when she fell in love with Phillip. She knew he would support her no matter what she did, and in a way, that added to her worries. Sidney was one of Fitz's best friends, and they'd known each other their whole lives. What if she decided to try and make a relationship with Sidney work, only to have it fall apart because she couldn't handle it? She knew without a doubt that Fitz would stand by her, and the last thing she would ever want is to cause a rift in their friendship.

“Recently I've begun to wonder if I would be truly happy living the rest of my life alone,” Angeline admitted. “It still feels foreign to think about a life with anyone other than Phillip, but I'm also not sure living here with all of you will be enough to fulfill me long term.”

“I can understand that. I know how much you enjoy being here with the children, and you'll always be a part of the family and welcome with us, but it's not the same, is it?” Fitz asked. Shaking her head, Angeline felt terrible affirming that life alongside her brother's family would never be quite enough. She needed something, or someone, for herself. “Then why not explore the possibilities with Sidney? If you both care for one another, what is making you hesitate?”

“There's too much at stake. What if I tell Sidney I'm ready to explore what we could be to one another, and then I can't handle it? I could hurt him. It could also ruin one of the most important friendships to both of us.” Angeline hated feeling so insecure.

“Please don't worry about me, Angie,” Fitz said. “I would hate if your concern for me prevented you from exploring something that could be so good for you. I actually like the idea of you and Sidney together. I know he's been a bit wild and indulgent in the past, but he's one of the best people I know. And he's been working hard to change his reputation and make a name for himself.”

“Thank you for that,” Angeline said, reaching to take her brother’s hand. “But you know I’m going to worry about the possible repercussions regardless. I’m tired of feeling miserable, and it makes me hesitate to move forward if it could cause upset to anyone.”

“He’d be lucky to have you,” Fitz replied, squeezing her hand back. “I think you just need to have an honest conversation with him. Only the two of you can decide what is best.”

Standing, Angeline moved toward Fitz and leaned down to hug him. “I love you. You really are the best brother.”

Wrapping his arms around her and returning the embrace, Fitz cockily replied, “I know.”

CHAPTER 13



Walking the grounds around Ravenswood with Nick, Sidney was distracted. “I’m sorry, what did you say?” he asked his brother.

Sighing, Nick repeated, “I asked if you thought I should start thinning out some of the trees and selling them for lumber, but I give up. You’re not listening to me at all, are you?”

Sidney rubbed his eyes, grunting in assent before apologizing. “Sorry, Nick. I’m listening, I promise.”

“No, you’re not. But that’s alright. Does this have anything to do with Angeline?”

“Yes,” Sidney admitted. “I feel like we’ve been growing closer over the past few weeks, but she’s confused about what she wants for her future. When we had dinner at Fitz’s a few days ago, she asked for some space to sort out her feelings.”

Nick let out a long whistle. “And what did you say?”

“What do you think I said? I agreed, of course. I value and respect her and don’t want to ruin my relationship with her. Yes, I would like more with her, but she needs to decide what she wants for herself.” Sidney knew he should be honest with Angeline about his long-standing feelings for her, but he worried she wasn’t yet ready for the intensity of what he felt, and he was scared it would make her bolt if she knew everything.

“But now you’re sitting here agonizing over what she may decide, aren’t you?” Nick asked.

“Of course I am, what do you think?” Sidney exclaimed. “But I don’t want to dwell on it until I’ve had a chance to talk with her again, so please, distract me.”

Continuing their walk, Nick pointed out changes he had made to the estate since Sidney’s last visit. Explaining the updates that were slowly happening to the main house as well as other buildings and structures on the grounds. Bit by bit, everything was being refurbished.

Sidney listened with more interest than he had previously. He’d never had much interest in the estate before, always assuming his brother would have an heir and he wouldn’t need to worry about it.

“It’s good that you’re making sure this place will last,” he said. “I know you want it to be in good shape long term.”

Sighing, Nick agreed. “I do want what’s best for the estate, and for Hazel. That’s why I’ve decided to go ahead with the marriage to Lady Effie.”

All Sidney could do was stare at his brother. After a moment, he tentatively asked, “Are you sure she is the best option you have?”

Nick looked uncomfortable, squirming uncharacteristically. “I know she did not present well the other day,” he said, pausing to shoot Sidney a glare when he grunted in agreement, “but she’s amenable to the match and it’s hard to find a lady willing to take on not just a husband but a child as well.”

“I don’t mean to question you. You know you have my full support—always,” Sidney emphasized. He clasped his brother by the shoulder. “I’m happy for you if this is truly what you want.”

“I think it’s what is best,” Nick replied, not easing Sidney’s fears.

“Well, then we’ll need to celebrate,” he told his brother, grinning. “What would you like to do to mark the occasion?”

“Let’s wait until the marriage contract has been drawn up and everything is settled, I don’t want to jinx anything.”

“Always the practical one,” Sidney muttered.

“Someone has to be,” Nick shot back, though he said it with an affectionate smile. “Come on, let’s get back to the house, I have a wife to secure.”

It was later that afternoon when Sidney received a note from Angeline. Spread out in the library, he was catching up on work. London newspapers plastered the desk where he was working, as he unsuccessfully tried to read a letter from Henry regarding a new bill they were drafting to present to both houses of Parliament next session. Try as he might, he couldn’t focus with his mind still worrying over Angeline, and had read the same sentence about four times. Needless to say, he was happy for the disruption when a knock sounded on the doorframe.

“Mr. Bright,” a footman said with a bow as he entered, handing him a letter.

Distracted and anxious, Sidney managed a “thank you” to the young man before tearing the note open.

Dearest Sidney,

I must apologize for the abrupt way I left our conversation the other night. I was caught off guard and needed time to collect my thoughts and assess my feelings. I hope I have not caused you too much distress with my silence since then.

I believe we need to have an honest conversation with one another and clear the air before either of us can make any decisions about what should happen moving forward.

I will be at the pond where we met before, at ten tomorrow morning. I hope I might meet you there.

Ever your friend,

Angeline

Breathing a sigh of relief, Sidney clutched the note in his hand. While it had only been two days, he couldn't live without talking to her for much longer before going insane. He thought it was a good sign that Angeline wanted to talk. He just hoped that when the depth of his pining was revealed, she would not become overwhelmed.

Sidney had no desire to lie to her, but he also knew she was still emotionally fragile. Though she had been a willing participant in their kiss the other evening, he had sensed she was a bit skittish at opening herself up in such a way again.

After living without her for so long, was it foolish for him to entertain hopes now? Closing his eyes, he reminded himself that he just needed to make it to tomorrow, then hopefully he would have more answers.

CHAPTER 14



Pacing nervously, Angeline waited for Sidney at the tree line where both estates met. They had spent so much time together there when they were children, but that time seemed like a past life now. She had arrived early, too on edge to sit around and feign engagement with her family. Hoping the scenery might lend her a sense of serenity, she turned to look at the pond just as she heard the crunch of leaves behind her. Whirling around, she noticed Sidney approaching right as he called out her name.

He looked amazingly calm. Either Sidney had an excellent poker face, or he wasn't feeling nearly as unsettled as she felt. Angeline realized she was wrong as he came closer. Though managing his expressions well, a nervous energy emanated from him, and she could see small stress lines around his beautiful blue eyes.

Relieved he had come, she forcefully expelled the breath she didn't even realize she'd been holding. Trying to suppress a smile at the unladylike gesture, the twitching of Sidney's lips betrayed him.

"It's alright, you can laugh," she said. "I'm anxious—I can't help it."

Sidney reached over and grasped her small hands between his, stilling them from continuing to strangle the handkerchief she had been twisting. "I know, I am too," he said simply.

His touch was electrifying but also had a calming effect. Standing so close to him, Angeline was drawn to the memory

of how it had felt to kiss him in almost that exact spot not four days prior. Sidney must have felt the charge in the air as well, sucking in a breath as his pupils ever so slightly widened.

“Thank you for inviting me here,” he said in a low voice, slowly running his thumbs over the back of her hands. “I was afraid I might have scared you away.”

Angeline couldn't help but notice how vulnerable he seemed at that admission. Shaking her head, she sought to reassure him and started to explain, “You didn't scare me, Sidney. You could never scare me. If anything, I scared myself. I don't think I was prepared for the possibility of what it might mean to feel something for someone again. I'm sorry if my wavering has caused you distress.” It broke her heart to think that she had ever caused him a moment's pain, even if inadvertently.

“You've never brought me anything but joy,” Sidney told her, cupping her cheek.

Closing her eyes, Angeline leaned into his touch, reveling in how wonderful it felt to experience casual affection once again. Phillip had touched her so frequently—a hand brushing her shoulder when he walked by, a kiss to her temple when he pushed her seat in at the table, or holding her hand while on a walk—that she had taken it for granted. It wasn't until he was gone and she found herself starved for contact that she noticed how constant it had been.

“I've missed that,” she told Sidney, refocusing on him.

He looked at her quizzically. “Missed what?”

“Contact. The feeling of connection to another. It's amazing how little cause there is for a single woman to touch someone, or proper for another to touch her. I've missed the feeling of being held so much that it sometimes aches.”

Without a word, Sidney wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. Cradling the back of her head, he tucked her under his chin and into the crook of his neck. Angeline instantly felt her body relax into his, and she soaked in his warmth and comforting smell. A moment later, he kissed her

temple, just as Phillip always had, making her eyes fill with tears.

“I’m sorry,” she said, pulling away and wiping at the wetness on her cheeks.

“What did I do wrong?” he asked. “Was I too forward?”

“No, it’s not you, Sidney. It’s me. It felt wonderful ... It just brought back some memories.” Breathing in deeply, Angeline calmed herself and forced her eyes to Sidney’s again.

“This is what I was afraid of,” she admitted. “I think I could lose myself in you, Sidney. It feels too good, too comforting and familiar, being with you. But I don’t know if that would be fair to you. I’m still a mess.”

“I don’t think you’re a mess,” Sidney said, taking a tentative step toward her. “I think you are strong but still emerging from something profoundly difficult. And it doesn’t bother me in the slightest.”

“It doesn’t bother you that I could be lost in a moment with you and then suddenly be thinking of another man?” Angeline didn’t know many men whose egos could handle such a situation.

“Angie, I would never expect you to stop loving Phillip. He’s a part of you now, and because I love all of you, that means he’s included and will always be there in some capacity. I believe we possess the ability to love multitudes. It’s why you can love your brother, Moira, and the children, all at the same time while you also loved Phillip. The heart does not have limited capacity. When someone new enters that space, it doesn’t squeeze someone else out to fill the void that’s left, it simply expands to accommodate them both.”

Angeline felt her chest tighten at his description. His willingness to accept what her life with Phillip had meant was priceless. But there were still many things she needed to understand before allowing her emotions to cloud her better judgment.

“Thank you,” she told him sincerely. “That means more than you can know. But I think we might be getting ahead of

ourselves.”

“You’re right.” Gesturing toward his home, he said, “Why don’t we walk down to the bench by the greenhouse, and we can talk further.”

Angeline took Sidney’s arm as he led her down the uneven path toward Ravenswood. Less anxious than she was before, she knew there was still a lot to be negotiated between them.

Settling down near the impressive glass structure, Sidney turned toward her and asked, “What would you like to know?”

“I guess I’m confused as to when you started to see me differently. I’ll confess I always had hopes for you, and I thought you seemed a bit different before my debut, but it was hard to reconcile that with the boy I knew growing up—the one who was irritated by my constant presence and only wanted to go on adventures with Fitz without his little sister tagging along.”

Smiling at the recollection of their childhood exploits, Sidney took one of her hands, holding it gently in his own before leaning back against the bench.

“You’re right that when we were younger, I found you more annoying than not. It rather puts a damper on the kind of shenanigans you can get up to when a six-year-old with no end of questions is along for the ride.”

Angeline started to blush, remembering how relentless she had been in her pursuit of answers. “I was an inquisitive child, what can I say?”

A wide grin broke out on Sidney’s face, brightening the space around them. “I like that part of you, Angie. Of course, I can appreciate it now in a way I couldn’t when I was twelve.” Leaning forward, his expression turned more serious again. “What did you mean a moment ago when you said you’d had hopes for me?”

“We’ll get to that, I promise,” she said softly. “Please continue.”

Nodding, Sidney settled back again and squeezed her hand. “When we went off to school, I missed seeing you grow

up. But then during the Cambridge years, I started to see you grow into your own, becoming a fierce, independent young woman. I didn't see you for two years when I was away being a young wastrel on my grand tour. And when I came back, you were all grown up. Angie, you were so beautiful you took my breath away the first time I saw you again. And so self-possessed. For the first time, I saw you as a woman and began to think about you differently."

Angeline let out a startled gasp. It seemed Moira and Fitz's suspicions were true, but she had no idea he'd felt drawn to her for so long.

"Why didn't you say anything? I had been infatuated with you for years, and it was my dream you would want me when I came out into society." Angeline couldn't believe how close they had come, how differently her life could have turned out.

"It was?" Now Sidney was the one who looked astonished.

"Sidney, you had been there my whole life. The charming, older boy whose smile and charisma made me melt. I was drawn to you before I even knew what it meant to have romantic feelings for someone. Why do you think I always inserted myself with you and Fitz? I love my brother, but it certainly wasn't his company I craved. I used to long for the school breaks when I knew you would return home and I could see you again, even if only briefly. You became the only person for me, and I built you up so high in my mind—you were as close to perfection as possible."

"I had no idea," Sidney said. "You did a good job of hiding it. Had I known, maybe I would have felt more comfortable speaking up after I returned."

"I'm amazed I was able to hide it. My mother knew how much I dwelled on you, and while she didn't disapprove, she wanted me to broaden my horizons and consider all my options."

"That's what I wanted for you as well," Sidney interjected. "It was your first season, I wanted to give you time to enjoy yourself. Also, to have more time with you so we could get reacquainted and know one another in light of who we had

become before confessing feelings that would have drastically changed our relationship to one another. But my father died before any of that could happen.”

“I wanted to wait for you,” Angeline confessed. “I didn’t want to attach myself to anyone else that season and hold out for the next year when you would be out of mourning and able to marry. My mother forced me to continue attending events. That’s how I met Phillip.”

Sidney’s gaze was intense, waiting to hear how her affections had turned to another man. “I found him charming, but I was still consumed by you, and I couldn’t see him clearly. But he was persistent, and I found him easy to be around. We began to spend more and more time together. Before I knew it, he was the one featuring in my daydreams. I fell in love with him before I even recognized it, and I didn’t know what to do. My feelings for him were different. He knew me as a young woman, in a way you didn’t, and I knew he returned my feelings. I had no idea how you felt about me.”

Cursing, Sidney shook his head. “I could kick myself for not speaking up earlier. I’m sorry you questioned what I thought of you.”

“Sidney, you were a young man of only twenty-four. Be forgiving of yourself.” Squeezing his hand, she said, “We don’t know what would have happened if even one thing had gone differently. And I’m sorry if you’ve suffered because of how things turned out, but I can’t regret it.”

Watching him intently, she saw him wince at her words. “What is it?”

Releasing her hand, he tugged at his hair in agitation. “I don’t want to say I wish things had been different, because I know how happy you were with Phillip, and I would never want to take that away from you. But I wish I would have known that you did care for me at one time. Maybe that would have been enough, and I wouldn’t have been so reckless.”

An iciness crept up Angeline’s spine at his words. “What do you mean? How were you reckless?”

“It broke my heart when I lost my chance with you, Angie.” Sidney gazed at her intently, and she could see the pain in his blue eyes. “I felt this emptiness, and I tried everything to fill that void. I’m ashamed of how I spiraled for a time, using drink, cards, and women, trying to numb my feelings and convince myself I was fulfilled.”

His words were like a punch to Angeline’s gut. She knew he’d been rakish for a time, but Sidney had always been the free spirit among Fitz’s friends and took a lighthearted approach to life. Sure, she had heard whispers from time to time about his playboy ways, but she didn’t know he’d been trying to overcome his hurt over her.

“I’m so sorry, Sidney,” she whispered before throwing her arms around him. “I didn’t know. But look what you’ve made of yourself, look at the man you’ve become. I’m so proud of you.”

Sidney held her tighter, stroking the back of her head. “It took me too long to realize that nothing I did would fill my emptiness and that I needed to find a way to be complete all by myself. It wasn’t long after I decided to turn things around that I heard Phillip had died, and then I started to work even harder.”

Pulling back, Angeline searched his eyes for answers. “Why? You had already changed for yourself, what was different?”

“I wanted to make myself worthy of you, should I ever have the chance to try and win your love again.”

CHAPTER 15



Sidney watched as tears began falling down Angeline's face. "I don't mean to overwhelm you, and I never intended for you to know my feelings before I knew you were ready to move forward, but lately it's felt like you might be starting to open up. And I don't think I'm imagining that you feel a connection between us as well, don't you?"

Dashing at her eyes and chin to catch the wetness there, Angeline took in a breath and slowly nodded her head. "You're right. I do feel something between us, I don't want to deny it. It feels like ever since Reid and Elise's wedding, the feelings I had for you so long ago have started to emerge again."

The vice that had been squeezing Sidney's heart for the past few days eased at her words, but he didn't want to become too hopeful just yet.

"I don't think my feelings for you ever went away, they just changed, settled into a loving friendship. But now they're stirring to life in a different way again. What I felt for you before was attached to the ideas and dreams of a girl. I'm a different person now, and what I feel is deeper and more meaningful, but that frightens me."

"Because you know what real love feels like," he whispered.

She snapped around to attention at his statement. "Yes, exactly," she said. "How do you know that?"

“Because there were times in past years when I thought maybe I would finally be able to move on, that I had found someone I could love. But what I felt for those women was different from what I felt for you—I knew my love for you was true in a way that I could never love another.”

“So what do we do?” Angeline asked. “We obviously care for one another, and it could be a second chance for both of us. But I’m still trying to figure out who I am now. Something in me broke and fundamentally changed on that day two years ago when I watched Phillip die. It’s like a part of me died along with him.” A shudder ran through her, and Sidney opened an arm, offering to hold her should she want it. Without hesitating she slid across the bench to his side, tucking underneath. Laying her head on his shoulder, she said, “I know I can love you, Sidney. I just don’t know if I’m in a healthy enough place yet to do so without causing you harm.”

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that? We can move as slowly as you need to, I don’t mind. The only thing I really need is to be with you.” Bending his head, he looked at her as she peered up from his shoulder. Angeline stretched her neck and closed the gap between them, placing a kiss on his lips. It was the sweetest kiss Sidney had ever experienced, because she offered it to him freely. While the kiss they had shared the other evening had been more passionate, this one was perfect in its simplicity and for no other reason than it had initiated with her. Pulling back after only a moment, a smile lit up her face.

Grinning, Sidney cupped her face and leaned his forehead against hers. “Let’s take things a day at a time and see where they go. Spend more time with one another and let whatever happens happen. Are you willing to try?” He held his breath waiting for her answer.

“Yes, Sidney. Let’s try,” she answered. He couldn’t remember what happened after that, he was too busy kissing her in joy.

The next few weeks went by in a blur of happiness. Sidney and Angeline spent as much time together as they could, truly getting to know each other for who they were now, and not continuing to assume anything based on how they had known one another previously. Now October, autumn had settled in, and the rainy season had started. Whenever a break in the drizzle appeared, they would sneak out and walk around the grounds of both estates, enjoying time with one another and the beautiful landscape. And kisses. They shared many, many kisses as they became more comfortable in the new way they related to one another.

Both families had given their enthusiastic support at the news of their courtship, though it felt like too formal a word for as slowly as they were moving. But Sidney knew marriage was his eventual goal. He wanted nothing more than to spend his life with Angeline.

Upon hearing the news, Fitz had given Sidney a hug and a slap on the back, accompanied by a warning.

“I love you like a brother, but she’s my actual sister,” he said. “She’s still fragile after Phillip. If you hurt her, I’ll come for you.”

“I know,” Sidney said, trying to reassure Fitz. “I would never do anything to intentionally harm her.”

“And I know that. Just make sure you don’t,” was Fitz’s response.

Things were also changing with Sidney’s own brother. Nick’s lawyer made a visit to Ravenswood along with a representative for Lady Effie, and a marriage contract was drawn up and signed. The wedding was being planned for just before the holidays and would take place in London during the Christmas season. Hazel wasn’t thrilled, but Nick was holding out hope that she would warm to his new wife in time. For the past week, since the agreement had been in place, Lady Effie had been staying at Ravenswood so everyone could grow accustomed to her presence in the home. The day she left, a worried-looking Nick asked Sidney if he thought he was doing the right thing.

“I can’t answer that for you, Nick. I guess I’m wondering why she has agreed to the marriage knowing your main purpose is for the benefit of Hazel when she seems to have no affection for her,” Sidney said honestly.

“That’s why I’m questioning it,” Nick said. “I thought she was a good option, but this past week was difficult. When I met her at Davenport’s she was all that was elegant and had nothing but smiles for me. She expressed an interest, and I thought I could make it work. But none of that matters if she’s not going to be the figure I wanted for my daughter and possible future children.”

“I think her interest might have more to do with being a viscountess,” Sidney offered gently. “Have you actually asked Hazel what she thinks of her?”

“No,” Nick said, scrubbing his hands over his face. “I’ve been too scared to hear what she might say now that there’s little that can change. I’ve made the commitment—the contracts have been drawn up. There’s not much I can do about it now.”

“We’ll find a way to get you out of it if necessary. Contract law exists for a reason, we can find a way to break it if that would truly be best.”

CHAPTER 16



The next morning dawned a crisp, clear fall day. Delighted that Angeline had agreed to come over for a picnic luncheon while the weather held, Sidney swung by the kitchen to grab the basket Mrs. Thompson had prepared for them.

“You look like you’re up to trouble,” the cook said, handing over the preparations.

“Only the kind of trouble you can get involved in when in love,” Sidney replied, unable to repress his bright smile.

“That’s trouble enough. You be careful with that lady—we all think a great deal of her around here. We’d much rather have her around than yourself, and don’t you forget it.” The twinkle in her eye belied the sentiment, but Sidney didn’t mind her good-natured teasing. She sent him off with a squeeze to his arm, and he made his way to meet Angeline.

He still felt as if he were living in some kind of dream. Sidney was well aware he needed to take things slowly, as Angeline was still tender. She sometimes took a moment to parse through what she was feeling as she began to share things with him that she had only shared with her husband before. He knew it was a bit disconcerting and was willing to be as patient as necessary to make sure she was as equally invested in the relationship as he was.

Just as he laid out a blanket near the pond, Sidney saw Angeline break through the tree line and make her way toward him. The sight of her never failed to stop him in his tracks. Now, knowing she returned his long-held affections, the sight

of her was that much sweeter. She moved with a grace that he had always envied, but her petite form was light and easy to move about, while he lumbered with his taller stature. And he had always been mesmerized by her deep-red hair. It was a fountain of different colors depending on the light and possessed traces of burgundy, flame, copper, and sometimes even gold. Today, in the muted autumn daylight, it was a true red with a richer undertone that mimicked the fall leaves around her.

Smile growing as she approached him, when Angeline reached him, she didn't hesitate to immediately stand on her toes and reach up, kissing him in greeting. Sidney wasn't sure if he'd ever been happier in his life. They conversed effortlessly, with the ease of two people who had known each other for almost their whole lives. But as the meal progressed, Angeline became quieter, and he could tell something was on her mind.

“What’s bothering you?” he asked. “I know you well enough to see you’re thinking deeply about something.”

Looking down, she picked absentmindedly at the edge of the blanket, her fidgeting giving away her nerves. “It’s nothing, I’m fine,” she deflected.

Taking her hand, Sidney sought to reassure her. “Angie, I know entering into a new relationship is difficult, and I won’t push you to move any faster than you are comfortable with, but we won’t grow if you aren’t willing to share with me what you’re thinking and feeling as we work this out between us.”

“I know. I promise I’m not trying to exclude you, I’m just not entirely sure what it is that I’m feeling. I can’t put words to it yet—does that make any kind of sense?” She searched his eyes, looking for understanding. “I’ll talk with you when I know what to say, but please don’t worry in the meantime. I just want to enjoy this time with you.”

“Darling, I always enjoy any time spent in your presence. And we certainly don’t need words to be able to enjoy one another.”

Angeline wasn't usually easy to fluster, but she blushed at his words. That didn't stop him from leaning in and kissing her passionately. Still clasping the back of her head, he kept her pulled tight to him as he moved his lips over her own. She didn't hold back, deepening the kiss after asking him for entrance. She slid her hand around his side beneath his coat as their tongues danced together. Still sitting on the blanket after the picnic, their bodies drifted down until both were lying on it. Sidney rolled on top of her gently, careful not to crush her.

The feel of her beneath him was indescribable. Sidney wanted to gather her into his own body and never let her go. Angeline's hands continued their exploration around his sides and up his back, and his hand began to travel the same path on her. Finally breaking away to catch her breath, she burrowed her head into his neck and tightly wrapped her arms around his neck, keeping him pressed close to her.

"Angie, you're killing me. You have no idea how much I want you," he said, breathing still labored.

Groaning, she replied, "Yes, I think I do."

Just then, the sky opened up, raining down on them in torrents. They had been so consumed with one another that neither had noticed the dark, foreboding clouds moving in. Startled, Angeline let out a shriek, and within seconds, both were soaked.

Looking up at Sidney's startled face, wet hair already plastered to his head, Angeline burst into laughter. Sidney started laughing as well not a moment later, and neither could move out of the rain as they became hysterical. The laughter provided Angeline with a needed release from the tension she held after his inquiry regarding what she was thinking about. They'd gotten rather carried away with one another before being able to really finish the conversation, and Angeline was relieved. She hadn't lied that she wasn't yet ready to explain what was bothering her, but she knew sooner rather than later

she would need to talk with him about her struggles having children, and what that could mean for their future.

Finally calming his laughter, Sidney stood and swiftly pulled her up so they could escape the rain. They scrambled to gather the picnic items and sodden blanket before dashing to the greenhouse, the closest building they could shelter in. Dropping everything inside the door, Angeline leaned against the glass wall, panting for breath after the short run. Looking around her, she picked up a few folded sheets from a nearby bench, most likely used to cover the plants when it became too cold, and handed one to Sidney as they attempted to dry off.

She unpinned her hair and let it fall down her back in a wet, tangled mess before trying to wring out the water. Feeling Sidney's eyes on her, Angeline looked up and saw his intense gaze burning with desire as he took in her form underneath the dress that now clung to her. A shiver went through her from both the cold and his gaze, and he was on her in a moment, rubbing his hands up and down her arms.

"Are you too cold?" he asked in concern.

"No, I'll be fine. I'll just stay close to you for warmth." He smiled deviously at her suggestion, the lefthand corner of his mouth quirking up and hinting at the bit of devilry which lay inside him.

"I hope the rain hasn't completely spoiled Nick's hunting trip," Sidney said, hugging her against his chest for his body heat. "He thought the weather would hold for at least the day, allowing for some good sport with his friends at the hunting party. It was a welcome break from all the rain the past week, but a shorter break than anticipated it would seem."

"I'm sure they'll be fine," Angeline said. "Isn't a little rain always a part of hunting? Surely that's part of the appeal, feeling at one with and trying to outwit nature." Sidney chuckled as she shivered and moved even closer to him, and she felt the laugh rumble through his chest.

It was amazing how in just two weeks he had completely awakened her from the fog she had been under since Phillip's death. Angeline had forgotten how thrilling kissing was, and

now that the gift of touch had been returned to her, she craved it. She wanted to feel as close to Sidney as possible, wanted to feel completely like a woman again.

The problem was that giving herself to Sidney also scared her, and more intimacy between them would force the conversation she wasn't ready for. With lovemaking came the possibility of pregnancy, and Angeline didn't know if she could handle that again, either emotionally or physically. As much as she longed for children, after her last miscarriage, the midwife had informed her it would be unwise for her to become pregnant again. It was just too much strain on a body that had been through such difficulties already.

Angeline thought she had already worked through her emotions regarding not having children, but much of that that came from thinking she would never have the opportunity again. Now, being in this moment with Sidney and desiring the closeness of a physical relationship with him, the possibility she could become with child was again a reality. And it was messing with both her heart and her head. Pushing away her confusing mix of emotions, she decided to lean into the moment and defer the troubling thoughts to be dealt with another day.

“Sidney,” she whispered, her voice barely perceptible as the rain pounded on the glass roof. He heard her anyway and looked down, waiting for her to continue. “I need you to make me warm. I need you closer.”

He caught on to Angeline's meaning immediately and began slowly removing the layers of her wet dress, kissing her hungrily. Taking off Sidney's sodden jacket proved challenging, as the already tight sleeves clung to his arms with the water, forcing them to stop kissing long enough to wrench him out of it. Angeline was down to just her chemise, which thankfully was only partially wet, and he wrapped her in one of the sheets before picking her up and placing her on one of the tables for preparing seed starts. Sidney stepped into the cradle of her legs, and she wrapped her arms around him, bringing him under the drape of the sheet. Cocooned in their

own little world, he kissed his way down her neck and onto the exposed skin of her shoulder.

It was an odd sensation to be intimate with someone other than Phillip, but Angeline had no reservations. Sidney touched her with such reverence that she could feel his love pouring out of him in his kisses and everywhere their bodies touched. It had been over two years since she had felt so connected to someone else, even as they only kissed and touched one another. Angeline was still struggling to reconcile holding two very different men in her heart at the same time. She appreciated what Sidney had said about the hearts capacity to expand and hold multiple people at once, and she did feel that way. It meant the world to her that he never seemed to expect her to let go of her memories of Phillip, accepted that he would always be a part of her. For a moment, reveling in being close to Sidney, she felt incandescently happy and began to believe that a life with only the two of them might be enough.

But that feeling quickly dissolved and panic began to set in when Angeline felt the evidence of Sidney's desire press against her inner thigh. The reality of making love and the possible consequences struck her in a more tangible way than they had before, and she stiffened in his embrace. She couldn't allow this to happen until she'd made sense of her feelings and talked with Sidney.

Sidney sensed the change in her and stepped back, allowing both of them some needed space before they got out of control. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to move so fast. I just can't seem to help myself when I'm around you." Still slightly panting, he leaned in and rested his forehead against hers. "Forgive me?" Angeline felt guilty for allowing him to think he was the one at fault for ending their moment together, but she did not correct him as she wasn't sure how to explain the tangle of her emotions. Not saying anything, she leaned back into him, and he pulled her into his embrace, keeping her warm.

When the rain slowed enough, a return to the house to dry off properly seemed prudent. Redressing as best they could in their damp and clammy clothing, they were a jumbled mess as

they stumbled into the kitchen, laughing once again. Hurrying to the library where a large fire was already blazing, Sidney rang the bell to request warm tea. Less than a minute later, the normally composed butler burst into the room.

“Oh, thank god, we’ve found you,” he exclaimed, seeming unusually agitated. Looking directly at Sidney, he said, “I’m afraid there’s been an accident, my lord.”

CHAPTER 17



Angeline watched the blood drained from Sidney's face as he realized the butler had addressed him using the title. White as a sheet, he grasped for the chair behind him and practically collapsed into it.

"What's happened?" he gasped.

"There was a hunting accident, my lord," the butler said nervously. Sidney winced at the use of the title again. "From what we understand, his lordship and the hunting party got caught in the storm. Visibility was low and ... another man was also injured."

Sidney let out a groan of pain before dropping his head into his hands. "It's my fault, it's all my fault," he muttered. Rushing to his side, Angeline crouched down before him, clasping his hands so he would know she was there. He leaned into her, seeking her comfort.

"I'm so sorry, my lord—"

"Stop calling me that!" Sidney roared, cutting the butler off. The man took a stuttering step back at the force behind Sidney's pained exclamation. "I'm not a lord, I'm not anything," he said, voice ragged. "The title doesn't belong to me, it's my brother's ..." He collapsed onto Angeline's shoulder in tears, clutching onto her for dear life while he poured out his pain and disbelief.

"It's my fault," he said again through his tears.

"What do you mean, my love?" Angeline asked. "You couldn't have done anything." She was worried why he

thought the tragedy had anything to do with him, but he was not in a state to elaborate.

Sidney shot upright suddenly, eyes wide in panic. “Hazel —”

“Is well, my lord,” the butler rushed to say. The man was clearly uncomfortable being in the room with them, a witness as Sidney processed the tragedy. But not having been dismissed, he waited to see if they would need anything.

“Has she been informed?” Angeline asked.

“No, not yet,” the butler said, squirming uncomfortably. “We thought it might be best coming from her uncle.”

Sidney began to hyperventilate at the servant’s statement. “Breathe, Sidney,” Angeline said, rubbing circles on his back while he clutched her other hand. Leaning her forehead against his, so he could feel their connection, she tried to reassure him. “We’ll tell her together, but we can’t do that until you are more composed. Breathe along with me.” Placing his hand on her chest, for the next minute, she took in long, slow breaths so he could feel her inhalations. Soon, as he focused on the rise and fall of her breast, his breath slowed enough for her to turn her attention away for a moment and take control of the situation.

Turning to the butler, Angeline began issuing orders. “I need you to send someone to Geffen House right away and inform my brother of what has happened. Then I want you to arrange for two messengers to send for Lord Carrington and Lord Weston at once.” The butler nodded and went to make the arrangements, seeming relieved to have a concrete task.

Left alone, Angeline gathered Sidney in her arms and held him as she waited for her brother to arrive. He was completely wrecked, clinging to her like she was his only tether to reality. His shuddering breaths slowly eased as she gently rocked him.

Not fifteen minutes later, Fitz burst into the room and took in the scene. “What do you need?” he asked, looking at Angeline.

“We need to go upstairs and talk to Hazel,” Angeline replied. At the mention of his niece, Sidney began trembling.

“I can’t tell her,” he said, beginning to panic once again. “How am I supposed to tell her that her father is dead, and that it’s all my fault?”

“Sidney, this isn’t your fault. The weather turned, no one was predicting it,” Fitz said.

“But I told him to go on the hunting trip. Nick needed time to enjoy himself with friends before settling down with Lady Effie, and I told him to go.” Sidney pulled at his hair, clearly distressed, believing his brother’s death was a result of his suggestion. “I should have known better ... Oh god, Nick was always the responsible one and I just wanted him to relax ...” Utterly distraught, he broke down again.

Angeline had never felt so helpless in her life. She knew she must have been in a similar state after Phillip died, but she couldn’t easily recall that time, it was all a blur. Watching the man she had so quickly grown to love break in front of her, she didn’t know what to do. Her own tears came now that she had a moment to be still. Fitz pulled up a chair and sat with them, holding Sidney’s hand while she cradled his head against her chest.

Exhausted from the turmoil of the last hour, Sidney eventually fell into a fitful sleep. Angeline gently extricated herself from underneath him and went out into the hall to talk with Fitz. Softly closing the library door, she leaned against it, tipping her head back as she closed her eyes.

“Someone has to talk to Hazel, Fitz. But I don’t know if he can.” Reopening her eyes, she took in her brother’s distraught face.

“I think we’re going to have to,” he said. “I’ve never seen Sidney like this, I’m not sure he could handle telling her himself.”

They left to find the butler and see what arrangements were needed. Running across the housekeeper, Angeline inquired if she knew where Hazel was, steeling herself for the difficult conversation. Just as she and Fitz were preparing to go upstairs, the library door opened behind them.

“I’ll go,” Sidney said, voice roughened from his earlier tears. “It’s my responsibility.”

CHAPTER 18



Sidney felt like he was drifting through a fog. His mind was sluggish and his head thick with unshed tears. He couldn't comprehend how such a perfect day had turned into utter tragedy.

The clock chimed three times, informing Sidney of the early hour while he slung back the whisky that remained in his glass. He needed the numbness the alcohol provided, needed to staunch the wave of guilt that he thought might eat him alive. Talking with Hazel that afternoon had been the most difficult thing he'd ever done. Unsure what to say, he fumbled his words in an attempt to soften the blow and only confused the poor girl. In the end, Angeline was the one who told his niece gently but plainly that her father was no longer with them. She had been inconsolable and flung herself at Sidney. Unable to handle his own emotions, he couldn't stay in the room as Hazel fell apart, and passed her to Angeline, who held her for hours.

Unable to eat or sleep, Sidney drank through the evening as the hours crept by. Fitz sat with him in silence well into the night, but eventually he went to bed, leaving him alone.

Sidney knew he needed to pull himself together. He had responsibilities to take care of as the new viscount. Everyone would look to him for guidance moving forward, and he needed to care for Hazel. The weight of it all was suffocating. He didn't realize how much comfort he had taken in freedom of being a second son. Now he could almost feel the shackles around his ankles, tying him down.

Shuddering, he put down his empty glass and forced himself to stand. The smart thing to do would be to go to bed, but he didn't think he'd be able to sleep. All he wanted was Angeline. She was just upstairs, having taken a guest room near Hazel. He knew joining her wouldn't be proper, but he didn't care.

After stumbling up the stairs, he opened her door and clumsily removed his boots and waistcoat before sliding into the bed next to her. She turned toward him as his weight shifted the mattress, causing her to partially wake. "Sidney," she said, sleepily curling into him. He wrapped his arms around her and buried his nose in her hair, breathing in her comforting scent. A moment later, she squirmed back, her nose wrinkling. "You smell like whiskey."

"I may have had a few," he admitted. Angeline didn't look pleased by his answer, but she resettled in his embrace. He ran his fingers through her hair, and her body relaxed until she eventually fell back into sleep. Though he lay there for hours, unable to quiet his mind, he felt better having Angie beside him, dulling the ache in his chest he feared might be permanent.

Sidney must have eventually fallen asleep himself because the next thing he knew, he was awakened by the sun in his eyes. "Hey," Angeline said as he stirred. "You're up. How are you feeling?" The honest answer was terrible: his head ached and his mouth felt dry, both likely due to an overindulgence of alcohol and emotion the night before. Scrubbing his hands over his face, he replied, "I've been better."

"What do you need from me today?" she asked. He looked over at her as she lay on her side, looking at him with concern. Reaching out, he twirled his fingers through the ends of her red hair.

"I just need you," he said. Angeline smiled at his answer and leaned in to place a light kiss on his forehead before settling back into her pillow. She began to mimic his movements, lifting her hand to his temple and running her fingers through his short strands. It was soothing, and he closed his eyes while leaning into her touch. "I'm sorry for

leaving you alone with Hazel,” he said, voice catching. “How is she?”

“She’s sad, overcome. I don’t think she really remembers her mother, so this is the first real loss she has experienced. It won’t be easy for her, but she’s strong—it will just take time. And she’ll have you to help her.”

Angeline’s faith in him was stronger than his own. Having failed so spectacularly to be what Hazel needed yesterday made him scared for the future, that he wouldn’t ever be able to be enough for her moving forward. Nick’s will had yet to be read, but Sidney knew he was now her legal guardian, having agreed to the responsibility shortly after her birth eight years ago. He’d never felt equipped to the task, and certainly didn’t now that it was reality, but he knew Angeline would be an exceptional mother for her.

“Why don’t we get up and get some breakfast? I know you didn’t eat anything last night, and you’ll need to keep up your strength.” Angeline was right, and Sidney forced himself upright with a groan. At thirty-five, he suddenly felt like an old man, his life decided for him. Shutting down his melancholy thoughts, he kissed Angeline before heading to his own room to prepare for the long day ahead.

Henry and Grace arrived early the next morning, with Reid and Elise not far behind. Though grateful for their presence and support, Sidney felt bad for taking his friends away from their own lives—especially Reid and Elise who’d married only a month ago.

The women joined Angeline in seeing to the funeral arrangements and preparing rooms for guests while the men retreated to the billiard room where they lazily played games to distract Sidney.

“How did this become my life?” Sidney asked, leaning on his pool cue. “Henry, you never thought you would inherit and become the duke. How did you handle it?”

“Not well,” Henry admitted. “It took me longer than it probably should have to wrap my mind around everything that now falls under my purview. And you know how I am, I hate when I can’t do things perfectly, so feeling so out of my element left me rather raw for a while. It really wasn’t until I met Grace that I felt capable of fulfilling my obligations.”

“I understand that,” Sidney said. “I don’t know if I’d be able to do anything right now without Angeline. She’s the only thing preventing me from completely falling apart.”

“I’m glad you have her, but just be sure you can support yourself soon. That’s a lot of weight for her to bear,” Fitz said, ever the protective brother.

Sheepishly, Sidney hung his head. “I know. I don’t deserve her, and it’s not fair of me to rely on her to keep everything running around here, including me.”

“Be kind to yourself, this has been a big blow. It takes time to adjust,” Reid said, squeezing his shoulder as he walked by, positioning himself for his next shot. After sinking three balls before scratching, he looked at Sidney pensively. “Sidney, I don’t think any of us have ever really said this aloud to you, but you know we’re all really proud of you. Over the last few years, you’ve worked hard, and it’s paid off. You’ve been able to make an impact in the party, and even though you’ll now serve in the House of Lords, I think an offer of a leadership position within the Whigs will soon be coming your way. You’ve become the man we always knew you were capable of being, don’t let this set you back.”

“How can it not?” Sidney was not unmoved by Reid’s sentiment, but he felt like he was down at the bottom of a hole and could barely see any light.

“He’s not saying it won’t be hard or that you should remain unaffected,” Henry said. “You loved your brother. This is a large blow, of course it’s going to have a big impact. Just don’t regress to being the man who lived without any sense of responsibility. That’s not possible now.”

“I know it’s hard to see right now,” Fitz added, “but just look at what you have now that you didn’t have before—

Angeline and Hazel. If nothing else, pull yourself together for them.”

Sidney knew they were right, and he certainly didn't wish to wallow, but he couldn't see a way forward so soon after his life had shifted so completely.

CHAPTER 19



Angeline was grateful for their friends arriving so quickly to support Sidney. She knew they would, which was why she sent word to them almost immediately after the tragedy a few days ago. While she wanted them here for Sidney's sake, she had to admit their presence was a comfort to her as well. Though she hadn't known Grace and Elise long, they all became close while supporting each other as they reentered society last season.

Grace had made waves as the new Duchess of Carrington, never having been properly introduced to polite society previously, and Elise was newly welcomed back into the fold, having redeemed her reputation after being ruined three years before. As for Angeline, a year and a half after Phillip passing, she had been just starting to dip her toe back into the world of the *ton* after emerging from mourning. Now, thankfully they did not hesitate to rally around her and make sure Ravenswood continued to operate as needed. Settling down to tea after a busy afternoon making sure guest rooms were aired out and prepared for expected guests, all three ladies were exhausted.

"I can't thank you enough for being here," Angeline said. "I don't know how much longer I could have handled all of this on my own. Sidney is devastated."

"How did you come to be here, if I may ask?" Elise inquired. "When exactly did you and Sidney become an item?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Angeline admitted. "Recently I began to feel differently, more than the friendly affection I've

always had for him. With us both returning to the family estates here in Kent, we saw each other more frequently and those feelings deepened. Moira told me she suspected he held feelings for me as well. I finally had to face everything, and when we talked, he admitted that he'd loved me for years and had hidden it because I had already found Phillip. It took a while for us to work everything out, but a few weeks ago, we decided to explore if a relationship between us might be possible."

"That's so romantic," Elise said with a sigh. "How has it been going?"

Angeline couldn't help the smile Elise's question brought to her face. "It's going well. He's been so patient with me as I figure out how to reconcile the love in my heart for Phillip with my renewed feelings for him. And I'd forgotten how wonderful it is to feel cherished."

Grace gave her beautiful, gentle smile and said, "I always thought there was something between the two of you. He always inquired about you and was greatly concerned for your well-being when you were first coming out of mourning."

"And oh how the tables have turned," Angeline quipped, frowning as she returned to the sobering present. "I am terribly concerned for him."

"We know," Grace said. "We are too, it's a profound loss and has impacted his life in more ways than one. Has he said much about his feelings on being the viscount?"

"He hasn't said much, but it's apparent he feels the weight of the responsibility. I'm worried about how he'll manage the stress. It was clear he had been drinking when he joined me in bed the other night."

Elise's eyebrows raised with the new bit of information. "Excuse me? I think you need to explain just how far you have developed this relationship with him."

"It's not what it sounds like," Angeline said, blushing. "That first night he needed comfort, and we simply held one

another. He actually did the same for me after your wedding, Elise.”

“I’m sorry if that day was difficult for you,” Elise said, worry in her eyes.

“It was fine, I was happy to celebrate you and the love you’ve found with Reid. I had prepared myself for the day, it just brought up a lot of memories. Other things throughout the day made me mourn what I could never have.” Angeline watched as Grace placed a hand on her burgeoning belly. Seeing the direction of her gaze, Grace wordlessly reached over and took Angeline’s hand.

“But maybe you can have that now, with Sidney,” Grace said. “When you marry, you can have the family you always wanted to with him.”

Angeline shook her head. “No, I don’t think that’s possible. I’ve never been able to carry a child to term, and I don’t know why that would change with Sidney.”

“I suspected as much, and I wasn’t trying to be indelicate,” Grace rushed to say. “I meant with Hazel, once you marry.”

Hazel. That dear, sweet girl. She had stolen Angeline’s heart the moment she’d leaned into her side while reading at Geffen House. Suddenly, with horror, she realized the implications of what they were discussing.

“Oh god,” Angeline gasped, startling her friends.

“What’s wrong?” Elise asked, immediately by her side.

“I can’t marry him ... He’s the viscount now.”

“Yes, but why does that matter?” Grace asked, clearly confused.

Tears flowed down Angeline’s face as reality fully set in. She’d been so consumed with both Sidney’s and her own grief that she had missed the consequences of the world they were now living in. “Sidney’s the viscount, he needs an heir. I’ll never be able to give him that.” Both women looked stricken by her pronouncement, but neither said a word. What was there to say? They knew she was right. With the inheritance

and entail laws as they were, one of the highest responsibilities of a peer was to beget an heir and further the line. Burying her head in her hands, Angeline didn't know what to do.

Later that evening, after faking her way through dinner with everyone, Angeline made her way upstairs to say goodnight to Hazel. She tried to spend as much time as she could with her. The poor girl was utterly lost and lonely without her father by her side.

Cracking the door open quietly, Angeline wanted to make sure she wasn't asleep. She saw Hazel standing by the window, looking out like she would magically see her father walk across the lawn. The small girl turned after hearing the door, her eyes red from crying. "Angie!" she cried, practically flinging herself across the room to get to Angeline. Little arms wrapped around her hips while Hazel buried her head into her stomach.

Every time she visited and witnessed the way Hazel was ravaged by losing her father, her heart broke all over again. Running her fingers through the child's hair, Angeline asked, "How are you today, Hazel?"

Hazel's only response was to cry into Angeline's dress, and she didn't push her further. She simply kept holding on and soothingly stroking her head. Angeline knew that losing the only family she had known would profoundly impact the girl, changing her and the way she related to others for the rest of her life. Experiencing profound loss could do that to a person. She knew firsthand.

All Angeline wanted to do was make Hazel feel loved and protected. Realizing that she would never be able to act as this sweet girl's mother, Angeline felt her own tears threatening to return as her eyes prickled.

"You know what Emily loves me to do with her?" Angeline asked. Hazel shook her head into her stomach, still not letting go. "She likes it when we read together. Do you like

to read? Did you enjoy it the last time you visited next door?" Pulling back ever so slightly, Hazel nodded. "Why don't you go pick out a book and we can read together?" Finally, the little girl released her and went over to find her favorite book.

Settling down on Hazel's bed, Angeline's aim was to read the girl to sleep. She clearly needed rest and would have to be prepared for the emotional onslaught the next few days were sure to bring. Tucking Hazel in, Angeline was just about to sit down beside her when she heard movement from behind. She turned to find Sidney staring at his niece and looking utterly haunted.

"Uncle Sidney!" Hazel's eyes lit up at the sight of the uncle she adored. "Will you read with me and Angie?"

At her question, Sidney shook himself and refocused, turning to look at Angeline instead. "May I?" he asked, his voice rough.

"Of course," she replied after swallowing around the lump that had grown in her throat as she thought of what couldn't be. She had made Grace and Elise promise not to say anything, and she wanted to wait to have the conversation ending their future until after the funeral.

Suddenly needing to be away from Sidney, she held the book out to him. "Why don't you read with her?" When he made no move to take the book, she quietly added, "Hazel needs some time with her uncle." He looked guilty, and she felt bad for manipulating him, but he took the book and moved to sit by Hazel. The little girl snuggled into his side as he sat down beside her, and he finally seemed to wake from his half-dazed state and focus fully on his niece for the first time since entering the room.

Seeing them settled, Angeline made her escape. Practically running to her room, she barely managed to close the door before bursting into tears. She longed for a different world where she would have been able to add herself to the tableau that had been laid out before her, making them the picture of a perfect family. She was almost glad for Sidney's distraction. He was usually so perceptive of what she was thinking and

feeling, but in his grief, he had missed how off she was. She felt guilty being grateful for anyone's sadness, but for now it allowed her to keep from hurting him even further.

CHAPTER 20



The morning of the funeral was a wet affair. With guests arriving from London, umbrellas and raincoats littered the front hallway of Ravenswood, and small puddles pooled on the marble floors as several footmen rushed around with towels to clear away the slipping hazard.

Sidney watched from his perch in the drawing room window as more carriages turned up the drive, bringing members of the peerage to pay their respects. He knew he wouldn't be able to hide for much longer and needed to play host, greeting the guests, but he dreaded it. Due to propriety, every single guest would greet him as Lord Hasting, and he wasn't sure he could handle it. Every time one of the staff addressed him as 'my lord', he tensed, still chaffing at the title that never should have been his. It was a constant reminder of how everything had changed and felt like an anchor weighing him down.

The past few days since his friends' arrival had been difficult. He knew he should have been more attentive to the preparations for today, and he definitely should have spent more time with Hazel, but it was hard to rouse himself to do much of anything at all. The only thing keeping him from falling into the abyss was Angeline, but something felt off. He was worried she was avoiding him. He knew she had been busy organizing the staff, and she spent hours with Hazel, for which he was eternally grateful. But even accounting for that, he had seen her hardly at all in the past two days.

He stopped by Angeline's room after reading with Hazel the other night, but the door was locked and she hadn't answered when he knocked. He figured she was asleep after some very long and emotional days and hadn't thought much of it until the next day when she seemed to be avoiding him. Every time he entered a room she was in, she seemed to just as quickly make her exit. Now he suspected something bigger might be going on and he'd missed it in his reduced state.

Noticing the Davenport carriage arriving, Sidney at last got up from his window seat and made his way out onto the drive with a large umbrella. He had to restrain himself from rolling his eyes as Lady Effie descended the carriage stairs. He was bemused to see her decked out in all black with a veil covering her face as if she and Nick had already been married and she was in fact his widow. His attention was diverted away from her when Davenport came up and embraced him in a big bear hug, slapping him on the back.

"How are you holding up, Sid?" Davenport's voice was unusually rough, and Sidney tried not to flinch hearing it. It was a good reminder that he was not the only one who felt the loss, and he needed to think of others beyond just himself.

"As good as can be expected I guess," Sidney said.

"And how's our little Hazel?" Sidney winced at the reminder of how much he had neglected his niece, knowing she was hurting most of all.

"Alright, I suppose. Angeline has been a blessing when it comes to giving her the attention she needs and deserves."

"I'm glad to hear it. I also heard your friends descended on you, that's good. Always good to know you have people you can lean on." Davenport's face became more serious. "I hope you know that I'm here for whatever you need as well, please let me know if there's anything I can do.

"Actually, there is something," Sidney said. Davenport looked surprised but nodded for him to continue. "Tomorrow, Nick's lawyer will officially read the will. Will you come? I'd like you to be there with me. You were Nick's best friend and I think it would be right, and I'd appreciate having you there."

Davenport looked touched to be asked and gripped Sidney's shoulder. "I'll be there, happy to."

The group shuffled inside, and he saw Lady Effie giving him a once-over as she removed her ridiculous hat and veil, allowing him to see her face. He suppressed a shudder but brushed the rather odd moment off, as he had more important things to dwell on.

Stepping into the formal parlor, Sidney was immediately greeted by several guests with a chorus of "Lord Hastings." He had to forcefully swallow the bile that rose in his throat.

Angeline watched from the side of the parlor and winced when she heard everyone greet Sidney with his new title. She knew how much hearing it still pained him, a reminder of what he had lost. She saw him approaching and tried to busy herself with organizing the refreshments table, attempting to avoid him for just a bit longer. He could read her too well, even in his distracted state. She couldn't bear any questions from him until they had a chance to talk.

"Angie, I feel like I haven't really seen you the past few days. I'm sorry I've been so caught up in myself that I've neglected you." Closing her eyes in guilt, Angeline had to force herself not to tell him it wasn't his fault. She was the one who had been neglecting him, and at the time he needed her the most. Further twisting the knife, Sidney continued, "I want you to know how much I appreciate you. I know how much you've done this week, and I couldn't have made it through without you."

"You know I always want to help. I would do it for anyone," she said.

"I know you would. Because that's the kind of woman you are. And it's part of the reason I love you," he said. "But you did it for me, so let me appreciate you." Leaning forward, he wrapped her in an embrace.

“Sidney, this is hardly appropriate,” she whispered. “Please let me go, we’re about to cause a scandal.”

“Please let me hold you,” he replied, on the edge of pleading. “I couldn’t care less what anyone says, and I need you today.”

Angeline stopped fighting. She wanted to be here to support him, though it hurt knowing that she would need to walk away once the day was over. But they did still have today, and it felt wonderful to be in his arms again. She surrendered to it and decided to be whatever he needed for the rest of the day, no matter how difficult it may make things later.

When the vicar announced it was time to gather for the service, Sidney finally let her go, but immediately took her hand so she would walk out with him.

The service was a blur, and Angeline could tell that Sidney wasn’t paying attention. He was barely hanging on. Keeping his head bowed, he wouldn’t look at the coffin. Not even Hazel could bring him out of his stupor. When she approached them, he managed a weak smile for her, but couldn’t focus when she tried to talk to him. Wanting to make certain she wasn’t neglected on this difficult day; Angeline picked her up and Hazel cuddled in her lap through much of the service. Guests whispered behind them about how intimate Angeline seemed with the family, but she tuned them out.

The rest of the afternoon dragged on as those who had come to pay their respects lingered. Angeline could tell Sidney was getting irritated, so she had her brother, Reid, and Henry usher the men out the door while Moira, Elise, and Grace escorted the ladies. Meanwhile, Angeline slipped upstairs to see Hazel once more and make sure she wasn’t traumatized from the service.

It had been a debate whether Hazel should attend the service, but Angeline insisted, feeling it would do more harm to prevent the girl from saying goodbye to her father. She believed this deeply after her experience with Phillip, knowing how jarring it was to lose a loved one so suddenly. She could

only hope that everyone's healing could begin now that Nick had been laid to rest.

CHAPTER 21



It had been an incredibly long day, and Sidney breathed a sigh of relief when the last guest finally left or retreated to their rooms. Angeline had gone to check on Hazel, so Sidney shuffled his way to the library and poured himself a large glass of whiskey before collapsing into the nearest chair. It was only a few minutes later that his friends found him.

Without a word, Fitz made his way over to the sideboard and started pouring drinks for the others while Henry and Reid settled into the chairs before the fire.

“Well, the worst part’s over now. Everyone left will leave tomorrow, and you’ll be able to start finding a new normal,” Henry offered. He was always the one to look on the bright side, and Sidney loved him for it, but hope was not what he needed right now.

“I’m not ready. I have no idea what I’m doing.” Sidney covered his face with his hand in shame. “I could kick myself for never taking anything to do with the estate seriously. I just always assumed Nick would have an heir. I didn’t believe I would ever inherit, and I neglected my responsibilities for too long.”

“No one thought this would happen, Sid.” Reid shook his head sympathetically. “No one is ever ready for something like this, even if you did know more about the estate.”

“Nick was still young and healthy, there was no reason to think he wouldn’t have an heir eventually, especially with him

planning to marry again,” Henry added. “There’s no need to add extra pressure to the situation with guilt.”

Sidney slumped down in his chair and leaned his head back, rubbing his tired eyes. “I have nothing but guilt. If only I hadn’t encouraged him to attend that hunting party to loosen up before deciding what to do with the engagement ... Just more of my irresponsible ways.”

Fitz passed the drinks around, and Sidney held out his empty tumbler, silently asking for more. Fitz frowned slightly but added more to the glass before propping himself against the edge of a side table. “It was an accident,” he said. “It’s no more my fault than it is yours. No one expected you to inherit, so you can’t be blamed for not being familiar with the workings of Ravenswood. We all have our own estates now. We’ll help you learn what you need to know.”

“And I appreciate you all for it. Thank you for coming out so quickly.” Sidney would have fallen apart if it weren’t for Angeline’s support and the swift arrival of his friends. Everything that had happened in the twenty-four hours after the accident was a bit of a blur for him. “How did you all find out anyway? You were here in no time at all.”

“Angeline sent word right away,” Fitz replied. “She knew you’d want and need your friends around you.”

“Your sister’s the best woman in the world,” Sidney told him.

“Yes, she is. But sadly, she also understands loss.”

Angeline awoke sometime in the middle of the night and was momentarily confused as to where she was. Stretching from her cramped position, she winced as her neck twinged. As a small form next to her stirred, she realized she had fallen asleep in Hazel’s room. Standing and exiting as quickly as possible, she left Hazel and headed toward her own room.

Passing the door to Sidney's room and noticing the door was not fully closed, Angeline peeked her head in to check on him. He was sprawled out on top of the bed, still clothed in a tangled coat and not properly tucked in. Glad he was finally sleeping, she approached to make him more comfortable and saw that thankfully, his boots had already been removed. As she bent over Sidney's prone form, she could smell alcohol on him again. While he wasn't drinking excessively, she had noticed him consuming whiskey more frequently since learning of Nick's death. She was worried about him and didn't want him to fall back into his old habits. Attempting to remove the jacket, she tugged on one of his arms and jostled him harder than intended.

Opening his eyes slowly, Sidney peered at her. "I'm sorry," Angeline said. "I didn't mean to wake you, I was just trying to make you more comfortable." He sat up and rubbed at his eyes, looking slightly disoriented.

"Angie," he said. "I looked for you, you weren't in your room."

Reaching out from where she was perched on the bed beside him, Angeline swept the hair away from his forehead. "I'm sorry you couldn't find me. I was in Hazel's room and fell asleep." Sidney winced at the mention of his niece, a guilty look on his face. Angeline knew being around her was difficult for him at the moment, but Hazel needed him. Now that the funeral was over, she would push him to spend more time with her. That is, if he would still listen to her after she broke his heart.

Angeline couldn't think of that now; the middle of the night was not the time for such a conversation. "How are you feeling now that the service is over?" she asked.

Sidney was struggling to get out of his jacket and let out a grunt, followed by a large sigh as his arms were finally released while flinging the offending garment across the room. Sitting back against the headboard, he scrubbed his hands over his face. "I don't know. I think I need to get through the reading of the will tomorrow—know that everything is settled. Then I would like to talk with you about what comes next."

“Yes, I need to talk with you about something as well. We should find a time to talk more fully tomorrow.” A heavy feeling was in her stomach as she set a time to let him know she was not a suitable option for his wife anymore. But she couldn’t put off the conversation any longer, even if things were left unsettled.

“For now, I just need you,” Sidney said, reaching over and taking her hand. “I’ve missed you—missed kissing you.”

“I’ve missed you too,” Angeline told him honestly. Kissing him probably wasn’t the best idea, but she wanted the opportunity to savor him one last time. Leaning in, she gently settled her lips on his. The kiss quickly turned intense, and within moments Sidney was devouring her. There was a desperation behind his actions. Even though she knew he loved her, she suspected he was using this moment with her as a way to forget, to escape and become lost in her rather than his own troubled and painful thoughts.

Sidney’s hands grew bolder in their exploration, and Angeline drew back slightly. “Now’s not the time, Sidney,” she said, leaning her forehead against his and catching her breath. “It’s been a long, difficult day after an even longer and difficult week. Let’s just get some sleep so we can approach tomorrow with clear heads.”

“I know you’re right, but you’re the only thing that makes me feel normal right now.”

Angeline closed her eyes and leaned into his embrace, battling inside herself. More than anything, she understood the hurt Sidney was feeling and she would do anything to help take it away, even for just a minute. Selfishly, she also longed to feel the pleasure and connection of making love with Sidney. This would be the last chance for them to be together, and she had promised herself earlier in the day to revel in it as much as possible before everything fell completely apart. Maybe it would make things worse in the long run and hurt them both to know what they were missing, but as stupid of an idea as it was, Angeline wanted to take the memories of her second chance at love with her when she left Sidney forever.

“Then make love to me, Sidney,” she whispered into his ear. “We both need to feel better.”

He pulled back just enough to be able to look her in the eyes. “Are you sure?” he asked, his stare assessing, trying to read what she was feeling. She struggled to hold his gaze, feeling guilty for taking advantage of him as he didn’t know she would be leaving, but nodded as her selfish desire to be with him just this once won out.

As soon as he was sure of her, Sidney moved quickly. Divesting them of their clothing, he paused only long enough to kiss newly exposed patches of skin before moving swiftly to reveal even more. Pulling her onto the bed, Angeline surrendered to him, trying to turn off her thoughts and enjoy the moment as he pulled her onto the bed, knowing she likely would never experience such an expression of love again.

She was glad she had the chance to be with him, to share her love in this way at least once. It was healing for her in a way, to know that she could love again after Phillip and that it wasn’t a betrayal of what she had felt for him or his memory. He would always hold a place in her heart. But now, where she had hoped Sidney could fill her heart up again, instead he would only sit alongside Phillip on a shelf there, as another lost love. Angeline had to let go of the dream that he would be her partner for the rest of her life as she had begun to hope.

Knowing how rare it was to feel such love even once in her life, let alone twice, made it even harder to let go. Angeline was sure she would never find it a third time, so tonight she would bask in the experience and give into what her body desired, the touch, closeness, and intimacy that she craved.

Sidney was gentle with her, but he was also a man possessed. She knew he was using her in this moment to forget about his troubles and grief just as she was using him to store up memories, yet she could still feel his love. It was in the way he stroked her body reverently and stayed connected with her, looking her in the eyes as they joined. She became lost in the moment, forgetting about everything as they moved together

and she clung to him. It was like they were the only thing keeping each other alive.

Sidney let out a strangled cry as he released, and reality came crashing back. The beautiful moment faded as Angeline realized he'd not pulled out, and had spilled inside of her, lost in the moment. A coldness settled over her as she realized her selfish recklessness of giving into this moment before talking to him about not risking conception meant she may once again become with child.

CHAPTER 22



Angeline closed the patio door as quietly as possible upon returning to Geffen House at such an early hour. With the hallway still relatively dark amid the foggy morning, in her haste, she smacked her bag into the side table and jostled a vase. Cursing under her breath, she managed to catch it before it fell, but in doing so she caused the very commotion she had been trying to avoid.

“What’s going on?” Moira said, appearing in the drawing room a moment later. “Angeline? What are you doing here? And at such an hour ...”

“I’m so sorry to disturb you, Moira. I didn’t think anyone would be up and about yet.” Angeline wasn’t sure how to explain her early-morning return without sharing the entire story. The prospect of that felt overwhelming, but she needed a friend to help her puzzle through the mess she had made.

“Never mind that ... I just thought you were staying at Ravenswood for a while. Is everything alright over there?”

Unable to suppress the emotions she’d been bottling up for days, trying to be a support for Sidney and Hazel, Angeline shook her head as tears welled in her eyes. “Oh, Moira. I can’t be there any longer. I’ve messed up so badly.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Moira asked, rushing forward and gathered Angeline into her arms.

The gentleness was too much, and the barrier Angeline had erected to keep her emotions at bay crumbled with Moira’s

comforting embrace. Bursting into tears, she felt like a terrible person for leaving Sidney when he needed her most.

Last night had been glorious. Angeline had forgotten how much pleasure could be had from completely sharing yourself, both emotionally and physically, with someone you loved. Sidney treated her with care and reverence, and she could still feel the ghost of his touch and lips lingering on her body, making her feel alive again.

But the only thing she felt now was terror. She had thoughtlessly assumed that since they were not married Sidney would not risk the possibility of a pregnancy, though she knew he hadn't meant to be careless.

Angeline felt terrible for sneaking out of his bed the way she had this morning, but she'd panicked and couldn't be there with him any longer. Unable to sleep after what happened, she lay next to Sidney until she was sure he was asleep before creeping out to her own room. After packing, she left for Geffen House as soon as the first trace of morning light started to warm the horizon.

"Hey now," Moira said quietly while stroking her hair. "This may be obvious given what's occurred, but what's wrong? What has you so upset?"

Angeline pulled in a shaky breath and tried to stem the flood of tears that was still falling now that she'd allowed them to release. Clinging to her sister-in-law, she muttered into her neck, "I've messed up so badly, Moira. I don't know what to do."

"Come now, I'm certain it can't be that bad." Moira pulled back and took Angeline's hand. "Follow me. We're going to get some hot tea and you can tell me everything that's been happening."

For the past week, Moira had been staying at Geffen House with the children while Angeline and Fitz supported Sidney at Ravenswood. Although they had not spoken at the funeral about how things now stood, Moira was a sharp woman, and Angeline was sure her friend had figured

everything out by the sympathetic look she sent her way yesterday.

Angeline sniffed and wiped her cheeks as she followed Moira into a parlor for tea. A maid arrived quickly to start a fire and take the tea order and once she had retreated to the kitchen, Moira practically forced Angeline down into a chair and waited for her to begin talking.

When Angeline didn't say anything, staring at her lap as they sat by the fire, Moira said, "I know it's been a stressful week, but your emotions this morning make me think there's more going on than just the loss of Nick. You said you'd messed up ... What did you mean?"

Taking in a deep breath, Angeline took Moira's hand before answering. "You're an intelligent woman, Moira. I'm sure you've worked out by now that it would be impossible for me to marry Sidney now that he is the viscount."

"Because he needs an heir." Moira said it gently, but the words still hurt. As close as the two women were, having been family for eight years now, this was not something the two of them had discussed before. It was too personal and hurt too much for Angeline to share freely.

"Yes. I know you're aware I've had trouble holding on to pregnancies in the past. That should be obvious as I was never able to birth a child in all the time that Phillip and I were together." Moira gripped her hand tightly, knowing this was difficult for Angeline to talk about. "I know there were a few times you were suspicious I was increasing ..." Moira nodded her head, "but I miscarried more times than you knew."

"Have you talked to Sidney about this?"

Angeline shook her head, swallowing hard against the lump in her throat to avoid crying. "No. I had planned to let him know the day of the accident, but that obviously didn't happen, so I decided to wait until after the funeral to talk to him about the fact that we can't continue. He'll need to wed someone who can provide him with an heir, and he hasn't yet realized that it can't be me."

“Is there no possibility?” Moira asked tenderly, trying to protect Angeline’s heart.

“No. The last time I miscarried, the midwife advised against trying again. The strain on my body was too great and they worried I may not survive if I were to lose another. I think the loss of hope injured me as much as I was weakened physically.”

“I’m so sorry, Angie.” Moira leaned forward and embraced her. “I didn’t know things had been that difficult.”

“No, you couldn’t have. I didn’t share with anyone because I was heartbroken and ashamed that my body couldn’t do the very thing a woman was made for. I felt like a failure.” Angeline pulled away to wipe her tears. The handkerchief she’d managed to find was now almost soaked through and completely useless.

“Here,” Moira said, handing Angeline a new handkerchief. “I’m sorry you’ve suffered through this alone. I’m sure it couldn’t have made things easy between you and Phillip either.”

Angeline blew her nose as delicately as possible before shaking her head. “No, Phillip was wonderful. He was so supportive of me, and he felt every loss just as I did. He never put any pressure on me, he said he was happy just to share our life together. But his family was anxious for an heir to be produced, and he had planned to start training his cousin when he grew a bit older. The impact on our relationship came from me, I just felt so broken.”

“And now that Sidney is the viscount, you are in the same situation.”

“Yes, but that’s not the worst part. Moira, I have been so careless.” Angeline closed her eyes and cringed when she thought again of last evening.

“Angie, what is it. What has you so upset—as if all this wasn’t enough?” Moira was looking at her with true concern. Thankfully, the maid reentered with a tea tray and Angeline took the moment to breathe deeply and decide just how much

she wanted to share with Moira. The maid apologized for taking so long, explaining that the kitchen fire was still getting going for the day. Moira assured her all was well, dismissing her so they would be alone once again. She poured out the tea and added a generous spoonful of sugar before handing the cup to Angeline.

“Here, drink this. The cure to all English ills, a good strong and sweet cup of tea.”

Angeline took a large drink and let the warmth seep in before confessing, “I made love with Sidney last night.” Bless Moira for not even blinking. There was no judgment in her eyes as she calmly sipped her tea and waited for Angeline to continue. “I know I shouldn’t have as we can’t stay together, but I selfishly wanted to know what it would feel like to be with him, to share that kind of love and passion with another again, while I still could. I don’t know if he’ll forgive me for it once I end our relationship, but he needed comfort, and I wanted to provide it.”

“I can understand that. You’re a grown woman and a widow, I don’t think anyone would judge your actions. You are allowed to seek your own pleasure, Angeline, even if only fleeting.”

Angeline let out a small laugh as she ran a knuckle over the corner of her eye where moisture was gathering. “I know, and thank you for saying so, but I still think it probably was not the soundest decision I’ve ever made. But the worst part is that, rather than stay and talk with him this morning, I fled.”

“Why? Don’t get me wrong, I know it will be one of the most difficult conversations you’ll ever have, knowing how much he loves you. But there’s something else, isn’t there?”

Moira was too perceptive for her own good. “Yes. I foolishly assumed he would pull out as we’re not married, but he spent inside of me. What if I become pregnant, Moira? I’m terrified.”

“Oh, Angie. Do you think that’s a real possibility?”

“I don’t know.” Angeline shook her head trying to clear away the fear and think rationally. “All I know is that until I am sure one way or the other, I can’t face him. I can’t break his heart, telling him that there is no future for us, only to then discover I’m with child. My courses should arrive in a few days, and then I’ll know. I just need to hide here until I’m certain. Please don’t let Sidney know where I am,” she plead.

Moira was looking at her with pursed lips. “Are you sure you want to disappear on him right now? I know you are not responsible for his emotional well-being, but he needs you more than ever.”

“I know. And I feel awful for walking away when he is so deep in his grief. I’m worried about him. He’s drinking too much and feels responsible for Nick’s death after encouraging him to attend the hunting party. But I can’t handle it. I know it makes me a terrible person, but I just can’t face him until I know whether I’m carrying his child.” Angeline burst into tears, feeling like the worst person in the world.

“It’s all right. I won’t tell him anything. Just be careful, Angie.”

CHAPTER 23



For the first time since the accident, Sidney awoke feeling rested. He smiled recalling the previous evening and rolled over to reach for Angeline, however, her side of the bed was empty and cold. Frowning, he wondered why she had left, but it was probably best for propriety's sake.

He was grateful that Angeline had offered herself so fully to him last night. He'd wanted to drown in her, lose himself completely in her soft and welcoming body. She was so beautiful it made him ache. For the first time since Nick had died, he'd felt true happiness and pleasure. Though he knew he couldn't rely on Angie to make him feel whole, it wasn't fair to place that kind of responsibility on her, last night she'd given him exactly what he needed.

The funeral was unbearable yesterday and watching Hazel had nearly broken him. But he refused to let his guard down in front of everyone. The only thing he had left to get through today was the reading of the will, and then the remaining guests would blessedly leave, allowing him to let his guard down and be with Angeline.

Stirring himself, he rose from the bed and caught Angeline's scent wafting off the covers. Sidney leaned over to breathe deeply of the pillow she had used. He knew they could not marry immediately, as it would not be proper while in deep mourning, but he couldn't wait to spend his life with her. He wanted to wake up beside her and her scent every morning. Recalling last night again, he winced remembering his regrettable action, lost in her as he'd been. No matter, it would

be a blessing if Angeline became with child, and they could marry regardless of what was and was not proper during the mourning period.

Heading down the hall after getting dressed, he paused outside Angeline's door and knocked, wanting to see her before his meeting. Sidney knew her lovely face would make him feel better and help him get through the last of the official business. Waiting, he knocked once more. When she didn't answer, he figured she must still be asleep after the late night.

He left to find Davenport and Fitz for the will reading, when both men greeted him at the top of the staircase. "I was just coming to find you, are you ready?"

"Ready whenever you are," Fitz said with a nod.

Sidney located the lawyer, Mr. Carlton, in the foyer and led the group to the study. He knew choosing the study was a mistake the second he walked in. It was the first time he had been in the room since the accident, and not seeing his brother behind the desk was like a punch to the gut.

Seeing him pause, Fitz asked, "Are you alright? Should we go to the library instead?" Sidney closed his eyes and shook his head.

"No," he said, breathing deeply. "It's my house now, and I can't avoid this room forever." Sidney fully entered the room and walked over to the sideboard to pour tea for everyone. Once settled, Mr. Carlton didn't waste any time getting down to business and reading the will and documents which outlined the entail.

It was all rather straightforward. Sidney, as the closest living male relative to Nick, would inherit the title and all lands that came with it, including Ravenswood. He was also named the official guardian for Hazel until she married or reached the age of twenty-one. Davenport let out a wet laugh when he was named the new keeper of an outrageous collection of rocks and geological oddities, which he'd always teased Nick about. Other tokens were left to friends or long-term members of the household staff, but nothing seemed out

of the ordinary. It wasn't until they were wrapping up and Mr. Carlton was preparing to leave that everything fell apart.

Opening the study door, Sidney spotted Lady Effie waiting outside. "A word, gentlemen," she said. "I'd like to clear up a matter before Nick's lawyer departs."

"I'm not sure now is the best time, Effie," Davenport said, trying to diffuse a potential situation before it started.

"I'm afraid I must insist," she said, not deterred.

Sighing, Sidney pinched the bridge of his nose as he felt a headache forming. "Very well," he said, gesturing for her to enter.

"Would you like us to leave?" Fitz asked the lady, indicating himself and Davenport. "It seems like this may be a family matter."

Smirking, she said, "No, I believe I would like some witnesses." Gesturing to their teacups, she added, "And you may want to add something stronger to that."

Feeling extremely ill at ease, Sidney lowered himself back into a chair and waited for her to settle and get to the point.

Turning to Mr. Carlton, she asked, "You are the lawyer who represented the late viscount in the drawing up of our marriage contract, is that correct?"

"Yes, my lady," the lawyer answered, clearly confused as to where she was going. "I'm afraid that with the late viscount's death, the contract is now null and void."

"Ah, see, that's where I believe you are wrong. I have my copy of the contract here," she said, waving a paper about, "and it clearly states that I am contracted to marry Viscount Hasting."

"Yes, my lady. And Viscount Hasting has passed," Mr. Carlton reiterated.

"What are you getting at," Sidney growled, his patience wearing thin after what had already been a long meeting.

Shooting him a glare, Lady Effie said, “I was just about to clarify that, *my lord*.” She knew what she was doing with the extra dig by using his title, and Sidney winced at the hit.

“As I was saying, I understand that Nicholas Bright, the previous Viscount Hasting, has passed. But the current Viscount Hasting, Sidney Bright, is very much alive and well.” Sidney still didn’t understand, but he watched Mr. Carlton pale as Lady Effie stated her case.

“I don’t understand,” Fitz spoke up, voicing Sidney’s own confusion. “You were engaged to Nick and he has sadly passed on. What does any of this have to do with Sidney?”

“No, I was not engaged to Nick. According to the contract, I was engaged to Viscount Hasting. Nick is never named specifically,” she said triumphantly.

Shaking, Mr. Carlton stood and reached out his hand. “May I please see that contract, Lady Ephegenia?”

“I prefer ‘Lady Effie,’” she said with a huff as she passed along the papers. “You’ll see you made a mistake, Mr. Carlton. And that mistake is not my problem. I expect this contract to be fulfilled with a marriage to the current Viscount Hasting within the next year.”

Sidney saw red. There was no way in hell he was ever going to marry this scheming, pathetic woman. His brother may have decided it was a good idea because he was blinded by love for his daughter and desired an heir, but Sidney wasn’t falling for her act. All she cared about was securing another husband with a title and a healthy bank balance, and he certainly was not going to be that man.

“Now, Effie, wait just a minute,” Davenport spoke up. “This is highly unfair. Absolutely no one will believe that Sidney needs to uphold the promise of marriage his brother made.”

“That doesn’t matter, it’s a legal issue. Is it not, Mr. Carlton?” Lady Effie asked. Sidney intently watched the lawyer who was now sweating as he closely pored over the document.

Nervously clearing his throat, Mr. Carlton proceed to kill any remaining hope Sidney still possessed after the past week. “I’m afraid the lady is correct. The contract refers to the viscount in general, it does not specifically refer to the late Lord Hasting. She does have legal precedent to ask for the terms of the agreement to be honored.”

“No,” Sidney said, too exhausted by the situation to protest further. Hanging his head, he shook it in disbelief. “No, I will not marry you. I’m sorry, Lady Effie.”

“I know this is a shock, so I’ll let you have some time to digest it. We can talk again tomorrow.” With that, Lady Effie stood and exited the room in perceived victory.

“How did this happen?” Fitz demanded. “Let me see that contract.”

Mr. Carlton handed it over without a word before gathering his belongings. “If I don’t leave now, I’ll never make it back to London today,” the lawyer said. “I do apologize, and my office will be in touch to help you negotiate this.”

“I think you’ve done enough, we’ll be asking for a second opinion,” Fitz said.

“Fair enough. Gentlemen,” Mr. Carlton said with a resigned nod as he exited the room.

At the sound of the door closing, silence descended on the room. Davenport looked dumbfounded, and apologized profusely for introducing Nick to Lady Effie, then went in search of his wife, hoping she’d talk sense into her friend. Fitz followed suit, storming out to get Reid and Henry, leaving Sidney alone. He didn’t know what to feel. Adding this on top of everything else was enough to finally tip him over the edge. Once again, he just wanted to feel numb. Standing, he made his way over to pour some whiskey into his tea as Lady Effie had suggested.

CHAPTER 24



“This is outrageous,” Reid said, shuffling through the papers of the marriage contract. “There’s no way a court will uphold this. You’re a peer now, you can’t be forced to marry against your will.”

“I won’t marry that woman. I won’t do it,” Sidney spat. “I finally have my chance with Angeline, my chance to be happy, and I won’t let that woman ruin it.” After his third glass of whiskey, he was feeling roused and ready to fight. Henry silently picked up Sidney’s empty glass and put away the decanter, a message he’d had enough as it was only mid-day.

Ever protective of his sister, Fitz growled, “You won’t have to, we’ll make sure of it.”

“I know a good lawyer you can talk to. I used him last year when I was trying to figure out what my father had been doing attempting to sell off entailed land. Fitz has used him before too,” Reid said.

“You mean Stanton?” Fitz asked. “He’ll be good, he deals in contract law and primarily looks at wills and other agreements,” he said when Reid nodded.

“Who is he?” Henry asked. “How do you know him? We need the best.”

“Hugh Stanton,” Reid spoke up again. “He has a law firm in London with his partner, John Beaumont. They’re good men and excellent lawyers. We can go to their offices right away and have Stanton look over this.” Reid waved the papers about for emphasis in his irritation.

“Thank you all,” Sidney said, finally speaking up again. “I don’t know what I would have done without you here, and I’m going to need you until all of this is settled. But for now, it’s been a truly awful morning, and I need it to end. I’m off to find Angeline, and we can depart for London in the morning.”

Sidney couldn’t find Angeline when he retreated upstairs and figured she must be in the nursery. He knew he needed to visit Hazel himself, but he was too upset. Guiltily, he used the whisky he had already drunk that morning as an excuse not to visit until he was fully sober. Exhausted from the emotions of the week and the shock from that morning, he headed to his bedroom to sleep off his intemperate state.

The lack of sleep from before must have caught up to him because he didn’t wake until early the next morning when the first rays of light began to peek through his curtains. He groggily sat up and got ready for the day, splashing water on his face while his valet found fresh clothes suitable for the trip to London.

It was still early, but Sidney was famished, and he made his way down to the kitchen to beg a scone off the cook before breakfast was laid out.

“My lord,” the cook said upon seeing him. “What can we do for you?”

“Please don’t ‘my lord’ me,” he said with a wince. “I’ve always been Sidney, and I should like to remain so to you.”

“I understand that, but you are the lord now, and the household needs to follow what’s proper,” the older woman said with an affectionate pat to his hand. “Now I know you missed dinner last night, so sit down there and I’ll get you something to tide you over until breakfast is ready.” Sidney grinned and sat at the large kitchen table, chatting with the staff and enjoying the cook’s pastries before heading upstairs to join his friends for breakfast.

Arriving at the breakfast room, he was upset to still not find Angeline. “Fitz, do you know where your sister is?” Sidney asked.

“No, I’ve not seen her since the funeral,” Fitz said with a frown, looking up from his paper.

“Neither have I.” An uneasy feeling swept through Sidney’s gut as he realized it had been over a day since he’d seen Angeline. Something didn’t feel right. He wanted to search for her but swallowed his discomfort and loaded a plate with eggs. Any talks with Angeline would have to wait until he and Reid returned from London.

Sidney and Reid made good time riding into London, managing to get almost all the way to the city before the rain descended. They had gambled with the weather by making the trip on horseback rather than taking a carriage but opted for the speed of riding. Arriving at Stanton’s office without an appointment, they were lucky to only wait in the lobby for thirty minutes. Upon entering his office, Reid shook the lawyer’s hand appreciatively upon seeing him and thanked him for taking the time to meet with them.

“Stanton, let me introduce you to my dear friend Mr. Sidney Bright ... I mean, Viscount Hasting,” Reid said, fumbling with the new title as Sidney winced at the correction.

“My lord,” Stanton said, extending his hand. Motioning to chairs across from his large desk, they all settled before getting down to business. “What brings you gentlemen into my office today? How can I help?”

Sidney summed up the events of the past couple weeks to the best of his ability. Nick considering marriage again and drawing up the contract with Lady Effie, Nick’s death leaving Sidney the viscount, and the scene that had transpired the day before with Lady Effie claiming her right to marry Sidney. He was impressed that Stanton gave nothing away as he listened.

He sat expressionless, fingers steepled in front of his face while he reclined in his chair.

“And do you have a copy of the contract with you?” Stanton asked.

“We do,” Reid affirmed, pulling the papers from his satchel and handing them over. They sat in tense silence for the next few minutes while Stanton looked over the document. Finally, he looked up and shuffled the papers together with a sharp snap against the desk.

“The lady’s claim certainly holds merit due to the shoddy way this contract was drafted. Not naming your brother specifically as the intended marriage partner creates ambiguity in the contract—leaving it open to interpretation, which she is trying to exploit, and could leave you vulnerable if this were to go before a court.”

Sidney dropped his head in defeat, keenly feeling the weight of the last week.

“However,” Stanton added, “there is precedent for challenging this type of contract. Many entails, especially those tied to the oldest titles, were written much too broadly and have led to disputed claims over who is to inherit over the years. I can apply the rulings from those cases to your contract and use it to dispute her claim.”

“What do you need from us?” Reid asked.

“Time to research as well as your permission to make inquiries with connected parties if necessary.”

“You have it,” Sidney said. “I can’t marry this woman. I refuse to be bound to someone I do not love and who cares nothing for Hazel. And there is another woman I have been planning to marry.”

“I make no promises,” Stanton cautioned, “but I do feel positive about the kind of outcome we may be able to claim.”

“Thank you, sincerely,” Sidney said, standing to shake his hand. “Please resolve this as quickly as possible, I can pay triple if necessary.”

“I understand, I’ll get to work on this immediately.”

Riding back to Ravenswood, Sidney didn’t even feel the rain.

CHAPTER 25



Early in the morning on the third day since Angeline's return to Geffen House, she breathed a sigh of relief when she awoke to signs of her menses. Tears sprang to her eyes, and she wasn't sure if they were from happiness or disappointment.

The past few days had brought a confusing tangle of emotions and Angeline was wrung out. There were fleeting moments of hope, wishing that she would fall pregnant, allowing her and Sidney to be together. But from there her thoughts would start to spiral. What if they married but she again miscarried? Or if she managed to successfully carry the child to term and had a girl, would they need to keep trying for an heir?

Those thoughts transitioned into memories of the pain and toll on her body after some of the miscarriages she had suffered in the past, turning her anxious all over again.

The hardest part was knowing the best outcome would be for her not to be with child. For as much trauma and fear came with the possibility of expecting, she still very much desired to be a mother. It felt like a betrayal of her deepest dreams to hope otherwise. She felt like a coward for wanting to prevent the heartache experience had told her would inevitably follow.

The last pregnancy she lost occurred shortly after Phillip's passing. She suspected she was increasing again when she lost him but hadn't been sure until after. It could have been due to the intense grief, but that final miscarriage made her dangerously ill as infection set in. The midwife explained that

her body had not expelled everything naturally as it should have, weakening her.

When the midwife discouraged any more attempts to have children, Angeline had grieved the loss, but tied in as it was to her grief for Phillip, she never truly dealt with the fact that her body could no longer support her greatest desire. She buried thoughts of her new reality as it was no longer a possibility with Phillip gone and dwelling on it was too painful.

These past few days however, brought it all rushing back. Not having children had now become a choice, one that was devastating for Angeline to make. Wishing away her dream of becoming a mother was wrenching her in two. But now nature had taken its course, freeing her from the limbo of the unknown and ceaselessly running all the possibilities, both good and bad, through her mind. Burrowing into the covers, she tried to settle and get some sleep, but she was too restless.

Finally making her way out of bed, Angeline took her time getting ready and indulged in a long, warm bath. It felt luxurious and she could feel the tension releasing from her muscles as the water soothed her.

She didn't know how she would start her conversation with Sidney today, but decided she'd need to be as straightforward as possible: reminding him of the reality that he had responsibilities as the viscount and it was now his duty to produce an heir. That was simply something Angeline could not provide him, and there wasn't any way around it.

Contemplating the best way to deliver that message, more than anything, Angeline wished she could have a different body. It had always hurt every time it failed to nurture life within her, but now it was creating a new kind of pain, costing not only the opportunity to be a mother, but also her second chance to be with a man she loved.

Inhaling deeply, Angeline knew the time had come and that putting off talking to Sidney any further was no longer an option. With the clarity that she was not with child after their night together, she absolutely could not allow him to keep living in the belief that they had a future together. It made her

furious, even in her sadness. Rising from the bath, she dressed and made her way downstairs for breakfast, though she didn't think she'd be able to eat anything with her nerves.

Entering the breakfast room, she found her brother seated at the table, returned from Ravenswood. "Good morning, Fitz."

Fitz looked up from his paper, startled by her voice. "Angie, where on earth have you been? No one has seen you for days and Sidney's a mess."

Angeline hung her head in shame. Yes, she had been dealing with a crisis of her own, but she knew she had left Sidney when he needed his friends the most. "I'm sorry, Fitz. I needed some time for myself, it was an overwhelming week. I returned here and asked Moira not to tell anyone. But, Fitz, what's going on?"

Sighing, Fitz laid down the paper and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm not sure it's my place to fill you in, but as it directly affects you, I think you should know."

Angeline was now alarmed. What could have transpired the past two days that would affect her?

"After the reading of the will, we were waylaid by Lady Effie," Fitz explained. "She's claiming that based on how the marriage contract was drawn up, she is engaged to marry Viscount Hasting—regardless of who that may be. As Nick was not named specifically, she's claiming that the contract was not voided upon his death. She is insisting that Sidney fulfill the terms of the contract and marry her as the new viscount."

Angeline was stunned. "What did the lawyer have to say?"

Fitz shook his head, looking more than a little displeased. "He said that Lady Effie's correct that the contract only listed 'Viscount Hasting' and did not name Nick as the viscount, so she had the right to make a legal claim."

"But why would she want to go ahead with a marriage when the person she had meant to marry died?" Angeline couldn't imagine being able to transfer affections so easily.

“Because it was never really Nick she cared about,” Fitz said with a sneer. “Her actions make it clear it was only his position and money that she was after. Sidney can still provide her with the title of viscountess now that there is a new Marchioness of Albany to replace her. That’s all she’s after, she could not care less whom she actually marries.”

“Have you consulted anyone else? Is Lady Effie still here?”

“Yes, to both. Lady Effie wanted to talk with Sidney again, but he wanted more information first. Yesterday, he and Reid went to visit a lawyer both Reid and I have worked with before. He specializes in contract law, and we wanted to see if he had any insights into how the contract can be voided or broken. I’m sorry, Angie,” Fitz added, looking both affronted and sad on her behalf. He really was a good brother.

“Maybe this is for the best,” Angeline said.

“What are you talking about?” Fitz asked, stunned.

“While I certainly don’t want Sidney to be forced into a marriage—especially not to that odious woman—now that he’s the viscount, he will need to marry.”

“Yes,” Fitz said slowly, “but he was planning to marry you, Angie.”

“He can’t,” Angeline whispered. Eyes filling with tears, she looked at her brother who still appeared confused. While she didn’t wish to share everything that had happened over the past few days, she did want him to understand why she needed to break things off with Sidney. “You know I can’t give him children.”

Stricken, Fitz’s face fell. “Oh, Angie. Is that why you disappeared here for the past few days?”

Angeline nodded. “I was planning to talk to Sidney about it today. I wanted to wait until after everything was settled.”

“There has to be a way you can make it work, the two of you were so happy together.”

“Yes, but that was before, Fitz. Everything has changed over the past week. Sidney has duties he never had before and will need an heir.”

“He has other relatives who can be his heir,” Fitz protested. “I don’t know who would be next in the family line, but it’s not imperative he have his own children.”

“None of this matters if he has to wed Lady Effie. I suppose we should wait to hear what the lawyer says before we go looking for solutions to a problem which may resolve itself.” Angeline stood and kissed the top of her brother’s head before leaving the room, needing a moment to herself to process the new turn of events.

While she certainly didn’t want Sidney to be forced into a marriage due to a legal precedent, it might make the blow that Angeline was no longer an option easier to handle. His hands would be tied, making marriage to her impossible regardless of why they couldn’t be together. But once again, Sidney would be the one hurt in the situation, forced into a life with a woman he didn’t even like.

A half hour later, Angeline set out to Ravenswood. Putting off talking with Sidney wouldn’t make anything easier, it would only keep her stomach tied in knots as she worried over what to say. Unfortunately, just as Angeline was coming out of the trees by the pond, she came face to face with Lady Effie herself.

“Lady Eastland,” she said in greeting, smiling victoriously at Angeline. “I’m surprised you’re still here. Unless you don’t yet know.”

“Know that you are trying to trap Sidney into a marriage he doesn’t want?” Angeline said.

“Ah, so you *have* heard. Since we last met, I learned you had intentions toward him, I do apologize for that.” Lady Effie’s fake smile was sharp enough to cut glass.

“No, you don’t,” Angeline responded with a tired sigh. All her fight had left her after the emotions of the last week. “I’m not going to stand here and debate with you. We’ll see what

happens, but until all this is settled, we should probably avoid one another.”

“Why are you even here?” Lady Effie asked. “This isn’t your home, so I’m not sure it’s appropriate for you to still be around.”

“That’s not your call to make,” Angeline said sharply, a bit of fight returning in her irritation. “And if you must know, I’m here to support Sidney, a lifelong friend. And for Hazel, a little girl whose entire world has just been crushed. Someone you should have a care for since you are so determined to wed the viscount.” Angeline stormed away and didn’t look back.

CHAPTER 26



Sidney felt like he was losing his mind. This was now the third day since he'd seen Angeline, and he had no idea where she'd gone. Yesterday, after returning from London, he'd searched all over the house for her, and no one claimed to have seen her. In despair, he drank a bit too much, leaving him with a throbbing headache this morning.

He was beginning to worry that he'd done something to upset her when they made love, as it had been the last thing to occur between them before she seemingly vanished. But for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what he could have done that would make her turn away from him.

He had just roused himself from his chair in front of the fire to pour himself a drink when none other than Lady Effie burst into the study.

"You've been avoiding me," she accused.

"On the contrary," he said. "I haven't thought of you at all."

Sneering at him, she made her way further into the room and shut the door. "We're going to talk about this and reach an agreement once and for all. I know you talked with another lawyer, and the fact that you haven't kicked me out yet means you know I have a legitimate claim to see the contract fulfilled."

Sidney snorted before taking another large drink from his glass. "I'll concede the contract was drawn up poorly, but that doesn't mean I'm obligated to marry you. The contract was

clearly created and signed with my brother in mind. The intention is plain, and my lawyer said there is precedent for breaking such agreements, should you decide to take this to court. Because, let me assure you, the only way I will ever marry you is if a judge orders me to on the threat of prison.” Looking at her pursed lips, he added, “On second thought, even then I may choose prison.”

“Very clever,” Lady Effie quipped. “But it doesn’t change the facts. I know you wanted to marry Lady Eastland and are taking to the bottle in despair that I may be disrupting that plan, but you need to let her go.” Sidney was seething.

“That’s part of the reason why I came down here to talk with you. I saw her pop up on the estate again, she’s hard to miss with that atrocious head of red hair. Since we will soon be married, I don’t think it’s appropriate for her to be around anymore, and I asked her to stay away.”

Sidney could only stare at the lady, in shock. Angeline was back. He had to find her, but first he needed to dispense with Lady Effie. “You’re delusional,” he spluttered. “First of all, it’s not your place to tell *anyone* what to do in my home. Secondly, not that it’s any of your concern, but she’s here as a friend and to spend time with my niece, who is grieving if you recall. And finally, Angeline’s hair is glorious, and I won’t hear a word spoken against it!” Shouting by the time he had finished, Sidney’s chest heaved as he regained his composure.

With a deadly quietness, he spoke up one last time. “I’ve never been one who thinks men should dictate what women do, but while you insist on remaining in my home, you will never approach Lady Eastland again. Are. We. Clear.”

Sidney was impressed as Lady Effie sat unmoved through his tirade, never blinking, even as he practically spat his final words at her. “Just think on what I said. I’m not giving up, and this is not over,” she said, standing without ceremony and leaving the room.

Sidney found Angeline sitting in the library, perched on a windowsill looking out at the rain. She hadn't noticed him yet, so he leaned against a nearby bookshelf and drank in the sight of her. With her head turned away, he took in the curve of her neck as it angled toward the window, her pale, smooth skin on display. Her hair appeared a bright flame red in the firelight, but as the flames flickered, strands of gold and copper also became visible, emerging and waning with the changing light.

Watching Angeline, he was determined to quickly resolve everything with the marriage contract so his life with her could begin. Sidney didn't know what he would do without her. He had loved her for so long, and he wouldn't let anyone or anything get in their way. Walking up behind her, he lightly placed a hand at the nape of her neck.

Angeline startled at the touch, lost in thought and not hearing him approach.

“Angie, where have you been?”

Angeline didn't look at him, keeping her gaze fixed on the window. “I'm sorry, Sidney. I know I've not been around. But I was just with Hazel, and she's doing better.”

Sidney noticed she avoided the question, but he decided to let it go for now, as they needed to discuss the issue involving Lady Effie. “There's something I need to talk to you about.”

Turning around on the window seat to face him, Angeline said, “I know, Sidney. Fitz filled me in this morning, and then I unfortunately ran into Lady Effie.”

Feeling storm clouds gathering above him as he thought about Lady Effie, he spat, “What did she want?”

“To strut around in perceived victory,” Angeline sighed. “Forget about her, she's not worth our time. What did the lawyer have to say?”

“He said she had the right to bring a case and challenge the contract because of Carlton's poor drafting.” Sidney was so angry that he'd briefly contemplated suing his brother's lawyer for negligence.

“So there’s no hope of getting the contract declared null and void?” Angeline asked.

“Not necessarily. Stanton thinks there is enough precedent from previous cases to argue against the vague nature of the contract. I’ll fight this with everything I have, I promise you, Angie.”

“I’m not really sure it matters,” Angeline said, voice shaking.

“What on earth do you mean? Of course it matters!” Sidney exclaimed.

“That’s not what I meant ... It matters a great deal. I want you to be happy, Sidney and not forced to marry someone you don’t want to.” Flustered, Angeline looked at him with eyes that looked haunted. “What I should have said is that it’s a moot point because whatever happens, you can’t marry me, Sidney.”

Ice ran down his spine from her serious tone. “What are you saying?” he whispered in disbelief.

“Sidney ...,” Angeline said, looking pained as she paused to find the words. “I don’t think you’ve realized this yet, but things are different now that you are a viscount. I didn’t want to say anything to you until after the funeral, but ...”

“But what?” he bit out. “What could have possibly changed so much that I wouldn’t want to marry you?”

“It’s not that you don’t want to, it’s that you can’t,” Angeline clarified. “With the title comes responsibilities. To the King and the government, but mostly to your tenants who rely on this land for their livelihoods. They need to know their future is secure and that the title will stay in good hands.”

Angeline stopped there and swallowed back a sob. Sidney understood he had responsibilities, but the estate was running well. “The estate is thriving, Angie. Nick was an excellent land manager, and of course I’ll continue to care for the tenants. Why would that change?”

Tears were now flowing down Angeline’s face as she found the courage to make her point clear. “Because, Sidney,

the Hasting line must continue for the estate to be secure. You need an heir, and that's the one thing I can't give you. We never talked about children, but you know I've struggled to have them, and nothing in that regard has changed."

Angeline's words hit him like a physical blow. He thought of all the times his brother had seemed weighed down by his duties and wondered if he was doomed to suffer the same fate. A sense of dread was beginning to creep over him as he felt the inevitability of what Angeline was saying.

"No! No, I'll not let this happen. Angie ..." He reached for her and crushed her against his chest.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," she muttered into his shoulder, shaking with her tears.

Sidney held on to her, his mind racing, trying to think of anything to negate what she had said. "We'll find a way, I can't lose you, Angie."

Angeline pulled back and wiped her cheeks. "It's not an option, Sidney. My inability to carry a child could have been ignored when you were Mr. Bright, but as Viscount Hasting, you have a duty. It would be irresponsible to knowingly enter into a marriage with a barren woman."

After everything that had happened, Sidney had reached his breaking point. It was too much. Collapsing into the nearest chair, he dropped his head into his hands, the weight of it suddenly feeling too heavy for his neck to support on its own.

Angeline crouched down in front of him, her hands on his knees. "Sidney, please look at me," she pled. "The last thing I want to do is hurt you, this is killing me too. After Phillip, for the first time I thought I could be truly happy again. But you know as well as I do that this is bigger than just what you and I want." When he didn't respond, she said quietly, "I'm going to return to Geffen House. I think space could do both of us some good as we adjust to this new reality."

Sidney could feel Angeline's eyes on him as she stood to leave, but he couldn't bring himself to look up from his lap.

She leaned forward and kissed the top of his head. “I love you, Sidney, and you will always be my friend. That will never change,” she said, before walking away.

CHAPTER 27



Everything hurt. Sidney didn't know what to do, and with no hope left, he drank. He felt hollow, the same way he had when Angeline married Phillip and he lost her the first time. Only this time it was worse, as he'd had a taste of what life could be like with her before losing her again. There wasn't enough alcohol in the world to fill the gaping hole in his chest where his heart had been.

Sidney lost track of the days and had no idea what was going on with Lady Effie's claim. He thought she was still hanging around the estate, trying to sink her roots into the place, but he wasn't sure. Even so, if he couldn't be with Angeline, it didn't matter who he was married to. It's true he would prefer it not be Ephegenia Tarlton, in his opinion the woman was a manipulative shrew, but in the end, if he had to marry someone other than Angie, why not her?

He hadn't seen Angeline since their talk several days before, though he knew she would still be coming by occasionally to see Hazel. He was trying to respect her wishes and keep his distance, it was best that she didn't see him in such a state anyway.

But he couldn't go on like this without answers. Sidney still didn't know what had caused her to leave after the funeral; however, even before then, he'd sensed her pulling away. While her anguish over being unable to produce an heir was understandable, he was convinced something else had happened and he needed to know. There had to be a way he

could convince her to remain with him, but it wasn't possible if he didn't understand everything she was thinking.

Sidney resolved to visit Geffen House and speak with Angeline. Before leaving, he knew he would need to clean up and make himself more presentable. Calling for a bath to be drawn and clean clothes laid out, he swung by the kitchen before heading upstairs to find some food and soak up some of the alcohol in his body.

"You're quite the sight, my lord," Mrs. Thompson said upon his entrance to the kitchen. "Sit yourself down and I'll bring you some stew."

Sitting down at the large prep table, Sidney cradled his aching head in his hands.

"Here, this tea is strong. Drink up, it will help set your head to rights."

"Thank you," he said gratefully. She'd always given him just what he needed and was an excellent cook. As he sipped the tea, she placed a steaming bowl in front of him, and his stomach growled at the delicious scent. When she shot him a look at the sound, he grinned at her sheepishly. "I guess I haven't been eating much lately. I appreciate this."

"You've been dealing with a lot, my lord, we are all happy to give you a little grace. Just make sure you're giving it to yourself as well." She was a smart woman.

Sidney ate the entire bowl before heading upstairs for a bath, already feeling more in command of himself than he had in days.

When he reached Geffen House, he approached through the back gardens and ran into Fitz.

"Sidney! It's good to see you out and about. What are you doing here?"

"I thought some fresh air might be good for me," Sidney said. It wasn't exactly a lie, the air was good for him. It just wasn't the main reason he had come. Unsure how much Fitz knew of where things stood between Sidney and his sister, he didn't want to say too much.

“Yes, but I’m guessing you also want to talk with Angeline. I know she dealt you another blow you didn’t need,” Fitz said, his tone gentler than normal. Sidney nodded while clearing a throat that suddenly felt thick, not trusting his voice. “Wait here, I’ll go and get her for you.”

Fitz went inside while Sidney took in the beauty of autumn around him. He’d not been out of the house since the afternoon of the accident when he and Angeline picnicked. It felt so long ago. Hearing a commotion behind him, he turned to see Fitz and Angeline exiting the house.

He immediately felt better seeing her, needing her to sustain him. It had only been days since they’d last spoken, but now that he knew what it felt like to be with her, the thought that she might truly leave him was crushing. She looked apprehensive approaching him but came to his side anyway.

“Angie, thank you for meeting me. I know you asked for some space, but I was hoping we could talk if you’re open to it.”

She looked him over, assessing, and he was glad he’d cleaned up before coming. Giving a curt nod, she said, “Alright, Sidney. The rain has held off today, let’s walk through the garden.”

Sidney was quiet for the first part of their stroll, but he finally choked out, “I don’t know what to do without you, Angie.”

Angeline sighed, knowing that indulging him any further would only hurt them both. “That’s why I suggested some space, Sidney. We have to get used to being without one another. Even if you don’t marry Lady Effie—and I sincerely hope you aren’t forced to—you’ll still need to marry someone else.”

Sidney shook his head violently. “I’d rather not marry at all if I can’t have you, heir be damned.”

“I know you don’t mean that,” Angeline said, exasperated. “You’re speaking from a place of emotion, you aren’t being rational.”

The past few days had been difficult for Angeline, knowing how much she’d hurt Sidney. She was constantly second-guessing herself, wondering if she should have waited to talk with him until he was stronger. It heartened her to see that he had made an effort before coming over. But even clean shaven, he did not look well, and she feared he wasn’t taking care of himself. And she knew from visiting Hazel the day before that he was not spending time with her.

“I know I have other relatives out there, and while they may be distant, someone is next in line to inherit,” Sidney beseeched, grasping for a solution to keep them together.

Angeline closed her eyes, pained by his desperation. “I’m sure that’s true, but you just said yourself you have no idea who that person is. That means they are distanced from this place and know nothing about the estate or how to run it. How fair would it be to your tenants to turn Ravenswood over to someone without a connection to it, who wouldn’t care for it the way you do?” Shaking her head, she added, “Fitz tried to make the same argument, but unless you suddenly discovered who may be next in line today, then spent the rest of your life educating them, I don’t see how that’s a viable option.”

“Then I’ll marry someone else in name only and still be with you. As soon as there’s an heir, I’d never touch her again.” Sidney was tugging at his hair, a clear sign he was reaching his breaking point.

Stopping abruptly at Sidney’s statement, he halted as well and turned towards her. Angeline grabbed the sides of his face and looked deep into his eyes. “I know you are only suggesting that out of desperation, so I’ll forgive you for it this once. While that may work for you, it would be incredibly disrespectful and hurtful not only to me, but your wife also. I refuse to be anyone’s guilty side piece, Sidney. You will not make a mistress of me.”

Not breaking from her hold, Sidney dropped his eyes in shame. “I’m sorry, Angie. You know I would never ask such a thing from you. I love you too much.”

“I know. But I don’t think we can rationalize our way out of the truth of this situation, Sidney. I had days to think about this before I ever brought it up with you. Don’t you think I thought through all these possibilities myself? I didn’t just decide to walk away from you on a whim, I did it because it’s the only realistic path forward where we both can retain our sanity—however excruciating it may be.”

Sidney started to cry, and Angeline’s heart shattered. All she could do was hold him while he trembled from the giant, heaving sobs escaping his body. Other than the day he had lost his brother, she didn’t think she had ever seen him cry. That he did so now, the force of it literally wracking his body, devastated her. She was seeing a broken man in one who was normally so jovial, the light of any party. Eventually, Sidney’s tears slowed, and his breathing evened out. Angeline pulled away, raising her hand to wipe the salty trails from his cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“I know,” she replied simply. “But we can’t go on like this. Hazel is starting to do better, and I think she’ll continue to do so.” She paused and looked into his eyes once more, making sure he really heard her. “*Especially* if her uncle starts spending time with her.” Sidney nodded remorsefully, and while Angeline hated rubbing salt in the wound, he needed to get his act together where Hazel was concerned.

Angeline knew the next part would be hard, but it had to be done. “Sidney, I need you to respect my boundaries and not pursue me. We need to make a clean break, or it may never stop hurting.”

CHAPTER 28



Angeline returned to Ravenswood a few days later to see Hazel, and Sidney was waiting outside the room looking haggard. “Can we talk?” he asked.

“I’m not sure there’s much more to talk about,” she said wearily.

“Please,” Sidney begged. Her heart physically ached seeing him so distraught, and though she was irritated that he was not giving the space she had requested, she nodded in agreement.

“Let me meet with Hazel first, and then I’ll come find you.” He must have agreed, for he turned away and began to walk towards the stairs. “She needs you too, Sidney,” Angeline called out after him.

He paused at the top of the staircase. Giving a curt nod, he uttered, “I know.”

The next few hours passed quickly with Hazel, who was slowly becoming more engaged and independent. Angeline was glad to see her adjusting, though she knew there was still a long road ahead for the sweet girl. Finally, she didn’t think she could put off talking to Sidney any longer. It’s not that she didn’t want to see him—she craved to be near him—but she knew it wasn’t for the best. There was nothing left to say. But the way he was neglecting Hazel when she needed her uncle could not be ignored, and her anger at the way he was shirking his responsibilities propelled her down the stairs to his study.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Angeline said, bursting through the study door. Reclined and half asleep in the desk chair, feet propped up on the desk with a tumbler resting on his chest, Sidney jerked awake at her sudden presence. Scrambling to keep himself from falling, he splashed whiskey all over his wrinkled shirt.

Sidney sat upright after regaining his balance and placed the tumbler on the desk before running a hand over his messy hair.

“Is she alright?” Sidney asked immediately. To his credit, he looked incredibly concerned.

“She is, but exactly how would you know if she wasn’t? When’s the last time you saw her, Sidney?” Angeline said, unable to hide her condemnation.

He squirmed under her piercing gaze but wisely didn’t say anything.

“Just look at yourself. I know you’ve taken a lot of hits recently, Sidney, but drinking yourself into a stupor is not the way to deal with it. I know you’re hurting—” she had to pause to swallow, throat thick with unshed tears “—and I know I’m responsible for some of that hurt, and for that I’m sorry. But there is a beautiful young girl who has lost the most important person in her life. Her entire world has been flipped around and will never be the same and she’s hurting too. Hazel needs you, Sidney, and you’re neglecting her.”

Tears now streaming unchecked down her face, Angeline no longer had any energy after her outburst and sat in the chair opposite the desk. Staring at Sidney, she could see just how unwell he had become in the past weeks. He clearly hadn’t been eating or sleeping well. His cheeks appeared thinner, the freckles she so loved appeared dull in his pallor, and he had dark patches under his eyes. Unshaven and unwashed, he looked like a shadow of himself.

Sidney closed his eyes, and his pain was evident. “I don’t know how to be what she needs,” he said after a moment.”

“That’s bullshit,” Angeline replied, surprising even herself. “She loves you. You’ve never had to try and be anything special for her before. Stop overthinking it, and just show up. All she needs is to know that you’re still here, that she hasn’t lost everyone, and that you care.”

“But how can I make her stop hurting if I can’t even do that for myself?” Angeline didn’t think Sidney was even aware that tears had started slipping down his cheeks. She could feel the pain in his question, and her heart broke just a little bit more, if that was even still possible at this point.

“You can’t make it stop, Sidney, but you can help her heal faster by being with her, letting her know it’s alright to hurt and that you’re hurting too. But you certainly can’t do anything for her if you continue to sit around here and drink your life away.”

“It’s the only thing that stops me from feeling so much,” he said quietly. “You don’t understand what this grief is like, to lose someone like that.”

Angeline looked at Sidney in astonishment and let out a small laugh in disbelief. “You don’t think that I know what it’s like to lose someone suddenly? You forget that I watched my husband die in front of me.” He was so caught up in his own world of pain that his reality seemed skewed.

“I can’t see you like this, Sidney,” Angeline said, shaking her head. “I won’t watch you throw your life away. Even if there were a way for us to be together still, I wouldn’t be with you like this. If this is who you plan to be ...” She shook her head. “I don’t recognize the man I fell in love with anymore.”

Sidney had never felt so berated in his life, and he knew he deserved every word Angeline had thrown at him. He needed to pull it together for Hazel’s sake if not for his own—and if he wanted the chance to keep Angeline in his life in any capacity moving forward. Knowing she was disappointed in him was what felt worst of all.

Sidney slowly stood from the desk and moved to open the window for some much-needed fresh air. He wasn't entirely sure the last time he'd left the study, and his stomach growled to let him know it had been quite some time. Stretching his long, lean body, he forced himself to down a glass of water and immediately felt better, even if only incrementally. Deciding he needed a meal before a bath and then sleep, he headed for the kitchen.

Passing the formal parlor on his way to the back of the house, Sidney was surprised when he heard voices. Hearing his name, he paused to listen.

"... maybe this was all for the better when you think about it."

Sidney recognized Lady Dalton's voice and realized she must be here to see Lady Effie, who was still refusing to leave Ravenswood.

"Well, I do think Sidney will be much more fun, you've heard the rumors about him over the years, I'm sure. He was quite the lothario when he was younger," Lady Effie said. Sidney winced at her description of him, pained by his past behavior.

"Yes, Nick was always a bit of a stick in the mud. I never knew what Davenport saw in him."

Enraged, Sidney didn't wait to hear anymore and burst into the room. "How dare you." The two women looked up in surprise, and Lady Davenport had the decency to look somewhat guilty. But Lady Effie wasn't bothered at all.

"I knew you were a conniving witch the first time I met you—and I warned my brother not to marry you. All you're after is the title and what you think it will give you now that you're a dowager. You could not care less about anyone or anything other than yourself."

"I won't deny looking out for my best interests, anyone would," Lady Effie said calmly.

"Well you should have been more careful what you said then. Because you better believe I'm going straight to my

lawyer about bringing this disputed marriage contract before a judge, where the case will undoubtedly be covered in the papers. I mean the story has it all: love, death, intrigue. How do you think it will look to the society you are so obsessed with when it's reported that you don't care which brother you marry as long as you can have a title? You may very well win the case, but you'll lose in the court of public opinion, and I know that's the only one you actually want to win."

Sidney could tell he'd finally found her weak spot when her face paled. "Unless you want your name dragged through the mud, I suggest you leave this house immediately and never even think about questioning that contract again."

Turning around, all his good intentions forgotten in his rage, he headed back to the study and poured himself a large dram of whisky.

CHAPTER 29



Still shaken by her encounter with Sidney when she arrived home, Angeline went to find Moira and her brother. Discovering Moira first, upon seeing her beloved sister-in-law, she promptly burst into tears.

“Oh, my dear, what happened?” Moira asked, rushing over to hold her. Angeline fell onto her shoulder and let out all the pent-up worry, anger, and sadness that had been building in her for weeks. When her tears didn’t stop after a few minutes, Moira called for Fitz.

“Angie? What’s wrong?” her brother asked.

When she didn’t answer, Moira talked on her behalf. “I’m not sure. She went to Ravenswood to see Hazel, and when she returned, she fell apart.”

“Angie,” Fitz asked again, laying his hand on her back and bending to her level. “Can you look at me?”

Taking in a shuddering breath, she calmed enough to pull away from Moira and sit down.

“Angie, what happened?” Fitz asked again, his concern clear on his face.

“He’s falling apart, Fitz,” Angeline choked out. “I thought after I talked with him here at Geffen House that he was going to clean up his act. But when I went down to Sidney’s study to see him after my time with Hazel, he was practically passed out on his desk from drink. He can’t handle anything that’s happening right now and is turning back to his old vices to cope.”

“God-damn-it,” Fitz said. “I hoped this wouldn’t happen, but between losing his brother, inheriting the title, the marriage contract debacle, and you necessarily breaking things off—that’s a lot for any man. He’s clearly not even trying to handle it, though.”

“I feel like this is my fault, like I was the last piece holding him together and when I pulled away, everything came tumbling down and I broke him. I don’t recognize him anymore, Fitz.” Angeline was haunted by how he’d appeared, so unlike himself. “I still love him, but I don’t like who he is right now. He’s been pleading for me to believe in him ... to find a way we can still be together. But I was so upset with his neglect of Hazel and seeing him that way ... I told him that even if that were possible, I wouldn’t want to be with him now. You should have seen his face, how wounded he was.”

“First of all,” Moira said, “Hazel can stay here with us for as long as necessary so Sidney can clean up his act. Secondly, this is not your fault. A lot of terrible things happened all at once, and yes, we need to support Sidney, but that doesn’t mean sheltering him from his new reality. He knows deep down that you were right in ending your relationship, he just doesn’t want to accept it because it hurts too much.”

“Moira’s right,” Fitz chimed in. “Angeline, we can’t continue to indulge him forever, and hopefully your decision to pull away will be the wake-up call he needs. When he’s ready to ask for help, we will absolutely be there for him. But until then, I think we need to leave him to fend for himself.”

“I just want my friend back. Even if we can’t be together, I still love him and I want him to be alright.” As Moira hugged her again, she couldn’t prevent the tears from coming.

“You son of a bitch,” Fitz yelled, bursting into Sidney’s study and seeing him sitting on the floor, whisky tumbler in hand. Sidney didn’t try to defend himself, knowing he deserved everything Fitz was about to give him.

“Well? Don’t you have anything to say for yourself?” When Sidney remained silent, Fitz continued to rant, unleashing his anger. “You know I love you like a brother, but when you started becoming serious with Angeline, you promised me you wouldn’t hurt her. You promised me! But you have hurt her, and it’s time you wake up and start to make things right.”

“I know,” Sidney whispered to the ground. “I know I’ve messed everything up. Oh god. Fitz, I don’t know what to do.” Cradling his head between his hands, Sidney sobbed uncontrollably.

Fitz looked at him in shock, not knowing how to react or comfort him. Finally, he just sat down beside him on the ground and waited for Sidney to cry himself out.

“Sidney, what happened?” Fitz asked when he had calmed down enough to converse.

Wincing, he recalled the conversation he had with Angeline. “Your sister rightly tore into me, and I was determined to clean up and do better, I was. But then I heard Lady Effie talking about Nick.” He recounted what he had overheard to Fitz.

“She said that?” Fitz asked, utterly shocked. Sidney then explained how he had convinced her to leave and not pursue the contract with threats of public exposure. “Good,” Fitz said, furious.

“I really was planning to clean myself up and start new. But then that conversation—I just fell apart again.”

Fitz let out a big sigh and leaned his head back against the desk. “Everything that’s happened over the past month isn’t fair, and you’ve had to deal with the brunt of it. But you’re not the only one affected, and you’re not the only one who’s hurting. You’re now the guardian of a fragile eight-year-old who needs the only family she has left. And if you don’t pull your head out of your ass soon, you’re going to lose one of the best friendships you’ve ever had. Angeline loves you, but she won’t suffer fools, she’s been through too much.”

Sidney flinched. “I know, that was another mistake. I may have implied that she didn’t know what it was like to lose someone so suddenly.”

“Sid...,” Fitz said with an exasperated sigh.

“She’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Fitz. I’ve loved her for over a decade and I finally had her. I can’t lose her too, I just can’t,” Sidney said, voice breaking.

“Then we’ll figure out a way, we’ll find your relations and train up the new heir. But first, you have to deserve her, Sidney. And right now, you don’t.”

He knew Fitz was speaking the truth. He needed to get away from Ravenswood to clear his head and dry himself out, so he could be stable for Hazel and be the man Angeline saw in him. “Do you think you can take care of Hazel for a while?” he asked Fitz.

“Of course,” Fitz said, squeezing his shoulder. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to visit Reid. If he’ll have me, maybe I can stay in the infamous dower house. I need some space, and I think the sea air will be good for me.”

“I think so too,” Fitz said.

CHAPTER 30



Dorset Coast—February 1821

Sidney breathed in the cold coastal air, letting the iciness fill his lungs as he relished feeling awake and alive. He finally felt strong and clearheaded, ready to take up his responsibilities as the viscount.

It had been a long three months, but taking the time away had forced him to deal with his grief once and for all as he had no one else to lean on, and no vices on which to fall back.

Shortly after Fitz left him on the floor of his study, he had pulled himself together enough to wash, change, pack and order his carriage. Two days later, ravaged from ill health and little sleep as the alcohol depleted his system, he arrived at Cliff House and begged Reid for a place to stay. Sidney had explained to his friend the plan he had managed to devise on the journey. Agreeing, Reid set everything up to allow Sidney to begin dealing with his new reality once and for all.

Placing him in the dower house that Elise had made so comfortable when she lived there, Reid arranged for his friends and right hands at the estate, Evie and Jonathan, to come by periodically to restock supplies and assist with cleaning. All alcohol had been removed from the premises, and Sidney did not have access to a form of transportation to venture into town and procure more. While Sidney was not addicted to drink as some men he had known, he had come to rely on the feeling of detachment it provided, allowing him to avoid dealing with his feelings. Not wanting to take chances,

he made sure every temptation to sink back into that oblivion was removed.

For the first few weeks, Reid and Elise came by periodically to see him, but they mostly left him alone as Sidney had asked. He needed time to process everything that had happened, trying to wrap his mind around the reality of his life both now and moving forward, and the poor way he had handled new challenges.

With so much time on his hands and focused on regaining his health, Sidney took rambling walks down the coastline enjoying the harsh bite in the air as autumn turned decidedly toward winter. He also spent hours reading in the study at the dower house while sitting beside the fire or perching on the windowsill. Reading was a particularly helpful escape whenever he began to feel overwhelmed, providing a space to lose himself in someone else's life or a different time and place all together for a while.

As he began feeling clearheaded again, Sidney ventured out from the house more often and engaged with people around the estate. Occasionally he dined with Reid and Elise, and he enjoyed helping Jonathan with the more mundane tasks of preparing for the next planting, the physical labor putting his mind at ease. He even helped brainstorm plans for a new greenhouse for Elise so she could grow medicinal herbs year-round.

Relishing the feeling of having even this small sense of purpose, Sidney realized how adrift he'd felt with Parliament out of session. Becoming an MP and being meaningfully occupied was what had helped him to straighten up his act previously, and he now realized that the life of an idle gentleman was not good for his well-being.

Another realization was that he'd avoided grieving fully for his brother, as the reality he was gone made it impossible to ignore the fact that he now held the title. Sidney always believed he thrived as a younger son, never wanting the responsibility of ensuring people's livelihoods. But maybe that mindset had been hindering him and he was actually at his best when serving others, like his work in the House of Commons.

Rather than seeing his viscount duties as a burden, he needed to embrace this opportunity.

Reid was helpful to talk with as he came to terms with everything, having struggled himself with how to make a difference as a landholder and not just within the halls of Westminster. At one point, about two months into his stay in Dorset, both Henry and Fitz visited. All three of his friends shared what they'd learned while becoming landholders of their estates, and they assisted him in making plans for continuing his brother's work at Ravenswood.

During the visit, Fitz pulled Sidney aside to check in on him more closely. "You look well Sidney. I can't tell you how happy that makes me."

"It took a while, but I finally feel well," he reassured him. "How's Hazel?" Sidney had written to his niece several times over the last month after he had time to get his head right. He deeply regretted that he had not cared for her in the way she needed after losing her father and he was eternally grateful to Fitz and his family for taking her in, especially Angeline.

Smiling wide, Fitz said, "Hazel is thriving more and more each day. We love having her, she's an absolute delight and Emily is enamored with her." Sidney took in a deep breath, relieved to hear it. Fitz must have seen the guilt on his face because he tried to reassure him he had done the right thing. "I know you feel like you've abandoned her, but don't. She's safe and happy, and you weren't in a place to provide for her. She's young and resilient and will be fine in the long run. Hazel knows you love her, and she gets excited every time she receives a new letter from you."

Of the many things Sidney had to be regretful for during the weeks following Nick's death, he was most ashamed of the way he had left Hazel to deal with everything on her own. He'd used his pain as an excuse for not being there for her, but really it had been fear holding him back. It terrified him knowing that he was now responsible for Hazel's happiness and well-being. He'd always felt comfortable being an uncle—he could have fun with Hazel and support her—but at the end of the day, there was someone else for her to fall back on. He

was all she had now; he was the one who always needed to be there.

While Sidney was still overwhelmed by the responsibility, he was looking forward to going home and building the kind of relationship with his niece that he should have from the start. He would have to feel out if she was ready to return to Ravenswood, but he would put in the work every day to let her know he loved her and would always be there for her.

“And how’s Angeline?” Sidney tentatively asked. Fitz gave him a measured look before answering. “She’s well. I know she misses you, but she’s glad you’re taking this time to get your head right.”

“Do you think she’ll ever forgive me?” Sidney knew how much he had hurt her. Angeline had been so understanding and patient with him, and he had completely taken her for granted. She had been in a vulnerable place herself when first returning to Kent, but she’d trusted him enough to open herself up and explore a new relationship. His inability to cope with tragedy in a healthy manner had shattered that trust, and he knew when he returned home that he would need to work to rebuild it piece by piece.

And that meant starting over from a foundation of friendship. He’d had a lot of time over the past months to think about Angeline’s reason for pulling away from him initially, even before he’d ruined everything, and he still felt like there was something she wasn’t sharing with him. Regardless, she still believed they could no longer be together.

Rationally, Sidney understood Angeline’s concerns regarding the need for him to produce an heir, but there were plenty of married couples within the aristocracy who’d been unable to conceive or only had female children.

Yes, in those instances the inability to produce an heir had not been known beforehand, but these families showed there were other ways to continue the line. And it was not unheard of for cousins or other relations to inherit, just look at Henry. Even in a family that appeared to have a solid line, Henry still came into the title as the second son of a second son due to

several untimely and unfortunate deaths. Nothing was guaranteed, which was why Sidney still intended to wed Angeline. There were several things he needed to accomplish first, though, including taking steps in hopes of making her more receptive to the idea.

CHAPTER 31



Angeline took in a deep breath as the carriage pulled up to Reid's estate, preparing herself to meet with Sidney for the first time since he'd left three months before. Though she knew this would not be easy, she owed him a conversation and explanation of why she had pulled away even before informing him she could not bear his heir.

It had been a difficult time without Sidney, and Angeline was eager to see that he was doing well, while also remaining cautious after how they'd left things. She truly understood his grief and how much pain he'd been in. He lost a beloved brother in a shocking accident. No one is ever prepared for such an unexpected loss, but adding in his new responsibilities as viscount and the Lady Effie bombshell, it had been too much in a short timespan for him to handle.

Angeline greatly feared that ending their relationship once she was no longer a viable romantic partner may have been the final straw. Carrying immense guilt that putting distance between them when he needed support the most may have been what made him break so completely, she prayed he could forgive her and that he was indeed his old self again.

Once her immediate concern for Sidney began to ease, her own emotions became heightened as she dealt with losing the future she had begun allowing herself to imagine. It had been so hard for her to open herself up again after Phillip, but Sidney made her feel alive again—pulling her to him in a way she couldn't deny. He'd made her feel safe, and she was angry that it was upended after such a small amount of time.

The bright spot in everything had been Hazel. She was such an undeniably sweet girl, and being around Miles and Emily seemed to expedite her healing, with her bouts of sadness becoming less frequent. Sidney had also been sending her letters, which always cheered her up. Angeline did worry, however, about how attached Hazel had become to her. She knew the girl was in need of a mother figure, but Angeline would not always be as present in her life. It was perhaps her own fault for indulging the girl and wanting to bring her comfort, allowing Hazel to cuddle up with her every night to read until she fell asleep in Angeline's bed.

Moira told Angeline not to worry about it, that once Sidney returned, Hazel would shift her attention to him. Angeline knew there was truth in her statement, but she would still need a woman in her life. And when Sidney eventually married, that would be someone other than her.

As for her own relationship with Sidney moving forward, Angeline wasn't sure what to expect. Soon after Fitz and Henry travelled to Dorset to see Sidney and Reid, he began to send her letters, along with those he'd already been penning to Hazel. She wondered if his intention was to start something new.

Fitz must have said something to him while they were together that made him feel such a step might be well-received. They were light in tone and not written in a way that made her feel obligated to respond. He didn't ask intrusive questions or try to make his case, seeking forgiveness, as he acknowledged there was no justification for the way he had acted. Rather, he wrote about how being on the coast and working was helping him slowly heal. He told her about the projects he was working on with Jonathan and how for the first time he was excited about what he could do for Ravenswood. Angeline was relieved by what she read; she could hear his lightheartedness returning in the way he wrote. He sounded like himself again.

It wasn't until Sidney's last letter that he even mentioned how they might try and rebuild their relationship moving forward.

Dearest Angeline,

As the time is quickly approaching for Parliament to resume, I have decided it is time for me to return home to Ravenswood and get things in order before I must depart, yet again, for London and the opening of the session.

I am most anxious to see Hazel. Fitz told me she was thriving when I last saw him, and she certainly seems more than enthusiastic in her letters, telling me all about her adventures with Miles and Emily. Reading about their friendship, I couldn't help but be reminded of another trio of children on the same estates a few decades ago.

My sincerest hope is that when I return, we can begin anew as friends. Regardless of what we have been to each other over the years, through all the ups and downs, we have always been friends. It has been one of the constant threads running through my life and one of the greatest privileges.

I know that may be asking a lot, and I hope that we may have an honest conversation with one another when next we meet.

Until then, ever your friend,

Sidney

Angeline had been warmed by the letter, and it made her desirous to see him and have that conversation sooner rather than later. That was why she planned a stop on her way back from visiting Highland Manor today. She, Moira, and Elise had spent a wonderful week visiting Grace and her new daughter, Josie. And they helped Angeline process some of her unreconciled feelings.

“It seems silly to mourn for something that was more of a missed opportunity than a real relationship,” Angeline said as the women took turns cuddling the newborn. “Our relationship really only lasted a few weeks before everything so tragically fell apart.”

“I’m not sure that matters,” Elise said. “When real feelings are involved, time frame has no impact. It was a span of only a few weeks when I fell in love with Reid, and I hadn’t been friends with him for over twenty years beforehand.”

“You and Sidney have always shared a connection,” Moira added, pausing to take Josie from Grace as she finished feeding her. “For most of your friendship, both of you felt more for the other at different times, and the timing was right to finally allow what was there to flourish. It’s hard to just leave something like that behind.”

“What is it that’s preventing you from moving forward?” Grace asked Angeline in her gentle way.

“I think what’s been so difficult is not knowing how to repress the feelings he’s reawakened in me. For so long after losing Phillip, I couldn’t even contemplate being with another man. But as I moved forward with my life and returned to Geffen House, I began feeling lonely. I missed what it was like to have a partner. Then Sidney waltzed back into my life and suddenly all the desire I thought had died came to life again. I have enough years left ahead of me that I wanted to live fully and with affection. Those feelings are still there, and it’s hard to imagine being without someone to love for the rest of my life, but I also can’t imagine sharing a life with anyone other than Sidney. Due to circumstances that’s just not possible. Now the very thing that made me feel alive might kill me out of desperation.”

All of the women looked at Angeline sympathetically as she wiped the tears from her eyes. She gave them a watery smile so they wouldn’t fret over her. “Please don’t worry about me, I’m just being melodramatic. I’ll be alright, I just need time to readjust and find a way to put these feelings back away again.”

“Are you sure you can’t make it work with Sidney?” Moira asked after a tense minute of silence. Grace and Elise let out sighs of relief at the question, as if they had been wanting to ask themselves.

“You all know the situation. I just don’t see a way it could work. And I can’t live in hope and constant disappointment. My heart can’t handle it.”

As the carriage drew to a halt in front of the dower house, Angeline shook herself from the memory. She knew the conversation she was about to have would hurt, but it was now or never.

CHAPTER 32



Sidney couldn't believe his eyes when he saw Angeline step down from the carriage in front of the dower house. She looked more beautiful than ever in the low winter light, making her hair appear a deep shade of red as the ocean breeze caught loose pieces from her chignon, sweeping them across her face.

"Hello, Sidney. It's good to see you. You look well." She was peering at him intently, trying to get a read on how he was faring. He knew he had regained his health and clarity of mind, and he hoped she'd be able to see that in his countenance.

"I am well, and it's wonderful to see you." He wasn't sure where they stood but risked drawing her into his arms. She didn't resist, and after a moment, she wrapped her own arms around him, drawing him nearer while she melted into his chest. He wanted to hold her forever and never let her go, but after a moment he loosened his hold, not wanting to press his luck.

"Not that I'm unhappy to see you, but why are you here?" Sidney asked in surprise, as he was planning to return to Kent soon.

"I was nearby in Somerset to see Grace and the new baby. I know you are preparing to come back, but after hearing how well you were doing, I figured this would be a good time for us to talk about what happened before you came here." Angeline looked down, fidgeting with her hands. "I owe you an apology, Sidney."

He stared at her aghast. “Angie, I am the one who owes you an apology, not the other way around.” She looked back up, and he could see several emotions crossing her face. “Come inside. I’ll make us some tea and we can discuss things more comfortably.”

Sidney led her inside, still amazed that she was actually there and reveling at the feel of her touch against his arm. He showed Angeline to the cozy study so she could take a seat by the fire, moving a table between them to be ready for the tea.

“Warm yourself up here, I’ll be just a few minutes while I prepare some treats for us.” Walking swiftly to the kitchen, he was grateful that Evie had stopped by the day before and left him freshly baked scones and cakes that he could plate as the kettle came to a boil.

“When did you learn how to prepare your own tea?” Angeline asked with a smile as he returned with the loaded tray.

“I’m not a completely useless gentleman. That said, Evie showed me, as I’ve mainly been here by myself these past months.”

“I was glad to hear in your letters that you have enjoyed working on projects around the estate. Do you feel more prepared for what awaits you at Ravenswood?” Sidney hated the concern that was in her eyes at the end of the question. He’d been so neglectful as the next in line to be viscount, but no more.

“I do. I’m actually excited about continuing some of Nick’s projects. I’ve learned a lot while I’ve been here from Jonathan and Reid—Fitz and Henry have shared their insights as well. I’ve a handle on the basics of estate management, and I know what to look out for when I meet with my steward at Ravenswood.” He put together a plate of treats for Angeline while she poured out the tea. Once they’d resettled, he knew it was time to broach the more difficult topics.

“I know I’ve shamefully neglected my responsibilities, and I can’t apologize enough for my behavior, but I’m ready to face them now. How is Hazel?”

A warm smile took over Angeline's beautiful face. "She is doing well. I know she misses her father, but being at Geffen House with the children has been good for her. She needed the support of friends and to feel like a carefree child."

"Thank you for taking care of her. I'm so ashamed of how I handled everything, Angie. I didn't want to fall apart on you, but I was so overwhelmed I fell back on old vices to try and forget. I know I neglected Hazel terribly, and I'm so grateful that you were there for her when I wasn't." He choked out the last words, trying to hold back his tears at his inexcusable behavior.

"I was happy to be there for her, Sidney. She's a wonderful child. And I'm sorry if my pulling away made things even more difficult for you to deal with. I never wanted to hurt you the way I did." Setting down her teacup and saucer, Angeline reached across the gap between their chairs and took his hand. "I need to explain my abrupt absence in the days before our last conversation. This is hard for me to share, so please just listen."

Sidney nodded, letting her know he would listen and encouraging her to continue. He was just glad that he'd finally understand what happened.

Angeline took in a deep breath and looked at the fire before starting. "We never really had a chance to figure out our relationship before losing Nicholas, and there was an important topic we had yet to discuss before everything fell apart. On the day of the accident, do you remember you took me on a picnic?"

Sidney nodded, recalling how happy he'd been with her. But something else about that day stuck out to him as well.

"Something was bothering you, though. You were distracted, but you said you weren't ready to talk about it yet, you didn't know how to explain what you were thinking."

"That's right," Angeline affirmed. "I was trying to figure out how to discuss my inability to have children with you. I wasn't sure if that would be a deal-breaker for you, and I was also trying to discern my own feelings around the issue."

“Angie, you know that doesn’t matter to me,” he interjected.

Holding up a hand, she halted him. “Please just listen, Sidney, this is hard for me.” Chagrined, he gave her a smile and silently mouthed an apology.

“It’s no secret that I never bore Phillip a child after eight years of marriage, but what no one knows is that I did become pregnant several times over the years, but each time I miscarried and lost the child. My body just couldn’t seem to nurture life the way it was supposed to, and it took a toll physically and emotionally.” Sidney ached as she paused to wipe her eyes. He could feel her pain radiating from her as she spoke.

“I’ve never told anyone this, not even Moira, but the last time I was with child was when Phillip died. I hadn’t been positive I was carrying until after he’d passed, and I wanted that child so badly—to be able to hold on to a piece of him forever and perhaps even fulfill the duty of providing his heir.”

Sidney winced and squeezed her hand. He didn’t want to think about the heir issue, as it was what currently kept them apart. But hearing her full story now, though he’d suspected at least some of it, made him realize how weighty of a topic this was for her, and how heavy the burden she’d been carrying.

“But it was not to be. About a month after Phillip’s passing, I began to bleed, but it was different from before. Part of me has always wondered if my grief played a part ... I don’t know. I became extremely ill, and an infection set in. When I recovered, the midwife told me that a future pregnancy could prove fatal, and I shouldn’t try to have children again.”

“Angie, I’m so sorry.” Sidney didn’t know what to say. Her sorrow permeated the room, and he wanted to hold her and take away the pain.

Offering him a watery smile, she stood and paced in front of the fire. “I grieved at the news, but because Phillip was gone, there was no reason for me to ever become pregnant again, so I didn’t fully process as I should have. Then you showed up in my life again, and I was so happy, Sidney. You

made me hopeful for a future I'd long since buried away in my despair. But that hope raised feelings and realities I had long ago buried and needed to process. With a new relationship came the possibility that I could become with child again, and I had to make a choice to deny something that I wanted so desperately. I was at war with myself and didn't know how to discuss it with you."

Sidney suddenly saw what had happened clearly and gasped as the pieces fell into place. Angeline turned from the fire to look at him, her brow raised in question. "And then we made love, and I carelessly spent inside you ...," he said, horrified at the possible consequences of his actions that night.

"Yes. I don't want you to think for a moment that I'm not happy that we were able to share ourselves completely. But we'd never discussed any precautions beforehand. I returned to Geffen House and hid until my menses started a few days later. I'm sorry that I left you when you were so vulnerable, Sidney, I'll never forgive myself for that. But I panicked."

Angeline dashed her eyes again as she sat down, breaking his heart. He couldn't believe that he'd put her in such a situation. "I'm so sorry, Angie, I didn't know. But I should have been more responsible regardless."

"Yes, but I hadn't told you any of this, so you're not entirely to blame. Regardless, I was terrified. I knew it could be dangerous for me to fall pregnant again, yet a part of me hoped I was. That I could provide you with an heir after all and wouldn't have to leave you and break your heart. It's the hardest thing in the world to wish against the very thing you most desire. I wanted to marry you and be a mother, but I also knew my body would not be able to handle it. So I panicked and fled, and for that I am so sorry."

Watching Angeline relive the turmoil she had been in for those few days broke Sidney, and he didn't know what to do.

Angeline watched Sidney try to process everything she shared with him. A variety of emotions crossed his face as he came to terms with what she had dealt with regarding children over the years and the feelings her recent scare had stirred.

“I’m so sorry, Angie. I should have been there for you. I should have gone to you when I suspected something was wrong,” Sidney finally said. “I’m relieved to finally understand why you left. I was afraid I had done something to upset you when we made love. I guess in a way I did, with my thoughtlessness, but I was scared I might have taken advantage of you or hurt you in some way.”

“Sidney, no.” Angeline was horrified to think Sidney had been living with that fear all this time. “I’m so sorry you thought that for even a second. I should have explained myself earlier.”

Now that she’d had time to reflect on her time with Sidney without the fear of a possible pregnancy, Angeline was glad they’d had the opportunity to be together. She often relived the experience fondly, remembering how gently he had touched her, as if she was the most precious thing in the world to him. And she had felt how deeply he cared for her through the sheer passion of his kisses. She would hold the memory of that night with her forever.

“I didn’t exactly provide a good opportunity for you to explain. I was a mess and in no state to discuss such a delicate matter.” Sidney reached across the table and grabbed her hand. “I don’t know if I could have heard what you needed me to. I’m just sorry I put you in such a precarious position, though I don’t regret being with you.”

“I don’t regret it either.” For the first time since beginning her tale, she gave him a real smile. But there was one more thing she needed to clarify. “I hope this also helps you understand once and for all that I truly cannot be your wife. It’s not just that I’ve been unable to have children in the past, it’s that I can no longer even try. I will never be able to provide you with the heir you need, so you must let go of the idea of us together. You need to find someone to wed.”

Sidney looked positively stricken, but Angeline thought she finally saw flickers of acceptance in him as well. Even though it broke her heart that they had to walk away from each other again, it was for the best. “I don’t know how to let you go, Angie.”

“I’ll always be in your life as a friend, Sidney. It may be hard for us to adjust at first, but I can’t picture the future without you in it. You’ve been an important person to me my entire life, and this doesn’t change that.”

CHAPTER 33



Sidney had been away from Ravenswood for three months, and after the conversation with Angeline provided additional understanding, he felt ready to leave Reid's estate and return home. Walking toward the coast from the dower house, he spotted Reid already waiting for him for a final beach walk together.

Upon seeing him, a grin split Reid's face. "You look good, Sid," he said slapping him on the back. "All packed up and ready to go?"

"I'm ready. It's bit nerve-wracking, as I know I caused so much harm before I left. It's not easy to face those who saw me at my worst."

"You've already repaired things as much as possible with Angeline, so you must mean Hazel," Reid stated, never one to mince words.

Sighing, Sidney nodded. "Among others, but yes. I hate that I ever made her feel alone, but I'm glad she turned to Angie."

"We're all really proud of you, you know," Reid said softly.

Shaking his head, Sidney scoffed. "You shouldn't have to be proud of me, I never should have fallen apart in the first place."

"Sid, you need to be more forgiving of yourself. No one thinks less of you because of what happened. You were dealt

multiple blows within the span of a week, no one could come through all that unscathed.”

Sidney wasn't aware how much he'd needed to hear that. It didn't excuse any of his behavior, but it was still comforting to know that the people who mattered the most to him were understanding of the situation. The pain of Nick's loss was still very much present, but he was no longer in denial that he was gone and that life was now radically different for him and Hazel. After talking with his friends and working with Jonathan around the estate, he had a renewed interest in his own and was looking forward to engaging with his land manager as soon as he reached Ravenswood.

“I should probably be on my way,” Sidney said. “I need to make a stop in London.” The two men turned back, neither saying much on the return, but it was a companionable silence. “I can't ever thank you enough,” he told Reid when they arrived at the dower house. “I showed up unannounced and a mess, and you didn't hesitate to welcome me and do everything you could to bring me back to my health.”

“It's what friends do,” Reid said simply, bringing Sidney in for an embrace. Slapping him on the back, Reid released him. “Safe travels,” he said before cheekily adding, “I'll kiss Elise goodbye for you if you give Angeline one for me.”

Stopping briefly in London on his second day of travel, Sidney had arranged to meet Hugh Stanton. The lawyer stood as he entered the law offices and greeted him warmly, extending his hand for a vigorous handshake. “Lord Hasting, it's good to see you. What brings you in today?”

“A few things actually,” Sidney said, sitting down in the comfortable office. “I need to apologize for disappearing after Lord Weston first introduced us over the marriage contract business. I've been away for a while, but I wanted to update you on where things stand.” Sidney filled Stanton in on what had transpired with Lady Effie three months prior, and the

lawyer was appropriately horrified. “I’ve not heard from her since, but as I mentioned, I was away. I’m hoping that nothing official has come through the legal system.”

“Thankfully, no,” Stanton reassured him. “If the issue ever does arise, I’ve completed extensive research into precedents and feel confident that I have prepared the arguments necessary to make sure everything comes out in your favor. I’ll also document what you’ve just told me and be sure to keep it on file in case Lady Effie ever becomes an issue again.”

“I can’t thank you enough,” Sidney said sincerely. “And that is why I would like to make you my lawyer officially and ask you to look into another matter for me.”

Smiling, Stanton affirmed he would be happy to have Sidney’s business. “What is this other matter you mentioned? How can I help?”

“I’d like you to find out who my heir is,” Sidney said. “My father and grandfather were only sons, so it will be necessary to go back a few branches on the family tree to find the next closest male relative who could inherit from me.”

“Of course, but when you were here before, you mentioned a woman you planned to marry. It’s possible you might soon have your own heir.”

“That’s where things get a bit complicated,” Sidney said, squirming in his seat. “The woman I love is a widow and was unable to bear any children in her previous eight-year marriage.”

“Ah, I see,” Stanton said without judgment.

“The fact that she doesn’t have children is well known, and she believes she cannot marry me, as she’s been told she should not try for another child. I’d like to find the current heir and bring him to Ravenswood to teach him about the estate. I believe this will help her feel comfortable in agreeing to marry me, and it will help make known that I do have an heir who has my full backing should anyone challenge a union between Angeline and I.”

“You’re concerned an announced engagement between the two of you might bring Lady Effie back with her claim?” Stanton astutely asked.

“I must admit that the thought has crossed my mind,” Sidney said.

“I’ll get to work on this right away, and I’ll be in touch.” With a final handshake, Sidney took a deep breath and prayed his heir could be found soon.

Walking toward Geffen House, Sidney was a wreck. He nervously tugged at his collar, thinking it might strangle him. But as he approached, before he could talk himself into turning around, the front door swung open and Hazel ran toward him at full force. “Uncle Sidney!” she yelled before launching herself at him.

“Ooof!” he expelled as her head rammed into his stomach. Wrapping his arms around her to steady them both, he finally felt some of his guilt lighten at seeing Hazel’s sheer joy.

“I’m so glad you’re here, Uncle Sidney, I’ve missed you a lot. I’ve been having so much fun with Emily and Miles though. Can they come over when we go back home?”

“Whoa, slow down, Hazel. One thing at a time.” Sidney held her at arm’s length and looked at her. “First, I’m also glad to be home because I’ve missed you very much too. Second, I’m glad you have been enjoying yourself so thoroughly while I’ve been away. And finally, yes, of course your friends can come and play anytime. Are you truly ready to go home?”

Hazel nodded enthusiastically, and while Sidney didn’t want to put a damper on things, he wanted to make sure she understood what they would be going home to. “You know it’s not going to feel the same at home, don’t you?”

Hazel’s expression became more serious, and the corners of her lips tipped down slightly. “I know,” she said. It will feel

different with Father not there. But you'll be there, won't you?"

He could sense her fear in her question, likely from the way he had left her alone before, and his heart ached in his chest. "Yes, Hazel. I'll be there. And I promise I'll try my best to be better. I was really sad, but I know you were sad too. Instead of being by myself, I should have talked to you so we could have been sad together. Because sometimes just being with someone else can make you feel better. I'll be around now if you're alright with that."

Nodding, she threw her arms around him again, and he eagerly returned her hug. "Now, in a few weeks I have to go to London for a while for work, just like your father would."

"For Par-Par-Parlement?" she asked, nose scrunched as she tried to get the word out correctly.

Chuckling Sidney said, "Yes, for Parliament. When I go, would you like to stay here at Ravenswood with your new governess so you can see Emily and Miles, or would you like to come to London with me?"

She took a minute to consider her options. "Where would Angeline be?" Hazel asked, making his heart clench.

"I don't know, that would be up to Angeline."

"Let's go ask her" she said, grabbing Sidney's hand and pulling him toward the door. It was only then that he looked up from Hazel and noticed that Angeline was standing in the doorway.

CHAPTER 34



Watching Sidney at last be the man she knew he was, and the uncle that Hazel so desperately needed, made Angeline smile. Assessing him intently, he looked even better than when she'd seen him in Dorset the week prior. He had regained the weight he'd lost after Nick's death, and there was color in his cheeks, though she supposed that could be from the chilly February breeze. But most importantly, his beautiful blue eyes sparkled again.

Angeline was standing far enough away that she couldn't hear everything Sidney and Hazel said, but judging from their expressions and body language, it seemed the reunion was going well. As Hazel began leading Sidney toward the house, he looked up and locked eyes with her. She couldn't tear herself away from his gaze as he approached. "Angie," he said simply, when he was at last in front of her.

"Sidney, it's good to see you home," she said after blinking and breaking the spell.

"Angeline," Hazel said, drawing her attention. "Are you going to London when Uncle Sidney does, or will you stay here? I can't decide if I should go with him or not."

"Oh, well I probably will go to London for a few months during the season, but I won't be there as long as your uncle will." Angeline was taken aback by the way she had asked the question.

"Hazel, you don't think that your uncle and I would be travelling together, do you?" She was relieved upon seeing

Sidney blush at her question, letting her know that he wasn't harboring hopes and giving Hazel the wrong impression.

"No," Hazel said. "I just wanted to check before I decided. Uncle Sidney, come and see my room here with Emily." She tugged on Sidney's hand, and just like that, they were off up the stairs.

Taking in a deep breath, Angeline felt some of her tension release. They'd seen each other again after everything was out on the table, and it had not been a disaster. Sidney seemed well and ready to take his place as viscount. Most importantly, he did not appear to resent her for how she had hurt him.

Sidney was gone for quite a while catching up with Hazel before returning downstairs to join Angeline, Moira, and Fitz for tea. When Fitz walked into the room, he went straight for Sidney and wrapped him in a bear hug, slapping him on the back before letting him go. "You look good, Sid. We've missed you, it's nice to have you home."

"It's good to be home," Sidney replied while bending down so Moira could kiss his cheek. Sitting down to enjoy the refreshments, it was an easy conversation between three of them. Angeline stayed mainly quiet and observed. Even after seeing the changes in him at Reid's, she was understandably still wary having witnessed Sidney so far from his normal, jovial self after the accident. There was a new layer of sadness and weight that clung to him even now, making him appear more serious overall, but his old spark seemed to have returned, and for that Angeline was grateful.

Sidney regaled them with stories of his time away, telling them about books he'd read and his chess victories against Reid and Jonathan. Elise turned out to be a surprise ringer and beat him every time they were matched up.

As tea drew to a close, Moira bid farewell to talk with the governess about the children's lessons, and Sidney walked over to Angeline. He looked down as if unsure of himself. "I need to collect Hazel and we should be on our way. I want to make sure she has enough time to resettle at home tonight."

"That seems smart," Angeline agreed.

“May I come by tomorrow, and if it’s not raining, we can take a walk like before?” He looked hopeful yet vulnerable at the same time. Sidney was placing the decision of where they went next in her hands, and she was grateful for the gesture.

“Yes, I would like that,” Angeline agreed. Sidney’s smile could have lit up the county.

The next morning, Sidney set out for Geffen House and saw that Angeline was already waiting for him at the edge of the wood. Seeing her again after so long soothed him. Even from a distance, her beautiful auburn hair stood out against the bare trees. She seemed to be pacing, and Sidney wondered if she was nervous. While Angeline had come to him of her own volition in Dorset and received him warmly yesterday, he noticed she was rather quiet during tea, and he’d felt her eyes on him the entire time.

As Sidney grew closer, Angeline became aware of him approaching and stopped moving, waiting patiently for him to reach her. “Good morning, Sidney. How was your evening with Hazel? Was she alright to be back?” Brow furrowed, her concern for the girl was admirable.

“We got along well,” he answered. “She’s currently getting to know the new governess I hired, and it seemed they were getting on well when I left.”

A smile broke out on her beautiful face at the news. “Good. I knew the two of you would do well together once you had a little time.” Dropping his head in shame at her observation, she quickly clarified, “Oh, no. Sidney, I didn’t mean that as an admonishment. I only meant to say that I’m glad your relationship still seems easy. You know she has always loved you.”

“It’s alright, you don’t have to be cautious in what you say around me. I’m not prickly about anything, I promise. Just still working through my guilt at neglecting her when she needed love and support the most. I know I’ve said this already, but I

will never be able to thank you properly for being there for her when I couldn't be."

"It was my pleasure to be with her, Sidney. You don't need to thank me for that. I was happy to support both of you however I could. I still am." Angeline spoke sincerely, and Sidney accepted what she offered.

"Should we walk?" he asked. "It's cold out, moving will help us stay warm." Angeline nodded and gladly took the arm he offered.

"Thank you for your letters. I don't think I expressed that the other day," Angeline said after a moment. "I enjoyed hearing what you were doing around the estate, and it was good to hear you sound like yourself again."

"I'm glad you liked them. In a way writing them was therapeutic. Another way to process what I was doing and how it made me feel."

"I'm sorry I never responded. It's not that I didn't want to, I was just unsure what to say. I was still coming to understand what I was feeling and didn't want to say the wrong thing, possibly causing even more hurt, before we'd had a chance to talk in person."

Sidney laughed and Angeline looked at him quizzically. "That's what you said to me before we began all this. When you first realized I had feelings for you after that terrible dinner. You said you didn't know how to proceed and you didn't want to hurt me because you suspected I was in love with you."

"But I did end up hurting you, and I'm so sorry for that, Sidney." Angeline's eyes filled with tears, so he stopped walking and turned toward her. "Did I do this to you, Sidney?"

"Oh, Angie. No." He gathered her in his arms and hugged her as tightly as he could. "You did nothing wrong. It wasn't you that hurt me, but the situation. I know you didn't reject me, circumstances just forced us apart." He pulled back to look at her. "In my anger and confusion, I know I said some things that may have made it seem like I blamed you, but I

don't, not for a second. I was desperately looking for a way to keep us together and, if anything, I blame society's fixation on securing a family line."

She turned away from him and said, "But it's my failing, my body's inability to do what it's supposed to." Sidney didn't know what to say to that to make her feel better.

"Angie, you have done nothing wrong, please believe that." He tentatively lifted a hand to her cheek where a stray tear had escaped and thumbed it away. "As for thinking you are what put me over the edge—I was already there. Drink has always been what I turned to in times of weakness. I'm ashamed to admit it, but it's true. When I can't handle a situation, I want to feel numb and not deal with it at all. I let it get out of hand this time. When you told me you wouldn't be with me in that state even if we could be together, I'd never felt so low. But I'm grateful you helped me remember what really mattered." She was silent but gave a nod.

"I'm glad to hear Lady Effie is out of the picture and you won't be forced to marry her. I know you will eventually find a good woman to marry."

What Sidney didn't tell her was that he still very much intended for Angeline to be that woman if at all possible. He would never marry if unable to convince her. But it wasn't the time for that conversation yet. He needed to start by being her friend again and rebuilding the trust between them.

"I meant it when I said that I can't imagine my life without your friendship, Angie. I would love for you to spend some time with Hazel and me in the next few weeks before I leave for London. We'll muddle through and find a new way to be with one another."

Offering him a small but genuine smile, she said, "I'd like that, Sidney."

True to her word, Angeline came to Ravenswood almost every day. They played and explored with Hazel together, and Angeline would listen to Sidney's plans for the estate when the sweet girl was at her studies. Now that Sidney was sober and the fog of his grief was lifting, Angeline was warming up to

him again. Within only a few days, the ease they had always had with one another returned.

Though it was cold that winter, it had been relatively dry, and they would often go for walks to escape the confines of the house. Sidney only wished there were more time before he had to leave. But thankfully Kent was only a county away from London and he could visit the girls regularly until Angeline arrived in town for the upcoming season.

Out walking with Angeline the day before his departure, Sidney never wanted it to end. He thought things were well between them, but he remained cautious. He desired to be closer to her; all he wanted was to kiss her and feel her skin against his again. Though the day had been sullied by the surrounding events, Sidney still treasured the memory of their night together. He'd never felt so connected to anyone in his life, and he prayed he would have the opportunity to experience it again someday. Knowing at this juncture a kiss would not be welcome, he instead asked, "May I hold your hand?"

Angeline was surprised by his request, but silently held out her hand. It was an innocent gesture, such a simple touch, but it meant everything to him. She was once again opening herself up, giving him her trust. "May I write to you from London?"

"Of course," Angeline answered, "but will you have the time for it?"

"I'll make the time," Sidney said.

They both noticed a footman approaching, and Sidney worried something was wrong. Bowing, the footman said, "Pardon the interruption, my lord. A note has arrived from Mr. Stanton, and you asked to be immediately alerted of any word from him."

"Yes, thank you," Sidney said, taking the note. Reading it over, he turned to Angeline. "I'm so sorry, but something important has come up and I'll need to make another stop before London. I'm afraid I'll need to leave now."

CHAPTER 35



Sidney arrived at the London address Stanton had provided him just hours after receiving the note. He'd ridden furiously, not even taking time to pack as he knew his valet would follow him with all he needed.

Now at his destination, he felt anxious and wasn't sure of the best way to proceed. His entire future might be determined by how this meeting went.

After tethering his horse in front of the modest house, Sidney stepped up to the door and knocked firmly, requesting to see Mr. Noah Bright when the maid answered. She led him into a comfortable drawing room to wait. Looking around, he could tell that, while not rich, Noah had a good home and must be doing fine for himself.

Turning at the creak of the door, a man Sidney estimated to be in his fifties entered and assessed him. "You asked to speak with me, my lord?"

"Yes, thank you for agreeing to meet with me, Mr. Bright," Sidney said, extending his hand in greeting. The man shook his hand but looked apprehensive at having an unexpected guest in his home. "Do you mind if we sit?" Sidney asked. "I have a bit of a tale I need to tell you."

"Please do," Mr. Bright responded. "I've asked for some refreshments and tea, it should be in shortly." They both sat, and Sidney wasn't quite sure how to begin. Sensing his unease, Mr. Bright asked, "Is there something I can help you with? It's not often we see anyone from the aristocracy here."

“Yes, and I’m sorry to arrive unannounced. I should have written before I visited and asked for a meeting, but I was too anxious to see you,” Sidney explained. Mr. Bright nodded as if to let Sidney know it was alright, and he took a deep breath before diving in.

“Mr. Bright, did you know you are related to the Hasting line?”

He looked surprised by Sidney’s question but bobbed his head. “I’m aware that my family is distantly connected to a lord, however, I did not know it was the Hasting’s viscountcy. Are you suggesting that we are related?”

“I am, Mr. Bright. I’ve just recently acquired the title myself after my brother’s sudden death a few months ago.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss, my lord,” Mr. Bright said, looking genuinely sad.

“Thank you, it was quite difficult.” Sidney paused to swallow around a lump in his throat. “I’ve struggled with the responsibilities of the title, as I was not prepared to take over. Perhaps I should have been as their heir, but I never thought the title would fall into my hands.” They were interrupted when the maid briefly entered the room with a tea tray. She deftly poured for the gentlemen before bowing and leaving them alone once again.

“I’m sorry you’ve had a tough transition, but how might I help you?” Mr. Bright asked.

Sidney appreciated his straightforwardness and looking him over, he was pleased to see that the man seemed like a kind and intelligent person.

“You see, I am unmarried and do not have my own heir, so I asked my lawyer, Mr. Hugh Stanton, to do some digging and see if he could find my nearest male relation. As it turns out, that man is you, Mr. Bright.”

He stared at Sidney for a moment. “You’re telling me that I’m the current heir to the title?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, Mr. Bright.” Sidney watched closely as the man blinked a few times before

bursting into laughter.

“Well,” he said with a deep chuckle, “I suppose you should call me Noah, seeing as we are related.”

Smiling brightly, Sidney responded, “Then please call me Sidney when we are in private. I honestly hate the pretense of it all.”

“I understand wanting to identify your heir, Sidney, but you are still a young man. Surely you may still have your own heir yet?” Noah said.

“Well, this is where I need to ask you a favor. If it were up to me, and if things work out as I hope, I will never have an heir.” Noah looked puzzled, so Sidney was quick to continue. “I am very much in love with and wish to marry Lady Eastland. She is a widow whom I have known since childhood, and I’ve loved her from afar for years. I missed my chance with her a decade ago, and she wed another. Sadly, her husband, the late Viscount Eastland, died a little over two years ago.”

“So much loss,” Noah mused sadly, captivated by the story.

“Yes, we’ve both experienced great loss. Fortunately, Angeline and I reconnected last autumn, and we fell deeply in love. However, she does not think we can marry now that I have inherited, as she is unable to have children. She knows that I will need an heir for the estate and has broken off our relationship as it is something she cannot provide.”

“So you decided to find me,” Noah said, catching on quickly. “You needed to find the heir so you can marry your lady.”

“Yes, but I fear that won’t be enough. Angeline thinks I need to marry and produce my own heir so that he can be raised on the land and grow to love Ravenswood, our family estate, and its tenants. But if I could convince my heir to move to Kent and learn about the estate—ensuring that the land and the people will continue to be cared for—I believe she will agree to marry me.”

“She sounds like a woman with a kind heart. So you’re here to see if I am amenable to your plans?”

Sidney couldn’t read Noah’s face to see if he was open to the idea. Taking in a deep breath and bracing himself, he answered, “I am. Is that something you and your family would ever consider?”

“I must admit to being rather shocked by all of this, my lord—I mean, Sidney. It’s a shock to learn that I’m the heir to a viscountcy.” Seeing the disappointed look on Sidney’s face, he hastened to add, “I’m not opposed to the idea, I just need to sit with it and talk to my boy.”

“You have a son? This affects him as well then.”

Noah nodded. “My son, Mark, is twenty-three. In a way, this affects him more than it does me. I am older than you, so you will likely outlive me, meaning Mark would become your heir.”

“Do you have other children? And your wife?” Sidney inquired.

“My darling Greta passed on five years ago,” Noah said with a sad smile. “And we had no other children, having experienced our own fertility struggles, so I’m sympathetic to your plight. I can tell how much you love Angeline, and I’m moved by it.” Noah grew quiet and swallowed back his tears, lost in thought. Sidney assumed he was thinking of his own late wife. “There is nothing personally tying me to London, and I’ve always wished to live in the country. I make my living by running a bookshop, which I do enjoy, but I would be alright to leave it behind if Mark is amenable. It is to be his someday after all.”

“So you are open to the idea?” Sidney asked, looking for reassurance as he grew hopeful.

“I am, but I can’t give you an answer before talking with Mark. It’s what will be best for him that concerns me the most.”

“I can understand that, Noah. Is he here? May I speak with him about Ravenswood?”

“I’m afraid he’s working at the shop currently and won’t be home until later this evening. You are welcome to stay for dinner if you’d like,” Noah offered.

“I’m afraid I can’t. I’ve just arrived in town and need to get settled. I’ll be here for the foreseeable future, as Parliament is reopening.” Handing him a card, Sidney said, “Here is the address of the Hasting town house in Mayfair. Please feel free to call on me there anytime so we can discuss things further, and I’d love to meet Mark.”

Noah took the card and shook Sidney’s hand as they stood. “I know you are anxious. I’ll speak with Mark, and we’ll have an answer for you within the week.”

It was the longest four days of Sidney’s life. But when the doorbell rang that Friday with a smiling Noah and Mark on the other side of the door, Sidney knew his dreams were about to come true.

CHAPTER 36



Raising her arms in a stretch, Angeline gloried in being out of the carriage after arriving at Fitz's townhome. She and Moira were joining him for the week to attend some of the season's first events.

Angeline wasn't entirely sure she was ready to face the gossip and occasionally vicious nature of the *ton*, but she did enjoy the symphony and the theatre. And though she was trying to suppress it, she was excited to see Sidney again as well.

It had been a month since he'd departed for London so suddenly. In that time, Angeline had often wondered what could have possibly sent him running off when he was about to leave so soon anyway. She tried not to worry about it. As Sidney was still new to the title, his lawyer could have been informing him of a countless number of things.

Even though he had left early, Sidney kept his promise and wrote to Angeline at least once a week. He was a witty letter writer, and she always enjoyed his stories of frustrating encounters with "backward-thinking, selfish Tories," as Sidney referred to them. It had been easy to fall back into friendship with him. What had been harder was keeping her feelings limited to those of friendship only.

Their talk the first morning he was back at Ravenswood had been good for both of them and helped to clear the air, speaking on more than they had in Dorset. Able to make full apologies after time to reflect helped them reassure one another after what was said and left unsaid during those

terrible weeks in October. She felt like Sidney accepted they could no longer be more than friends, and they might be able to move on. Angeline had been fooling herself into thinking that for months now. But on that last day when he so innocently asked if he could hold her hand, she thought she might die from the pleasure of even that small contact.

Entering the house and taking off her coat, she was surprised when a member of the staff approached her with a note. Taking it with thanks and quickly breaking the seal, she scanned to the bottom to see who it was from.

My Darling Angie,

I know you have just arrived and must be tired from the road, but I would ask for your presence at my house this evening. There is a matter of great importance I need to speak with you about, and I'm afraid it can't wait. I've asked my cook to prepare dinner for seven o'clock, but could you please arrive at half past six so you may meet my guests?

Ever your servant,

Sidney

“What is it?” Moira asked with curiosity, peering over her shoulder.

“It’s from Sidney. He’s asked me to join him and some guests for dinner tonight. He said it’s important.”

“Well, I guess you had better attend then. I’ll have one of the maids unpack your belongings right away so we can prepare a dress for you to wear tonight.”

By six that evening, Angeline was dressed and ready to go. Not sure what she should wear or how formal the dinner was, she chose a brilliant gold gown that was cut more simply. Though it shouldn’t be a consideration, she knew Sidney loved her hair, and the color of the dress complimented it well. Still curious as to what he could be up to, Angeline departed Fitz’s townhome as quickly as she had arrived.

Arriving at the Hasting townhome, she was ushered in and welcomed by a beaming Sidney. “Angeline, thank you for coming on such short notice. You look positively ravishing this evening.” Angeline could see the desire in his eyes, and she cursed herself for provoking him.

Sidney led her into the drawing room, and three men rose as she entered. An attractive middle-aged man with lush silver hair was to her left, and to her right were presumably a father and son, based on their similar appearance and difference in age.

Sidney gestured to the man on the left first. “Lady Angeline, Viscountess Eastland, may I introduce you to my friend and lawyer, Mr. Hugh Stanton.” Stanton gave her a slight bow as a beautiful smile lit up his face.

“My lady, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Angeline wondered what exactly he had heard, but before she could ask, Sidney turned her toward the other two men.

“And this is Mr. Noah Bright and his son, Mr. Mark Bright.”

“My lady,” they both murmured with polite nods.

“Angeline,” Sidney said turning toward her and grasping her hands, “I want to explain something I’ve been working on behind the scenes for several weeks now. Before returning to Ravenswood, I asked Mr. Stanton to locate the man who was the new heir since my inheritance.” Angeline swallowed hard, her mouth having gone dry as she realized who the other two men must be, especially with the last name Bright.

“The note I received right before I came back to London was to inform me that Stanton had found him. It took some digging, as both my father and grandfather were single sons, but Noah here is the direct descendent of my great grandfather’s little brother. It makes him my third cousin or something ... I don’t really know,” Sidney said with a flutter of his hand.

“I’m glad you’ve found him, Sidney, but what does this have to do with me?” Angeline asked.

“Everything,” Sidney replied. “I visited Noah as soon as I could to explain who I was and the events that transpired last fall.” It was Sidney who now had to pause and swallow, taking a moment to compose himself before continuing. “I explained that I was learning to cope with bearing the title and the corresponding responsibilities, but what I couldn’t handle was not being with the woman I loved. I know it was not my information to share, and I apologize for that, but I had to explain why you felt we could no longer marry. I then told him I had a plan if he would agree to help me.”

Noah and Mark had been quiet up to this point, but Noah spoke up. “At first my son and I were shocked to learn that we’re next in line to be viscount, but we were moved by his lordship’s story and his loss, and willing to hear his plan.”

“Angie,” Sidney said, “you are the one who gave me the solution.”

“What are you talking about, Sidney?” Angeline was utterly perplexed. “I thought you had accepted that you need an heir.”

“But I do have an heir, and that was the solution. You told me that the only way we might possibly be able to be together was if I found my heir and helped him learn to love Ravenswood and everyone connected to the estate.”

The conversation was beginning to come back to Angeline, and she felt her eyes filling with tears.

“Noah, as it turns out, has always had a passion for land management,” Sidney said with a smile, looking at the older man. “He’s excited about the prospect of learning about the estate and how it’s run and has agreed to come and live at Ravenswood.”

Angeline, beginning to hope, turned to Noah and asked, “You’re really willing to uproot your life and move to Kent, Mr. Bright?”

“I am, my lady. And because I’m older and Hasting is likely to outlive me, Mark will come as well. He can work as a land manager until it’s time for him to take over the title himself. We’ve no binding ties to London, my wife died a few years ago and Mark is my only child. I’m ready to do anything to provide this opportunity for him.” While Mark didn’t chime in, letting his father speak for him, he was smiling and nodding, seemingly in agreement with the arrangement.

“So you see, Angie, Ravenswood will be in good hands. They will grow to love it just as we do. There is no reason why you can’t marry me and we can be a family for Hazel.”

Angeline burst into tears. While it may not be a perfect solution, she was done trying to fight what she wanted, and that was unequivocally Sidney.

“Why don’t we give you a minute?” she heard Stanton say. All three men left the room, at last leaving her alone with Sidney.

Wrapping her in his arms, he kissed her temple. “Please don’t cry. I love you so much, Angie. I could never give up on us, not after you’d come back into my life.”

“I’m sorry for giving up, I just didn’t see another way. I love you too, Sidney. Thank you for never losing hope for us.”

“You trusted me enough to open yourself up to the possibility of love again, and then when circumstances intervened, I betrayed that trust and hurt you. I’m so sorry, Angeline. But I have never stopped loving you, not even when you belonged to another, and I’m not going to stop now. I refuse to give in because of what society might think.”

Angeline was overwhelmed with happiness. “I won’t pretend that this will suddenly make everything perfect, it may still be a bumpy road ahead ... but I would love nothing more than to walk that road with you, Sidney. I love you with all my heart. You’re the second chance I never thought I’d get, and I’d be a fool to walk away from you again.”

Pulling back, Sidney cupped her face in his hands and took a moment to gaze in her eyes before gently lowering his lips to

hers. After months without his kiss, it felt like rain in the desert. Angeline leaned into the kiss, hungrily taking as much of him as she could. After a moment, when they both were left gasping for air, Sidney shot her his old grin. “I think I could get used to that.”

EPILOGUE



Angeline and Sidney's wedding took place only one month later, neither of them willing to miss out on their second, or arguably even third, chance to be together. Though the timing was less than proper with Sidney still in mourning, they decided a quicker ceremony would be best for providing Hazel with the stability she needed. The wedding wasn't a large affair, but all their closest friends and family were there to celebrate them, including Noah and Mark.

No one was happier about the union than Hazel. The girl had been ecstatic when they told her, thrilled to have them with her always, and Angeline became a mother, just as she had always desired. Hazel thrived feeling their constant support, and though she would always grieve her father, she no longer felt lonely.

Waking up to Sidney beside her every morning was the best part of all. While Angeline still loved Phillip and always would, he had settled into a corner of her heart. The rest of it firmly belonged to her husband, and both were happy to show that love to each other as often as possible. The fire Sidney had lit within her burned brighter than ever as they stole kisses from each other and made love at every opportunity.

As for the estate, soon after the wedding and the close of the Parliamentary session, Noah and Mark moved to Ravenswood and dove into learning everything they could. Sidney had begun seeing the possibilities of what he could do as the viscount and was a great partner and teacher to his heirs, making sure the estate would be in good hands.

It was now autumn again, and Angeline loved nothing more than taking walks with Sidney, even if they did get caught in the rain once and awhile. This evening, Angeline was just coming out to meet him at the edge of the wood when it began to drizzle.

“Should we chance it?” Sidney asked her. “Or do you think we should forget the walk and return to the house?”

“Let’s be wild and take a gamble,” Angeline answered, taking his arm, the desire to touch him never far away.

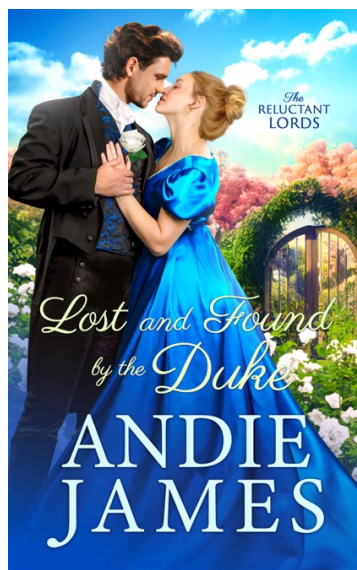
“I like that idea,” Sidney said before adding with a wicked smirk, “Besides, we can always take shelter in the greenhouse.”

Thank you so much for reading Angeline and Sidney’s story, I hope you enjoyed it! Please consider leaving a review, they really do help independent authors. For a short story about how Fitz and Moira met and fell in love, sign up for my newsletter at andiejamesauthor.com/contact Available exclusively to those on my mailing list.

Did you miss Grace and Henry’s story? Find out how they fell in love in the first book in the Reluctant Lords series, [Lost and Found by the Duke](#)

Reid and Elise’s story can be found in the second book of Reluctant Lords series, [Ruin and Redemption for the Earl](#).

OTHER BOOKS IN THE RELUCTANT LORDS SERIES



Lost and Found by the Duke

Lost and Found by the Duke is the first book in the Reluctant Lords series. It can be read as a standalone novel.

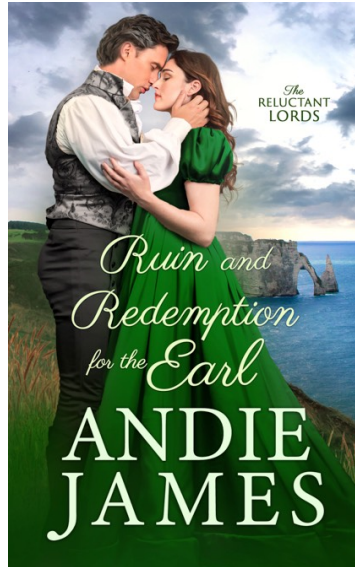
As she found herself again, he found he couldn't resist her

Recently widowed after an unhappy marriage, Lady Grace Harcourt is determined to make her own way in the world and never marry again. Entering society for the first time as she was married before her debut, she needs to make a good impression and secure herself placement as a companion or governess.

Henry Ellison, Duke of Carrington, is trying to learn his new responsibilities after inheriting a title he never thought would be his. While avoiding title hunting debutantes and mothers, he is adjusting to his new life and trying to find a place in society where he is now one of the most influential men in the *ton*.

Meeting at the house party of a common friend when Grace unexpectedly needs Henry's help, he believes they could be the solution to each other's problems if he can persuade her to marry him. Undeniably attracted to one another, can they make a marriage of convenience work between them when neither is sure of their place in polite society?

Content Warning: Attempted assault, and discussion of past neglect, grief



Ruin and Redemption for the Earl

Ruin and Redemption for the Earl is the second book in the Reluctant Lords series. It can be read as a standalone novel.

She believed herself to be ruined, and he didn't care

Ruined in the eyes of polite society for breaking one of the unspoken rules of the *ton*, Lady Elise Pelham has had to make a life for herself in a world that is not easy for a single woman to navigate on her own. All she desires is to be able to live life on her own terms, embracing the freedom she now has without the shackles of propriety.

Returning to his family's estate on the Dorset Coast, Reid Claybourn, the new Earl of Weston, wants to do anything other than take over the title. Resentful that he must now relinquish his influential place in the House of Commons to take up his seat in the House of Lords, he is struggling to find his place as the earl.

When Reid and Elise meet on his estate, the attraction between them is immediate. But will Elise be able to let go of the comfortable world she has created for herself in order to be with Reid? And can Reid find a way to embrace his new place in the peerage if he does not have Elise beside him?

Content Warning: Character death, grieving, and discussion of past attempted assault

EXCERPT FROM LOST AND FOUND BY THE DUKE

Chapter 1

Kent, England—July 1819

Grace knew attending the house party would be a mistake, which was confirmed when she found herself pinned against a bookshelf in the back of the library, struggling to get away from the hostess's inebriated brother.

“Thomas, please, you're drunk,” Grace implored. “You've known me since I was fifteen years old, and I know you will regret this in the morning,” she said, adopting an amiable tone in hopes of making her appeal seem reasonable and slowing his impending figure.

She felt a hard and unrelenting pressure as the shelf bit into her hip. Thomas had cornered her into the back of the library after discovering her there, and his body was now uncomfortably close. Leaning heavily over her, he forced her further into the bookcase than she thought possible. She was certain to have a bruise on her hip in the morning.

The reasonable element of the negotiation tactics she had been trying to employ quickly became less viable with each second as Thomas continued to creep even closer, causing Grace to shiver in revulsion as the buttons of his waistcoat pressed into her stomach one by one. The smell of whiskey was evident on his breath, and she tried to repress a further shudder when the fine hairs on her temple stirred from a puff of air as he exhaled. “You weren't this pretty when you were fifteen,” he slurred into her ear.

Grace berated herself for being in this position in the first place. It had been foolish to accept the invitation to the house party when she was already in a precarious social position, but desperate people tended to make impractical decisions. Being unable to sleep in an unfamiliar room and unsettled by her poor choices, she headed down to the library for a book.

Usually, reading helped Grace quiet and focus her mind so she might be able to get some rest. She had rationalized that with the house still mostly empty, having arrived a day before many of the guests, it was not too great a risk to wander downstairs. Now, looking into the half-lidded eyes of the young man she had not seen in close to a decade, she feared her decision to ignore propriety by walking around in her night clothes could make her situation even worse.

Grace wondered what had happened to Thomas in the intervening years that would make him act in such a manner. His expression, unfocused as it was, contained a contradictory mix of lust and derision. It was as if she, being a woman, was so far beneath him as to not be worth his notice—yet he still desired her.

“Thomas, stop this,” Grace beseeched once more. She hated how her voice was beginning to tremble, making her sound weak. Just when she feared the situation was nearing a point of no return, Grace felt Thomas’s movements stutter and then halt. He stiffened infinitesimally. Before she knew what was happening, a hand appeared on his shoulder, gripping firmly.

“I believe the lady asked you to stop,” a voice said from behind Thomas. Grace could not see the man who had spoken, but his voice had been low and controlled, making it feel like a command that would be dangerous for Thomas to ignore.

“And who the hell are you?” Thomas spat with a sneer, turning to face the stranger.

“Henry Ellison, the fifth Duke of Carrington,” the stranger replied coolly.

Thomas released her with a start, eyes widening as the gravity of this declaration and its icy delivery bore down on him. And

Grace, free of his grip, could now see the duke with his cutting glare and clenched jaw directed at Thomas.

“I didn’t know you had arrived, Your Grace. I was just having a little fun,” Thomas replied with a laugh, failing to lighten the tension. “Catching up with an old friend of the family. Haven’t seen Grace in years and wanted to let her know how much we missed her,” he continued, unable to mask his slurred speech.

“Perhaps it might be best to share how much you missed her in the morning, when everyone is refreshed and has a clear head, don’t you think?” Carrington was still calm but had taken command of the situation, his gaze never wavering from Thomas, who was wilting under the pressure like a flower in full July sunlight.

While the duke had yet to glance at Grace, she felt his protection acutely and was thankful he had intervened, though she resented being unable to control the situation on her own. It was apparent from Thomas’s actions thus far that he respected the power of a duke far more than the protests of a woman.

Grace recalled that, even as a young man, Thomas shared his father’s belief in the social structure of the aristocracy. They had kowtowed to those above them in the peerage, attempting to earn favor and bolster their own social standing among the *ton*. As a second son to a baron, even at the tender age of thirteen when she first met him, Thomas clearly demonstrated he felt himself lacking; Grace was sure he would do anything to increase his standing in the eyes of those he esteemed.

The sad reality was that Grace needed the duke’s intervention, as much as she hated relying on others. There were a few women within polite society who had the power to use their influence within the *ton*, but Grace was not one of them. And with an elite nobleman now standing up for her, Thomas had no option other than to retreat.

“Of course, Your Grace. Tomorrow would be a much more hospitable setting for renewing acquaintances,” Thomas acquiesced. “Can I help you find something here in the library

to make your stay more comfortable?” he asked with a touch of desperation.

“No,” Carrington said. “I believe it would be best if everyone called it a night. I will see you again in the morning, sir,” he said with finality.

Having been dismissed, Thomas bowed his head with a look of unease before backing out of the room.

Still somewhat shaken, Grace slowly straightened away from the bookcase and attempted to compose herself. Now that Thomas was gone, a wave of embarrassment began to engulf her. She could feel the heat creeping up her neck and onto her cheeks as she began to blush, an unfortunate and frequent reaction of hers, and found she could not bring herself to look directly at the duke, even though she wanted to thank him.

“Are you alright?” Carrington asked softly, not wishing to further agitate her.

At his gentle tone, Grace was appalled to feel tears forming and knew she would need to leave soon to avoid crying in front of him. Carrington’s kindness, a sentiment she was no longer used to receiving, would surely be her undoing, so with downcast eyes, she whispered, “Yes. I am well. Thank you, Your Grace.”

“Are you injured? Is there someone I can get for you?”

The thought of bringing anyone else into the situation made Grace’s pulse quicken. The last thing she needed was for word of this to spread. Raising her eyes to the duke, she implored, “No, please, I am well. I do not need anyone. I just need rest. I’ll be on my way.” He must have seen the anxiety in her eyes because he did not press her further.

Holding his gaze, fully seeing him for the first time, Grace had to catch her breath. He had kind, deep-gray eyes and chestnut hair that waved across his forehead, with stubble accentuating his perfectly angled jaw. Though he was one of the handsomest men she had seen in a long time, it was his demeanor that transfixed her: his forehead was creased out of concern for her well-being, and while he was much taller than

her, he was not intimidating, his stance having softened with Thomas's departure. She felt safe in his presence, even when considering what had just transpired with Thomas, as well as her general unease around titled men.

"Very well," he said, eyes searching her own to discern her truthfulness. "If you are certain you're unharmed, I will see you to your room and make sure you remain undisturbed."

Wishing to escape the foreign and unsettling effect of his kindness, she protested, "I assure you, Your Grace, I am fine to make my own way back. I apologize for inconveniencing you this evening, but I am grateful for your assistance."

Turning quickly, Grace fled the library and, terrified for her reputation, rushed back upstairs before anyone in the house could stumble upon them. Being found after hours and underdressed in the company of not one but two men could ruin her.

Chapter 2

Waking slowly and fighting sleep-heavy lids, Henry caught a glimpse of unfamiliar surroundings and was momentarily confused as to where he was. As sunlight pierced through the curtains and birds chirped in a nearby tree, his consciousness began to set in. With a groan, he remembered he was at Fitz's country home, Geffen House. While he normally enjoyed relaxing with Fitz and his family, this occasion was for Fitz's wife's house party. Henry adored Moira and would do almost anything for her, but attending this party was stretching the limits of his good grace.

Henry was more than prepared for a trying and tedious week. Still adjusting to the fact that he was now a duke, which was preceded by the unexpected deaths of his cousin and father in quick succession, he found the transition into polite society after leaving mourning straining. The way people now looked at him and deferred to his judgment based on a label was disconcerting. Henry had not changed; however, the new title made others regard him in a different light, lending his words a weight he was unused to. Who he was and what he did suddenly mattered, and that left him feeling insecure.

Henry knew this week others at the party would treat him differently than they had before, and he was not prepared for it. Even Moira's brother, Thomas—who had never treated him as anything special—deferred to Henry after hearing his new title last evening. It was the first time he had used his newfound clout to try and influence the actions of others, and while Henry was grateful it had worked given the situation, the quick deference had been unsettling.

Henry shuddered thinking about the young woman that Thomas had trapped in the library. He hoped she was alright after the unfortunate encounter and was glad he arrived when he did. Henry found Thomas's attitude toward women reprehensible. He hated how easy it was for men to disrespect and disregard women in their society due to the established and unspoken rules of the aristocracy. Henry respected the role women played in running homes and social spaces and felt they should be treated with the utmost care. Maybe this was an area where he could try and use his newly elevated status to sway opinions for the greater good.

Stretching, Henry allowed himself one final moment to luxuriate in the warmth of the bed linens before rising. He seemed to have slept later than usual, but then again, he had arrived late the evening before and had to break up the troubling scene in the library. He realized he did not actually know who the woman was and wondered about her connection to Fitz and Moira. While a bit timid last evening, which was understandable given the circumstances, she still made an impression on him. He would need to ask Fitz about her at breakfast. With that thought, Henry heard a perfunctory knock on his door before Smyth, his valet, promptly entered the room to assist with his morning ablutions.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Smyth greeted, all business, as he bustled toward the small dressing room holding a freshly pressed green jacket.

“Good morning, Smyth. Any worthy news this morning?” Henry asked, still abed.

“The chatter below is that most of the guests will arrive today and the party will commence officially this evening with

dinner,” Smyth answered in a muffled voice, responding from the adjoining room. “Captain Claybourn has seemingly been held up with final government business in London as the legislative session closes but should be here in the afternoon, and Mr. Bright will join from Ravenswood next door.” Henry appreciated that Smyth mentioned the arrival of his friends, Reid and Sidney, as he would need their support to get through this party. It would be quite the week navigating mamas of the *ton*, who were anxious for their unmarried daughters to make the acquaintance of a new and unattached duke. Just the thought made him want to stay in bed forever.

Groaning, Henry got up and made his way over to the dressing room to watch his valet at work. “Smyth,” Henry addressed him, leaning against the doorframe, “I don’t think I’m going to make it through this week, I feel like an utter imposter.”

“That’s what I’m here for, Your Grace,” Smyth replied. “I will make sure you look every inch the part of a duke and you will have one less thing to be anxious about.”

Making sure the duke was turned out in a manner respectable to his rank brought Smyth great pride, and he was working valiantly to try and educate Henry on such matters. Smyth firmly believed that clothes made the man. He hoped that draping Henry in finery could help him gain the confidence needed to succeed in his newly elevated position. But Henry felt too stiff and buttoned up as he stared at himself in the mirror—like he was wearing the costume of a duke. And he suspected that until he felt comfortable in the finery, any efforts to feign a level of gravitas through his appearance would be severely undermined. Sensing his unease, Smyth let out a sigh.

Even a year later, Henry still found it odd to have assistance with a morning routine that he had been doing for the past thirty-six years before becoming a duke. But this morning he welcomed Smyth’s help, as it allowed his mind to wander. This week would be a debut of sorts, as it had been fifteen years since he was an active member of high society, since before he enlisted in the army to halt the progress of Napoleon’s forces. While Henry had been working in the war

department's London office for the past few years, he had been too occupied to participate in polite society. If Henry had a failing, it was that he hated to do anything imperfectly, and he was still learning how to be a duke in society, so he supposed a few nerves about the house party were justified. But first he needed to find breakfast. The loud rumble of his stomach concurring as he finished buttoning his waistcoat.

“Thank you, Smyth. I believe I am set for the day. I will call you if I need to change for any of the activities later today.”

“As you wish, Your Grace,” Smyth said with a small bow before leaving the room. Henry shook his head at Smyth's deferential gesture; he did not think he would ever become accustomed to such attendance. His Aunt Hester had insisted that he needed to honor the family name and legacy by maintaining the dignity of the dukedom. Scared about stepping out of place and letting her down, he had learned to appreciate the service of those who attended him and helped him keep up appearances. So, Smyth stayed, though Henry felt what he provided was frivolous. He also did not wish to put the man out of a job. More than any other of his inherited responsibilities, Henry felt the weight of providing for those who relied upon his estate and holdings for their livelihood. And on that weighty note, he took a deep breath to prepare himself for the week ahead and walked downstairs.

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This was a story that surprised me. Of all the books in the series, this was the one I had thought through the least before sitting down to write the first draft. All I knew was that I needed to find a way for Sidney and Angeline to find their own HEA.

What came out of me was a story that was heavier and more steeped in grief than I had initially intended, but it felt right for these characters, and made the hard fought for happy ending that much sweeter!

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ALSO BY ANDIE JAMES

The Reluctant Lords

Lost and Found by the Duke

Ruin and Redemption for the Earl

Once and Again with the Viscount

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andie James is an emerging author of historical romance books. This is Andie's third book.

Though a voracious reader her entire life, it wasn't until more recently Andie truly fell in love with romance. During the pandemic, she needed something lighter and joyful—and the HEA in romance fit the bill. Focusing on historical romance, Andie loves the element of fantasy inherent to the genre, and the way a historical lens can provide new ways to understand contemporary issues.

Andie happily lives in Tacoma, WA with her cat. There is nothing she enjoys more than curling up with a good book and coffee. Fulfilled by good food and time with loved ones, she appreciates a good story in any form (book, movie, theatre, NPR reporting), and tries to live by the philosophy of Ted Lasso.

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