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**Beastly Earl's  
Bride**

*Falling for the Windhams*

HAZEL LINWOOD

# THE BEASTLY EARL'S BRIDE

A Historical Regency Romance Novel

FALLING FOR THE WINDHAMS

BOOK IV



HAZEL LINWOOD



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## BEFORE YOU START READING...

Here is a prequel chapter that will help you understand and visualize the story inside my book better.

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

***“You are the wife of a beast, whether you like it or not...”***

After returning from war a scarred man, Gabriel is struggling to get his life back. But there is one more duty he must fulfill: marriage.

Diana has vowed to protect her sister from their uncle’s clutches. So when he announces he plans to marry her off to the beastly Earl, Diana must act quickly. She has to marry the beast in her sister’s stead, even if it means her own ruin...

After Diana traps Gabriel in a scandal, he offers to marry her on one condition. She must keep her distance! Yet as Diana starts healing Gabriel’s wounded heart, an undeniable affection grows between them. Threatening to ruin their lives completely...

## CHAPTER I



“I don’t think you can delay it for much longer, Gabriel. That’s the point I’m trying to make.” Neil leaned back in his chair and looked at his younger brother with a rather piercing gaze.

Gabriel looked away. “Please, can we talk about something else? Surely this is the most boring topic of conversation known to mankind.”

Neil shook his head. “No, Gabriel. You have been avoiding this conversation for long enough. You are the younger brother of a duke. You are expected to marry.”

Gabriel shrugged. “I do not see why. You have a son now. He will become the Duke of Whitewell when you’re gone, and inherit the estate. I thought younger sons were supposed to be able to do what they liked?”

Lydia, Neil’s wife, who was sitting in a comfortable armchair on the other side of the drawing room, looked at him with a little more kindness than Neil had. “You know that is not the way of things, Gabriel. Come now, you must see your brother’s point?”

Gabriel turned and walked towards the window, then looked out at the gardens of the Whitewell estate, which stretched out almost as far as the eye could see. It was a perfect spring afternoon, and what he really wanted was to be outside, riding his horse across the countryside, preferably as fast as possible, and not to have to listen to all this nonsense from his family.

He felt ambushed by them. Everyone was here. Neil and Lydia, and his sisters, too. Constance and Catherine. At least their husbands were not present to add to the onslaught. How could any of them possibly understand how he felt about the idea of marriage? Their lives were perfect in comparison to his.

Well, he would not let them push him into doing something he did not want to do.

Constance got up from her chair and went to pour some more tea. “Gabriel, would you like another cup?”

He nodded. At least having a teacup in his hands would give him something to do, something to focus on, while his siblings carried on telling him what to do. He watched as his sister poured the tea, then added milk and a generous amount of sugar, before stirring it and handing him the cup. He gave her a half smile as he took it.

At least Constance was not telling him off for having too much sugar in his tea.

Gabriel realized that Lydia was still looking at him, expecting him to answer her question. He was very fond of his sister-in-law. In fact, he had known her since he was only thirteen years



old, and she was almost like a mother figure to him. He had never known his mother, who had died giving birth to him.

He took a deep breath and prepared himself to say what needed to be said. "I do not care what Society expects of me. I have no wish to marry. I simply do not understand why I have to, when I don't want to."

"Because you are a peer of the realm, Gabriel!" Neil interjected.

Lydia glanced at her husband, and he raised his hands in acknowledgment. "I am sorry for raising my voice," he said, in a more measured tone. "But the fact is that you are an earl in your own right, with your own estate, and you must marry and have a son to inherit the title."

"I only have the title of Earl of Denro and the estate at Milebur because of the battle," Gabriel countered. "If I had never gone to war, then I would be a nobody—a younger son who could do as he pleases."

"But the reality is that you do have the title, and Society has certain expectations of you, whether you like it or not," Lydia said gently.

"I do not give a fig about Society!" Gabriel protested.

He knew that he sounded churlish and that he was lucky in many ways. So many of his friends and companions had not even made it home from the war, and here he was, complaining about having to get married. But the truth was

that since he came home, he could hardly face interacting with anyone, even his own family.

The thought of having to go out into Society to find a wife filled him with horror. All those crowded, noisy ballrooms with people staring at him.

He reached up and touched the ridged scar that ran down his left cheek. Who would even want to marry him anyway, looking the way he did now?

“I know it seems rather intimidating,” Constance piped up from where she was sitting on the sofa next to the window. “I did not enjoy my first few Seasons, as you know, but I think it will be easier for you.”

Gabriel shook his head. He knew that his family did not understand how much he had changed since he came back from the war, and he could not really blame them, since he had chosen not to talk to them about his experiences at all. And they had long since stopped asking him questions about it.

But the truth was that he scarcely recognized himself, and not just because of his scars. He hated having to talk to strangers, and his nightmares seemed to be occurring more often rather than lessening as time passed. He wished sometimes that he could talk about it more freely, but he feared that talking about it would only make things worse.

Catherine got to her feet and came towards him, then placed a comforting hand on his arm. He could not help but smile at her. Their relationship had often been rather volatile, but he

knew that she had his best interests at heart, even if he didn't always want to hear it.

"You don't have to do any of this on your own, you know," Catherine murmured. "All of us have been through it, and we are here to support you."

He sighed. "I am not sure that I can face it. And besides, you are forgetting one very stark reality." He glanced around the room at the expectant faces of his family.

"And what is that?" Neil asked, a little despondently. "I feel that another excuse is coming, yet another reason why you will not do your duty and take a wife."

"It is not an excuse!" Gabriel cried. "It is a fact. No one will want to marry me when I look like this!" He motioned towards his scar, then turned away.

Constance shook her head. "That is not true, Gabriel. I promise you. There are many young ladies who would be able to see past your scar and see what a fine young man you are. I am sure of it."

Gabriel shrugged. "I do not believe you, I must confess."

"Well," Neil said, with a sense of finality in his voice. "I have a lady in mind."

"Oh?" Gabriel looked up in surprise. He had not realized that his brother's plans for him had advanced quite so far.

“You did not tell me about this, my dear,” Lydia whispered.

“Well, I thought that you might not approve,” Neil said slowly. “The fact is that it would be a marriage of convenience, and I thought that you might not like the sound of that.”

Lydia cocked her head to the side. “Well, sometimes it is necessary, and I considered it for myself once, as you know.” She smiled at her husband. “But I was lucky enough not to have to go through with it. It must be up to Gabriel to decide.”

Gabriel felt a pang of envy as he watched Lydia and Neil together. Theirs was a love match, of course, as were both his sisters’ marriages. But Neil clearly thought that anything like that was beyond Gabriel’s reach, for he had been seeking a different kind of arrangement for his younger brother.

Gabriel sighed. He didn’t even know why he was allowing himself to get upset about it when he didn’t even want to get married. It was ridiculous. The whole situation was ridiculous.

“Well, tell us about this young lady, then?” Constance asked, a hint of excitement in her voice. “You never know, Gabriel, you might come to love her in the end. These things do happen.”

“I have not agreed to anything yet!” Gabriel snapped. “Why are you all talking about it as if it has been agreed upon?”

Neil let out a huff. “No one is suggesting that anything is agreed upon, Gabriel. Calm down.”

“Oh, Neil, please, will you just tell us about her?” Catherine pressed. “We are all desperate to know.”

“Well, she is the niece of a man who owes me rather a lot of money that he is unable to pay back. I have agreed with him that his daughter could marry you, in exchange for the debt.” Neil paused and frowned. “I know it sounds rather brutal, Gabriel, but I think it could work out well for you. I know nothing more about the young lady in question, but we can arrange for you to meet her soon, and move things along from there.”

Gabriel turned to face the window again, desperate for a moment to gather his thoughts. Was this how it was to be, then? The whole situation was mortifying. But at least it meant that he would not have to attend all the events of the Season or socialize with the ton. Perhaps his brother’s idea was valid, after all.

Much as he had tried to avoid the ton as much as possible since his return from the war, he knew that he could not carry on like this forever. But perhaps by agreeing to a marriage like this, he could avoid endless balls and dinner parties and the excruciating process of trying to find a wife who would even consider marrying someone as broken as him.

His mind returned, as it did so often these days, to the battlefield and the experiences that had changed him so much. The noise had been unbearable, with cannon shots and gunfire ringing out from every direction. And even though the men all pretended to be brave, the stench of fear was thick in the air, along with much worse smells. He knew that he would never be the same again after the experiences he had endured.

Perhaps it would just be easiest to go along with his brother's plan.

There was a sudden crash, followed by a shriek. Gabriel whirled around, his heart pounding and his skin tingling with fear.

"Catherine, you are so clumsy!" Constance scolded. "Look at the mess you have made."

Catherine sighed and bent down to pick up the pieces of her broken teacup. She had dropped it, and the remains of her tea were spilled on the floor. "Never mind, Constance, it is only a cup. Perhaps you could ring the bell for someone to come and help us clear it up."

"Not just yet, Constance, if you don't mind," Neil said. "Gabriel has not given his answer to my proposal yet, and I am sure that he would prefer not to discuss such matters in front of the servants."

Gabriel tried to calm his breathing, but the sense of panic would not leave him. It was the same any time he heard a loud noise. Terror filled him immediately, and in his mind, he was back on the battlefield, facing the guns and bayonets of the French army. He could not bring himself back to reality, no matter how hard he tried. Yet, his expression remained impassive. His eyes never left the pieces of the shattered teacup on the floor.

Constance looked at him with concern. "Gabriel, are you all right?"

He nodded quickly. He did not want his siblings to see him like this. He would not allow them to understand the full extent of his traumatized mind.

“I am fine,” he said, forcing the words out through his constricted throat.

“And what of this marriage, then?” Neil asked. “I am not going to let it go, you know.”

“I know,” Gabriel snapped. “It is all you have talked about for weeks.” He glanced at the door of the drawing room, longing to run towards it and escape the room.

The atmosphere felt cloying in the room, and he could feel beads of sweat dripping down his back. He had to make his escape, and quickly.

He pushed his shoulders back and tried to look as if he was in control of himself. “I agree with your suggestion, Neil. I can see now that arguing about it is pointless.” He paused and looked at his siblings. “The fact is that I know you are right. I must marry. And this way, I can do it with as little exposure to the idiocies of the Season as possible.”

He strode towards the door and left the room as quickly as he could, then leaned against the wall in the corridor outside. He could feel the coolness of the stone against his back through his clothes, and it calmed him a little, but not enough for him to even consider returning to his family.

All he wanted now was to get out of the house. He walked quickly towards the door that led out into the gardens and stepped outside. He breathed in the crisp air and felt his heart rate beginning to slow.

What on earth had he just agreed to? Well, it was done now, and he would have to go along with it. An embarrassing arrangement that neither he nor the young lady in question really wanted to be part of.

He knew, though, that it had been the right decision to agree to Neil's plan.



## CHAPTER 2



**D**iana set her embroidery down on a cushion next to her and looked over at her sister, Albina. “I am convinced that Uncle Walter is plotting something,” she said softly, not wanting to be overheard by anyone outside the room. “He has been acting rather oddly this morning, and I’m sure he has been getting more letters than usual over the last few days.”

Albina shuddered, her pretty face scrunching into a frown. “I dread to think what he is up to.” She sighed. “I hope he is not gambling again.”

Diana frowned. “I have tried so hard to stop him, but I simply have run out of ideas. He won’t listen to me. I have no idea what we are going to do when he has spent all the money.” She bit her lip, feeling rather as if she had said too much.

She tried her hardest to spare her younger sister from having to worry about money and all the other troubles that they faced, but sometimes, it was just too hard to keep everything inside, and she had to open up and talk about it.

“I know you are doing your best,” Albina said, in what Diana thought she meant to be a reassuring tone. But she could see

her sister's bottom lip quiver a little as she spoke.

“Well, I am sure everything will turn out fine,” Diana said briskly and then picked up her sewing again. “Now, I really must concentrate on this, or I will never finish it!”

Just as she was beginning to refocus on her embroidery, the door to the parlor swung open, and their uncle Walter, the Viscount of Berlock, strode in, with a purposeful look on his face. He sat down in an armchair opposite them and stretched out his long legs in front of him.

Diana often thought that her uncle tried to take up as much space as possible when he entered a room as if that would mean that he was the dominant force everywhere he went.

“Girls, I have news,” he announced in a grand tone.

Diana set her sewing down again and looked up at him, a feeling of trepidation growing in her heart as she saw the triumphant look on his face. Whatever it was that was making him so cheerful, it was unlikely to be good news for herself and Albina.

“Please, do tell us the good news, Uncle,” she urged, keeping her tone as neutral as she could.

Diana knew from bitter experience that even the slightest thing could send her uncle into a fit of rage, and that he found her immensely irritating at the best of times. She felt as if she had been walking on eggshells in her own home for many years now.

“I have found you a husband, Albina!” Walter declared.

Diana saw her sister tense at his words. She knew full well that her sister dreamed of a love match, and that the thought of being forced into an arranged marriage by her uncle filled her with horror. This was the moment they had both been dreading for a long time.

“And who is the man that you have arranged for Albina to marry?” Diana asked, trying to keep her composure as best she could.

“The Earl of Denro. A fine match, wouldn’t you agree?” Walter stared at her as if he were trying to gauge her reaction. “He is the younger brother of the Duke of Whitewell, who is very well-known in Society, of course. At least, he is well-known to people who are properly informed about these things.”

Diana bit her lip. He was inferring, of course, that she and her sister were not well-informed, and in some respects, he was right, as they had not been much in Society lately. But even she knew who the Duke of Whitewell was, and she had heard about his younger brother, too, who had been elevated to an earl after his heroics against the French. But what she heard about him was not good.

In truth, the Earl of Denro was rumored to be a mysterious beast of a man. Everyone said so. But she had never met him, as he had never attended any Society events, and so she was not sure if the rumors were true or not. But either way, she knew that her sister would not want to marry this man.

Diana glanced over at Albina, whose eyes were brimming with tears. She felt a surge of rage coursing through her. She would not let this happen to her sister.

“You cannot force her to marry him!” she protested. “You can see from the look on her face that she is horrified by the idea. Do you have no compassion for us at all?”

Walter laughed. “Compassion will not pay off my debts, my dear! I owe rather a lot of money to the Duke of Whitewell, and he has very graciously agreed to cancel the debt if his brother marries Albina. So, you see, the whole thing is a very elegant solution to multiple problems.”

“It is not Albina’s responsibility to pay off your debts!” Diana protested. She was raising her voice, and she knew that her uncle would not like it, but she could not help herself. “You are the only family we have, and we are at your mercy. Why will you not see that you will be pushing Albina into a life of misery if you force her to marry this man?”

Walter shrugged. “I am sure she will get used to the idea—won’t you, Albina?”

Albina did not reply.

Diana concluded that her sister was too upset to speak, and this enraged her even further. “You cannot make her marry him!” she repeated.

“Yes, I can,” Walter replied. “And I will. Your opinion does not matter in the slightest, Diana, even though you give it in such a shrewish way. And then you wonder why you are still unmarried?” He chuckled. “No one would ever marry you, with the way you carry on. That is why it is up to your sister to solve our financial problems. Or some of them, at least.”

Diana flushed. She knew full well what her uncle thought of her. He had said such things to her many times before. She was not conventionally beautiful, she knew that. She was too tall and too curvaceous for the tastes of polite society, and she gave her opinion far too freely, as far as he was concerned. And it was because of her shortcomings that her sister was going to be forced into this terrible situation.

She bit her lip and tried not to cry. “That is the reason, then, that Albina has to marry the Earl and not me?”

“Of course.” Walter nodded. “Even in an arrangement such as this, the bride has to be somewhat attractive. I am sure that I will never be able to persuade anyone to marry you.”

His callous words cut deep into Diana’s heart. She wanted to protest, to argue with him, but she knew that he was right. Since her debut in Society five years ago, scarcely a single gentleman had ever looked at her, and no one had ever paid her any serious attention. She had accepted long ago that she would never marry and that she would live out the rest of her life as a spinster.

But Albina’s happiness mattered more than hers. The situation felt hopeless, though. She decided to have one last try at persuading her uncle.

“Will you not suggest me instead?” she asked softly. “I am the elder sister. I should marry first, should I not?”

“No, that is not what is going to happen,” Walter said firmly. “Anyway, the deal is made. I received a letter from the Duke this morning saying that his brother is in favor of the arrangement, so all that remains is for the introductions to be made, and then the wedding can take place. It is my intention that you should be married as soon as possible, Albina. I am sure you will get used to the idea.” He got to his feet. “Now, I am a busy man, with rather a lot to do, so I will leave you now.” He shot Diana a warning glance. “And mark my words, Diana, there is nothing you can do to change this situation. So, you had better simply accept it. Do you understand?”

Diana saw that it was pointless to argue with him anymore. She simply nodded dumbly and watched as he swept out of the room.

As soon as he was gone, Albina let her feelings take over. She burst into tears, her shoulders shuddering as she sobbed.

Diana jumped to her feet and went to sit next to her sister, putting her arm around her shoulders. She felt another stab of anger coursing through her at the hopelessness of their situation.

Since their parents died five years ago, they had been entirely at the mercy of their uncle. She knew that he didn't care about them. He only cared about the title and the fortune that his older brother's death had brought him. But he was rapidly squandering that fortune, and their situation was clearly becoming desperate.

But she would not allow her sister to be sold to the highest bidder. She was determined to save her from this marriage.

“Diana,” Albina said through her sobs. “It is hopeless, isn’t it? But I don’t want to marry him! You know what everyone says about him. He sounds like an awful man. And why has no one ever seen him in Society? What can possibly be wrong with him that he remains hidden away like this? I dread to think what he is like in the flesh.”

It occurred to Diana once again that the Earl might not be as awful as everyone said, but she knew that was irrelevant. Her sister did not want to marry him, and that was all that mattered.

“I am sure that there is a way out of this,” Diana replied.

She hoped that Albina was more convinced by her statement than she herself was because the truth of the matter was that she had no idea what either of them could do to enable Albina to escape the situation.

“All I have ever wanted is to marry for love.” Albina sniffled. “But it seems that is an impossible fantasy. How could I have been so foolish as to expect it, or even hope for it?”

“It is not an impossible fantasy,” Diana insisted. “Our parents always wanted us to marry for love, and I am determined to make sure that you can choose your own husband.”

She took a deep breath, remembering how she had promised herself, when their parents died, that she would always protect

Albina in their stead. That was her role now that she and Albina only had each other.

Albina wiped her eyes. “It’s all I’ve ever dreamed of—to find a love match. Do you really think I can escape this marriage to the Earl?”

Diana nodded determinedly. “I promise, I’ll protect you from our uncle’s plotting. I promise you, Albina, that, somehow, I will get you out of this marriage!”



“Now, girls, I expect you to be on your best behavior,” Walter hissed as they climbed down from the carriage. “This is an important day, and if you let me down, I will be furious. There will be consequences, do you understand?”

Diana shuddered at their uncle’s words. It filled her with fury that she and her sister were so powerless, so completely under his control, and they could do so little to change their situation. But the tiniest fragment of a plan had developed in her mind, and today was the day that she intended to carry it out.

The grand sandstone house that was the Duke of Whitewell’s residence rose up before them. The butler stood at the door, ready to greet them.

“My Lord,” he greeted Walter with a bow, then turned to the girls. “Miss Haskett, Miss Albina, His Grace is expecting you. The guests are all gathered in the garden if you will allow me to escort you there.”



They followed him down the gravel path and across the lawn, to where the attendees of the garden party were all standing clustered in groups, drinking glasses of champagne.

Diana and Albina hung back a little. Diana could sense her sister's nerves and chose to follow her lead as to how quickly they threw themselves into the center of things.

“Well, here we are,” Walter said with a grin. “I will leave you to it and go find the Duke. But remember what I said, won't you, my dears?” He added the last words in a sickly-sweet tone, clearly being careful lest anyone overheard him, but his meaning was clear to his nieces.

He stalked off across the lawn in search of the Duke, leaving Diana and Albina standing together.

“Shall we go and get something to drink?” Diana asked.

She felt ill at ease, and she thought that a glass of champagne might help. Either way, she felt too restless to be standing around, not doing anything.

Albina glanced at her. “Wait a moment, Diana. I wanted to ask you something.”

Diana nodded. “Of course.” She had a feeling that she knew what was coming.

“Have you thought of anything?” Albina asked, a note of desperation in her voice. “It's all happening too quickly. Uncle

Walter said the wedding would happen in a month. How am I going to get out of it?"

Diana gave a tight smile. "I have an idea," she whispered. "Please, Albina, do not worry. I promise you that I won't let this happen. Even if it's the last thing I do."

"You seem a little nervous. What are you going to do?" Albina pressed, her eyes wide with fear.

Diana had decided when she came up with her plan that she would not share it with her sister. If anything went wrong, it was better if no one else knew anything. So, she simply smiled.

"Everything is going to be fine, Albina. I promise you."

## CHAPTER 3



Gabriel stood under a tree and watched as the party went on around him. He was grateful, at least, to be outside, rather than stuck in a busy ballroom or at a dinner party, where everyone seemed to watch everyone else's every move. He did not understand why people found such events enjoyable, but he supposed that they must, or they would not continue to attend them. His brother and sisters and their spouses were continually going off to dine at each other's houses, or other people's, with crowds of others present, too.

The whole idea sounded quite unbearable to Gabriel.

Today was the day that he was going to meet his future wife. As the thought echoed in his head again and again, he reflected once again on how absurd the whole situation was.

How could he have agreed to marry someone he had never even met, someone who was not of his choosing? And, of course, he was not the choice of the lady in question, either. He almost felt more sorry for her than he did for himself. At least he had never hoped for anything better for himself, but he knew from his sisters' experiences that most young ladies wanted to marry for love, rather than to pay off their family's debts.

He let out a sigh. He knew that he was delaying the inevitable by standing here, away from everyone else. But he could not bear the stares and the whispered comments when he was near to other guests. He knew that they were looking at his scar and wondering what had happened to him. Perhaps they were wondering why he had kept out of Society so much, even though he had been home from the war for a year now.

Well, maybe now that they had seen his face, disfigured by the ugly scar on his cheek, they would understand why he had kept himself hidden.

He was just trying to work out if he could get away with going inside for a while, to avoid people for as long as possible, when he saw a valet approaching.

“My Lord,” the valet said, holding out a piece of paper. “A message for you.”

Gabriel frowned. He could not imagine who the message could be from, since his whole family were here at the party, and he had no friends to speak of.

He reached out and took the paper, unfolded it, and read it. *Please come to the library immediately*, was all the note said. It was not signed.

He looked at the valet, who was standing discreetly to the side, waiting to see if his help was required. “Thank you. No response is needed,” he replied, then looked at the piece of paper again.

The whole thing seemed rather suspicious. Who on earth would want to meet him in the library in the middle of a garden party? The most sensible thing, surely, would be not to go. If anyone needed him, then they could find him out here, among the guests—although it was the last place on earth he wanted to be in right now.

He was just about to go and find a drink to calm his nerves when he heard his brother's voice from the other side of the tree.

“Where on earth has Gabriel gotten to?” Neil was saying, presumably to Lydia or whoever he was with. “I asked him not to disappear into a corner somewhere and to try to be a little sociable for once. But sure enough, when the time comes to go and meet his bride, he has disappeared into thin air!”

Gabriel groaned quietly. He had known that this moment was coming, but he was not prepared for it yet. He decided in an instant that going to the library seemed a much better idea. Surely whatever was waiting for him there could not be as awful as being faced with the woman who was being forced to marry him, and seeing the inevitable look of disappointment on her face the moment she laid eyes on him.

He jogged across the lawn, hoping that his brother's view of him was obscured by the hedges he was trying his best to stay behind, and then entered the house and made his way to the library. Unsure what to expect, he pushed the door open.

There, standing in front of one of the large mahogany bookcases, stood a woman he had never met before. He thought, at that first moment of surprise when he saw her, that she was taller and more imposing than any young lady he had

ever met before. Not as tall as him, of course. He had grown up to be the tallest in his family, towering over even Neil.

Dressed in a dark green gown, with her light brown hair swept up on top of her head, she stared at him, and he stared back.

“Who are you, Madam,” he demanded, “and why have you summoned me here?”



Diana had been pacing anxiously up and down in the library for some time. When she heard the door open, she felt a strange mix of relief and anxiety. She had not been sure that the Earl would appear at all. After all, it would seem rather strange to receive an anonymous summons to the library when a garden party was in full swing outside. And if he did not appear, then her plan would not work.

But now that he had turned up, she would have to go through with it. Her heart thudded in her chest at the enormity of what she was about to do.

She looked at the man who had entered the room. He was very tall, indeed, and he looked strong. He stood up straight, like a soldier, but there was a wary look in his hazel eyes. And she could not avoid noticing the scar on his face—it ran from above his brow all the way down his cheek, ridged and silvery.

She took a deep breath. “My name is Miss Diana Haskett,” she answered slowly.

A flicker of recognition crossed his face. “Oh, your sister is Miss Albina, is that right?”

She nodded.

“And why have you asked to meet me here? It is most unusual, as I am sure you are aware,” the Earl said.

She nodded again. “I am aware that it is not usual, My Lord.”

She was simply playing for time. Of course, she could not tell him the real reason that she had sent him the note and asked him to meet her there. If he knew what she was planning, no doubt he would turn on his heel and run. But she noticed that he was not looking at her with disdain, like young men usually did. Instead, he seemed rather curious about her. And she, in turn, found that she felt curious about him, too.

She wondered how he had gotten his scar, and imagined the horrors he must have experienced in the war.

“Well?” he prompted. “As pleasant as this is, Miss Haskett, I fear that we should return to the party.”

There was a noise outside, and the Earl looked around in a panic. “I must hide!” he whispered. “If we are found in here alone, you know there will be trouble!”

She looked at him and prepared herself for what she was about to do. Everything was going according to plan. The guests

who were having their tour around the house were about to come in, and now it was the moment to take action.

Diana reached for his hand and held it tightly—tight enough to stop him from moving away from her. She looked into his eyes, feeling a pang of regret. “I am sorry, My Lord. Really, I am.”

The Earl held her gaze, his eyes wide with amazement.

The door swung open, and a group of people entered the library. They had been chatting amongst themselves as they came into the room, but when their eyes fell on Diana, with the Earl’s hand clasped in hers, silence fell as they all stood staring at the spectacle before them.



Gabriel pulled his hand away from Miss Haskett and looked at the group who had just come into the library. They were whispering amongst themselves, unsurprisingly.

“What on earth were they doing in here alone?” an older lady asked. She was feigning a whisper, but her voice was so loud that he could hear her on the other side of the room.

“My goodness, and she was holding his hand, too! How improper!” another lady gasped.

All eyes were on them, and various people were tutting and shaking their heads.



“This is quite the scandal, no doubt about it,” a gentleman said.

The Earl looked at Miss Haskett, who was still standing silently next to him, her cheeks flushed crimson with embarrassment. He had noticed a hint of hurt and conflict in her voice when she had apologized to him, but events had moved on so quickly that he had not had time to think about it.

Gabriel sighed. The gentleman who had just spoken was right. They were caught in a compromising position.

After what felt like a lifetime, Neil entered the room and looked around, confusion clear on his face. “What on earth is going on here?” he demanded.

Gabriel glanced at Miss Haskett, then at his brother, and shook his head slightly. He could not say the words out loud. It was all too humiliating.

The gentleman nearest the door leaned over and whispered something to Neil, whose eyes widened in shock. Neil stared at Gabriel, then Miss Haskett. It was as if time had stopped as everyone in the room waited for his response to this shocking situation.

Eventually, he cleared his throat. “The garden party is over. Everyone should leave,” he announced. “Miss Haskett, I suggest that you go and find your uncle and your sister, and wait in the drawing room. Smith will show you where it is, he is just outside.”

Miss Haskett gave a tiny nod, then crossed the room, pushing her way through the group of people gathered by the door. Everyone was staring at her. Gabriel felt a pang of sympathy for her, in spite of everything. He knew from everything he had heard that young ladies were always judged much more harshly than young men in situations such as this.

“Gabriel, wait in here. I will speak to you shortly. But first, I must ensure that everyone has gotten the message that the party is over and that their carriages are readied.”

Gabriel nodded glumly and went to sit down in a leather armchair by the window. He had no idea how to respond to what had just happened, but from the look on Neil’s face, he could tell that his brother was furious.

He could not imagine what Miss Haskett had been playing at, to throw herself in his way like that. And now he was caught up in a scandal not of his own making—the focus of everyone’s attention. He felt a surge of anger towards the unknown young lady who had caused this whole situation to erupt.

It was just the sort of thing he hated, and now he had been plunged into the middle of a great drama. But all he could do was sit and wait. Once the remaining guests had all left, the full ramifications of the events of the day would become clear.



“I cannot believe that you have done this to me!” Walter shouted, his face purple with rage. “You are so incredibly stupid and selfish. What do you think will happen to you if I cannot pay off my debts? Do you want us to end up in the workhouse?”

Diana sat in silence on the sofa next to her sister while their uncle raged at her. She stared at the carpet in front of her. She knew there was nothing she could say to defend herself. All she could do now was hope that her plan had worked. There was no way that the Earl would want to marry into their family after what she had done. Surely the wedding would be called off before the planning of it had even really begun.

“You are an embarrassment!” Walter went on. “Just because you know that no one will ever marry you, you had to spoil things for your sister! And now everything is ruined.”

Diana looked up at her uncle, trying to disguise the hatred she felt towards him. “I have ruined nothing for Albina. She did not want to marry him, as I kept telling you.”

“And I keep on telling you that what you and your sister want is utterly irrelevant! I shall decide what happens to you, is that clear?”

Diana was just trying to decide whether it was even worth replying to him when the Duke of Whitewell and his brother entered the room.

“You can be under no illusions, My Lord, of the severity of what happened in the library just now,” the Duke said.

Walter shook his head. “I quite understand, Your Grace, and I can only apologize for the inexplicably stupid actions of my older niece.” He turned to glare at Diana, then returned his attention to the Duke. “But, please, do rest assured that her behavior does not reflect her sister’s. Albina is a modest and

obedient young lady, and I am convinced that she will be a perfectly biddable and proper wife for the Earl of Denro.”

Neil shook his head. “The deal is off, Berlock. Surely you can see that is the only reasonable option for me? I cannot ally my family with yours when there has been such a scandal. You will have to find another way to repay me the debt you owe me, and I suggest that you do it quickly.”

Diana saw a look of panic crossing her uncle’s face. She knew that he had no other way of repaying the debt. This veiled threat from the Duke would only serve to make him angrier and more terrified about what the future held.

“It is all her fault!” Walter protested, pointing at Diana. “She has deliberately sabotaged this match for her sister because she is jealous. You will never have to see her again when Albina marries your brother. I shall never let her go out into Society again.”

Diana felt a flush of shame creeping up her face. What had she done? She may have saved her sister from a marriage that she did not want, but had she condemned herself to a life as her uncle’s hated prisoner?

She felt tears welling up in her eyes. She bit her lip hard to stop herself from crying. She would not give her uncle the satisfaction of seeing her weeping in front of him.

Gabriel held up a hand. “That is quite enough,” he declared. “Your nieces are your responsibility. You are the one to blame here.”

Walter looked as if he was about to explode with rage. “No, it is all her!” he shouted. “She is the one who always causes trouble!”

Diana tried to tune out his words and kept on staring at the ground, but when she looked up momentarily, she could see the Earl watching her closely.

The Earl stepped forward so that he was standing between Diana and Walter. “There is something I wish to say,” he declared.



Gabriel could bear it no longer. Miss Haskett had tricked him, yes, but he could see why. And despite his anger towards her for trapping him like that, he could not stand to listen to her uncle abusing her like this.

His heart was pounding as he prepared to speak. Every time Lord Berlock shouted at Miss Haskett, scenes from the battlefield flashed before his eyes. But he knew that he must speak up. He had to protect this young lady from being attacked like this by her awful uncle.

“Lord Berlock, I will marry Miss Diana Haskett if she will have me,” Gabriel said firmly. “That way, the scandal will go away, and you still repay the debt you owe to my brother.”

Neil looked at him in amazement. “Gabriel, you cannot be serious?”

Gabriel nodded. “I am absolutely serious.”

Neil shook his head. "I cannot allow you to do this."

"Whyever not?" Gabriel demanded. "You wanted me to get married, and now I am taking control of the situation. I am not asking your permission. I will choose my own wife. And I will marry Miss Haskett if she agrees to it."

He glanced at Diana, and he could not help but see that there was that same hint of hurt in her eyes that he had seen before in the library. But she pushed her shoulders back and looked him in the eye, then gave a slight nod. "Yes, I agree," she said softly.

"Very well," Gabriel replied. "It is settled."

After such a momentous decision, though, Gabriel could stand it no longer, being here in this room with everyone looking at him. He turned on his heel and left the room.

He would face the consequences of what he had done later, but now, all he wanted was to be alone, and he could not even bear to speak to the woman he had just promised to marry.

## CHAPTER 4



**D**iana was sitting in her room the next day, staring out the window at the gloomy weather outside. The persistent drizzle and grey clouds matched her mood, as she thought about the events that had transpired during their visit to the Whitewell estate.

Walter was still furious with her. He had been ignoring her ever since they got home from the garden party. She supposed that was better than continually berating her, at least, but she was not entirely sure what the reason was behind his continued fury. The Earl had agreed to marry her, so her uncle's debt to the Duke would be repaid, and she would be off his hands. But still, her uncle glared at her with unconcealed rage every time he saw her.

She suspected it was because she had scuppered his plans, and he could not stand to have anything happen that was not exactly as he had intended it. But she thought that his anger would probably pass soon, and he could begin his next scheme. And she would not be here to suffer the consequences.

She was certain, too, that Albina would find her own love match soon and be able to escape from his clutches. That was,

after all, the whole point of the shocking thing Diana had done yesterday.

A soft knock sounded at the door, and she heard Albina call, “Diana, can I come in?”

“Of course,” Diana called back.

Her sister entered the room, looking pale and worried.

“Albina, dear, you look as if you have not slept at all. Are you quite well?”

“Oh, Diana, you must not worry about me! It is I who is worried about you!” Albina said, rushing over to her sister and clasping her hands in her own.

“I am perfectly all right,” Diana assured her, freeing her hands.

The movement reminded her of the moment when she had grabbed the Earl’s hand the previous day, and the look of horror on his face, and she found that she did not want to dwell on that moment too much.

Albina sat down on the bed, and Diana remained where she was—on the window seat. The rain outside pattered against the window, and Diana found the noise strangely comforting.

“That was your plan all along, wasn’t it?” Albina asked. “To trap the Earl in a scandal, and then force his brother to cancel



the deal with our uncle.”

Diana frowned. “I suppose my plan was to do anything I could to prevent you from being forced to marry him,” she replied. “I was not sure exactly what would happen, but I knew that I had to do something.”

Albina smiled weakly, then sprung up from the bed and rushed over to embrace her sister. “Thank you,” she said softly. “I truly appreciate what you have done for me. But now, you are going to be the one who suffers, and I never intended for that to happen!”

Diana shook her head. “I am responsible for your happiness. I have known that since our parents died. Our uncle is our guardian, of course, but you and I both know that he does not care a bit about whether we are happy. I had to do something to protect you. It is my duty as your older sister.”

Albina stared at her. “But did you have to agree to marry him yourself? Diana, you have committed yourself to spending your life with that monstrous man. Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“It was my choice, Albina. It seemed like the right thing to do. If he is married to me, then no one can suggest that you have to marry him. No one can go back to the original plan, and you will be free to marry whoever you want to, I hope.”

“But he is beastly!” Albina protested. “Did you see his awful scar? I feel terrible that you have to marry such a ghoulish creature.”

Diana paused and thought about the moment when she had first laid eyes on the Earl and seen his scar. She knew that some people would think it was monstrous, but in fact, she thought he was rather attractive, in spite of it. There was a curiosity in his eyes that she liked, and a frankness about his face. He did not seem like the kind of man who would be dishonest, no matter what.

“I do not think I will be afraid of him, Albina,” she murmured.

In fact, the more Diana thought about it, the more she felt grateful that Gabriel had agreed to marry her at all. She may well have given up any hope of marrying for love, but having such a scandal attached to her name would have been very hard to live with, and he had saved her from that.

That meant that he was kind, too, to consider her in his decision. Perhaps he was not so bad as everyone thought.



A few days later, Diana found herself waiting rather anxiously in the drawing room for her caller to arrive. The Duchess of Whitewell had sent her a note asking to call on her, and of course, Diana had accepted and invited her to come the very next day for tea.

In her note, the Duchess said that she wanted to help with the wedding plans. Diana had spent most of the previous night lying in bed, awake, worrying about the meeting.

What on earth must this lady think of her after what she had done? And Diana did not even know where to start when it came to talking about wedding plans. She had never imagined

that she would get married, so she had not thought about it at all. She only hoped that she could get through the conversation without making a fool of herself more than she already had.

The Duchess arrived perfectly on time and was shown into the drawing room. Diana curtsied to her in greeting, hoping that her nerves were not evident on her face.

“Miss Haskett, it is a pleasure to meet you properly,” the Duchess said, looking at Diana rather searchingly with her clear green eyes.

Diana felt her cheeks redden at the words the Duchess had used. She was clearly referring to how wrong things had gone at the garden party, before official introductions between the two families had taken place.

“Thank you so much for coming to visit, Your Grace,” Diana replied, trying her best to keep the nervous tremor from her voice. “I will call for some tea.”

Once the tea had arrived and been served, they both sat down in armchairs opposite each other. There was a rather awkward silence between them. Diana tried to think of something appropriate to say, but her mind was blank, and her mouth felt dry.

“So, the wedding will take place very soon,” the Duchess began. “The Duke has managed to secure a special license. As I’m sure you will appreciate, there is a degree of urgency about it after... well, after the events of the last few days.”

Diana nodded. "I am very grateful to His Grace," she replied.

"Well, I should think so," the Duchess said flatly. "Now, Gabriel is the youngest of the Windham siblings, and the others are all married, so we are rather well-practiced at organizing wedding parties. I trust that you will be happy to go along with things the way that we are used to doing them?"

"Of course," Diana said. The look on the Duchess's face made it quite clear that this was the only acceptable response.

"We will not invite so many people as usual, given the circumstances, but all of our extended family will be there, including my own sister and her husband, the Earl of Hertford. And, of course, your sister and your uncle. Do you have any other family?"

"No, Your Grace," Diana replied, unable to hide the sadness in her voice. "My parents died a few years ago, and there is no one else except my uncle, who took us in after their death."

The Duchess's face softened a little. "I imagined that your parents must have passed away, for you to be living with your uncle, but I did not realize that it was quite recent. I am sorry for your loss."

"Thank you." Diana took a deep breath and forced herself to regain her composure. "I have felt very protective of my sister ever since, as I am all that she has in the world."

The Duchess looked at her searchingly and was quiet for a moment, then reached for her teacup and took a sip. "I quite

understand,” she replied, still gazing at her meaningfully. “I have a younger sister, too, and I know how it feels to be willing to do just about anything to protect a younger sibling. I think that I see things a little more clearly now.”

Diana saw a warmth in the Duchess’s eyes that had not been there before, and she felt a surge of relief. Perhaps there was some hope that the Earl’s family might accept her, despite what she had done.

She feared that it would be a very lonely life for her if her husband’s family did not like her. It was a good sign that the Duchess seemed to be warming up to her, albeit rather slowly and cautiously.



The next few days were a blur, and before she knew it, Diana found herself sitting at the head of a long table, next to Gabriel, as their wedding breakfast began.

The ceremony had been simple and had gone quickly. She had tried to gauge what he was feeling as they stood opposite one another, reciting their vows, but he was a closed book. He was not cold towards her, or rude. In fact, he treated her with perfect courtesy. But it was clear to her that he was struggling with the situation as much as she was.

As they sat at the table and ate the wonderful food that was served to them, the Windham siblings, who were all seated together, chatted amongst themselves.

“Do you remember our wedding, Levi?” Catherine asked her husband, who was sitting next to her.

“Of course, I do! How could I forget the happiest day of my life?”

“We thought that you would never get there, the pair of you,” Constance said, rolling her eyes. “All that time that we thought you liked each other, and then all that confusion and trouble, before you finally admitted that you were in love.”

“Well, you cannot say that you and Michael have a simpler story!” Catherine protested, flipping her hair over her shoulder rather archly as she glared at her sister.

Constance turned to Michael and smiled. “I confess that you are right. Our courtship was a little unconventional, to say the least. But we got there in the end.”

Diana glanced at Gabriel, to see if he would contribute anything to the conversation, but he sat quietly, staring at the plate in front of him. She had very quickly realized that all the other Windham siblings were very happily married. Perhaps Gabriel was sitting there at his own wedding feast, reflecting that his own marriage would never be as happy as that of his brother and his sisters.

She turned to him and smiled. “I hope you are enjoying the feast, My Lord?”

He nodded. “Of course.”

She frowned. It was their wedding day, after all, but he had hardly spoken to her. He must be full of anger and resentment

at what she had done.

*And well he might.*

Surely, he would never have considered marrying her if he had just met her at a ball or a garden party. Like every other gentleman of the ton, he would not have looked at her twice. He would probably have completely ignored her. But she had trapped him in a scandal and forced him to marry her.

“I am glad that all your family could join us,” she went on.

She was determined to try, even though he was stonewalling her. But he scarcely acknowledged her, focusing his attention instead on the plate of food in front of him.

She could not tell if he was ignoring her because he was angry, or because he was just naturally reserved. Either way, she reflected that Albina would never have been happy, married to him. Her sister was lively and quick-witted, and she needed a husband who matched her temperament.

She had done the right thing, Diana told herself. She and Gabriel would simply have to make the best of things. It sounded from what his siblings were saying as if some of their marriages had resulted from rather unusual beginnings. Perhaps something similar would happen to Diana and Gabriel.

Diana hoped, at least, that they could learn to live contentedly together. Otherwise, it was going to be a very lonely experience being the Countess of Denro.

## CHAPTER 5



The wedding feast was over, and the party had moved to the terrace outside. Gabriel had refused to even consider any kind of dancing as part of the wedding feast, despite his siblings' protests. He did not want to dance, and he insisted that they respect his wishes.

Diana felt a little sad that she would not be able to dance at her own wedding, but she respected his wishes. Even though she felt as if she hardly knew him at all, she could tell from his reserved nature that he would not much enjoy the sometimes frenetic mood of a ballroom. After all, it was his wedding day, too, so he should be allowed to be comfortable with what was going on around him.

Her eyes kept returning to him, though, and she thought, more than once, how handsome he looked, even in spite of the scar on his cheek. He barely glanced at her, though. But then why would he? She knew that she was no beauty.

She found herself standing alone, a glass of champagne in hand, while the festivities carried on around her. There was a rather strange atmosphere amongst the guests, especially those whom she had not met before. The wedding had been arranged very quickly to avoid a scandal, and she could tell that people were talking and whispering about her behind her back. She



tried to hold her head up high and ignore the whispers, but it was rather painful to be the subject of gossip on what was supposed to be the happiest day of her life.

A young lady whom she had not met before approached her, smiling broadly. “Lady Denro!” she said with enthusiasm. “I am so pleased to meet you, at last.”

Diana smiled in response. She did not think that anyone had greeted her quite so warmly as this young lady, who was remarkably striking in her looks, with long dark hair and sparkling dark blue eyes.

“My name is Eliza Oakley. I can tell that you do not know who I am, and this family is very complicated, indeed, so I shall explain it to you! My uncle Levi is married to Catherine, Gabriel’s sister.”

Diana nodded. “That makes sense, you and he are rather similar in appearance.”

Eliza grinned. “People do say that about us, yes! I am a great favorite of his, he always says—although whether he just says it to annoy my sister, I am not sure!”

Diana could not help but feel immediately comfortable with Eliza. “I hope that you are enjoying the party?” she asked.

“Indeed, very much so,” Eliza replied, then looked at her closely. “I hope that you are enjoying the day, too, My Lady?”

Diana nodded. “Everything has happened rather quickly, but I think the day has gone well.”

“Eliza!”

Diana looked up to see Gabriel approaching. He was *smiling*. She realized that it was possibly the first time she had seen a genuine smile on his face as he greeted Eliza. Even with his siblings, his cool demeanor did not seem to soften, but seeing this young lady seemed to give him genuine pleasure.

“Diana, I am so pleased that you have met Eliza. She is one of my oldest friends.”

“It has been my pleasure,” Diana replied.

“I was just coming to ask you if you needed anything, but I see that you have a full glass of champagne, and you are in excellent company,” Gabriel said.

Diana nodded. The enthusiasm her husband was showing towards Eliza was somewhat unexpected, but she was pleased that he seemed happy, at least.

“Gabriel, I was just speaking with Catherine about your shameful decision not to have any dancing at the wedding,” Eliza began, a teasing look in her eyes. “How could you do such a shocking thing and deny us all the chance of a dance?”

“Well, as everyone keeps telling me, I am a great nobleman now, and I can do whatever I like,” Gabriel said with a

chuckle. “And if that means no dancing at my wedding, then so be it.” He paused and glanced at Diana. “But my Countess did not object too much either, so the decision seemed like a sound one.”

Diana nodded. “I did not especially wish to have everyone looking at me while I was on the dance floor,” she admitted.

Although much good it had done her, she thought, since everyone was looking at her anyway.

“Well, I think it is shocking, and I expect you to throw a ball very soon here at your estate, Gabriel, to make up for it,” Eliza persisted.

Gabriel laughed, a rather unexpectedly hearty sound that Diana had never heard before. “That will never happen!” he declared. “Me, throwing a ball? The very idea!”

Diana gave a half smile in response to his joviality, but she could not help but feel a little on the edge of the conversation. Her husband and Eliza were clearly very close friends, and it made Diana realize what a gulf there was between herself and her husband. And she had no idea how to bridge the gap to make things more familiar between them.



It was early evening, and the last of the guests had finally departed. Diana stood in the drawing room of her new home, looking around with a strange mix of feelings.

She had never seriously considered what it would feel like to be the lady of her own house. And now, she found herself a countess! It seemed almost laughable that she, whom nobody thought would ever marry, had made such a good match. And Gabriel's house was rather impressive, far more so than the house that she had grown up in, and certainly much grander than her uncle's rather neglected house.

But there was so much that she did not know. She had no idea how to manage servants, how to oversee a household, how to go about suggesting changes to the décor of the house that she had moved into. And there was another anxiety that was growing in her mind as nightfall approached. Her wedding night.

She had no idea what to expect, and she sensed that Gabriel was rather nervous, too. He had disappeared somewhere about half an hour ago, leaving her alone, and she did not even know where she was going to sleep that night. He had not yet shown her around the house, and she did not know where their bedchambers were located.

She got to her feet and walked towards the window, looking out at the view. The sun was setting now, and the gardens were bathed in an orange glow. She reflected, as she looked at the beautiful sight before her, that she was lucky to be here, even if the marriage was not quite what she had expected. She hoped that Albina, who was at home alone with their uncle, was not missing her too much and that, somehow, in the next few months, she managed to find a way to escape his clutches, just as Diana had.

There was a soft sound behind Diana as the door opened and Gabriel entered.

“I am sorry to have left you alone for so long, Lady Denro,” he said. “I hope that you have been comfortable?”

“Quite comfortable, thank you, My Lord,” she replied. “This is a very fine house.”

She wondered if things would ever become more relaxed between them, or if this stiff formality would remain forever.

There was an awkward silence between them for a few moments before he spoke again. “I expect that you would like to see your room.”

She nodded.

“All of your things are there already, and your new lady’s maid, Clara, is there, waiting for you.” He paused. “I hope that you find her to your liking. Catherine told me to try and find you a proper French lady’s maid, but it is rather difficult finding anyone from France these days, since we are still at war.” His face darkened for a moment at the mention of war.

Diana shook her head quickly. “Of course not, and I am very grateful for your efforts.”

She had never had her own lady’s maid before. Their uncle would never have spent a penny on what he would have seen as pure indulgence. So, she found that she was rather excited by the prospect. She kept forgetting that she was now a countess and that there were certain standards to be met in her lifestyle.

“Come along, then. I will show you the way,” Gabriel said.

She followed him out of the room and up the stairs. He led her down a long corridor and finally opened the door to one of the rooms leading off it.

“Here we are,” he said.

She entered the room and let out a gasp of delight.

The room was large, and she could tell that in daylight, it would be bright and sunny, with a south-facing window. Now, it was softly lit with candles, and there was a roaring fire in the hearth. A tidily dressed young woman stood in one corner and bobbed a low curtsy as soon as she saw Diana.

“This is Clara,” Gabriel said, motioning towards the woman. “She will ensure that you have everything you need.”

Diana glanced at the bed a little nervously. It was enormous, certainly big enough for two, and covered in soft blankets and plump cushions. Was Gabriel going to join her here later? She had no idea how to ask him.

He followed her gaze and then coughed awkwardly. “Well, I shall leave you now and go to my room,” he announced.

She turned to look at him, and she could see a hint of panic in his eyes. “Are your chambers close by?” she asked carefully.

He shook his head. “No, my room is on the other side of the house.”

She felt her heart sink. She had not realized that she had been looking forward to being alone with him. But it seemed that was not to be.

Gabriel glanced at her quickly, then turned to Clara. “Perhaps you could go and fetch some warm water for the Countess so that she can wash before bed if she so wishes?”

Clara curtsayed, then replied, “There is already a bowl here, My Lord.”

“Well, fetch some more, please,” Gabriel instructed, with a stern look on his face.

Clara curtsayed and hurriedly left the room.

Gabriel turned to Diana. “I am sorry, I should have made it clear before now. But, please, be assured that I expect nothing of you. You will not have to fulfill any of the marital duties you may have been fearing. This room is yours and yours alone, and I will keep to my own chambers.”

Diana nodded, feeling a lump rising in her throat. “Thank you for the explanation, My Lord,” she replied.

He nodded curtly, then headed towards the door. “I will see you in the morning. You may have breakfast in your room if you prefer it to coming downstairs. I usually eat early, and of

course, you may join me if you wish. Just tell Clara what you would like to do.”

She nodded again. “Good night, Gabriel.”

“Good night,” he returned, not looking at her, then left the room, the door swinging shut behind him with a thud.

Diana stared at the closed door, fighting back the urge to cry. Perhaps it was for the best. She told herself that it was foolish to be disappointed.

Why had she even expected anything more from him? He had only married her to save them all from a scandal. Of course, he found her unattractive, just like every other gentleman she had ever met. She should never have hoped for anything more.



Gabriel walked quickly downstairs and into his study, then closed the door behind him.

The whole situation was mortifying. He should have spoken to Diana much sooner, rather than leaving it to the last possible minute to tell her about the arrangements with their room. He expected that she would have found the situation embarrassing at the best of times, but he had made the whole thing a lot worse.

He crossed the room to a small table where a decanter of brandy stood and poured himself a large glass. He had already drunk several glasses of champagne today, and he knew that his decision to have another drink might be something that he



would regret. But he wanted to fall asleep quickly, without having to listen to his thoughts whirring around in his mind for hours. Anything to blot out the noise of his memories of the past, and worries for the future.

Had he done the right thing in agreeing to marry Diana? She seemed a rather unusual young lady, but he expected that she had had hopes of a love match, just like his sisters had. And now, she was saddled with him, a scarred freak who was not even prepared to be a proper husband to her.

He had noticed, though, that her eyes lingered on his face from time to time, and she did not look down fearfully like everyone else. And he had to admit that she had looked beautiful in her wedding dress, with the sunlight pouring in through the window of the chapel and reflecting off her hair, making her look almost angelic in the morning light.

But he had resolved to keep her at a distance, like he kept everyone else. It was better this way—safer. Then, she would not have to discover how broken he really was. How tortured by nightmares and flashbacks of the war he was, and how unable he was to have even the most normal of interactions with other people in Society.

It was better that they tried to live as companionably as possible in the same house, but nothing more. Diana deserved better than to be drawn into the turmoil that was Gabriel's life since he had come back from the war.

## CHAPTER 6



The following day, Diana woke up early. She rang the bell, and Clara appeared almost immediately.

“Good morning, My Lady,” Clara said cheerfully, crossing the room and drawing the curtains. “It is a beautiful morning.”

Diana smiled at the girl. She was sure that they would get along well in due course, even though things still felt a little awkward after the conversation she had been forced to have with Gabriel in front of her the previous evening. But she was sure that Clara would be discreet, and had probably seen much worse if she had much experience in service.

Diana climbed out of bed and crossed the room towards the window. It was indeed a glorious morning, and she felt a surge of optimism in her heart, despite the oddness of her situation. Perhaps she could make the best of it, after all.

“I think I will go downstairs for breakfast and join the Earl,” she said.

Clara looked at her a little awkwardly. “His Lordship’s valet just told me that he already had breakfast and left to attend to

some business with some of his tenants.”

Diana nodded, trying to hide her disappointment. “Very well. Perhaps I will have breakfast in my room, in that case.”

The morning progressed uneventfully. Diana took herself on a walk around the estate, but when she returned for luncheon, Gabriel still had not returned, so she ate alone. The same thing happened at dinner time, and she could not help but feel a little despondent.

Perhaps Gabriel intended for them to live separate lives entirely? She had to admit to herself that this was not what she had imagined, even though she knew that their marriage was not likely to be a conventional one.

The following day passed in much the same way, but on the third day, Diana resolved to conduct herself differently. She was a countess, after all, and in charge of this house and all the staff who worked in it. She knew that she had to make an effort to meet everyone and familiarize herself with her new home.

After breakfast in her room, she checked her appearance in the looking glass and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She was wearing a rather plain day dress, which had always seemed perfectly adequate for days spent at home with her sister when she lived with her uncle, but now she wondered if perhaps her new position required something more elegant, even on days when she was not going anywhere or expecting company. She resolved to speak with Clara about it later. She felt comfortable with her already, and the girl seemed to like her.

But this morning, Diana had decided to ask the housekeeper, Mrs. Thomas, to show her around the whole house and tell her everything she needed to know about the management of the day-to-day chores.

She met her in the drawing room, and they began their tour, going first of all to the kitchen.

“His Lordship has a rather plain taste in food, My Lady,” Mrs. Thomas said after she had introduced Diana to the cook and the two kitchen maids, who both seemed so shy that they could barely even look Diana in the eye when she greeted them.

It seemed strange to Diana that she should be intimidating to anyone, but then she supposed that these two young girls would probably not have met many countesses in their time.

“Indeed?” Diana replied. “I am a little surprised by that. His siblings all seem to enjoy a rather exotic selection of foods.”

Mrs. Thomas nodded. “Of course, the Duke and Duchess of Whitewell are rather famed for their dinner parties. But His Lordship has never hosted so much as a soiree in this house. We live rather quietly, and he eats the same things for dinner almost every day. He does not much like change.” She coughed. “But, of course, things will change now that there is a lady in the house, and you must tell me exactly how you would like things to be.”

Diana looked at Mrs. Thomas, whose face was kind and open. Already, she had things in mind that she would like to change

about the house, but she was not sure whether Gabriel would be happy with her plans.

“I wonder, Mrs. Thomas, how to manage the social aspect of our lives. Do you think we should be hosting great parties and balls? I know that is what Society will think we should be doing in our first year of marriage.”

Mrs. Thomas laughed. “His Lordship has sworn that there will never be a ball in this house, and when you see the ballroom, you will understand why that is a crying shame. But perhaps it is best to start a little less ambitiously—perhaps with a small dinner for his siblings and their husbands and wives?”

Diana nodded. “Let us wait a few weeks, and then I will speak to him about it.”

She thought that a quiet family dinner sounded like the perfect way to introduce Gabriel to the idea of hosting guests as a couple, but she knew that to speak of it now would probably be a mistake and only serve to annoy him. It was better to be a little patient about these things.

They left the kitchen and made their way through the dining room and towards the ballroom. As they proceeded through the house, Diana decided to try and find out as much as she could about her new husband from this woman who clearly knew him far better than she did, even though she was only a servant.

“What are the Earl’s favorite foods?” Diana asked, swallowing her embarrassment that she did not even know this most simple of facts about her husband.

“Well, as I said, he likes plain food for his dinners. Soups, meat, and potatoes—that kind of thing. I think it is probably from his army days. You know, they cannot provide great delicacies for the men on the battlefield!” Mrs. Thomas paused and considered for a moment. “He is very fond of pheasant, though, when we can get it. And cake is his favorite thing, of course. He has a sweet tooth.”

“Oh, I did not know that!” Diana said. A thought formed in her mind. Perhaps she could learn to make his favorite cake, as a way of showing that she was sorry for tricking him.

“Yes, the cook often makes puddings and cakes for him when he seems to be particularly glum.”

Diana frowned. It was wonderful that Gabriel’s servants took such good care of him, but she found it interesting that he should be glum sometimes, and that the housekeeper should choose to tell her this. She resolved to store this information in her mind and consider it further when she was alone.

They arrived in the ballroom. It was indeed a grand room, with ornately carved pillars and a high ceiling. But the furniture was all stacked up around the edges of the room and covered with white dust sheets. All the bronze candlesticks were stacked together in one corner, and the room had a neglected, slightly musty feel to it.

“I must confess, My Lady, that we do not do much with this room. The maids are busy enough as it is, and it seems pointless to spend much time cleaning a room that is never used.” Mrs. Thomas coughed, sounding a little embarrassed.

“But, of course, if you wish it, we can turn out the room thoroughly any time that you like.”

Diana shook her head. “No, indeed, I quite agree with you. There is no point in the poor maids wasting their time cleaning a room that no one ever uses. Please, carry on as you have been doing.”

When they reached the front parlor, though, Diana found that she felt a little differently.

“His Lordship does not use this room, My Lady,” Mrs. Thomas explained. “He uses his study when a friend or a business associate comes to visit, and the drawing room on the rare occasion that there are more guests.” She paused. “I suppose that before he moved here, this room was used by the lady of the house. And you may wish to do the same.”

Diana looked around the room. At the moment, it was rather dull and depressing, with only a few upright chairs scattered around, and no pictures on the walls. “I think that I would like to use this room as my private space,” she said slowly. “I would very much value your advice on how to go about redecorating. Do you think you could help me with that?”

Mrs. Thomas smiled delightedly. “I should be delighted, My Lady. Perhaps we could work through some plans tomorrow?”

Diana nodded. “I was wondering if perhaps the groom might be able to show me the stables this afternoon? I should like to go for a ride if there is a suitable horse for me.”

“Of course, My Lady,” Mrs. Thomas replied. “I will go and see to it now, unless there is anything else you want?”

“No, not at all. Perhaps we can tour the upstairs rooms another time.”

“Whatever you wish, My Lady.” Mrs. Thomas bobbed a curtsy and left the room, leaving Diana alone in the parlor.

Diana glanced around the room again, imagining what it might look like with new curtains, some paintings on the walls, and a fire burning merrily in the hearth. She allowed herself a small smile. Perhaps being a countess was not going to be so hard, after all.



A little later, after she had had luncheon alone in the dining room as usual, Diana headed outside to the stables. The groom, whose name was John, was waiting for her, looking a little nervous.

Diana could not help but suppress a chuckle of amusement. It was taking her a while to get used to her new status, and the fact that the staff seemed to find her intimidating was rather entertaining to her. But she resolved, once again, to try to be as approachable as possible. She did not want any of the servants in their employ to feel uncomfortable in her presence.

“Good afternoon, John,” she said cheerfully. “Thank you so much for making time to show me the horses.”



John returned her smile, albeit a little shyly. “It is my pleasure, My Lady. If you’d like to come inside, I can show you all the horses.”

She followed him into the stables, breathing in the warm, horsey smell and feeling herself relax. She had to leave her own horse behind at her uncle’s house, and she had been missing him greatly. She wondered briefly if it would be at all possible for him to be brought here. She resolved that this was another thing she would speak with Gabriel about when she finally saw him. She felt sure that not many more days could pass without her laying eyes on her husband.

The groom took her around the stables, telling her about each horse in great detail. He was quite young, but he clearly took his work very seriously and knew each of the animals in his care very well.

They came to the last stable, and when Diana looked inside, she let out a little gasp. Inside there was a stunning black Arabian horse, standing quietly in his stall.

“This is the horse His Lordship thought might suit you best, My Lady. His name is Prancer.”

Diana could not believe her eyes. She did not think that she had ever seen such a fine animal. “He is beautiful,” she breathed.

“Oh, and he knows it, too!” the groom replied with a chuckle. “He is rather forward-going, though, My Lady. His Lordship thought that you probably would be able to cope with him

perfectly well, but perhaps you'd like me to come with you the first time you ride him?"

Diana considered what he had said for a moment. She was a confident rider, but it would not do any harm to be cautious.

"Perhaps we could just have a little ride now around the grounds of the estate? You can come with me and check that everything is fine before I go any further."

John nodded. "I think that is a very sensible plan, My Lady. Now, if you would like to go back to the house while I get the horses ready, I can call for you when they are ready to go."

"That won't be necessary, John," she replied with a grin. "If you can find me a brush, I'll get this handsome beast ready for tacking up. If we both work together, it will be much quicker."

John looked at her in surprise. "Well, if you are sure, My Lady."

"Quite sure."



Gabriel looked out the window of his study and saw John riding his own dappled mare down the gravel path, followed by Diana, who was riding Prancer in the elegant side-saddle that he had asked John to order for her. He knew that he should still be angry with her for the trick she had pulled on him, but he did not want her to be uncomfortable in his home, and that was why he had ensured that there was a suitable horse for her to ride.

It had been a lucky guess, really, that she was a competent rider, but he was glad that he got that right, at least.

And how perfect she looked on the back of her horse. He felt a strange surge of pride as he watched her riding along. She looked the very picture of a countess. He thought that they were probably heading for the woodland path which skirted the edge of his estate. It was a fine place to ride and would give Diana the perfect opportunity to get to know her new horse.

He wished, for a moment, that it was him riding along next to her. But then he reminded himself of his resolve.

He would give her space, to find her feet as a countess and to slowly find a way to accept her new life, married to a beast like him. The least he could do was make sure that she had a wonderful horse to ride, when he knew that he had committed her to a lifelong, loveless marriage.

## CHAPTER 7



**T**hat night, Diana lay awake in bed, restless. She had been doing her best for days to act like a countess, but also to be kind and approachable to the household servants, and in truth, she was exhausted. But still, she could not drift off to sleep. It was as if her mind was too busy with thoughts to allow her to rest.

And she had not seen Gabriel at all since the evening of their wedding day. Each day, he had left early and come home late, and she had taken all her meals alone. Surely he did not intend for them to live like this forever? She knew that he was never going to love her, but she had imagined that they might form some kind of companionable relationship in due course.

Perhaps he could not forgive her for what she had done. It was a terrible thing, she knew, to have entrapped him the way she had, and when she thought about it now, lying alone in her dark room, she was not surprised that he could not see past it. Perhaps this was how he intended to punish her for forcing his hand into marriage—by making her live a solitary, lonely life.

She had noticed, too, over the last few nights, that there seemed to be an unexpectedly high level of activity in the house during the night. She often heard sounds from downstairs, and footsteps rushing down the corridor outside

her room. It all seemed rather strange to her, but she had not yet had the courage to ask Clara about it.

And tonight, just as she was thinking about it, she heard a loud bang outside her room, followed by a muffled voice, then rapid footsteps moving down the corridor. Enough was enough, she thought, jumping out of bed and wrapping a shawl around her shoulders. If she were to live the rest of her days in this house, she wanted to know why there were people running around dark corridors in the middle of the night.

She threw the door open and shouted, "Who's there!"

The footsteps stopped, and a little way down the corridor, a figure appeared, walking slowly towards her. It was Dennis, Gabriel's valet. He was carrying a large jug that was broken into two pieces in his hands.

"Forgive me, My Lady, I dropped this jug outside your room," he said, looking thoroughly miserable as he admitted what had happened. "I am very sorry if I woke you up."

"Not at all," she replied. "I was not asleep." She looked at him suspiciously. "Please, can you tell me, though? What you are doing up at this time, running around in the dark?"

Dennis frowned and said nothing. Clearly, he was reluctant to reveal whatever secrets were going on in this house. Diana decided that now was the time to play the part of the imperious Countess.

“I insist, as the lady of this house, that you tell me what is happening, Dennis,” she said firmly. “It is not at all usual for the servants to be up at all hours, running down corridors and dropping things. You are not in any trouble, I promise you, but I expect you to tell me the truth.”

Dennis looked at the floor. “His Lordship had a nightmare, that is all, My Lady. I was simply helping him by fetching a jug of water.”

Diana frowned. The whole situation seemed rather strange, but clearly, the young valet was not at fault, and he looked quite terrified as he stood in front of her in the gloomy corridor.

“Very well,” she said, with a nod. “You may go.”

She was about to go back into her room, to try and get some sleep herself, but something held her back. She was worried about Gabriel. Why was he having nightmares? It seemed awful that he should be suffering alone, with only servants to help him. She knew that she was taking a risk, but she decided to go to his room and check on him. He was her husband, after all, even though he seemed to be intent on avoiding her as much as possible.

She crept down the corridor towards his room, her heart pounding with nervous anxiety. What if he turned her away or was angry with her for disturbing him? She forced herself to carry on, though. It did not seem right to leave him to face things alone now that he had a wife.

She reached his bedroom door and knocked quietly, her breaths coming out fast and ragged.

There was no answer. She paused, trying to decide what to do. Perhaps he had gone downstairs, or maybe he had fallen asleep again?

She had come this far, she resolved. She would not go back to her room without checking that he was all right.

She opened the door and saw Gabriel standing next to the bed. He was not wearing a shirt, and she could see his broad chest and strong shoulders in the flickering candlelight. She gasped audibly, she could not help herself. He looked up and stared at her. She saw, then, that the scar on his face went all the way down to his chest.

“What are you doing in here?” he demanded. “Why are you intruding on my private space? Is there to be no peace, now that I am married?”

Only then did she realize that she had been staring at him, too, her eyes wide with amazement, and a feeling that she did not entirely recognize stirring in her chest. She blushed furiously, her cheeks burning with shame, and turned away from him immediately.



Now that Diana's back was turned, Gabriel hurried to pull on his shirt. What on earth did she think she was doing, coming into his room in the middle of the night? He flushed with shame at the thought that she might have heard him crying out in his sleep like a child.

“I am sorry for intruding on you,” she said softly.

He had to strain his ears to hear her, as she was facing the other way. He yanked his shirt over his head.

“You can turn around now,” he said. “I am fully dressed.”

She turned and looked at him, a look of concern on her face. “I heard that you had a nightmare, I was worried about you.”

He shrugged, trying not to let her see his mixed emotions. “It is nothing to worry about, just a nightmare. I was going to take a bath before trying to go back to sleep. That’s why I… um, that’s why I wasn’t fully dressed when you came in.”

She blushed again, and he almost wanted to laugh. It seemed ridiculous that there should be such awkwardness between them when they were husband and wife, but he supposed that was how it had to be between them. She would never want anything more from him, he was sure of that. Especially not now that she had seen the full extent of his disfiguring scar.

“How often do you have these nightmares?” Diana asked.

He didn’t want to tell her that it was almost every night, that he had almost become afraid to go to sleep because of how bad they had become. But he did not want to lie to her about it either.

“Really, it is nothing to worry about,” he repeated, looking at her earnestly. “Please, you should go back to your room now.”



There is no need for you to be awake in the middle of the night.”

She stared at him, a flicker of indignance in her eyes. “I have every right to worry about you. I am your wife, after all, even though you do not treat me as such!”

He frowned. She was right, of course. He did not treat her as his wife, but he had thought that she would prefer it that way.

Her face softened a little as she looked at him closely. “I-I could stay if you think it would help to have someone to talk to?”

He shook his head, a pang of regret in his chest. It was the right thing to do to send her away, he knew it was. “You should go,” he insisted.

“Very well,” she relented. “But I will ask the servants to make you some lavender tea and bring it up for you while you are having your bath. I used to have terrible nightmares after my parents died, and it was the only thing that helped me relax.”

She smiled at him gently again, then turned to leave the room.

He almost called out to her to ask her to stay, but the words would not come. He should not have been so cold towards her, he thought. But now, she left him alone, just as he had asked her to, and he thought that he had never felt more desolate than he did right now.



After having visited the kitchen and arranged for the lavender tea to be made for Gabriel, Diana went back to her room. All the while, she was constantly wondering if she should have insisted on staying with him. But if he wanted to bathe, then she couldn't very well have sat with him, and he had made it quite clear to her that he wanted her to leave.

Obviously, he was having these nightmares often. Otherwise, he would not have evaded the question the way he did. But Diana felt powerless to help him. What could she possibly say to make him feel better? And besides, he clearly didn't want to talk to her about it. Or about anything at all, it seemed.

She felt a wave of despair washing over her as she lay down in her bed and tried to fall asleep. She wondered how Albina was at their uncle's house. She hoped that the risk she had taken and the sacrifice she had made had been worth it and that at least her sister might be able to find happiness sometime in the future.

It was clear to Diana that she was unlikely to find it for herself, here at the Milebur estate.

## CHAPTER 8



**D**iana entered the ballroom at the home of the Duke and Duchess of Vaughan and could not help but smile. She had not been to a ball for some time, and everything here was quite perfect. The room was brightly lit with candles on every surface, and there were grand flower arrangements in each corner. The Duchess, Constance, clearly had a great flare for such things, and the combined effect of the décor was marvelous.

Diana glanced at Gabriel, and as she had expected, he did not look as enthralled as she was to be there.

He took her arm as they entered the room, but she sensed him tensing up when they were announced as the Earl and Countess of Denro. Well, she reflected, as she glanced around the room, she had never imagined that she would be introduced as a countess, and perhaps he had never imagined that he would enter a ballroom with a wife on his arm.

As they walked down the steps and across the ballroom, she noticed groups of people turning to stare at them, and groups of young ladies whispering behind their fans. Even groups of gentlemen, who usually had little time for gossip in her experience, were turning to look at them.

She let out a soft sigh. The scandal had not quite faded yet, it seemed. She felt a surge of frustration that the members of the ton had nothing more important to worry about than a couple of strangers holding hands in a library. But she knew that was the way of things, and there was nothing she could do about it. And, of course, the fact that it would cause a scandal was exactly the reason why she had taken action in the way that she had. It was exactly what she had wanted, and yet, now, she was feeling embarrassed that everyone was staring at her.

She shook her head, trying to push the ridiculous thoughts away. It would do no good at all. The most she could hope for this evening was that she and Gabriel managed to have a reasonably enjoyable evening together.

Since the night she had gone to his room, they had spent a little more time together. He had at least joined her for a few meals, and they had managed to make polite conversation. It was an improvement, albeit a tiny one.

But she knew that he had not wanted to come to the ball. Constance and Michael had called on them one day during the previous week, and it had taken Constance nearly an hour to persuade Gabriel to come. She had insisted, though, saying that everyone would think it very strange if he did not make an appearance with his new bride. Eventually, Gabriel reluctantly agreed.

He had not explained in full to Diana the reasons for not wanting to come to his sister's ball, but she already knew that he did not enjoy balls, and she imagined that he did not like the crowds and the noise. She could not say that she blamed him entirely. They had only been present for a few minutes, and already, she felt rather hot and overwhelmed.

They went and stood rather awkwardly together in a corner. After a few moments, a footman passed them with a tray of champagne, and Gabriel reached out and took two flutes, handing one to Diana.

She smiled and took a grateful sip, enjoying the feeling of the bubbles bursting in her mouth. There were some aspects of a ball, she thought, that were rather enjoyable. Even Gabriel could not deny that.

She looked across the room to see Constance approaching them, beaming happily.

“Ah, I am so glad that you are both here,” Constance said when she reached them. “It would not be the same without all of us here.”

Gabriel scoffed, “I am sure you all had plenty of balls while I was away at war.”

Constance raised an eyebrow. “Indeed, we did, Gabriel, and we missed you and talked about you at each and every one. You must know that.”

He sighed and looked away as if he did not care to think about what had been going on at home while he was away fighting.

Constance turned away from Gabriel and towards Diana. “It is a pleasure to welcome you to our home. I hope it shall be the first of many visits.”

Diana returned her smile. “Thank you so much for inviting us. Your home is so beautiful!”

“Thank you.” Constance smiled. “I hope that you will come in the daytime another time, and we can show you the gardens. And you can meet Alice, too. I am sure she would love to meet her new auntie!”

“I only ever imagined being an auntie to my sister’s children, I must confess,” Diana said quietly, her mind wandering again to Albina.

She was missing her sister more than she had expected, and she felt that pang in her heart again that everything would be worthwhile if her sister found happiness somehow.

Constance looked at her closely. “You must miss your sister very much. Gabriel told me that you lost your parents a few years ago. I imagine that you and your sister became even closer after that.”

Diana nodded. “That is exactly how it was,” she replied. “We were close already, but when our parents died, I felt that I was all that she had, that I was responsible for her happiness.” She paused and tried not to let her feelings overwhelm her.

She had a gnawing fear, which kept returning, that it had all been for nothing, and both she and her sister were destined to end up unhappy.

Constance nodded, a look of understanding in her eyes. “That is how we all feel about Gabriel, too. Our baby brother.” She

glanced lovingly over at him.

Gabriel glared at her. “Less of the baby, please!” There was a hint of laughter in his eyes, though, and it made Diana happy to see it. He turned to face her. “You will see that my siblings persist in treating me as if I am still a child,” he grumbled.

Diana looked at him closely. As was so often the case when speaking with her husband, she could not tell if he was entirely in earnest.

“I suppose it is natural,” she replied carefully. She did not want to seem to be siding with his siblings, but she could see their perspective as an older sister herself. “But of course, you must stand up to them!” she added with a chuckle, hoping that it seemed as if she was on his side, without being too serious.

“It is natural, of course, especially when siblings have lost their parents, to feel protective over one another. That is why we are all so glad that he is settled now with you, Diana,” Constance said.

Diana looked at her, wide-eyed. Could they really be happy that he had married her, after everything that had happened prior to the wedding? Maybe they were just pleased he was married, or they were hoping that their marriage of convenience would grow into something more. Or perhaps Constance was just trying to make her feel better.

Either way, Diana appreciated her words very much. She began to feel rather more at ease as the conversation progressed, but when she looked at Gabriel, she could tell that he was not feeling in the slightest bit relaxed, despite his

loving sister's teasing him. In fact, his shoulders were tense, and his face was stern.

Diana wished she could think of a way to distract him, to make him forget where he was and simply enjoy her company, if only for a few moments.



Gabriel had known from the moment they entered the ballroom that he was not going to enjoy being here this evening. Constance had been insistent about their attendance, but he had agreed to come because he knew that Society would expect him to attend some events with his new wife. And despite everything that had happened, he did not want Diana to think that he did not want to be seen with her.

His brother and sisters threw great balls and parties, and he knew that it mattered very much to Constance that they were in attendance, especially since their marriage was so recent. He had resolved that he would simply get through it, somehow.

But now that he was here, he was beginning to think that it was all going to be too much for him, no matter how hard he tried to hide it. The noise in the room was intense, with a great hubbub of voices ringing in his ears. The musicians were beginning to tune up their instruments, ready for the dancing to begin, and to Gabriel, it sounded like a cacophony. It made him feel incredibly irritable, and as if he did not want to be there at all.

But he knew that he had to go through the motions and pretend to be enjoying himself. He could not bear it if anyone could



tell how he really felt. He did not think he could stand the shame of it.

But almost worse than the noise was the heat and the crowds. Every now and again, someone pushed past them to get to another part of the room or to go and greet an acquaintance. Gabriel felt a surge of irritation every time it happened, even though he knew that it was a normal part of being in a ballroom. Every time someone tried to make conversation with them, he cut them off as quickly as he could. He was just too irritated to make an effort.

He pulled at the cravat around his neck. It was too tight. He could hardly breathe. He loosened it a little and felt slightly better, but still, he had no idea how he was going to get through the next few hours.

Next to him, he could sense Diana looking at him. Now that Constance had wandered off to speak to some of her other guests, it was just him and his wife standing next to one another, with seemingly nothing to say to each other.

He felt sorry for her, really. A woman like her deserved a more dynamic, impressive husband, not the shell of a man he had become. He felt himself becoming more and more morose. He was tempted to go and find some wine. The champagne really was not strong enough to take the edge off. But he realized that was probably not a very good idea.

The dancing had started now, and he realized that Diana was gazing at the dance floor. Constance and Michael were leading the dance, as was their place as the hosts. Also dancing were Levi and Catherine, although he noticed that Neil and Lydia were standing on the edge of the dance floor.

“I wonder if your brother thinks he is too old for dancing now,” Diana commented, with a smile.

Gabriel shook his head. “I doubt that very much. I think that my brother thinks he is immortal. I suspect that he is letting Constance and Michael have their moment as the hosts of the ball.”

Diana nodded. “Of course. I must confess that I have not been to many balls in the last few years. My uncle thought they were a shocking waste of time. No doubt you would agree with him.”

He thought that he heard a note of teasing in her voice, and he found that he rather liked it. “I do not think they are a waste of time for people who enjoy such pursuits, but as you know, it is not the way that I would choose to spend an evening.”

“Do you not at least enjoy the music, though?” Diana asked.

He noticed that her body was swaying slightly in time with the music. Her gown fitted her perfectly, and he wondered whether it was new for the occasion, or something she had brought with her from her previous life before she knew him. He could never ask her such a thing, of course, and he felt almost a little ashamed to have even thought of it.

He cocked his head to the side and tried to focus on the music. It was not easy to filter out the other noise in the room, but he found that if he concentrated, he could do it. And she was right, the music was rather enjoyable. The current dance was a

rather upbeat country dance, and he felt himself beginning to tap his foot in time with the rhythm.

“They do all look as if they are enjoying themselves,” Diana observed.

Gabriel glanced at her shrewdly. “Are you trying to persuade me to ask you to dance, Lady Denro?”

She blushed, and he wondered if she objected to his rather teasing use of her title.

“No, My Lord, of course not,” she protested.

“I was only teasing you,” he whispered, leaning in a little closer to her. “And you know, I think you should start calling me Gabriel, if you wish, rather than *My Lord*. Since we are husband and wife, it would be quite proper.”

She blushed a little as he spoke, and he thought that she really did look very pretty when she blushed. He found her embarrassment rather amusing.

“I know that everyone thought I was an awful beast for not allowing any dancing at our wedding,” he went on, “and I have just realized that you and I have never danced together. That surely cannot be right?”

She looked at him, her eyes sparkling with what he thought was hope. He was rather moved by her open expression.

“Would you like to dance with me, Diana?”

“Only if you are sure you want to,” she replied softly.

“I am sure,” he said.

She nodded, and he took her arm and led her to the dance floor, where a waltz was just beginning.

## CHAPTER 9



**D**iana would not have admitted it to anyone at that moment, but the truth was that she had never danced a waltz with a gentleman before in her life. She knew the steps, having practiced them with her sister many times, even when they were still in the schoolroom, but at the few balls she had attended over the last few Seasons, no one had ever asked her to dance the waltz. She was too tall, too ungainly, she had always imagined.

But now she was about to step onto the dance floor to waltz with her husband, a peer of the realm, and she could feel many pairs of eyes on them as the music began.

Gabriel held her gaze, his hazel eyes twinkling, as he placed his hand on the small of her back. She reached out and placed hers on his shoulder rather hesitantly at first, then they clasped their other hands together and began to move.

It was surprisingly easy, she thought, following his lead. She could not help but feel a little thrill of excitement at the firmness of his muscular shoulder and the feeling of his strong hand on her back, moving her around the dance floor. But she knew that she was reading too much into it. He was only dancing with her to be kind, or to put on a show for the other people in the ballroom, who no doubt expected to see the

elusive Earl dancing with his new bride. It would give them all something to talk about around the breakfast table tomorrow, at least.

She looked at his face, rather closer now to hers than it had ever been before, and the scar on his cheek. She did not find it ugly, far from it. In fact, she hardly noticed it now whenever she saw him when they were at home. But here, in the bright shimmering light of the ballroom, it was somehow more visible, more obvious on his face.

She still thought he was handsome, but she tried to push the thought out of her mind. There were so many things she wanted to say to him, and now, as they moved slowly around the dance floor in time to the music, she decided that it was finally time to speak.

“Gabriel, I have been meaning to say something to you,” she began, her voice trembling slightly with nerves.

“Yes?” he prompted, quirking an eyebrow.

He looked as if he was ready to listen to something other than the most casual of small talk, so she said, “I wanted to thank you for agreeing to marry me, after what happened in the library. I know that you do not trust me, and I do not blame you, but I would like to be your friend. If we are going to live together for the rest of our days, then I think that is the least we can do for each other. What do you think?”

He twirled her around and then pulled her back to him, and she felt her heartbeat accelerating. She could scarcely breathe as she waited for him to answer her.



Gabriel hardly knew where to start, when it came to replying to what his wife had just said to him.

His wife! Just the thought of him having a wife was almost too much for him to comprehend at times. And this strange arrangement that they had found themselves enmeshed in together did not seem to be getting any easier. But she was holding out an olive branch to him now, and he was not going to refuse it.

Should he admit to her, though, that he had never really been angry with her for what she had done in the library? He wondered, sometimes, if he would have done the same for one of his siblings. She had clearly been utterly focused on saving her sister from an unwanted marriage and had not really thought about what would happen next. She obviously had not thought about her own happiness at all. And in many ways, Gabriel admired her for that. It showed how much she cared about her sister, that she would sacrifice herself for her.

But if he told her all that, then perhaps she would get her hopes up, that something might grow between them. That their marriage might even become more like the marriage he imagined she had dreamed of.

No, he could not do that to her. She did not deserve a broken man like him. It was better if she carried on believing that he didn't trust her and that that was the reason he kept his distance.

He swallowed and prepared to answer her question. Why was it so hard to find the right words to say when she was gazing at him expectantly, her sparkling green eyes fixed on his?

“In all honesty, Diana, I do not have any friends. I lost almost everyone I was close to in the war. I have my siblings, of course, but you have seen how much they tease me.” He shrugged, trying to look nonchalant. “I would very much like it if we could try to be friends. It is a very good suggestion, and one that I completely agree with.”

He almost winced at the formality of his words. How ridiculous would it sound to anyone who could hear them talking for a man and a woman to agree to be friends? But it was perhaps better than the cautious coolness that had existed between them until this point. And he had to admit that she was right. It would be much more pleasant to share their home together if they could be open, honest, and friendly with one another.

When she heard his final words, her face lit up with a wide smile, and her eyes shone with happiness. It was like the sun coming out from behind a cloud, Gabriel thought. He felt something twisting in his chest as he looked at her.

She really was beautiful, although he knew that she did not think she was. He had seen her frowning at herself in the mirror when he passed her room that morning, and he had noticed how she stooped a little sometimes as if she was trying to make herself smaller, to hide her height. But now, as she looked up at him, her face beaming, he thought he had never seen anyone more beautiful.

But he forced himself to look away.



The dance was over now, and he led her away from the dance floor. He reminded himself that he must not allow himself to get carried away. He was a scarred monster, and she was only being nice to him out of duty, and because she was lonely.

They would be friends, but no more, and only to make their blighted lives a little easier.



In the carriage on the way home, Diana looked across at Gabriel, who was sitting opposite her and staring out the window into the black night.

They had not stayed late. Diana knew that the dancing would go on for a little longer, and then there would probably be more food, and some of the guests would not leave until it was almost dawn. But she had been able to tell that Gabriel was struggling.

He had not asked her to dance again. Instead, they had sought out the company of his siblings once again, and their lively conversation. But Gabriel had stayed very much on the sidelines. In the end, Diana had feigned a headache, to enable them to leave early, and Gabriel had shot her a grateful glance as if he realized that she was only pretending out of kindness to him.

But he was so hot and cold towards her that she did not know quite what to make of it. There had been a look in his eyes while they had danced together that she had never seen before, and she had thought that perhaps it meant something. But almost immediately, he had looked away.

Perhaps he had remembered at that moment the reality of their situation. It would never be a love match for either of them, not like the marriages of his siblings, who were all so gregarious and confident and so happy in their lives. The best they could hope for was friendship—but at least he agreed to that.

Diana realized that she missed her sister terribly. She desperately wanted to talk to someone about her situation, and Albina was the only person she could fully trust. She resolved to write to her the very next morning and invite her to visit. It was not far from their uncle's house, but Albina would need his permission to visit, and it would be just like Walter to pettishly refuse or make things difficult.

“Gabriel,” Diana said softly, feeling a little unwilling to pull him out of his reverie as he stared out the window.

Gabriel blinked and looked at her. She could tell that he was tired, no doubt from many nights of disturbed sleep.

“Yes?”

“I wanted to ask you something. I would like my sister to come for a visit. Would you permit me to send the carriage to collect her, then take her home again? It is not far, but I fear that my uncle will not allow her to use his carriage.”

Gabriel nodded, looking a little surprised. “Of course, Diana. But you do not need to ask my permission for such things. You are a countess now. You can command things in the household as you see fit.”

“Thank you,” she said, feeling a genuine surge of gratitude in her heart as she looked at him.

Complicated though their situation might be, they were very fortunate in their status in life. Perhaps they could work out a way to make the best of it, after all.



Gabriel stood alone in his chamber, staring out the window. He knew that he should try to sleep, but the fact was that the thought of even getting into his bed was beginning to fill him with dread.

His nightmares were getting worse, there was no doubt about it. And he had run out of ideas to try to make things better.

He thought back to the carriage ride home with Diana. He knew that her situation as a new countess was singular, but he hoped that he had encouraged her to take matters into her own hands as much as she wanted to when it came to managing their household and making decisions. He was almost ashamed that she had felt the need to ask his permission to arrange for her sister to visit.

Was he really such an ogre that she felt she could not simply do as she pleased in that respect?

He had been cold towards her, he knew. The situation they were in could not be ideal for her either. The least he could do was try to help her feel comfortable in her own home.

He vowed to make more of an effort, even though it was uncomfortable for him. He wondered if perhaps she would like to go riding with him. He knew that she had been out with the groom more than once, and although he had been tempted to join them, he had held back, assuming that she would prefer to be alone.

But he felt something shifting between them. She said she wanted them to be friends, so perhaps she wanted them to spend more time together?

He scarcely knew how to navigate their peculiar situation, but he decided that in the morning, at breakfast, he would ask her if she wanted to go riding together. Then, he would see how she responded and act accordingly. There must be some way that they could live contentedly together, he thought.

He glanced a little ruefully at his bed. He knew that he must try to sleep, even though he dreaded it. He only prayed that tonight, for once, he might have some respite from his nightmares.

## CHAPTER 10



“Well, Diana, there is no way that you could not be happy with your new home!” Albina exclaimed, looking around the front parlor.

Diana followed her sister’s gaze, taking in the comfortable room. She had made a few very subtle changes, not wanting to do too much too soon. But the new curtains and cushions made the room a lot more welcoming, and she was pleased with the effect.

“This room is my very own,” Diana said softly. “It is where I spend most of my time when I am not outdoors.”

Albina looked at her a little quizzically. “You mean that the Earl never spends time with you here?”

Diana shook her head. “No, but we-we do spend time together in other parts of the house.” She bit her lip.

She had invited Albina here so that they could talk and she would have someone to confide in about her marriage, but now that the moment was here, she was not sure she wanted to talk about it. She decided to change the subject.

“Tell me, what has been happening at home since I left?” she asked, realizing as soon as she uttered the words out loud that the Milebur estate was her home now, even though it did not yet feel like it.

She wondered how long it would be before she stopped thinking of her uncle’s house as her home, despite how unpleasant it had been to live there.

“Well, there is nothing much to say, except...” Albina paused, her eyes sparkling. “Do you remember me telling you about Lord Longate, whom I met at the Talbots’ ball a few months ago?”

Diana smiled. She did indeed remember her sister’s excitement to have been introduced to the handsome Baron, and to have danced with him and then spent at least an hour conversing with him at the party.

“I do remember him, Albina, of course. Have you seen him again?”

Albina nodded with a shy smile. “I saw him at a dinner party a couple of weeks ago, and then we were both invited to the same card party. I do sometimes wonder if chance is on our side, that we both keep on ending up at the same parties!”

Diana chuckled. “Chance, or the rhythm of the Season,” she quipped. “But either way, I am glad that you keep happening upon one another. And, has anything progressed between you?”

“I can hardly speak of it without getting overexcited,” Albina said, grinning broadly. “I have known since the first moment I met him that he was by far the most handsome, charming gentleman I have ever met, but I had no idea that he felt the same about me!” She blushed prettily, then lowered her voice, even though there was no chance they could be overheard in the privacy of Diana’s front parlor. “He told me at the card party that he likes me, too.”

“Well, that is wonderful news!” Diana gushed, returning her sister’s smile.

Inside, she felt the tiniest pang of envy. But wasn’t this the whole point of everything that she had done, and the reason why she was now married to Gabriel? Otherwise, Albina would have had to marry him, and she would no doubt have been very unhappy. All the sacrifices that Diana had made had led up to this moment, and now her sister was on the verge of securing a love match.

“And has he spoken to our uncle yet?” Diana ventured.

Albina shook her head. “This is my great fear,” she admitted, her face creasing into a worried frown. “He is only a baron, you know. He is the eldest son, but his fortune is not large. We would not be able to live in a large house with lots of servants and a carriage.”

Diana paused for a moment before responding. She was well aware of her own material comforts since she had married Gabriel, but she did not want to be tactless. “There are more important things in life than having a large house and a carriage,” she said softly.

“Oh, I know!” Albina replied earnestly. “And that is just what I said to Benjamin!” She hesitated and giggled. “I mean, Lord Longate. I told him that I do not care, so long as we have enough to live on. A simple life with a man I love is far better than a big house!”

The pang returned and twisted Diana’s heart once more, but she ignored it and plowed on. Her sister’s happiness was more important than her own. That had been her resolve for a long time now.

“Well, I will help you in any way I can,” Diana promised.

She thought that perhaps Gabriel might be able to help, in some way, although she had not the slightest idea how she would broach the subject with him. But if that was what it took to ensure that Albina was able to marry the man she loved, then of course she would take action. It would not be the first time, after all.

“Thank you, Diana!” Albina breathed. “You have done so much for me already. I feel that I should not ask you to do more, but anything you can think of that might enable us to be together... well, I cannot tell you how grateful I would be.”

Diana nodded, her mind whirring. Could she really ask Gabriel to help her sister secure a love match, when their own marriage was such a strange and awkward thing? She would do it, of course she would, but she could not say that she was looking forward to the conversation.



Albina glanced around the room again. “This really is a lovely space, Diana. I love the way the light filters in from the garden. Are you happy here?” She paused. “I mean, really happy?”

Diana hesitated. It was rather a difficult question to answer. “I do not think I ever expected to be really happy, Albina,” she said slowly. “But things have been better over the last few days. We have breakfast together now, most days, and we are going to go riding together tomorrow.”

Albina let out a little gasp of shock. “You mean that you did not even have breakfast together in the first few weeks?”

Diana shook her head. “Things were rather awkward, as I am sure you can imagine. It has not been easy for either of us to get used to the idea of being married to one another.”

Albina sighed. “I am so sorry that you have had to go through this, Diana—and all because of me. Perhaps I should have just agreed to marry the Earl myself.”

“I could never have let that happen,” Diana scoffed. “I knew that you would not have been happy with him.”

“But you are not happy!” Albina cried. “It is not right that I should be looking forward to a happy life with Benjamin if only we can persuade Uncle Walter to allow us to marry, while you are forced to live like this!”

Diana shook her head. “It is not so terrible, you know. Like you said, this is a beautiful house, and I do think that Gabriel

and I are forging a beautiful friendship, too.”

Albina glanced at her a little anxiously. “A friendship? Is that the best you can hope for?”

Diana looked at her sister and saw the worried look on her face. She felt her heart twist, a multitude of confused feelings coursing through her. “You know that I never expected anything when it came to marriage, Albina,” she murmured. “So, perhaps this is better than nothing?”

Albina shook her head. “I do not like to think of you being stuck here with a man who does not even want to have breakfast with you!”

Diana almost laughed. “On the contrary! You know as well as I do that most married couples do not have breakfast together anyway. The wife stays upstairs in her bedroom—it is the privilege of being a married woman. I simply prefer to come downstairs, and now, Gabriel has decided to join me more often. Really, it is rather pleasant.”

“Well, it all sounds rather strained and difficult to me,” Albina huffed. “But I suppose that things will get better with time.”

Diana nodded. “That is just what I am hoping for, too.”

She got to her feet and went to look out the window, thinking about the outing that she and Gabriel had planned for the next day. She had been rather surprised when he mentioned it the previous morning at breakfast time, but pleasantly so.

If he wanted to spend more time with her, then surely that must be a good thing?



The following morning, Gabriel woke up early. He had only slept fitfully that night, but at least, his nightmares had not come to him. He wondered if, perversely, they had stayed away because he was preoccupied with other things.

Today was the day that he and Diana had planned to go for a ride together. He knew that this should not seem like a special event for a married couple, but for them, it was. They had spent precious little time together, up until now, mainly because he had been deliberately avoiding it. But she was right about a friendship being the best way for things to develop, and he knew that the only way to foster it was for them to spend more time together.

Clearly, she wanted nothing more, and he could not blame her. She was beautiful, and he was a scarred monster. She had only become his wife to save her sister from the terrible fate of being married to him, and she was simply trying to make the best of it.

Still, though, his heart stirred with a feeling of excitement at the thought of spending the day with her. And if he wasn't allowed to look forward to spending time with his wife, then things were in a sorry state, indeed.

He called for his valet and took extra care in dressing that morning. He hoped that Diana would enjoy herself in his company today.

## CHAPTER 11



The weather was perfect for a ride, the bright sunshine lighting up the countryside around them, and Gabriel had to admit that things were going well so far.

Diana looked very elegant riding Prancer. He was the perfect choice for her, and Gabriel was glad that he had put so much effort into finding him in those hasty couple of weeks before their wedding, when he had had to get used to the idea of having a wife all of a sudden. It was clear that they were a match made in heaven—a spirited horse for a spirited lady.

Diana had been quiet at first, and he thought that she, too, was a little nervous, but after a while, their conversation had begun to flow more easily. Gabriel found himself telling her a little more about his childhood at the Whitewell estate.

“My siblings have always been very kind to me, of course,” he said. “But because I was the youngest, sometimes I did feel like the odd one out. There is quite a large age gap between myself and Catherine, you know, and an even bigger one between me and Neil.”

Diana nodded. “I can quite imagine how it must have felt.”

He smiled. Somehow, she always managed to make him feel as if what he was saying was both interesting and reasonable at the same time.

“So, I often ended up going to the stables,” he told her. “It was perhaps the only place on my brother’s estate where I felt that I was in charge. My sisters were not terribly interested in riding, apart from as a means to get from one place to another, but it has always been a passion of mine.”

“Were you interested in breeding horses?” Diana asked.

Their horses trotted down the path steadily together as they chatted, and Gabriel found the rhythm of the hooves clopping down the path rather soothing.

“Indeed,” he replied enthusiastically. “I was always interested in horses from a very young age, and as I got older, I began to help the head groom make decisions about which stallions and mares would be chosen for breeding. And then, I was allowed to help with the foals, and eventually to decide which ones we would keep to train ourselves and which ones would be sold.”

Diana looked at him a little admiringly. “You must be very knowledgeable, Gabriel.”

He grinned, feeling unexpectedly pleased by the compliment. “I did learn rather a lot over the years,” he replied. “But I would not consider myself an expert, by any means.”

He paused and looked at her. The cool morning air had brightened her eyes, and her cheeks were rosy with the

exertion of their ride. He could not help but reflect, once again, how pretty she was. He wondered how she had ended up single, practically a spinster. It really was a mystery to him.

“Tell me what else you like to do?” Diana asked.

He paused before replying, feeling rather flattered that she was showing so much interest in him. He thought about his childhood and remembered that when he had not been riding, he had spent much of the rest of his free time in the library.

“I have always been rather an avid reader,” he admitted. “I was very lucky to grow up with access to such an impressive library at Whitewell. I used to read all sorts of books when I was a child, and then, as I grew up, I became more interested in philosophy and history.”

Diana nodded. “Our library at home is not as impressive as yours, I am sure, but I have always enjoyed reading, too—although I suspect my taste is not as sophisticated as yours.” She looked at him a little sheepishly. “I prefer novels, I must confess.”

“And there is no shame in that!” he insisted, then realized that he had not asked her about herself at all. Cursing his rudeness, he cleared his throat. “You must not just let me prattle on about myself, though, Diana,” he added. “I know very little about your life before you came here. Please, do tell me how you and your sister spent your days.”

He regretted mentioning her sister the instant he saw her reaction. A little shadow of pain crossed her face, and he realized how much she must be missing Albina, and perhaps

worrying about her, left alone at home with their awful uncle. But she seemed to compose herself quickly, although he noticed that her hands gripped her horse's reins a little more tightly, her knuckles turning white.

"We had a reasonably happy life, despite my uncle's behavior," Diana began. "We tried to spend as much time outdoors as we could, walking and riding. It was one of the easiest ways to avoid Uncle Walter, as he was not fond of country pursuits. When he was home, he would hide away in his study, plotting and scheming, but we always still felt like it was safer to be out of the house."

Gabriel frowned. "I am sorry that you had to endure that," he said. "I am lucky that I cannot remember much about my own father, but I know that Neil suffered terribly at his hands, and my sisters, too." He paused in thought. "I cannot understand how some men manage to inflict so much suffering on their own families. I hope that I never do that."

Diana glanced at him curiously, and he held her gaze. Her eyes really were the most remarkable shade of green, and the dusting of freckles on her nose was so beautiful that it made his breath catch in his throat.

She looked as if she was about to say something, but then she bit her lip. He realized that perhaps she had thought that he was referring to children of his own—of their own—and sensed the awkwardness of the moment. Of course, that would never happen. What on earth had he been thinking, saying something like that?

He tried to think of something else to say, to bring the conversation back onto safer territory, but his mind went blank.

Fortunately, though, Diana took control of the situation.

“The other thing that we spent a lot of time on was music,” she said in a chatty voice. “I have worked rather hard at the pianoforte over the years, so I think that my playing is passable, and Albina likes to sing. We were lucky to have a wonderful music room, and we spent a lot of time there, practicing and enjoying making music together.”

Gabriel smiled, grateful at her effortless changing of the subject. “I have no great talent for music,” he confessed. “But I do enjoy listening to it very much.”

He had been about to ask her if she would play for him sometime, but he did not want to move too quickly. When the time was right, he would mention it to her.

“And your sister,” he added gently, “I know that you miss her. Do you think she is coping with being at home alone with your uncle?”

Diana frowned. “She is tougher than she seems, but she is rather used to her own way,” she replied. “And I blame myself for that, in some ways. Since our parents’ deaths, I have tried to protect her from some of the harsher realities of life.”

The horses seemed to be tiring a little, so Gabriel suggested allowing them to draw to a halt and giving them the freedom to graze in a nearby hedgerow. He leaned back a little and felt himself relax. Perhaps Diana was about to open up to him a little more about her sister and her worries. He felt a sense of privilege, that she might be about to confide in him.



She cleared her throat and looked at him. “I wanted to speak with you about something regarding Albina, actually.”

He nodded, feeling slightly apprehensive about her request but willing to listen. “I will try to help if I can. I know that the situation for you both, having had to live with your uncle, has not been easy.”

“The truth is that there is a young man she met—a baron—and they have formed an attachment. His name is Lord Longate. Perhaps you know him?”

Gabriel shook his head. “I have stayed away from the ton as much as possible since coming home from the war, so there are many members of the ton whom I do not know at all.”

“I have only met him very briefly myself,” Diana replied. “Before... well...”

“Before you and I got married,” Gabriel finished for her, saving her the embarrassment of having to relive their first meeting in the library and everything that followed.

“Indeed,” she said, nodding gratefully. “I thought that he seemed perfectly respectable, and she really has become very attached to him. She told me yesterday that he returns her feelings, but that he is afraid to speak to our uncle, as he is only a baron and his fortune is small.” She paused. “Now, as you know, the reality of the situation regarding our uncle is that he is likely to refuse any suitor who is not very rich, as he needs to form strong connections with well-established

families to improve his precarious situation, which is almost entirely his own doing.”

Gabriel nodded. He had been entirely unimpressed with Lord Berlock when they had met. Walter was the kind of gentleman for whom Gabriel found it incredibly difficult to feel any respect. But clearly, he had been in a position of power over both sisters. And now, Diana was free from his influence, but Albina was still at his mercy.

“How can I help?” Gabriel asked earnestly. He realized as he said the words out loud that he really did want to help Albina so that he could somehow assuage Diana’s worry for her happiness and well-being.

Diana smiled, her face lighting up. “I had been hoping that you might be able to speak to Uncle Walter if the situation presents itself, and try to persuade him to allow Albina to marry the man she chooses, regardless of his fortune.”

Gabriel nodded slowly. “I will do my best,” he replied.

He looked into her eyes and saw a flicker of sadness there. Perhaps she was thinking about the chances she may have missed, to marry a man she loved, rather than having to settle with him instead?

He tried to force the thoughts out of his mind, but they would not leave him, and a cloud of heaviness enshrouded his heart.

“Shall we ride on?” he asked, aware of the change in the tone of his voice.

“Of course,” she said, sounding a little surprised, but she gathered up her horse’s reins and nudged him forward into a trot.

Gabriel did the same and followed her down the path on his own horse, feeling that something had inexplicably shifted between them in those last few minutes.



Diana felt something change in Gabriel once they had spoken about Albina and her desire to marry Lord Longate. She had known that it would be an awkward conversation, and she had not been looking forward to it, but nonetheless, she knew that it had to happen. He was quiet for a while, but as they rode on together, she sensed him beginning to relax again as she chattered about the weather and the scenery.

She realized, almost by accident, that she was enjoying herself. It was pleasant spending time outdoors with Gabriel, and she liked his company. But while she knew that they were both simply making the best of their situation and that a friendship was the best that she could hope for, she could not help but feel a pang of longing for something more as she watched him sit up straight and tall on his horse as he rode in front of her. She could not deny that she found him handsome, despite his scars.

They paused again to allow the horses to rest, and to drink from a stream that ran alongside the path. The sunshine bounced off the rippling water, and the sound of the water trickling over the stones was rather soothing. They dismounted their horses and stood by the water’s edge.

“The countryside around your estate is really lovely,” Diana observed, looking around and smiling. “It reminds me a little of some woodland where my sister and I used to roam when we were younger. Albina was always rather wild. It was sometimes a little difficult to persuade her to be sensible.”

Gabriel looked at her a little wryly, and she wondered if he was thinking of her rash act in the library, which had led them to where they were now. It could not exactly be called sensible, what she had done. She blushed and looked at the ground.

“Tell me more about it,” he requested.

She took encouragement from his tone and looked up at him, noticing that his eyes were fixed on her, even when she had not been looking in his direction.

“We used to go for walks by the river,” she said. “One day, when the weather was quite windy and wild, I had tried to persuade Albina that we should stay at home, but she insisted on going for a walk. She was wearing one of her favorite hats, and it blew off in the wind.” She laughed at the memory of her sister’s shrieks of indignation. “The hat landed on some driftwood by the water’s edge, and she insisted on climbing down the bank to retrieve it, even though I told her not to. I was worried that she would trip and fall in. And sure enough, she did trip and twist her ankle, so I had to clamber down and rescue her, then walk all the way home with her leaning on my shoulder. We arrived home hours later than we were expected, and our mother was furious!”

Gabriel chuckled. “I think that your sister is rather used to her own way.”

“Indeed.” Diana nodded. “When our parents died, I felt utterly lost. I knew I had to be there for her, to look after her, as our parents would have wanted, but I did not know what to do, did not know how to protect her from our uncle’s scheming.” She looked across to where the horses were drinking. The stream trickled pleasantly over the stones, and a weeping willow tree hung over the water. “It really is very beautiful here,” she said softly.

Gabriel let out a sigh. “I know that I am very fortunate to live here.” He looked a little pensive for a moment. “I never expected to have my own estate. It was rather hard-won, though.”

Diana nodded. She wanted to ask him more about his experiences in the war, but she was a little hesitant. She sensed that he would not want to speak of it, but this was one of the first times he had mentioned it without any prompting.

“It is right that you were rewarded for your service,” she stated simply.

Gabriel shrugged. “I am not so sure about that, really.”

“Was it—” Diana hesitated again. “Was it really so very awful?”

She felt foolish as soon as she said the words out loud, but she did not know what else to say. She could scarcely imagine the things he had experienced.

He looked at her frankly. “It was worse than you can possibly imagine. And my pain was the least worst of it all, really. It is seeing all the pain around you that you can do nothing about. That is the worst thing.”

She nodded. She wanted to say something to comfort him, but she felt that anything she would say would sound facile and empty compared to the depths of despair that he had endured.

“I lost a lot of my regiment on the battlefield. It is the worst thing in the world, not being able to save a comrade, a friend. So, that is why I do not like to talk about the accolades that I received, and the title, and all that. I still feel defeated, even though I came home with an honor.”

“But you were brave, Gabriel—you must have been,” Diana insisted.

He let out a hollow laugh. “Yes, I suppose I was.”

She frowned. “Of course, you were brave. Just look at the scar on your face. You must have suffered greatly.”

“I would prefer not to look at it, in all honesty,” Gabriel said with a soft chuckle. He glanced at her a little tentatively, and she tried to smile reassuringly.

Diana wanted to tell him that it did not matter to her, that she did not mind his scar, but the words were caught in her throat.

“How did it happen?” she asked gently.

“I was trying to save my friend,” he replied. “I was stupid, really. His situation was rather hopeless, there were far too many men attacking from the other side. I tried to pull him out of the way, into safety, but it was too late.”

“Too late to save him?”

“Yes,” he said. “It was too late to save him, and I almost died myself. Every time I see the scar in the mirror, I think of him, and my failure to rescue him.”

Diana could not help herself. She turned to him and reached up to touch his scar while looking deeply into his eyes.



The touch of her fingers on his skin sent a surge of electricity through him. Gabriel looked at her, standing so close to him with her eyes wide and her lips slightly parted.

He could not quite believe what was happening. His heart was pounding in his chest, and he found himself imagining what it would be like to kiss her. He imagined pressing his lips to hers. How would she react?

It seemed so strange to be thinking like this, when just a few weeks ago, he thought that he would never be close to anyone again, that it was safer to keep his distance from everyone around him. And now, here he was, standing in the beautiful morning sunshine with his wife, with her caressing his cheek, almost as if she cared for him.

But surely he must be imagining it?

Diana looked up at him, her eyes fixed on his as she caressed his cheek with her soft fingers. “I am sorry that you have been through so much, Gabriel,” she said softly.

Something churned inside him. It was pity, that was all. Nothing more. How could he have imagined anything else?

He stepped back, and she dropped her hand down to her side, staring at him in surprise.

“Gabriel, are you all right?”

He nodded stiffly. “Of course. I just think that we should be getting back home now. The horses seem tired.”

A look of confusion crossed her face. “But I thought we were planning to ride out for the whole day? I asked the cook to pack us a picnic basket.”

He shook his head. “I should have told you, I do not have time to spend the whole day out riding. I have business to attend to this afternoon.”

He led his horse away from the stream, then mounted and began to head back down the path towards the house.



How stupid he had been to imagine that Diana felt anything more than pity for him. This was why he had resolved a long time ago to never talk about what had happened to him on the battlefield. It only made people feel sorry for him, and he could not bear it—least of all from his own wife.

## CHAPTER 12



A few days later, Diana sat at the dining table, watching as her husband chatted with their dinner guest, Miss Eliza Oakley.

It was the first dinner that they had hosted as a married couple, and Diana had thought at the time that she suggested it that it was a good idea. Eliza and Gabriel were clearly good friends, and Diana liked her, too. She had thought that a quiet dinner at home with just one guest whom Gabriel was so familiar with would be a good way to get him used to the idea of entertaining.

“Do you remember when Levi and Catherine finally announced that they were going to get married, Gabriel?” Eliza asked.

Gabriel nodded. “We all thought that it was never going to happen after they had spent so long pretending to hate each other. Although Constance always says that she knew all along.”

Eliza laughed. “Uncle Levi is so stubborn, and Catherine is not much better. It’s a wonder that they ever admitted to each other that they liked each other.” She turned to Diana. “I’m so

sorry, Diana, that we always end up telling boring stories about our family!”

Diana shook her head. “It’s not boring at all,” she replied. “I like to hear all about it.”

Eliza had tried to involve her in every element of the conversation up until now, but of course, it was hard when they were talking about the past. But Diana knew that they were not trying to exclude her. They were simply reminiscing about things that they both remembered.

“I remember when you first met Levi, Gabriel,” Eliza went on. “He has such a sweet tooth—all he wants to eat is cake. And he could never convince you to try any, until that day when he brought some fruitcake that his cook had made on a visit. Do you remember?”

Diana felt a pang in her heart at the sight of Gabriel’s wide smile in response to Eliza’s question. She did not think she had ever seen him smile so genuinely when he had been alone with her. But Eliza seemed to bring out the best in him somehow.

“Of course!” Gabriel replied. “How could I forget that amazing cake? But I was convinced that I would hate it. I was sure that I did not like the dried fruit in it. But goodness, what a cake it was.” He looked at Diana, almost as if he had only just remembered that she was there. “It really was the best cake imaginable, Diana. It was Levi’s cook’s special recipe. And from that moment on, I have had as much of a sweet tooth as Levi.”

Eliza smiled, too, and turned to Diana. “Are you fond of cake, too?”

Diana nodded, feeling a dip in the energy of the conversation as Gabriel and Eliza both focused their attention on her. She tried to think of something amusing to say but found that she could think of nothing.

“Of course,” was all she could contribute.

Gabriel and Eliza continued to chat about shared memories from their childhood, and Diana felt herself drifting further and further away towards the edge of the conversation. She realized how much she missed her sister, and the familiarity of home, even though they had not always been happy or comfortable with their uncle.

Before their parents passed away, she had had a very happy life, indeed. She wondered, for a desolate moment, if she would ever be as happy again as she had been back then.

She remembered when she had allowed her feelings to take over a few days ago and lifted her hand to caress Gabriel’s face. At first, she had thought that he welcomed the affectionate gesture, but then he had pulled away suddenly, almost as if her hand burned his face. And then, he had declared that they had to go home, to cut short their ride, and she had been unable to quash the sense of disappointment that washed over her as they rode home together, almost in silence.

And now, as she watched him with Eliza, she realized that what she was feeling was jealousy, a feeling that she was not sure she had ever experienced before—at least not like this.

She wanted to be the one to make him smile. She wanted to make him grin more broadly than he ever had before, and to make him chuckle at her jokes. And yet, she could not.

She did not have it within her power to make him happy—not even to make him smile.

The thought of it made her cheeks burn with embarrassment. Theirs had always been a marriage of convenience—an arrangement to save her sister from a loveless marriage and to save both families from scandal. And here she was, allowing herself to imagine that it could turn into something more.

She felt foolish, and she stared at the tablecloth in front of her, hoping that neither of her companions would notice her burning cheeks.



Gabriel glanced over at Diana and saw immediately that the expression on her face had changed. He had sensed earlier that she was finding the conversation a little difficult to follow, since he and Eliza were talking mainly about things that had happened when they were younger. He had tried to steer it back to things that Diana could contribute to, but he had felt her drifting away.

Now, though, she looked quite uncomfortable, with her cheeks flushed a dark red.

“Diana, are you feeling all right?” he asked softly, leaning towards her.

Diana looked up at him, her green eyes fixed on his for a moment. Then, she blinked and looked down at the tablecloth again. "I am perfectly fine, thank you," she replied.

"Diana, I am not sure that you are," he persisted. "You seem to be unwell."

She shook her head and stared up at him. "Please, I do not want to spoil this pleasant evening. I will be fine in a moment. I just felt a little strange for a moment."

Gabriel glanced at Eliza, who had a concerned look on her face.

"I shall take my leave so that Diana can rest," Eliza announced, standing up. "I have stayed too long, as it is."

Gabriel frowned. It was still early. He realized that he had rather been looking forward to playing cards after dinner, but he suddenly felt a little concerned for Diana's health.

"Of course," he replied.

He looked at his wife again, who was sipping a glass of water slowly. He thought that she looked rather pale after her initial flush. Perhaps she was unwell, after all.

After he had accompanied Eliza to the front door and she had departed, he returned to Diana's side. He thought she looked perhaps a little better now, but he was not sure at all what he should do to make her feel better.

“Should I call a physician?” he asked gently.

Diana shook her head. “No, Gabriel. Honestly, there is no need to fuss. I am not ill.” She looked around the dining table, which was designed to seat more than three people and now seemed rather empty with just the two of them. “I am sorry that Eliza felt that she had to leave. I could tell that you were enjoying one another’s company.”

Gabriel wanted to say that he had been enjoying her company, too, but he could not find the words. He still did not know how to speak to his wife, he realized.

“Not at all,” he replied, shaking his head. “It was the best thing for her to leave. There will be many more chances for us to play cards together in the future, and many more dinners, and other such things. You are the Countess now, so you can invite her whenever you like—and anyone else you choose, for that matter.”

She smiled weakly. “I know so little about you, Gabriel,” she said softly. “I wish that you would tell me more about yourself.”

Gabriel looked at her curiously. Did she really want to know more about him? Perhaps she, too, wished for something more than living almost like strangers. But he was still worried about her.

“I will tell you anything you want, Diana, if you will promise to go up to your room and rest.”

She looked at him a little quizzically. “You will have to come with me, in that case.”

He nodded. “Of course.”

They went upstairs together, and before long, Diana was lying on her bed, and Gabriel sat in a chair next to her bed. The situation between them had initially felt rather awkward, but now, Gabriel felt more comfortable somehow. He had to keep reminding himself that it was perfectly normal for a husband and wife to be alone together. They were not doing anything wrong. In fact, it was rather pleasant.

“So, what would you like to know?” he asked, with a slight smile. He could not really imagine that there was anything much about him that she would find interesting, but he wanted to do as she asked.

“Tell me some more about your family,” Diana said. “I know that they are very important to you.” She lay back and rested her head on the pillow, looking at him expectantly.

“Do you not get bored of me talking about my family?” Gabriel asked with a chuckle. “I feel sometimes as if it is all I talk about.”

She shook her head. “Not at all,” she assured. “In fact, I very much enjoy hearing about them.”

“Well, things were not always so happy, you know,” Gabriel said slowly. “Our father could be rather cruel and heartless,



and his treatment of my brother became much worse after our mother's death. In odd moments of insanity, I blamed myself for that, because she died giving birth to me." He paused and bit his lip, realizing that he had never confessed that out loud to anyone else before. "I know that it was not my fault, but as a young child, I thought about it often."

"I am sorry that you were so troubled, Gabriel," Diana murmured.

He shook his head. "We had our difficult moments, but my childhood perhaps was the easiest of all my siblings' because I had them to look after me. It was Neil who suffered the most. He used to be very stern, and very abrupt. When our father died, he found it very hard to get used to the idea of being a duke."

Diana raised an eyebrow. "I cannot imagine that, knowing him even the little bit that I do now."

Gabriel nodded. "He has changed a lot over the years. He has been more like a father figure to me, really, and Lydia like a mother. I have been very lucky to have them as my family."

"And they are all happily married," Diana added.

Gabriel thought he sensed a note of wistfulness in her voice.

"Yes, that is true, although it was not easily won for them," he said. "Initially, Lydia came to Whitewell as a guest at a house party with her sister Isabel. Their father owed some money to Neil when he died, and they were unable to repay it, so Lydia

formed a plan to marry a rich gentleman to settle the debt. But, of course, she and Neil fell in love, and her sister married Ambrose, the Earl of Hertford—Neil’s dear friend.”

“It is a very romantic story,” Diana said.

Gabriel glanced at her. He thought her voice was becoming a little thick with tiredness, and her eyelids looked heavy.

“It is,” he agreed. “You have already heard Catherine and Levi’s story, I know, but Constance and Michael’s tale is perhaps the most intriguing of all. Constance asked Michael to help her learn how to attract gentlemen, as she did not want to end up a spinster. It was rather bold of her, and they ended up falling in love, too.”

“Your siblings have been very lucky,” Diana noted.

There was silence between them for a while. There were so many things that Gabriel wanted to say, but he could not find the words. He could not explain to her that he had never expected to marry, never expected to find happiness, but that somewhere in his heart, at that moment, there was a tiny sliver of hope.

“Gabriel, I am sorry,” she murmured, her voice barely audible in the quiet room.

“What for?” he asked, turning to stare at her. But he saw that her eyes were closed, and she was asleep.

How beautiful she looked, he thought, lying there with her light brown hair fanning across the pillow and her lips slightly parted. He wondered once again how she ended up single after several years out in Society. How could any gentleman look at her and not find her attractive?

He leaned forward and pressed his lips to her cheek, marveling at the warm softness of her skin. His heart was racing, but he drew away and left the room, reflecting once again on what an odd situation he and his wife had found themselves in, entangled in this strange marriage.

## CHAPTER 13



“I must confess that I am rather surprised you agreed to come at all, Gabriel,” Constance said as they took their seats in the box at the opera house.

Gabriel felt a flicker of irritation at his sister’s comment. “You all talk as if I never leave the house at all,” he returned a little peevishly.

Diana glanced at him and smiled as they sat down next to each other, and Gabriel immediately felt better.

They settled into their seats, as did the rest of the family. The box was just about large enough for all of them—Neil, Lydia, Constance, Michael, Gabriel, Diana, Walter, and Albina.

Gabriel was not especially thrilled to see Diana’s uncle there, but Diana had been keen to invite her sister to join them, and their uncle had invited himself along once he found out that Neil had secured a box at the opera house.

Gabriel suspected that the man rather liked the idea of being seen in a box with his grand relations by marriage, but the thought made him cringe. He had hoped to be able to largely

avoid Diana's uncle but was rather frustrated to find him sitting next to him, with Neil on his other side.

Neil exchanged a glance with Gabriel that told him that he was feeling just the same about the unwelcome addition to their group.

"It is a shame that Catherine and Levi could not join us," Constance said from where she was sitting in the row behind them.

Lydia nodded. "She said that she is feeling rather unwell, though. I suspect that she may have another child on the way, although she has not admitted it to me yet."

Constance chuckled softly. "Well, I had thought the same thing," she said. "And how lovely it will be for Theodore and Sally to have a baby brother or sister. But, of course, I am sure she will want to wait a little while before she shares the news, just in case."

Gabriel glanced at Diana and saw that her eyes were trained on the empty stage below. He wondered if she found his siblings' talk of their children difficult. Perhaps she, like most young ladies he knew, had always wanted a family of her own. She was probably thinking that she would never get to experience what Lydia and Constance were talking about.

He had resolved, after the evening when Eliza had come to visit, that he would try harder to be a good husband, even though the situation they found themselves in was so unusual. And the last couple of days had been enjoyable, in fact. They had taken breakfast together, then gone riding each morning.

In the afternoon, Gabriel often had business to attend to, and Diana assured him that she had plenty to keep herself busy.

Gabriel knew that she was making some changes to the house, and he was glad that she felt confident enough to do so in her own home.

Then, they had come together again for dinner and sometimes played a game of cards afterwards in the drawing room. Things were beginning to feel much more comfortable between them, and Gabriel felt a shaft of hope in his heart that things would continue like this in the future.

But here at the opera house, they were about as far away from their calm, domestic setting as possible. He found, though, that he was rather more relaxed than he had expected, despite the heat and the hubbub of noise as they waited for the performance to begin.

Next to him, Walter had leaned back and was trying to get Neil's attention. "Your Grace," he said, his voice persistent even through the buzz of the background noise. "Your Grace!"

Neil, who had been talking to Michael, turned to look at Walter, a flash of irritation crossing his face before he somehow managed to hide it. Gabriel recognized that the duke in Neil was taking over, rather than the man, at that moment.

"Lord Berlock," Neil asked rather absently, "you wish to say something to me?"

Walter smiled, a rather odd, simpering smile. “I wanted to ask for your advice, Your Grace,” he said. “I have been considering making some investments, and I was hoping to discuss them with you. I know that your advice would be most valuable.”

Neil shrugged. “I am not sure that is true. I entrust many of these things to my estate manager these days.” He paused and looked at him with those piercing blue eyes that several years ago many people would have found cold and hard. “But now is not the time to discuss business, Lord Berlock, when we are enjoying the company of family and the pleasures of the opera.”

He turned back to face Michael and picked up their conversation about their children where they had left off, leaving Walter looking rather perturbed.

Gabriel stifled a grin, then turned to Diana. “Are you looking forward to the performance?”

She smiled. “I am, very much! One hears such great things about Mr. Handel, I am very excited to hear his music this evening.”

“I am delighted that we are here together, Diana,” Gabriel said, lowering his voice a little and leaning towards her. “I think that there are many things we can enjoy together, and opera is only one of them.”

She beamed at him, and he felt his heart swell with happiness. Perhaps he could make her happy, after all? He hardly allowed himself to hope.

He could see that she was just about to reply when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He whirled around to see Walter smiling at him with that same leering look he had given Neil earlier.

“My Lord, now that we are family, I am sure I can rely on you for some business advice?” Walter began. “I have been thinking about investing—”

Gabriel felt a surge of irritation coursing through him. He lifted a hand, cutting Walter off before he could continue. “Lord Berlock, I was enjoying talking to my wife. Please, do not interrupt us again.” He turned back to Diana and smiled. “I’m so sorry about that, Diana. Now, remind me, what were we talking about?”



Diana watched with a mix of amazement and amusement as her uncle glared at the back of Gabriel’s head for a moment, then turned away, folding his arms, to face the stage.

The orchestra was tuning up now, and the performance was about to begin. A hush fell over the audience, although there was still a hubbub of noise from the back of the auditorium. Candles were flickering everywhere—on the stage, hanging from the ceiling on enormous chandeliers, and along the edges of the boxes and the tiers of seating.

Diana glanced at Gabriel and felt an unexpected surge of happiness. Even though they could not really talk anymore, now that the performance was about to start, he wanted to converse with her. He silenced her uncle with firm words because he preferred to speak to *her*.



She did not think a gentleman had ever given her such flattering attention before, and she felt protected, somehow, by him as he sat between her and her uncle. She remembered the moment when he had announced that he would marry her, when her uncle was saying all those awful things about her. Of course, she was used to such things, as that was how Walter had always spoken to her since she and her sister started to live with him. But now that she thought back to their conversation, she realized that Gabriel had stood up for her even then, just as he had now.

She glanced at him and gave him a smile. Gabriel met her gaze for a moment and returned her smile, and she saw that it was a true, genuine smile. She wanted to reach over and take his hand, and hold it throughout the performance, but something was still holding her back.

It could not be true, could it, that he was developing any kind of feelings for her other than friendship?

The performance began, and as she watched the singers moving around the stage in their impressive costumes, singing songs of love and passion, she felt that perhaps there was a chance that she might get to experience some of the grand feelings herself, even though she had never imagined that it was possible.

The intermission came after an hour or so, and the occupants of the box stood up. Gabriel suggested that they go and stand in the hallway outside the box for a while, to stretch their legs, and Diana happily agreed, following him out the door and into the more open space.

There were plenty of people milling around already. After all, everyone knew that going to the opera was not just about enjoying the music—it was also about seeing one’s friends and acquaintances in Society, and being seen.

Albina came with them, with Walter following closely behind. “Isn’t it wonderful?” she gushed. She had not been to the opera before, and everything was a new, exciting experience for her.

Diana could not help but smile at her enthusiasm. “I am glad you are enjoying it,” she replied. “What was your favorite part, so far?”

They were discussing the details of the performance when Diana noticed her sister’s attention wavering. Albina seemed to be rather focused on what was going on behind Diana.

Diana turned around to see a group of gentlemen standing a little way away from them, drinking champagne.

Albina’s eyes were sparkling, and her cheeks turned pink.

Diana looked a little more closely at the group of gentlemen and realized that amongst them was Lord Longate, the gentleman to whom Albina had formed an attachment.

“Gabriel,” she whispered, turning to her husband. “That is Lord Longate over there with some of his friends. He is the gentleman I was telling you about.”

Gabriel glanced over. "I was right before, then. We have never met before."

Diana knew that neither she nor Albina could approach the Baron and ask him to join them, and she was hoping that Gabriel would offer, but she noticed that he was looking a little apprehensive now.

She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Gabriel, do you think you could go over and invite him to come and join us? It would be a perfect opportunity for Uncle Walter to meet him."

Diana knew that she was being perhaps a little optimistic, but maybe her uncle would meet Lord Longate and see that he and Albina would be a perfect match.

Gabriel looked a little unsure, but then he nodded. "If you wish, Diana," he said a little stiffly, then walked over to the group of young gentlemen.

As Diana watched him, she noticed the broadness of his shoulders under his jacket and marveled at how upright he held himself. He still moved like a soldier, she thought, although perhaps with a little more softness about him now.

He returned to the group with Lord Longate and performed the introductions.

"Of course, you know Miss Albina," Gabriel said, "and I know that you are also acquainted with my wife, the Countess of Denro."

Diana flushed a little at his use of her title, as she always did. She wondered if she would ever get used to it. In a way, she hoped not. She rather enjoyed the little stir of excitement that she felt in her chest every time he said the words out loud.

“And, Lord Berlock, I do not believe you have met Benjamin Gulliver, the Baron of Longate?” Gabriel went on, turning to Walter. “He is a particular friend of Miss Albina.”

Walter sniffed. “Baron of Longate, eh?” He paused and looked Lord Longate up and down. “I do not think we have met, no.” And with that, he turned away, craning his neck to try and hear what Neil and Michael, who were standing away from him, were saying to each other.

Gabriel frowned but said nothing more.

Diana turned to Lord Longate. “Are you and your companions enjoying the performance, My Lord?”

Lord Longate smiled warmly. “We are enjoying it very much, as I am sure you all are, too.” He glanced a little shyly at Albina. “And it is always such a pleasure to meet one’s friends when out and about.”

Albina smiled prettily at him, and her cheeks flushed a little when he held her gaze.

Diana could not help but find the whole situation rather charming. Her sister was quite clearly in love with this young man, and the feeling seemed to be entirely mutual. But her uncle’s behavior was even worse than usual. Now, he was

trying to interrupt Neil and Michael's conversation again. She glanced at Gabriel and raised an eyebrow.

Gabriel seemed to read her thoughts and took a step towards Walter. "Lord Berlock, do you not wish to further your acquaintance with Lord Longate?" He lowered his voice so that only Walter and Diana would be able to hear what he said next. "I think your behavior is rather rude."

Walter glared at him, aghast, but then glanced at the Baron and seemed to realize that Gabriel was right. "Forgive me," he muttered. "I just wanted to ask His Grace something, but of course, it can wait." He glanced at Albina, who was waving her fan rather fervently in front of her face, then eyed Lord Longate again. "So, do tell me, My Lord, about your estate. Where exactly is it situated?"

Lord Longate coughed. "Well, at present, I am mostly living in town," he replied.

"In town," Walter said slightly scathingly. "How interesting."

Diana jumped in, keen to try to mitigate her uncle's rudeness. "I have often thought how wonderful it would be to live in the middle of London," she commented in as enthusiastic a voice as she could muster.

Diana, Albina, and Lord Longate discussed some of the many diversions of London for a few minutes, while Gabriel stood a little apart from them, seemingly a little reluctant to join in the conversation.

Even though he was being rather taciturn, he had intervened to try and persuade Walter to change his behavior towards Lord Longate, and Diana appreciated that very much. She could not help but reflect, as she looked at him, that she did find him very handsome, indeed.

The thought brought a flush to her cheeks, and she found herself raising her fan to her face to hide her blush from anyone who might care to look at her.

## CHAPTER 14



“**W**e have been so lucky with the weather every time we have gone riding together,” Diana said, smiling happily as they walked down the path together astride their horses.

Gabriel looked up at the clear blue sky above their heads and felt almost as if someone was smiling down on them. She was right that on their rides, which took place several days a week now, it had never rained, and more often than not, there was bright sunshine overhead.

He shook his head, chuckling to himself at his foolish thoughts. He was getting carried away—of course, he was. Theirs was a pleasant friendship, and he was glad of it, but nothing more could ever come out of it. How could it, when he was so scarred and broken, and his wife was such an incredible woman?

Because that was his view of Diana now, he realized. He had watched her at the opera house, gazing at the performers on the stage in wonder, and thought how beautiful she looked, her face lit by soft candlelight and her gown fitting her body perfectly. He had wanted to reach out and take her hand, and he had wanted to kiss her in the carriage on the way back

home, but he had held back. Because he knew that there was no way she could possibly feel the same about him.

The best Gabriel could hope for from her was friendship. He knew that a woman as amazing as Diana could never love someone like him—a broken, scarred man who was a shell of his former self. If she ever knew the whole truth about him, and what he had become since returning from the war, then all she would feel for him was pity.

They walked on to a gateway, where the path ended and open fields lay ahead. Diana leaned down from her horse and deftly opened the gate, before riding through. He followed, then closed the gate behind them.

She looked at him a little mischievously. “I wonder if we should let the horses show us what they can do,” she said. “Perhaps we should have a wager? Who do you think will make it to the other side of the field first? I fancy that Prancer and I shall be the winners!”

Prancer seemed a little restless underneath her, stomping his hooves, and Gabriel suspected that when she had ridden him alone, with only the groom following at a distance for safety, she had already let him loose to gallop across the fields. And he, too, had ridden fast out here alone. But together, up until now, they had not ridden faster than a trot.

He held her gaze, unable to resist the sparkle in her eyes. He knew that it would be much more sensible to turn back and return to the house, perhaps at a trot, but he could see that she was desperate to let go and ride as fast as she could, even if only for a little while.



And who was he to deny his wife such pleasure?

“If you insist, Lady Denro,” he replied with a grin, then moved off on his horse, nudging her into a trot almost immediately, then a rocking canter. He glanced back to see Diana laughing and urging Prancer on with a well-practiced movement of her leg.

She caught up to him quickly, and soon, they were riding along together, their pace increasing all the time. Gabriel enjoyed the feeling of the wind in his hair, and the sight of his wife enjoying herself in the open fields, on her beloved horse that he had chosen for her.

Their pace increased further to the point of a gallop. Diana was riding alongside him, but she sped up even more and overtook him, riding hard and fast ahead of him.

They were going too fast. Diana was going to get hurt. He had to stop her before something terrible happened.

Gabriel felt his chest beginning to tighten and his breathing becoming ragged. He tried to calm himself down, but it was no good. The sense of panic engulfed him. The horses' hooves were too loud. The last time he had heard hoof beats this loud, he had been galloping into battle with his regiment, and so many of them had never returned. Images of the fighting flashed before his eyes as the noise rang in his ears.

Diana was quite ahead of him now. She might not even hear him if he shouted out. But he had to try. He had to do something to protect her from what he was sure would happen next if he took no action.

“Diana!” he shouted as loudly as he could. “Diana!”

He had to fight to make his voice heard over the sound of the horses thundering along.

She turned to look at him, and his heart leaped. She was not even looking where she was going. Surely she would fall! He had been a fool to call out to her and distract her.

“Diana! Stop!” he yelled.

She looked ahead again, and he saw her pulling on the reins deftly to slow Prancer down. The horse clearly was enjoying the run and did not want to stop, but he eventually eased into a jerky trot.

Gabriel watched in horror, though, as Prancer began to rear up. Diana held on tight, her arms wrapped around the horse’s neck as she spoke soothingly to him.

He knew he had to take action. Drawing his own horse to a halt, he dismounted with a thud, the impact echoing through his whole body, from his ankles all the way up to his shoulders.

He shook himself off, then walked calmly towards Prancer, who was still hopping from hoof to hoof. Diana was trying her best to calm him, but it was clear to Gabriel that she was struggling.

He reached out and took the reins, and firmly spoke to the horse, then gently pulled him into a standing position.

“Jump off now, before he starts to rear again!” Gabriel instructed, holding the horse steady so that Diana could dismount safely.

He offered her his hand without even realizing it, and when she took it, he moved towards her. Before he even knew what he was doing, he found that he had wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close to him.

His breaths were coming fast now, but the feeling of her in his arms began to calm him. He could smell her sweet, floral scent and feel the softness of her hair against his cheek.

“Are you all right?” he whispered. “I thought you were about to get hurt.”

Diana pulled away from him for a moment, her hands still on his shoulders, and smiled. “I am fine, Gabriel. Thank you for helping me with the horse.”

He shook his head. “I am a fool. I should not have bought you such a feisty horse. Are you quite sure that there is nothing wrong? He was rearing like a beast possessed!”

He glanced over to where their horses stood calmly, side by side, a little distance away, happily munching on the lush grass of the field. Prancer looked as if he had no recollection whatsoever of the trouble he had just caused.

“Honestly, Gabriel, I am fine,” Diana insisted. “And do not blame the poor horse. It is my riding skills that are at fault. I should not have been going so fast downhill.”

Gabriel remembered the surge of terror that had coursed through him when he thought that she was going to fall. He stared at her, then looked her up and down, trying to spot any sign of injury. “You are quite sure that you are well?” he asked softly. “I should be so devastated if anything happened to you.”

She gazed at him, her green eyes sparkling. Her hands were still on his shoulders, and he sensed her moving closer to him. There was barely any space between them now, and his heart was pounding in his chest.

“Gabriel,” she whispered. “I am fine. All is well.” And then, she raised herself up on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his.



Diana had sensed the tremor in his hands as he held her and had seen the panicked look in his eyes. He looked lost, as if his mind had ventured somewhere far away.

She was glad that she had the courage to kiss him. She had wanted to make him feel better, as it was clear that he was suffering somehow.

His lips felt warm and soft against hers, and as she lifted her hands to caress his face while she kissed him, he wrapped his arms around her waist and began to kiss her back. The kiss was gentle at first but became more fervent, and Diana felt her

breath catch in her throat. Her knees wobbled a little, the strength of her feelings was so powerful.

She leaned into Gabriel and felt him catch his breath in a gasp as their bodies pressed more closely together.

Time seemed to stand still, but after a few more moments, he pulled away from her, then stared into her eyes. She smiled and allowed herself to wonder if this was the beginning of a new stage in their relationship.

“As you can tell, Gabriel, I am perfectly all right,” she said a little playfully.

Up until that moment, his face had been open, and she had thought he seemed calm—perhaps even happy—but in an instant, a shadow clouded his eyes, and he took a step back from her.

“I am sorry for my behavior, Diana,” he said, and she immediately felt the distance he was trying to put between them. He did not even look her in the eye as he spoke. “I should not have reacted like that, with your horse. Please, accept my sincere apology.”

The formality of his tone wounded her. Just when she had thought that they were getting closer, that things had begun to shift between them, he pulled away, and now he seemed even more distant than ever.

Diana did not know how to respond.

He turned and looked at the horses. "We should head home," he said.

Diana thought she could detect a note of sadness in his voice. She could not let their ride together end like this. She had to try and find out what was going on in his head.

"No," she said suddenly, reaching out and grabbing his hand. "Please, Gabriel, do not walk away from me."

Gabriel turned back to face her, an almost desperate look in his eyes. "Diana, we should go home," he repeated. "There is nothing more to say."

She shook her head. "No, I will not accept this, Gabriel. You must talk to me. I am your wife."

He looked at the ground, then back up at her, and then gave the slightest nod, as if he accepted the truth of what she was saying, even if he did not want to.

Diana took a deep breath, unsure now what it was that she wanted to say. "I hear you in the night, Gabriel. I know that you are having nightmares almost every night. No one could miss it. There is such a hubbub in the house as the servants try their best to look after you. Why will you not let me help you?"

He said nothing but simply looked at her a little sadly.

She plowed on, regardless. Now, perhaps, was her only chance to say what was really on her mind. “I have seen you panicking, too, in those moments when things get too much for you. I wish that I could understand what is happening, what you are experiencing in those moments.”

Gabriel shook his head again. “Diana, I cannot talk about it...” he trailed off, and she thought that he looked almost desolate as he looked away, refusing to meet her eyes.

“Gabriel, I am your wife,” she stated firmly. “I am here for you, no matter what, whether you like it or not.”

He smiled a little wryly. “I had never imagined that I would have a wife like you,” he said. “But here you are.”

She nodded. “And I am not going anywhere, so you might as well tell me what’s going on. I will not let this go, Gabriel, I promise you that.”

He met her eyes again, at last. “The truth is, Diana, that I never wanted anyone to see me like this. Especially you.”

“Like what?” She stared at him, not understanding his meaning.

“Like this!” He waved his hand towards the horses, then motioned towards himself again. “What kind of man panics at the sound of horses’ hooves? Or jumps at the sound of a shattering teacup?”

She shook her head. "I do not understand, Gabriel."

He sighed. "Since I came back from the war, I have been having nightmares almost every night. They are so vivid. I dread going to sleep. It is as if I am right there, having to live through it all again, night after night. The sounds, the smells, the pain, and the anguish that we all went through. And I am one of the only one of my friends who survived. I should be grateful, I know, but the suffering never seems to end."

"I did not realize things were so bad for you," Diana murmured, feeling her heart ache for him and all that he was going through every night.

He nodded. "I did not want anyone to know. Some of the servants know, of course, but that is all. I do not want my family to know, and I did not want you to know." He paused and bit his lip, almost as if he was trying to distract himself from his emotional pain. "Loud sounds remind me of gunshots and all the other sudden noises on the battlefield, and I feel like I am right back there, in the middle of the war. I do not know what to do to make it better, but I know that I cannot go on like this." He sighed again. "There, now you know it all."

She nodded. "Thank you for telling me," she said softly.

Her mind was whirring, trying to think of possible solutions to his problems, but then she remembered how he had pulled away from her after their kiss. It seemed that she would never truly know where she stood with him. But at least he had finally confessed to her what was really going on, and she realized that they were closer than ever now. And he had kissed her back, before pulling away.



Something inside her melted a little at the memory of their kiss. She allowed herself to hope that perhaps things might change between them, eventually, and that their marriage would become more like what she had always imagined a marriage to be.

But as she looked at him, she could tell that he did not want to talk anymore.

“You are right, Gabriel, we should go home.”

## CHAPTER 15



**T**here was a shout, then another. Then a volley of gunshots. Gabriel threw himself to the ground, pulling his companion down with him.

*“Stay down!” he shouted, just before his face hit the mud.*

*The sour smell of the soil hit his nostrils, and he kept his lips tightly shut to avoid any of the mud getting into his mouth. Next to him, his companion was still. Too still. He raised his head a tiny bit, to see if he was moving at all. No, there was no movement. None.*

*Another comrade gone. Could he have saved him if he had moved more quickly?*

*He tried to push the thoughts out of his mind. There was no use dwelling on that now. He had to focus on surviving.*

*All around him, gunshots echoed. The air was thick with smoke and the acrid smell of gunpowder. He wanted to run, to find somewhere to hide. But he knew he had to keep fighting. It was his duty, to his country and his men.*

*He forced himself to his knees. A bullet flew past his ear, grazing his skin.*

*Would it never end, this hell that he was in?*

Gabriel awoke, his whole body drenched in sweat. The sheets and his nightshirt were wet, too. He let out a sigh. This nightmare had been even worse than usual. He had felt like he was stuck in eternal torture, never to be free.

And surely he must have shouted out in his sleep. In the darkness of his room, he felt the usual shame creeping over him. A man in his position, unable to get through the night without his nightmares disturbing the whole household. He could scarcely imagine what people would think of him if they knew. What Diana must think now that he had confessed everything to her.

A soft tap sounded at his door. He called out for whoever it was to come in, expecting it to be Dennis, who usually came to him in such situations.

He felt a sense of horror, though, when he looked up to see Diana entering.

“Diana, please, leave me,” he pleaded.

He could not bear for her to see him like this, with his hair drenched in sweat and plastered to his forehead.

She shook her head. "I heard you shouting out, Gabriel," she said softly. "I could not sleep, so I went to the library, and then as I passed your room, I heard you calling out. I did not want you to be alone."

"Dennis will be here soon." Gabriel was aware of the gruffness of his voice as he tried to dismiss her. "He is the one who always comes. Please, I do not want you to see me like this. I am sorry I disturbed you, but you must leave me now."

"No," Diana said firmly, walking towards his bed. "I will not leave you."

She sat on the edge of his bed, and Gabriel let out a sigh. His wife certainly was stubborn, if nothing else. But he had to confess that he was pleased to see her, in spite of all his protests.

They sat quietly for a few moments, and Gabriel was grateful for the peace. After a while, another tap sounded at the door, and Dennis came in. At first, he looked a little surprised to see Diana there, but then he schooled his face into its normal, neutral expression.

"Is there anything I can get for you, My Lord?" Dennis asked.

Gabriel looked up at him from his position on the bed. "I would be most grateful if you could fetch me some lavender tea," he replied.

Dennis nodded. "Of course, My Lord. I will go down to the kitchen straight away and fetch it for you." He bowed and then

withdrew, leaving Gabriel and Diana alone.

Diana smiled at Gabriel, her face glowing and her eyes sparkling. "I am so happy that my suggestion has been helpful to you."

He nodded. "Lavender tea is something of an acquired taste, is it not? But I have gotten used to it now, and it has been most effective in helping me go back to sleep after I have woken up from a nightmare."

"Really, I cannot tell you how pleased I am that it is helping," Diana repeated, and Gabriel felt his heart clench at the earnest look of happiness on her face.

Perhaps she really was beginning to care for him?

He shook his head, trying to push the thoughts out of his mind. It was ridiculous to suppose that a woman like Diana could feel anything more than friendship for a man who was as scarred and damaged as he was.

"I am sorry that you had another nightmare," she said gently. "Do you think there is anything that could be done to stop them?"

Gabriel shrugged. "I do not know. At times, it seems hopeless, I must admit."

He wondered, as he had wondered many times since their ride a few days ago, whether he should even have told her about

his nightmares at all. The shame that he felt at times was extreme. But she was right. She was his wife, and she deserved to know what was going on in her own house in the middle of the night. He only wished that there was something she could do to help stop the nightmares. But, of course, there was nothing anyone could do.

Dennis returned and set Gabriel's tea down on the bedside table, then withdrew.

Gabriel lifted the cup to his lips and took a sip, enjoying the slightly floral flavor that had taken him a while to get used to. He turned to Diana, who was still perched on the edge of his bed. "You do not need to stay with me, Diana. You should go back to bed and try to get some sleep."

She shook her head. "I would prefer to stay with you if you do not object."

He paused, remembering the night she had come into his room unbidden, when he did not even have his shirt on, and how embarrassed he had felt. He had been angry with her then, for intruding on him, but now he felt rather glad of her company, even though he had just tried to persuade her to leave.

He stifled a sigh. His feelings were such a complex mix that he did not know quite what to make of them.

Diana glanced at him. "If you really want me to leave you alone, then I will."

There was a look of hurt in her eyes that Gabriel did not like to see.

He realized that she must have interpreted his sigh as some sort of resistance to her presence. He shook his head. “No, I am happy with you staying, Diana. I just do not want to deny you the opportunity of going back to sleep yourself, just because I am awake. There is no need for you to suffer on my account.”

She smiled. “As I said, I would like to stay.”

He nodded and took another sip of his tea. He thought for a moment, then asked her, “Diana, will you tell me something about your childhood? I have told you all about mine, but I realize that I do not know very much about yours.”

“Of course,” she replied, then shifted her weight a little so that she was more comfortable sitting on the bed.

He felt her body press against his leg through the covers, but he did not move away. Instead, he found that he was rather enjoying the sensation of being close to her.

“What would you like to know?”

He shrugged. “Anything that you would like to tell me.”

She smiled and thought for a moment. “We were a very happy family when my sister and I were growing up. Our mother was caring and loving, and our father worked hard on the estate to

make sure that the land was well cared for and the tenants were all looked after. But we had a lot of fun with him, too, when he was at home with us.”

“And your sister, I am sure that you enjoyed being with her when you were growing up?”

“Yes! Albina is like my best friend and my sister all rolled into one. My family was not as large and lively as yours, but we were very happy.”

Her eyes glazed over a little, and he could sense that she was thinking of her parents’ deaths, and how much life had changed for her and Albina after that. He regretted that he had asked her to remember things that made her sad, but equally, he wanted to know more about her, and about what her life had been like before he met her.

“Tell me more about your mother,” he said softly.

She smiled as if some happy memory just popped into her mind. “Did I ever tell you that she taught me to play the pianoforte?”

He shook his head. “No, you have never told me about that.”

There must be so much more that he did not know about her, he realized. It would take a lifetime to get to know someone fully.



“She was a very proficient player herself, and she started to teach me when I was quite young—much younger than children usually are when they begin to learn to play,” Diana said, her eyes shining as she recounted the memory. “But that way, it was always fun and never a chore, like I think it can be for some young ladies who are taught music by visiting masters.”

Gabriel nodded. “I do rather wish that I had persevered with something like that when I was a child, but all I wanted was to be at the stables, with the horses, or hiding in the library with a book. Neil could never persuade me to do much else.”

Diana grinned. “I can imagine that you were a rather incorrigible boy!”

Gabriel returned her smile. “You would have to ask my siblings about that,” he replied. “I think that, finally, they have started to realize that I am an adult now, and not a child anymore.”

Diana’s face turned serious for a moment. “Your family loves you very much, Gabriel,” she said. “And they respect you. It was clear to me from the moment I first saw you all together.”

Gabriel felt awkward, suddenly, at the earnestness of her speech. He reflected, though, what a good heart she had, and how kind she was to him. After her shocking behavior in the library on that fateful day when they had first met, he would never have imagined how much respect he had for her now.

“I wonder, Diana,” he asked, “if you would consider playing the piano for me?”

She nodded. "Of course, I would love to," she replied. "Perhaps tomorrow, after dinner?"

He shook his head. "I meant now, Diana. Let us go downstairs to the drawing room, and you can play for me now."

## CHAPTER 16



**D**iana shifted a little awkwardly on the bed. She felt nervous all of a sudden as Gabriel looked at her expectantly. It was one thing to play for him in the drawing room after dinner, but another thing to go downstairs in the middle of the night with him.

But she pushed her nerves to the side and stood up. Perhaps it would help him relax if she played some music for him. And then, he might be able to go back to bed and get some sleep. She felt constantly worried that he was not sleeping enough and that it was bad for his health, so she was prepared to do almost anything to help him, even if it made her feel nervous.

“Yes. If you would like that, Gabriel, then of course.”

She turned away as he climbed out of bed, and pulled her shawl around her shoulders. She remembered how mortified he had been when she came into his room and saw him without his shirt on, even though she had not been anywhere near as horrified by his scars as he seemed to think she had been. But she realized that he would perhaps not want her to see him in his nightshirt without a cloak or some other garment over him, and she was keen to give him some privacy for a moment.

In a moment, he was next to her, a cloak draped over his shoulders. “Do you think you will be warm enough downstairs? I can ask Dennis to come and light the fire for us, or one of the other servants, if anyone else is still awake.”

“I will be quite warm enough in my shawl,” she replied. “I would not want to bother the servants when we are choosing to stay up half the night!”

He hesitated at the bedroom door. “Diana, you must go back to bed if you are tired. Please, you do not have to stay up just to humor my whims.”

“I want to play for you, Gabriel, if it will make you happy and perhaps help you go back to sleep,” she insisted. “I am not at all tired.”

It was not entirely true, as she did feel rather tired, but she did not want him to think that she didn’t want to spend time with him. On the contrary, she felt rather flattered that he had asked her to play for him, even though her nerves were increasing now as they went down the stairs and then entered the drawing room.

Gabriel went around the room, lighting all the candles he could find until the room was bathed in a soft glow. He brought a candlestick over to the piano and set it on top.

Diana moved towards the piano and began to look through the pile of sheet music on top. She had played a little since she moved to the Milebur estate, but only when she knew that there was no one else around. For some reason, the idea of playing on this rather grand instrument in Gabriel’s drawing

room—she still thought of it as his drawing room, she realized—made her feel rather anxious.

And now, he was watching her closely, waiting for her to begin to play. She noticed that her hands were trembling. How on earth was she going to manage to play properly when she was so nervous?



Gabriel watched Diana as she leafed through the sheet music and eventually chose something to play, then arranged it on the stand in front of the piano keyboard and sat down on the stool.

The piano in his drawing room did not see much use, apart from when his sisters were visiting. Gabriel knew that he was not at all educated when it came to music, but he enjoyed listening to it nonetheless, and he was looking forward to hearing his wife play. He could not help but notice, though, that she seemed rather nervous. He wondered if she still found him intimidating in some way. He found himself hoping that it would pass soon, and they would become more comfortable with one another.

She began to play, a little tentatively and haltingly at first. He did not know the piece, but it did not matter. He enjoyed it anyway, the lilting melody and gentle rhythm that she somehow drew out of this instrument with her hands.

She faltered and paused for a moment, then started to play again, a little more slowly this time. There was a tiny crease on her forehead, a frown of concentration. Her body swayed ever so slightly as she played, and her eyes were fixed on the sheet music in front of her as she played.

She faltered again, then stopped playing and turned to look at him. "I am making so many mistakes," she said with a sigh of frustration. "I am very out of practice. Please forgive me, Gabriel."

He smiled. "There is nothing to forgive. I know very little about music, you know, so you must assume that I will not even notice any mistakes, and certainly, I do not mind at all. It is just lovely to hear you play."

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw him smile. He looked almost blissful, sitting there, waiting for her to carry on playing. His compliments made her heart soar, and she enjoyed being the reason behind his smiles.

"Well, I shall carry on, then, and we can both pretend that my playing is perfect and free from mistakes."

He leaned against the piano as she played. She finally seemed to begin to relax as she started the piece again. Her lips were parted a little and formed a slight smile.

Gabriel watched her in the candlelight and thought that he had never seen anyone more beautiful in all his life. The memory of their kiss out in the field came back to him, and he felt something stir inside him.

Before he could stop himself, he reached out to touch her face, stroking the soft skin of her cheek.

She stopped playing immediately and turned to stare at him, a look of surprise on her face. He moved closer to her and bent down to kiss her. It was almost as if he was moving automatically, as if there was nothing he could do to stop himself from kissing her.

She gave way to him at first, a little gasp escaping her lips as their kiss deepened. But then, after a moment, she placed her hands on his shoulders and gently pushed him away. She looked at him, her eyes boring into his.

Gabriel felt something inside him lurch. Of course, she would push him away. She may well have kissed him a few days ago, but since then, she had had time to think. She must have realized that it had all been a mistake and should not be repeated.

He stepped back and looked away.

“Gabriel—” she began.

But he could not bear to hear it. He did not want her to say that she did not want to kiss him, that she did not want to be close to him. He had to get out of the room before his emotions overtook him again. And he could not bear to embarrass himself in front of her, yet again.

“We should go back to our rooms,” he said flatly, then turned on his heel and walked out of the room before she could utter another word.

His heart was pounding as he hurried up the stairs and then back to his room. With the door firmly closed behind him, he leaned against the wall and let out a sigh. How could he have been so stupid as to think that she might be falling for him? She must have stopped him from kissing her because she knew that she could never love him.

She was kind and pure, after all, and he knew that she would never lead him to believe in something that could never happen. How could a woman as beautiful and special as her ever love him?

He had been a fool, he told himself. And Diana deserved better than him. Much better.



Diana remained seated on the piano stool after Gabriel left the room. She was almost overwhelmed by shock, at the suddenness of his departure.

She had stopped the kiss only to ask him what it meant to him. Even though she wanted nothing more than to kiss him, she could not bear the many unspoken things between them. It was too hard to live like this, not knowing where she really stood with him or how he felt about her.

But when she pulled away, he had looked at her in horror, before averting his gaze and turning away from her. She knew that she had probably hurt him, but she felt a surge of anger that he had not even allowed her to speak. How were they to properly get to know each other as husband and wife if they did not communicate?



Her mind was whirring with thoughts as she sat there, looking at the black and white keys of the piano in front of her.

She was not even sure why she was so upset. She had never really thought that something more could grow between them, had she? He would never be able to truly forgive her for entrapping him into a marriage that he did not want, she was sure of that. How had she imagined that he might be beginning to feel something for her?

She shook her head and got to her feet. Things could not continue the way they were. She would find a way to speak to her husband, she resolved. She did not know how she was going to find the words to ask him what she wanted to know, but she knew that she must.

She knew that she could not live like this for much longer, under the same roof with a man she was falling for, but who would not be honest with her about his feelings.

## CHAPTER 17



Diana took a deep breath as they walked across the lawn to where all the guests were gathered. A garden party was just about the last thing she felt like doing today, but she knew that Catherine and Levi were excited to be hosting them at the Coltfoot estate, and everyone would wonder what was wrong if they did not attend.

And there was much wrong between Diana and her husband, she acknowledged. He had scarcely spoken to her since the night she had played the piano for him in their drawing room. It was almost like it had been when they first got married, with him going off in the early morning to attend to business, and her spending the days by herself. They had dined together, at least, but the atmosphere between them had been awkward and stilted.

And now, they were about to be greeted by Gabriel's whole family, and they would have to pretend that everything was all right. Diana was not sure if she could bear it, but she knew that she had to try.

Catherine was waiting to greet them, standing next to a marvelous rose bush in full bloom. She was smiling broadly, with Levi at her side. The couple looked a picture of joy.

“Thank you so much for coming!” Catherine gushed.

Levi stepped forward to greet them. “You will probably be wondering why we are throwing such a grand party,” he said softly. “We will make an announcement later on, but we wanted to tell you privately first, Gabriel—and you, too, of course, Diana.” He turned to face his new sister-in-law, smiling.

Diana remembered the conversation between Lydia and Constance when they were at the opera house, and she guessed immediately what was coming.

“We are expecting another child in a few months’ time, so what better excuse to throw a party?” Levi said with a grin.

“Congratulations,” Gabriel uttered, in a rather distracted tone. “But, of course, the Windham siblings are famous for needing very little excuse to throw a party,” he added. He turned to Diana. “I will go and fetch us something to drink. I am rather thirsty after the long carriage ride.”

Diana nodded and watched him walk away, towards a long refreshments table that had been set up on the other side of the croquet lawn.

“Diana, is Gabriel quite all right?” Catherine asked quietly, following Diana’s gaze and watching Gabriel closely. “He seems a little out of sorts.”

Diana paused before answering. She knew that Gabriel would not like it if she shared their problems with his family, so she

held back from telling the full truth. But equally, Catherine's piercing gaze told her that she would not be easily fobbed off.

"I think that he has not been sleeping well," Diana said.

That was true, at least. She did not need to say anything other than that.

"Perhaps he ought to see a physician," Catherine suggested, frowning. "I do worry about him so much."

Levi reached out and took her hand. "Come now, my love, you must not let yourself get anxious about anything. It is not good for you, or the baby. Gabriel is a grown man now. I am sure he is quite capable of deciding for himself whether he needs to see a physician or not."

Catherine nodded. "I am sure you are right." She turned back to Diana. "Come along and meet the children. All the cousins are here, together. Isn't that wonderful!"

The next few minutes were a blur as Diana tried to remember the names of all the Windham siblings' children, who were running around the rose garden happily together.

"That's Bella, the oldest," Catherine said, pointing to a young girl with long blonde hair who seemed to be in charge of the game. "She's ten, and she likes to boss the others around! Her brother, Daniel, is eight. They are Neil and Lydia's children."

Diana nodded. Gabriel had told her all the children's names before, but it helped to see them all together.

“And then, there's our children, Theodore and Sally. Theodore is seven—although he will insist that he's nearly eight if you ask him, even though his birthday is in nine months. And Sally is five.”

“They must be very excited to be having a little brother or sister,” Diana said.

Catherine grinned. “They are very excited about the idea of it. I am not quite sure how they will feel when the baby actually arrives and steals the attention from them!”

“I am sure you will handle it perfectly, Catherine,” Diana said sincerely. “It could not be clearer that you and Levi are wonderful parents.”

Diana felt a strange pang in her heart as she spoke these words, and she looked at the gaggle of children running around, calling out to each other and whooping with glee. The rest of the family would, of course, be expecting her and Gabriel to add to this group of cousins in due course, and she felt sure that that would never happen. They were going to disappoint everyone.

Catherine did not seem to have noticed anything amiss about Diana's response to seeing the children all together, though. “You are so kind!” she replied with a broad smile. “I do not know where Alice has gone, but I expect she is with Constance somewhere. She is only four, and you know that children can be terribly clingy at that age.”

Diana nodded absently. She had no idea, really, what four-year-olds were like in comparison to other slightly older or younger children, and she doubted that she ever would, apart from in relation to her many nieces and nephews.

“Now, Diana, will you excuse me for a moment? I must go and check how things are progressing with the food. I always end up going a little bit too far at these kinds of events, you know. I’m sure there will be far too much food, but I would not like to think of anyone being hungry!”

Diana nodded. “I am quite all right here,” she assured. “I will just wait for Gabriel to come back with our drinks.”

She stood between the rose bushes, watching the children play. She had never really imagined what it would be like to be a mother. It has been clear to her for many years that it was unlikely to be something that she would ever experience for herself. She had thought more about being an aunt to Albina’s children. She had never doubted, for some reason, that Albina would get married and have a family of her own.

And now, here she was, surrounded by happy couples, who between them had produced this wonderful group of offspring. How proud they all must be of their beautiful, vivacious children. And she and Gabriel would be the odd ones out, with their strange marriage, which did not seem to be making either of them happy at the moment.

She looked around the garden, trying to spot Gabriel. She, too, was feeling rather thirsty, and of course, she could have gone to get a drink herself, but she thought that would look rather

pointed, since Gabriel had said that he would go and get one for her himself.

Eventually, she spotted him standing under a tree. He had two glasses of lemonade in his hands, but instead of coming over to her to give her a glass, he was talking to Eliza.

Diana watched them for a few moments, standing with their heads close together. She felt increasingly uncomfortable at the sight of it. He had barely spoken to her for days, but he managed to find something to say to Eliza. She realized after a while that she was jealous.

She could hold back no longer. She walked quickly across the lawn towards them.

“Gabriel, I was wondering where you went,” she said, trying to keep her tone light but aware that her frustration was seeping into her voice.

He turned to look at her. “Oh, Diana, I am sorry. Here’s your drink. I was just chatting with Eliza.”

“I can see that,” Diana replied. “I was rather hoping that you might talk to me.”

Eliza looked between the couple, then smiled a little nervously. “You must excuse me,” she said quickly. “I promised Catherine that I would do what I can to help with the party. I must go and check if she needs anything.”

Diana felt guilty for a moment, aware that she had probably been a little rude to Eliza, but when she turned back to look at Gabriel, her resolve returned. She was sure that Eliza would forget about it soon enough, but she knew that she could not continue much longer with things the way they were between her and her husband. Because he was her husband, after all, even though he did not treat her like his wife.

“I want to talk to you, Gabriel. But you have been avoiding me for days,” she said.

Gabriel handed her a glass of lemonade, and she took a grateful sip. The silence hung heavily between them.

“Perhaps this is not the place, Diana,” he replied carefully, looking around the garden.

She realized that he might be feeling anxious now, amongst the throng of people at the garden party. “Are you all right?” she asked. “Is it too busy for you here? Would you prefer to go inside and find somewhere quiet?”

He frowned. “No, I am perfectly all right,” he snapped. “What is it you wanted to talk to me about?”

She flinched at the sharpness of his tone. But she had come this far, and she did not want to back down now.

“I know that you would prefer not to talk here, but I cannot wait any longer. I promise I will not make a scene and cause you any distress. I just thought that we could talk just as well



here as we can at home. Perhaps better, in fact, as you cannot disappear off to your study for hours at a time.”

He raised an eyebrow, and she wondered if she had been a little too harsh with him. He was clearly on the defensive. But she knew that she had to be honest with him and try to persuade him to be honest with her, too.

“Very well,” Gabriel relented with a sigh. “What is it that you want to talk to me about?”

She lowered her voice a little. She did not want to draw attention to them. Just as Gabriel said, there was enough scandal surrounding their marriage already. But she was determined to say what she needed to say here and now.

“You kissed me in the drawing room the other night, and we need to talk about it.”

He sighed. “I am sorry, Diana. I should not have kissed you. You were right to stop me.”

She looked up at him, her mind awash with confusion. “I stopped you because I wanted to ask you what it meant. I wanted to know if it meant anything to you. That is all. I would not have stopped you if you had been clearer about your feelings.”

She felt strangely vulnerable, speaking to him so openly like this. But she had to know what it was that was creating this distance between them, when she had been so sure that they had been growing closer.

“I am sorry,” Gabriel repeated. “I should not have kissed you. I apologized at the time, as I am sure you remember, but I apologize again now. It should not have happened.”

He was not looking her in the eye as he spoke, and she felt a surge of frustration. Why would he not explain himself properly?

“Gabriel, I do not understand,” she said softly. “I thought—”

She was about to say that she thought he had enjoyed kissing her before when they were out with the horses. But it was simply too mortifying to say out loud. And she realized, then, what it was that was happening here.

He had resolved, finally, that he could not love someone as unattractive as her. Of course, she had always known in her heart that it would come to this. How could it be any other way?

He held her gaze for a second, then looked away, his eyes fixed on a point somewhere over her shoulder.

“We agreed to be friends, Diana,” he said. “You and I both know that our marriage is unconventional, to say the least. We started out in a strange way.”

“And you cannot forgive me for it,” she mumbled. “I do not blame you for that.”

He shook his head. "It is not that. I understand why you did what you did, and in your shoes, I probably would have done the same thing for my siblings. But we had such a strange start, and friendship is a much better outcome than I expected. It is what we agreed on, Diana, so I will not be kissing you again."

Diana tried to calm her breathing, but she felt a lurching sensation in her stomach as he said those last words. Tears pricked her eyes, but she would not give in to them. She would not cry, not here in front of all these people. And not in front of Gabriel either. She could not bear it, for him to see how much his words wounded her.

She forced herself to reply, "I understand, Gabriel. I think that you are quite right. Friendship is the best we can hope for in a situation such as ours."

He held her gaze for a moment, and she thought she saw a trace of sadness in his eyes. But then, she remembered that she had misinterpreted his feelings and his intentions so many times. How could she know now for sure what he was really feeling?

She looked away. "I must ask you to excuse me now," she said, then turned on her heel and walked away.

She did not know where she was even going to go, or whom she was going to speak to, but she knew that she could not stand there next to him, pretending that everything was all right.

She needed to put some distance between them and try to process what he had just said to her. Because right now, her pride was deeply wounded, and she felt too sad to even be able to think straight.



Gabriel watched as his wife walked away. His mind was full of doubts as to whether he had done the right thing. But he knew that he could not let himself get any closer to her. He would only get hurt, he told himself. If he allowed his feelings to develop any further, then there was only pain ahead. She clearly pitied him if she was worried that being at a garden party would make him anxious.

How could any self-respecting woman love a man like him? He had been fooling himself, and it was much better now to be clear about how things had to be between them.

He saw Eliza approaching him a little cautiously.

“Where did Diana go?” she asked.

“I am not sure, I must confess,” he replied.

“I saw her walking away from you. She looked upset. What is going on, Gabriel? You have only been married for a short time. Surely you are not quarreling already?”

He shook his head. “It is not like that. I told you about the circumstances of our marriage already. The whole situation is very strange. We are not like an ordinary married couple.”

Eliza scoffed, “Well, you certainly will never be like an ordinary married couple if you keep upsetting her! What happened?”

Gabriel sighed. He was not about to tell Eliza every detail of what had happened between him and Diana—that would not be right. But perhaps she would understand the situation better if he tried to explain to her a little of what was going on. Perhaps she could even offer him some advice, or some reassurance. Eliza was his oldest friend, after all.

“I told her that we should just concentrate on being friends,” he said.

“Friends?” Eliza spluttered. “But you are married!”

“I know that!” Gabriel huffed. “I am not a total idiot.”

Eliza rolled her eyes. “Well, you could have fooled me,” she drawled. “You told her that you only want to be friends with her, even though you are married. No wonder she is upset!”

“You do not understand, Eliza. The situation between us is complicated. Our marriage can never be like other people’s.”

“I do not think it is anywhere near as complicated as you are choosing to make it,” she retorted. “But all men are fools, it seems.”

Eliza turned on her heel and walked away, leaving Gabriel standing alone. His eyes fell on his nieces and nephews, who were still having the time of their lives, running around in the rose garden. He wished that his life was as simple as theirs.

Would he ever know peace again? He was not sure.

But he felt convinced that he had done the right thing in telling Diana that there could be nothing more than friendship between them. Perhaps she was even a little relieved, he thought. Because he could not expect her to want anything more from him, not now that she knew all his secrets.

She realized now what a broken man he was, so there was no way that she could be harboring any feelings for him. And he would just have to try and manage his own feelings so that things did not get out of hand again.

It was bad enough that he could not control his nightmares. The least he could do was try to control his emotions in broad daylight.

## CHAPTER 18



“I have invited your uncle to come and join us for luncheon today,” Gabriel said, glancing at Diana across the breakfast table.

It was the first time they had breakfast together in a few days. After their conversation at the garden party, Gabriel had slipped back into his old ways of leaving the house early in the morning, to avoid having to see Diana. He knew that it was not right, but things felt so awkward now, he could not help himself. But he needed to tell her that Walter would be joining them for lunch, and he needed to explain to her the reason why. After all, it was not usual for him to invite the man to join them for meals if he could avoid it. He had made no secret of the fact that he did not enjoy the company of Diana’s uncle in the slightest.

Diana looked back at him in surprise. “Very well,” she replied. “Might I ask if there is a particular reason why you have invited him?”

Gabriel nodded. “I am going to speak to him about Albina again, and the prospect of her marriage to Lord Longate.” He paused, hoping that Diana would realize that he was doing this for her, too, as he wanted her to have peace of mind about her sister.

“Oh!” Diana murmured. “Um, thank you. I do not know if it will do any good, but I am grateful to you for trying.”

“I hope that I might have some success, but like you, I am not confident.” He held her gaze. “He is rather a difficult man, I find.”

“Oh, indeed,” Diana replied. “No one knows that more than me. Thank you for making the effort with him.”

Gabriel held her gaze and saw the genuine look in her eyes. He looked away, remembering what he had promised when they were at the garden party. They would be friends and no more. He could not allow himself to feel tempted by any deeper emotions. He was meeting Walter solely to help Albina and the young Baron have their happy ending, and to make Diana’s dream of seeing her sister marry for love come true. That was all there was to it.

He got to his feet. “He will be here shortly before lunch. I will speak to him in my study first. Let us hope it goes well, or we may be in for a rather awkward luncheon.”

He left the room, reflecting that it would not be the first time a meal in his house had been awkward since his wedding, and he suspected that it would not be the last.

A little while later, he found himself sitting opposite Walter in his study. Both men sipped cups of strong coffee.



Walter looked out the window at the fine gardens of the Milebur estate, then turned back to Gabriel. "It is a rather fine estate you have here," he mused, narrowing his eyes. "Far grander than Berlock. I wonder if you have thought any more about whether there are any business connections you could point in my direction. It really is becoming increasingly difficult to make ends meet on the paltry income the estate generates."

Gabriel bit his lip. He knew that he had to keep calm, for the benefit of Albina and Diana, but it was very hard not to react to Walter's obvious probing for opportunities that might benefit him financially.

He shook his head. "I do not know if any of my business connections are looking for new investors or partners," he replied, "but I think it unlikely. Most are well-established in their positions."

Walter scoffed, "Well, how fine it must be for a man to be well-established!"

Gabriel took another sip of his coffee and did not respond for a moment. But he knew that he must proceed with the matter at hand, even though he was almost certain that he was not going to be met with any success.

"I wanted to speak to you again about Longate, actually."

Walter glared at him. "That baron who has his eye on Albina?"

Gabriel flinched at his dismissive tone. “Yes, I meant Lord Longate. He has formed an attachment with Albina.”

“An attachment!” Walter barked. “And why should I care about that?”

“Do you not want your nieces to be happy?” Gabriel asked.

“Happy? Happy does not pay debts, My Lord!” Walter snapped. “I need that girl to marry soon, and to marry well. I had hoped...” He glared at Gabriel but seemed to hold his tongue, for once. “Well, anyway, there is no chance of her marrying that young scoundrel. I have told her I will not allow it.”

Gabriel cleared his throat. “It is very important to Albina that she marries for love. Diana talks about it a lot. Do you really not care at all about her wishes?”

Walter chuckled. “So, you and Diana spend your time talking about love and affection and such nonsense, don’t you?” he said with a sneer. “I thought that you were a man of more sense. But the truth is that I cannot afford to care about her wishes, even if I want to. I have someone else in mind for her to marry. I am just trying to tie up the last few details, but she will be married to the Earl of Pembroke in due course, who I hope will help me regain my position in Society.” He stared at Gabriel, his eyes flashing with anger. “It is the position I deserve!”

Gabriel let out a sigh. He could tell that he was not going to get anywhere with Walter. “Well, I see that you have made

your mind up,” he replied. “But I must tell you that I hugely disapprove of your actions.”

Walter had the audacity to laugh in response to his comment. “Well, you may disapprove as much as you like, My Lord, but it will not change a thing!” He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece behind him. “Now, is it almost time for luncheon? I am hungry, and I am sure that your cook is vastly superior to mine!”

Gabriel stifled a groan. He had almost been hoping that Walter might leave in a fit of anger, but clearly, that was not going to happen, and he and Diana were going to have to put up with him for the duration of the meal.

He only hoped that Walter would not do anything to upset his wife. Even though Gabriel had resolved to try to keep his feelings for her secret, he did not like to see her distressed.



Diana had been able to tell the moment that Gabriel and Walter entered the dining room that the conversation about Albina and Lord Longate had not gone well. Gabriel looked downcast, and Walter seemed even more irritable than usual.

The meal that followed was uncomfortable, with Walter talking continuously about his debts and pressing Gabriel again and again for information about any opportunities that could be advantageous to him. Diana found the whole thing rather excruciating, and when Walter finally left, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Gabriel showed him out, then returned to the dining room. She saw him hesitate as he approached the table and wondered if he had been about to sit down a little closer to her. But he seemed to check himself, then went to sit at the other end of the table.

“I can see that you tried your best, Gabriel,” Diana said softly.

He looked across the table at her, and she thought she could see the frustration and sadness in his eyes. “He is infuriating!”

“I know,” Diana replied. “I do not know what else we can do to try to help Albina.” She let out a sigh.

She really had hoped that Gabriel would be able to persuade Walter to allow the match, but now that she faced the reality of the situation, everything seemed hopeless.

She wished that Gabriel would come and sit closer to her, perhaps even give her a hug, but she knew that he would not. She could sense that he was holding back, keeping her at a distance, just as he had been for the last few days since the garden party. And the subject of the much-desired match between Albina and Lord Longate was always going to be difficult for them both, she suspected.

Perhaps Gabriel wished that he, too, had been able to find a love match, rather than being stuck with a wife with whom he only wanted friendship.

She swallowed, trying to reign in her thoughts. Albina was her priority now, rather than her hopeless musings on her

marriage.

“I’m afraid to tell you that he has another match in mind for Albina,” Gabriel said, looking at her closely.

“Oh!” Diana gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. It was just as she had expected, but even so, it was a shock to hear him say the words out loud. “Did he... did he say who it was?”

“Eventually, he told me the man’s name. It is the Earl of Pembroke,” Gabriel replied. “I do not know him personally, but...”

Diana stared at him. “What is it, Gabriel? Please, tell me the worst of it!”

Gabriel jumped to his feet and rushed around the table, then sat down next to her. He moved as if to take her hand, then pulled back. “He is a lot older than her, and his reputation is not good.”

Diana felt the tears springing to her eyes. “I do not think I can bear it if she has to marry a beast!”

Gabriel was sitting so close to her now, but it felt as if he was a hundred miles away. He gazed into her eyes for a moment, then looked away, his face a picture of confusion.

Diana felt as if her heart was about to break. The news of Albina’s upcoming wedding was bad enough, but the situation

between herself and Gabriel served only to make a bad situation worse.

## CHAPTER 19



**G**abriel jumped off his horse and landed with a thud on the ground, a cloud of dust rising up around him. He handed the reins to the groom, who was waiting beside him.

“Please, can you give her some oats?” he asked, patting his horse’s neck, which was damp with sweat from the long ride to the Whitewell estate. He could have come in his carriage, of course, but he had felt the need for the fresh air and exercise, and a long ride usually made him feel better.

Not today, though. Even after the ride to Neil’s house, he still felt restless and unhappy. It had been several days since the garden party, and he and Diana had barely spoken in that time. The atmosphere at home was strained, and he did not like it one bit.

As he walked out of the stables and towards the front door, he allowed himself to hope that Neil might be able to help him. His brother had never let him down before, so he felt confident that he would be able to offer him some sensible advice. He just had to work out where to start when it came to telling Neil about what was bothering him.

A little while later, Gabriel and Neil were sitting in Neil's comfortable study, with a fire burning in the hearth and glasses of brandy in their hands.

"It is a pleasure to see you, Gabriel," Neil said, taking a sip of his drink. "Since you got married, we have not seen quite so much of one another without all the others being around us."

Gabriel nodded. "I do rather like having the chance for us to chat alone."

He looked at his brother and thought how grateful he was to have had him around when he was growing up. The late Duke had not been a good father, and Neil had suffered greatly at his hands. Gabriel had not felt the loss of their father at all because Neil had shown him such care and devotion.

The two brothers were silent for a while, enjoying the wordless sense of companionship that existed so easily between them.

Eventually, Gabriel cleared his throat. "I wanted to ask your advice about something, Neil."

Neil smiled. "Of course. I will do anything I can to help you, Gabriel." He paused for a moment. "I do sometimes wonder, though, if you need my help at all anymore. You are not a child any longer, you are a fine man in your own right."

Gabriel chuckled. "I think that I will always need your support, Brother."



“And there is no shame in that. None at all,” Neil assured.  
“Tell me what is on your mind.”

“I have been trying to figure out a way of helping Albina, Diana’s sister,” Gabriel began. “There is a gentleman I know that she would like to marry, but Diana was concerned that their uncle would not approve of the match, because the gentleman in question is not wealthy.”

“Ah, yes, the uncle is very much concerned with status and power, I have noticed that,” Neil commented.

“Indeed,” Gabriel agreed. “Diana asked me to put in a good word with her uncle, in support of the gentleman that Albina likes. His name is Benjamin Gulliver. He is the Baron of Longate, but he is not rich. I invited Lord Berlock to join us for luncheon yesterday, and the conversation did not go well.”

“What happened?”

“Well, he is insufferably rude at times, as you know,” Gabriel said, feeling a little ashamed to be speaking badly of a member of his wife’s family, but also knowing full well that Diana would agree with him on his assessment of Walter, especially after the events of the previous day.

Neil nodded. “I was not impressed with his behavior at the opera house.”

“Nor was I,” Gabriel said. “The truth of it is that when I tried to speak to him about it, he was utterly dismissive. He will not consider it at all.” He sighed. “He has another match in mind

for Albina, which will be more financially rewarding for him and provide him with the business connections he is seeking. It seems that he has never been interested in either of his nieces being allowed to marry a man of their choice.”

Neil nodded. “We all know that this is the case in many families. I suppose all you can do is try again the next time you see him?”

“Yes,” Gabriel replied. “I confess I do not enjoy his company at all, but I suppose I must tolerate him, as he often accompanies Albina on her visits, and I would not want to do anything to reduce the amount of time Diana can spend with her sister. I know that she misses her very much since moving to Milebur.”

Gabriel still felt a slight sense of shame that Diana had even felt the need to ask his permission to invite her sister to their home. He hoped that she would always feel at liberty to invite whomever she chose to her own home.

“I will try, too, to persuade him, if I get the chance to speak to him,” Neil promised. “A baron is a perfectly adequate match for Albina. They will be able to live comfortably, although not grandly. And for many couples who have formed a real attachment, the prospect of that is more than enough.”

Gabriel nodded. “Diana is, of course, very keen that Albina is able to marry the man of her choice, rather than being forced into something against her will. She would no doubt prefer a simpler marital arrangement for her sister than the one that she has ended up in herself, I suppose.”

Neil glanced at him curiously but was quiet for a moment, taking another sip of his drink and then setting it down on the small table next to him. Then, he looked at him expectantly, as if waiting for him to continue.

“Neil, why are you looking at me like that?” Gabriel asked a little irritably. He loved his brother deeply, but Neil did have a certain knowing look that he put on occasionally, which Gabriel found extremely annoying.

“I was just wondering how things are going between you and Diana,” Neil said mildly. “The early part of your relationship was rather unconventional, after all.”

Gabriel paused. He was not sure whether he wanted to talk about how things were between him and Diana. He was so confused by his feelings for her, and even more confused by what she felt for him, that he was not even sure he could put it into words.

“I am not sure there is much to say,” he mumbled.

He stood up and took their empty glasses over to the corner table, refilled them, and then returned to his seat.

“Well, you do not have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” Neil said evenly. “But I sense that there is something else you would like to say.”

Gabriel sighed. “I think I am falling in love with her,” he blurted out.

Neil stared at him, then let out a bark of laughter. “Gabriel, you look as if that is the worst thing in the world that could happen to you. But she is your wife! Why should you not be in love with her?”

“I knew you would not understand!” Gabriel huffed.

He got to his feet and went to look out the window. The sun was setting outside, and he realized that he should probably ask Neil if he could stay the night, rather than ride home, especially considering how much brandy he had already had. He would need to send word to Diana, though. He would not want her to be worrying about him.

There it was again. That pang in his heart every time he thought of her. All he wanted was for her to be happy. He realized now how much that mattered to him.

Neil, still seated in his leather armchair, spoke up at last. “Why don’t you try and explain it to me, then, so that I understand?”

Gabriel turned to face him. “I do not want to talk about it if you are going to laugh at me.”

Neil shook his head. “I apologize for laughing at you, Gabriel. But you must admit, it is rather a strange thing for a man to say, in such a despondent tone, that he is falling in love with his own wife. I do not understand why you think that is such a bad thing.”

Gabriel could hold back no longer. “It is awful!” he cried. “I cannot begin to tell you how miserable it is making me. I have

not told you this because I did not want you to worry, but I have been having nightmares since my return from the war, and these awful panic attacks. My heart pounds, and I feel like the world is going to end. I feel like such a fool.”

Neil stared at him in shock. “Why on earth didn’t you tell us, Gabriel? We could perhaps have done something to help you.”

“I did not want to admit it to anyone, not even to you or our sisters,” Gabriel said quietly. “I have been so ashamed of my weakness. And Diana has discovered it!”

“Ah,” Neil said slowly. “I think I can see why you might be worried about that.”

“She pities me!” Gabriel grumbled. “I can tell from the way she talks to me that she thinks I am a pathetic excuse for a man. How could she ever love someone like that?”

“I am sure she does not pity you, Gabriel. Perhaps she feels sorry that you had experiences in the war that have caused you to suffer so much, but that is not the same as pity.”

Gabriel thought for a moment. “Perhaps that is true, but even so. When she looks at me sometimes, I am sure I can see pity in her eyes.”

“I wish you had talked to me about this sooner.” Neil sighed.

Gabriel wondered if perhaps he should have confided in his family. Maybe it would have helped, and his nightmares might

have improved if he had shared his problems more openly. But it was too late for that now.

He turned to his brother and shrugged. “I know that nightmares and panic attacks are quite common amongst soldiers who have been to war,” he said slowly. “I think that many people suffer from this, but we just do not talk about it. And it will never really go away—I know that, too. It is just something that I have to learn to live with.”

“And the reason that you are concerned about your feelings for Diana is because you think that she will not reciprocate them?” Neil asked a little tentatively.

“Of course!” Gabriel snapped, feeling his anger beginning to rise again. This was exactly why he had not wanted to talk about it, even to his brother, but it was too late now. “And how could any woman love me, with this horrible scar on my face? And down half of my body, too?” He turned to face the window again. “Neil, I am not deluded. I know that there is no way she will ever return my feelings. I must simply learn how to control my emotions more effectively. It should not be difficult for someone who has survived a war.”

“I do understand how you feel, Gabriel,” Neil said, “although I can scarcely imagine what you went through in the war. But you must know that love has nothing to do with appearances? And even if you feel that you are broken, or not worthy of love, it may well be that Diana feels quite differently.”

“I cannot believe that is true.” Gabriel shook his head. “She is perfectly nice to me, but there cannot be anything more to it than that.”

He remembered, though, that she had kissed him. Surely that meant something? But that had been before she knew everything, before she knew about his nightmares and his panic attacks.

“I have thought, sometimes, that she might be beginning to feel something for me, too,” he admitted slowly. “But now that I told her about my nightmares and panic attacks, I cannot imagine how she could see past all of that, let alone my scars.”

“Gabriel, you know that my back is covered in scars from when our father used to beat me so savagely for trying to run away?” Neil said.

Gabriel nodded. “Yes, you have told me about it before.”

He knew it was wrong, but he had sometimes felt grateful that his father passed away when he did so that Neil and their sisters did not have to suffer his temper and violence any longer.

“Well, don’t you see? Lydia loves me in spite of my scars. They do not bother her in the slightest because our love is more than skin deep. It is about who we are, and the life we have chosen to build together.” Neil paused and looked into Gabriel’s eyes. “Perhaps love can heal the scars in your mind, too, if you will let it.”

Gabriel sighed. “I cannot believe it,” he repeated. “I just cannot believe that she could love me, and so I have been pushing her away to protect myself from the humiliation of rejection.”

Neil nodded. "I can see why you would do that, but do you not think that you owe it to her to be honest?"

"Well, she was not honest with me in the beginning, was she? She tricked me so that I was forced to marry her."

"I am not sure that she thought you would be forced to marry her, actually," Neil countered. "I think she was simply trying to prevent her sister from marrying you."

Gabriel shrugged. "Either way, she has not always been honest with me."

Even as he said the words to justify his actions, he had a nagging sense that his view of things was not quite right. He knew Diana much better now than when they had first met in the library, and he was not at all convinced that she had meant to trick him, even though it may have seemed like that in the beginning.

Neil looked at him shrewdly. "Well, from what you are telling me, you have not always been honest with her either. Perhaps you should put what has happened behind you and start afresh."

Gabriel took another sip of his brandy and thought hard. "You know, I will have to stay here tonight if you will have me. It is too late to ride home. Perhaps we can send a messenger to Diana so that she knows where I am. But in the morning, I will go home, and I will speak to her about how I feel."



Neil nodded. "I think that is absolutely the right thing to do. And, of course, you may stay."

Gabriel let out a sigh of relief. There was something about the comfort of being here at Whitewell that he missed sometimes, even though he was established at his own estate.

He would allow himself one night to think it all through, and then, in the morning, he would go home and face his wife, and tell her everything.

It was risky, he knew, but they could not go on like this, with so much unspoken between them.

## CHAPTER 20



Gabriel awoke in the morning feeling more refreshed than he had in some time. He still had nightmares, as always, but somehow, he felt better equipped to cope with them, now that he had reached a decision about talking to Diana.

He enjoyed an early breakfast with Neil, then made the journey home on horseback, taking his time and enjoying the scenery as he went. He felt a little anxious about speaking to his wife about his feelings, but he was spurred on by the thought that perhaps they might find some resolution to the impasse they had found themselves at.

He could scarcely allow himself to hope that she would reciprocate his feelings, but somewhere in his heart, he was allowing himself to imagine a scenario where she did, and they could be happy together in a way that he had not thought was possible.

He arrived at his estate and left his horse in the capable hands of his groom, then walked quickly to the house and headed for the breakfast room. He thought that Diana might still be there, and he wanted to see her immediately.

He found the room empty, though, and to his confusion, it did not even look as if anyone had eaten a meal in there that morning. Confused, he looked at the clock on the mantelpiece, wondering if it was earlier than he had realized. But no, it was well into mid-morning. It would be most unusual for Diana to have not come down for breakfast by now. And she never took breakfast in her room.

He wondered, with a wave of worry, whether she was unwell. He went out into the hallway, frantically searching for anyone he could ask about his wife's well-being.

He almost ran into the butler, Davis, in the corridor.

"Where is Diana?" he asked immediately, aware of the note of panic in his voice but not even bothering to try to hide it.

"Good morning, My Lord," Davis said in his usual calm tone. "Her Ladyship left early this morning with a small bag." He paused for a moment. "She seemed to be in a hurry, My Lord."

"Did she say where she was going?" Gabriel demanded.

His heart was pounding in his chest. Where on earth could she have gone so early in the morning?

"She did not, My Lord," Davis replied. "And I did not think it was my place to ask her. I believe she took her horse, but the groom would be able to verify that. Shall I go and check with him?"

Gabriel nodded absently.

The butler hurried off towards the stables, leaving him standing alone in the hall.

Gabriel paused for a moment, his mind racing. Had she left him perhaps to go back to her uncle's? Or perhaps she had some other place in mind where she could start a new life? His heart sank at the thought of her being so unhappy with him. But then, what had he expected? It was just as he had tried to explain to Neil. How could a woman as wonderful as Diana possibly have any feelings for a man like him? And now he had pushed her away, with his harsh attitude and his coldness towards her.

He resolved, though, that he would not stand around idly, waiting for someone to tell him something. He had to try and find out where his wife had gone, if she was safe, and what on earth was going on. And perhaps, if he managed to go find her and catch up with her, he might be able to persuade her to come back to him.

He ran up the stairs and down the corridor towards Diana's room, then threw the door open. He was not expecting to find her in there, of course, but he still felt a stab of disappointment when he did not see her sitting at her dressing table. Instead, her lady's maid, Clara, was standing in front of the wardrobe.

Upon hearing the door swing open, she whirled around. "Oh, My Lord!" she gasped, looking at him in surprise. "I am sorry, I was not expecting anyone. I was just trying to tidy Her Ladyship's clothes..." she trailed off, and she stared at the floor.

“Clara, do not apologize,” he said gently, moving towards her. “You have done nothing wrong. I was looking for Diana, although Davis says that she left early this morning. Do you know anything about it?”

Clara looked a little awkward, and for a moment, Gabriel thought that she was not going to tell him anything, but then she cleared her throat. “A letter came early this morning, My Lord. As soon as she opened it and read it, she told me to pack her a bag, and then she was off, quick as anything!”

“But where did she go?” Gabriel cried. He turned to look at Diana’s writing desk in the corner of the room. “Is the letter still here, or did she take it with her?”

Clara frowned and then reached into her apron pocket. “I kept the letter, My Lord,” she replied, handing him an envelope. “I thought it might be important.”

“You did very well,” Gabriel said in as calm a tone as he could muster, even though he wanted to tear the letter from her hands and read it immediately. “You may leave now.”

Clara curtsied and left the room, leaving Gabriel alone with the letter in his hand.

He stared at it, feeling almost afraid to read it. But he had to find out the truth. He opened it and saw that it was from Albina.

*My dear sister,*

*Before I say anything, I must beg your forgiveness for what I am about to do. I know that our family has been through more than enough scandals already, but I cannot think of another way to escape my fate.*

*Uncle Walter has refused to give permission for Benjamin and me to marry. Oh, Diana, I love him so much, it is beyond what I ever could have imagined! I cannot bear the thought of a life without him. You will think it is shocking, I know, but we are going to elope. I do not feel that I have another choice, unless I want to be miserable for the rest of my days, and I know that you would not wish that for me, in spite of all the trouble that I know it will cause for us to take this course of action.*

*We are going to Gretna Green. Would you join us? We can start a new life, far away from here. You can live with us when we are married, and you will not have to contend with your unhappy marriage anymore.*

*I have been feeling so guilty that you had to marry someone you did not love to save me, and this is a way that you can escape. I know that you are not happy, and I am so sorry for it. Please, Diana, consider it. You can be free, and we would love to have you with us.*

The letter ended with details of the route that Albina and Benjamin planned to take on their journey to Gretna Green, and a suggestion of an inn where they could all meet later that day which was on their way.

Gabriel could scarcely believe what he was reading. Albina and Benjamin eloping! He had thought that Diana's younger sister was perhaps a little too used to getting her own way, but he had not thought that she would go to such lengths to get what she wanted.

But then, he remembered the young man they had met at the opera house, and how the two of them had looked at each other. Why should they not be together, even though Walter disapproved? Why should he get to decide whom Albina should marry?

All of a sudden, the whole situation seemed wrong. Everything about the way that Society viewed marriage was wrong.

Gabriel felt a twinge of guilt that his efforts to persuade Walter to approve of the match had fallen on deaf ears. But the truth of the matter was that Walter was only interested in money and status, and Benjamin did not have enough of either to satisfy his greed.

Walter had tried to use both his nieces as pawns in his quest for power and wealth, and it was clear to Gabriel that he would stop at nothing to force Albina to marry someone of his choosing, for his own gain.

It was quite right, then, Gabriel thought, that Albina had taken matters into her own hands. He was rather surprised at himself for thinking this, but he felt, now more than ever, that happiness in marriage was something important—vital, in fact—and it should be fought for.

But Diana had abandoned him, or so it seemed. Perhaps she was attracted by Albina's suggestion of a new life without him? He could not blame her for feeling like this, after everything that had happened between them. And he had always suspected that she did not really want to be with him, for who could really want to be with a man as broken as him?

But perhaps there was a chance, still. And the love and courage that Albina and Benjamin were showing spurred him on. He would fight for his marriage, too, he resolved.

He paced up and down the room, thoughts flying around in his mind. Diana may have abandoned him out of despair. Or she might be angry with him because of the way he had behaved towards her. But he would not let her go. He would find her and confess his love for her, and then if she still wanted to leave him, he would let her go.

He had tried to push her away, though. He could not deny that. He only had himself to blame for her leaving him. But there were so many times already when he had done that, and she had refused to stay away. That first night when she had come into his room, when he had heard the servants coming to him, he had told her to leave, but she had refused. And even when he had refused to have breakfast with her, refused to talk to her, she had kept on trying.

And then, on the day of that horse riding excursion, when he had told her the truth about his nightmares, she had not judged him or laughed at him, even though he knew that is what many young ladies would have done. He had truly believed that she was developing feelings for him, but he had kept her at arm's length, and still, at the garden party, she had tried to talk to him.

Perhaps it was that final rejection that had pushed her away. She had been brave enough to speak to him, brave enough to approach him when he was engaged in easy conversation with Eliza. And he had been too much of a fool to respect her efforts to build something with him. He had been foolish,



indeed, and he knew that he had much to do to regain her trust, if he could even persuade her to return home with him.

His heart was awash with feelings of hope and trepidation as he ran back downstairs and out to the stables. Sure enough, the groom confirmed that Prancer was gone. So, Diana must have ridden to the inn to meet her sister. He felt a momentary surge of relief that at least he knew where she had gone, but there was still so much to resolve.

Gabriel gave the orders for his own horse to be readied, then paced up and down outside the stables while he waited. He knew that he only had one option, and that was to go after his wife. He would tell her how he felt and then let her decide whether she wanted to come back to Milebur with him.

The decision had to be hers and hers alone. He did not want either Diana or her sister to be forced to live in marriages they did not want, with men they did not love.

His heart cracked a little at the thought that she might want to part from him. He realized now the full depth of his feelings for her. All he could do was pray that he caught up with her in time. She might already be on her way to Gretna Green by now, with Albina and Benjamin.

If they had already left the inn, then he might never catch up with her. He would ride as hard as he could and hope against hope that it was not too late.

## CHAPTER 21



**D**iana had ridden hard all the way to the inn where Albina and Benjamin were waiting for her. Her mind had been racing for the whole duration of the journey, and as she jumped off her horse at the stables of the inn and handed the reins over to the stableboy, her heart was pounding with anxiety.

She had known the moment she had read Albina's letter that she had no choice but to go after her. The situation was parlous, to say the least. She wondered now, though, whether she should have left a note for Gabriel, or waited until he came home before leaving. But she had felt that there was not a moment to lose, and in her heart, she wondered if Gabriel would even mind that she had left.

Since the garden party, they had barely spoken. She was not sure if he would even miss her. And she would be back soon, in any case. She was not abandoning him. All she was doing was going after her sister, to see if she could unravel this mess that she had embroiled herself in.

She entered the inn, forcing herself to take deep breaths, to try and ease her anxiety. She had to keep calm for her sister's sake. There was so much at stake, and it was crucial that they found a resolution somehow to the situation.

She found Albina in a private room upstairs, sitting at a table with Benjamin. She tried not to be shocked at the sight of her sister alone in a room with a gentleman. She had been expecting it, of course, but the reality of the situation hit her hard when she entered the room.

“You came!” Albina cried, jumping up from her chair and rushing over to embrace Diana.

Diana pulled away and glared at her sister. “How could I possibly have not come, Albina?”

Albina looked at the ground, blushing. “I know it is shocking, what we have done, but honestly, Diana, I felt that I did not have a choice!”

Diana shook her head. “There is always a choice.” She turned to face Benjamin, who had also stood to greet her. “Lord Longate,” she said, “I would love to say that it is a pleasure to see you, but the situation is a little more complicated than that.”

He nodded. “I do realize that, Lady Denro. I wanted to do everything properly, you know, but the situation with your uncle made that impossible.”

Diana sighed. “Tell me what has happened,” she said softly. “From the beginning.”

“Well, you know the beginning of the story, Diana!” Albina said a little sharply. “Benjamin and I met at a ball, and we fell

in love!”

“Yes, I know that,” Diana replied. “But what happened when you spoke to Uncle Walter about it?”

“I called on him a few days ago,” Benjamin said. “Like I said, I wanted to do everything properly. I wanted to marry Albina with his permission. Obviously, that would have been the best solution for everyone. But he refused to even consider it.”

“It is all about the money, of course,” Albina huffed. “As if that is the most important thing in the world!”

“It is of some significance, Albina,” Diana reasoned. “One must have something to live on.”

“I assure you, Lady Denro, that my income is sufficient to keep us comfortable when we are married,” Benjamin said, his cheeks reddening a little.

Diana felt a stab of sympathy for him. Clearly, he had tried to do the right thing but had not been able to persuade Walter to see past his modest income.

“I know that, Lord Longate,” she said gently. “I know that you would not consider marrying if you could not afford it.”

Benjamin shook his head. “I just want to do the right thing, but he would not consider it at all. I only wish that I had a bigger income, and then I could perhaps have persuaded him.”

“I am not sure he would have agreed to it even then,” Albina said, glancing over at him. “He does not care about me being happy. All he cares about is money.”

Benjamin nodded. “He said that he would never consider allowing Albina to marry me and that I should forget all about it and never see her again.” He paused and looked at Albina lovingly. “I could never agree to that, of course. I could not bear to live without her.”

Diana could not help but smile at the young man’s romantic words. He clearly loved her sister and wanted the best for her, but she was still anxious about the idea of them eloping.

“I think you should reconsider going to Gretna Green,” she advised as firmly as she could manage.

Albina stared at her. “But what other option do we have?”

Diana shrugged. “We could try again to persuade Uncle Walter? Gabriel has already tried, but I can ask him to speak to him again, and perhaps Neil, too—the Duke of Whitewell, my brother-in-law?”

“It’s no use!” Albina cried. “He will not give us his permission. He is desperate for money, it seems, and he wants to use me as a bargaining chip. He will not be persuaded otherwise.”

“But there will be such a scandal if you elope,” Diana cautioned.

She could not help but think of Gabriel and his family, and the impact that it could have on them, too, if a family connection was embroiled in such a scandal. There would be gossip about it for months, and it might even impact Neil and Gabriel's business interests, and Levi's and Michael's, too.

The thought of Gabriel made her heart tighten. When she saw the way that Albina and Benjamin looked at each other, she could not help but feel a flicker of jealousy. She wanted Gabriel to look at her like that. She remembered the moment he had kissed her in the drawing room, the night she had played the piano for him. In that split second before their lips met, he had looked at her in a similar way, and it had made her heart swell.

She realized now that she wanted more of those looks. But he had pushed her away and told her that he only wanted them to be friends, and nothing more. It seemed that she would never experience the love that Albina and Benjamin shared.

“Diana, you cannot stop us!” Albina declared. “We will leave right away. You do not need to come with us. I only offered you the chance because I thought that you wanted to escape your marriage.”

Diana shook her head. “I will not abandon my marriage, no matter what,” she said firmly. “But this is not about me. This is about the two of you, and whether there is any way that we can manage the situation so that you can be together, but without scandal.”

“If I go home, Uncle Walter will make me marry some awful old man!” Albina protested, her eyes filling with tears. “I cannot bear it!”

Diana had hoped, somehow, that what Gabriel had told her about the Earl of Pembroke had not been true, or that Walter might not have finalized the arrangement. But it seemed that was not the case.

Benjamin cleared his throat. “This is why the situation is so desperate. He has already chosen a husband for Albina,” he explained. “He told me when I went to call on him that he is an earl with a very large fortune. Lord Berlock clearly thinks that the match would be advantageous to him. I tried to persuade him against it, I really did. I tried to get him to think of Albina’s happiness, but to no avail.”

Diana remembered her sister’s distress at the idea of having to marry Gabriel. This situation was ten times worse. At least Gabriel would have been kind to her, she thought. But they knew nothing about this man, this earl whom Walter wanted Albina to marry, and Gabriel had said that he had a bad reputation. And Walter’s greed knew no bounds. He would not care what sort of man the Earl was. He would only be interested in the benefits that Albina’s marriage could bring to him.

The situation was hopeless, it seemed.

Albina wiped her eyes. “I did not want to do it without your blessing, Diana, but I *will* if I have to.”

Diana turned to Benjamin. “And you would go through with it, too, even if I said that I did not want you to?”

Benjamin nodded. “I am sorry, Lady Denro. I know that it is a shocking thing, but I cannot stand by and allow Albina to be forced into marrying someone she does not love, when I know that I could make her happy.”

Diana realized at that moment that she had to agree. There really was no other option. The situation was just the same as when their uncle had wanted Albina to marry Gabriel, except there was nothing she could do to stop it.

The whole point of her actions, then, had been to try to stop Albina from having to marry someone she did not love. Her priority had always been Albina, and nothing had changed. Her sister being able to marry for love was one of the most important things to her in the world. And she had a chance now—a chance that Diana herself had never had.

“I see that I have no other option than to allow you to go,” Diana relented. “In fact, it is not even a matter of permission, since you are both saying that you will go anyway. But I give you my blessing.”

“And will you come with us?” Albina asked, her eyes wide. “You can live with us when we are married, and start a new life.”

Diana paused. She hardly knew what to say. Her mind was such a mass of confusion that she wondered if it would help to say it all out loud.

“I do not want to leave Gabriel,” she admitted softly, hardly able to believe that she was even saying the words out loud.



Albina looked at her, her eyes wide with surprise. “But isn’t he a terrible beast of a man? How can you want to stay with him?”

Diana shook her head. “He is not a beast, Albina,” she said. “He is a little irritable sometimes, it is true—especially when he is out somewhere and there is a crowd or a lot of noise—but in his heart, he is a good man.”

“Are you... developing feelings for him?” Albina asked.

Diana could not help but smile. It seemed so strange for the idea of her feeling affection towards her husband to be so shocking to her sister, but she supposed that since their relationship had started in such an unconventional way, it was natural for Albina to come to that conclusion.

But if Gabriel did not feel the same way, then what good was it?

She sighed. “I have become very fond of him,” she admitted.

She could not bring herself to say that she was in love with him. She felt that Gabriel should be the first person to hear that truth from her lips, although she was not sure if that time would ever come.

“Well then, you must go home!” Albina urged, a note of excitement creeping into her voice. “Oh, Diana, I am so happy for you! I have been so worried and sad, thinking of you living with a man you did not love, and now you tell me that you have fallen in love with him! You will be so happy!” She

smiled broadly. "I am so relieved that everything has turned out for the best."

Diana shook her head, feeling a wave of emotion washing over her in response to her sister's happiness. She wished more than anything that what her sister was saying was true, but there was no way of escaping the horrible fact that it was not.

"It is not as simple as all that, Albina," she replied sadly.

Albina looked at her in confusion. "How can it not be simple? You are in love!"

"I may well have feelings for Gabriel," Diana said. "But I do not think that he feels the same way."

"How could that possibly be true?" Albina demanded. "You are beautiful and kind and clever. You are everything a man could want in a wife!"

"You say that because you are my sister and you see the best in me, but I do not think that Gabriel sees it that way."

"Have you spoken to him about it?" Benjamin asked. "I do not know him well, of course, but I am sure he would want to know how things stand for you."

Diana sighed. "I have tried to talk to him, but he told me that he only wants us to be friends. I am so confused. Sometimes, when he looks at me, I think that he might feel something for me, but then he refuses to say it out loud."

“You must talk to him, Diana,” Albina pressed. “We will go to Gretna Green on our own. That way, you are not implicated in the scandal either.”

“I confess that I am a little worried about Gabriel’s family becoming the subject of gossip,” Diana added. “But the fact is that all his siblings had love matches, so I am sure they would understand the reasons behind your actions.”

She thought for a moment about Gabriel’s sisters. Catherine would probably think the whole thing very romantic, but Constance would be a little more cautious about it.

But the truth was that Diana was not going to do anything to stop Albina and Benjamin from eloping. It really did seem like the only option to save her sister from a miserable marriage. And what was the point of what she had done with Gabriel if she now allowed Albina to be forced to marry the old Earl?

“I do not want to cause anyone any distress,” Albina said. “But my mind is made up.”

Diana nodded. “I know that, and I will not try to stop you.”

Her thoughts returned to Gabriel, and she wished that her own mind was made up. She knew she should go home and talk to him, but the fear of rejection made her hesitate. She was not sure she could bear it if he told her that she meant nothing to him.

Just as she was about to speak, though, the door to the room flew open. They all looked up in shock to see who was standing there.

## CHAPTER 22



Gabriel ran into the inn and looked around, searching for someone he could ask about Diana's whereabouts. He saw the innkeeper wiping down one of the large tables next to the fireplace and walked over to speak to him.

"Good afternoon, I am looking for a couple who are staying here." He paused and realized that Albina and Benjamin might have used false names when they arrived to avoid scandal. He decided to describe their appearances instead. "The young lady is of medium height, with dark brown hair and blue eyes, and the gentleman is tall, with fair hair. They would have come in a chaise, I believe."

"And you are..." The innkeeper eyed him a little suspiciously.

"My name is Gabriel Windham, the Earl of Denro," Gabriel said formally.

He saw the reaction on the innkeeper's face at the mention of his title and suppressed a smile. Hard-won as it had been, his title did come in handy at times.

“Forgive me, My Lord,” the innkeeper said immediately. “One must be careful, sometimes, you know...” he trailed off, looking suitably embarrassed.

“Think nothing of it.” Gabriel waved his hand dismissively. “I quite understand.”

The innkeeper nodded and smiled gratefully. “Now, the couple that you mentioned are in one of our lounge rooms upstairs,” he said. “I’ll take you there now if you wish.”

Gabriel shook his head. “It’s quite all right, I will find the way myself if you give me directions.”

He did not want the man right by his side as he entered the room, and he wanted a few minutes to himself, too, to prepare for the moment when he might see Diana again. He felt more emotional than he had expected at the thought of seeing her.

The innkeeper told him how to find the room, and he made his way up the stairs and down the corridor. He became aware of a faintly musty smell. The inn made him feel uneasy, somehow, although he could not quite understand why.

Gabriel was nearly at the door to the room now, and he knew that Albina and Benjamin were inside. He had scarcely thought about them throughout the whole journey from his home to the inn, for his mind had been so full of Diana. But now, as he approached the room, he wondered what he should say to them.

He knew that he should try to persuade them against eloping, that he should explain to them how much scandal and trouble they would cause if they really were to run away to Gretna Green. But in his heart, he knew that he could not.

Walter would never agree to the match, but the young couple were clearly meant to be together. Gabriel thought about what Neil would say, or Michael, or even Levi, and he realized how impossibly lucky his siblings had all been to have been fortunate enough to fall in love with people who were suitable for them to marry, without the disapproval of their families and Society.

But his mind returned once again to Diana, amongst all of the drama of the situation. He wanted to see her, to take her in his arms and tell her how he felt about her, and to beg her to return home with him. He took a deep breath, braced himself, and pushed the door open.

The sight that greeted him was so shocking that it almost knocked the wind out of him.

Albina was sitting in a chair, tears running down her face, paralyzed with fear. A few feet away, Walter stood, his face contorted with rage and hatred. In his hand was a gun, and he was pointing it at Albina. Between the two of them stood Diana, holding her hands up.

“Please,” Diana was saying. “Please, Uncle Walter, put the gun down. Let us talk about this calmly!”

Gabriel’s heart began to pound at the sight of the gun. He wanted to turn away and run, but the panicked look on Diana’s

face persuaded him otherwise. He had to be strong. He had to stay and help her get out of this terrible situation. But all at once, he felt as if his mind had cracked, and in his imagination, he was back on the battlefield, surrounded by gunshots and shouts of fear and pain.

He tried to slow his breathing, to calm himself down, but it was no use. He simply could not look at a gun without being transported back to that awful place.

Diana looked around and saw him standing there in the doorway. Wide-eyed with shock, she asked, “What are you doing here, Gabriel?”

He stepped forward. “Walter, are you out of your mind? Put the gun down!” he shouted. He knew that he had to put his fears aside and protect Diana and Albina from their uncle’s madness.

Walter whirled around to look at him. “Oh, it’s you! Yet another person trying to interfere with my plans!” As he spoke, he waved the gun in his hand, and Gabriel could not help but wince. One move of his finger on the trigger and one of them would be killed.

The situation was extremely dangerous, and Gabriel was not quite sure how to handle it.

“Put the gun down!” he commanded.

Terrifying as the situation was, he felt a surge of fury that Walter would have the audacity to point a gun at his wife. He



would not allow it.

“I will not!” Walter shouted back. “All my plans are ruined! I am ruined! And it’s because of the actions of these two!” He motioned towards Albina and Diana. “I had such great plans for their marriages. But their actions have ruined me.”

Gabriel forced himself to take another step towards Walter. He was desperately trying to think of a way that he could take the gun from him, but he knew that the only way he could do it was to throw himself at Walter and try to wrestle the gun from his hand. It seemed too risky, though. All Walter needed to do was pull the trigger, and everything would be over.

“Walter, please, try to calm down. Surely you can see that this is not the solution to your problems?”

Gabriel did not think he had ever seen anyone look as angry as Walter did at that moment. His face was purple, and his hands were shaking.

“I do not think you fully understand the situation, My Lord,” Walter hissed, his voice low and dangerous and his annunciation of Gabriel’s title slow and deliberate—almost sarcastic. “My debts are out of control. There are people threatening to kill me if I do not pay them back. I cannot go on like this. But I had a plan. If Albina marries the Earl of Pembroke, then I will be saved. He will help me repay the debt and point me in the right direction for some good business connections. All will be well!” His eyes glinted with a kind of insane energy as he spoke, which Gabriel found rather alarming.

“But, of course, it is not as simple as that when my nieces are concerned,” Walter went on in a scathing tone. “They ruin everything. If Albina marries this young baron, then I will not be able to repay my debts, and I will most probably be murdered in cold blood by one of my creditors!”

Gabriel glanced at Benjamin, who was next to Albina, trying to calm her down. Tears were still streaming down her face. He wished he could think of a way to snatch the gun away from Walter, but his mind was blank, and he could sense panic beginning to set in. He fought hard against the feelings, but the flashbacks kept on pushing their way into his mind, and he could do nothing to stop them.

Walter returned his attention to Albina, pointing the gun at her again. “It is simple, Albina. All you have to do is come home with me and agree to marry the Earl of Pembroke. Because if you don’t, then I will be forced to take matters into my own hands!”

Diana let out a cry. “Please, Uncle Walter, do not do this!”

Walter roughly shoved her back. Gabriel wanted to run to her, to pull her away from Walter and into safety, but he found that he could not move. It was as if he was rooted to the spot. His heart was racing, and thoughts of the war would not leave him.

“It all started with you!” Walter roared at Diana. “You were always the disobedient one, the one who gave me the most trouble. I thought that when your parents died, things would get easier for me. I would have a title and an estate. I thought I would have no worries at all. But you have given me nothing but trouble!” He glared at Gabriel. “I do not know why you agreed to marry her at all!” he spat out. “She is not beautiful, or rich. She will give you trouble, too, I am sure of it!”

Something about his words brought Gabriel back to the moment. He stared at Diana, thinking how beautiful she was, even with a terrified look on her face. He was glad he had married her, even though their relationship had begun in such a strange way.

“I am happy that she is my wife!” he declared.

Diana’s face lit up for a moment as she heard the words Gabriel had spoken. But the moment between them disappeared all too quickly as Walter carried on with his angry tirade.

“You ruined my first plan, Diana, and it would not surprise me in the slightest if you were behind this ruse as well!” He looked around the room quickly, almost as if to remind himself of where he was. “Otherwise, what would you even be doing here? It makes no sense. I am sure that you are behind it all. You seem determined to ruin my life.”

Diana turned to face him. “No, Uncle, it is you who seems determined to ruin our lives! Why should Albina not marry the man she loves? It is not her fault that you have gotten yourself into so much debt. The income from my parents’ estate should have been more than enough for you, but you always want more. That is why you are in this situation. It is not our fault.”

“Everything is your fault!” he roared and then waved the gun so that it was pointing at her.

Gabriel’s heart clenched with fear. He could not bear to lose Diana, not when he had only just come to recognize his

feelings for her. He could not live without her.

He forced himself to move closer to Walter. He had to do something now to stop him.

Walter turned to him, waving the gun in the air. “If you come one step closer, I’ll shoot!”

Waves of panic threatened to engulf Gabriel. His mouth was dry, and he could feel the palms of his hands becoming sweaty. Walter was pointing the gun at Diana now. Gabriel could scarcely keep track of who it was that Walter intended to kill. The man had clearly lost his mind and was extremely dangerous.

Benjamin moved closer to Albina, who was still crying quietly. He crouched down on the floor next to her chair and took her hands in his, whispering in a soothing tone.

Gabriel tried to catch his eye in a brief moment of clarity. If they acted together, they had a much better chance of overpowering Walter. But Benjamin’s attention was fixed on Albina, and Gabriel could not risk saying anything out loud to him.

His breathing was becoming heavy, and the urge to run was strong. In his mind, he heard gunshots again, and he could imagine the acrid stench of gunpowder. The flashbacks were so real, it was as if he was physically back there on the battlefield. He knew that if he did not take action soon, it might be too late.

He considered shouting for help. Perhaps someone in the inn might overhear them and come to their assistance. But it seemed too risky, with Walter in the crazy state of mind that he was in. Anything that made him feel threatened could spur him into action, and make him pull the trigger.

Gabriel felt a heaviness wash over his body. He felt almost as if he was going to fall down onto the floor. He knew that he had to take action, right now, before it was too late.

He took a breath and ran towards Walter, who whirled around to face him.

A gunshot rang out, the noise ringing in Gabriel's head. Diana and Albina both let out screams of terror at the sound. Gabriel kept going, though, somehow, and lunged at Walter, wrestling him to the ground.

The gun flew from Walter's hands as he fell to the ground, and Benjamin rushed across the room to grab it.

Gabriel kept Walter pinned down, despite his writhing and struggling.

"Let me go!" Walter yelled. "You'll pay for this, mark my words!"

Adrenalin coursing through his body, Gabriel looked down at Walter. He did not want to hear another word coming from the man's mouth. Without even thinking, he raised his arm, balled his fist, and then struck him hard across the face.

It had been a long time since he had punched somebody, and he remembered now how painful it was. His hand throbbed. But he saw that Walter had slumped back onto the floor, his eyes closed. He was unconscious.

Gabriel climbed off Walter and rested on his haunches, trying to gather his thoughts. He looked at the man lying in a crumpled heap in front of him and let out a small sigh of satisfaction.

It was over, at last.



The sound of the gunshot rang in Diana's ears. She stood stock still, staring at Walter lying on the ground. Tears sprung to her eyes. She had not believed that they would all get out of this alive, but thanks to Gabriel's courage, it looked as if they would.

He was crouching on the floor next to Walter, nursing the hand that he had just used to punch him. But after a moment, he looked over at her, then ran across the room towards her.

Diana was too frozen by shock and terror to move, but Gabriel wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly.

She felt her heartbeat begin to slow as she relaxed into his arms. A sense of peace washed over her. It felt like coming home, being held by him.

"Gabriel," she whispered. "I can't believe you came after me."

He pulled back and smiled at her. “What else would I have done?”

She returned his smile.

He looked her up and down. “Are you injured?”

She shook her head. “No, I am quite all right.”

“Thank goodness,” he breathed. “I thought for an awful moment that I was going to lose you.”

She stared at him. Could his words mean what she thought they meant?

But before she could ask, Gabriel let out a gasp of horror. “Diana, there is blood on your dress!”

She looked down and saw that he was right. There was a crimson stain on her dress. She stared at it in confusion. She felt no pain, and she was certain that she had not been injured.

She saw then that Gabriel’s shirt was also stained with blood, and the stain was growing.

“Gabriel!” she cried. “You were shot!”

He looked at her in horror, then let out a moan. “Oh, it did not hurt before, but now—oh!”

He collapsed onto the floor, and Diana knelt down beside him, pressing on the wound on his side with her hands to try and stop the bleeding. She could not bear to see him in pain, and her heart filled with fear at the thought of losing him. Tears fell freely from her eyes as she leaned over him.

He smiled at her and reached up to wipe away her tears. “I will be fine, Diana,” he whispered. “I am relieved that it is not you who is hurt.”

At that moment, Diana saw something in his eyes that convinced her of his feelings for her. She knew that he would not look at her like that if he only saw her as a friend.

But just as she allowed herself to revel in that realization, her heart soaring in her chest at the thought that perhaps he loved her, too, his eyelids began to flutter shut.

“Stay with me, Gabriel!” she cried. “Please, do not leave me!”

But a moment later, his eyes closed, and he slumped backwards, unconscious.



## CHAPTER 23



**G**abriel opened his eyes and looked around, trying to figure out where he was. He had no idea how long he had been asleep, and he felt groggy and disoriented.

He worked out that he was in his bed, in his room at the Milebur estate. He stretched out his legs and wiggled his toes, then flexed his wrists and moved his fingers around. He was reassured to realize that all his limbs seemed to be working just fine.

He remembered gradually what had happened. Walter had shot him! The whole situation seemed almost surreal now. But at least he had survived.

He looked around the room and saw a man standing near the door, speaking to Neil. He did not know who the man was, but he imagined that perhaps he was a physician. He knew that his brother would have made sure that he had the best possible care while he was indisposed.

Neil thanked the physician, who then left the room.

Gabriel turned to see Diana sitting in an armchair close to his bed. She was curled up, with her knees tucked underneath her, staring out the window. The late afternoon sun was streaming through the window and glancing off her hair. He thought that she had never looked more beautiful, and he wanted nothing more than to reach out and take her hand.

Gabriel tried to sit up, and in doing so, he let out a groan.

“Gabriel!” Diana jumped out of her chair and moved towards him. “You are awake!”

“I am awake,” he replied with a smile. “And I am glad to see you here next to me.”

Neil turned around to face them and walked back to the bed. “I am glad to see you awake, Gabriel!”

“How is the pain?” Diana asked, a concerned expression on her face.

Gabriel frowned. “The pain is still there in my side,” he admitted. “It hurts to move much.”

“You must rest,” Diana insisted. “Do not try to move! The physician said that you should stay as still as possible to prevent the wound from starting to bleed again.” She turned a little pale at the mention of blood.

He reached for her hand, wincing a little as he did so. “I will be all right soon, I am sure of it,” he assured. “I am just feeling

rather exhausted and sore at the moment.”

“I am not surprised!” Neil interjected. “You were shot, after all, by that lunatic. Thank goodness he is not a good shot.”

Gabriel nodded. “Thank goodness, indeed. I am very happy to have survived it. Is everyone else all right? Albina and Benjamin?”

“They are both fine,” Diana replied. “No one except you was hurt. It has taken us all a couple of days to get over the shock. I thought we were going to lose you, Gabriel. I was so afraid. I am so sorry, Gabriel, that you were drawn into my family’s troubles once again.”

He shook his head. “Do not apologize, Diana. They are my family now, too, after all.” He paused for a moment. “And what has become of Walter?”

“He has been arrested,” Neil said. “The innkeeper called the constables when he heard the gunshot, and shortly after you passed out, the constables arrived and took Walter away.”

“Well, that is something to be grateful for, too,” Gabriel said. He glanced at Diana, then turned to Neil. “Brother, I wonder if you might leave us for a while? I would like to be alone with my wife.”

Neil smiled. “Of course,” he replied. “I will go downstairs. Everyone is here, waiting for news of your health.”

“Perhaps you can all come back in a little while, then,” Gabriel said. “I would like to see my sisters after my near-death experience, but I would like to talk to my wife first.”

Neil left the room and closed the door quietly behind him.

Gabriel squeezed Diana’s hand and saw her blush. “I have something that I need to tell you, Diana.”



Diana had barely left Gabriel’s side since the shooting incident. He had been transported home from the inn in a carriage, and she had refused to leave him, despite the protests of those who had been involved in coming to their rescue. And since he had been in his bed, she had been by his side every hour of the day and night. She did not want to miss the moment when he finally woke up, and she also wanted to make sure that she was present when the physicians visited, in case there was anything of importance to be discussed.

The whole situation with Walter had left her reeling, and in the two days that Gabriel had been unconscious, she had been trying hard to process it all. That her uncle had gone to such lengths to try to force Albina to comply with his plans still shocked her, but she knew that the reality of the situation was that he had only ever cared about himself, and about money and status.

Walter had never been interested in the happiness of his nieces, and since their parents died, they had been entirely alone in the world. It was all the more reason, really, that Albina should be able to marry the man she loved.

While Diana had been sitting next to Gabriel for all those hours, her mind had returned over and over again to the moment when he had rushed across the room to embrace her. He seemed to care for her safety and comfort even more than his own. She had been quietly allowing herself to hope that perhaps he might have feelings for her, too. But all the while, her heart was tight with fear at the thought that he might not wake up, despite the assurances of the physicians, who all seemed convinced that he was going to make a full recovery.

And now he was awake, and holding her hand, and she waited with bated breath to hear what he had to say to her.

She thought that he looked a little nervous as he cleared his throat and looked into her eyes.

“Diana, I need to tell you something,” he said softly.

She nodded. “You can tell me anything, Gabriel. I will always listen.”

“I am in love with you, Diana,” he confessed. “When I came home from Neil’s in the morning and didn’t find you, I thought that you had left me. I thought that you did not want to be with me anymore.”

Diana looked at him in surprise. “I did not ever intend to leave you, Gabriel,” she said. “Not really. I was hurt because I thought that you were pushing me away, but in my heart, I always hoped that something could grow between us. I did not mean to make you think that I had abandoned you.” She paused and took a deep breath. It was time for her to speak her

feelings out loud, too. “I would never leave you, Gabriel, because I love you, too.”

Gabriel smiled. “I have been hoping against hope that you felt the same way for me,” he said. “I know that our relationship began in an unusual way and that we were forced together, but I want us to have a real marriage now.”

“I thought that perhaps you had not been able to forgive me for what I did in the library,” Diana murmured. “I am sorry. I do not think I have ever apologized properly for my actions.”

He shook his head. “I was angry for a little while, in the beginning, but the truth is that I always understood why you did what you did. I knew that you wanted Albina to find a love match and that you would have done anything to protect her from having to marry a man she did not love.” He smiled again, his face lighting up. “And if you had not taken the action that you did, then we would not be sitting here together now. So, I am grateful, in a way, that you did what you did.”

Diana breathed out a sigh of relief. “I have felt so guilty about it since our wedding,” she admitted. “But in the last couple of days, I, too, have felt glad of it. I was glad to be able to be near you the whole time you were unconscious, and now I am more pleased than you can imagine that you are well again.”

Gabriel chuckled. “I would not go so far as to say that I am well again,” he replied. “But I will get there, and I will be back to my old self again soon.” He paused and looked into her eyes. “And I have something else to thank you for, too,” he added. “You did not judge me when I told you the truth about myself. Many people would think that I was weak, pathetic, for suffering the way I still do with the nightmares and the panic attacks, which come to me so often. But you did not

think badly of me, and you tried to help me. I am sorry that I pushed you away. It was simply because I thought that you deserved better. But Neil helped me to see that love does not work like that.”

Diana felt her heart swell with happiness at his words. “I have only ever wanted to help you, Gabriel,” she whispered. She felt his fingers caressing her own, and she shivered.

He pushed himself up into a seated position and leaned towards her, then reached up to caress her face. “Diana,” he whispered. “I am so happy to call you my wife.”

He pressed his lips to hers, softly at first and then more fervently. She gave way to his kiss, wrapping her arms around his neck and gently pulling him towards her. His lips were soft and warm, and in her heart, she knew that she never wanted to be apart from him again, not even for a day.

He pulled away and stared at her. “I believe that we can be happy together, Diana.”

She nodded. “I believe that, too.”

“I wanted to tell you something else, too,” he continued. “When we were at the inn, with Walter, and I saw the gun, I felt as if I was on the battlefield again. All the memories came flooding back, and it felt so real, I could hardly move. But I knew that I had to protect you and that I had to do something to stop Walter. I was afraid that he really was going to shoot you, or Albina. In the moment when I forced myself to take action, all I could think about was you.”

Diana felt her cheeks redden as he spoke. Only a few days ago, she would never have imagined that she would hear him say such things to her. And now, here they were, together, holding hands and talking of a happy future together.

“The marvelous thing, though, Diana,” he went on, “is that when I held you in my arms after I had punched Walter, all those symptoms disappeared. I could feel the fear and terror fading away. It was like coming home, holding you like that.”

“I will always be here for you, Gabriel,” Diana promised. “I will do my best to help you with your struggles, and I will never leave you. I promise you that. I will always be by your side.”

A soft knock sounded at the door a moment later.

“Come in!” Gabriel called.

The door opened, and Neil entered, followed by Lydia, then Constance and Michael, and Catherine and Levi.

Gabriel chuckled. “You really did mean everyone, didn’t you!”

Neil nodded. “Of course!”

“You have all been here for days while I have been lying unconscious?” Gabriel asked, a note of incredulity in his voice.



“Of course, we have!” Constance replied. “As soon as Neil sent word to us that you had been injured, we all rushed here. You are our baby brother, after all!”

“Less of the baby, please!” Gabriel protested, then winced a little as he moved.

“Are you in pain?” Diana asked, moving forward to help him get comfortable. She plumped up the pillows behind him, and he leaned back, seeming to be a little more comfortable.

“A little,” he replied. “But I am all the better for having my family around me.”

Catherine moved a little closer, looking at her brother in concern. “We were so worried, Gabriel. I cannot believe that he shot you! What a beast that man is.”

Levi and Michael stood back a little, allowing their wives to fuss over their brother, but Diana saw them exchanging a glance with Gabriel. Clearly, they, too, were relieved that he hadn't sustained a fatal injury.

Constance and Catherine began to chat amongst themselves about the best foods for Gabriel to be having while he was recovering, and he turned to face Diana. “I am glad they are all here,” he whispered. “But I am most glad to have you by my side.”

She squeezed his hand. “I will never leave your side, Gabriel. I promise you that.”

## EPILOGUE



*Two Months Later*

**D**iana took Albina's hand and squeezed it as the carriage pulled up outside the church.

"There is no need to be nervous," she said softly, looking at her sister's rather anxious face.

"But what if something goes wrong?" Albina whispered. "I almost cannot believe that it is really going to happen, that I am really going to be able to marry him, after all that we have been through." She paused for a moment and looked at Diana. "I know that it is not nearly as much as you and Gabriel have gone through, though."

Diana smiled. "Gabriel has been through the most, out of all of us, I think, but it does not mean that yours and Benjamin's trials have been any less important. And we were all there, in that room, with Walter and his wretched gun."

Albina shuddered. "I am so relieved, every single day, that no one was badly hurt that day."

Diana nodded. "We were lucky, I think." She looked out the carriage window. "I think that everyone is waiting for you, Albina. Are you ready to go inside?"

"There is something that I want to say to you first," Abina said. "I am sure that Benjamin will not mind waiting a few minutes."

Diana raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Albina said firmly. "I should have said it much sooner, but I did not know how to find the words." She paused and looked into Diana's eyes. "You have done so much for me," she said softly. "I do not know how to thank you."

"There is no need to thank me!" Diana said, staring at her sister. "I know that you would have done the same for me."

Albina shook her head. "I am not sure that I would have done, in all honesty. You married someone that you did not love to save me from a loveless marriage. I do not think that I could have brought myself to do that, even for you, whom I love most in the world." She stopped and giggled softly. "Well, perhaps I love Benjamin just as much, now, as I love you."

Diana grinned. "Well, that is how it should be," she replied.

"That is just what I mean, though," Albina said, her face turning serious again. "You believed in the importance of love in marriage, just as much as I do, but you sacrificed it, for me, so that I had a chance of finding love for myself."

Diana looked at her sister for a moment and realized that she was right. That moment, all those months ago, when she had ambushed Gabriel in the library, she had been thinking only about Albina, and not herself. But perhaps the happiness she was now enjoying in her marriage was her reward, for that moment of selflessness.

Gabriel would not have thought it a selfless act, though. At least, not in the beginning. But he had said to her more than once that he knew the reason she had taken the action that she had, and that he would have done the same for any of his siblings, so perhaps he really had known what was in her heart, all along.

“Albina, you must not dwell on it,” Diana said. “You are about to enter your new life now. Let’s put it all behind us.”

Albina nodded. “I will, I promise. But I wanted to say thank you, all the same, for the sacrifice that you made for me.”

“But see how it has turned out!” Diana said, thinking for a moment of Gabriel, who should already be inside the church now, at Benjamin’s side at the altar as he waited for his bride. “Gabriel and I are so happy now. I found my own love match, in the end. It just did not come about in the way that anyone had imagined that it would!”

Albina smiled, her eyes sparkling. “Oh, Diana, how fortunate we both have been in the end!” She paused, and a cloud of sadness crossed her face. “I wish that our parents were here to share this day with us.”

Diana nodded. "I have thought of them, too. I confess that they are in my thoughts most days, but today, in particular, they have been on my mind. I am sure that they would both be delighted to see you marrying a man so fine as Benjamin, whom you love with all your heart."

"You do not think that they would say I should have married an earl, or a duke, instead of a lowly baron?" Albina asked, a look of mischief on her face.

Diana laughed. "I think that it would never have occurred to them to say such a thing," she replied. "All they ever wanted was for us both to be happy, and I am certain that you and Benjamin will be very happy together, for the rest of your lives."

Albina took a deep breath. "Let us go inside," she said, preparing herself to step down from the carriage.

"You look beautiful," Diana whispered, taking in her sister's fine silk gown with a lace trim.

Gabriel had helped fund Albina's wedding gown and her trousseau, and she looked the picture of a perfect bride.

Albina blushed and smiled prettily. "I never thought the day would come," she said softly. "And I am glad that you are here, and Gabriel, and all our friends. We would have gone to Gretna Green if we had to, but it is much better to do it like this, without scandal."

“I think we have all had more than enough scandal in this family!” Diana snorted. She climbed out of the carriage, took her sister’s arm, and walked into the church just as the organ began to play.



Diana sat in the pew next to Gabriel and listened as Benjamin and Albina said their vows. She remembered her own wedding, when she had looked at Gabriel as she made her promises to him, and wondered what on earth she had done, to agree to marry this man whom she scarcely knew, who was so reserved and distant, and rumored to be such a beast.

She glanced at her husband and caught his eye. He smiled, and she felt her heart melt. She felt so differently about him now, it was almost as if they were not in the same reality as they had been on their wedding day.

He had been so brave, facing Walter despite the flashbacks that assaulted his senses at the sight of the gun. Diana had realized, at that moment, that he would do anything to protect her, that he loved her truly, in a way that she could never have dreamed that anyone would ever love her.

And while he was still not fully recovered from his injury, the worst of it was now over, and Diana knew that, soon, they would be able to go riding together again, enjoying the fresh air and each other’s company in a way that she had never imagined.

As the ceremony reached its conclusion, and Albina and Benjamin were declared man and wife, Gabriel quietly reached for his wife’s hand.

“I am glad that you found me in the library that day,” he whispered. “Even though at the time it seemed like the worst thing imaginable. Just look how well things have turned out now.”

Diana smiled in response, feeling a surge of warmth coursing through her at her husband’s touch. “I feel just the same,” she replied.



A few hours later, Diana looked around the ballroom and smiled in satisfaction. She remembered the conversation she had had with the housekeeper just after her wedding to Gabriel, when she had only just moved to the Milebur estate, about this very room and how it was never used.

No one had thought that Gabriel would ever host a ball, let alone a wedding party. The room had been neglected, abandoned, and the servants had thought that it would never be used for its true purpose.

But now, the room looked perfect, lit by candles on every surface and decorated with flowers and foliage. She had worked hard with the servants to get everything ready, and Constance and Lydia had helped, too. Catherine was heavily pregnant now, so she had not joined them. In fact, she was likely to give birth in a matter of weeks, but it had not stopped her from attending the wedding. Her siblings had teased her that even in her current situation, she could not stay away from a party.

The day had gone perfectly, so far. After Albina and Benjamin had exchanged their vows in the chapel at the Milebur estate, everyone had shared a wonderful feast. And now, the dancing was about to begin, and there was a hum of anticipation in the ballroom. Many of the guests were marveling at being there at all, at the home of the Earl of Denro, when everyone had been convinced that he would never throw a ball or a party as long as he lived, just as the housekeeper had told Diana all those months ago. But now, everything had changed, both for Gabriel and Diana.

Diana looked across the room to see her husband chatting with Neil and Levi. Michael and Constance were elsewhere, but Diana knew that the siblings and their spouses would soon find themselves grouped together again. They were all so close now, herself included, that they always ended up in one another's company, wherever they were.

Diana could hardly believe that two months had passed since the incident with Walter. Gabriel's wound was much better, but he still complained of pain sometimes, and they had to be careful when it came to riding. She had promised him never to challenge him to another race, so now their rides together were a little more stately, but still as enjoyable as ever.

Diana felt a presence next to her. She turned to see Lewis Hatchett standing next to her, a distant cousin who had now inherited the title of Viscount of Berlock following Walter's arrest and subsequent downfall. He was a young man, only a couple of years older than her, and very mild-mannered. She felt that he was a huge improvement compared to Walter and that he would manage the estate much more effectively, the way her parents would have wanted things to be managed.

"This is a fine gathering, indeed," he commented, looking around the room. "You have done an excellent job."



“Thank you,” Diana said with a smile. “I have had a lot of help. But I wanted everything to be perfect for Albina.”

“And it is,” he said. “Thank you for inviting me. I am having a very pleasant time.”

“It is a pleasure to have you here,” she replied. “And I wanted to thank you, too, for allowing Albina to marry Benjamin. When we first heard that you were inheriting the title, I was worried that you would not allow the match, and after everything Albina has already been through, that would have been very hard for her.”

The Viscount shook his head. “I would not have dreamt of refusing the match,” he said. “Not unless I had a concern that the Baron did not have enough money to keep them comfortable, or if I had some concern about the decency of the gentleman in question. But Lord Longate is a perfectly respectable match, and he seems the perfect gentleman. And clearly, they are very much in love. It would have been very cruel to keep them apart.”

Diana nodded, casting a glance across the room to where Albina and Benjamin were standing together, waiting for the first dance so that they could open the ball together. “I have never seen her so happy,” she murmured, looking at her sister with a surge of joy in her heart.

It was all she had ever wanted for Albina, that she could marry for love, and today was the day when that dream had finally come true.

She glanced at Gabriel and realized once again that that same dream had come true for her, too. She had never expected it for herself, but now, with Gabriel, she had found a happiness that she could not even imagine. It still took her by surprise, when she looked at him, and she knew that she would never stop feeling grateful for what they had found together, after all the hardship they had been through. As she stood with the Viscount, watching couples gathering on the dance floor to begin the first dance, she saw Eliza approaching them.

“Diana, thank you so much for inviting me! It has been a truly wonderful wedding, and the party is only now just beginning!” Eliza gushed, then turned to the Viscount, to whom she had already been introduced earlier in the evening. “Are you enjoying yourself, My Lord?”

Diana could not help but smile at Eliza’s forthcoming approach. She could hardly be more different than Gabriel. Diana often wondered how the two of them were such good friends.

“Miss Eliza,” Lord Berlock said. “How nice to speak to you again. I very much enjoyed our conversation over dinner. I must say that I am enjoying myself very much.” He smiled at her warmly, and Diana glanced at Eliza, who was now blushing a little.

“I am very glad to hear it,” Eliza replied. “I am sure that no one believed there would ever be a single note of music, or a dance of any kind in this room, as Gabriel is such a reluctant attendee of any kind of large function, but I do think that the whole thing has come off rather well.” She glanced at Diana. “And Gabriel, of course, is much changed since his marriage.”

“I am not sure if he has really changed all that much,” Diana said. “I think that perhaps he is a little more like he used to be before he went away.”

“Either way,” Eliza replied, “he is much improved since you became his wife!”

“You flatter me,” Diana said with a giggle. “I am sure I have not done anything particularly special.”

“Oh, you have,” Eliza insisted. “He seems so much happier now, and all his family and friends are delighted to see it.”

The Viscount, who had been standing a little awkwardly to the side during this exchange, cleared his throat. “The first dance is about to commence,” he said rather nervously. “I wonder, Miss Eliza, if you are not already engaged, whether you would permit me the pleasure of your hand for this dance?”

Eliza smiled broadly and nodded. “I would be delighted,” she replied.

The Viscount took her arm and led her to the dance floor, leaving Diana standing alone.

Diana could not help but smile at how easily the connection had been made between Eliza and the new Viscount. She wondered if it would lead anywhere. Many happy marriages were formed based on connections made at balls, after all, and not everyone had such a complicated story as hers and Gabriel’s. Some couples simply met in a ballroom, fell in love, and then got married. She could scarcely imagine the

simplicity of it, compared to her own and Albina's experiences.

She felt a presence behind her and turned to see Gabriel standing there, a smile on his face. "I owe you a lot of dances, I think," he said softly, offering her his arm. "Would you care to join me on the dance floor?"

She nodded. "I would love to," she replied. "I cannot think of anything I would rather do, in fact."

They took their place on the dance floor as the orchestra began to play the first notes, and Gabriel took her in his arms. She let out a sigh of happiness at the sensation of his hand on her waist.

"You are right that we have not shared many dances together, Gabriel," she murmured, staring into his eyes. "But you must never feel like it is a debt that you have to repay. There is no need for us to keep count of these things. We must just consider ourselves lucky that we have found each other, even though our relationship did not start in the most conventional of ways."

He nodded. "I never expected to be so happy," he said, squeezing her hand as they moved through the dance.

Diana allowed herself to get lost in the moment as they glided across the dance floor together. She remembered the countless balls she had been to in her first two Seasons, and how hardly anyone had ever asked her to dance. She had dreaded having to go to a ball, and she had always felt awkward and undesirable, as if no gentleman could ever love her.

And now, here she was, in the arms of a man who made her feel wonderful every day. The happiness she felt was almost too much to bear. Sometimes, she thought that her heart might explode at the intensity of her feelings.

At the end of the dance, they went over to the refreshments table to get a glass of champagne, then stood to the side, watching as the next dance began. Diana noticed that Eliza and the Viscount were also standing together, chatting. It seemed that their dance together had been a success and that they wanted to spend more time together.

“I wanted to tell you some news,” Gabriel said after a while.

“Oh?” Diana murmured. “What about?”

“Your uncle Walter,” he replied. “I am sorry to mention his name at such a happy event, but I did not want you to hear about it from anyone else.”

“Hear what? Has something happened?” Diana asked.

Gabriel nodded. “A date has been set for his trial. It will be in a month’s time. I am not sure if you or Albina will be required to testify. I will speak to the solicitor about it, but it is my hope that Benjamin and I can manage it between us, to save you both the distress.”

She frowned. “I would do it if I had to, but of course, I would prefer not to, and we should try to spare Albina from having to relive the trauma, too.”

“Yes, indeed,” Gabriel agreed. “I know that you are strong, my love, and that you could sustain the stress, but I would much prefer to spare you of it, too, if we can.” He paused and took her hand in his. “There is one other thing.”

“Yes?”

“I think it is very likely that a death sentence will be handed down to him. Almost inevitable, in fact. It is not a pleasant thing to think of, but I wanted to tell you so that you can prepare yourself, and prepare Albina, too.”

Diana flinched as he said the words. It was brutal to think of it, but she knew that it was just. “The law is the law,” she said slowly. “There is nothing we can do about it, and many people would say that he deserves it.”

“Well, he was never kind to you and Albina, that is for certain,” Gabriel replied. “I hope that he manages to make his peace with God before he leaves this earth.”

Diana nodded, feeling a little somber. She was grateful, though, that Gabriel had told her the truth. He was quite right that she would not have wanted to hear it from anyone else. And with her husband by her side, she felt that she could face anything.

“There is something much more cheerful that I would like to speak to you about, too,” Gabriel added, turning to face her with a smile.

“I like the sound of that,” she replied.

“I was thinking that, perhaps, once the trial is over, we could go on an extended honeymoon. Perhaps we could go to Italy. What do you think?”

Diana flushed with delight. “I cannot imagine anything I could want more.” She beamed. “I would love to go to Italy. But most of all, I would love to go almost anywhere with you.” She smiled up at him, feeling as if her heart might burst at any moment.

“Italy in the spring would be wonderful, I think,” Gabriel said. “And now that I get to spend every night in bed next to you, dear Diana, I am just as happy here at home as I will be in Italy, and my nightmares are waning, as you know.”

Diana nodded. She had noticed in the previous few weeks that his nightmares had become less frequent and less intense, and also that when he awoke, he found it easier to go back to sleep again, with her there by his side.

“It makes me so happy, Gabriel, to know that I am helping you in some way.”

“You help me in more ways than you can imagine,” he replied. “I cannot believe that you are mine, even now.”

“I am yours, Gabriel, and always will be.”

They stood quietly side by side for a moment, watching the dancing couples. Albina was beaming, a smile of pure joy on her face as Benjamin led her through the dance. And alongside them, Eliza smiled prettily at her partner.

Also on the dance floor were Neil and Lydia, Constance and Michael, and Catherine and Levi.

“How wonderful it is that we have all found such happiness,” Gabriel said softly. He took Diana’s hand and led her away from the dance floor, placing his other arm around her waist.

“Gabriel, people will stare at us!” she whispered.

“I do not care,” he replied, pulling her closer. “You are my wife, and I want to kiss you.”

He pressed his lips to hers, and she felt her heart swell with joy.

He pulled away and looked into her eyes. “I did not think that I would ever find such joy in my life, but here you are, by my side, making me happy every day.”

*The End?*



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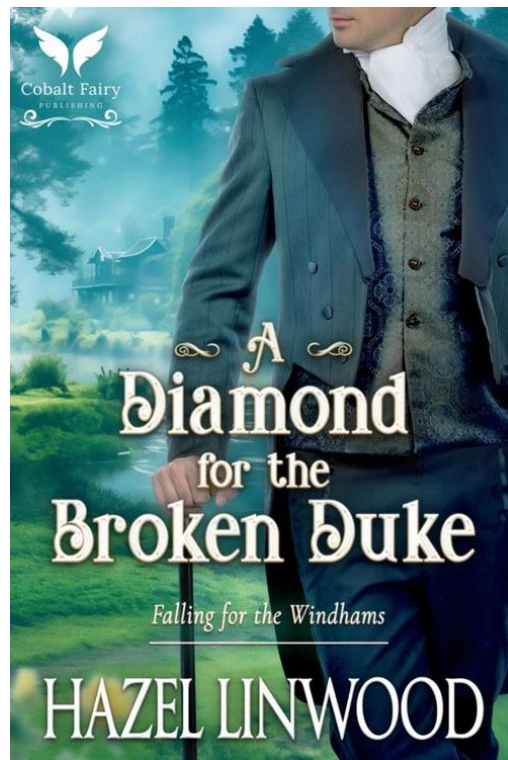
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# PREVIEW: A DIAMOND FOR THE BROKEN DUKE



Can't stop reading? Turn to the next page to read the first chapter of "*A Diamond for the Broken Duke*", the third book of this series!



## CHAPTER ONE



Levi looked on as his oldest friend, Michael, stood in the center of the entrance hall, gazing around with a sense of awe on his face.

“I must confess, Levi, I did not know your father’s estate was so incredibly grand!”

Levi frowned as he too cast an eye around the hallway, taking in the marble staircase, the ornate fireplace, and the portraits of dukes of the past adorning the walls, all the way up to the high ceiling. “There are many grander houses, I am sure. And, anyway, it is my estate now,” he said quietly. “Come, let us go into the drawing room. I have ordered tea.”

Michael followed Levi down a corridor, and they settled into easy chairs opposite one another, then waited until the maid had served them tea and left the room before they resumed their conversation.

“It has been a long time, my friend,” Michael mused. “I think it has been more than a year since I last saw you. It must have been at the ball, a year or so after my wedding.”

Levi nodded. “It feels like a lifetime ago, I must confess.”

“I was sorry to hear of your father’s passing while Constance and I were on our honeymoon,” Michael said slowly.

Levi looked at him and let out a small sigh. “It was not a surprise, you know. He had been ill for some time. In a way, it was rather a blessing. He was not a man who enjoyed being stuck in bed all day. Those last few months were a great trial to him.”

There was silence between the two men for a moment before Michael spoke again. "But your brother's loss must have been much more of a shock."

"I cannot deny that it was," Levi agreed. "We were not close, you know. He was raised to be a duke and to keep his distance, even from those in his own family."

Michael nodded and gave a wry smile. "I can certainly identify with that. You have met Constance's brother Neil, have you not?"

"Indeed," Levi said. "Although only briefly. But yes, Theodore was rather similar in character to the Duke of Whitewell, from what I could gather. And, of course, he was expecting to be the Duke of Coltfoot until his old age, not to die suddenly before he had even reached his prime."

Levi heard the crack in his own voice as he spoke. In front of anyone other than Michael, he would have been embarrassed to show his feelings, but he had known Michael far too long for any such dissemblance, and he knew that his friend would see right through him if he tried to hide anything.

"At least the illness was brief," Michael mused.

"Yes," Levi agreed. "It is a relief to know that he did not suffer too much in those final days. The disease of his lungs came on quickly, and his passing followed soon after. At least, he did not leave behind a wife and children to grieve him. That is something to be thankful for."

"But he has left you behind to grieve," Michael said quietly. "And more, it seems." He glanced around the room again. "I cannot believe I have never visited you here in all the years we have known each other."

Levi shrugged. "I have not chosen to live here for many years. The estate is too far away from town, too far away from the life I chose to live, before... well, before everything changed. When I still had a choice."

Michael leaned back in his chair and took a sip of his tea. "It must have been a shock to you, to inherit the dukedom."

Levi paused and met his friend's gaze. "I never wanted it, you know. I am not like one of those younger brothers who secretly resent the older ones for the title and the position they are to inherit. Far from it. I was relieved not to have to live that life. And now, well, I have no other option but to live it, until my dying day."

"There must be some benefits to it, though?" Michael frowned. "You seem rather maudlin, not your usual jovial self at all. Is there nothing that I can say to cheer you? I know I should have visited you sooner, but I kept writing to make sure that you were all right, and barely received a response. I assumed, therefore, that you wanted to be left alone."

Levi sighed again, a deep sigh that felt as if it came from his bones. "I apologize for not replying to your letters or inviting you here sooner. But the affairs of the estate have kept me busier than you can imagine over this past year, since Theodore's passing."

"Well, I have the perfect suggestion that might cheer you up," Michael said in a jolly tone that sounded more than a little forced to Levi's ears.

Levi wished for a moment that his friend would stop trying to cheer him, stop trying to persuade him that everything was going to be fine, when Levi knew in his heart that it was unlikely to be so. And as for him not being his usual jovial self... well, how could that be when he had so much to worry about?

Levi looked at his friend and thought that it was unlikely that he could come up with anything that would take his mind off his many troubles, but he did not want to seem churlish.

"Tell me your plan," he said instead, trying to sound interested.

"There is to be a grand ball next week at Neil and Lydia's house, Sandhill Estate," Michael said. "We would love to see you there. It has been a long time since you have been to a ball, I think?"

“I am not sure that I have the time,” Levi said, hesitating a little.

He knew that he could make himself available if he really wanted to, but what would be the point? Going to a ball would only force him to remember the life he had once had.

Michael huffed. “Levi, I am sad to see you so down. It is not like you at all. What makes you so pessimistic?”

“I simply have not had much time for such pursuits over the last couple of years, and I do not think that I will in the future either,” Levi replied.

He knew that his friend barely recognized this version of himself, but perhaps it was better that Michael got used to who he was now, sooner rather than later.

“Can you really see no way that you can try to enjoy your new position, and to make the most of being a duke? Surely it cannot be that bad.”

Levi frowned. “I know on the surface that I must seem churlish,” he said slowly. “And, of course, many people would envy me for my position and all this apparent wealth and splendor. But the truth is that my father left a massive debt on the estate. Theodore barely had time to do anything about it before he fell ill, and so now, it is all down to me to try and resolve it. And I have tried, heaven knows I have tried. But to no avail.”

He looked around the drawing room, at the plush furniture and the sculptures and paintings, and felt a wave of sadness at the realization that one day, he might have to try to sell them all to the highest bidder. The shame of it!

“I am sorry to hear that, Levi,” Michael said. “I know that being a duke is not always as easy as people might think.”

Levi set his teacup down on the table. “And I never even wanted it. I was not brought up for it. My father pretty much ignored me for most of my childhood, you know. He preferred to pour all his energy into preparing Theodore to be the perfect duke when the time came.”

He let out a low groan of despair. “I know nothing about business, or investments, or any of those things that noblemen are supposed to know about. And although I have not made things worse, everything I have tried over the last year has made no difference. The debt is not paid off. I have not even made a dent in it.”

He looked up at Michael. “I have been wracking my brains for weeks, for months, to think of an answer to the problem. And there is only one solution, as far as I can see. I must marry, and by that, I mean I must marry a young lady with a dowry. That is the only way to clear the debt in one go, and look towards the future.”

Michael raised an eyebrow. “I would never have thought that you would say such a thing, Levi, if I am perfectly honest.”

“And I confess it is not something I thought I would ever say, or consider, but what choice do I have? I cannot marry for love now. It is best if I just accept that and give up on any foolish romantic hopes I may have had in the past. I must look for a lady with a large dowry, to help me save my father’s estate. There is no other option.”

Michael glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece and smiled a little wryly. “Well, it is after four o’clock, Levi. I think that kind of news warrants something a little stronger than tea, don’t you?”

Levi smiled weakly, despite himself. “I think so. There is some brandy over there. Perhaps you could see to it?”

Michael nodded and crossed the room, then poured two glasses of brandy from a decanter on the sideboard. He returned and handed one to Levi, then the two men clinked their glasses together.

“Perhaps it is not as bleak as you think it is, Levi,” Michael said. “If you agree to come to the ball, then maybe you will meet a young lady who has a fortune, and with whom you might form an affectionate attachment. Stranger things have happened, you know. I do not think you should give up on happiness entirely.”



Levi sighed and took a sip of his brandy, feeling the familiar burn trickling down his throat. "I do not dare to hope that such a thing is possible, Michael. It is better to be pragmatic, to see it as a business deal. But I will come to the ball all the same. It is the place one must go to meet young ladies, that much I do recognize and accept."

Michael groaned. "Gosh, you are resigned to it, aren't you?" He sipped his own drink for a moment, before speaking again. "Well, you never know. Even if you are not looking for love, it might be your lucky night!"



Catherine took a sip of her lemonade and looked around the ballroom. She felt a stab of sadness as she remembered how excited she had been during her first Season. Each and every ball had felt like an adventure, bringing with it the hope of excitement, of romance. But as each year had passed since her debut, that sense of excitement had begun to fade. And now as she looked around the ballroom of her brother's fine home, filled with some of the most important and influential people of the *ton*, she felt scarcely even a flicker of excitement.

"These balls are all the same, aren't they," she said with a sigh, turning to her friend, Isabel, who was standing next to her.

"I suppose they are," Isabel agreed, raising an eyebrow. "There is always music and dancing and smiles and laughter. But I suspect that is not quite what you were getting at, my dear?"

Catherine chuckled, in spite of herself. "I suppose it is different for you, as a married woman. You have found your prize." She glanced across the room to where Ambrose, the Earl of Hertford, was standing.

Isabel and Ambrose had been married for a few years now and already had one child, with another on the way.

"And I am sure that you will find yours, Catherine." Isabel placed a reassuring hand on her friend's arm. "It is not too late, you know."

Catherine rolled her eyes. “It will be soon, though! I shall be twenty-three on my next birthday. You know as well as I do that I am creeping towards spinsterhood at a steady pace, and time slows for no man, or woman either!”

Isabel huffed. “We have had this conversation countless times. You have many more years ahead of you before there should be any talk of giving up hope.”

Catherine looked over at the dance floor, which was thronged with couples making their way through an upbeat country dance. “But have you noticed that hardly any gentlemen ever ask me to dance anymore?”

“Well, that will be because of your ridiculous stubbornness about your dowry,” a masculine voice interjected.

Catherine looked up to see her brother, Neil, standing close by. He was not as severe in demeanor as he had once been before he had met his wife, Lydia, but he still was an impressive presence as he stood there in his finest clothes, observing all that was going on in the ballroom of his grand home at Sandhill Estate.

“Oh, Neil, I did not see you coming,” Catherine said, a little snappily. She had been in a bad mood already, and she sensed a lecture coming from her brother that was unlikely to improve things.

“I have not been eavesdropping, don’t you worry. I only heard the last thing you said, about gentlemen not asking you to dance anymore.”

Catherine shrugged. “Well, I am right, aren’t I? No one has looked twice at me all evening. And it is because they know that I have no dowry, which proves the point I have been trying to make for at least a year now. They were only interested in me for my title and my money. And now that there is no money attached to my hand, no one is the least bit interested.”

Neil sighed. “I wish you would not be so insistent about this, Catherine. You have made your point. Yes, there are some fortune hunters out there, but I would never have allowed you

to marry one of them. It is possible for you to have a dowry and a love match, you know.”

Catherine huffed in frustration. “I do not believe it, and tonight proves my point. When money mudds the water, how can you tell if a gentleman’s affections are genuine? They pay no attention to young ladies who have no money, which says it all. I have almost given up hope.”

She folded her arms and stared across the room, aware that she was probably coming across as sulky and childish, but not caring much at that moment.

All she had ever wanted was to fall in love and have a happy family life of her own. And she had seen her brother Neil find happiness with Lydia, and her sister Constance fall in love with Michael. But happiness seemed to elude her. Yet, she was determined not to settle for anything but true love. And if that meant never marrying at all, and remaining a spinster forever, then so be it.

It looked as though her siblings were going to have plenty of children between them, so perhaps her duties as a devoted aunt would have to be enough to give her a sense of fulfillment in life.

Next to her, Neil sighed. “Well, I have made my thoughts very clear on this, Catherine. It is, of course, up to you, but I think you should have a dowry, and the money is there if you change your mind. But I know that you will have it your way, as always.”

She nodded. “I will, indeed.”

She turned away and surveyed the ballroom, looking for something, anything, to divert her attention from this very vexing subject.

Her eyes fell upon a tall man with long, dark, wavy hair that fell almost to his shoulders. He was speaking to Michael on the other side of the room, near the refreshments table. There was something very familiar about him, but Catherine could not quite work out where she had seen him before.

Constance appeared next to her and followed her gaze. “Oh, Levi is here!” she said happily. “I was not sure if he would come. Michael said he has been rather down lately.”

“Levi,” Catherine repeated as she struggled to remember where she recognized him from. “Oh, Levi Galpin! He is a good friend of Michael’s, of course! I met him at your wedding. But we have not seen much of him in Society as of late?”

Constance shook her head. “He is the Duke of Coltfoot now, since his brother died rather suddenly last year, and Michael told me that there are a great many troubles plaguing him on the estate. He has not been in Society for some time. But now that he is here, let us go and greet him!”

Constance took her sister’s arm and led her across the room to where the two men stood.

## CHAPTER TWO



“It feels a little clinical, looking around the room like this and talking about money,” Levi said with a frown as he followed Michael’s gaze towards a group of young ladies standing together at the foot of the large staircase that led down from the grand entrance hall into the ballroom.

Michael rolled his eyes. “Well, it was you who said you wanted to marry a young lady with a healthy dowry. I am simply trying to help you identify her. And Miss Elizabeth Talbot, who is standing over there in the lemon-yellow gown, apparently has a very large dowry, being the only daughter of Lord Talbot. She is considered to be one of the most desirable young ladies of the Season.”

Levi forced himself to look at where the young lady in question was chatting with her friends. There was something rather self-conscious about the way she was standing. No doubt she knew that many eyes would be on her. Levi did not know whether to feel sorry for her or not. No doubt many of her peers thought that she was in an enviable position, but surely being the focus of everyone’s attention must also be rather disturbing.

“Do you think she is pretty?” Michael asked, lowering his voice a little.

“Michael!” Levi admonished his friend. “We should not talk of her like that. And, anyway, that is irrelevant.”

“Of course, it is not irrelevant. Surely there must be some attraction, to complement this business deal that you now

seem to be viewing marriage as.”

“Oh, I don’t know!” Levi huffed. “The whole thing makes me feel rather strange. But I suppose I should get it over and done with and start to meet these young ladies. Perhaps you would be so kind as to introduce me to Miss Talbot?”

Michael nodded, and they were just about to cross the room to where Miss Talbot stood with her friends when Michael’s wife, Constance, appeared next to them with her sister Catherine. Levi remembered her instantly. They had met at Constance and Michael’s wedding, and then again at a ball about a year later. He had thought then that she was beautiful, and as he looked at her now, smiling up at him, he thought no different. She was still the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on.

“Ah, Constance!” Michael said, greeting his wife with a warm smile and a kiss on the cheek. “I have been wondering where you have gone, and I am not at all surprised to see you with your sister.” He turned to Levi. “Levi, you must remember Lady Catherine, Constance’s sister? I am sure that you met at our wedding.”

Levi nodded, the memory of their first meeting vivid in his mind. It seemed like a lifetime ago, when he had been a carefree young man celebrating his friend’s marriage. He had scarcely allowed himself to think of it since, with everything that he had had to worry about in the following months.

“Lady Catherine.” Levi bowed. “It is a pleasure to see you again.”

She looked at him with surprising frankness, then smiled. “It is a pleasure to see you again too, Your Grace.”

Levi winced a little at her use of his title. Of course, it was quite correct, but he still had not gotten used to it fully, and every time he heard it, it jarred him a little.

Her brown eyes were gentle and kind as she held his gaze. “I was very sorry to hear of the passing of your brother,” she said softly.

He nodded. “Thank you. It was a shock, I must confess.”

Levi found that he could not tear his gaze away from her. He remembered now, when they had met at Michael and Constance's wedding, how struck he had been with her beauty, and of course, that remained unchanged.

She was tall, lean and elegant, and her gown fitted her perfectly, skimming her figure. Her dark blonde hair was swept up onto the top of her head, with a few tendrils loose around her face. There was a quiet confidence about her that he remembered finding enchanting when he had met her, and he was sure that he would continue to do so today.

When he had met her before, it had seemed as if she had been surrounded by suitors, but he had always sensed that she had been looking for something deeper, more real than those encounters in a ballroom. And here she was, still unmarried, and still as captivating as ever.

Without even really thinking about what he was doing, he decided on his next course of action. "Lady Catherine, it is a long time since I have been to a ball. Do you think you could honor me with a dance, even if I am most terribly out of practice?"

She chuckled at his request. "Of course, Your Grace. And I promise not to cry if you step on my toes."

He smiled and took her arm, avoiding Michael's amused gaze as he did so, and led her across the room to the dance floor, where the orchestra was just about to begin playing a waltz.

Levi felt something fluttering in his chest as he took her in his arms. He tried his hardest to suppress it, even though as he looked at her, the memories came flooding back to him of the night they had first met, at the wedding, and how much he had wanted to dance with her then, but how fate had stolen him away when a message had arrived, telling him of his father's ill health. He had thought of her since and remembered her vivacious spirit. But something now made him hold back. There was much more at stake now that he was a duke.

"It is very pleasant to see you back in Society, Your Grace," Catherine said as they began to move around the dance floor.

Levi frowned. "I have been far too busy, I'm afraid, for balls and parties."

A look of confusion crossed Catherine's face, and he realized that his tone had been rather sharp, but he did not know what to say next, so he waited for her response, feeling rather hollow inside.

"I am sure that the duties of a duke are far beyond what a lady such as I would ever understand," she said crisply. "But I confess that I had thought at one point that you may have been traveling abroad," she said, a little hesitantly.

Levi scoffed. "In my previous life, that would very likely have been the reason for my absence, but now, I cannot hope to find much time for travel in the future." He paused and looked at her closely, wondering for a moment what it would feel like to be her, at the mercy of the marriage market and the rhythm and flow of the Seasons of the *ton*. "Have you had much chance to travel, Lady Catherine?"

She shook her head. "No, although I would love to see the world!" Her face broke into a smile. "When we were children, we had a large book of maps in the nursery, and we used to pour over it, imagining what all these places would be like. Italy, Greece, all those fascinating places, and then lands further away still, where there are great deserts of sand or expanses of ice. Can you imagine anything more thrilling?"

Levi could not help but smile at her enthusiasm. "And do you imagine that one day you might have the chance to travel to such places?"

Catherine looked into his eyes. "I hope that one day, when I am married, I might see the world with my husband." She looked at him through long eyelashes. "Although I suppose that you will think that is a rather naive thing to say, but it is what I hope, nevertheless."

"Well, you had better hope that your husband has nothing better to do than to travel around the world with his new wife!" Levi said, once again noting the unintended sharpness in his voice. "I suspect that most gentlemen who might find themselves lucky enough to marry you would also have to



dedicate some of their time to the more tedious pursuits of running an estate.”

The worst thing was, he thought as he watched her digesting what he had said, that a couple of years ago, before his life had changed forever, he would have agreed with her. He could think of nothing better than traveling the world with a beautiful and charming woman like Lady Catherine at his side. But he knew that now he could not allow himself to think that way.

“Your Grace, it is sad that you do not see any chances for adventure in your future,” Catherine said, giving him a rather mischievous smile.

Her smile almost knocked the wind out of him, her beauty had such an impact. And Levi could not help but respond to her in kind, returning her smile.

“Perhaps I have had enough adventures to last me a lifetime already,” he replied.

He knew that he was teasing her, pushing the boundaries of propriety, but somehow he could not stop himself. Her vivacious nature was drawing him in all over again.

“And I am sure that some of those adventures are not fit to be discussed in a ballroom, Your Grace,” she bit back, a hint of a challenge in her brown eyes. He felt her body stiffen slightly in his arms as they moved together around the dance floor.

Levi flinched at her forthright comment. How could he respond to that without stepping outside the bounds of propriety?

Fortunately, though, Catherine spoke again, saving him from the need to respond to her. “It is a shame that you do not see love and marriage as an adventure in itself, Your Grace.”

“I am not sure that love and marriage should go together in the same sentence if I am perfectly honest, Lady Catherine,” he replied.

He knew he should not be saying such things to her, and on so short an acquaintance too, but he felt as if he had known her for much longer. And somehow, he could not stop himself

from being honest with her, even though he thought that his words were probably not the ones she wanted to hear.

She seemed to flinch a little at his response. “I am rather sad that you think that, Your Grace, but I confess I am not surprised. Many men, it seems, feel the same way.”

“And perhaps many young ladies do too,” Levi retorted. “There are just not many who would dare to admit it out loud.”

“I think that young ladies are far less likely to use men for their own ends than the other way around!” Catherine replied rather hotly, her cheeks darkening a little at the turn that their conversation was taking.

Levi paused and took a breath. This was not the kind of conversation they should be having while dancing a waltz. He found that his gaze was drawn to her eyes, her face, no matter what he said or did. He tried to control himself a little better before he ended up saying something that he might regret later.

“Lady Catherine, forgive me,” he said slowly. “I am sure there are more pleasant things we could talk about, don’t you agree?”

Catherine cocked her head to the side and looked at him a little coyly. “More pleasant than marriage? Or love?”

“Come, Lady Catherine,” he cajoled, unable to resist returning her smile. “Let us talk of the weather instead, or perhaps the number of couples on the dance floor, or the shocking state of the roads. I think we are far more likely to agree on those topics.”

She gave a tiny shrug of her slim shoulders. “If you prefer it, Your Grace. You start, though. That kind of small talk always leaves me rather at a loss for words.”

He could not help but laugh at her wit as he twirled her around and the dance drew to a close. But he knew as he looked at her, her pretty face a little flushed from the exertion of the dance, that he must not think of her that way. She was just the kind of woman he would have chosen as a wife, all those years ago, but now, everything had changed, and he would have to

choose a different kind of young lady to share his life with. One with money, for starters.

He bowed stiffly in her direction as they left the dance floor. “Lady Catherine, thank you for the dance. I enjoyed your company very much.”

He found that he could not even bear to meet her eyes before he turned and walked away. How much he had changed in just the space of just two years. He reflected as he made his way towards the refreshments table for a much-desired glass of wine that he hardly recognized himself now—his life and outlook had changed so much.

He could no longer afford to think with his heart. It was his head that would have to be in charge from now on, no matter how captivating he found Lady Catherine Windham to be.



Catherine stood stock still, watching Levi walk away from her. She could hardly tear her eyes away from him. It was hard to believe how much he had transformed since the time she had first met him at Constance’s wedding.

How carefree he had seemed then, and how vivacious! And now, he was stiff and cold, and he seemed almost to be carrying a sense of anger with him too, at how his life had turned out. She felt a little sorry for him, at that moment. She knew from her brother the onerous nature of managing a dukedom, and she did not envy either man the task, but she did wonder at how miserable it seemed to have made Levi. He was not the same man at all.

And yet, there was a hint of something there in his eyes, and around the edges of his smile, that reminded her of the man she had met two years ago before he had been dragged away into a pit of bad news and responsibilities. There was a glimmer of something that was still there, in his playful smile. But she had seen the moment when he had shut it down and become cold and formal again.

As she turned to make her way back to her sister and brother, she saw something lying on the floor. It was a white cloth. She stooped to pick it up and saw that it was a gentleman's handkerchief, with the initials L.G. embroidered on it in a fine crimson thread. It must be Levi's.

She held it tightly in her hand, debating inwardly for a few moments what she should do with it.

Of course, she would return it. She should go and find him now and give it back to him. And, perhaps, in the moment of thanking her for her kindness, something of the real Levi would shine through the cold façade that he seemed to be hiding behind.

Catherine did not like to think that this new version of Levi was the real thing. No, it could not be. It scarcely seemed possible that he could have changed so much in such a short period of time. She found herself desperately hoping that she was right.

## CHAPTER THREE



Levi took a deep breath, feeling a surge of gratitude to be out here on the balcony in the cool night air. The ballroom was stifling, and after such a long time away from Society, he was rather surprised at how overwhelming he was finding the experience. He had never felt anxious or stressed at a ball before in his life, and now here he was, grateful for a quiet moment away from the crowd so that he could gather his thoughts in peace.

Michael stood next to him, a glass of wine in his hand. “So, how was your dance with Catherine?” he asked a little slyly.

Levi rolled his eyes. Was there to be no escape? “It was perfectly pleasant,” he replied flatly.

“Perfectly pleasant!” Michael exclaimed. “Good Lord, man, that is faint praise, indeed, for a woman such as Lady Catherine.

Levi frowned. “She is a very nice young lady,” he said but stopped after that. There was nothing more to say.

“I seem to remember a time when you thought a good deal more of her than that,” Michael said teasingly. “When you first met her at the wedding, you could not keep your eyes off her. We all thought—”

Levi raised a hand to stop him. He had heard quite enough. “I can scarcely even remember the encounter that you mention, Michael,” he replied sharply. “And there was certainly no chance of... well, whatever you are implying that you all thought was going to happen. She is not the woman for me.”

“But you were infatuated with her!” Michael ploughed on.

“Please, do not speak another word of it,” Levi insisted. “You are causing me great embarrassment. She is very pretty, yes, of course she is. As Constance’s sister, how could she not be? But that is all there is to it.”

Michael frowned. “What has changed your mind?”

Levi was about to protest that nothing had changed his mind, that he thought she was as beautiful as ever, but he held back. How could he indulge these thoughts when he had to forget everything he had once believed and become a different man, now that his life and his responsibilities had changed forever?

There was no point in going back over old ground. Instead, he would address the present situation.

“She is convinced that she will be able to travel the world with her husband when she finds him,” he said. “And I tried to tell her that if she marries a man with a title—as she almost certainly will, given her own elevated position in Society—then he will not be at liberty to gad about the place with her for months on end if he has an estate to run.”

Michael chuckled. “And I imagine she did not take kindly to your bursting her bubble like that.”

Levi shook his head. “Indeed, she did not,” he replied. “And then, she began to prattle on about love. Really, Michael, she is rather childish for her age. She has the naivety of a debutante, even though she has a good few Seasons under her belt.”

Michael raised an eyebrow. “That is rather a harsh thing to say, don’t you think, my friend?”

Levi felt a twinge of guilt, but he pushed it aside. He could not have all of Catherine’s extended family fantasizing about an attachment between them that had never and could never exist.

“She needs to be careful,” Levi said. “If she carries on like this, she will never find a match. She will end up being a spinster aunt to all of Neil and Constance’s children, and never find the happiness she is so clearly desperate for.”

Michael sighed. “We all just want her to be happy.”

“Well, I have heard rumors that she has no dowry, and I think that this may well be affecting her chances when it comes to finding a husband. And in all honesty,” Levi continued, “that is another reason why I could not consider her as a possible wife, regardless of all the other reasons. I need to marry a woman who will bring with her the money I need to save the estate. There is no point in me wasting my time with young ladies who have nothing to offer in that respect.”

He paused for a moment, glancing up at the inky-black night sky above. “And the most important thing, Michael, is that Lady Catherine is looking for love. And that is not something I can give to her, or to any other young lady. I will never have the time or the energy to dedicate myself to romance, and all that nonsense, while I have a dukedom to run.”

Michael stared at him. “Levi, you are much changed, I must confess,” he said, a little sadly. “I did not think that I would ever hear you speak of marriage in such a cold, business-like manner. But I shall not try to persuade you of any alternative views. I can see that your mind is made up, and I cannot force you to agree with me on this.”

“Indeed, you cannot,” Levi murmured, then turned to reach for his glass of wine, which he had left on the stone wall of the balcony. And at that moment, his eyes fell on Catherine, who was walking towards them, with a handkerchief in her hands. His handkerchief, if he was not very much mistaken.



Catherine had come out onto the balcony to look for Levi and seen him almost instantly, standing chatting with Michael. His height made him stand out amongst every other person present, and she could not help but notice his impressive stature and the strength in his broad shoulders. Somehow, she could not help but look at him. She had approached slowly, intending to speak to him immediately, but once she had heard her name being mentioned, she had stepped back and hidden

behind a pillar. She had heard almost every word he had spoken about her.

Childish! Desperate! How dare he say such things about her. And to suggest that she would end up a spinster because her ideas of marriage were so ridiculous. She may well have had those thoughts herself, but it stunned her most horribly to hear them coming from another's mouth, particularly his.

She had been wringing his handkerchief between her hands as she listened to his words, and now she wished she had never even bothered to pick it up. How foolish she had been to want to speak to him some more. There was nothing to uncover, no hidden depths in the Duke's personality or character that he was keeping concealed.

No, he was just the same as every other gentleman she had met, in her many Seasons in Society. Those many Seasons that should, according to him, have made her more cynical and more prepared to see marriage as nothing more than a business deal.

Well, she never would. She had made that promise to herself a long time ago.

And, he had revealed his true motives for reentering Society. He was looking for a rich wife to get him out of trouble. All he was interested in was a young lady's dowry, just like all the other gentlemen.

Catherine resolved, at that moment, that she was not going to let him get away with it. Any other lady would have run off crying, her heart broken to hear a gentleman—nay, a duke—speak so harshly of her. But not Catherine. She refused to give in to it. Her anger was stronger than her disappointment. She would face him and not let his insults go unpunished.

She took a deep breath, gripped the handkerchief tightly in her hands, and moved from behind the pillar, then walked purposefully towards Levi and Michael. She saw the look of horror on his face when he saw her. She hoped that his heart was seized with panic at the thought that she might have overheard him.



His face changed after a split second, and he gave her a neutral, polite smile. “Lady Catherine, how nice to see you again.”

She bobbed a small curtsy, determined to do everything properly throughout this conversation. No one would be able to accuse her of impropriety, no matter how angry she was.

“I was just coming to return this to you, Your Grace,” she said, handing him the handkerchief with a smile. “And to say what a pleasure it was to see you again in Society after your long absence. I do hope that you find what it is you are looking for, now that you are amongst us again.”

She gave him a long look and saw, with a certain feeling of satisfaction, that he at least had the decency to look embarrassed. He broke her gaze and looked at the floor.

“Well, I shall take my leave now and go and find Constance and Isabel, but I do look forward to our next meeting, Your Grace.” She turned to Michael. “I will see you later, Michael,” she added, then turned away and left the balcony, walking purposefully back into the ballroom.

She would make the Duke pay for his insults, there was no doubt about it. She was not quite sure yet how she would go about it, but she was not going to let him get away with speaking about her in such a dismissive and cruel way.



Levi watched Catherine walking away, a sinking feeling in his chest. He could tell that she had not meant a word of what she had said. Her smile had not reached her eyes, and there was something about the look in her eyes that had made him uncomfortable. He had a rather ominous feeling that there was trouble ahead, and it was the last thing in the world that he needed, with everything else he had to worry about.

“Well, it was nice of her to bring your handkerchief back,” Michael said, looking at him hopefully.

“Please, Michael, will you admit defeat on this, once and for all?” Levi sighed. “She brought my handkerchief back because she is a well-brought-up young lady who thinks about other people. It means nothing. That is the end of it.” He picked up his wine glass and drained it, then set it down on the stone wall with a thud. “Come on, let’s go inside. I want another drink.”

Michael nodded and followed him back into the ballroom.

Levi felt the heat of the room hitting him in the face as soon as they entered. He fought his way through the crowd to the refreshments table and managed to get hold of a glass of wine for himself and one for Michael. Then, they found a place to stand where they could survey everything that was going on, without being caught too much in the throng.

“Well, Levi, since you will not have Catherine, we must find you someone else,” Michael said, looking around the room. “I’ll see what I can do.”

He stalked off to where a group of young ladies were gathered with their mothers, and probably their aunties and grandmothers and goodness knows who else.

Levi looked away. He was not particularly enjoying this new quest to find a wife, even though it had only just started, and it was his own idea. But he forced himself to look around the room again. He would make no progress if he stared at the floor and drank rather too much wine than was good for him.

He regretted looking up almost immediately, though, for across the room, he caught Catherine staring at him. She did not smile, and he saw something like coldness in her eyes.

Once again, he forced himself to look away. He was sure that trouble was on the horizon. It seemed to him almost as if Catherine was plotting something, although he had no idea what could be on her mind. He would face up to it, though, and tackle whatever problems came his way head-on.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In case you love free books, you will find one that Hazel never published on Amazon. A gift to her followers! You can find it on her real Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/hazellinwoodauthor>.

Influenced by the extraordinary tales of Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, Hazel Linwood has always adored the fairy-tale like romances of the past. The youngest of four sisters, she has spent most of her youth lost in the classic historical romances of her favorite authors. Despite her parents' efforts to persuade her to pursue a career in medicine, she found her heart's true calling in English Literature.

After obtaining her degree, Hazel worked as an English teacher. That was until she met her husband and decided to indulge in her secret passion...writing! When she isn't writing, Hazel enjoys spending time with her family, travelling or roaming the Texan countryside.

Embark on this journey of desire, decorum and intense love of Regency England. Let Hazel transport you into an era of pure, sincere love and charming lords that will take your breath away!

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