



THE LADY OF A LYON

THE LYON'S DEN CONNECTED WORLD



LINDA RAE SANDE

THE LADY OF A LYON

The Lyon's Den Series

Linda Rae Sande



© Copyright 2024 by Linda Rae Sande

Text by Linda Rae Sande

Cover by Dar Albert

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

P.O. Box 23

Moreno Valley, CA 92556

ceo@dragonbladepublishing.com

Produced in the United States of America

First Edition January 2024

Kindle Edition

Reproduction of any kind except where it pertains to short quotes in relation to advertising or promotion is strictly prohibited.

All Rights Reserved.

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

License Notes:

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook, once purchased, may not be re-sold. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it or borrow it, or it was not purchased for you and given as a gift for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. If this book was purchased on an unauthorized platform, then it is a pirated and/or unauthorized copy and violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Do not purchase or accept pirated copies. Thank you for respecting the author's hard work. For subsidiary rights, contact Dragonblade Publishing, Inc.

Other than the characters and the setting of Lyon's Gate Manor, no previously copyrighted or other proprietary materials appear in this work.

All other characters depicted in this work are imaginary and are not intended to refer to specific places or living persons. The opinions expressed in this manuscript are solely the opinions of the author and do not represent the opinions or thoughts of the publisher.



ARE YOU SIGNED UP FOR DRAGONBLADE'S BLOG?

You'll get the latest news and information on exclusive giveaways, exclusive excerpts, coming releases, sales, free books, cover reveals and more.

Check out our complete list of authors, too!

No spam, no junk. That's a promise!

[Sign Up Here](#)



Dearest Reader;

Thank you for your support of a small press. At Dragonblade Publishing, we strive to bring you the highest quality Historical Romance from some of the best authors in the business. Without your support, there is no 'us', so we sincerely hope you adore these stories and find some new favorite authors along the way.

Happy Reading!

CEO, Dragonblade Publishing

**Additional Dragonblade books by
Author Linda Rae Sande**

The Lyon's Den Series

[The Courage of a Lyon](#)

[The Lady of a Lyon](#)

Other Lyon's Den Books

[Into the Lyon's Den by Jade Lee](#)

[The Scandalous Lyon by Maggi Andersen](#)

[Fed to the Lyon by Mary Lancaster](#)

[The Lyon's Lady Love by Alexa Aston](#)

[The Lyon's Laird by Hildie McQueen](#)

[The Lyon Sleeps Tonight by Elizabeth Ellen Carter](#)

[A Lyon in Her Bed by Amanda Mariel](#)

[Fall of the Lyon by Chasity Bowlin](#)

[Lyon's Prey by Anna St. Claire](#)

[Loved by the Lyon by Collette Cameron](#)

[The Lyon's Den in Winter by Whitney Blake](#)

[Kiss of the Lyon by Meara Platt](#)

[Always the Lyon Tamer by Emily E K Murdoch](#)

[To Tame the Lyon by Sky Purington](#)

[How to Steal a Lyon's Fortune by Alanna Lucas](#)

[The Lyon's Surprise by Meara Platt](#)

[A Lyon's Pride by Emily Royal](#)

[Lyon Eyes by Lynne Connolly](#)

[Tamed by the Lyon by Chasity Bowlin](#)

[Lyon Hearted by Jade Lee](#)

[The Devilish Lyon by Charlotte Wren](#)

[Lyon in the Rough by Meara Platt](#)

[Lady Luck and the Lyon by Chasity Bowlin](#)

[Rescued by the Lyon by C.H. Admirand](#)

[Pretty Little Lyon by Katherine Bone](#)
[The Courage of a Lyon by Linda Rae Sande](#)
[Pride of Lyons by Jenna Jaxon](#)
[The Lyon's Share by Cerise DeLand](#)
[The Heart of a Lyon by Anna St. Claire](#)
[Into the Lyon of Fire by Abigail Bridges](#)
[Lyon of the Highlands by Emily Royal](#)
[The Lyon's Puzzle by Sandra Sookoo](#)
[Lyon at the Altar by Lily Harlem](#)
[Captivated by the Lyon by C.H. Admirand](#)
[The Lyon's Secret by Laura Trentham](#)
[The Talons of a Lyon by Jude Knight](#)
[The Lyon and the Lamb by Elizabeth Keysian](#)
[To Claim a Lyon's Heart by Sherry Ewing](#)
[A Lyon of Her Own by Anna St. Claire](#)
[Don't Wake a Sleeping Lyon by Sara Adrien](#)
[The Lyon and the Bluestocking by E.L. Johnson](#)
[The Lyon's Perfect Mate by Cerise DeLand](#)
[The Lyon Who Loved Me by Tracy Sumner](#)
[Lyon of the Ton by Emily Royal](#)
[The Lyon's Redemption by Sandra Sookoo](#)
[Truth or Lyon by Katherine Bone](#)
[Luck of the Lyon by Belle Ami](#)
[The Lyon, the Liar and the Scandalous Wardrobe by Chasity
Bowlin](#)
[Lyon's Roar by Tabetha Waite](#)
[The Lyon's First Choice by Sara Adrien](#)

Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

Publisher's Note

Additional Dragonblade books by Author Linda Rae Sande

Other Lyon's Den Books

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-One

About the Author



CHAPTER ONE

A Death in the Study

Autumn 1815, Penthurst Place, near Burwash, Sussex

THE BLOOD-CURDLING SCREAM that erupted from Annabelle Hutchins, Viscountess Burwick, should have been enough to wake the dead. It was certainly enough to bring the butler, a footman, and the housekeeper of Penthurst Place rushing into the study and to send her son, Benton, into the arms of his nurse. It was not enough, however, to bring her husband back to life.

“What is it, my lady?” Gilbertson asked, his calm manner most annoying at such a moment as this.

“Burwick. I think... I think he’s dead,” Annabelle whispered, her hands clutched to her chest. The fright she had experienced at feeling the middle-aged man’s cold skin now had tears pricking the corners of her eyes. “He was fine only a few minutes ago,” she added as her entire body began to tremble.

In fact, Harold Hutchins, Viscount Burwick, had summoned her only the hour before, asking if she might accommodate him in his study. For the past four years, his appetite for sexual favors had him requesting her presence at least five times a week at various hours of the day or night, in any room of the country estate in which they lived near the village of Burwash in Sussex.

She’d been happy to oblige. How could she not when the viscount had offered marriage at a time when she might have

been forced to prostitute herself to a clientele far poorer than the titled men she had entertained at *The Elegant Courtesan* in London? A well-endowed flame-haired beauty, she had been Burwick's favorite—and only—lady of the evening. When the owner of the establishment, the late David Fitzwilliam, had been forced to close the business upon inheriting the Norwick earldom, Burwick made her an offer she couldn't refuse.

Marriage.

A marriage that brought with it respectability, a title, and extreme wealth. All she had to do was accommodate Harold Hutchins, which she was happy to do. He was an excellent lover. Generous. Not the least bit salacious in his demands. She was practically in love with him and probably would have been more fully had he been just a bit more passionate with his want for her.

"I will send for a physician immediately," Gilbertson announced.

Pulled from her reverie, Annabelle furrowed her brows. "Physician?" she repeated.

"I do believe a physician is best. To confirm the death and file the appropriate paperwork, my lady," the butler replied. "So, your son can be declared the Viscount Burwick."

Annabelle blinked. Gilbertson was right. Benton was now the viscount. Her gaze darted to the doorway, but the boy's nurse was no longer framed in the opening. "Of course. Thank you," she replied.

She slowly turned to regard her late husband with a wince. At least he had tucked in his shirt tails and refastened the buttons at the top of his breeches before taking his last breath. Anyone unfamiliar with the viscount might have thought him disheveled even when his valet had finished dressing him in the mornings. As for the expression on his face, Annabelle felt heat suffuse her own, for he looked thoroughly content. Satiated. Like he always did after he'd had his way with her in the middle of the day.

“My lady?”

Annabelle gave a start. Mrs. Gilbertson stood not three feet away, a look of concern aging her more than her five-and-fifty years. “Yes?” she managed to say without sobbing.

“Apologies, my lady, but I’ve brought tea to your salon. I think it’s best you wait there,” the housekeeper said as she placed a hand at the small of Annabelle’s back and urged her to move away from the only sofa in the study.

“Thank you,” Annabelle whispered. “Where is Benton?” she asked, worry for her son momentarily replacing her thoughts of what a physician might think when he examined the late viscount. Would he be able to determine the cause of death? Would he discover her husband had lain with her only a few minutes ago?

Would he conclude Harold died from too much sexual congress?

Was that even possible?

At least he hadn’t died whilst she’d been atop him on the sofa, “riding St. George” as he liked to say.

He had certainly enjoyed playing the role of St. George lately. Nearly every day of late, now that she thought about it.

She absently gripped her skirts and gave them a quick shake, worried they might not have fallen into place of their own accord when she stepped back from the sofa only moments ago.

“Nurse took your son upstairs, my lady,” Mrs. Gilbertson assured her as she led her from the study and through the corridor toward the front of the estate home. The country house had been part of the Burwick viscountcy for over a hundred years.

A moment later, Annabelle was seated in her favorite chair with a cup of tea and saucer held in one hand and a spoon in the other. She absently stirred the steaming liquid as she stared at the red-orange flames in the fireplace.

For the first year of their marriage, she had thought Harold was attracted to her because of her breasts. Large, round, and fairly pert, they seemed to hypnotize him as they bobbed with his every thrust.

When she learned it was because of her flame-red hair, she had to stifle her immediate reaction, which was to laugh at him. A snort managed to erupt, though, which had them both laughing with shared amusement in his bed.

My hair? she had replied in disbelief.

Indeed. I feared you were using henna or some such to color it, but it grows out that color, he had replied in awe. *The perfect color to complement your green eyes. And yet, you never display the temper associated with such hair color.*

Annabelle remembered that moment as if it had happened only yesterday, for she had been so surprised and touched by his words, that she had climbed atop him and made mad, passionate love to him before whispering in his ear, *I love you.*

From that moment on, Harold Hutchins behaved like a man half his age. He bestowed her with jewels. Had hot-house flowers delivered on a regular basis. Surprised her with bolts of fine fabrics and furs. They entertained nearby peers and gentry and accepted invitations to all the *soirées* and balls to which they were invited in their part of Sussex.

Annabelle could almost believe she had always been a respectable lady.

Almost.

For if Harold had just a bit too much to drink, he would mention how lucky he was to have been a client of hers at *The Elegant Courtesan*.

Thankfully he never did so in the company of peers, but despite his invitations, she never accompanied Harold when he went to London for Parliament for fear he might. That he continued to speak of their time together at *The Elegant Courtesan* when in their marriage bed always had her feeling

shame. More so than the reminder that she was the illegitimate and apparently forgotten daughter of a baron.

She knew Mrs. Gilbertson was already beyond the salon door when the first tears pricked the corners of her eyes. The hand holding the saucer began to tremble, and she set the porcelain disk on a nearby table.

Rushing back to the study, Annabelle sighed when she saw that her husband was exactly how she had left him only moments before. “Oh, Harold,” she whispered as the tears streamed down her face. “Why so soon? You promised you’d live to see your son graduate from Cambridge.”

She almost expected a response from the corpse. When he merely farted, she wrinkled her nose and returned to the salon. She needed to make a new plan for her life—and her son’s.



CHAPTER TWO

An Earl Learns He's Broke

Nearly a year later, No. 32 Oxford Street, London

“AS I TRIED to explain in my numerous letters, you are broke, my lord,” James S. Peabody, Esquire, stated with an exaggerated sigh.

Jeffrey Murray-Hicks, Earl of Tidworth, slumped into the chair in which he had been sitting since arriving at his solicitor's office earlier that morning. Although he had been receiving regular letters from his man of business for the many months since his father's death, he rarely read them. “How can this be?” he asked in dismay. “Has someone robbed my accounts?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Peabody replied. “I know this will not make you feel better, my lord, but you are not alone in this unfortunate situation. Crop failures from the last two years have caused many of your peers to suffer the same fate. Those of you who rely on your farms for the majority of your income have succumbed to a cruel trick by Mother Nature,” he explained. “Incessant rains. Cold temperatures—”

“You needn't remind me,” Jeffrey interrupted, remembering all too well how it had rained every single day of the past June. He hadn't considered that all that rain might have had a detrimental effect on his tenant farms.

His attentions had been elsewhere. *He* had been elsewhere.

“What about the income from the mines? I do still have a couple of those, don't I?” he asked as he wracked his brain for

a solution and suddenly remembered them. Surely there was some sort of income source still providing monies for the Tidworth earldom.

“Some, and those should improve now that the weather is better, and the mines are no longer flooded. The expenses were nearly as much as what they brought in last year,” Peabody explained as he pulled a ledger book from one corner of his desk. He opened it and turned it so Jeffrey could see for himself. “My annual fee was almost what you cleared. Your profit should improve... but the monies won’t be there for some time.”

Not having learned how to fill in a ledger, Jeffrey hardly knew what he was looking at as the solicitor pointed to various numbers and said words he didn’t understand.

Profit and loss.

He knew the meanings of those words. As for the rest, he had never had a head for business. He was the second son. The spare heir. A military man more comfortable commanding a regiment on foreign soil than arguing for or against Corn Laws in Parliament.

With the death of his older brother, George—the cold snap of the winter of 1815 brought with it pneumonia and influenza—Jeffrey had inherited the earldom before his father had had a chance to teach him what he would need to know to run the Tidworth earldom, for he, too, died of pneumonia only a few weeks after George was buried.

Despite the war against Napoleon, Jeffrey’s superiors in the British Army ordered him to return to London where he was relieved of command.

You’re an earl now, he was told. Last of your line. Sell your commission and do your duty.

Jeffrey gave a start. “How much do you suppose I can get if I sell my commission?” he asked the solicitor.

Peabody blinked. “Commission, sir?”

“I’m an officer. A lieutenant colonel in the British Army. I was told to sell my commission, but I... I haven’t yet.”

Straightening in his chair, Peabody regarded his client with renewed interest. “Three... mayhap four-thousand pounds, I should think,” he replied, hopeful he was right. “It would be enough to tide you over for a time. Perhaps enough for the rest of the year.”

For a moment, Jeffrey imagined an evening gambling at the *Jack of Spades* or the *Queen of Hearts*. The two Mayfair-based gaming hells were practically across the street from one another. He was rot at dice—hazard would break him—but he was a fairly good card player. Perhaps he could parlay a thousand pounds into something more.

“I would advise against gambling as a means of increasing your monies, sir,” Peabody stated as if he could read the earl’s mind.

Jeffrey scoffed. “I am not a gambling man,” he argued before he furrowed his brows. “What *do* you advise?”

Peabody didn’t hesitate with his reply. “Marriage, sir.”

It was Jeffrey’s turn to blink. The word was said so quickly and with such finality, that he wondered if the solicitor had practiced his response before his arrival. “Marriage?” he repeated, managing to say it without his voice sounding too strangled. “I cannot imagine how taking a wife could *improve* my financial situation.”

“You’re not getting any younger, sir, and you need an heir,” Peabody stated. “A dowry would help restore your coffers until the harvests are better. Or simply marriage to a wealthy woman may be enough. Mayhap a rich commoner in search of a title in exchange for shoring up your accounts,” he explained as if he made the recommendation on a regular basis.

Given this past year’s weather, perhaps he did.

Still, Jeffrey gave Peabody a look of disbelief. “A title?” he repeated. “For *money*?” He couldn’t imagine anyone

wanting a title. “Why? Why would a woman subject herself to the vagaries of London gossip mongers and mean-spirited ladies in exchange for... what? A marriage of convenience? The right to style herself a lady? Invitations to balls and *soirées*?”

Dukedoms and marquessates came with a coronet, too, but how many of those were available? Damn things rarely fit a woman’s head and only made her look pretentious.

“You would not be the first to marry for blunt, my lord,” the solicitor said with a shrug.

Wincing, Jeffrey considered how much time would be involved in attending entertainments. In finding and courting a young lady. Even if he made a proposal, she might not provide an answer until the end of the Little Season.

Could his coffers hold out that long?

Could he?

“I’d rather face a thousand of Napoleon’s armed frogs than have to marry for money,” Jeffrey claimed.

Peabody grimaced. “My lord, at least you won’t be shot at by a wife. As long as you don’t do something foolish to them,” he said, wincing. Then he shrugged. “The point is, you will survive, as will your earldom.”

The way he felt at that moment, Jeffrey wasn’t so sure. “I suppose I have to speak with someone about securing invitations to the upcoming Society events,” he said. “I hardly know where to start.”

Clearing his throat, the solicitor gave him a sympathetic look but didn’t say anything.

“You have a suggestion?” Jeffrey asked. “Spit it out!”

Peabody rifled through his top desk drawer and pulled out a white pasteboard card. “There is a matchmaker who specializes in situations such as yours, sir,” he replied, holding out the card. “Titled men in need of monied women.”

“Oh?” Jeffrey responded, arching his eyebrow with interest as he took the card.

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon.”

Jefferey gave a start. “The Black Widow of Whitehall?”

“She’s one and the same, sir.”

Scoffing, Jeffrey stared at the card. “She owns The Lyon’s Den?”

“Indeed, sir. It’s... it’s actually a front for her matchmaking service. Men play high-stakes games of chance in exchange for the opportunity to be matched with a woman of means,” Peabody explained.

“Only a moment ago you warned me not to gamble,” Jeffrey reminded the solicitor.

“I did, sir. That was before you indicated an interest in finding a wealthy wife.”

About to mention he *wasn't* interested, Jeffrey decided he needed to be. He glanced down at the card, his brows furrowed. “What’s in it for the woman?” he asked in a near-whisper.

“A titled man, sir. And protection. Some of the women may not be... perfectly *suitable* if you catch my meaning. But I’ve never heard any complaints.”

Jeffrey’s discomfort slowly eased as he considered the solicitor’s words. “I suppose it’s worth the time to at least talk with the widow.”

“You can have a footman deliver word you’d like an appointment,” Peabody suggested. “You needn’t make a commitment until you’ve heard what she has to say.”

“I suppose you receive a cut of the deal should I agree to the arrangement?”

Peabody looked suitably alarmed. “I do not, sir.” After a moment, he said, “Although that’s not a bad idea, given the number of lords I have sent her way.” When Jeffrey gave him

a quelling glance, he added. "I would not accept payment, sir. I am a solicitor with an impeccable reputation, and I won't do anything to tarnish it."

From the man's look of offense, Jeffrey decided Peabody was telling the truth. "Unless I come across a potential wife between here and home, I shall secure an appointment," he said, making his way to the office door.

"Very good, sir. You won't regret it."

Not entirely convinced, Jeffrey rolled his eyes as he took his leave. "I already do," he whispered.



CHAPTER THREE

A Trip to London

Meanwhile...

THE EARLIER MORNING drizzle had ceased, and gray clouds were parting in favor of blue skies when the Burwick traveling coach rumbled into London.

Annabelle pushed apart the curtains and peered out, unsure of where they were. Despite having lived in the capital most of her life—she had been born in a townhouse her mother’s paramour had arranged on her behalf—she knew immediately that much had changed since Harold Hutchins, Viscount Burwick, had proposed and told her he wished to take her to wife. That had been the day after the Cyprians were informed the owner of *The Elegant Courtesan* had inherited the Norwick earldom and would be closing the establishment.

The news hadn’t been a surprise. Other than the income they earned from their farms or from their horse racing endeavors or gambling at their favorite gaming hells, peers of the realm weren’t supposed to make money from businesses. There had been some hope that Norwick might find a buyer for *The Elegant Courtesan*, however.

Annabelle hadn’t been up for the risk of holding out for a new owner, though. And, Lord Burwick had always been good to her. Always treated her as a lady during their twice-weekly times together. With his intent to live in the country came the relief that she would not be under the harsh censure of the ladies of the *ton*, for she was sure some client from *The*

Elegant Courtesan would recognize her and tongues would wag despite the protection a husband could provide her.

Burwick had also shown his regard for her when he bestowed her with a number of jewels, which for a time she had thought were merely paste. Imagine her surprise when a jeweler in Royal Tunbridge Wells had confirmed the value of a ruby bracelet when she was in a shop to buy a gift for her mother.

They're real? she had asked in shock.

The gemologist had given her such a look of disbelief, that she had to say that she had no reason to know one way or the other. *It was made here, my lady,* she was told. *As were your earbobs.*

Bless Burwick's heart, Annabelle thought now as the coach stuttered to a halt in front of a townhouse on Bruton Street.

“Are we there?” Benton asked before his mouth rounded into a huge yawn. He blinked several times as he came to full wakefulness from his morning nap.

Annabelle regarded the five-year-old with a grin. “We are, indeed, young man,” she replied, once again hoping she was doing the right thing by bringing the young viscount to London. After nearly a year of mourning, she realized she could no longer remain sequestered in a country estate near the eastern border of Sussex. She needed to see to her son's future. Needed to find him a suitable tutor and especially, a new father. Someone who knew what it meant to be a peer of the realm. Someone to teach him what he would need to know to take his seat in Parliament when he was finally of an age to do so.

Burwick had started Benton's social education. The boy knew how to bow and to take a lady's hand to his lips and brush them over her knuckles when he was introduced to her. He knew to remain silent at the dinner table unless someone addressed him.

He hadn't, however, begun his academic education. The boy had been too young to learn to read. Too young to learn arithmetic.

The details Burwick didn't know—such as how to keep his ledgers—Annabelle had seen to doing. The topic of her abilities in arithmetic had been one of their more interesting evenings together at *The Elegant Courtesan*. A night when Burwick announced he didn't require her soft body for a tumble but rather her attentive nature, for he had come from the office of his man of business, all hot and bothered, and then requested they simply spend the evening in conversation.

Not having had another client who merely wished to talk had Annabelle on alert. She'd listened as he explained how he was sure his employee was embezzling from him but knew not how to prove it.

You have not reviewed the ledgers yourself? she had asked in response.

From his grimace and look of embarrassment, she had realized Burwick didn't know *how* to read the ledgers. Since he had inherited the viscountcy at a young age, Annabelle decided his father hadn't had the chance to teach him. *If you trust me—*

I do.

Bring them when next you come, and I'll review the numbers for you, she had suggested. She had done the household accounts for her mother, a mistress to the baron who was her father, from the time she was eleven. Since she usually had her days to herself at the high-end brothel, Annabelle had the time for such an endeavor. Reviewing ledgers would provide a welcome diversion.

So Burwick had arrived for his next appointment carrying three thick, leather-bound ledgers. For the next three afternoons, Annabelle had carefully added every entry on a separate sheet of paper, done the subtractions, and written corrections in small print at the bottom of each page of the

ledgers. When she had finished her audit, she was appalled to discover Viscount Burwick's man of business had indeed been stealing from him.

Three-thousand pounds, my lord, she announced when he next appeared for his usual tumble and an evening of conversation. He is a thief. I do hope you will see to it he is brought to justice.

A week later, Burwick had proposed marriage.

A fortnight later, they were married and on their way to Penthurst Place in Sussex.

She never learned what happened to the man of business.

The coach door opened and the driver, Pickerton, appeared. "We've arrived, my lady," he said. "My lord," he added, obviously still uncomfortable addressing a young boy as a lord. "It appears the butler is expecting you."

"Thank you, Pickerton. I did send word ahead," she said. One of the benefits of being in charge of the Burwick viscountcy ledgers was that she knew where the monies were sent, and so she knew the names of the household staff at Burwick House in Mayfair. With Benton's nurse having stayed behind in Sussex—she didn't wish to move to the capital—Annabelle had also requested candidates be brought in to apply for the position.

Benton had already come to his feet, his small hands brushing his short pants and coat sleeves into place. "May I assist you, my lady?" he asked as he made his way to the door and held out a hand.

Annabelle had to resist the urge to titter at his earnest expression. "Why, yes, my lord," she replied. She watched as he took the steps out of the coach one by one with the help of Pickerton and then turned to hold out his hand to her.

Even though they had left only the afternoon before and spent the night at Mount Edgcumbe House in Royal Tunbridge Wells, Annabelle felt as if they had been traveling for days. Benton had kept himself entertained with a few wooden toys

and a sock puppet. When he grew restless, she surprised him with a box of metal soldiers she had found in the bottom of one of Burwick's dresser drawers.

They were his when he was a child, Burwick's valet had explained when she asked about them. He intended to give them to his heir when he was old enough.

Although she didn't think Benton was really old enough to be playing war games, the boy was thrilled when he opened the wooden box that morning. Despite the incessant sway and occasional bump of the coach when it hit a hole in the road, he managed to line up the tin soldiers on the bench and play until an hour before they reached Burwick House. He had seen to putting all the soldiers back in their box before he stretched out on the bench and went to sleep.

"Welcome, my lady, my lord," the butler said as he dipped a bow.

"Might you be Dobbs?" Annabelle asked as she held out her right hand.

The butler's eyes widened as he shook her hand, obviously not expecting the courtesy. "Indeed, ma'am."

"I am Annabelle Hutchins, Lady Burwick," she said as she held a hand at her son's shoulder and added, "This is Benton, Viscount Burwick."

Dobbs bowed again to the boy. "My lord. Mrs. Dobbs has your rooms ready, and I'll have the footman see to your trunks right away," he added as he took Annabelle's redingote and gloves.

About to ask to meet the servants, Annabelle discovered the housemaids, housekeeper, cook, and a groom were already lined up beyond the small vestibule.

Sure to give each member of the staff a nod to their curtsy or bow, Annabelle asked a few questions of them before she allowed Mrs. Dobbs to take her and Benton up to their rooms.

“Miss Thompkins has volunteered to look after Lord Burwick until such time as a nurse can be hired,” Mrs. Dobbs said as they climbed the two flights of marble stairs to the second floor. “Truth be told, I think she will apply for the position.”

Annabelle recalled the petite maid with her dark curls and pink cheeks. She was probably no more than seventeen or eighteen years old, but she seemed especially happy upon her introduction to Benton. “Tell me, in your estimation, is it easier to find housemaids or nurses?” Annabelle asked.

“Oh, housemaids, no doubt,” Mrs. Dobbs replied as she threw open a door to a bedchamber. “Mr. Dobbs seems to think his lordship would be most comfortable in this room,” she said.

Annabelle glanced down to find her son grinning. “A far bit larger than your bedchamber at Penthurst Place, is it not?” she asked. His room there was off the nursery and contained a small trundle bed, a chest of drawers, and a shelf of books and toys.

“A bigger bed,” he said in a small voice. “Is this because I am a lord now?”

Placing a hand on his shoulder, Annabelle wondered if she should ask that he be moved to the nursery. Seeing his look of awe had her deciding they could at least try the arrangement. “I suppose it is. You’ll need to behave, though. No bouncing about on the bed.”

This bedchamber was nearly as large as a master suite, the bed covered in a blue velvet counterpane and the windows dressed with matching drapes. Decorative plasterwork adorned the wall near the ceiling and in the corners as well as around the door frame. The wood floor was covered in Aubusson carpeting. A fireplace was centered on one of the short walls and on the extended hearth in front of it stood two upholstered chairs. She could imagine Benton setting up his tin soldiers on the marble-tiled hearth.

“I won’t, Mother,” he said, barely able to contain his excitement. “Is it really mine?”

Annabelle ran a hand over his ginger-haired head and shrugged. “Apparently so. There will be no playing with your soldiers in the fire, though,” she warned. “Only on the hearth and carpet.”

“Yes, Mother.”

It was then she recognized he had his wooden box of soldiers tucked under one arm. She hadn’t even realized he had stepped out of the coach with them.

“Is there a nursery? A school room?” she asked, thinking there must not have been a room for a youngster if he was assigned a bedchamber appropriate for an adult.

“Upstairs,” Mrs. Dobbs affirmed. “The boy’s father grew up in this house, but the family always preferred the country house in Burwash, so they were only here during Parliament. This was the late Lord Burwick’s bedchamber.”

Annabelle nodded her understanding. “And the mistress suite?”

“Next door, my lady,” Mrs. Dobbs replied. Instead of going back out to the corridor, she led them through the connecting dressing room and into the next bedchamber. For every bit of blue there was in the master suite, the mistress suite featured peach, and the opposite arrangement of the bed and fireplace.

“This will do nicely,” Annabelle said, now wishing she had accepted Burwick’s invitation to come to the capital during the Season. She would have been happy to remain sequestered in the house, eschewing Society events in favor of making only occasional trips to shop, and to a lending library. If she traveled in an unmarked carriage, no one would know she was Viscountess Burwick.

As for now, her concern wasn’t whether she would be recognized as Annabelle, Viscountess Burwick, but rather as Miss Anne of *The Elegant Courtesan*.

Surely after five years, she wouldn't be recognized by any of the men who had been her clients.

Would she?



CHAPTER FOUR

An Earl Meets a Matchmaker

Later that day, Lyon's Gate Manor, Cleveland Row, Westminster

REGARDING THE FRONT of the five-story blue house at the end of Cleveland Row as if it might explode, Jeffrey Murray-Hicks, Earl of Tidworth, pulled his watch from his waistcoat pocket and winced at seeing the time.

He was late, and not by only a few minutes. After what he had learned from his solicitor, he had sent word ahead with a footman that he wished to speak with the proprietress of the gambling hell, The Lyon's Den, with the intention of arriving by four o'clock in the afternoon.

With the ringing of the bell of a nearby church, he realized it was half-past five. He had spent far too much time at his tailor's being measured and poked, and then even more time choosing fabrics for waistcoats and breeches, topcoats, and cravats as was expected of an earl.

Wearing a uniform was far easier than dressing as an aristocrat.

Tossing a coin to the driver of the hackney who had brought him from Tidworth House, Jeffrey turned and briefly studied the establishment. White Portland stone blocks decorated the corners of the otherwise blue-painted exterior, and a black, wrought iron balcony fronted the first floor. If he hadn't been told it was the location of The Lyon's Den, he would have assumed it was the home of a wealthy family.

He made his way to the black-painted door at the front. To one side stood a guard dressed in livery, his pantaloons, topcoat, and hat all black. From his bearing and stern expression, he had obviously served in some country's military. Before Jeffrey was near enough to ask if he had the right address, another man appeared from behind the front door, his garb matching that of the first.

"Theseus, you're needed on the main floor."

The burly guard nodded and disappeared into the house, and the new arrival took his place next to the door.

Jeffrey furrowed his brows when he realized he recognized the man. Not from any of the soldiers that had served under him on the Continent—he took pride in meeting each and every man who had been assigned to his regiment—but from another's command.

"Weren't you Tarly's batman?" he asked.

The guard's eyes barely rounded before he said, "Indeed, Lieutenant Colonel. Welcome to The Lyon's Den." He gave a slight bow.

"You work here...?" Jeffrey paused, struggling to remember the man's rank. "Forgive me. I don't recall your name."

"I am employed here as the escort manager, sir. I am called Titan."

Jeffrey straightened, sure the man's surname was something like Chris or Cross. "Well, Titan. I have an appointment with Mrs. Dove-Lyon, but I fear I've run terribly late."

"Due to circumstances over which you had no control," Titan stated. Although the comment might have been said with sarcasm, there was no hint of it in his voice.

Giving the guard a scoff, Jeffrey nodded. "Something like that. Will she be... angry, or—?"

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon is a busy woman, Lieutenant Colonel. But your late arrival has allowed another to gain an audience. One who is now a client, so my employer will not mind.”

Jeffrey frowned again. The news had him annoyed, for every man in need of the dowry of a young lady or the wealth of a rich widow meant there was more competition for him. And, less of a chance he might secure one for himself which he found reasonably pleasant in both manners and appearance. That Mr. Peabody would even suggest such an arrangement as using the owner of a gambling den for her skills as a matchmaker still had the earl bothered.

Confused, even.

Exactly how did Mrs. Dove-Lyon make the matches?

He was about to ask Titan, but the manager was already seeing to the door. “I’ll escort you up to her office,” he said.

Jeffrey nodded, his gaze darting to how Titan favored one gloved hand, fisting and spreading his fingers twice before gripping the door handle.

On the way into the house, yet another employee appeared. “May I escort you to the games, sir?” he asked.

About to decline, Jeffrey was prevented from doing so when Titan said, “He has an appointment, Egeus. If you’ll see to the entrance, I’ll take him upstairs.”

“Very good,” Egeus replied before he stepped out the front door.

Jeffrey watched the black-garbed Egeus pass by him, wondering at the odd name. He didn’t recognize the man, though, and turned to follow the former batman up an impressive flight of stairs. On either side of the main floor, he spied open doors leading to a cloak room and what appeared to be a gentlemen’s lounge.

Straight ahead and through a central corridor was a huge room filled with various gaming tables. Even at this time of the day, a few gentlemen were involved in a lively game of

hazard, the dice bouncing on a table covered in green felt. In one corner, a foursome was staring at playing cards tightly clutched in their hands, their occasional glances across the Honduran mahogany table filled with suspicion.

“I suppose it’s only this quiet during the day?” Jeffrey commented when Titan approached a closed door.

“By nine o’clock this evening, the gaming hall will be filled with players. More so on nights the gents are playing for the ladies,” Titan replied as he paused and knocked on the door.

“Playing for the ladies?” Jeffrey repeated.

Before Titan could respond, a female called out, “Come,” from the other side of the carved wooden door. Once again fisting and spreading the fingers of his left hand, Titan pressed down on the door handle.

About to ask again what the batman meant by his comment about men playing *for* the ladies, Jeffrey found he couldn’t when he spotted a black bombazine-clad matron watching him with interest from inside the office.

At least, he was fairly sure she was a matron. Only the bottom half of her face showed beneath the black netting of her small hat. She held a cup and saucer in front of her impressive bosom, one hand gripping the porcelain handle as if she was about to take a sip. Steam curled up from behind the rim, and for a moment, Jeffrey hoped she might offer him a cup.

He hadn’t drunk tea since before his time on the Continent, but he found he wanted some. With milk and sugar. The reminder of a time when his father and brother were still alive. A time when he never expected to have to take on the responsibilities of an earldom. A time when he would have been satisfied continuing his military career until he was either killed on a battlefield or pensioned from the British Army.

“Lord Tidworth has arrived for his appointment,” Titan said as he waved a hand to indicate Jeffrey should enter the

office. “Mrs. Dove-Lyon will see you now.”

Jeffrey suddenly felt as if he was about to have an audience with a superior officer. Mrs. Dove-Lyon was that imposing. That commanding. Although she merely regarded him from over the top of her teacup and through the black netting of her hat, what he could see of her gaze was filled with a combination of censure and curiosity.

Even though she didn't stand to curtsy, Jeffrey was quick to bow and reach for one of her hands. Arching a slender brow, she allowed him the courtesy as she set aside the teacup. A moment later and she had her elbows resting against the edge of a desk that looked as if it had seen better days.

“Lord Tidworth,” she said. “I expected you earlier this afternoon.”

“Please allow me to apologize for my tardiness,” Jeffrey was quick to say. “I've only recently returned to London and find things have changed a good deal.”

The brow briefly furrowed before Mrs. Dove-Lyon leaned back in her chair. “Have a seat, my lord, and tell me why you've come.” She gestured to an armchair set kitty-corner to her own throne-like seat.

Taking the proffered chair, Jeffrey allowed his gaze to dart about the office. Besides the well-used desk, the office featured some bookshelves, an ormolu clock, brass sconces on two walls, and a shabby carpet. The back wall of the office featured windows, apparently overlooking the gaming room. From the address of the gaming hell, he had expected finer fixtures and furniture.

Shouldn't the matchmaker strive for a better first impression?

Mrs. Dove-Lyon must have noticed his perusal, for she said, “Our gaming areas are exquisitely appointed and feature only the very best dealers. The appearance of my office is meant to ensure comfort, however. I don't wish for anyone to

feel intimidated when they are seeking assistance with affairs of the heart.”

About to argue that the heart had nothing to do with arrangements made by a matchmaker, Jeffrey decided not to bother. “All business, are you?” he replied, his attention going to the sheaf of papers on the side of her desk. He frowned when he recognized his name on the top sheet.

“Indeed. Now, why are you here, my lord?”

Jeffrey winced and wished he had ignored his solicitor’s advice. Telling a woman he had never met before that he was in search of one with some wealth and the ability to provide him an heir wasn’t exactly something he had ever imagined having to do. Prior to his service on the Continent, he hadn’t imagined needing a wife. He was the second son. He was never expected to inherit.

As for company of the female persuasion, before his departure to the Continent, he’d been satisfied visiting his favorite redhead at *The Elegant Courtesan* a few times a week.

The brief thought of the buxom girl called Anne had him wondering what might have become of her. He hadn’t expected to find the establishment still in business, but he had asked as to its fate upon his return to England. Learning the Earl of Norwick had closed the operation didn’t surprise him, but why no one else had purchased the business had him curious. Surely it was a profitable concern.

But not one of his, especially at this particular moment. “After years of serving in his Majesty’s army and never expecting to have to marry, I find I am in need of a wife,” Jeffrey stated in response to the matchmaker’s query.

“Ah, a military man. A lieutenant colonel, were you not?” she replied.

Glancing at the paper with his name on it, Jeffrey wondered how she could know anything about him. He had only made the appointment that morning. “I was,” he replied.

“Inheriting an earldom was unexpected,” she said.

He grimaced. She had done her research, but how? “Indeed. I would have preferred to remain where I was only a month ago or so,” he admitted.

“My late husband was a colonel,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon stated. “Colonel Lyons. Having followed the drum in my younger years, I can understand your discomfort with your new situation.”

Jeffrey straightened in his chair, understanding now why she exuded the air of command. She had obviously taken on her husband’s position, though in life rather than in the army. “My condolences on the loss of your husband. I did not have occasion to serve with him, nor do I recall having met the man.”

“You’re too young, I should think,” she replied, her head angling to one side. “He’s been gone for some time.” She straightened in her chair, captured a quill in one hand, and dipped the tip of it into an ink bottle. “Now, tell me, my lord, what are you seeking in the way of a wife?” she asked, once again all business.

Jeffrey furrowed a brow, realizing he was to trust this woman to find him a suitable match. One who could help avert his impending financial disaster. “Preferably one with a fortune,” he replied. “I understand from my solicitor you can assist with such a search.”

Humor showed in the widow’s eyes. “I appreciate your candid response, my lord. When it comes to women, do you have any preferences? Any proclivities we might need to accommodate?”

“Proclivities?” he repeated in surprise. “I’m looking for a wife. Not a damned highflyer. Pardon my French.”

When Mrs. Dove-Lyon merely continued to regard him with an expectant expression, he furrowed his brows. “What?”

She took a sip of tea, the liquid no longer emitting steam as it had when he arrived. “Do you wish to have a happy marriage?”

Jeffrey blinked. “Happy?” he repeated, wincing when he realized he sounded like a parrot given his tendency to repeat everything she said. For a moment, he recalled doing the same with Mr. Peabody. Perhaps he had developed the habit when confronting the officers and soldiers who reported to him on the Continent.

He could pretend incredulousness and doubt with the best of them. Repeating their answers was a means of intimidation. A way of making them think before they spoke.

At the moment, he wasn’t pretending. He did need to think before he answered the matchmaker, though. The combination of preferences, proclivities, and a happy marriage didn’t seem possible.

“How old are you, my lord?” she asked before he had a chance to respond to her last query.

Resisting the urge to repeat the question, Jeffrey inhaled a moment before he said, “Four-and-thirty.”

“Do you want a wife who is near to your age or much younger?”

Not having given it any consideration—he hadn’t even thought about marriage prior to the visit with his solicitor—Jeffrey took another breath. Memories of attending balls and *soirées* filled his mind’s eye.

He had despised Society events. Even if he was successful in avoiding the dancing by hiding in the card room, it meant he was trapped discussing politics with the other players, a topic on which he had never been comfortable.

He was a military man. He took orders. He gave orders. The reasons for decisions weren’t up for discussion. Once he took his brother’s seat in Parliament, though, he would have to pretend an interest.

As for his preference in women, he recalled the balls he had attended. Memories of young ladies fresh from the schoolroom—insipid, giggly girls put on display by their

managing mothers—had him wincing. “Closer to my age, I should think,” he announced. “Not so... ridiculous.”

“You won’t have much time to ensure your succession,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon warned. “You’ll want a younger widow, I should think. Someone who has already proven she can bear an heir.”

Jeffrey scoffed. “You’re suggesting I take on someone else’s whelp?”

The matchmaker angled her head to one side, a pointed glare suggesting he had no choice in the matter.

“All right. If I must,” he said with a shrug. Any widow with a boy would probably have a tutor seeing to his education, or if the lad was old enough, he would be sent off to boarding school. With any luck, he would never see him.

“Now... what features do you like in a woman?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked, plucking the paper from atop the pile. She once again dipped the quill into an ink pot.

An image of Anne, her large, bare breasts pressed onto his chest and her flame-red hair falling in waves around her face, flashed before Jeffrey’s mind’s eye. He shifted in the chair, shocked at how his body responded to the memory. “Red hair,” he blurted as he held his cupped hands in front of his chest.

He wasn’t even aware of what he had done with his hands until the matchmaker asked, “With fleshy breasts?”

Sure his face was as red as his waistcoat, Jeffrey cleared his throat. “Well, not so large that they’ll smother me,” he replied defensively.

“Tall, short, thin, round?” she asked as she wrote something on the paper.

He frowned. “No.”

A smirk formed at the edge of Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s lips before she angled her head and asked, “Anything she must be willing to do that might seem unusual or out of the ordinary?”

Jeffrey blinked. “Are you asking about my proclivities?”

She inhaled softly. “Have you fetishes? Anything that would drive you to seek the company of a mistress over remaining loyal to your wife?”

Grimacing, he considered what he liked when he bedded a woman. Nothing out of the ordinary, surely. Although Anne might have been willing, he certainly hadn’t attempted all the positions in the Kama Sutra. Now that he was older, he didn’t think he would be physically able to manage anything acrobatic in a bed. “No,” he said with a shake of his head. “Although...”

About to write something on his paper, Mrs. Dove-Lyon paused and waited. “Although?” she prompted.

“I should like to, at least on occasion, spend the entire night in the same bed with her. Especially on a cold winter night,” he said, remembering the few nights Anne had allowed him to remain in her bedchamber. One time, she had even begged him to stay.

He had done so once she promised she didn’t expect him to pleasure her more than he had already done, something he took great pride in doing during their nights together. Watching her whilst she experienced ecstasy gave him a great deal of satisfaction.

“I’m quite sure that won’t be a problem,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said as she wrote a few notes. “Now, what are you best at when it comes to gambling?”

“Gambling?” he repeated, wincing when he realized he did indeed sound like a parrot.

“Games of chance. Or activities upon which bets might be placed,” she clarified.

“Encouraging others to place their bets, I suppose,” he said after a moment of contemplation. “I am not much of a gambling man, Mrs. Dove-Lyon.”

The answer had the matchmaker sitting back in her chair as she reached for the cup of tea. She drained it in a single gulp before setting the porcelain dish back onto the saucer. “Do you have any hobbies? Things you do especially well?”

Jeffrey furrowed his brows. “Well, I managed to stay alive despite the number of frogs I’ve had to face over on the Continent,” he remarked. She gave him a look of frustration. “I don’t suppose that’s what you’re asking, though,” he added.

“Do you play cards? Whist, perhaps?”

“No. I mean, I can play cards, but...” He shook his head.

“Hazard?”

“No.”

“Faro?”

“God, no,” he replied.

She blinked. “Do you take part in *any* games of chance?”

He shook his head.

“Whatever did you do when you weren’t fighting the French?” she asked in exasperation.

He shrugged. “Besides planning coordinated attacks in an attempt to keep my soldiers alive?” He had never thought planning battles could be some sort of competition, but he had spent hours arranging a variety of objects on hand-drawn maps of battlefields and then moving them about to determine all the possible attack and counter-attack scenarios.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon didn’t offer a response but merely stared at him.

An idea occurred to him. It might work. “I fenced,” he stated. “I’m quite good with a foil if I do say,” he added. “Learned at Angelo’s Academy. Long before my father bought my commission.” Facing French soldiers armed with bayonets had required the occasional use of his sword. He had used it to defend his own life as well as that of his lieutenant and his standard bearer. Although the sword had been heavier than a

foil, the skills he had learned on the piste came in handy on the battlefield.

Pulled from his reverie when he noticed the matchmaker staring at him—or rather through him—Jeffrey said, “Does that count?”

Despite the black netting meant to obscure her face, a gleam seemed to form in one of Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s eyes. “A fencing tournament,” she murmured.

“Pardon?”

She straightened in her chair. “My lord, those who come to me for help in securing a wealthy widow must win them.”

Jeffrey blinked. “Win *them*?” he repeated, almost immediately wincing. There he was, sounding like a parrot. Again.

“In a game of chance,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon stated. “Usually that would be by playing faro, or some sort of card game, or hazard, or any number of typical or atypical games of chance. For you, it seems a different sort of tournament will have to suffice. You’ll have to win your match by being the best fencer in a tournament.”

Displaying a look of disbelief, Jeffrey asked, “How many fencers do you expect to compete?”

She didn’t respond right away but glanced at her desk and thumbed through a few sheets. “Four, perhaps. Two against two, and then the winners against one another.”

Jeffrey’s brows arched. Her terms seemed fair. “What if I don’t win?”

“You forfeit the buy-in, and you don’t get to keep the wealthy widow,” she replied with a shrug.

He scoffed. “And if I do win?”

“You marry the wealthy widow. Pay off your debts—”

“I don’t have any debts,” he argued.

“Save your earldom from certain bankruptcy and sire an heir. And a spare, if you’ve got the time.”

“You make it sound as if I’m on my deathbed,” he complained.

She sighed. “May I remind you that you are four-and-thirty?”

“Please don’t,” he said with a grimace. Scratching his forehead, he asked, “What’s this about a buy-in?”

A sigh of impatience sounded from the older woman. “The blunt you pay up front to show you’re serious about winning the girl,” she explained.

“And I don’t get it back if I lose,” he complained on a sigh.

“You don’t get it back even if you win,” she said in a scolding voice.

Scoffing again, he said, “How much is this buy-in?”

She glanced at the sheet of paper on her desk and winced. “Seems you can’t afford much now, can you?” she murmured.

“How do you know that?” he asked in dismay.

“It’s my job to know, my lord. I’m a matchmaker,” she replied. She lifted a bell from the edge of her desk and rang it. A moment later, Titan opened the door carrying a small tray with two steaming cups of tea.

“You’re probably already aware of how good Titan is in performing his duties,” she commented as the former batman set the tray on the desk.

Jeffrey exchanged a quick glance with Titan and nodded. “Indeed, I am, ma’am.”

“I only hire the best for The Lyon’s Den,” she said as she took the cup and saucer Titan offered. “We’re going to host a fencing tournament, Titan. Four gentlemen. Five-thousand-pound buy-in—”

“Five thousand?” Jeffrey interrupted, not bothering to wince at repeating the amount. He absently took the cup of tea Titan offered him, noting milk had already been added.

“We’ll need a referee, I believe he’s called?” she continued, ignoring Jeffrey’s outburst.

“I can act in that capacity,” Titan replied, his gaze meeting Jeffrey’s. “We’ll have to reconfigure the gaming room for a piste. Leave adequate room around it for the onlookers, which means four of the card tables will have to be removed,” he went on as if he had already been considering such a need.

“I’ll let you know the date just as soon as we have our competitors arranged,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said, her words directed to both men. “This will be ever so exciting, even for the women.”

About to repeat the last few words, Jeffrey resisted the urge to do so and instead took a long drink from his tea. He nearly closed his eyes upon realizing it had been sweetened with sugar. The pleasant experience was supplanted by his curiosity, though. Why would a fencing tournament be exciting for the women?

He glanced over at Titan and wondered if he’d know the answer. Jeffrey was so far out of his realm, and there were so many things he didn’t know. It was disconcerting.

Apparently, his questions were showing on his face. “Women watch the proceedings from a gallery up above the gaming floor,” Titan explained. “Especially the one for whom the winner will be her husband.”

Jeffrey’s attention went from Titan to the matchmaker. “You’re saying women come to you *knowing* they’ll have no say in who they’ll be leaving with?”

“Oh, they know they’ll be leaving with a titled man who will provide them protection,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon replied. “Which is why they’ve come to me in the first place.”

Jeffrey winced. For a moment, he couldn’t fathom why a wealthy woman would have need of the matchmaker’s

services. She had mentioned a widow for him. Why would a widow require a matchmaker, though? Any respectable widow would have no trouble landing a new husband, especially if she possessed a fortune.

Blinking, Jeffrey straightened in his chair as he remembered Peabody's comment.

Some of the women may not be perfectly suitable.

"These women you find matches for..." He wasn't even sure how to ask the question.

"They do not always have the best reputations, or perhaps they merely seek a titled man," Mrs. Dove-Lyon finished for him. "But they can all provide the means for a gentleman to stay out of debtors' prison."

Exhaling a huff, Jeffrey dropped his head into one hand. "For five-thousand pounds, I should hope so," he complained.

"Selling your commission will provide most of the funds you'll require for the buy-in," the matchmaker said with a prim grin. "And you have enough in your coffers to make up the difference."

Suppressing the urge to make his annoyance any more apparent than it already was, Jeffrey finally nodded. "I just have to win," he said on a sigh.

"There's the spirit, Lord Tidworth," Mrs. Dove-Lyon said. "I'll contact you when we have the tournament arranged. Do have a good day."

Well aware he was being dismissed, Jeffrey stood and bowed to the matchmaker. Meanwhile, Titan opened the office door and waved him out.

He descended the stairs in a daze, visions of fencing foils and a certain red-headed woman passing before his mind's eye.



CHAPTER FIVE

A Baron Learns He Isn't Broke

Meanwhile, at Arthur's men's club, Mayfair

SHOVING HIS BARE hands into his greatcoat pockets, Anthony, Baron Covington, cursed under his breath as he emerged from Arthur's men's club and realized he had forgotten his gloves and an umbrella. Now he wondered if he had missed some other necessary bit of wardrobe when he had dressed the hour before.

Although Anthony employed the same valet as his late father had used, Fredericks hadn't appeared for work that morning, nor had the older man sent word as to his whereabouts. He had permission to have the driver bring him in a coach from Covington House, where he had a room. Perhaps he was seeing to a family member or had decided he didn't wish to continue in service. Fredericks was nearly of an age to be pensioned. But that didn't excuse his absence.

On the other hand, Anthony mused, there was no decent way to send the valet packing. Not after his years of dedicated service.

Still, of all the days for the servant to be absent, this was not the one, no matter the reason. Anthony was due to begin his residence in Covington House—or rather move back into the home of his youth. Besides meeting with the solicitor, he was expected to take on the responsibilities of the Covington baronetage and appear in the House of Lords for Parliament the following week.

The incessant rain that had begun the day before only darkened his mood as he waved for a hackney. Shocked when the equipage actually slowed to a stop, he stutter-stepped his way to the coach. “Thirty-two Oxford Street,” he called out as he tossed a coin up to the driver.

“Very good, sir.”

The hackney merged into traffic as Anthony was still closing the door. Settling onto the bench, he took a deep breath and immediately wished he hadn’t. The odors of mildew and urine had him grimacing. At least this would be the last day he would have to use a hackney. There was a mews behind Covington House, and ensconced within was a town coach, a curricule, two horses, a driver, and a groom.

At least, there had been when he was last there.

Estranged from his father for the past decade—ever since his second baroness’ death, Edward Covington had been impossible to live with—Anthony had moved into bachelor quarters at Arthur’s and avoided his father’s company.

The oddest sensation settled over him at the reminder that with his father’s death, he was alone in the world. The funeral had made it very apparent. No brothers or sisters. No living aunts or uncles. No close cousins.

He was the baron now.

“Something wrong, sir?”

Jerked from his reverie, Anthony glanced up to discover the hackney driver staring down at him from the trap door above his head, cold drops of rain falling onto his face. “What is it?” he asked as he wiped the water away with a handkerchief. The scrape of whiskers against his hand reminded him he hadn’t shaved that morning.

“We’re here, sir. Thirty-two Oxford Street.”

Anthony blinked. “Of course.” He made his way out of the equipage and hurried to the door with the words, *James S. Peabody, Esq.*, painted on it in fashionable script. Forced to

step aside to allow another man to exit the office, Anthony heard the man curse upon discovering it was raining and said, "I concur."

A grunt was the only response, and Anthony continued into the office. When he glanced left, he noted a few bedraggled men hurrying into the office next door, some limping and one with a sling on his arm. At that moment, he was reminded that he lived a life of privilege. The lack of a visit by his late father's valet was hardly a hardship.

"Were those war veterans I saw going into the office next door?" he asked, shedding his greatcoat onto a hook as he regarded the bespectacled solicitor sitting behind the room's only desk.

Papers were precariously stacked on one side of the wooden top, and several additional stacks were more neatly arranged on the floor in front of wooden filing cabinets. For a moment, Anthony had a thought; he might have to find a new solicitor.

How could anyone work in such disarray?

"Indeed. Lady Bostwick runs a charity to find employment for them. With the war ending, her office and the one beyond is busier than usual," the solicitor replied, his attention on a sheet of paper with copious notes in the margins.

"You don't seem to mind," Anthony remarked, impressed the solicitor didn't complain about the presence of wounded men others might find unsuitable.

"Of course not. I own the building. They have long-term leases." He paused, finally taking stock of the newcomer. "May I help you?"

Anthony glanced around. "I'm here about the Covington estate. I am Anthony Covington."

Straightening in his chair, the man regarded him with a blank expression which quickly changed when he noticed the black armband of mourning wrapped around his left arm. "My sympathies on the loss of your father, Lord Covington. I am

James Peabody,” the solicitor said as he held out a hand. “Forgive me for not standing...” He waved to a well-worn walking cane, and Anthony immediately realized it wasn’t for show. “Have a seat,” Peabody said as he pulled a thick folio onto his blotter. “I have your father’s will and some other papers for you to review.”

Anthony took the proffered chair and absently checked the knot of his cravat. Although he had tied it himself many times in the past, he was especially conscious of it now, fearing it was no longer presentable. Rain had dampened the silk, and he was sure the even pleats were crushed.

“Please tell me he wasn’t broke when he died,” Anthony said with a wince. Although he had a decent allowance and lived more frugally than his fellow heirs, Anthony knew most aristocrats were suffering losses due to the awful weather.

Peabody aimed a glance at the door and arched a brow. “Lord Covington was certainly not broke,” he replied.

Anthony frowned. “Is there a ‘but’ in there somewhere?”

The solicitor grimaced. “No. However, there are some situations you may not be aware of. His valet, Fredericks, has been pensioned. I spoke with him late yesterday about his arrangements.”

“Pensioned?” Anthony scoffed. “Well, that explains why he didn’t show up at my apartments this morning.” He knew he required more than an occasional manservant to see to his clothes now that he was a baron, but he had no idea where he would find a valet. Who could he even ask?

As if he could read his mind, the solicitor said, “If you need help hiring a new one, you’ll want to speak with Lady Natalie, two doors down. She runs the servants’ registry.”

“Are there any other servants I’ll need to replace?” he asked.

“Of all the servants at Covington House, Fredericks is the only one of an age to be pensioned at this time,” Peabody said.

“The butler and housekeeper will be next, but not for another five years or so.”

Anthony felt relief at hearing this bit of information. Hiring a new valet would be his priority in the coming week. “Are there any other arrangements I should know about?”

“An... accommodation you’ll be required to continue according to your late father’s wishes.”

“Accommodation?” Anthony repeated.

“Let’s review the other information first,” Peabody suggested. “It’s fairly straightforward. As the heir, you inherit Covington House and all its furnishings as well as a townhouse on Green Street and the country estate in Surrey.”

Anthony held up a hand. “Townhouse on Green Street?” he repeated.

“Your late father’s mistress lives there, and there are strict instructions that the house remain available for her sole use as long as she wishes to live there.”

Dumbstruck, Anthony glanced down at the papers in front of Peabody and shook his head. “Are you quite sure you don’t have my father confused with someone else?”

Straightening in his chair, Peabody gave his head a shake. “Quite sure. Mrs. Billings has been in your father’s employ since the year following your birth. Lord Covington has set up a continued allowance for her. A pension, so to speak,” he explained.

Blinking as he shook his head, Anthony said, “I am nearly one-and-thirty. You’re telling me my father employed a mistress for three decades?”

“Indeed, sir. He loved her. Said she made his life tolerable.”

Anthony scoffed. “He never said a word about her to me,” he whispered.

Peabody's brows furrowed into a single, graying caterpillar. "Then you will no doubt be surprised to learn that you have a sister. A half-sister."

Jerking back as if the solicitor had punched him in the jaw, Anthony swallowed back a curse. "You, sir, are a master of understatements."

"I am a solicitor," Peabody remarked dryly.

"Do I... do I know her?"

Pulling another paper from the stack, Peabody shook his head. "He named her Annabelle."

The only Annabelle Anthony could bring to mind was a friend's sister, and she was married with three children and two ankle-biting dogs. "Does she have a... a family name?" he asked, thinking she probably lived with the mistress in Green Street.

"She would be in her mid-to-late twenties now," Peabody replied. He pulled up another paper, and a scowl appeared to age his features. "I'm afraid her mother hasn't yet responded to my request for information. Your father acknowledged the babe was his daughter, and he did include bequests for the both of them, so I will do what I must to locate her and see to it that she is paid," he said with a sigh as he glanced up. "No need for you to be tainted by the association."

Anthony furrowed a brow. On the one hand, he appreciated the solicitor's discretion, but on the other, he couldn't help the curiosity he felt. His father had engaged in a life he knew nothing about. "Are these... generous bequests?" he asked, concerned his inheritance might not be enough to afford him to take a wife. As the new baron, he would have to marry and sire an heir.

"The estate can afford them, and unlike a majority of your fellow peers, your barony should afford you and your tenants a decent living for the rest of your days, sir."

Although relief settled over Anthony, he suddenly felt a combination of anger and annoyance that his father had kept

something so important secret from him.

Somewhere in Green Street lived a mistress who was probably over fifty years old. A woman his father had loved. And somewhere—who knew where in the world—was his sister.

Perhaps he wasn't alone in the world after all.

"I think I should like to meet her," Anthony blurted.

"The mistress, sir?"

"And my sister, should you locate her," he replied. He wondered at Peabody's initial hesitation. "What is it?"

The solicitor sighed. "May I inquire as to the reason you wish to meet them? I assure you, there's no need for you to associate with them—"

"My father apparently lived a life of which I was entirely unaware," Anthony argued. "I assure you, I do not wish to deny either one of them what my father has bequeathed them, but I should like to at least meet them. Especially this... sister," he added. Good God. He wasn't even able to fathom the idea he had a sister. Who was she? What was she like? And...how in God's name did his father keep the secret?

Peabody stared at his client for a moment before he finally nodded. "All right. I have the address of the townhouse in Green Street," he said as he pulled a calling card from a stack and turned it over. He dipped his pen into a messy ink pot and then wrote the numbers on the white pasteboard. Blowing on the wet ink, he glanced up at his client before he passed him the card. "Promise me you won't..." He paused, a pained expression crossing his face.

"I won't do anything untoward," Anthony stated. "I may not even go there," he added, his resolve quickly fading.

For what if he discovered the mistress had already taken on a new client? Or that his sister was a doxy, too? If his fellow aristocrats learned of his relationship with the woman... well, he doubted much would come of it.

His father surely wasn't the first peer of the realm to father a bastard daughter.



CHAPTER SIX

A Fateful Meeting

The following day, Jermyn Street, Mayfair

“**W**HERE ARE WE going, Mummy?” Benton asked, his face pressed against the town coach’s window glass. When a wheel hit the edge of a pothole, he struggled to keep his feet as his hands gripped the curtains.

“Shopping, darling. You’ve grown too tall for your short pants,” Annabelle replied, her attention on what she could see through the other window. Although she had no intention of spending time in other shops, she loved seeing the colorful displays in the windows along Jermyn Street. If she didn’t have Benton with her, she might have been tempted to acquire a few items she could wear once she was out of widow’s weeds. “It’s time you started wearing breeches, like a proper gentleman,” she added.

Well aware some celebrated a young boy’s move into trousers with a breeching ceremony, she and the servants of Penthurst Place had simply enjoyed a slice of cake on the day she had his nurse begin dressing Benton in short pants.

He had been three at the time. She was relieved no one commented on the small birthmark that showed on the side of his knee.

“A proper gentleman,” Benton repeated, carefully pronouncing all the syllables before grinning ear to ear.

“Which means we must find you a tailor.” She glanced at the small pad of notepaper she had pulled from her reticule

and then looked out the window again. “Mr. Garth comes highly recommended if I’m to believe the butler.”

Dobbs had been most helpful when she asked him about the various businesses she would need to employ now that she was back in London. A tailor for Benton, a modiste for her, a printer for calling cards and stationery, and a bookseller.

The coach veered toward the curb and came to a stop in front of a perfumery.

“Tailor. Mister Garth,” Benton repeated.

Annabelle struggled to keep a straight face as she reached over and ruffled her son’s ginger-colored hair. Although he seemed to do well with his nurse in Sussex, he had announced that morning that he wanted to marry Miss Thompkins.

“I like her very much,” he’d added when Annabelle had simply stared at him in shock.

“Oh? Enough to wish to marry her?” she asked, wondering what the nurse had done to earn her son’s affection.

Benton had nodded. “She doesn’t treat me like a baby. And she makes me say all the words.”

After only a few days in London, Annabelle had noticed a change in the boy. He enunciated his words. When he bowed, he didn’t look as if he was about to topple onto his head. When he ate his meals, food seemed to make it into his mouth rather than down the front of his chest.

Miss Thompkins, it seemed, would not be returning to the position of household maid in Burwick House.

“Come, my little man,” Annabelle said when Pickerton opened the coach door.

“Are you sure you don’t wish me to accompany you, my lady?” the driver asked when she and Benton were on the pavement. “I can find a street urchin to watch the horses.”

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary, Mr. Pickerton. We’ll only be here in Mr. Garth’s shop,” she replied as she

waved in the direction of a small business featuring an elegant shingle above the blue door. She took Benton's hand in her black-gloved hand and led him into the shop.

A man in his forties greeted her, but his attention was on Benton as the boy held out his right hand.

"It's very good to meet you, Mr. Taylor," Benton said, his serious manner quite at odds with his age.

"Mr. Garth," Annabelle corrected him quietly, dipping her head to hide her amusement. "You haven't yet been introduced."

"It's very good to meet you, Mr. Garth," Benton said, his right hand still held out.

The tailor bent down and shook the boy's hand. "And you, sir. Who might you be?"

"I am Benton Hutchins, Viscount Burwick," he stated, clearly enunciating each syllable.

Straightening, Mr. Garth regarded Annabelle with a look of surprise. "Please accept my condolences, my lady. I was unaware Lord Burwick had died."

"Thank you, sir. Am I to understand my late husband was a client of yours?"

"Indeed. For... fifteen years, at least," Mr. Garth replied, a myriad of emotions displayed on his handsome face.

"My son is in need of two pairs of breeches, a few waistcoats, and a proper topcoat. Can you make them?"

The tailor blinked. "Of course, my lady. Although I admit I don't usually make suits for men so young, I can certainly do so."

Annabelle wasn't sure why she felt such relief at hearing his response, but she had been nervous prior to entering the tailor's shop. "Have you the time to take his measurements now? Or should we make an appointment for another time?"

Pulling a chronometer from his waistcoat pocket, Mr. Garth said, "I've another client due soon, but I think we have enough time to see to his lordship now."

Annabelle grinned. "Thank you, sir."

Showing her to a settee, Mr. Garth gave her a selection of fabrics for waistcoats. He then had Benton step up onto a platform in front of a cheval mirror.

Settling onto the velvet settee, Annabelle watched as the tailor pulled a long tape from around his neck and began a series of measurements as Benton held out his arms. Turning her attention to the fabric samples, she didn't notice when another person entered the shop. She might have remained blissfully ignorant of his arrival except that when she lifted one of the samples, so it was better illuminated by a nearby sconce, she realized the man was staring at her.

"Anne?"

Blinking, she dropped the hand holding the swatch to her lap. Her heart raced as she considered how to respond. "Lieutenant Colonel?"

"It *is* you," Jeffrey Murray-Hicks said as he took another step in her direction. "I admit the black gown and hat had me rather confused, but I suppose it's a good choice when you're... out in public."

Annabelle nervously glanced over to where Benton still stood, the tailor pausing a moment to acknowledge the new arrival. "Apologies, my lord. I'm nearly finished here. Would you like a brandy, or...?"

"Nothing for me," Jeffrey replied, his gaze still on Annabelle. "Where have you been?" He glanced around. "And what are you doing *here*?" he asked as his attention went to the young boy who was frowning at him from the tailor's platform.

"Seeing to a new wardrobe for my son," Annabelle replied, giving the boy a look of pride. "He's growing far too fast."

Jeffrey's brows furrowed. "Your *son*?" He winced, his gaze once again darting to Benton. "He's a handsome little bastard," he commented.

Mr. Garth inhaled sharply, his measuring tape falling to the floor. No other sounds could be heard in the shop—that is, until a loud *slap* and the bare hand that had created it sent Jeffrey's head jerking to one side.

"How *dare* you," Annabelle said, experiencing a combination of fright and anger.

Jeffrey gave his head a shake as he rubbed his cheek with one of his hands. At the same moment, Benton stepped down from the platform and hurried to Annabelle's side.

"Mummy, is this man bothering you?"

Absently, Annabelle pulled one of Benton's hands into hers and gripped it, perhaps too tightly. "No, darling, but we'll be leaving now." She turned her attention to the tailor. "I think the red brocade and blue silk should do nicely for the waistcoats. Do you have everything you need, Mr. Garth?"

Obviously flustered, the tailor nodded. "I'll manage. I'll send word for a fitting in a day or two, my lady." He bowed, almost too deeply.

"My lady?" Jeffrey repeated.

"Thank you, Mr. Garth," Benton said as he nodded to the tailor, doing his best to keep up with his mother as she practically dragged him to the door.

"You're welcome, my lord," Mr. Garth called out.

"My lord?" Jeffrey cursed under his breath when he turned to regard the tailor with a look of confusion.

"Lord Burwick, sir," the tailor said by way of explanation.

Jeffrey cursed again and rushed to the door. He stepped onto the pavement in time to see Benton being shoved up and into a town coach. Annabelle was about to follow, but he

hurried up to her and caught her elbow with one hand. “Anne ___”

“Let go of me,” she demanded as a footman quickly stepped around her in an attempt to use his body as a shield between her and the crazed man.

Jeffrey stepped back and lifted both his hands in the air as if in surrender. “Apologies. I didn’t mean to... I didn’t mean to offend you, *my lady*,” he said. “I merely wished to... to make conversation,” he claimed.

“By calling my son a bastard?” she whispered fiercely, her eyes narrowing.

Recoiling at the anger she displayed, Jeffrey took another step back. “As I said, I apologize. It won’t happen again,” he murmured.

“I should hope not.” She turned to the driver. “Pickerton, take us home.”

Jefferey watched as Pickerton assisted Annabelle into the coach and closed the door. When he was about to climb up to the driver’s seat Jeffrey employed his army officer’s voice to stop him. “Pickerton!”

The driver jerked. “Sir?”

“Your mistress is *Lady Burwick*?”

“She is, sir,” Pickerton acknowledged.

Cursing softly, Jeffrey searched his waistcoat pocket and pulled out a calling card. “See to it she gets this,” he said, shoving it into the driver’s hand. “Along with my sincere apologies. I meant nothing by what I said. I promise.” Without another word, Jeffrey returned to the tailor’s shop.



PICKERTON FURROWED A brow and dared a glance at the engraved pasteboard. Having been taught to read so he could navigate the country roads of England, Pickerton could make

out the words, “The Earl of Tidworth,” printed in black ink on the bright white card. “Arse,” he whispered in disgust. Shoving the card into his greatcoat pocket, he climbed onto the bench and took up the reins.



FROM INSIDE THE coach, Annabelle watched as the man she knew as Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey Murray-Hicks marched back into Mr. Garth’s shop. A memory of how his hand had felt hooked around her elbow had her jerking in the squabs.

Other than a hand of assistance provided by Pickerton when she was climbing into the coach, she hadn’t been touched by another man since Burwick’s death. A fraction of a second in the hold of the lieutenant colonel, and it was as if her entire body had been awakened from a long stupor.

Perhaps it had.

He’d had that sort of effect on her in the past. That sort of power to render her defenseless. To make her do things she might not otherwise. She hadn’t wondered too much why, though. He was an officer in the British Army. Perhaps her body simply knew enough to follow his silent orders. Knew that if she did, she would be rewarded with pleasures so intense, she sometimes had to beg him to stop.

A memory of his soft chuckle after he had taken his pleasure and landed on the mattress next to her sent frissons coursing through her entire body.

A moment later, and she felt fear.

Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey Murray-Hicks had recognized her.

Of all the men to meet in London on her first outing from Burwick House, why did it have to be one of her former clients from *The Elegant Courtesan*? Had she really expected anyone else?

Annabelle reached up and knocked on the trap door. Pickerton appeared only a moment later, breathless from having climbed onto the driver's seat.

"I hope the earl didn't hurt you, my lady," he said. "He asked that I pass along his sincere apologies for having offended you."

"The *earl*?" she repeated. About to argue that he was an officer in the British Army, she thought better of admitting she recognized the man. Perhaps the driver knew something she didn't. He had been her husband's driver whenever he was in London, after all.

"That's what he claimed. Where to, my lady?" Pickerton asked, unaware of her discomfort.

"Number forty-two Green Street," she replied.

Although she knew she would eventually have to pay a call at the address of her youth, she hadn't planned to do so this soon.

Circumstances required it, though.



CHAPTER SEVEN

A Mother Has News and a Solution

No. 42 Green Street, Mayfair

STARING AT THE messy scrawl covering a sheet of white parchment, Lucy Billings sighed as she considered how to respond.

Her only paramour for the past thirty years, Edward, Baron Covington, had died in his sleep.

Not in her bed, thank God. There would have been a scandal if he had. Something the unmarried matron of nearly nine-and-forty years had been able to avoid despite her position as a mistress to the baron.

Rather he had expired in his own bed, in the master suite of Covington House in Kensington.

He hadn't been well of late.

During his last visit to the townhouse he had purchased for Lucy several decades prior, Edward had complained of feeling poorly, and when she had placed her hand against his forehead, she had felt the tell-tale heat of a fever.

Feeding him broth had helped his aching body. Holding him in her arms had lifted his spirits. Hearing his apologies regarding their shared daughter had lifted *her* spirits. Listening to his farewell had them both weeping as if he knew he would not recover from his latest bout of influenza.

He knew. He knew he wouldn't live much longer.

Tears streamed down Lucy's face as she remembered that day from last week, and not only because Edward was about to meet his Maker.

Edward Covington hadn't seen his only daughter in over ten years. He had acknowledged she was his, although he had only done so privately.

Had he been more forthcoming about his role in his daughter's existence, she might not have chosen the life she did. She wouldn't have, for if it had been known she was the progeny of a baron, she would have benefitted from introductions to Society. Perhaps met a titled man or a well-to-do cit. Married well, at least earlier than she had.

Instead, their daughter had elected to live the same sort of life Lucy had lived for the years before Edward took her as his mistress.

At least Lord Covington had loved Lucy, maybe more than he was willing to admit.

The letter from the solicitor was proof of it.

Edward had arranged for Lucy to keep her townhouse and had set aside a stipend equivalent to what he had been paying her every year to be his mistress.

His exclusive mistress.

She had been so ever since his best friend had arranged for her to meet Edward by way of one of her friends and fellow courtesans, Bessie. Back then, that's the way it had been done. Arrange a meeting, sign a contract, carry on an *affaire* for some predetermined length of time.

Most separated after the contract ended. She and Edward did not.

Edward had been married prior to their meeting. Married and widowed, his young wife had died in the childbed as his son and heir was born.

Not yet ready to court, the baron had been satisfied with taking a mistress while a nurse saw to caring for his son. Two

years later, Lucy bore him a daughter. Although she feared he would end their contract when he married again, he saw to paying for the babe to be raised first by Lucy and then by a governess. She was sent to a girl's school for her education. At some point, Edward apparently intended to see to it she was married off to a wealthy merchant or a baronet.

Their daughter had other plans, though.

Lucy shook herself from her reverie when the butler cleared his throat.

“What is it, Bernard?” she asked, brushing a hand across her wet cheek.

“Lady Burwick and... Lord Burwick have paid a call,” he said as he placed a calling card on the table next to the solicitor's letter.

Blinking, Lucy wondered how she could have conjured her daughter into existence by simply thinking of her. Of remembering her when she had been at her worst—rebellious and tempestuous—living up to the reputation of those who were cursed with vibrant red hair.

Whatever could have happened to impel Annabelle Billings Hutchins to show up at her door?

“Show her to the drawing room and bring tea,” Lucy ordered, excitement in her voice. “Did you say *Lord Burwick*?” she questioned.

“A small young man, ma'am,” Bernard commented, a hand held out next to his thigh to indicate the child's height.

“No doubt,” Lucy replied, her heart racing at her realization that she was about to meet her only grandchild for the first time. She stood from the table and shook out her black skirts. “Tell me the truth, Bernard. Should I change into a different gown?”

The butler gave her a look of surprise, a rare expression for a servant who seemed far too stoic in his position. “Your caller

is dressed in mourning clothes as well, so I rather doubt you need to change, ma'am."

She glanced down at her bombazine gown, wincing when she realized she should probably wear black for a year in deference to Edward. Especially given his generosity. "I suppose not." She glanced one more time at the letter from James S. Peabody, Esquire, and decided she really needed to send a response. At least to let him know she would accept Baron Covington's generous arrangement on her behalf.

As for providing information as to their shared daughter's whereabouts, she supposed she was about to find out just where that whereabouts was located.



"WHERE ARE WE, Mummy?" Benton asked after the butler led them into a small but beautifully appointed parlor. Given the vibrant colors in the upholstered chairs and the uncrushed pile of the scarlet velvet on the settee, it appeared as if the room was rarely used. Tasteful white plasterwork surrounded the chandelier above, and a Turkish carpet covered the floorboards below. The lack of dust on the inlaid maple and ebony console table and the luster of the other wood surfaces were proof a maid had been seeing to the cleaning.

Annabelle knew her mother wouldn't be the one doing the domestic chores.

"Your grandmother's house," Annabelle replied as she pulled her gloves from her hands and gave them to the stout butler. She thought about removing her black felt hat, a swath of netting barely hiding her forehead, but decided against it. If this meeting with her mother didn't go well, she wanted to be able to leave with her head held high and her red hair mostly-covered.

"He's already so tall."

Annabelle whirled around from studying a landscape painting above the fireplace to find her mother clasping her

hands together in front of her chest, her gaze on Benton.

“How do, Mother?”

Lucy rushed to stand before Benton. She took his hands into hers. “I’m quite fine, now that you’re here,” she replied happily, her attention entirely on the boy.

“Mother, may I introduce you to Benton Hutchins, Viscount Burwick? Benton, this is your grandmother...” She paused, not sure if she should include her mother’s name in the introduction.

“Lucy. You can call me Grandmother Lucy. Or... or just grandmother,” the matron said as she watched in delight when Benton bowed. “I may be your only one.”

“You are,” Annabelle confirmed with a shrug, wincing when she noticed her mother’s red eyes. Their arrival had obviously interrupted a good cry.

When Benton straightened, he reached for one of Lucy’s hands and kissed her knuckles. “It’s very good to meet you, Grandmother,” he said, his eyes wide as he stared up at her.

“Well, aren’t you the perfect little gentleman?”

“Yes, Grandmother.”

Lucy tittered and then redirected her attention to her daughter. “Oh, dear, black was never your color,” she commented.

Annabelle was about to say the same in response as her gaze swept down her mother’s black gown. It looked as if it had been made from the same pattern as her own.

“What’s had you weeping, Mother?” Annabelle countered, determined to stave off the tears she felt were about to fall upon seeing how the former courtesan reacted to meeting her grandchild.

Waving her guests to chairs, Lucy sniffled. “A letter from Lord Covington’s solicitor. It seems your late father has included us in his last will and testament.”

Annabelle blinked. “The baron died?” she murmured, suddenly understanding why her mother was wearing black. For a moment, her chest felt heavy, as if she couldn’t breathe. “I’m so sorry for your loss,” she whispered.

“Yours as well,” her mother replied before she sniffled.

Not sure if the comment referred to her late husband or her father, Annabelle said, “Thank you.” She sighed. “How long ago?”

“Last week. I knew... I had a feeling he wasn’t long for this earth, and he proved me right,” she stammered. “He was ill. Had been for some time,” she added.

“You were with him a very long time,” Annabelle remarked, knowing her parents’ relationship had been unusual.

“We had thirty years, even if they weren’t always together,” Lucy commented as she sank onto the settee. Benton waited for her to be seated before he scrambled up and into one of the upholstered chairs. His legs dangled from the edge as he sat with his back straight and his hands in his lap. “He would have loved to meet Benton.”

“He knew about him?” her daughter asked in surprise.

Lucy scoffed. “Well, of course he did, darling. He loved you both.”

A sudden lump in Annabelle’s throat had her swallowing. “It seems we’ve both lost our loves,” she murmured. “Almost exactly a year apart.”

“Mine has left me the townhouse and an annual stipend that will see me living as comfortably as I have been these past few years,” Lucy commented. “Minus a man, unfortunately. The solicitor has sent me a letter with the details.”

“That’s wonderful,” Annabelle remarked, ignoring the comment about a man not being included in the arrangements. Her mother had always had a man in her life, so she supposed she wouldn’t have done well on her own.

“And yours?” Lucy prompted, her furrowed brow indicative of her worry.

Inhaling to answer, Annabelle glanced over at her son. “He’s left us in good stead, Mother. I see to the ledgers, of course, so I know.”

“So... then why have you come to London?”

Lucy Billings had never been one to beat around the bush, and Annabelle realized her mother wasn’t about to start. “I might still be in mourning—at least for a few more days—but my son is a viscount now. He needs a... a father. Someone to help raise him for the role he’s to fill when he reaches his majority,” she explained. “I can continue to do the ledgers for the viscountcy, but I should like a man to see to the business. To teach Benton what to do.”

Bernard appeared on the threshold carrying a silver tea tray. He went about setting out the cups and saucers, asking first Annabelle and then Benton how they took their tea.

“With milk and one lump, please,” Annabelle replied.

The butler glanced over at Benton, who said, “The same for me, please.”

“He is the perfect gentleman,” Lucy commented as she held out a plate of biscuits in his direction.

Benton grinned and helped himself to a lemon biscuit. “Thank you,” he said. He didn’t immediately take a bite. Instead, he waited until the butler placed a teacup and saucer on the table next to his chair and then he set the biscuit on the edge of the plate.

“Polite, too.”

“His new nurse is excellent with him,” Annabelle said before she took a sip of tea. “Or governess, I should say. She’s already been teaching him things.”

“Where are you living these days?” Lucy asked. She needed to supply an address to the solicitor.

“Burwick House. On Bruton Street here in Mayfair,” Annabelle replied. “The staff is small, but they have been doing their jobs. There’s more than enough room for the two of us,” she added.

“But.”

Annabelle blinked. “But?” she repeated.

Lucy scoffed. “Something must have happened for you to come running to me,” she gently scolded.

It was Annabelle’s turn to scoff. “We’ve only been in London a few days,” she countered. “I would have paid a call yesterday, but I needed to meet with the housekeeper and…” She paused and sighed, her bottom lip trembling.

“Oh, dear, what’s happened?” Lucy asked as she set aside her teacup.

“Someone recognized me. Not even an hour ago.”

Lucy straightened on the settee. “Where?”

Annabelle blinked, wondering why it would be important. “A tailor’s shop on Jermyn Street.”

“In Mr. Garth’s shop?” Lucy guessed.

“Yes, that’s the one.”

“Mr. Garth is a model of discretion. You needn’t worry about him,” Lucy said with a wave of her hand. “Who recognized you?”

Annabelle glanced over at Benton, relieved to see he was concentrating on his tea and biscuit. “Lieutenant Colonel Murray-Hicks,” she said, closing her eyes in an effort to tamp down the renewed panic she felt. “What do I do, Mother? I thought I’d been away long enough that I could simply blend in—”

“Ha!” her mother said as she rolled her eyes. “With that hair?”

Annabelle winced, briefly imagining her head covered with a mob cap in an attempt to hide her flaming tresses. “If he tells anyone—”

“He won’t.”

“If he gets drunk? Will his tongue loosen? Will he mention how he knows me? From *where* he knows me?” she asked. Worry had her growing nervous as she imagined the very worst scenarios for her future. “I’ll be a scandal. Benton’s chances of having a peer for a father will be nil.”

Lucy regarded her daughter with an expression of sympathy. Although she could have chided Annabelle for the choice she had made to follow in her footsteps, she had learned long ago the past needed to stay in the past.

If only the gossips of Mayfair would subscribe to the same philosophy.

“I know a woman who can help,” Lucy stated, giving her grandson a wink when she caught him watching her. “A matchmaker who specializes in these sorts of situations.”

“These *sorts* of situations?” Annabelle repeated in a hoarse whisper.

Lucy lifted a shoulder. “They happen more often than you think, darling. Where do you think ruined young women go if they’re to land an aristocrat for a husband?” she asked rhetorically. “Your saving grace is that your husband has left you with a bit of wealth. It makes it far easier to land a titled husband—one who can provide protection—when you possess the security he requires for his title’s future.”

Annabelle scoffed. She had never considered she might have something with which to bargain when it came to finding a new husband. She winced at the thought of money being a man’s reason for marrying her, though. “I don’t suppose affection will come into it at all?” she guessed.

Her mother gave a start. “Did it with Burwick?” she countered, sounding incredulous.

“Yes, it did,” Annabelle insisted. “I loved him. He loved *me*,” she claimed as tears brightened her eyes. “Surely as much as Covington loved you.”

Inhaling softly, Lucy regarded her daughter with contrition. “I was lucky,” she whispered. “I’m glad you had a love, too. But now... I fear you’ll have to make do with whoever is willing to take on a widow with a young boy and a less-than-pristine past.”

Annabelle winced. “So... who is this matchmaker I should meet?”

Lucy glanced over at Benton. He had finished his biscuit and was staring longingly at the plate of remaining biscuits next to the teapot. “Help yourself to another, young man,” she said with a grin.

“Thank you, Grandmother,” he said as he slid from the chair and hurried over to the plate.

“That will be your last. You’ll spoil your dinner,” Annabelle warned.

Lucy made an unladylike snort. “He’s a boy. He could probably eat all the biscuits on that plate, an entire cake, and still have room for his dinner,” she claimed.

Benton’s eyes crinkled in delight. “I am hungry,” he said as he scrambled back onto his chair. He waited until he was completely seated before he took a bite of the biscuit.

Watching him, Annabelle sighed. Was she doing the right thing by finding a new husband?

“You won’t be committed to anything by simply speaking with Mrs. Dove-Lyon,” Lucy said as if she could read her daughter’s mind.

Annabelle blinked several times. “Mrs. Dove-Lyon? How do you know her?”

Lucy lifted a shoulder. “She was once a courtesan, too. Don’t tell anyone I told you.”

Furrowing her brows, Annabelle said, “My lips are sealed.”

As if she hadn’t heard her daughter’s comment, Lucy continued. “She married a military man from a well-to-do family. When he died...” She paused a moment, as if in thought. “Well, she ended up with a house she has since turned into a very profitable gambling den, and she provides matchmaking services.”

“Gambling and matchmaking?” Annabelle questioned.

“Not so very unusual bedfellows when you think about it,” Lucy said.

“Where might I find her?”

Lucy was already up and headed to a small *escritoire* behind the settee. Benton once again slipped from his chair and stood, waiting until she returned to the settee before he clambered back onto the chair. “Such a polite young man,” she said, giving her daughter a note with an address written on it. “You’re to be commended.”

Giving her mother a wan smile, Annabelle took the note and slipped it into her reticule. “Thank you, Mother.” She glanced over at Benton again to discover he hadn’t eaten any more of his biscuit. “I thought you were hungry,” she said.

“I am saving it for later,” he said before he drained his teacup, his pinky finger extended as he had seen his grandmother do.

“It’s getting late. I should take him home,” Annabelle said when the clock on the fireplace mantel chimed five times.

“Oh, all right. But don’t be a stranger,” Lucy replied. “Do let me know how it goes with Bessie.”

“Bessie?”

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon. Her methods might seem odd, but she has been responsible for some rather successful matches in the *ton*.”

Not about to ask for examples—she wouldn't be acquainted with any of them given her extended absence from London—Annabelle stood. "I will let you know after I've met her," she replied. Benton was quick to regain his feet, and he hurried over to Lucy to stand in front of her.

"Thank you for the biscuits, Grandmother," he said as he reached for her hand and kissed the back of her knuckles.

Lucy knelt before him and pulled him into a hug. "You're welcome, young man. Do come again. Whenever you wish."

She watched the two take their leave as Bernard saw to their wraps before they slipped out the front door and into a drizzly rain.

Waving to them once they were inside the Burwick town coach, Lucy was about to step back when Bernard said, "A missive arrived for you. A liveried footman delivered it, but I didn't recognize the colors," he added, handing it to her.

Lucy took the missive but didn't give it a glance. Her attention was still on the departing Burwick coach.

Sensing she was being watched, Lucy placed a staying hand on the butler's arm when Bernard moved to close the door. She noticed a hackney that had stopped on the opposite side of the street, and its occupant staring at her through its window.

Although he seemed familiar, she didn't recognize the man. Pretending not to notice him, her hand once again lifted in a wave aimed at the Burwick coach.

Without a reason to remain in her open doorway, Lucy finally stepped back and allowed the butler to shut the door.

"What is it, ma'am?" he asked. "You look as if you've seen a ghost."

Lucy blinked and managed a shrug. "I might have, Bernard," she murmured. "I might have."

Returning to the parlor for another cup of tea, she did her best to ignore the shiver that shot down her spine as she

unfolded the note Bernard had given her. Her brows shot up when she read the signature at the bottom.

“Talk about ghosts,” she murmured happily, perching on the edge of the settee to read the entire letter.

My dearest Lucy,

I write to send my condolences on the death of Covington. I know you two were close, perhaps even closer than we were back in our day.

Although much has happened since our contract ended, I find myself in a position to renew it and wondered if you might be of a like mind?

If this note is too soon for your sensibilities, please do not take offense. I merely wish to ensure you have protection.

I look forward to your favorable reply,

Bertie

When she finished reading, she grinned and then tittered. “What a pleasant surprise,” she said out loud. Moving to her *escritoire* in the corner of the parlor, she lifted a sheet of bright white parchment from a drawer. A faint scent of parfum wafted from the page as she dipped a quill into an ink pot and began writing.

Dear Bertie,

I write to thank you for your perfectly timed note. Why, I was thinking only this morning how much it was I missed you—

The sound of a clearing throat had Lucy looking up. Bernard stood on the threshold, a pasteboard card in hand. “Ma’am, you have another caller.”

Setting aside the quill, Lucy sighed and closed the ink pot as Bernard handed over the card.

Her last few minutes of elation were quickly replaced with dread and the reminder Baron Edward Covington had died.

The sadness she had felt upon learning of his death returned. “Send him in, and do bring a new tea tray,” she ordered. She couldn’t help the sudden tears collecting in the corners of her eyes.

Tears of grief combined with tears of fear.



CHAPTER EIGHT

A Baron Meets a Mistress

Meanwhile, in front of No. 42 Green Street, Mayfair

THE DRIVER OF Anthony Covington's hackney rapped on the door before opening it. "We're at number forty-two Green Street, sir. This is the correct address, is it not?"

Anthony glanced at the fashionable townhouse and nodded. "It is," he affirmed, sure its occupant had caught him staring at her through the light rain as she waved to her departing guests.

That she was dressed in black surprised him. Did she do so because she mourned his late father? Or did she regularly wear black?

He wondered as to the identity of the woman and young boy—also in black—who had stepped out of the townhouse and departed in a town coach. The crest painted on the glossy black equipage meant nothing to him, a situation he realized he would have to remedy if he wished to know who traveled the streets of Mayfair.

She was a well-to-do matron, that much he could tell, which had him even more curious.

Why would a respectable woman pay a call on his late father's mistress?

"Do you want me to wait, sir?"

Pulled from his reverie, Anthony regarded the driver with a grimace. "Tell me, is five o'clock too late to pay a call?"

The driver blinked. "I suppose it depends on who you're wantin' to pay a call on," he hedged.

Not about to tell him the identity of the woman, Anthony said, "A friend of my late father's."

The driver shrugged. "If she doesn't wish to take any callers, the butler will tell you so."

Anthony cursed softly. Of course, the woman would have servants. "Will you wait? I'll wave if I'm to be admitted," he said as he decided it was now or never. He pulled a coin from his waistcoat pocket, and the driver's eyes widened. "For your trouble," he added.

"Yes, sir. I'll wait."

Making his way to the blue-painted door of number forty-two, Anthony wondered why he was so nervous. The woman wasn't the queen, for God's sake. She was merely a mistress. A high-paid prostitute.

He loved her.

The solicitor's words came back to him at the very moment he lifted the brass mermaid door knocker.

Had she been an exclusive mistress? One only his father employed? Or had she others she entertained in the house his father paid for on her behalf?

The door opened before he had a chance to imagine other, far more nefarious scenarios in which the woman could have engaged, all to take advantage of his father and his generous nature.

"Good afternoon, sir," a stout butler said as he came to attention.

"Afternoon," Anthony replied, belatedly remembering to pull a calling card from his waistcoat pocket. "I wish to have a word with your... employer," he said as he handed over the card.

“Lord Covington,” the butler acknowledged, looking up from the card. “I believe Mrs. Billings has been expecting you,” he said as he stepped back and waved the baron into the vestibule. “I’ll be one moment,” he added before he hurried off.

Anthony removed his top hat, wiped away a few rain drops from his coat sleeves, and glanced around the small entry. His gaze darted to the environs beyond. The house seemed tastefully decorated. Not at all how he imagined a mistress’ house to be—all pink or scarlet red. His attention went to the silk wallpaper of the vestibule and then to the ormolu sconces flanking the front door. Below his feet was a carpet he thought might be from Aubusson.

Tasteful, indeed.

“Mrs. Billings will see you in the parlor,” the butler said. “If you’ll follow me?”

Not having noticed the butler’s sudden reappearance, Anthony nearly jumped at hearing the baritone voice. “Of course,” he replied, his attention darting about as the servant led him to a room beyond the small hall which featured a modest staircase to the first floor and a round table upon which sat a lovely glass vase filled with fresh flowers.

He had a passing thought that it was his father’s money that had paid for the daisies before he remembered daisies were cheap. Easy to acquire.

What the hell is wrong with me? This woman had obviously meant something to his father. They had been together for thirty years!

“Lord Covington.”

The words were said in a voice filled with awe, and before he knew it, the woman he had seen earlier approached him and took his hands in hers. “You look exactly like your father did when I first met him.”

Anthony bowed his head. “You have me at a disadvantage... madame.”

The older matron stared up at him with red-rimmed eyes for a moment before she inhaled softly. “Forgive me. I am Lucy Billings. Your father’s mistress for these past... three decades,” she said with a roll of her eyes. “I begged Edward to introduce us years ago, but I certainly understand his reluctance to do so. Please,” she said as she waved to an upholstered chair. “Do have a seat. How do you take your tea? Or would you prefer a brandy?”

Taken aback by the offer of refreshments, Anthony considered the options. “Tea is fine. With a bit of milk,” he replied, once again feeling as if he had been caught off-guard. “I apologize for not having sent word I would be paying a call.”

“Oh, don’t fash yourself. After reading Mr. Peabody’s letter earlier today, I expected I might finally meet you.”

“You did?” he asked as he took the chair she offered.

She poured a cup of tea and added a dollop of milk before handing him the saucer. “Why, of course. If I had just learned my father had bequeathed monies and a house to a woman I’d never met, I would have done the same.” She held out a plate of biscuits.

“I don’t begrudge you either,” Anthony said, waving off the biscuits despite his growling stomach.

At least, he didn’t intend to begrudge her unless he learned she had stepped out on his father.

His words had the mistress straightening on the settee. “Oh?”

He shook his head. “According to Mr. Peabody, my father loved you.” Pausing so he could gauge her reaction to the comment, he wasn’t disappointed when she inhaled softly, and her eyes brightened with unshed tears. For a moment, he wondered what had happened with her earlier callers to cause her to cry. He was sure he’d heard a sob and a catch in her breath during their introduction. Now the tears were more apparent, and she sniffled.

Either she was a very good actress, or she really had been in love with Edward Covington.

“As I did him,” she murmured, one hand pressed to her chest. “I’ll be mourning him for a long time.” She slipped the hand into the side of her bombazine gown and pulled out a hanky before quickly dabbing the corners of her eyes.

So, the black gown was a show of mourning, Anthony realized. “The house is paid for,” he said. “His estate can afford to continue paying you your monthly stipend, so... I have instructed Mr. Peabody to see to it my father’s wishes are carried out.”

Mrs. Billings’ eyes rounded in surprise. “Thank you, sir,” she said quietly. “I’m obviously no longer of an age to be anyone’s mistress, and I was only your father’s for these past thirty years,” she explained. “Neither one of us seemed inclined to change our circumstance.”

Anthony heard the wistfulness in her comment and decided she was telling the truth. “Would that be because you bore him a daughter?” he asked. Although he had every right to be annoyed at learning of another potential Covington out there in the world—one who could make his life miserable if she wished—he was too curious to be guarded about it.

Stiffening on the settee, the mistress regarded him with a face that displayed a number of emotions. Surprise. Fear. Uncertainty. “Probably,” she replied. “Edward was quite taken with Annabelle. Although he acknowledged her as his daughter in private—he paid for her to be educated, you see—he did not do so with his peers. In deference to you and your position, I believe.”

Anthony furrowed his brows. “She still lives?”

Mrs. Billings blinked. “Well, of course. She’s... she is Burwick’s widow. Viscountess Burwick.”

Recoiling as if he’d been struck in the jaw, Anthony set aside his teacup. “My sister is a... a respectable *lady*?”

Blinking, the mistress set her saucer on the low table in front of the settee and seemed to think on her response before she said, "She is, sir. She and Burwick lived at Penthurst Place for several years, but now that he has died, she has taken up residence here in Mayfair." She paused. "She is anxious to find a new father for their son, Benton. Someone who can bring him up to properly to fill his role as an aristocrat."

Anthony blinked, not expecting this bit of news. "Who sees to the viscountcy in the meantime?" he asked in a worried voice.

"Oh, well. There is a man of business, of course, but Annabelle sees to the ledgers for the viscountcy. She is very good with numbers. Always has been. And she's a wonderful mother. Benton is the new Viscount Burwick," she said proudly.

"Benton," Anthony repeated. "I have a... a nephew," he murmured.

Mrs. Billings nodded. "A very polite young man, if I do say. He has a very astute nurse who has taught him to enunciate his words and behave like a little gentleman," she enthused. "Why, I would never have believed he's only four years old." One of her graying brows furrowed. "Or is it five? Oh, I do believe he has a birthday coming up soon."

Anthony balked. "Four?" he repeated. Perhaps it was the boy he had seen leaving the townhouse when he was watching from the hackney.

"Well... closer to five or six, perhaps," she amended. "Annabelle has always been better with numbers than me." The mistress sighed. "She and Burwick were married for five... mayhap six years before he died," she replied. "Annabelle was quite overcome. She loved him very much."

"No doubt," Anthony murmured. "Do you think Lady Burwick would allow me to pay a call on her?" he asked. "So that I might introduce myself? Meet my nephew?" He dipped his head. "Until I met with the solicitor earlier today, I was

under the impression I was left alone in the world. Imagine my surprise when I learned I have a sister.”

Although Lucy hadn't been present at the time, he had met Annabelle when they were both children. Instead of reminding him of what she had been told was an awkward encounter, she asked, “Didn't your late mother have any relations? Sisters or brothers? I know Edward didn't. He always bemoaned his lack of family.”

“None, I've been told,” Anthony said, about to add that she probably knew more about his father than he did.

“He didn't leave things here,” she said, dabbing at the edge of one eye with a hanky.

“Pardon?”

“Your father. He... he would come here a few times a week, but he never actually moved in. Never brought clothes or papers or anything that reminded him of his position. I think he liked having a home away from home,” she explained. “So, I don't have any of his things. To return to you,” she clarified before she sniffled.

“Oh,” Anthony replied, not having considered the possibility. Even so, he couldn't help a quick glance around the parlor. Decorated as tastefully as the vestibule, it wasn't overly adorned with porcelains or statuary, vases, or knick-knacks. The Turkish carpet seemed newer than the other furnishings, though. It wasn't worn, not like the edges of the chair in which he sat.

“Your father spilled coffee on the old carpet,” she said as if she could read his mind. “He was beside himself despite my assurances that the stain could be removed. The next thing I knew, a dray cart pulled up outside, and several men entered carrying this new carpet,” she said as she waved at the intricately patterned rug. “They moved the furniture about, took up the old, and unrolled the new, moved the furniture back into a place, and then they were gone, all in the space of fifteen minutes.”

Anthony furrowed his brows. “You had no say in the selection of the pattern?” he asked in surprise.

Lucy shook her head. “No, of course not. But your father always had excellent taste in furnishings. His waistcoats were never too flamboyant. He didn’t dress to draw attention to himself.”

Dipping his head, Anthony knew the matron spoke the truth. His father hadn’t been a dandy. Had the mistress implied he was, he would have argued with her.

“Would you like more tea, Lord Covington?”

Anthony blinked, realizing he had only been addressed as such by Mr. Peabody. “Thank you, but no. I... I should be taking my leave. I didn’t mean to call so late in the day.”

“Oh, it’s quite all right, sir. You’re always welcome here,” Lucy said.

Regarding the mistress with a look of sadness, Anthony inhaled deeply and gave a nod. “Thank you, Mrs. Billings.” He stood. “I’ll see myself out.”

He didn’t intend to rush from the townhouse, but he was nearly running when the butler opened the door for him and handed him his top hat.

Once on the wet pavement, he was relieved to see the hackney exactly where he had left it, the driver regarding him with a look of boredom. The rain had stopped, and the clouds to the west had cleared to reveal a darkening blue sky beyond. Twilight would give way to darkness before he made it home.

“Thank you for waiting,” he said as he stepped up and into the equipage. “Covington House in Kensington,” he added before the driver shut the door.

As the darkness descended on Kensington, Anthony, the thirteenth Baron Covington, entered his new home. His brief ride in the hackney had him deciding he wished to meet his sister and nephew.

Needed to meet them.

Despite her mother's status as a mistress, Annabelle Hutchins, Viscountess Burwick, was a respectable woman, after all, and his nephew was a viscount.



CHAPTER NINE

An Encounter with an Earl and a Viscount

Later that night, White's Men's Club, Mayfair

“LIEUTENANT COLONEL, is that you?”

Jeffrey straightened in his chair and turned to discover the head of the Foreign Office regarding him with surprise. Out of habit, he quickly stood. “It is, my lord,” he replied.

Matthew Fitzsimmons, Viscount Chamberlain, held out his right hand, and Jeffrey shook it. “I didn’t realize you were back in England,” the older man remarked. “Did Whitehall give you leave?”

About to reply, Jeffrey was prevented from doing so when a guffaw sounded from someone nearby. “They gave him leave permanently. Haven’t you heard? Murray-Hicks is the new Earl of Tidworth.”

Jeffrey turned and boggled at hearing how Albert Montgomery, Earl of Habberly, made the comment—as if he was chastising the viscount for his ignorance. The pompous lord, once a rather handsome man, was growing long in the tooth and had yet to take a second wife. His first had died several years ago after giving him his heir, a spare, and a lovely daughter, all apparently married off. From the way his eyes appeared glazed and he swayed slightly as he held an almost empty glass of brandy, it was apparent he had been imbibing too much liquor that evening.

Albert had also been Jeffrey's most worthy opponent on the piste. Neither could claim they were better than the other given their fencing skills were evenly matched. Before Jeffrey had left for the Continent, their bouts usually ended in draws, leaving the betting men at Angelo's frustrated.

Chamberlain's eyes rounded at hearing the earl's remarks. "A second son, are you not?"

Jeffrey nodded. "I was, sir. My father and brother have both succumbed to this year's most common illness. I'll be attending Parliament when it resumes next week."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, sir."

"Whitehall can't be happy about losing their star strategist," Chamberlain said as he indicated Jeffrey should return to his chair. He took the adjacent seat, which left the Earl of Habberly still standing. Barely.

"I suppose not," Jeffrey agreed. "I did not want to resign, of course, but they insisted."

A chuckle sounded from Albert. "You must be the only man in London who likes war," he accused. "A rather expensive hobby for the Crown."

Wincing, Jeffrey was about to reply, but Chamberlain held out a staying hand. He directed his gaze on the drunk earl and said, "I do believe Sinclair was in search of you. Something about a bet you won? He's in the front room."

Albert drained his brandy and dropped the glass on a nearby table. "Then I shall discover what he is about," he said before he sauntered out of the back room.

Left alone with the viscount, Jeffrey said, "Thank you for that. I feared he was going to fall down at any moment."

"He might yet," Chamberlain murmured as he settled back in his chair. "He needs a woman. A reason to go home. He's not been the same since Lady Habberly died," he explained. "I

take it inheriting the Tidworth earldom was not something you were expecting?”

“You have that right,” Jeffrey agreed. “I feel like a fish out of water. Politics, laws... well, I have a lot to learn, I suppose.”

“It is a different sort of duty,” Chamberlain concurred. He dipped his head. “I am a poor example because I did so very late in my own life, so feel free to ignore my advice, but might I recommend you find a countess this Season?”

Jeffrey grimaced. “You are not the first to make that recommendation, sir.”

“You’ll need an heir. I finally have one, but I doubt I’ll live to see him graduate from Oxford,” he said sadly. “Don’t make that mistake.”

Scoffing, Jeffrey leaned forward in his chair and lowered his voice. “I have engaged the services of a matchmaker.”

Chamberlain’s brows rose as he scoffed. “I hardly think *you* would require help in landing a wife,” he commented.

“It’s a bit more complicated than that, sir. It seems the Tidworth earldom is in need of... of *funds*.” He whispered the last word, hoping no one was eavesdropping on their conversation.

“Like every other earldom in this country,” Chamberlain replied with a shrug.

Surprised at hearing the boredom in the viscount’s voice, Jeffrey wondered if he might have overreacted at hearing his solicitor’s advice. “I don’t want to be in debt. And I certainly don’t want the earldom to go back to the Crown under my watch,” he said, keeping his voice low.

“So, you’re in search of a woman with some fortune?”

Jeffrey nodded. “It is too much to hope she’ll be comely?” he asked rhetorically, a memory of his unfortunate meeting with Anne—Viscountess Burwick—flashing before his mind’s eye.

“I can’t imagine it will be difficult for you,” Chamberlain remarked. “Unlike many new to the *ton*, you’re an honorable man. Well-respected. I expect you’ll be wed by Christmas.”

About to argue that Christmas might be too late, Jeffrey held his response when a footman carrying a silver salver approached the viscount.

Chamberlain plucked the missive from the salver and shook it open. He audibly sighed. “No rest for the wicked,” he murmured before he drank the last of his brandy. “I must be off to Whitehall,” he added. He stood and rushed from the back room, nearly colliding with Albert.

“Pardon me,” Chamberlain said, barely acknowledging the earl as he hurried to the front of the club and its exit.

The slightly younger man appeared to sway before he said, “Don’t mention it.” A moment later, he passed through the opening into the room in which Jeffrey was still seated. The newly-minted earl was holding his glass of brandy but was staring at something in his mind’s eye.

“I shouldn’t think you’ll find your new role a difficult one,” Albert stated as he moved to take the chair the viscount had vacated. “You’ll probably find you have more time for leisure pursuits than you did when you were with the army.”

Secretly wishing the missive had been for him—he would have liked nothing better than to dash off to army headquarters and do whatever it was that had Chamberlain saying his farewells—Jeffrey regarded the other earl with curiosity. The fact that Albert had returned so quickly after being dismissed by Chamberlain had him suspicious. He also thought it rather curious the man didn’t exhibit signs of drunkenness.

“I’m afraid running the Tidworth earldom is more difficult than I expected,” Jeffrey replied. “I rather doubt there will be much time for leisure.”

“Not even for fencing?”

Jeffrey straightened in his chair. “It’s been some time since I enjoyed doing it,” he admitted.

“It’s been years since we sparred at Angelo’s,” the earl countered. “Are you up for a match?”

“I might be,” Jeffrey hedged. “It would have to be early, though. I’ve an appointment at one o’clock.” Noticing Albert’s words weren’t slurred, and his manner seemed rather sober, Jeffrey furrowed his brows. “You’re not drunk.”

Albert chuckled. “I am not.”

“So... why act like it?”

“I like to vex Chamberlain,” Albert replied, grinning. “Learn what he’s up to.”

Jeffrey’s look of suspicion deepened. “And once you know, what do you do with the information?”

Once again chuckling, Albert said, “I like to know things. With all my children out of the nest, no wife at home, and my man of business seeing to the earldom, it gives me something to do.”

“Is that all?” Jeffrey prompted. He arched a brow as if he was challenging the earl to admit something nefarious.

“Oh, all right,” Albert replied on a sigh. “It gives me ammunition to use against him should I disagree with him on some matter in the House of Lords.”

Jeffrey stared at the earl, shocked he would be so forthcoming. “Does that happen often?”

Albert nodded. “We’re usually political opposites.”

“And yet you’re members of the same club,” Jeffrey argued. “Shouldn’t you be at Brooks’?”

Leaning back in his chair, Albert said, “Probably, but I like the brandy here better.”

“And the gambling?”

He shook his head. “Stakes are never quite right.”

“You could take a mistress,” Jeffrey suggested.

Grinning, Albert said, “I’m actually in negotiations with one at the moment. She’s recently been freed of a long-term contract.” He inhaled. “I have to admit, I wasn’t sure she would be amenable to my offer—I must have started that initial letter three or four times before I got it right, and then I still held onto it another day before I had it delivered.”

Intrigued, Jeffrey asked, “Why the delay?”

Albert shrugged. “I was afraid she’d turn me away. I don’t think I could face the rejection, even if it has been a long time since we were last together.”

Jeffrey scoffed. “Sometimes courage is all it takes,” he murmured, feeling a bit of jealousy.

If only he possessed the same level of courage when it came to Anne. He could only hope the driver had given her his calling card and passed along his apology. Even so, he knew he owed her one in person.

He pulled his chronometer from his waistcoat pocket and winced when he saw it was half-past nine. Far too late to be calling on a viscountess, even if it was about the same time of the night he used to visit her at *The Elegant Courtesan*.

“I must be going,” Jeffrey said.

“See you at Angelo’s at half-past nine in the morning?” Albert asked.

Jeffrey boggled. Exactly twelve hours in the future. “Indeed,” he replied, deciding he would pay a call on Anne later in the day. He would muster the courage no matter what.

He took his leave of White’s and returned to Tidworth House.



CHAPTER TEN

A Matchmaker Meets a Lady

The following day

SITTING ATOP THE driver's seat of the Burwick town coach, Pickerton pulled on the reins until the matched Cleveland Bays halted. He stood and glanced around, not sure he was in the right place.

"You there," he called out to a street urchin.

"Aye?" the boy responded before he hurried over, expecting there might be a coin involved.

Pickerton sighed and fished a farthing from his waistcoat pocket. "This house up ahead...?" He pointed to a blue, Portland stone manor house. The corner stones, which had been left white, were bright in the morning sun.

"You mean Lyon's Gate Manor?" the urchin asked.

The driver arched a brow. "So that is it?" he asked as he checked the address his ladyship had given him when they set out from Burwick House.

"Most know it as The Lyon's Den," the boy replied. "'Cuz there's gambling."

Pickerton blinked, his attention turning back to the house to discover a black-clad man making his way in their direction. "Gambling?" he repeated. "I think I must have the wrong address," he murmured, absently tossing the farthing to the street urchin. "My mistress is meeting a matchmaker."

“Oh, there’s one of them, too,” the boy said. “Missus Dove-Lyon.”

“Might I be of assistance?” the man wearing black asked, somewhat breathless from his quick jog from the house.

“My mistress wishes to see Mrs. Dove-Lyon. Would you know—?”

“I can escort her,” the servant replied.

Pickerton winced. “To a gambling den?” he said with disgust.

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s office is by way of a side entrance. Your mistress won’t be seen by the few who are playing faro on this fine day,” the servant assured him.

About to step down from the driver’s seat, Pickerton found he didn’t have to when the black-clad man opened the coach door.

“My lady. I am Theseus. I will see you to Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s office.”

Inside the coach, Annabelle inhaled softly “Will it be a problem if I don’t have an appointment?” she asked. “I came to make one,” she added.

“No need, my lady. Mrs. Dove-Lyon can see you right away.”

“Theseus, did you say?” Annabelle asked as she made her way out of the coach, allowing the servant to assist her.

He was impeccably dressed, his black tailcoat, black satin breeches, and black top hat all recently brushed. The black cravat looked as if it had been tied by a valet, and the black shoes were topped with shiny silver buckles.

“Yes, my lady.”

“Like the Greek god?” she asked as she walked next to him. She gave Pickerton a slight shrug when she realized he was watching them closely.

“More like the character from a play,” the servant remarked as he led them not to the front door of Lyon’s Gate Manor, but rather to an entry from the right side of the building. “Helena will see to escorting you into the house,” he added as a similarly dressed woman appeared from the side door of the establishment.

“*A Midsummer Night’s Dream?*” Annabelle guessed upon hearing the woman’s name.

“Indeed, my lady.”

“The matchmaker. Is her name Titania, by chance?” she asked, arching a brow that probably couldn’t be seen behind the netting hanging from her black hat.

Although she had considered wearing a gown of color on this day, Annabelle had elected to wear her widow’s weeds one last time. Even if it wasn’t a good color for her, black provided a sense of seriousness and added an air of weightiness to the situation. She wanted the matchmaker to understand she did not take their meeting lightly.

This was her life they were about to upend.

Upend again, she supposed.

There had been a reason Annabelle had left her mother’s house and taken up the life of a courtesan all those years ago. She hadn’t done it to disappoint her mother or to embarrass her father. The only other option for her at that time was the same as it was for any aristocratic woman—to marry and become a brood mare.

At the time, the thought of marriage and bearing children held little appeal. She knew too many who had died in the childbed. Too many who despised their controlling husbands. The life of a courtesan offered a freedom that even the life of a spinster could not and funds on which she could live.

After a few years, though, she understood her mother’s wish for her. That she would marry well and embrace motherhood.

She had, once Burwick had proposed and moved her to his country estate. When Benton was born, she couldn't imagine why she had desired that other life.

Could she do it again, though? Expect to find another man who would treat her so well? Give birth to his heir? Or a daughter, perhaps?

"Mrs. Dove-Lyon is her real name, and she is an excellent matchmaker," Helena stated as she waved her into the house. Although there was another door straight ahead, a flight of stairs to the right went up to the first floor.

"Her office is just up here," she added as she led the way.

Gathering up her black skirts, Annabelle studied the worn carpet on the stairs as she climbed. *Had these been the servants' stairs at one time?* she wondered before she was suddenly in a large corridor. Here the carpet was newer, the wallpaper suggesting she was in the home of a well-to-do gentleman. A console decorated with a vase of flowers sat against one wall and opposite it was a carved wooden door. Beyond and from somewhere else in the house came the sounds of men's voices. A hint of cheroot smoke hung in the air.

"May I take your hat and coat, my lady?"

Annabelle paused at hearing the offer and turned to discover another servant dressed in the same livery as Theseus and Helena. The newcomer had appeared from around the opposite end of the corridor.

"Thank you, no... uh, Demetrius?" she guessed. "Or Lysander?" She was struggling to remember the other names of the characters in Shakespeare's comedy and was about to offer 'Puck' when the servant's stern expression disappeared with his chuckle.

"Titan, actually," he offered as Helena gave a nod and disappeared down the corridor.

Annabelle noticed the servant's left hand. Although Titan wore black gloves, she could see that he was attempting to

stretch his fingers by splaying his hand and then fisting it.

“I am Annabelle Hutchins. Viscountess Burwick, here to see Mrs. Dove-Lyon,” she said. “Does the damp weather bother your hand?” she asked in worry.

About to knock on the carved wooden door, Titan paused and held his hand to his side. “Occasionally,” he acknowledged, obviously embarrassed she had noticed his infirmity.

“My late husband suffered a similar malady. One of the reasons we didn’t live here in London,” she replied. “Heat helped him the most. Hot water bottles,” she added.

“Thank you, my lady.” He knocked on the door and a woman’s voice called out “Come,” from the other side.

“I’ll bring tea in a moment,” Titan said as he opened the door and said, “Lady Burwick, may I introduce you to Mrs. Bessie Dove-Lyon?”

The matchmaker, dressed in widow’s weeds and a black hat much like Annabelle’s, stood up from her desk. She didn’t exactly curtsy, but she did dip her head. When she straightened, only the bottom half of her face was on display, the upper half obscured by black netting.

“It’s good to make your acquaintance,” Annabelle said as she nodded.

“And yours,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon replied, waving to the chair sitting opposite her desk. Her hands were bare, but a pair of black gloves were stacked on the edge of the desk. “Do have a seat, my lady, and please accept my condolences on the loss of Lord Burwick.”

The door closed behind Annabelle, and she took a steadying breath before she said, “Thank you. It seems you have recently lost someone as well?”

The matchmaker scoffed. “Colonel Lyons died a decade ago, but I find I am still in mourning,” she said.

Annabelle caught the oddest inflection in the woman's voice. Despite the matchmaker's words, she was sure the widow wasn't mourning her late husband but rather the life they might have had.

"Do you own the establishment? The Lyon's Den?" Annabelle asked, remembering what she had overheard when she was still in the coach. Why ever would her mother send her to a matchmaker in a gambling hell?

"I do," Mrs. Dove-Lyon admitted. "Might I learn who recommended you to me?"

Annabelle hesitated in her response, remembering her mother's comment about the matchmaker at one time being a courtesan. "My mother," she stated. "Mrs. Lucy Billings."

"Oh, that poor woman. I only just learned about Lord Covington a few days ago. Please pass along my condolences."

Wincing when she realized the woman knew far more than she thought, Annabelle said, "I will do so. Might I ask how you two became acquainted?" She attempted to keep her voice light even though she was beginning to regret having come to the manor house.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon inhaled to answer and then seemed to think better of her response. "I must have met Lucy... oh, well before I ever met my husband, I suppose it was. We were both concerned for our futures. Did what we could for each other until Colonel Lyons proposed marriage to me."

"I see."

"May I ask why it is you are still wearing black, my lady? Surely a year has passed since Burwick's death?"

About to say she was in mourning for her father, Annabelle decided she best not give away that bit of information so freely. "It has, but barely," she replied. "I have only just returned to London, you see. I still have to hire a lady's maid. My trunks aren't yet unpacked. I have found an excellent governess for my son, though."

Mrs. Dove-Lyon scribbled something on a small sheet of paper. “Why have you come, Lady Burwick? A respectable lady such as yourself shouldn’t require my services.”

Annabelle inhaled softly. “I wasn’t always. Respectable, I mean,” she replied. “Someone recognized me from those days, and... although I don’t think he’ll say anything about it, I require a husband who will... overlook my past and provide protection,” she explained.

“In exchange for part of Burwick’s fortune,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon stated, not making it a question.

Once again wincing, Annabelle asked, “Does it really come down to that? A business proposition? A marriage of inconvenience?” She deliberately changed the common term, curious as to how the matchmaker would respond.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon arched a brow behind the black netting. “Most aristocratic marriages are, my lady. But I assure you, I will do my best to find someone for you who... who might be in search of something more than simply a marriage of convenience and fortune.”

“So... men come to you?” Annabelle asked in confusion.

“Of course. Since your mother seems not to have explained what it is we do here, let me do so. I don’t wish for you to be too shocked.”

Annabelle straightened in her chair at the same moment Titan appeared with a tea tray. “Milk and a lump of sugar, please,” she said, almost wishing there was brandy. Whatever her mother hadn’t told her was about to be revealed.

“Of course, my lady,” Titan said as he prepared her tea. He handed her the cup and saucer before refilling Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s cup, and then he was gone.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon took a sip from her steaming cup before she settled back into her chair, studying her visitor with widening eyes. “Men must *earn* their matches here at The Lyon’s Den, Lady Burwick,” she said without preamble. “Win them.”

Annabelle frowned. “Like some sort of... prize?” she asked in alarm.

“Indeed. You *are* a prize. A red-headed woman who can provide a small fortune in exchange for protection and a title? I should think there will be at least two... more likely *four* men who will vie for your hand in a game of chance.”

The mention of her hair color had Annabelle on alert. “Whatever does my red hair have to do with finding me a husband?”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon tittered. “Only yesterday, I had an earl who mentioned he preferred a wife with red hair.”

Annabelle blinked. “What sort of game of chance will he have to play in order to become my husband?” she asked with a roll of her eyes.

“Oh, I have an idea, but I haven’t yet decided for certain,” she hedged. “Not a typical game of chance, surely. Something more... physical. More sporting. Something of a spectacle.” When the viscountess displayed a look of discomfort, she added, “You already have a title, my lady. Your potential husband should have to work a bit harder at earning the right to marry you, don’t you agree?”

“What if I don’t like him?” Annabelle asked, her voice meek.

“Did you like all the men you bedded before Lord Burwick?”

Annabelle had a thought the matchmaker was baiting her. Trying to make her angry. Trying to make her lash out. Struggling to maintain control—she had admitted to not being a respectable lady, after all—Annabelle angled her head to one side and said, “I did, actually. Not that there were many. Only... one or two, in fact.”

Which was the truth. Her thoughts went back to her second night at *The Elegant Courtesan*, when the lieutenant colonel had appeared at her door, in uniform, with his hat in hand and

a bouquet of flowers. *You did not tell me you were a virgin*, he had said in a quiet voice.

You did not ask, she had replied, glancing around him to determine if anyone else was about to overhear their conversation. *But it matters not. If not you, someone else would have claimed me.*

It matters to me, he had said, his expression fierce. *My honor demands I apologize.*

She had taken the flowers and then kissed him on the cheek. *Thank you for the bouquet, sir. Might I leave particular nights open for you?*

His features had softened, and his breath had left him in a whoosh. *I cannot afford every night of the week, so... Mondays. Wednesdays. Fridays?* he had listed in a halting voice.

They are yours, sir.

“I shall see to it all the participants in this particular game of chance are amiable,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon stated. “That they are all deserving of you.”

“Deserving?” Annabelle repeated.

“Indeed. You are doing them an immense favor,” she replied.

“How are you to be paid?” the viscountess asked.

“Those who vie for your hand will be paying for the privilege to do so, my lady,” the matchmaker replied. “Given the amount I expect will be wagered on the outcome by our other patrons, The Lyon’s Den shall have a rather lucrative evening.”

“There will be wagering?” Annabelle asked in a whisper. She took a sip of the tea and was amazed at how delicious it tasted.

“Of course. It is how I make my living these days,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon remarked. “Now, may I see to lining up some

amiable, titled potential husbands for you?”

Annabelle’s first reaction was to politely decline the offer. Claim she had to take a day or two to think about it. But the sooner she had the matchmaker working on her behalf, the sooner she would be remarried. The sooner there would be a man to help train her son for his position in life.

Benton.

“Whoever wins my hand must be willing to be a father to my son,” Annabelle blurted. “He cannot be cruel to him. Or ignore him.” She nearly drained her tea due to her sudden nervousness.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon blinked. “How old is your son?”

“He’s... almost five.” It wasn’t quite the truth.

The matchmaker furrowed a gray brow but wrote several lines on the sheet of paper she had pulled from one side of her desk. “All right. I’ll see what I can do. Where can I send word when I have the contest arranged?”

Annabelle briefly closed her eyes, hoping she was doing the right thing. “Burwick House. Mayfair,” she replied.

“Very well, Lady Burwick. I’m looking forward to this particular game of chance,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said as she straightened in her chair. “A bit out of the ordinary.”

For some reason, Annabelle was left with the impression that all of the matchmaker’s games of chance were a bit out of the ordinary.

“Thank you for your time, Mrs. Dove-Lyon,” Annabelle said as she stood. Before she had made it to the door, Titan was there.

“I’ll escort you out, my lady.”

“Thank you, Titan.”

Annabelle barely noticed they descended the main stairs as the servant led her out of The Lyon’s Den. From there, Theseus escorted her to her town coach, opening the door and

helping her in, worry and doubt threatening to change her mind.

“Mrs. Dove-Lyon will find you the perfect husband,” Theseus said when he handed her into the coach.

Inhaling softly, Annabelle regarded the black-clad man with an expression of relief. “Are you willing to place a wager on it?” she asked with an arched brow.

Theseus scoffed and said, “I already have, my lady.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

A Colonel Meets a Boy

Meanwhile, back at Burwick House

“**W**HAT DO YOU mean you must go out?” Dobbs asked as Miss Thompkins pulled on a spencer. “And through the front door? You’re a serv—”

“I am a governess now, Dobbs, which affords me the right to use the front door,” the former housemaid stated, her chin lifting in defiance. “It is Tuesday,” she added. She positioned a straw hat atop her head. “I always pay a call on my mother on Tuesdays.”

Dobbs gave her a look of disbelief. “For how long?”

“I’ll be back in less than two hours.”

“But... but what about your charge?” Dobbs countered. Despite his usual stoic expression and demeanor, the butler looked panicked.

“I’ve left the viscount in the parlor,” she replied, pulling on a pair of cotton gloves. “He might be a child, but he’s very good at keeping himself entertained. He’s playing with his tin soldiers. He’ll hardly know I’m gone,” she said with a wave. “You might take him a cup of milk and some biscuits. We’ve been practicing how to behave when there are adults present.”

Dobbs blinked as the governess hurried out the front door. “Milk?” he repeated in disgust.

Before the door closed, Miss Thompkins replied, “Yes, Dobbs. Milk.”

Dipping his head in an attempt to control his annoyance with the governess, Dobbs took a breath or two. He turned and headed into the hall. Before he had made it past the round table, there was a knock at the front door.

Thinking it was Miss Thompkins returning for something she might have forgotten, Dobbs marched to the door and opened it far more quickly than usual, ready to scold the servant.

He immediately straightened upon realizing the person on the other side of the door was not Thompkins but rather a man of rigid bearing and serious demeanor. For the second it took Dobbs to open the door, though, he was sure the man was smiling at Thompkins, his top hat in hand. Once he was facing the butler, his expression hardened.

“Good day, sir. May I be of assistance?”

Handing the butler a calling card, Jeffrey regarded him with an arched brow and said, “Lord Tidworth to see your mistress.”

Dobbs glanced at the card. “Lady Burwick is not in residence, my lord,” he replied. “But I can give her—”

“I’ll wait for her return,” Jeffrey said, his gaze going over the butler’s shoulder as if he expected Annabelle was somewhere nearby. “Might there be a parlor or a drawing room available where I can wait?”

Dobbs blinked. “Yes, sir, of course. I’ll escort you,” he replied, deciding it best he not argue with an earl. Although he didn’t recognize the man, he did recognize the name Tidworth. He glanced at the calling card, grimacing when the engraved print confirmed the name and title.

The two climbed the stairs to the first floor, and Dobbs stopped short upon entering the parlor.

At the back of the room, a young boy was standing on a wooden side chair pulled up to a green felt-covered gaming table. His collection of tin soldiers, the flat metal cut-outs painted and mounted on oval discs, were set up in a line along

one side of the table, and several objects were scattered about the tabletop.

“Lord Burwick,” the butler said before he resumed his entry.

Startled by the interruption, Lord Burwick straightened too quickly from his bent-over position and waved his arms about in an attempt to keep his balance.

“Careful there, young man,” Jeffrey said as he hurried to steady the boy. He caught him by the shoulders before the boy could fall from the chair. “Are you all right?”

“I am, sir,” he replied, his eyes rounding upon recognizing Jeffrey. “You were at the tailor’s shop yesterday.”

Jeffrey winced. “I was, yes.” He held out his right hand. “Jeffrey Murray-Hicks, Earl of Tidworth,” he said by way of introduction.

The boy grinned, as he placed his right hand into the earl’s. “Benton Hutchins, Viscount Burwick,” he said, enunciating each syllable as he shook the earl’s larger hand. “It is very good to meet you, sir.”

Chuckling softly, Jeffrey said, “And you as well. Tell me, Burwick, how old are you?”

“Four. Almost five,” Benton replied, holding up five fingers.

For a moment, Jeffrey experienced the oddest sensation. He mentally did the math and realized almost immediately there was no chance the boy had been conceived while his mother was employed at *The Elegant Courtesan*. The establishment had been closed for at least six years.

He wasn’t sure if he felt relief or disappointment, especially when he glanced down at the boy’s knee. The discoloration he had noticed the day before was most definitely a birthmark.

“I’ll see to tea and milk,” Dobbs announced from the threshold.

“And biscuits, please?” Benton said with a look of excitement. “Are you hungry, sir?” he asked in a whisper, directing the comment to the earl.

“I am.”

Jeffrey did his best to suppress a grin as he watched the butler push out his chest and say, “And biscuits, my lord.” Dobbs furrowed a graying brow and hurried off down the stairs.

“Capital,” Jeffrey said as he turned his attention back on the little lord. “Now...” His gaze darted to the gaming table. “Are these yours?” he asked in awe.

“They were my father’s,” Benton replied. “Mummy gave them to me.”

Lifting one of the soldiers from the end of the line, Jeffrey examined it by the light from the window. “These are exquisitely crafted,” he commented, one brow arching.

“Exquisitely,” Benton repeated. “What does that mean?”

Straightening, Jeffrey regarded the young boy a moment before saying, “Very well made. I think I have a set much like these.”

“You do?” the boy asked. “Maybe you can bring them, and we can set them up over on this end of the battlefield,” he said as he indicated the other side of the table.

“Perhaps I could,” Jeffrey hedged, his attention going to the other objects on the green felt—a small vase, a figurine of a flower and its matching bird, and a short pencil. “What are these to be?” he asked, realizing almost at once the boy was using them as stand-ins for something else.

Benton pointed to the vase. “Trees.” His finger went to the pencil. “And a canon. I had to promise Mummy I wouldn’t break them.”

“Ah,” Jeffrey acknowledged. “Perhaps we need to make an opposing army from half of your soldiers,” he suggested. “How many do you have?”

Using a pudgy finger, Benton counted quietly. “Twelve,” he announced.

“Half would be six. May I?”

Benton nodded.

Jeffrey plucked six soldiers from the line. He moved around the gaming table to the other side and took the chair opposite Benton before setting up the soldiers, so they faced the first group.

“Where should I put the trees?” Benton asked, dropping onto the chair so he was on his knees instead of his feet.

“Off to the sides, I should think,” Jeffrey commented. “Where they won’t be in the way of a clear shot.”

Benton furrowed his brows. “But won’t it be easier for the enemy to shoot if they have a clear shot?”

Remembering all too well the battle scenarios he had mapped out for the past few years in his role as a lieutenant colonel, Jeffrey understood the boy’s query. He had never agreed with the reasoning that a war should be fought on an open battlefield, where everyone was at risk of being shot. Wouldn’t it have made more sense to hide? To shoot from behind trees, using them as cover?

That sort of fighting wasn’t deemed honorable, however. As if there was truly any honor on a battlefield.

“It will indeed,” Jeffrey agreed. “It makes no sense to sacrifice so many men on the front lines in the name of honor,” he added. “But that’s what we had to do.”

Benton jerked. “You went to war?” he asked in awe.

Jeffrey winced at hearing the boy’s excitement. “I did. Until a few months ago, I was a lieutenant colonel in His Majesty’s army. Had five commanding officers reporting to me. Over six-hundred men under them.”

“Is that a big number?” Benton asked.

His mouth opening to answer, Jeffrey considered how to respond. "It is," he finally said. "Too many for me to learn all their names. Where they came from," he murmured. "I used to know all my men's names, though, when I was a captain."

"What did you have to do?"

Jeffrey brightened, his attention going to the mock battlefield they had set up on the gaming table. "I used to plan attacks, much like we're doing here," he said. "I did so on large maps," he added as he held out his arms. "Used blocks of wood and rocks to stand in for trees and such," he explained.

"I can get rocks from the garden," Benton offered.

Chuckling, Jeffrey held out a staying hand and said, "We don't need them now."

He wished there had been some rocks on the piste at Angelo's Academy that morning. He and Albert, Earl of Habberly, had met in the middle and sparred until they were both breathless and soaked with perspiration. Albert had beaten him handily, his sure-footed attacks leaving Jeffrey retreating until he was off the piste more times than he could count. A few strategically placed rocks might have encumbered the earl enough to give Jeffrey a fighting chance.

He had needed the practice, though. A reminder of how good he would need to be to win at The Lyon's Den.

Albert had agreed to his request they meet again the following morning.

Dobbs appeared with the tea tray.

"How do you take your tea, my lord?"

"Milk and sugar," Jeffrey replied, remembering how good it had tasted at The Lyon's Den.

"Should I serve you at the table, sir?" Dobbs asked.

Jeffrey noticed the tray included a cup of milk in addition to the tea set and a plate of biscuits. "Indeed. I think his lordship's milk will do better with a table beneath it," he said,

suppressing the urge to chuckle when he saw Benton's reaction at being referred to as "his lordship."

"Very well, sir." Dobbs set the milk and biscuits in the center of the gaming table and prepared the earl's tea. "Will there be anything else, sir?"

About to reply in the negative, Jeffrey hesitated. "Would the late Lord Burwick have any maps in his study?"

Dobbs hesitated before saying, "There is a map of England, but it's not on the wall."

"That's even better," Jeffrey replied. "Would it fit on this table?" he asked, waving a hand over the mock battlefield.

"I suppose so, sir."

"We'll need it. After we finish our biscuits," Jeffrey said, his tone of voice that of a commanding officer.

The butler's look of concern grew. "May I ask what your intentions for it are?"

Jeffrey blinked and stared at the servant. "Once we've finished off these biscuits, I intend to teach this young man about battlefield strategy, if you must know."

Dobbs jerked. "Yes, sir. I'll fetch it right away." He hurried out the door as Benton helped himself to his milk and biscuits.

"We're going to eat *all* of them?" Benton asked, his eyes rounding.

"We are, my lord," Jeffrey replied, grinning as he helped himself to a Dutch biscuit.

After the spirited fencing match he'd had with the Earl of Habberly that morning, he was starting to feel the complaints of overexercised muscles. Still, he was glad he had accepted the earl's challenge if for no other reason than the man's good mood.

Albert had heard from his former mistress, and she was about to become his current mistress.

The cur.

Jeffrey finished off a biscuit. “Tell me. Where have you been all this time? I don’t recall seeing you in London before.” He hadn’t been in London very long—his dismissal from his position had only occurred a fortnight ago—but he was curious as to how the young boy would respond.

Benton swallowed the remains of his first biscuit. “At Penthurst Place, sir,” he replied. “I was born there.”

“Penthurst Place. Hmm. Where might that have been located?”

Dobbs entered the parlor carrying the map, and he hesitated. “My lord—?”

“Give it here,” Jeffrey ordered. “Your timing is perfect. His lordship is about to show me where he was born.”

Not bothering to hide his dismay—there were biscuit crumbs scattered about on the green felt—Dobbs said, “Very good, sir. Will there be anything else?”

“No, thank you, Dobbs,” Benton replied.

Jeffrey did his best to suppress a grin as he held the map off to one side.

As Dobbs left the parlor, Jeffrey pointed to London’s location on the map. “We’re here. This is London,” he stated. “Can you show me where you were born?”

“My father showed me,” Benton replied. He reached out and used a finger to point to a spot in Sussex. “Near Burwash,” he murmured, his brows furrowing. “I can’t read yet, but Miss Thompkins is going to teach me how.”

Jeffrey arched a brow. “Burwash? South of Royal Tunbridge Wells,” he murmured, his forefinger tapping the city on the thick paper map.

“That’s where Mummy went shopping sometimes,” the boy said. “But we lived here. In the country.” His finger traced

a line heading south from Jeffrey's finger to where the word "Burwash" was written in tiny script.

"Tell me, do remember your father?" Jeffrey asked, setting aside the map.

Benton nodded. "Yes. He was tall. Sometimes he carried me on his shoulders. When we would go to have our luncheon outdoors. Mummy liked picnics." He took a drink of milk, which left a white mustache on his upper lip. He attempted to use his tongue to wipe it away. "Mummy is pretty."

Helping himself to another biscuit, Jeffrey chuckled. "She is that," he agreed. "Why does she still wear black gowns?"

Finishing off his second biscuit, Benton seemed to think on the question for a moment before he said, "She wears black gowns every day." He shrugged. "My grandmother says black is not her color."

Jefferey gave a start. "Grandmother?"

"Grandmother Lucy. We paid a call on her yesterday."

"Here in London?"

Benton nodded. "Number forty-two, Green Street," he said proudly. "I remember from when Mummy told our driver. We went there after..." His features screwed up into a look of bewilderment. "After Mr. Garth measured me for my clothes. Mummy was very upset."

The earl regarded the boy with a look of consternation for a moment. After their unfortunate encounter at the tailor's shop, Anne had apparently run to her mother, no doubt for advice.

A mother who lived in Green Street.

"Your Grandmother must be very well off if she lives in such a nice neighborhood," Jeffrey commented.

"She has a nice house," Benton agreed. "But she was wearing black. Her man died, too."

Jeffrey's brows shot up at the odd reference. "Do you know who this man was?" He wondered if he might, struggling to remember if Anne had ever said anything about her parents.

The boy sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "I think she said his name, but I don't remember." He took a drink of milk and added, "He was with her thirty years."

Inhaling softly, Jeffrey asked, "With your grandfather, perhaps?"

"With my Mummy's father," Benton stated. "I don't think she liked him, though." He helped himself to another biscuit. "Can we play with the soldiers now?"

Jeffrey immediately realized the boy wasn't old enough to understand familial relationships. He drained his tea and set aside the cup and saucer. "Yes, we can. At least until your mother arrives. Then I'll need to speak with her alone. To apologize."

"Apologize," Benton repeated carefully before finishing up his milk. "Does that mean you have to say you are sorry?"

"It does indeed."

"I have to apologize when I do bad things," the boy admitted. "What bad thing did you do?"

Wincing, Jeffrey cleared his throat. "I referred to you using an unsuitable word. I didn't mean it the way it sounded, of course. All my years in the army have me sometimes choosing curse words over the proper words. I'm a gentleman now, though, so I must be more careful," he explained.

"Is that why Mummy was mad at you?"

Jeffrey gave a start and nearly said one of his favorite curse words. "I hope that's all it was," he murmured. "If there is another reason, I am quite sure I don't know what it would be."

When the boy didn't offer a response, Jeffrey set aside Benton's glass and the empty plate and settled himself in his

chair. “Now. Shall we begin this battle?”

“Yes, sir,” Benton replied. “Can I be the winner?”

About to say there were no true winners in a battle, Jeffrey instead chuckled and said, “Follow my orders, captain, and you will be.”

Benton beamed in delight as the former lieutenant colonel explained what to do.



CHAPTER TWELVE

A Second Chance at a Reunion

Ten minutes earlier, downstairs in Burwick House

FEELING HOPEFUL AS much as she was worried about what she had just done—committed to Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s plan to match her to a suitable aristocrat—Annabelle returned to Burwick House with the intention of spending the rest of the day unpacking her trunks.

Her lack of a lady’s maid would become an issue given she had decided to stop wearing her widow’s weeds. Most of her gowns had been folded and stored away for the past year. They would require a good airing and pressing before she could be seen wearing them in public.

“How do, Dobbs?” she said when the butler opened the door before she reached it.

“Miss Thompkins has gone off to see her mother,” the butler blurted.

“Yes, it’s Tuesday,” Annabelle murmured, handing over her hat. “She told me she always pays a call on her mother on Tuesdays. I told her Benton would be fine playing in the parlor. Did you take him milk and biscuits, by chance?” She had to suppress a grin at seeing his attempt to hide his surprise. Thompkins had mentioned he would protest her departure when she had apprised Annabelle of her plan earlier that morning.

“I did, yes,” Dobbs replied. “Your son is in the parlor...” He paused, his face screwed into a grimace.

“Yes?” For a moment, Annabelle wondered if she might have erred in trusting Benton to entertain himself. She didn’t wish to treat him as a babe any longer, though. He was nearly six years old—would be next week—although she would continue the ruse he was a year younger. “What is it?”

“You have a caller, ma’am. I put him in the parlor before I knew your son was in there,” Dobbs explained, taking her redingote as he handed her Lord Tidworth’s calling card.

At first glance, she had no reason to think she knew the aristocrat and was about to mention it when she saw his entire name in smaller type below his title. “Oh,” she breathed, a sense of panic settling over her.

Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey Murray-Hicks was an earl.

“I have served him tea and biscuits, my lady.”

“Very good,” she replied, her heart hammering in her chest.

“Is something wrong?”

She lifted her head to find the butler regarding her with a look of worry. “This name on the card... I have met him... he was a friend of the family many years ago, but he was a military man. A lieutenant colonel, as I recall,” she said, wanting to be sure the butler hadn’t jumped to any conclusions about their relationship. “Not a peer of the realm,” she added with a shake of her head.

“That would explain why he seems so taken with your son’s tin soldiers. They’re playing with them on the card table.”

Annabelle blinked. “Oh. Oh, dear. I should probably make sure Benton hasn’t bored him to tears with questions,” she said. She hurried up the steps, holding her skirts higher than necessary with her impatience to reach her son.

ON THE ONE hand, she wanted to scold Jeffrey for coming to her house. For invading her privacy. What if one of the

neighbors saw him? What if he mentioned how they knew one another?

On the other hand, she remembered the look of desperation on his face when he had run after her the day before. He appeared truly sorry for what he had said.

Surely, he wouldn't tell anyone about their past. He had been her very best client back in the day. Three nights a week. For a time, she had thought him besotted with her. For a time, she might have felt the same for him. At least until he had to leave London for the Continent with no word as to when—or if—he would return.

A fortnight later, David Fitzwilliam announced *The Elegant Courtesan* would be closing, so it didn't matter much then.

Slowing her pace, Annabelle stood off to the side of the parlor door and listened intently. She held a hand to her mouth when she heard her son mention his grandmother. He had been present for the entire conversation she'd had with Lucy Billings, and she wondered how much he was relaying to Jeffrey.

The Earl of Tidworth.

Whatever had happened to elevate him to such a rank?

Curiosity had her peeking around the door opening to surreptitiously study him. He was definitely older, his light hair displaying hints of gray amongst the blond. The planes of his face had always given him a severe look, which perfectly suited a military man, but now there was a softer edge to his jaw, and lines radiated from the outer edges of his eyes. His posture had always been rigid, so she was surprised he wasn't sitting as straight as he sometimes did when he remained in her room on their nights together.

Aware Jeffrey was responding to Benton's latest comment, she tried to make out his words, but his deeper voice was barely audible. She inhaled softly when she heard Benton ask if they could play soldiers now.

Deciding it was now or never, Annabelle entered the parlor and said, “Here is my young man.” Her attention wasn’t on her son, though, but rather on Jeffrey.

About to move one of the tin soldiers on the table, Jeffrey froze and stared at her. “Anne,” he whispered. A second later, the toy was forgotten as he stood and gave a deep bow.

Benton scrambled off his chair and did the same. “Mummy! Lord Tidder is teaching me how to win a battle.”

Suppressing a grin, Annabelle dipped a curtsy. “Oh, dear. You’ll be impossible to live with once you know how to do that,” she said. “Are you going to introduce me to our caller?”

His eyes widening, Benton glanced over at Jeffrey. “I thought you said you knew my Mummy.”

“It’s been a very long time,” Jeffrey replied. He stepped forward and took Annabelle’s hand to his lips. “Far too long,” he added, not taking his eyes off her.

Annabelle reached out with her free hand and ruffled her son’s hair. “Benton, darling, Miss Thompkins is due back any moment. When she arrives, it would be best if she finds you taking a nap,” she said.

The boy looked stricken for a moment. “Now? But—”

“I’ll be sure to bring my soldiers tomorrow, your lordship,” Jeffrey said. “So, we can finish the battle then.”

“Oh! Thank you, my lord,” Benton said in awe. He kissed his mother’s hand, gave a bow, and left the parlor.

Glancing down to where Jeffrey still held her hand, Annabelle said, “Thank you for your patience with my son.”

“He’s a bright boy. You should be very proud.”

“About yesterday afternoon—”

“I wish to apologize. For what I said,” Jeffrey interrupted. “I did not mean it. As I told Lord Burwick, my years as a military man had me using rather coarse language. I grew used

to it, but I need to watch what I say these days. Now that I find myself a titled man.”

Annabelle glanced around the parlor, taking in the used cups and plates. “Apology accepted. Please, have a seat, my lord,” she said, waving to a chair.

“You can still call me Jeffrey. I’d prefer it if you did,” he said, the timbre of his voice sending a frisson shooting down her spine. Memories of their nights together flooded her mind and had her nerve endings prickling with excitement.

She took the adjacent settee and rang the bell. Given how quickly Dobbs appeared, she was sure he was standing outside the parlor, probably eavesdropping. “Could you bring tea, please, and the brandy?”

“Right away, my lady.”

Once he was out of earshot, Annabelle said, “I told him you were a friend of the family, so I suppose we must use our given names,” she reasoned. “You may call me Annabelle.”

A myriad of emotions seemed to cross his face before he nodded. “When did you develop a taste for brandy, Annabelle?”

She grinned. “I had a mind to drink an entire bottle of it last night after your appearance at Mr. Garth’s shop,” she said in a quiet voice. “But I refrained. I actually ordered it for you.”

His furrowed brows had Jeffrey appearing crestfallen. “I thought we had parted on good terms.”

“Oh, we did. Very much so,” she quickly replied. After a pause, she added, “But I’ve only just returned to London a few days ago, and my biggest worry has been that I’ll be recognized.” She said the last word in a whisper. “I cannot afford a scandal. My son cannot,” she added.

Jeffrey’s sad expression continued. “I would never tell anyone, Annabelle. You should know that.”

She nodded even as she let out her breath in a *whoosh*. “I am relieved to hear it. You left London so suddenly, and

then... everything else happened so quickly.”

“Everything else?” he repeated.

“The proprietor announced he was closing the establishment. We had only a fortnight to make arrangements.”

“When did you marry Burwick?”

The question had her scoffing. “Shortly after... after the establishment closed,” she replied. “We married here in London, and then Burwick took me to his estate in Sussex. I have lived there until this past week.”

“Burwash,” he murmured, glancing toward the map of England he had set on a side table. “Was he good to you?”

Not expecting the query, Annabelle blinked. “He was. Far more generous than he had need to be,” she said. “I admit I grew to love him, even though he had the horn nearly every day toward the end.” She said this last with a soft chuckle but quickly sobered when she noticed Jeffrey’s expression.

She had never seen him appear so angry.

“What’s wrong?”

“You have no idea how jealous I was of him,” he murmured, shaking his head. “And now... well, it’s a good thing he’s dead, or I might have arranged a match at Angelo’s and used a foil without a blossom on the blade.”

“Jeffrey,” she scolded. While she was shocked to hear his claim of jealousy, she couldn’t help but remember their fondness for one another. Perhaps he had felt more for her than she had thought.

“I mean it, Annabelle,” he insisted. “I would have skewered him through the heart, or mayhap somewhere else.”

About to remind him he was speaking of a dead man, she instead warned, “There will be no more talk of murder.”

“Did you *have* to marry him?”

She inhaled to answer, but paused because she knew Dobbs was about to enter the parlor. “Do you still take milk in your tea, my lord?” she asked lightly, the moment the butler entered the room.

“You have an excellent memory, Annabelle. And the brandy won’t be necessary,” Jeffrey replied, understanding her ploy with the butler.

“Thank you, Dobbs. I’ll see to serving. Has Miss Thompkins returned?”

“She has, my lady. She went straight to your son’s bedchamber.”

“Very good. That will be all.”

Dobbs nodded and left the parlor as Annabelle saw to pouring the tea. “I had no choice but to marry Burwick,” she said in a quiet voice. “With the establishment closing, I needed protection.” She handed Jeffrey the teacup and saucer.

“If I had known—”

“What could you have done?” she interrupted, stirring sugar into her own cup of tea.

“Brought you with me.”

“To the Continent?” she asked in disbelief.

He nodded and then sighed. “I suppose following the drum wouldn’t have been your first choice,” he murmured. “But I would have provided protection. Set you up in an apartment.”

“We’ll never know since you didn’t ask,” she countered, holding out the plate of biscuits.

A look of hurt crossed his face as he waved away the plate. “No, thank you.”

Annabelle inhaled softly. “I apologize. That was uncalled for.”

“You are right, though,” he said. “I should have paid a call to let you know of my orders,” he added. “But I was all about

doing my duty back then.”

“You’re not now?”

The query had him straightening. “It’s different now. I’m not a colonel any longer. I’m not even in the army.”

“About that. Whatever happened to make you an earl?”

“Death, my lady. Two of them,” he remarked dryly. “Everyone was sure I would be the one to meet my Maker fighting on the Continent—frogs always aim for those who are mounted on horseback because they know we’re the officers—but as unlikely as it seems, I am the one who survived to inherit.” He set aside his teacup. “I know I never talked about my father. My family. As the second son of an earl, I never expected to have to inherit.”

“I didn’t know your father was an aristocrat. Your brother... George, wasn’t that his name? Why didn’t he inherit?”

“You’ve a good memory,” he stated, sounding impressed. “He and Father both died of the flu this past winter. I was ordered to return to England and claim the title.”

Annabelle inhaled softly. “I’m so sorry for your loss,” she said quietly. “I suppose you’ve already met with your man of business and solicitor and such?” She would need to make an appointment with Burwick’s solicitor once she was settled.

He grimaced. “This past winter has not been kind to the coffers. I...” He suddenly stopped speaking as his gaze went to the meager flames in the fireplace.

“What is it?” she asked, her gaze darting to the clock on the mantel. For a moment, she thought he might have realized he had an appointment elsewhere.

“I admit I am having a difficult time of it,” he murmured. “The colder than usual winter and cooler spring has apparently impacted my tenant farms...” He allowed the sentence to trail off, not about to say more about his financial state. “Did Burwick leave you in good stead? Have you money?”

Annabelle scoffed at his sudden change in topic. “He did. The viscountcy is... quite solvent, if that’s what you mean.”

“You’re sure?” From the look on his face, she knew he was concerned.

“I do the books, so, yes, I am sure,” she replied.

“You can do ledgers?” he asked in surprise.

She grinned. “I did them for my mother’s household for many years before... before I moved out,” she stammered.

Ran away would have been a more truthful way to put it.

For a moment, the image of her father’s face filled her mind’s eye. The way he had looked the day he announced she was to have a Season and needed to see a modiste about a wardrobe. The look of disgust on his face when he said he would have to admit to being her father in order to secure invitations to balls and *soirées* on her behalf.

Well, she had saved him from that distasteful task, hadn’t she? Chosen her mother’s path in life instead of that of a baron’s illegitimate daughter.

She had been luckier than her mother, though, in landing a husband when life might have forced her to the seedier side of her profession. Her flaming tresses had been her saving grace.

Well, her hair *and* generous bosom.

“Annabelle?”

Pulled from her reverie, she jerked upright. “Apologies. I...” She glanced at the clock again. “Oh, dear. You no doubt have appointments, and I still need to unpack,” she said.

As if sensing something had changed in her, Jeffrey straightened. “I suppose I should be on my way,” he agreed. “However, I must return tomorrow. I promised Lord Burwick I would bring some tin soldiers.”

“That’s very kind of you,” she said. “He adores the set he has now.” Given what Jeffrey had said about her late husband, she dared not tell him they were originally his. “In fact, I’m

thinking of buying him another set for his birthday. It's next week," she added.

"He'll have an entire regiment to command," Jeffrey said with a grin. "I think I might be jealous."

She chuckled. "Tell me, where might I find tin soldiers in London?"

He thought about it for a moment. "Rundell and Bridge probably have some in their shop," he suggested.

"Aren't they goldsmiths?"

Nodding, Jeffrey said, "They carry more gifts than they do jewels. If they don't have soldiers, I'm sure they can tell you who does." After a pause, he added, "I would be happy to escort you there."

A frisson of pleasure shot down Annabelle's spine. "That's very kind of you," she replied. "Perhaps we can go tomorrow. After you've brought your soldiers and had a chance to set them up."

He grinned. "We will," he said. He stood at the same moment she did and made his way to stand before her. "I have missed you, Annabelle," he whispered. He bent his head and captured her lips with his.

The quick kiss caught her by surprise. She blinked as he straightened. "Good-bye, Jeffrey."

"I'll see you tomorrow." He bowed to her curtsy and took his leave of the parlor.



FEELING LIGHTER THAN he had in a very long time, Jeffrey made his way down the stairs. He knew he had surprised Annabelle with his kiss. Although she hadn't expected it, she had returned it. He almost wished he had wrapped his arms around her shoulders, pulled her against him, and continued kissing her.

He had done everything possible to keep his arousal in check during their brief time together. If he had held her, his cock would have made its presence known to her, though. Another minute, and he would be begging her to join him in a bed.

Realizing he needed to think of something else fast lest Dobbs notice his erection, he thought of his meeting with Mrs. Dove-Lyon. The image of the widow in his mind's eye did the trick, and for a moment he considered sending word he wouldn't require her services after all.

He could court Annabelle. She would make the perfect countess, at least for him.

Once he reached the vestibule, Dobbs was quick to give him his hat and help him with his greatcoat. When the butler opened the front door for him, Jeffrey was forced to stop short, for a well-dressed man carrying a bouquet of flowers blocked the opening.

"Pardon, sir," the younger man said. "Is this Burwick House?"

Jeffrey stared at the caller a moment before he said. "It is. Pardon me. I was just leaving."

"Oh!" The man bearing flowers stepped aside to allow Jeffrey to exit and then turned his attention to the butler. "Is Lady Burwick in residence?" He struggled to pull a calling card from his waistcoat pocket.

Dobbs opened the door wider and waved him in. "I'll see if she's here, sir," he replied, taking the card.

From behind the new caller, the Earl of Tidworth turned and glared.

"Who the hell is this?" he asked under his breath. At the same moment, he regretted not having thought about bringing flowers.

He wouldn't be making that mistake on the morrow.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A Brother Pays a Call

Meanwhile, upstairs at Burwick House

“**Y**OU’RE SUPPOSED TO be asleep, young man,” Annabelle said when she peeked into his bedchamber and saw Benton sitting up on his bed.

“I’m not tired, Mummy. Honest.” He held one of his tin soldiers in his fist. “I can hardly wait for Lord Tinder to come tomorrow.”

“Tidworth, darling. His title is Lord Tidworth,” she said, attempting to hide her amusement.

“Tidworth,” he repeated softly, the syllables said distinctly.

“That’s right.”

“He was very nice.”

“Was he now? It sounds as if you spent a good deal of time with him. What did you talk about?” In the moment she had walked in on them, she feared Benton might have shared more information than she wanted the earl to know.

“Mostly about battles. Ordering soldiers about used to be his job in the army,” he said with excitement.

“I see. Did he show you how to arrange your soldiers for battle?”

He nodded. “I don’t have enough soldiers for a reg-ment, though.”

“Regiment,” she corrected him, not sure she wanted him to know so much about war at his age. Expecting him to repeat the word, she noticed his attention wasn’t on her, though, but rather on who was behind her.

“Dobbs is waiting for you,” he remarked.

“What?” Annabelle spun around to discover the butler was standing outside the bedchamber, apparently waiting for her. “What is it, Dobbs?”

“You have another caller, ma’am,” he said as he handed her the calling card. “Should I escort him to the parlor?”

Annabelle read the card, furrowing her brows at seeing her late father’s title in print. She glanced up. “Did he seem... angry or... or terse?” she asked in worry. “Impatient?”

Dobbs blinked. “Neither, ma’am. He is carrying a bouquet of pink roses.”

Inhaling softly, Annabelle glanced over at Benton. “You go to sleep.” Turning to Dobbs, she said, “Yes, take him to the parlor, and bring tea and biscuits if there are any left.”

“Very good, my lady.”

“Who is it, Mummy?”

Annabelle regarded her son a moment before she said, “I think it’s your uncle.”

He looked surprised. “I have one of those?”

She chuckled. “Possibly. I’m going to go find out.” After the discussion she’d had with her mother the day before, she hadn’t been sure if her half-brother would wish to have any contact.

If he was in the house and bearing flowers, apparently he did.

Stopping at her bedchamber to check her gown and hair, Annabelle’s heart rate soared at the thought of seeing her only sibling again. They had met only once in their youth, when the baron had brought him to her mother’s townhouse. Although

he was a couple of years older, he seemed awkward and shy and not at all pleased about the unscheduled stop when he'd been promised an ice at Gunter's Tea Shop. For their brief meeting, her mother had remained upstairs and out of sight, apparently in hiding.

How long ago had that been? Twenty years?

For a moment, she thought to change into a gown that wasn't black but remembered her father had died recently. Perhaps it was best she continued wearing mourning clothes.

When she stepped into the parlor, Anthony Covington was standing over the card table, apparently admiring the tin soldiers lined up on either side of the green-felt battlefield.

"Lord Covington?"

Anthony spun around, nearly losing his grip on the paper cone-wrapped roses he held. "Annabelle?"

She curtsied and he bowed. "It's been a long time," she said as she approached, her steps cautious.

For a moment, he seemed confused. "Ha... have we met?"

Allowing a wan grin, she said, "A long time ago. More than twenty years, so I do not expect you to have remembered. Your father—my father—introduced us, and I'm so sorry for your loss. I only learned of Father's death yesterday when I paid a call on my mother to let her know of my return to London."

He took her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. "That's my fault. I didn't know how to reach you," he said as his gaze took in her black gown.

"I've only been in London a few days," she said. "Please, do sit down," she added, waving to a chair.

"These are for you," he blurted, holding out the bouquet.

The scent of roses wafted past her nose, and she inhaled deeply. "They're gorgeous," she murmured. "And they smell divine. Thank you for thinking of me." She placed them in a

nearby vase at the same moment Dobbs entered with the tea tray.

“I brought water for the flowers, my lady,” the butler said as he indicated a pitcher on the tray.

“Very good. I’ll see to serving the tea.” She turned to Anthony. “You take milk, do you not?”

He displayed an expression of surprise. “How do you know that?”

“Just a guess,” she admitted. She poured the tea and added some milk before handing him the cup and saucer. Lifting the pitcher, she stood and moved to the bouquet of roses. “If father died only last week, you must be terribly busy with his final arrangements and the Covington barony,” she remarked, pouring the water around the stems.

“Oh, I’m led to believe from the solicitor that running the barony won’t be a difficult task,” he replied. “I do have to learn it, though.”

“Father didn’t have you doing it in his stead these past few years?” She was sure most aristocrats trained their heirs in the day-to-day operations of their titles. “Burwick claimed he was going to teach Benton when he was old enough to read,” she added with a chuckle.

“Benton?”

Annabelle inhaled softly. “My son. He is Viscount Burwick now. I fear if I’m not careful, he is going to begin acting too big for his breeches. He’s already quite chuffed about being called ‘his lordship’.”

Her brother chuckled, his good humor reminding Annabelle of how her father had appeared when she was a young girl. She could imagine how her mother reacted to meeting the man. “Do you suppose you could acknowledge him as your nephew?” She held out the plate of biscuits.

Anthony seemed surprised by the query as he helped himself to a lemon biscuit. “But of course. I must admit, when

I met with my solicitor earlier this week, I felt very alone. Mr. Peabody is the one who informed me arrangements had been made for your mother and for you.”

“Me?” Annabelle questioned, pausing as she poured herself a cup of tea.

He gave a shrug. “Apparently Father didn’t give your dowry to Viscount Burwick when you two first married. Mr. Peabody has the details. If you could have your man of business pay a call on him, I’m sure he’ll see to the transfer for you.”

Inhaling softly, Annabelle felt the oddest sensation grip her heart. Nothing had ever been said about a dowry for her. She had never thought the baron a very generous man—he rarely gave her gifts, and he’d spent little time with her when she was growing up. “I’ll see to it, thank you. I’ll have the funds set aside for Benton, of course.”

“But what about you?”

She gave a start at hearing the concern in his voice. “Burwick left me in good stead. The viscountcy is more than solvent.”

“Did Father... did he not approve of your marriage?”

Her brows furrowed, but she wasn’t surprised to learn Anthony and her father hadn’t gotten along. “Actually, we never discussed it.” Panic threatened at the thought she might have to share how she met the man. “Burwick and I weren’t betrothed very long, but we had known one another for a couple of years before he proposed. And we left for Sussex shortly after the ceremony.”

“Surely he spoke with Father about marrying you.”

Annabelle swallowed. “I’m sure he would have if I had told him who my father was,” she said in a quiet voice. She struggled to keep her lower lip from trembling.

Anthony blinked. “Oh.” After a moment, he scoffed. “It seems as if you thought Father wouldn’t approve.”

She allowed a long sigh. “I doubt he would have had an issue with Burwick, but I will admit, I was terribly stubborn. I wasn’t about to allow him to interfere in my life when he seemed so embarrassed by my very existence.”

“I cannot blame you,” Anthony commented. “You married well, it seems.”

“Oh, I did,” she acknowledged. “What about you? You no doubt have all the young misses batting their eyelashes at you,” she teased.

His eyes rounded. “Not that I’ve noticed,” he replied.

“You’re not courting anyone?”

“No,” he insisted. He seemed surprised she would even think so.

“You’re a baron now,” she reminded him. “You’ll need an heir and a spare. A baroness to act as your hostess.”

“Please, don’t remind me,” he said as he shook his head. “I’ve managed to avoid the Marriage Mart these past few years.”

Annabelle scoffed. “You don’t wish to marry?”

He angled his head, first one way and then the other. “It’s not that. It’s the... courting, I suppose. You would think that when you inherit a title, there would already be a wife that comes with it.”

Tittering, Annabelle refilled his teacup. “You’re not getting off that easy, my lord,” she chided.

“I am serious. Do you know someone?”

“Me?” She scoffed. “I’ve only just returned to London after being away for over six years,” she replied. “I haven’t attended a *ton* event... ever.”

“Will you now though?”

Annabelle’s immediate thoughts went to her son. To the need for him to be raised as a proper young gentleman and a

viscount. "I'll have to, after I see to a new father for Benton."

"So... you're going to remarry?"

She nodded. "I am. I spoke with a matchmaker earlier today, in fact. I expect she'll have some possibilities for me within a few days." Pausing, she wondered if it would be crass to ask if their father had left the barony in good stead. "If you're in need of a wealthy wife, Mrs. Dove-Lyon could probably arrange a match for you, too."

Anthony blinked. "Oh, no. The barony is in good shape. There are funds enough and a regular income," he explained. "No worry there. I'm not a gambler, so..." He shrugged.

"You won't be gambling away the coffers," she finished for him.

"Exactly."

"I'm so glad to hear it. Apparently, this past year has been especially challenging for many in the peerage. The weather was so severe. I suppose it's why everything costs so much these days."

"But it wasn't challenging for the Burwick viscountcy, it would seem?"

Deciding to admit her role, Annabelle said, "I have been seeing to the viscountcy's ledgers since I married Burwick. He didn't trust an accountant to do it, and I've always been good with numbers, so I know the viscountcy is in good stead."

Anthony inhaled deeply. "I'm so relieved to hear it," he murmured. "I would have been happy to help—"

"No need," she said, shaking her head.

Anthony waved toward the card table. "Are these Benton's tin soldiers?" he asked.

She grinned and said, "They are now. I found them in one of Burwick's dresser drawers. His valet said he'd been keeping them for Benton. He was thrilled when I gave them to him for the trip up from Burwash."

“No doubt,” Anthony murmured. “I would have loved such a gift when I was young.”

The way he made the comment had Annabelle angling her head to one side. “You say that as if Father never gave you anything.”

“He didn’t,” the baron replied curtly.

Annabelle furrowed a brow. “No gifts for your birthday or... or at Christmastide?”

He shook his head. “Oranges at Christmas, but birthdays were not celebrated. Mother died when I was born, you see, so I don’t believe Father ever knew how to be a parent.” He shrugged. “He did remarry. My stepmother was good to me. But after she died ten years ago...” He allowed the sentence to trail off as he shrugged.

“Oh,” Annabelle breathed softly. “And here I thought it was just me. Due to the circumstances of my birth.”

“My father—*our* father—was not a generous man, and as he grew older, he turned into a true miser. Like you, I could not abide his boorish behavior. I fear we were estranged this past decade.”

“I’m so sorry to hear it,” she said softly. “I saw my mother briefly yesterday and... she didn’t make mention of it, but then, she hadn’t met Benton yet, and it had been years since I had seen her,” she explained. “So her mind wasn’t on our father, I suppose.”

“I hope he was on his best behavior with her,” he said. “I paid a call on her yesterday to let her know my father’s wishes will be honored with respect to her stipend. The house is paid for, and she can live there for the rest of her life.”

“That’s very generous of you,” Annabelle said in awe. “Thank you.”

“I only wish to do what’s right. Besides, even if it was only a few days a week, she could live with him when I could not.”

“So... where have *you* been these past ten years?”

He screwed his face into a grimace. “I took bachelor quarters at Arthur’s men’s club and have spent my time attending lectures at the Royal Society and studying Ancient Greek artifacts.”

“Oh, my. Are you with a museum?” she asked with excitement.

“Only as a consultant,” Anthony replied. He appeared startled by her reaction. “I’m not paid, of course, but I do like having an office. Access to research materials and a library.” He paused. “You think I’m dicked in the nob, don’t you?”

“I do not,” she protested. “Your nephew will be thrilled to learn you work in a museum. He’ll beg me to take him there. Will you continue doing so, now that you have the barony to oversee?”

He shrugged. “I hadn’t given it much thought, but I don’t see why not. Ever since university, I’ve discovered it’s possible to have several interests at the same time.”

“Oxford or Cambridge?” she asked.

“Cambridge,” he replied, his head lifting. “Will Benton go there?”

“I expect so,” she said, nodding. She only knew Burwick had attended Cambridge because she had seen a certificate amongst his papers. He had never spoken of his university days. “But first I’ll need to arrange a good tutor for him. I don’t want to even think about him leaving home to attend Eton.”

Anthony dipped his head. “How old is he?”

“Almost five,” she replied.

“You have time,” he said quietly. “He’s welcome to visit me in my office. I can show him around the exhibits.”

“The more unusual, the better,” she warned with a grin.

“Of course. At that age...” He rolled his eyes. “I remember what *I* was interested in.”

She offered him another cup of tea, but he held out a hand to stop her from pouring more. “No more for me. I really should be going soon. I’ve an appointment with the housekeeper at Covington House this evening. She wishes to go over menus and learn my expectations.”

“Does that mean you won’t be keeping your rooms at Arthur’s?” Annabelle asked, hoping he would choose to live in their father’s house. “Although I’ve never been in it, I recall Covington House looked rather lovely from the road.” She remembered her mother taking her in a hackney to show it to her when she was young, and the large Portland stone mansion in Kensington appeared as if it were a palace. The land on either side and behind it was beautifully landscaped, and a fountain graced the middle of the circle drive in front.

“I’ve already given up my rooms at Arthur’s. In fact, I moved into Covington House earlier this week,” he explained. “Once I am settled, I shall have you and Benton come for dinner. I know there is still a kitchen staff and housekeeper and the butler.”

“You say that as if the house isn’t fully staffed. Was Father a miser when it came to servants?”

“I don’t think so, and although all the servants have agreed to stay on, I learned from my solicitor that Father’s valet has been pensioned.”

“Oh, dear. I would recommend Burwick’s valet, but he retired. And I’m in search of a lady’s maid since mine didn’t wish to make the move from Sussex,” she said.

“I’ve never had to search for a servant before.”

Chuckling, Annabelle said, “A servant *and* a wife.”

He hit his fist against his chest. “Oh, you wound me, sister,” he accused.

“Given your position and how handsome you are, perhaps you would do well with a bluestocking for a wife,” she suggested. “Despite their reputation, they tend to be educated enough to carry on diverting conversations and are less likely

to be insipid English misses,” she added. “As for a valet, you can task your butler with contacting a servants’ registry office. They’ll send applicants for you to review, or if you have the time, you can go to one on your own.”

His eyebrows lifted in surprise when he remembered his solicitor’s recommendation. “I think I know of one,” he murmured. “In Oxford Street.” After another moment, he scoffed. “You think me handsome?”

She gave him a quelling glance. “You say that as if you have never looked in a mirror.”

His face bloomed with color as he struggled to respond. “Perhaps if I had a valet...” he reminded her.

Annabelle tittered. “Come. I’ll show you out.”

“You needn’t,” he said as he stood and reached out to help her up.

“Oh, but I must. My butler is probably very curious as to how we know one another,” she replied. “I’m quite sure he thinks I am bad *ton*, so I wish to see his reaction when I kiss you and mention you’re my brother.”

“You cheeky wench,” he accused, chuckling. He held out his arm and the two took their leave of the parlor.

A few minutes later, Annabelle wasn’t disappointed when Dobbs paid witness to her farewell.

“Once we’re both settled, you must come for dinner, Anthony,” she said when they approached the vestibule.

“Perhaps our mother can join us, too,” he suggested, one of his brows rising in a tease.

“She would love it, I’m quite sure,” Annabelle replied, nearly blinking in surprise at hearing how he referred to Lucy Billings. “Now, where are you off to?”

“The registry office. To find a valet,” he announced.

“Then I am coming with you,” she said. “I need a lady’s maid.” She turned to the butler. “Dobbs, do you know

anything about a servants' registry office in Oxford Street?"

The butler seemed flustered for a moment before he suddenly straightened. "Although I have not used it, *Lady Natalie's Servants Agency* comes highly recommended," he said. "It's run by a... a woman whom I am to understand is quite exacting in her requirements for those who work in service."

"I know of the place," Anthony remarked, remembering Peabody's comment. "It's two doors down from my solicitor," he added.

"Sounds perfect," Annabelle said. She allowed Dobbs to help her with her redingote, pulled on her gloves and hat, and then took Anthony's proffered arm.

They were both grinning as they made their way to the Covington coach, Dobbs watching in wonder from the door.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

An Earl Meets a Mother

Meanwhile, in Green Street

FOR THE ENTIRE trip from Burwick House to Green Street, Jeffrey stared out one of the Tidworth coach windows and imagined what life might be like if he took Annabelle to his wife.

He already knew they were compatible in bed. From the first night he had chosen her from among the ten or so women who were employed at *The Elegant Courtesan*, he knew there would never be another who would satisfy him as she had. His jealous nature had him securing entire nights with the woman.

If he'd had a fortune, he would have hired her as his exclusive mistress. Despite his status as the second son of an earl, his allowance coupled with his meager salary as a British army officer wasn't enough to buy her away from the exclusive men's club, though.

Somehow Burwick had managed to steal her away. Gained her agreement to marry him. She had given him his heir and managed to hide her former life from the gossipmongers of Mayfair by staying away from London.

The cur. For six years, Harold Hutchins had her to himself. Now that the man was dead, Jeffrey was determined that Annabelle be his for the rest of his life.

She and Burwick's fortune.

Jeffrey gave a start.

Did he really wish to rescue his earldom with Burwick's blunt?

Did he have a choice?

He supposed it depended on what The Black Widow of Whitehall had in mind for him. He would need to contact her—perhaps even pay a call in the morning—to let her know to put their plans on hold until he could determine if Annabelle would agree to be his wife.

First things first, though. A talk with her mother was in order. If the man who had recently died had indeed been Annabelle's father, then Jeffrey could at least inform her mother of his plans. Seek her approval.

Ask permission.

He ordinarily would scoff at the thought of asking a mother for permission to marry her daughter. Given the circumstances, though, it might work in his favor in more ways than one.

When the Tidworth town coach slowed and finally stopped across from the fashionable townhouse in Green Street, Jeffrey pushed aside the window's curtain. He surreptitiously studied the façade of No. 42 and wondered how long its occupant had resided in the four-story, white-stuccoed abode featuring black shutters and a bright blue door.

Benton had said his grandmother lived there.

Curious as to who she was, he stepped down from the coach and straightened his topcoat. Then, he fished a calling card from his waistcoat pocket and made his way to the front door.

A butler opened the door after he rattled the brass mermaid knocker and said, "How do, sir?"

Jeffrey nodded and was suddenly at a loss.

He had no idea what name to give.

“Would Lord Burwick’s grandmother be in residence?” He handed the butler the calling card. “I am Lord Tidworth, and would appreciate a moment of her time.”

Bernard’s brows lifted slightly. “I’ll see if Mrs. Billings is available,” he replied. “Would you like to wait inside?”

Jeffrey stepped into the small vestibule and knew immediately the townhouse was of the very best quality. Aside from the silk fabric covering the walls, there was a Turkish carpet beneath his feet, and fresh flowers adorned the round table at the base of a curved staircase.

Perhaps Benton had misremembered the house number. Could this really be the residence of the mother of a courtesan? Or had Annabelle come from money and left it behind for a completely different lifestyle?

“Mrs. Billings has been expecting you. I’ll see you to the parlor,” Bernard announced when he returned a moment later.

Jeffrey blinked. Not about to argue—how could she know he was going to pay a call when he hadn’t even known his plans until a half-hour ago?—he followed the portly butler to a ground-floor salon. He was waved into the tastefully decorated room where an older matron sat in a floral upholstered chair holding a teacup in one hand and a parchment in the other. From the creases evident in the paper, it was apparent it was a letter. Dressed entirely in black, she reminded him of Mrs. Bessie Dove-Lyon, except this woman’s graying red hair was uncovered.

In her youth, her hair had probably been as red as Annabelle’s.

She came to her feet without need of assistance and set aside the teacup on a side table. The letter disappeared into a pocket in her gown. When he approached to take her hand, her brows rose. “Lord Tidworth, I presume?”

“I am. It’s very good to meet you, Mrs. Billings,” he said before brushing his lips over the back of her hand.

Dipping a slight curtsy, she regarded him a moment before she said, “And you, my lord. Would you take a cup of tea?”

He shook his head. “Thank you, but no. I have had too many already on this day.”

She waved him to a chair adjacent to her own. “Do I dare ask?”

“I took tea. Lord Burwick drank milk. We both ate too many biscuits whilst we set up tin soldiers for an epic battle.”

Lucy tittered, a hand moving to cover her lips. “Do I dare ask which side won?”

“We didn’t get that far. He lacks a suitable number of soldiers. If I can find mine, I’ll take him more on the morrow,” Jeffrey replied, glad to see he had humored the older woman.

Poised and perfectly coiffed, she had probably been stunning in her youth. She was still a beautiful woman. From her appearance and that of the parlor, she could have been any older aristocrat’s wife.

“So, my lord, what brings you to me on this fine afternoon?”

Jeffrey moved to the chair she had indicated but paused before sitting. “Perhaps I should be sure you are who I seek.”

“I am Annabelle’s mother,” she stated. “Lord Burwick’s grandmother.” She beamed in delight at saying this last, as if she knew a good secret.

She probably did.

“Then I do have the right house,” he said with relief. “Forgive my intrusion. I wished to pay you a call after I spent time in the company of Lord Burwick this afternoon.”

“And Lady Burwick, no doubt,” she guessed.

“Annabelle, yes,” he agreed, wanting to be sure she understood they were more than mere acquaintances. “It was very good to see her again. It’s been... over six years.”

“You had her quite vexed yesterday, Lord Tidworth. I don’t ever recall my daughter showing fear of anything or anyone. Seeing you at Mr. Garth’s shop...” She shook her head. “Tell me, my lord, did she have reason to be concerned?”

Immediately understanding what she meant, he said, “No, ma’am. She did not. I have told her as much.”

Apparently happy with the response, Lucy settled into her chair, and Jeffrey followed suit. “Then if all is well, why have you come?”

“I wish to propose marriage to your daughter.” He glanced around in search of any sign a man might have lived in the house. “I intended to ask her father for her hand, but Lord Burwick informed me he has recently died. I see you are dressed in black, so I suppose it’s true?”

Lucy angled her head to one side. “Has my daughter told you who her father was?”

Jeffrey swallowed. “She has not. She... doesn’t seem to wish to speak of him. I suppose you know why that is?” He held his breath, sure from her slight wince he was treading on thin ice.

“Lord Covington acknowledged his daughter in private, but did not do so publicly,” she said, lifting her chin.

Furrowing his brows, Jeffrey struggled to come up with an identity for the man she mentioned. “Covington?” he repeated softly. “I may not be familiar with him, ma’am. Had he been a military man, I might, but having only inherited recently, and not expecting to do so, I fear I am still learning titles.”

Lucy seemed perplexed for a moment. “Baron Edward Covington,” she stated.

Jeffrey jerked in his chair. He recognized that name from Angelo’s Academy. “He was a fencer.”

“He was, although he rarely demonstrated his skill in my company,” she said quietly. “He died last week. I was his mistress for these past three decades.”

Although he had never been particularly good with math, Jeffrey was quick to realize Mrs. Billings and the baron had been together far longer than Annabelle had been alive. “Wasn’t he a widower?” Jeffrey asked, his brows furrowed.

“Indeed.”

“Whatever reason could he have for not acknowledging his own daughter?” he asked in disgust.

“His son, my lord. He didn’t wish there to be scandal associated with Anthony Covington’s name.”

Jeffrey scoffed. “I hardly see how fathering a daughter would taint his son,” he argued. He suddenly remembered what Annabelle had done for her living. What she’d been doing with him.

“We are in agreement, of course,” Lucy said, a wan grin appearing to youthen her features. “As is his son, I am happy to say.”

“The new Lord Covington, I presume?”

“Exactly.”

“Does *he* know? About her? About where she worked?”

“He does not, nor will he,” Lucy stated, an eyebrow arching to reinforce her claim. “I cannot prevent him from making her acquaintance, however, and I expect at some point he will, given that his father arranged a settlement of some sort on her behalf.” She gave an exaggerated sigh. “I have no reason to believe his father even knew about her time at *The Elegant Courtesan*. At least, if he did, he never said anything to me. I made him believe she ran away so she wouldn’t have to marry,” she explained. “I was sure he would wash his hands of both of us when that happened. Imagine my surprise when he continued our arrangement. Paid off the townhouse and put my modiste on retainer. Even gave me pin money.”

“As he should,” Jeffrey remarked. “I would have done the same for...” He clamped his mouth shut, remembering he was speaking with the woman from whom he wanted approval to

wed her daughter. The very last impression he wanted her to have was that he ever intended for Annabelle to be his mistress.

“For?” she prompted.

Realizing he had to tell her the truth, he sighed. “Annabelle, had it been possible.”

“Why wasn’t it?”

He opened his mouth to respond and quickly shut it. Dipping his head, he said, “I was merely an officer in the British Army. I couldn’t afford to make her my mistress. But if I had known about her... her *employment* ending, I would have offered protection as Burwick obviously did. Taken her with me.”

“To the Continent?” Lucy asked in disbelief.

He nodded. “I know asking her to follow the drum seems —”

“Perfectly understandable,” Lucy stated. “We were at war.”

Shocked by her comment, Jeffrey once again settled into his chair and sighed. “I love her,” he blurted.

“Well, I should hope so, if you’ve come seeking permission to marry her,” she countered, apparently expecting such a response. “Which makes me wonder to what lengths you’re willing to go to secure her hand in marriage.”

Alarm prickled over his skin, and Jeffrey straightened. “Ma’am?”

Lucy pulled the letter from her pocket. “You paid a call on Mrs. Bessie Dove-Lyon at Lyon’s Gate Manor, did you not?”

Jeffrey’s eyes rounded. “How—?”

“She’s a friend, my lord, and she’s currently looking for a match for you.”

Managing to suppress the urge to curse, Jeffrey cleared his throat. “I have every intention of paying a call on her in the

morning to inform her I have someone in mind to be my wife,” he explained.

“As does she,” Lucy stated. “You see, it’s far too late to cancel your arrangement with her.”

“But—”

“You wouldn’t be able to afford the rather expensive fee should you cancel, so... it would behoove you to simply show up and compete for your bride as you originally intended.”

“But...” Jeffrey’s face paled as he remembered the matchmaker’s warnings. “What if... what if I don’t *want* the woman she has in mind for me?” The thought of deliberately losing—of giving up the buy-in—had him experiencing heart palpitations. Could he afford to give up that much blunt?

“Now, now, my lord. You need to calm yourself and remember Mrs. Dove-Lyon has your best interests at heart.”

“But what about *my* heart?” he asked in a near whisper. At any moment he might experience apoplexy.

Lucy gave him a prim grin. “You did let her know your idea of the perfect wife, did you not?”

His brows knit together in frustration. “I did,” he responded slowly.

Continuing to regard him with a grin worthy of the Mona Lisa, Lucy settled back in her chair and took a sip of tea. “Then you have nothing to worry about.” She arched a brow. “Well, except for winning the fencing matches.”

Jeffrey blinked. “Fencing matches?” he repeated.

All at once, he remembered Mrs. Dove-Lyon intended for him to win a wife by winning a fencing tournament. He felt calmer even as he thought it odd Mrs. Billings would know of it.

Obviously, the matchmaker had mentioned it in her letter. Why Mrs. Dove-Lyon would do so wasn’t something he was particularly concerned about at the moment.

He wasn't completely relieved, though.

He knew who he wanted as his wife, and although he was fairly sure Mrs. Dove-Lyon wouldn't be able to give her to him, Annabelle's mother was another matter.

"Oh, I'll win," he vowed. "But it won't matter. I'll only wed Annabelle."

"That's the spirit," Lucy said with a grin. "You'll want to go to Angelo's to practice now," she added, waving as if she was dismissing him.

"Thank you for your time, Mrs. Billings," he said, coming to his feet. He gave a bow, but before he took his leave, he asked, "Does this mean I have your permission to wed your daughter?"

Lucy beamed in delight. "But of course. She'll be a countess. Quite a step up from viscountess, I should think," she remarked. "But it's really not up to me now, is it?"

Momentary doubt had Jeffrey wondering if Annabelle would be willing to wed him. She had kissed him, though. Willingly. A simple kiss in her parlor.

"She won't regret marrying me," he called out before he stepped out of the townhouse.

Although he had the older woman's blessing, he still wasn't sure how he was going to extricate himself from his agreement with Mrs. Dove-Lyon.

Deciding not to wait until the morning to pay a call on the matchmaker, he had his driver take him to Lyon's Gate Manor right away.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In Search of Servants

Meanwhile, in Oxford Street

FROM THE COVINGTON coach, Anthony and Annabelle regarded the front of No. 28 Oxford Street with dubious expressions.

“It’s certainly a busy place,” she remarked.

“I don’t think all these people are here for that office,” he said, noticing men had formed a line leading into No. 30. “There’s a charity next door which arranges employment for wounded men recently returned from the war. I learned of it from my solicitor.”

“I see,” she replied, reading the fairly new shingle above No. 30—*Finding Work for the Wounded*. “I suppose he complained about it?” she guessed. Most of the men were either missing limbs, limping, or simply appeared bedraggled.

“Not at all. He owns the entire building and was glad to let the other offices for what he said were ‘necessary services’.”

“I may have to hire him as a solicitor for the viscountcy,” Annabelle murmured, her attention on the shingle above the registry office. The words *Lady Natalie’s Servants Agency* were in bolder letters. “Well, shall we?”

“I don’t know why I’m nervous,” Anthony said as he stepped out of the coach and turned to help Annabelle to the pavement.

“You’re about to employ someone who will dress and undress you almost every day for the rest of your life,” she

reminded him. “Help you bathe. Shave your face with a straight-edged razor.”

“Ah, that would be why,” he said with a wince.

“Choose your clothes and tie your cravats.”

“When you put it like that,” he said as he held the door for her. “It’s a rather onerous occupation.”

“But he might also become someone you can trust—”

“Well, I should hope so, if he’s going to be holding a straight-edged razor to my throat.”

“—with your deepest, darkest secrets,” she continued, grinning at his comment.

He chuckled. “I know we only met today, but doesn’t it seem as if we’ve known one another our entire lives?”

Annabelle angled her head to one side, a sense of awe settling over her. “Indeed,” she admitted, secretly glad her brother was nothing like their father.

They stopped short in the lobby to discover several younger men and women lined up on benches on either side of the room. From their nervous glances and manner of dress, and their ages, Annabelle wondered if they had ever been in service. They were obviously waiting for appointments.

Straight ahead, a young lady seated at a reception desk regarded them from over the top of a pair of gold wire-rimmed spectacles resting on the end of her nose. “May I be of assistance?” she asked.

Anthony stepped forward. “I am in need of a valet, and my sister is in need of a lady’s maid.”

The woman held up a finger. “I’ll see if Lady Natalie is available to meet with you, sir.” She took the calling card Anthony held out and disappeared through a door near the back of the office.

“Lady Natalie?” Anthony whispered, one brow arching.

“That’s what the sign says, but I didn’t think the owner would actually work here,” Annabelle whispered. “Dobbs did say a woman was running the business, though,” she reminded him.

“Peabody didn’t explain she was a *lady* lady.”

“She might not *really* have a peer of the realm for a father,” Annabelle warned.

“Why would she style herself a lady if she wasn’t?”

“Why do most modistes have French names and accents when they’re not really French?” she countered.

Anthony gasped. “They’re not?”

Annabelle caught a glimpse of his stunned expression and tittered at the same moment a slightly younger woman than herself appeared from the back office, the receptionist in tow.

Dressed in an apple green day gown, her face surrounded by a riot of short auburn curls, the green-eyed proprietress looked as if she was hosting a garden party rather than running an employment agency for those in service.

“Lord Covington? I am Lady Natalie.” She turned to Annabelle, her smile fading. “Oh, I am so sorry for your loss, my lady.”

“Thank you. Our father—”

“The late Baron Covington,” Anthony stated, his voice sounding far away. He reached for the woman’s hand and brushed his lips over the back of it.

“—recently died,” Annabelle continued, nearly stammering when she realized it was the first time someone mentioned who her father was in public. “His valet was pensioned, and my lady’s maid did not wish to move to Town with me. We were hoping you might have some applicants we could consider.”

She glanced down to see that Anthony still held onto Natalie’s hand, and when her gaze went up to his face, she

found him staring at the proprietress with his mouth slightly open. “She may need her hand back,” Annabelle whispered.

Anthony jerked and let go of Natalie’s hand as if it had burned him. “Apologies, my lady,” he murmured.

But Natalie’s attention was on the five people behind them who were lined up on the benches. “Let’s speak in my office,” she said, turning to lead them. “Miss Abernathy, please bring the characters of our personal servant applicants.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the receptionist replied, dipping a curtsy as they passed.

“If those people have appointments, we can certainly return at another time,” Anthony said before they had stepped into the office—and into another world.

“They’re waiting to be interviewed by my associate, Mrs. Dawson,” she said, waving a hand in the direction of two thickly upholstered chairs. “Let’s learn what skills and traits you’d like in your valet and lady’s maid,” she added as she accepted a sheath of papers from Miss Abernathy.

“A note was just delivered for you, my lady. It’s from your father,” the assistant murmured as she handed over a bright white envelope. A red wax seal embossed with a set of initials kept the corners closed.

Lady Natalie stiffened, her brow furrowing. “Did the footman say anything?”

“Only that I was to give it to you and be sure you read it today. He mentioned it was good news.”

She accepted the note but placed it on the front edge of her desk as Anthony and Annabelle moved to the pair of chairs facing it.

Their attentions weren’t on the chairs, though, but rather on their environs. Lady Natalie’s office was more elegant than most ladies’ salons and far better lit—a huge chandelier cast the room in a yellow-white glow. Sconces illuminated the peach silk-covered walls, and there was a candle lamp on one

corner of her petite maple desk. An Aubusson carpet covered the floor, which swallowed the sounds of Oxford Street traffic.

“You’ve a very well-appointed office,” Anthony remarked, waiting for her and Annabelle to be seated.

“Thank you, my lord. First impressions are so important, are they not?”

“Indeed,” he replied softly.

“You can be seated, Anthony,” Annabelle whispered. Her gaze darted to Natalie, who had finally noticed what held her brother’s attention. The blush she displayed was enhanced by her peach surroundings.

“Oh, of course,” Anthony stammered as he quickly settled himself into the chair. His eyes rounded. “My apologies, Lady Natalie. I’ve not introduced you to my sister. This is Annabelle, Viscountess Burwick.”

For a moment, Natalie appeared perplexed before she said, “It’s very good to meet you, my lady. I feel as if I know you from somewhere, though.”

Annabelle froze. She was sure she had never met Natalie before, especially not at *The Elegant Courtesan*. “What... whatever do you mean?”

Natalie lifted a shoulder. “We’re about the same age and both recent widows.”

“You’re a widow, my lady?” Anthony asked, awestruck.

She dipped her head. “My late husband died fighting on the Continent. We were only wed a few months before he left England, though,” she explained. She held up her hand as if to stave off any comments. “My father—he’s an earl—practically disowned me for marrying a commoner—even if he was a British Army officer—but I didn’t exactly have titled men lining up to court me.”

“Why ever not?” Anthony asked, obviously dumbfounded.

Giving him a prim grin, she said, “I’m afraid I’ve always had a reputation as a bluestocking. Spent more time at the Temple of Muses than I did in ballrooms,” she added, referring to the multi-story bookshop featuring remaindered books. “So when we had an issue with servants a couple of years back—we were trying to staff a new house Father acquired in Westminster and we were unable to find any suitable applicants—I begged Father to allow me to start my own agency. Within a month, the problem was solved.”

Anthony blinked at the same time Annabelle attempted to suppress a knowing grin. “Let me guess,” Annabelle said as she leaned forward. “You started this business, and it’s now more solvent than your father’s earldom?”

Natalie’s eyes crinkled in delight. “How did you know?”

Anthony’s gaze went from Natalie to his sister. “Yes, how would you know such a thing?”

“I do the books for the Burwick viscountcy. While other aristocrats have suffered due to the extremely cold winter and crop losses, we remain solvent due to other investments,” Annabelle explained. “Most aristocrats are struggling to simply pay their bills.”

“Which I will admit gave me a good deal of concern when it came to this business,” Natalie remarked. “Staff are sometimes the first to be let go when there are money troubles, but it has actually been good for us. I have more applicants, but they come with far more experience. I can place them more quickly.”

“Would you have a valet who isn’t going to slit my throat with a straight razor?” Anthony blurted.

Natalie’s eyes once again rounded before she burst into a fit of giggles. “I’ll do even better,” she replied, pulling one of the sheets Miss Abernathy had brought in. “I have one who can tie eight different knots in your cravat and has experience as a butler, although it was for a small household in Bruton

Street. He's probably a year or two older than you. Would you like to speak with him?"

"I would. Tomorrow, if possible."

"Where should I send him?"

"Covington House. It's in Kensington."

She dipped a feather quill into a pot of ink and wrote a note on the sheet. "Is eleven o'clock too early?"

"Not at all."

"As for lady's maids—"

"She has to be patient with a boy of about five," Annabelle stated. "Although Lord Burwick has a nurse, I do like spending part of my day with him, and sometimes that's when I'm at my dressing table."

"I have three who might suit you," Natalie replied, rifling through the sheets. Her brows furrowed. "One is much older—her employer perished in a carriage accident—and two are in their thirties. Good characters. All three started their service as housemaids in aristocrats' homes."

"I'd like to meet with all of them," Annabelle said. "At Burwick House in Mayfair, on the morrow, if possible."

"I'll send them. Is eleven o'clock too early?"

"Not at all. I'm up well before that. I can see them as early as eight."

Natalie regarded her with surprise. "Eight in the morning?"

"The late viscount and I lived in Sussex. I've not been to Town since we wed," Annabelle explained, "so I haven't yet adapted to the later hours of London."

"Ah, well, since starting this office, I'm certainly starting and ending my days earlier than usual," Natalie said. "I haven't exactly been as sociable as I was in my younger years, though, either."

“You’re out of mourning now, are you not?” Annabelle asked, mostly for her brother’s benefit.

“Oh, yes. Uh... two years now,” she stammered.

“Do you ever go to the park? For the fashionable hour?” Annabelle asked, her gaze darting to Anthony. “I understand it can be an excellent way of meeting people.”

Natalie inhaled softly. “I did in the past. I haven’t recently.”

“I shall like it very much if you join me in my curricle,” Anthony blurted. “This afternoon, perhaps? I can come for you at...” He pulled his chronometer from his waistcoat pocket and furrowed his brows. “Half-past four o’clock?”

Blinking, Natalie glanced at Annabelle, noticed her quick nod, and said, “I would be delighted, sir.”

Exhaling his relief, Anthony said, “Well, if we’re done here, I’d best return my sister to Burwick House so I can fetch the curricle.”

“Of course, my lord,” Natalie said. She stood and held out a hand to Annabelle. “My lady,” she added, shaking her hand. When she held it out for Anthony, intending to shake his, he brought it to his lips and kissed the back of it. “My lord.”

“I’ll be back for you in a couple of hours,” he said.

Her gaze once again darted to Annabelle before she said, “I look forward to it.”

The siblings took their leave of the registry office, Anthony so light on his feet, Annabelle nearly offered to take a hackney home.

“Did I do it right?” he asked when he helped her into the Covington town coach. “The way I asked her, I mean.”

“I don’t know how you could have done it wrong,” Annabelle replied, chuckling. She settled into the squabs and grinned as her brother took his seat.

“Will you come with us?”

Annabelle blinked. “Me? No!” she replied. “You don’t require a chaperone, and I rather doubt she does, either.”

He seemed surprised by her answer. “What do I talk about?”

“Since she’s an admitted bluestocking, anything and everything. Except perhaps politics, blunt, and sexual congress,” she replied.

Anthony’s eyes rounded as his face displayed splotches of red. “I wouldn’t dare,” he claimed.

Annabelle tittered. “Then let’s hope she doesn’t, either.”



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A Matchmaker Explains the Rules

Nearly an hour later

JEFFREY PULLED HIS chronometer from his waistcoat pocket and cursed. Given the heavy London traffic, the trip from Green Street in Mayfair to Cleveland Row in Westminster had taken far longer than usual.

Worse was when in Oxford Street, he spotted Annabelle in the company of a rather handsome man entering an office together. He was sure it was the same fop who had been carrying the bouquet of roses when Jeffrey departed Burwick House.

Who was he, and what was he doing with the woman Jeffrey intended to marry?

When the driver finally opened the coach door, Jeffrey practically shot out of the coach.

A liveried guard—one he didn't recognize from his prior visit to Lyon's Gate Manor—held the door for him.

"Is Mrs. Dove-Lyon available?" he asked, holding out a calling card.

After glancing at the pasteboard, the guard said, "She's expecting you, my lord. Egeus will take you up."

When Jeffrey turned to make his way to the stairs, Egeus was suddenly next to him. "Welcome back to The Lyon's Den, my lord."

“Don’t take this wrong, but I wish I’d never come in the first place,” he grouched.

“My lord?”

Not wishing to share his plans with a servant, Jeffrey didn’t respond. He waited while Egeus knocked twice on the matchmaker’s office door.

From the other side of the carved wood, he could hear a good deal of bustling about, as if his visit was interrupting something. For a moment, he imagined the widow being tugged over the edge of her desk, so when her call of “come” sounded from the other side, he had to suppress the urge to chuckle.

Egeus opened the door and stepped aside. As she had been the day before, Mrs. Dove-Lyon sat behind her desk, gowned in widow’s weeds and holding a cup of steaming tea. The hat she wore was different, though, this one smaller but still adorned with a good deal of black netting.

“Oh, Lord Tidworth. You’ve come even quicker than I expected,” she said with a smile.

He furrowed his brows. There was no one else in the office, nor did she appear the least bit disheveled.

So much for interrupting a liaison.

“How is it you expected me?” he asked, suspicious.

She waved a hand toward Egeus, and he shut the door. “Didn’t you receive my note? I had a footman take it to your townhouse not an hour ago.”

Jeffrey gave a start. “I haven’t been home all day,” he said. Although he hadn’t intended to sit in her presence—he had thought to simply tell her he wasn’t in need of her services and be on his way—he took the chair she indicated. “I came because—”

“I have found the perfect match for you,” she stated. “A widow with flaming red hair, a generous bosom, and fortune enough to allow your earldom to remain solvent.”

“But—”

“Now there is one little...” she held up her thumb and forefinger so there was about an inch between them, “tiny, small matter of her child. A young lord of about five,” she went on, ignoring his attempts to interrupt. “You’ll have to agree to help raise him, of course, but I understand he’s very well-behaved, and as a former colonel in the army, you’ll be happy to learn he’s fascinated with tin soldiers.”

Jeffrey’s mouth dropped open as his blond brows furrowed with realization. “Benton?” he whispered.

“Actually, Annabelle Hutchins, Viscountess Burwick,” she replied. “I’ve set up a fencing tournament for you and at least two other contenders for tomorrow night at nine o’clock. I’m sure I can find a fourth contender before the start of the tournament. I do hope it’s not too early in the evening for you,” she said with some concern. “With three matches—two to determine the finalists and one to decide the winner—I expect it will take an hour or so to complete. Do I have that right?”

Blinking, Jeffrey stared at the matchmaker. “Annabelle?” he finally said in disbelief. “How...?”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon regarded him with a wan grin before taking a sip of tea. “She came to me as a client only this morning, Lord Tidworth. Imagine my surprise when I realized you had described her to a T during our first meeting.”

“Imagine,” Jeffrey repeated, a sense of panic and annoyance slowly building. “She didn’t say a word about it.” He lifted a hand to his head, his fingers spearing his hair as his fingernails scraped his scalp. For a moment, he wished it felt the same as when Annabelle had done it to him all those years ago. “We’re supposed to go shopping for tin soldiers on the morrow,” he murmured.

“Oh, you can still do that,” she replied, allowing a shrug. “I think you might find some of impeccable quality at Rundell and Bridge. You can shop for a wedding ring while you’re

there, too, since you'll require one anyway. Or there's always the jewelry shop here in our building."

Jeffrey winced, not having thought about a ring. He would need one, which would require even more blunt than what he was expected to pay the widow. "What if... what if I propose and Annabelle accepts before tomorrow night?" he asked, not yet willing to agree to the terms Mrs. Dove-Lyon had set forth.

"She is committed to this arrangement, sir, and might I remind you, *you* committed to the terms only yesterday afternoon."

He straightened in the chair, not about to give up. "What if I refuse?"

Audibly sighing, the widow leaned forward in her chair, her forearms resting on the edge of her desk. "You'll be in debt to me for your buy-in and that of your first opponent, and someone else will win the tournament. And Lady Burwick's hand in marriage."

He fumed at the thought of another man with Annabelle. For the rest of his life, he knew he would regret it if he didn't fight for her. "What would it cost me to... to simply buy the win?"

Mrs. Dove-Lyon scoffed. "*Buy* the win?" She seemed to do some mental calculations before she said, "Twenty... twenty-five thousand pounds."

"What?!"

"Which you haven't got."

"Why so much?" he asked in disbelief.

Rolling her eyes, she sighed again, as if she'd had to explain the reasoning dozens of times in the past. "All the buy-ins plus all the betting that happens as a matter of course on these nights. I expect tomorrow's event to net this establishment upwards of twenty-five thousand pounds."

"I'm in the wrong business," he grouched.

“It’s not the first time I’ve heard those words,” she murmured.

Jeffrey once again ran his fingers through his hair, which left it in furrows. “Dammit,” he whispered.

Adopting a sympathetic manner, the widow clasped her hands together on the desk. “I must say, I do hope you win the tournament tomorrow. I hadn’t realized before now how much Lady Burwick means to you.”

Resigned to the fact that he would have to follow through with the fencing tournament in order to end up with Annabelle, Jeffrey slumped in his chair. “I hadn’t either,” he whispered. “I think I love her.”

“And the boy?” she asked, her head angled to one side.

Jeffrey scoffed softly at the memory of a birthmark. “I’ll raise him as my own, of course.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon sat back in her chair and regarded the earl with appreciation. “Then we’ll see you here tomorrow night,” she said. “With your buy-in in hand. Oh, and do bring your own sword. I think there are only a couple of them in the gentleman’s lounge, and they’re both mounted over the fireplace.”

He scoffed. “It’s called a *foil*,” he said with annoyance, rising from his chair.

Given the black netting covering most of her face, it was impossible to see her reaction to his comment. “I stand corrected. Do close the door on your way out, won’t you?”

Jeffrey did as she bid, although it took a good deal of restraint to keep from slamming it shut.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A Ride in the Park with a Baron

Meanwhile, in Oxford Street

FOR THE ENTIRE trip from Kensington, Anthony wished Annabelle had agreed to join him. Once he had left her at Burwick House, his resolve—and his excitement—about that afternoon’s ride in the park with Lady Natalie had begun to wane.

Likewise, his nervousness had increased.

Slowing the Cleveland Bay to a halt near the front of No. 28, he tossed a coin to a street urchin who promised to look after the horse.

“You here for Lady Natalie?” the boy asked as he took the reins from him.

Suspicious, Anthony glanced around. “If I am?”

“Well, a different driver usually comes to get her about now. In a fancy town coach.”

A streak of jealousy had Anthony frowning. “Oh?”

“Her Father insists, is what I heard. Doesn’t like her being so ’ndependent, whatever that means.”

“It means I don’t require a husband for my living,” Natalie said, appearing from beyond the office door to join them.

“Lady Natalie,” Anthony said in surprise. “I would have escorted you,” he added, taking her gloved hand to his lips.

“No need. Miss Abernathy is working late this evening, and she will see to locking up the office.” She turned to the young boy. “I sent a note to Westminster to let them know I didn’t require a ride this evening, but should Perkins come with the coach, let him know I already have a ride.” She turned to Anthony. “You will take me home after our ride in the park, will you not?”

“Of course, my lady,” he replied, providing a hand so she could step up and into the curricule. He couldn’t help but notice an envelope she held in the other. He was sure it was the same one brought by Miss Abernathy when she delivered the characters for the servants before their meeting started earlier that afternoon. “An important letter?” he added, nodding to her gloved hand.

“It’s from Father. I haven’t had a chance to read it. I thought to do so whilst I waited for you, but you were too prompt.” The words were said as if she was chiding him.

“Please read it now. I won’t be offended,” he said.

Natalie glanced at him before she lifted a shoulder. “All right.” She slid a finger under the wax until it pulled free and quickly unfolded the sheet of parchment.

A waft of floral perfume floated past Anthony’s nostrils, and he wondered how he could have missed it earlier that day. Surely her office would have held the same scent, which meant she had probably applied it especially for him.

Thrilled at the thought she would do such a thing for a ride in the park with him, Anthony said, “I know I shall enjoy our ride simply for the pleasant scent surrounding you,” he murmured, silently chiding himself for not refreshing his amber and citrus cologne prior to leaving Covington House. He hadn’t been at the house longer than the time it took for the horse to be hitched to the curricule. He took the seat next to her as the boy handed him the reins.

She glanced up at him. “A clerk at Floris urged me to buy it. You don’t think it’s too cloying?” she asked, her brows

furrowing as she read the masculine scrawl in the short letter.

“Not at all,” he assured her. “Where will I be taking you after our ride in the park?” he asked, merging the curricle into traffic.

“Trying to get rid of me already?” she asked in a tease, her attention no longer on the letter.

“No, but if you don’t tell me, you’ll end up at Covington House in Kensington,” he warned.

“You say that as if you think I won’t like it,” she accused. She refolded the note and stuffed it into a pocket before hooking her hand around his elbow.

Anthony felt a thrill at how close she sat, her thigh almost touching his. Chuckling, he said, “I’ve only just moved back there after an extended absence,” he explained. “I’m not sure if *I’ll* like it.”

“Oh, I’d quite forgotten. You’ve recently inherited, have you not?”

“Indeed. The Covington barony. I had bachelor quarters in London until yesterday. It has been strange having an entire house to myself starting last evening.” He made the turn onto Park Lane heading south.

“I have rooms in Cleveland Row,” she said, one brow arched as if she expected him to ask an obvious question. When he didn’t, she added, “And no, my rooms are not in Lyon’s Gate Manor.”

His brows furrowed. “Lyon’s Gate Manor,” he repeated softly. “The name is familiar, but...” He shrugged.

“The Lyon’s Den?” she prompted. She wasn’t surprised when his face lit up with understanding.

“Oh! I have heard of it, of course, but I’ve not been there,” he said.

She scoffed. “You are lying,” she accused.

It was Anthony's turn to scoff. "I'm not a gambler, my lady."

"Call me Natalie, my lord," she said, awestruck by his claim.

"Call me Anthony," he countered, grinning at seeing her expression of disbelief. "Why is it so hard for you to believe I don't gamble?"

"Because every other man your age does," she insisted. "From the number of men I see enter the building every night..." She shook her head. "Even more tomorrow night," she added in a quieter voice.

"Not all of us do. Some of us like having blunt for other things," he argued.

"Like what?" she challenged.

He shrugged. "Like... the bouquet of pink roses I gave to my sister when I met her today," he replied.

He loved hearing Natalie's soft inhalation of breath and the way the expression on her face changed. "Which reminds me..." He transferred the reins into one hand and reached behind the seat with the other to pull out a bouquet of carnations. "These are for you."

"Anthony," she purred, taking the paper-wrapped pastel flowers from his hold with her free hand. "They're beautiful."

"I was going to get roses for you, too, but Annabelle said I couldn't until you had agreed to allow me to court you." He directed the horse to turn into the Hyde Park Gate at the southeast corner of the park, so he couldn't see her immediate reaction to his claim.

"Oh, did she now?" Natalie said in a huff.

Anthony glanced over at her but was forced to pull up on the reins as a high-perch phaeton nearly collided with them. "If you were still under your father's protection, I would have asked him first," he said. "But since you're not... I am asking you. Would you allow me to court you?"

They passed under the arch for the gate, the late afternoon sun casting long shadows over the curricle. When they had cleared the arch and joined the parade of coaches and carriages, horseback riders and walkers on Rotten Row, Anthony dared a glance at her.

She was staring up at him with a look of uncertainty. “I warned you I am a bluestocking,” she stated.

“Annabelle told me I should seek a bluestocking for a wife,” he countered.

“Oh, did she now?” Natalie responded, blinking before she scoffed in disbelief. “Why would *she* say such a thing?”

Anthony shrugged, wondering how much he should admit. “I like to attend lectures at the Royal Society,” he explained. “So she warned me against insipid English misses. She thinks I require a wife who is educated enough to provide me with diverting conversation,” he explained. “You seem like such a woman.”

Natalie inhaled softly and was about to respond when she was hailed by someone on a passing phaeton.

“How do?” she called out, releasing her hold on Anthony so she could smile and wave. She still held the flowers in her other hand. When the equipage disappeared behind them, she said, “I suppose she mentioned what topics we’re to engage in discussing?”

Anthony secretly thrilled at hearing her query. He knew the answer to this. “Indeed. Anything and everything, except politics, blunt, and sexual congress.”

A blush suffused Natalie’s face, suggesting she agreed with the list. “You like your sister, don’t you?”

His brows furrowing, Anthony nodded. “Very much, actually. I haven’t known her long—we share a father but not a mother—but after spending the day together, I have decided we are like two peas in a pod.”

Rethreading her arm through his, Natalie considered his response for some time before she said, “I am giving you permission to court me.”

Anthony gave a start. “What changed your mind?”

She allowed a shrug. “I never had to change it,” she claimed.

Anthony boggled a moment before he chuckled. “Does that mean you’ll allow me to kiss you when I take you to your rooms later?”

“Well, I should think so,” she replied as if it were obvious. After a few seconds, her attention went solely to him. “Now you think me fast and wonder what you can do to extricate yourself from such an awkward situation,” she stated, daring him to counter the claim.

He shook his head. “I don’t think of you as fast, but you are rather... efficient,” he said. When he saw her reaction—eyebrows arching in question, he added, “From the moment we met this afternoon, I found you quite compelling. Completely unexpected. A conundrum I find quite appealing.” He grimaced at the realization he was thinking of her as if she were one of the scientific finds they discussed during meetings of the Royal Society. In a manner of speaking, she was. “If you have decided I am worthy of your time and attention, then it hardly seems necessary to delay the inevitable.”

It was Natalie’s turn to boggle at hearing his pronouncement. “Careful, sir, or you might discover you’re betrothed,” she warned.

He chuckled softly. “Isn’t that the point of courtship?”

She didn’t immediately answer, her nose once again buried in the flowers.

“If we’re betrothed...” She stopped speaking and clutched the flowers closer to her chest. “Well, let’s just say you may not be spending the night in Kensington.”

Another sense of thrill passed through Anthony. “You mean we’re going to be discussing one of the subjects we’re not supposed to discuss?” he asked in surprise, turning to regard her with a combination of shock and awe.

Natalie scoffed. “Who said anything about discussing it?”

Although they were only halfway down the length of the northernmost track of Rotten Row, Anthony directed the horse to turn around and head back toward the Hyde Park Gate.

Next to him, Natalie dropped her nose into the bouquet and inhaled deeply, her grin of delight hidden by the ruffled petals.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A Mistress Makes Plans

Meanwhile, at No. 42 Green Street

DRESSED IN HER very best dinner gown, Lucy Billings waited as patiently as she could manage given the events she had planned for that evening.

Albert, Earl of Habberly, was due to arrive at any moment.

The correspondence they had exchanged the day before and that morning had confirmed the rumors she had heard about the widower—he was lonely, he wanted a woman, and he didn't wish to share.

She had liked him well enough when he was a younger man. Appreciated his desire for exclusivity. Made sure she abided by every rule in their contract. She would have gladly renewed it, and if he hadn't been about to marry, he said he would have kept her as his mistress.

Thank goodness he had said something to Edward Covington, for the baron had been waiting in the wings, ready to take her as his mistress.

Despite having assurances from Anthony Covington she would be taken care of by the late baron's estate, Lucy didn't think she could abide spending the rest of her life alone. After so many years as a mistress to Edward, she had grown used to having a man in her life—and her bed—at least a few days a week. Not even a fortnight had passed since his death, and her loneliness had become untenable.

She needed another lover—a protector—and depending on what happened that evening, Albert could very well be that man. If she was to believe his last two letters, he thought he already was.

She was up and on her way to the door of the parlor even before Bernard appeared.

“You have a caller, ma’am,” the butler said as she passed by him in the hall. “And dinner can be served when you are ready.”

Lucy winced at hearing his last comment. She had hoped for a few minutes alone with the earl before they went into the dining room.

Pasting a pleasant smile on her face, she caught the earl watching her from near the front door, and she displayed her delight with a huge smile.

She couldn’t help how her body reacted, either. All at once, it was as if every intimate moment they had ever shared decades ago relived itself in the span of a few seconds. Given the teasing smirk he displayed, it was apparent he was having the same thoughts.

“Lord Habberly,” she said with a sigh, holding out both hands in front of her to capture his. She stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. “So good of you to come.”

He chuckled softly. “So good of you to invite me,” he replied, bringing both her hands to his lips to kiss their knuckles “And do call me Bertie like you always did.” Angling his head to one side, he lifted a graying brow. “I must say, I am more than intrigued.”

Lucy arched an elegant brow. Although his original note had suggested they should renew their acquaintance, she had been coy in her response. She had been thinking of her daughter’s future as much as her own when she wrote the letter inviting him to dinner. “Are you hungry?”

From his initial reaction, Lucy knew she had to amend the question. “For *dinner*, I mean, darling. We can have dessert

later, of course.” She arched a brow suggestively.

“Oh, I’ll join you for dinner,” he said with a smirk. “I intend to stay for dessert. But what about breakfast?”

Lucy dipped her head even as heat colored her face. “Why, Bertie. It sounds as if you wish to pick up exactly where we left off all those years ago.”

He shrugged. “Are you surprised?” he asked, allowing her to lead him to the dining room. “I thought I had made myself clear in my letter.”

“I admit I am,” she said, moving to the sideboard to pour him a brandy. “It’s been a long time. I thought you would have set your sights on a younger woman to warm your bed.”

“I thought I had,” he countered, arching a bushy brow. He wrapped a hand around her waist and pulled her close.

Lucy’s mouth dropped open. Despite a brief thought of her daughter—the earl would make an excellent husband should the Earl of Tidworth fail in his attempt to win at The Lyon’s Den—she realized she wanted Albert for herself. “You flatter me,” she murmured. “It’s been thirty years.”

He pretended surprise. “Has it?” he asked. He shrugged. “You’re still a beautiful woman, Lucy. Rather devoted, too, given you stayed with Covington that entire time,” he remarked. “Don’t think I didn’t notice.” He took the glass of brandy she offered but set it on the table.

She dipped her head. “I must say, you have me pleasantly surprised. I, of course, would be willing to pick up where we left off.”

“Good.” He glanced around. “I see Covington set you up rather nicely. Do you like it here?”

“I do.”

“I’ll have my man of business see to buying the townhouse from his son, so you don’t have to move.” He pulled out a chair for her at the dining table.

Lucy's eyes widened in surprise, but she decided not to argue. If word got out Albert had taken her as his mistress, she doubted Anthony Covington would continue to support her. She sat at the table, glad the footman had already seen to pouring the wine. "How are your children?"

Albert chuckled softly. "Hardly children any longer. James is married, John is on his Grand Tour, and... well, my daughter continues to vex me now and then, but I suppose they all do."

"I am familiar," Lucy murmured. She cleared her throat. "And on that note, there is the other matter I hoped you might help with," she said as she watched him settle himself in the adjacent carver.

He chuckled. "Might that be the next event at The Lyon's Den?" he asked before taking a sip of his brandy. "Tomorrow night, is it not?"

Bernard appeared with the first course, setting bowls of soup in front of them both before hurrying out of the room.

"It is. Are you familiar with Mrs. Dove-Lyon's means of matchmaking?"

Albert set aside his brandy and sobered somewhat. "More than most," he admitted. "I might have been the first or second man she ensnared in one of her traps. Although I suppose one cannot claim it's a trap if you knowingly step into it in order to be ensnared."

Almost dropping her soup spoon, Lucy boggled. "What's this?"

Allowing a long sigh, Albert said, "When we were together... I was almost broke. Father left the earldom with a mountain of debt from all his gambling and building projects, and although his investments eventually made back what they cost and more, I had to marry a wealthy heiress to pay off the debts."

Lucy inhaled softly. "Oh, Bertie. I had no idea. You never said a word," she murmured.

“Probably because I discovered the situation when it was almost too late,” he said. “Anyway, Bessie found me my wife, but it’s always annoyed me that I had to gamble to win her. Especially after Father’s gambling cost me so much.”

He began eating his soup, his brows arching in appreciation. “You have a good cook,” he commented. When Lucy didn’t respond, he glanced over to find her deep in thought. “What is it?”

Lucy let go of her soup spoon and turned to face him. “Do you still fence?”

Blinking, he straightened in his chair. “Of course. A few times a week at Angelo’s—I was there only this morning, in fact. I sometimes host a match in my ballroom should one of my friends wish to exercise.”

“Have you ever fenced with the Earl of Tidworth?”

Albert’s brows shot up. “Do you mean the current one? Who was a lieutenant colonel in the army?”

“Yes, him.”

He chuckled softly. “Odd that you should ask about Murray-Hicks. I hadn’t seen him in Town for years until last night... at White’s. He didn’t look too happy, but then... I... was pretending to be very drunk,” he stammered.

Upon seeing Lucy’s questioning expression, he waved a hand. “I only do it around Chamberlain. To see his reaction,” he explained with a grin. “If I’m convincing enough, he’ll sometimes talk about Foreign Office secrets.”

Gasping, she said, “You’re incorrigible.”

Still grinning, he said, “Anyway, I pretended to leave when Tidworth asked to speak with Chamberlain, but I admit to eavesdropping for a time.”

Lucy’s brows shot up. “So you know what they talked about?”

He nodded. “Tidworth’s need for a wealthy wife.”

“Oh?” Abandoning her soup completely, she turned her intention entirely on him. “My daughter... Viscountess Burwick—”

“Covington’s daughter?” he guessed.

“Yes,” she affirmed, deciding she wouldn’t keep the information from him. “She gave Burwick his heir but wishes to marry a titled man who can help raise him to take over the viscountcy when he’s of an age. I sent her to Bessie to arrange a match.”

Albert stiffened. “Why?”

She sighed. “Annabelle is illegitimate. She was concerned because Covington never acknowledged her as his daughter in public—”

“She’s Burwick’s widow. Surely that counts for something,” he argued, obviously bothered.

“As does the viscountcy. It’s solvent and doing rather well.” When he prompted her to continue, she said, “Lord Tidworth came to me yesterday. He wishes to marry Annabelle, and I believe she could be easily convinced to marry him.”

“So... what’s the problem?” He had an idea of what it might be—Jeffrey Murray-Hicks had explained the situation in detail after their sparring match—but he wanted to learn what she knew.

“The Lyon’s Den. I heard from Bessie today. Lord Tidworth will be fighting for the right to marry my daughter in some sort of fencing tournament.”

Sighing, Albert sat back and regarded her for a moment. “I’m well aware.”

“You are?” She scoffed and sat back in her chair. “How?”

“I met him at Angelo’s this morning for a match. I’m helping to prepare him for the tournament, and it’s a good thing because he is out of practice. He’ll be ready for me in the

morning, though. We have another sparring session scheduled.”

“Can he win, do you suppose?” she asked with worry.

Albert winced. “I don’t know. It will depend on his opponents.” His brows shot up. “Do you want *me* to fight for your daughter? In a fencing match?”

Lucy inhaled to respond but reconsidered what she was about to say. “Not exactly,” she murmured. “I do want Lord Tidworth to marry her, though. When he paid a call on me yesterday, I learned he sincerely loves my daughter.”

Albert appeared deep in thought before he suddenly chuckled. “How many fencers has The Black Widow of Whitehall lined up for this event?”

Startled by his use of Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s nickname, Lucy realized Albert’s opinion of the matchmaker hadn’t improved over the years. “Three, I think,” she replied, wondering at his sudden humor. “She would like at least four players. To make it a true tournament.”

Draining his brandy, Albert set the glass on the table and said, “Leave this to me.”

Lucy inhaled softly. “What are you going to do?”

“When we’re finished with breakfast in the morning, I’m going to pay a call on Mrs. Dove-Lyon,” he stated. “I intend to be one of those fencers tomorrow night.”

Although he was telling her what she wanted to hear, Lucy couldn’t help the streak of jealousy she felt. “But... if you win ___”

“Oh, I’ll do my damndest to win,” he promised.

“But... you’ll end up having to marry my daughter,” she warned.

He chuckled again, this time with more delight. “Oh, Lucy, you’re making my life worth living again,” he said before he took her hand and kissed the back of it.

Somewhat confused, Lucy gave him a wobbly grin. “As long as you’re happy,” she murmured.

“Leave it to me, my sweet,” he said, patting the back of her hand. “Leave it all to me.”



CHAPTER NINETEEN

A Courtship Begins

Near dusk, Hyde Park

WHEN ANTHONY'S CURRICLE reached the Hyde Park Gate, he was about to direct the horse to head southeast along Constitution Hill, but Natalie gripped his sleeve and said, "Turn right."

He frowned in confusion. "But Cleveland Row is to the left, is it not?" he argued. "Next to Green Park."

"I've changed my mind," she stated. "I wish to see Covington House."

Anthony gave her a look of uncertainty before he merged them into the westbound traffic on Kingsbridge Road. "All right. Does this mean you're having second thoughts about allowing me to court you?"

She huffed. "Third thoughts, actually." His quizzical brow had her grinning. "Your wish to court me implies there might be a wedding in our future."

"There might indeed," he agreed, unable to glance in her direction. A town coach directly ahead threatened to cut them off in an attempt to turn at Sloane.

"Which implies I'll be your wife."

"And my baroness," he said, hoping the title might help convince her to consider his suit.

“Which implies I’ll be the mistress of Covington House,” she went on.

“You will be, yes,” he affirmed, deciding to pretend she had already agreed to be his wife.

“What about your mother? Isn’t she the mistress now?”

Anthony sobered, steering the horse around a dray cart parked near Charles Street. “Given my mother died in the childbed and my father’s second wife died a decade ago, there is no current mistress of the house.” He heard her inhalation of breath and glanced over to see her look of consternation. “What is it?”

“I’m very sorry,” she said, her words barely loud enough to be heard over the spinning wheels and horse hooves. “I didn’t mean to be... to be flippant about it,” she stammered.

“I didn’t think you were,” he replied, allowing a phaeton exiting the park at the Princes Gate to move ahead of them. “In fact, I’m rather glad you’re of a mind to ask me these sorts of questions. I shouldn’t want there to be any secrets betwixt us.” After what he had learned about his father from the mistress, he hoped Natalie might be the sort of companion he would be free to speak with about any matter—including politics, blunt, and sexual congress.

“You don’t intend to keep things from me?” she countered.

He shook his head. “I appreciate honesty. I should wish to strive for it in our marriage,” he stated, relieved when the phaeton in front of them turned at Hyde Park Gate South.

“But what if you discover something about me you don’t like?” she asked, her attention on the Kensington Gate and the grounds beyond.

The question had him turning to regard her with a curious expression. “I’m afraid you’ll need to give me an example, because I am hard-pressed to think of anything that would paint you in a bad light.”

He directed the horse to turn left onto a lane that led to a circle drive. At the end of it, Covington House, a four-story Portland stone mansion, stood behind a fountain featuring two dolphins and a naked nymph.

Natalie's mouth dropped open. "*This* is where you live?"

"I know it's a bit of a drive from Town, but—"

"What a vantage," she interrupted. She stood and aimed her glance back down the lane. "Kensington Gardens?" she added in disbelief.

He grinned, glad she seemed impressed.

A young man ran up from behind the house and immediately took the reins from Anthony. When he noticed Natalie, he tipped his hat. "Shall I leave her hitched up, guv'nor?"

Anthony glanced over at Natalie before he said. "For the time being, yes. In the event her ladyship wishes to go out again." He stepped down from the equipage and hurried around to assist Natalie. Instead of offering a hand, he gripped her around the waist and lowered her to the ground.

Natalie stifled a complaint when her hands landed on his firm shoulders. "Thank you," she murmured, her gloved hands still pressed against him.

"It was my pleasure."

The groom bowed and jumped into the curricule before driving it around toward the back of the property.

Natalie acknowledged the boy with a nod before turning her attention back to Anthony. "Before we go in, I really think I need to tell you something. I won't hold it against you if you decide it's too much to bear."

His brows furrowing, Anthony surveyed the area around them. He knew if they went inside, there would be servants about. Outside, they were alone. He offered his arm and led her to the fountain where they turned and sat on the edge.

Although Natalie had clasped her gloved hands together in her lap, Anthony reached over and took one of them in his. “Have you murdered someone?” he asked, his manner rather sober.

She scoffed. “No!”

“Been guilty of theft?”

“No!” Her eyes darted sideways. “Well, mayhap a biscuit or two when Cook wasn’t looking.”

“Then whatever it is you’re about to tell me—”

“I’m a ruined woman,” she blurted.

He blinked. “Oh?” Of all the possible reasons she could give him why he might find her unacceptable, he wasn’t expecting her to say she was ruined.

“Not of my own choosing, of course,” she continued. She rolled her eyes and sighed loudly.

“Well, aren’t you a widow?” he asked, remembering when she had introduced herself at the agency.

Her eyes once again darted to the side. “It’s what I tell clients,” she said in a whisper. “I was betrothed once before. When I was much younger and stupid—”

“Natalie,” he gently scolded.

“Before I became a bluestocking, I *was* stupid,” she insisted. “I didn’t know anything about...” Her voice lowered to a whisper. “*Sexual congress*, so I wasn’t prepared for what he did to me.” She inhaled and let the breath out in a huff. “I told him it was never going to happen again, and I broke it off. I was never courted by anyone else, nor have I been amenable to courting,” she added. “So...” She glanced in the direction of where the groom had taken the curricule. “I suppose you should have had him leave the curricule where you left it,” she said on a sigh.

He followed her line of sight before turning his attention back on her. “Why?”

She regarded him with disbelief. “Because I’m a ruined woman.”

“Through no fault of your own,” he argued. He narrowed his eyes. “Is that really the worst you can come up with?”

Nodding, she glanced down to discover he held both her hands in his. “You already know I’m rather independent,” she murmured. “Probably too independent.”

“I do,” he said with a grin. “Definitely not an insipid English miss.”

“Well, I should hope not,” she murmured. “My mother died many years ago—”

“As did mine.”

“—and you’ll need an heir, and I’m not sure I’ll make a very good mother.”

Anthony inhaled, holding his breath a moment before letting it out in a *whoosh*. “Do you want children?”

“Oh, I do,” she said. “At least a few.”

Appearing relieved to hear she would be willing to bear his heir and a spare, he nodded. “We shall have a nurse, of course,” he murmured. “And tutors or governesses to see to their education.”

“Of course,” she agreed.

“And you’ll teach our daughters the importance of learning, and how to rely on their wits, and run their own businesses should they wish,” he continued.

“I will?” she asked, her serious expression suggesting she found his comment daunting. When he clamped his mouth shut, her face split into a huge grin. “I will,” she amended, tittering in delight. She lifted and lowered her shoulders with a sigh of relief. “Is there something about yourself you think *I* should know?” she asked meekly.

He inhaled and nodded. “I haven’t lived here in a long time because I could not abide my father. Until his recent death, we

were estranged because...” He allowed the sentence to trail off and shook his head. “I met his mistress yesterday.” He paused at hearing her soft gasp. “A very kind woman who claimed he was always good to her, and all I could think was she had to be lying to me. Because the man I knew was always impatient and angry and very difficult to live with. Couldn’t stand that I would favor scientific pursuits over philosophy and the Classics and politics,” he went on. “So, I took rooms at Arthur’s and avoided him as much as possible.”

Natalie angled her head to one side. “Perhaps she was not lying,” she countered. “Perhaps your father wasn’t impatient or angry or difficult to live with when he was in her company.”

Uncertainty crossed Anthony’s face. “Perhaps.”

“I hear men take mistresses so they can step away from their usual lives for a time. So, they can be someone else,” she commented.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised you would know about mistresses.”

She displayed a wince. “My father had one. I demanded to know more about her, and although he claims to have ended their liaison before he married my late mother, I learned today he intends to renew his acquaintance with her,” she explained, pulling the note from her pocket. “I don’t recall any of his notes making him sound so happy as this one. I think he loves her.” She angled her head and asked, “Did your father love his mistress?”

Anthony nodded. “He did. Left her in good stead, and made arrangements which I intend to honor.”

“And your sister? Was he good to her?”

For a moment, Anthony looked as if he didn’t know how to answer. “Not particularly, I think. He supported her, of course, until she married. But if you had asked him if he had a daughter, he probably would have denied it.”

If she was surprised to hear this last bit, she didn’t show it. “She seems not to have suffered for it, though.”

Chuckling softly, he nodded. "If she did, she has not said," he affirmed. He stood and pulled on Natalie's hands until she was standing before him. "May I kiss you?"

Natalie blinked. "Out here? For the whole world to see?"

He glanced around, as if in search of witnesses. "Yes."

She gave him her very best smile. "Then yes, you can."

About to lower his head, Anthony paused and said, "You might have to help..." he stilled himself when one of her hands lifted to his shoulder. "Because I don't really know what I'm doing..." He took a steadying breath when her other hand moved behind his neck and began pulling his head down. "Because I haven't really done..." He couldn't continue the sentence given his lips were otherwise engaged with hers.

They stood kissing one another for a long time, Anthony placing his hands at her waist as more of a means to steady himself than because he was curious as to the figure beneath her muslin gown and spencer. Her fingers speared his silken hair as their fronts collided, and his entire body shivered in response.

When they finally came up for air, they stared at one another for several seconds before Anthony blinked several times. "Well, I'm certainly left wondering why I've never done that before," he murmured.

Natalie tittered, her cheeks nearly as red as her lips. "I'm rather glad I'm your first."

"First and only," he countered.

She gave him a quelling glance. "You still have to show me the house."

Chuckling, Anthony offered his arm and they headed to the front door of Covington House.

They didn't leave again until the following morning.



CHAPTER TWENTY

A Lady's Maid Begins Work

The following morning

AFTER MEETING WITH the three candidates for the position of her lady's maid, Annabelle settled in her dressing table chair and grinned as her new employee saw to styling her hair.

"May I ask, my lady, why it is you chose me?" Sanderson asked. The woman, probably a few years older than Annabelle, was tall and blond, a testament to her Scandinavian ancestry.

"You were the only one who acknowledged my son when he entered the parlor," Annabelle replied. "The others pretended not to notice him."

The lady's maid seemed disappointed by the response. "Oh. I had hoped it was because of my experience," she said, pulling a brush through Annabelle's flame-colored hair.

"Well, that, too," she said. "Have you been in London long?"

"All my life, my lady. My father was a footman and my mum a housemaid for an estate in Kensington."

Annabelle grinned. "My late father's house—or rather, my brother's house—is in Kensington. I've not yet been there, though."

Sanderson paused as she began pinning up locks of Annabelle's hair, a look of confusion crossing her face. "Did he recently buy the house?" she asked.

“Oh, no, but...” Annabelle realized how odd her comment sounded to the servant. Her brother’s house should have been where she had grown up prior to her marriage. “My late husband and I were in Sussex for many years, you see, and I’ve only been back in London a few days. I’ll get there for dinner soon.”

She thought of the missive that had been waiting for her when she returned to Burwick House the afternoon prior. Dobbs had brought it on a silver salver and presented it with a good deal of fanfare.

Apparently having an earl and her baron-of-a-brother calling on the same day had elevated her to a higher status with the butler.

Remembering her initial reaction to reading Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s words, Annabelle now wondered if her tears had been an overreaction. The matchmaker was merely doing her job and doing it well if she already had three candidates lined up for consideration.

As for the ‘consideration’ portion of it, she felt a combination of curiosity and disgust.

The men were to fight for her on a piste with fencing swords, as if she was to be some sort of prize in a medieval tournament between jousting knights.

Annabelle hoped the matchmaker meant *foils* and not *swords*.

A fencing match would be an honorable way of fighting, the elegant, gentlemanly sport a far better means of determining a husband than by way of a deck of cards or a pair of dice.

“What color gown would you like to wear when you go out today?” Sanderson asked.

All at once, Annabelle remembered Lord Tidworth would be taking her to shop for tin soldiers. She had nearly forgotten about their appointment, but certainly not their kiss.

Her brother's visit and their trip to Lady Natalie's registry office had kept her mind on other matters for a time, but upon her return to Burwick House, the memory of how it had felt to be kissed by the earl came back in a flash. The image still lingered of seeing her son with Jeffrey, so happy with the older man's attentions and the stage he had set with the tin soldiers.

A frisson shot through her as earlier memories of Jeffrey passed before her mind's eye. Back when he had come to see her at *The Elegant Courtesan*. The way he used to greet her when he arrived at her bedchamber, treating her as if she were a lady. The way his fingers barely touched her as he undressed her. How his hands caressed and held her breasts. How his lips traced every curve and dip of her body. How his tongue felt when it entered her most private place and set her body to quaking with intense pleasures.

Even now, her body felt as if it was waking from a stupor, the space between her thighs throbbing with need.

Although Burwick had been able to incite some of the same excitement, he hadn't been nearly as good a lover as the lieutenant colonel had been.

Jeffrey knew exactly how to satisfy her. Exactly how to set off a series of trembles and frissons that would build and multiply until her pleasure crested and crashed, his with it. Sometimes he would even do it again until she was completely and thoroughly satiated from their lovemaking.

Had he treated his time with her as some sort of contest? One he was determined to win every time? He never once left her disappointed, so she supposed he was the winner.

Well, he wouldn't be winning the match that was to start that evening at eight o'clock. Not unless he was one of the contestants.

"Ma'am?"

Pulled from her reverie, Annabelle remembered Sanderson had asked about what she wished to wear. "With my father's recent death, I think it best I continue to wear black. But I will

need to change into something different later tonight as I have an appointment at eight o'clock."

"So, a dinner gown, perhaps?" Sanderson guessed. "I'll see to it they're all unpacked when I finish here," she promised.

"I'll know more later of what's expected." Although she doubted Anthony would be familiar with The Lyon's Den, he might know of someone who could describe how women usually dressed for the venue during the contests to determine who would win the well-to-do woman.

For a moment, she wondered how she would explain why she needed to know. She was also curious as to how his ride in the park had gone with Lady Natalie.

The servant nodded as she continued her work on Annabelle's hair. Once she finished, she stepped away to fetch a gown.

When the sound of small knuckles knocked on the door, Annabelle grinned. "Come in, my little lord," she called out.

Giggling, Benton hurried into the room and took her hand to his lips. "Mummy. You have a caller," he said with excitement. "Lord Tid Worth is downstairs," he added, struggling with Jeffrey's title. "He brought me some more soldiers. Twelve of them."

"Already?" She glanced at the mantel clock and gave a start. "Oh, my. Where has the time gone? It's already after twelve o'clock," she murmured.

"He said he could wait for you forever," Benton said, his gaze going to the lady's maid. "How do?"

Annabelle inhaled softly at hearing her son's comment about Jeffrey. "Well, we shan't make him wait that long," she said, ordering Sanderson to hold the gown over her head. She lifted her arms into the sleeves and allowed the black bombazine to settle over her body. Sensing her mistress was in a hurry, Sanderson was quick with the fastenings at the back.

“You two haven’t been properly introduced,” Annabelle said, noticing how Benton remained quiet, his attention on the tall servant. “Benton Hutchins, Viscount Burwick, I’d like you to meet my lady’s maid, Miss Sanderson.”

The lady’s maid sobered and dipped a curtsy. Benton managed a bow before he reached for her hand and kissed her knuckles. “It’s very good to meet you, Miss Sanders-son.”

She gasped and tittered. “And you, my lord.”

“Lord Tidworth is escorting me shopping this afternoon,” Annabelle said before turning her gaze on her son. “Now, what have you done with the soldiers he brought you?”

“We put them in the parlor. He’s setting them up for me right now,” he said with excitement. “He brought you a gift, too, but I’m not supposed to tell you.”

Annabelle’s breath hitched. “All right. You need to go upstairs for your luncheon. Then you can play with your soldiers for a while, but when Miss Thompkins says it’s time for your nap, do be a good boy and go to your bed.” She kissed him on the forehead.

“I will,” he said. “Your hair looks nice,” he commented before heading for the door.

“Why, thank you,” she replied, arching a brow in Sanderson’s direction.

Benton said, “You’re welcome.” He paused, remembering to bow before he ran out.

Annabelle exchanged a glance of amusement with Sanderson before she said, “I’ll be gone for some time, but I will be home in time for an early dinner and to change my clothes.”

“Very good, ma’am. I’ll see to unpacking your trunks and airing out your gowns.”

Trying not to seem as if she were anxious to join the earl, Annabelle calmly made her way out of her bedchamber and down the stairs to the parlor.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A Courtship Continues

Earlier that day

“GOOD MORNING, GORGEOUS.”

Natalie blinked several times, her gaze finally settling on the painted ceiling featuring cherubs and plasterwork found in only the finest homes. Beneath her were bed linens of the softest fabric and a rather comfortable mattress. She turned her head to the side and blinked again.

“Good morning,” she whispered, suppressing the urge to gasp. Anthony, leaning on his elbow with his head propped up in a hand and his hair in utter disarray, was displaying a grin of delight.

The events of the night before came back to her in a flash, and she, too, grinned. “You seem rather happy.”

His expression faltered, but only for a second. “That’s because I am. Aren’t... aren’t you?”

She rolled over onto her side to face him, her body coming to full wakefulness, as if it, too, was reminded of what he had done to it after their post-dinner stroll in the gardens. What he had done again a few hours later. “I am,” she replied, chuckling softly.

“I wish I had met you years ago.”

Natalie blinked again. “Years ago?”

He nodded and leaned forward to kiss her on the forehead. “We could have been married. We could have been waking up like this for—”

“I’m only two-and-twenty,” she stated.

Anthony reacted with surprise. “Oh. Well, for a couple of years, at least,” he amended. “You’re so... sophisticated, being a woman of accomplishment—running your own business concern—I suppose I thought you were older.”

“I wasn’t offended,” she murmured.

“Good.” He kissed her again, this time on the lips. “You will marry me, won’t you?”

Rolling onto her back, Natalie stared up at the ceiling. One of the cherubs, obviously Cupid, seemed to be aiming his bow in the direction of the bed.

The cur.

“I suppose that all depends.”

“On?”

She turned her head to discover he had moved closer. “Will you allow me to continue running my agency?”

“Do you *want* to continue running your agency?”

Sitting up, she scoffed. “Well, of course.”

“Then you must,” he said. About to say more, he paused when the ormolu clock on the fireplace mantel began chiming.

“Is it really seven o’clock?” she asked in alarm.

“Yes,” he answered, although he hesitated in his response. “What time must you be at the agency?”

She sighed even as she felt relief—for a moment, she was sure he was going to suggest they remain in bed or spend the day on a picnic or on some other romantic pursuit. “I’m usually in the office by nine—”

“I’ll take you there,” he promised. “And then I suppose I should pay a call on your father.” Before she could murmur a

word of protest, he held a finger to her lips. "It's the right thing to do. I shouldn't want to get off on the wrong foot with someone I'll be seeing in the House of Lords as well as at a dinner table on occasion."

Sighing, she said, "I understand. But I should warn you, he's probably not at home."

"Oh, you're thinking he's still with his mistress?"

"Indeed. And then he'll be at Angelo's Academy. He's a fencer, you see, and likes to spar before he starts his day."

"Fencing is a rather good exercise. Is he any good?"

"The best." She inhaled softly.

"What is it?"

"In the note I received from him yesterday, he mentioned paying a call on me at home tonight. Something about him having to be in Cleveland Row for an event at The Lyon's Den. He said he is meeting Mrs. Dove-Lyon there this morning."

Anthony jerked. "Mrs. Dove-Lyon? Isn't she...?" He paused, remembering Annabelle had mentioned the woman was her matchmaker.

"A matchmaker?" Natalie finished for him.

"You know of her?"

Natalie stared at him a moment. "Have you... contracted with her? To find a wife?"

He shook his head. "No, of course not. My sister hired her, though. To find her a titled husband." His brows furrowed. "What has Mrs. Dove-Lyon got to do with The Lyon's Den?" he asked.

Sitting up straight in the bed, Natalie scoffed. "She's the owner. She's the matchmaker. She's..." She shrugged her shoulders, not sure how to describe Bessie Dove-Lyon.

"What is it?"

“Well, she’s not exactly a typical matchmaker,” she hedged.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“You really aren’t a gambler, are you?” she asked rhetorically. She scratched her forehead. “I’m well aware of The Black Widow of Whitehall’s matchmaking methods. I’ve lived near the establishment for two years,” she explained. “But I shouldn’t think your sister would need help finding a husband.”

Although he agreed with her assessment, Anthony said, “She has a son. She wants a titled man to help raise him.”

He gave a start at hearing Natalie’s scoff of disbelief.

“What?”

She covered her face with her hands. “Mrs. Dove-Lyon arranges rather unusual contests in which the men must compete to win the right to wed a rich woman.”

Anthony joined Natalie in sitting up on the bed. “Are you saying my sister will be... will be the *prize* in a contest?”

Natalie nodded.

“And your father will be one of the contestants?”

She blinked before gasping softly. “Well, if the contest is a fencing match...” Shaking her head, she held up her hands as if warding off a blow. “This makes absolutely no sense. My father isn’t looking to wed anyone, and he certainly isn’t in need of a rich wife,” she claimed. “And your sister... she’s a comely widow who has already proven she can bear an heir,” she argued. “She wouldn’t have a problem landing an earl or a viscount.”

“Except she’s...” Anthony stopped and hissed, realizing he might be sharing more information about Annabelle than he should.

“What?”

He winced. “Her mother was my father’s mistress,” he finally stated. When he noted her look of confusion, he added as a reminder, “She’s my half-sister, and our father didn’t exactly acknowledge her as his daughter. At least, not in public.”

Natalie rolled her eyes. “Oh, is that all?” She shook her head.

“I should be there tonight,” Anthony stated. “I should be providing protection for her,” he added.

“Well, I certainly hope Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s plan will result in a decent match for her. May I join you there tonight?”

Anthony blinked. “At The Lyon’s Den?”

She nodded. “You can come meet my father and collect me all at the same time,” she suggested. “I’m terribly curious as to why he’s attending tonight’s event.” When Anthony didn’t immediately respond, she nudged his arm. “What is it?”

“Perhaps he’s asked Mrs. Dove-Lyon to find *him* a wife,” he reasoned.

Natalie shook her head. “No. That cannot be. My father is perfectly happy now that he’s back with his mistress. He said so in his letter. There’s no reason for him to remarry,” she argued.

“He’s an earl,” he murmured. “Perhaps he needs a hostess. A countess,” he added, remembering the other reasons Annabelle had given him when she encouraged him to find a wife.

Staring at him as she reconsidered her earlier claim, Natalie collapsed back into the bed. “Do you realize what you’re saying?”

Anthony displayed a grimace as he sorted out what could happen that evening. “Your father could become my brother-in-law and my father-in-law,” he replied in a voice tinged with disbelief.

Natalie burst into a fit of giggles, but she soon sobered as she considered the possibility. “Let’s hope there’s an entirely different reason for Father’s presence at The Lyon’s Den this evening,” she whispered, turning her head to find Anthony watching her with appreciation.

“If he’s as excellent a fencer as you said, perhaps he’ll be there as the referee,” he guessed.

Displaying a grin of delight, Natalie placed a hand on his cheek and kissed him on the lips. “That’s it, of course,” she agreed. “That has to be the reason.” She kissed him once again before she pulled away and sighed. “If I didn’t need to be at the office this morning, I would stay in bed and let you have your way with me.”

“I was thinking you could have your way with me,” he countered, kissing the tip of her nose.

Natalie arched a brow but sighed in resignation. “Could you ring for a tub and water to be brought up? I’ll be in the mistress suite,” she said, climbing off the bed to stand. “And don’t forget, you have an interview with the valet here at the house at eleven o’clock.”

Anthony barely heard her words as he watched her bend over to collect her clothes, his groan of frustration audible. She grinned as she straightened her shift, which only exacerbated his arousal before she disappeared into the dressing room.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A Visit to a Shop

Burwick House parlor

“SSOMETHING TELLS ME I need to have a larger table moved in here,” Annabelle said as she approached Jeffrey. His attention was on the arrangement of tin soldiers on the gaming table, his brows furrowed in concentration.

He chuckled before he turned to face her, a momentary look of disappointment crossing his face when he saw she was wearing a black gown. He quickly recovered, though, bowing before taking her hand to his lips. After he kissed her knuckles, he leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, but he didn't step away. “We need to talk,” he whispered.

Sensing something was wrong, she tensed. At the same time, she knew she needed to let him know what would be happening that evening at The Lyon's Den. “Here?” she asked.

He shook his head. “In my coach.”

“We can leave now. I'm ready,” she said.

“First... let me give you these,” he said, stepping away from her to gather a huge paper-wrapped bouquet of red roses from the settee.

Annabelle inhaled softly. “Jeffrey,” she whispered. She suppressed the urge to tease him, thinking he must have paid witness to her brother bringing the pink roses the day before. “It's rather thoughtful of you,” she added, burying her nose in the red velvety petals.

“I should have brought them yesterday,” he said. “Your butler said he would see to it there was a vase ready on the hall table for them.”

“The hall will smell lovely,” she murmured.

“Be careful of the thorns,” he warned, holding up his index finger. A dot of blood had bloomed on the tip.

Gasping softly, Annabelle reached for his finger and pulled it to her lips. She quickly suckled the end of it and then examined it briefly. “The bleeding has stopped.”

Jeffrey stared at her and then blinked when he realized she was right. “How... how did you know to do that?” he asked.

She tittered. “I have a young son.”

Staring at her lips, he swallowed. “It was rather... erotic,” he whispered.

“It wasn’t meant to be. I...”

She was unable to say more when first his finger lifted her chin and then his lips captured hers in a kiss. Although his lips didn’t linger, he left his forehead pressed to hers for a moment after he ended the kiss. “We really must talk.”

Offering his arm, Jeffrey led them down the steps. At the bottom, Annabelle paused to place the roses in the vase on the hall table, careful to avoid the thorns as she pulled away the tissue surrounding the stems. “They’re beautiful,” she said with a smile, allowing Jeffrey to lead her to the vestibule.

Dobbs stood holding his hat and hers. “It’s a fine spring day,” he said. “No need for a redingote, ma’am.”

Noticing Jeffrey didn’t don a greatcoat, Annabelle decided not to wear a mantle and instead pulled on a black spencer. “Dobbs, do let Cook know dinner needs to be early tonight. And I’ll need the coach at seven o’clock.”

“Yes, my lady,” the butler replied.

“If Lord Covington should pay a call...” She paused, frowning her brows. “Ask that he leave me a note if he

would. I'm terribly curious about what he thought of yesterday's ride in the park."

Dobbs nodded. "I will, my lady."

Well aware of Jeffrey's glare at the mention of Lord Covington, Annabelle suppressed a giggle as they made their way to his coach. Once they were settled on the same bench, riding in the direction of travel, she said, "If looks could kill, my brother would be dead."

Jeffrey's brows lifted with his surprise "Your *brother*?" he repeated. "Who—?"

"Baron Anthony Covington. He paid a call yesterday, directly after you took your leave."

Scoffing, Jeffrey rolled his eyes. "With pink roses?"

His query confirmed he had seen the baron's arrival at Burwick House the day before. "Indeed. Our conversation was enlightening and entertaining." When she noted how Jeffrey furrowed a brow, she added, "It was our second time seeing one another. He didn't remember meeting me when we were children," she explained. "When our father died, he thought he was alone in the world. When he met with his solicitor earlier this week, he set him straight on the matter."

"You didn't tell him... you didn't tell him *everything*, I hope," Jeffrey murmured.

She shook her head. "As far as he knows, I am a viscount's widow, mother of his heir, daughter of his father's mistress, and that I've been gone from London for an extended length of time," she explained. "He paid a call on Mother first. That's how he knew where to find me."

Jeffrey wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close, his other hand gripping one of her hands. "I'm going to fight for you, Ann."

She gave a start, attempting to pull away so she could see his entire face, but his hold on her prevented her from doing so. "Fight for me?" she repeated.

“Tonight. At The Lyon’s Den. I sold my commission this morning. I made enough to pay for the buy-in. I’ll be a contestant in the tournament.”

Gasping, Annabelle felt a combination of disbelief and embarrassment. “How... how did you know?” she asked in a whisper.

“I went to Mrs. Dove-Lyon a few days ago myself. At the insistence of my solicitor, thank God,” he replied. “You went —”

“Yesterday morning,” she admitted, settling her head into the small of his shoulder. “While you were waiting for me at Burwick House.”

They were quiet for a time as he simply held her. “Why?” he asked softly.

Annabelle pushed away from him. “When you recognized me at Mr. Garth’s shop, I... I panicked. I knew if you remembered me, then others might as well. I paid a call to my mother. I thought—”

“I would have kept your secret,” he interrupted, rubbing her arm with his hand. “But I understand you couldn’t count on it. We hadn’t seen each other in a very long time.”

Annabelle audibly sighed. “Oh, Jeffrey. I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“It’s not your fault,” he countered. “Besides, *I’m* the one who went to Mrs. Dove-Lyon first. If you hadn’t...” He rolled his eyes and cursed.

“You would be fighting for someone else this evening?” she guessed, once again settling into his hold.

“Forfeiting is more like it,” he murmured. He kissed the side of her head. “There isn’t any other woman worth fighting for in this entire country.”

The sound of conviction in his voice had her inhaling softly. “You still fence, do you not?” she asked with worry.

“I do,” he replied. “I managed to get some practice in these past two mornings, but...”

Alarmed, she pulled away. “Jeffrey,” she admonished him.

“Practiced last night, as well. My valet is shite with a foil, but it allowed me to limber up. I was stiff after yesterday’s bout with Habberly, but it reminded me of strategy and how to move. How to keep my opponent off-kilter,” he explained. “So... I suppose the question now is... do you *want* me to win?”

“Well, of course I do,” she replied with excitement.

“Because... I want you to be my wife, Annabelle. My countess,” he stated. “No matter what happens tonight. I promise I’ll raise Benton as my own. I promise I’ll be faithful, because... because I love you,” he went on.

“Jeffrey,” she breathed.

“Will you marry me?” He held his breath in anticipation of her answer. She had been the only woman for whom he had ever felt this sort of affection. This sort of conviction. Surely, she knew it, too. He had kissed her. She had kissed him.

The coach stuttered to a halt, and Annabelle stared up at him in wonder. “I will,” she said.

His lips collided with hers in a crushing kiss. Even when the driver opened the door, he continued to kiss her as the two hummed their happiness.

Annabelle was the first to pull away. “We’re embarrassing your driver,” she whispered.

About to curse his driver, Jeffrey audibly sighed. “All right. Let’s see if we can’t find a regiment for his lordship,” he said as he let go of his hold on her and stepped out of the coach.

He helped her down and offered an arm as Annabelle’s gaze went up the front of the building located at No. 32 Ludgate Hill.

“It hasn’t changed much,” she commented.

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know. I’ve never had a reason to go in,” he replied, holding the door for her.

“Surely you’ve peeked into the windows,” she accused.

He nodded. “Glanced *at* the window displays is more like it,” he said, referring to the colorful and shiny items set on shelves so they could be seen from the street.

Once inside, he steered her to the shelves lining the front of the shop, their contents a myriad of objects mostly made of silver.

“So... you never bought any jewelry here?” she pressed, her gaze darting to the jewelry counters at the back, where trays backed with black velvet displayed necklaces and bracelets, rings and brooches.

“Never had a reason to,” he replied. “I do now, of course, but first things first.” He examined an ornate teapot and a candle snuffer before moving to the next shelf. “Now, if I were a toy soldier, where would I be?” He chuckled, bending to discover a set of tin soldiers lined up next to their colorful pasteboard box on the bottom shelf. Oval in shape, the container was similar to a hat box in its manufacture.

“The level at which a young boy would easily find me,” Annabelle finished for him, plucking one of the flats from the shelf to examine it more closely. “This is exquisite,” she murmured. “Almost too nice to be played with.” She knelt to replace the soldier before pulling another from the display, admiring the details done with paint.

“Even his stand is well made,” Jeffrey remarked, holding one of the soldiers around its middle between his thumb and forefinger before turning it over to study the bottom. “Good base. He won’t wobble,” he added.

“You know more about these than I do,” she said. “Is it a good set?”

He examined another soldier before saying, “Oh, most definitely. German, I think. Some are from the Kingdom of the Netherlands.” He stopped speaking when his attention was caught by something else. “What’s this?”

Annabelle followed his line of sight and she gasped. “A cannon?” she guessed.

He returned the toy soldier to its place and lifted the metal cannon from the shelf. “Indeed. Heavy, too,” he remarked, hefting the weapon in his palm.

“How many does a regiment require?” she asked, pulling another from the display. She held it in her gloved hand, surprised to discover the wheels turned.

“Looks as if there are only two, so... one for each side,” he said with a grin. “There are some cannon balls here, but...” he held up a pyramid made up of round metal spheres... “no individual ones,” he added with a scowl. “I suppose there will be no actual shooting of the cannons.”

“The balls would only get lost,” she said. “Besides, I wouldn’t want one of the housemaids to step on one of them and have her feet go out from under her,” she added when she noted his look of chagrin. “Word would get out that one of my staff was injured by a cannon ball.”

“Good point,” he said with a chuckle.

“Are there more? Or is there just the one box?”

Jeffrey glanced around. “Looks as if this is the only one.”

“I’ll take it.”

“If you buy these for him, then what am I to give him?” he asked when he returned to standing, the pasteboard box of soldiers cradled in one arm. He helped her up from where she knelt.

“You can give him the cannons,” she suggested, holding out both cannons and the cannonballs.

He seemed to think on the idea for a moment before he grinned and finally nodded. “Agreed. Would you like to pick out anything else?”

She glanced around the shop and shook her head. “My thoughts aren’t on shopping at the moment,” she whispered.

He furrowed his brows. “What are they on?”

“You.”

Staring at her for several seconds, Jeffrey imagined a dozen different scenarios for what she meant and finally concluded only one would suffice. “Then let’s pay for these and be on our way,” he finally said.

He was nearly breathless when they left the shop and climbed into the Tidworth town coach.

“Home,” he called up to the driver. “As fast as you can manage.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

An Earl Meets with a Matchmaker

Meanwhile, at The Lyon's Den

STUDYING THE PARCHMENT on which he had drawn a proposed floor plan for that night's fencing tournament, Titan was entering measurements for the piste when Theseus, sounding breathless, joined him.

"Lord Habberly's coach has just parked out front," Theseus murmured, his manner on the nervous side.

Titan straightened. He glanced around the gaming hall. Although a game of hazard was still in progress, none of the other tables had any players. Most had left earlier that morning, either to finally take to their beds or their breakfast parlors. Only two dealers were still on the floor.

"I'll escort him to the office," Titan said. "See to it the tables are rearranged like this for tonight's event," he added, handing the parchment to Theseus. "And be mindful of the measurements for the markings on the piste. They must be exact."

Theseus frowned as he glanced at the floor plan, orienting the sheet to match the gaming room's current layout. "Understood."

Titan headed down the stairs and to the front door, stretching and fisting his left hand several times. He barely had the door open when Albert, Earl of Habberly, appeared.

"Good afternoon, my lord."

“Titan,” Albert replied. “I need a moment with the widow.”

“I’ll take you to her office, sir.”

Although the earl seemed about to argue, he shrugged and followed the guard up the stairs. “Tell me, Titan, how many players are in the tournament tonight?”

The escort manager straightened. “There are three who have paid to participate, sir.”

“Who’s the referee?”

“I am.”

Albert lifted his chin. “Has one of the players been designated to win?”

Titan paused before knocking on Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s office door to regard the earl with a questioning glance. “Sir?”

“Come now, Titan. We both know how this works,” the earl murmured in a quiet voice. “Will you see to it Tidworth is declared the winner?”

About to claim it didn’t work like that, Titan didn’t have time to answer before Albert knocked on the door and opened it without waiting for a response from the other side.

“Bessie, my dear. Good to see you again,” the earl said, one of his hands making a shooing motion in Titan’s direction. “Bring tea and some brandy, won’t you?”

The escort manager gave Mrs. Dove-Lyon an apologetic glance before he hurried off.

“Why, Lord Habberly, to what do I owe this honor?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked as she rose from her desk to dip a quick curtsy. Although she wore her typical widow’s weeds and black hat, she hadn’t pulled down the netting on the front brim to completely cover her face as she usually did.

“My desire for a bit of fun this evening,” he replied, taking the chair across from her desk. “Lucy Billings sends her regards, by the way.”

Bessie inhaled softly. “So, it’s true. You’ve taken her as your mistress again?”

Although her words implied she had learned of the arrangement through her network of young spies—street urchins who brought her news of the goings on in the aristocracy—Albert knew she had heard directly from Lucy. The two had been friends long before the matchmaker had married Colonel Sandstrom T. Lyons. “Of course. But I’m not here to discuss my love life.”

The widow arched a brow. “Oh?”

“I’m here about tonight’s fencing tournament. You need a fourth participant. I wish to be that man.”

Bessie blinked. “I wasn’t aware you were in the market for a wife.”

He shrugged. “I haven’t told anyone I was,” he countered. “I don’t care who I have to fight in the first round, but I wish to take on Tidworth in the final match.”

The matchmaker straightened in her chair. “You seem terribly confident,” she remarked.

He shrugged. “That’s because I’m the best fencer at Angelo’s. What’s the price for tonight?”

“Five-thousand pounds.”

“And the prize is Burwick’s widow?”

Not able to hide her reaction at hearing how he referred to Annabelle Hutchins, Bessie nodded. “She is.”

Albert pulled a cheque from his waistcoat pocket and handed it to her.

She glanced at the amount—five-thousand pounds had already been filled in—and arched a graying brow. “I see you’ve come prepared.”

“It’s not my first time, Bessie,” he murmured, his gaze hardening as if in warning.

She stiffened as if she expected some sort of verbal rebuke from the earl. “I was under the impression your marriage was a good match.”

He lifted his chin. “It was,” he acknowledged. “After a time. Which is why I’ve returned for another chance. Whatever happens tonight... well, let’s just allow fate to have its way, shall we?”

Furrowing her brows, Bessie said, “There will be no cheating, if that’s what you’re implying.”

He shook his head. “Glad to hear it.”

“She’s Lucy’s daughter,” the matchmaker blurted.

“And Covington’s. I’m well aware,” Albert replied. “What time should I arrive?”

About to put voice to a protest, Bessie seemed to realize it was too late. She had already accepted his cheque. “No later than half-past eight o’clock,” she replied. “The tournament begins at nine. I’ll be sure your first opponent is Viscount Marshallton.”

Shrugging, Albert asked, “Who will Tidworth’s opponent be?”

She glanced at a sheet containing a list of names. “Robert Tipton. The baron.”

Albert seemed to think on the name for a moment before he relaxed. “Bessie, you’re going to have a very exciting final match,” he claimed.

“Promise?”

Grinning, he said, “Tidworth is almost as good as me.”

She seemed uncomfortable at hearing his claim. “He loves her.”

Shrugging, Albert pretended nonchalance. “Remember, you said there would be no cheating,” he warned.

Bessie regarded him with an expression of uncertainty. "No cheating," she agreed.

Titan entered the office with a tea tray which included a crystal tumbler half-filled with brandy. He set a steaming cup of tea in front of the matchmaker.

When he set the brandy in front of the earl, Albert said, "That's for her." He stood and made his way out of the office, displaying a sly grin as he descended the stairs.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

An Afternoon of Rediscovery

Tidworth House

WHEN ANNABELLE STEPPED out of the Tidworth coach and onto the pavement, she shook out her black skirts and regarded the façade of Tidworth House with a combination of anticipation and disappointment. Two of the black shutters had become detached from their mountings and hung at odd angles. The window boxes beneath the soot-stained windows were filled with weeds. The front door was in need of a new coat of paint, and some of the stucco had chipped away from the original brick edifice.

“Oh, dear,” she murmured.

“My thoughts exactly,” Jeffrey said as he offered his arm. “Now you know the real reason I went to Mrs. Dove-Lyon,” he added.

The black door opened even before they had crossed over the area. A quick glance down showed the below-ground entrance hadn’t been swept in a very long time.

“Afternoon, sir,” the ancient butler said, stepping aside to allow them into the hall. With no vestibule or entry, the servant was forced to take their hats into the first room on the left.

“Foster,” Jeffrey acknowledged. “Could you have tea brought up to my apartments?”

“Right away, sir.” Foster shuffled off toward the back of the house as Annabelle surveyed the sparsely decorated hall.

The dark paneling was in need of a good scrubbing as were the marble tiles making up the checkerboard pattern on the floor. There were only a few doors along one side of the hall and a wide staircase on the other. Above them, the high ceiling went up to the third story. A chandelier dripping with crystal tears hung from its center.

“My study,” Jeffrey said with a wave, his sigh audible when he noted a number of folded notes on a silver salver. Although a few were probably invitations to the upcoming Season’s events, he knew most were invoices.

Past due invoices.

The rest of the room looked as if the previous occupant had slept there. “Breakfast parlor,” he said, moving onto the next door. “The parlor, library, and my late mother’s salon are on the first floor, and the bedchambers are on the second.”

“Do you have any servants left?” Annabelle asked, running her gloved hand over the top of an empty caryatid. The lack of dust in the middle suggested something had been removed from it recently.

“A few,” Jeffrey acknowledged. “The cook, a footman, a maid, and... and Foster.”

“You could have used the funds from selling your commission to have things put to rights,” she suggested, moving to the base of the stairs. The marble steps were uncovered, their middles stained from a century of use.

“But then I wouldn’t have been able to fight for you,” he argued. “Besides... it’s only a house. If you prefer, we can live at Burwick House. This one’s entailed, but—”

“If you win tonight, then we’ll live here,” she stated. “I’ll leave a small staff at Burwick House and bring the rest with me. See if we can’t mend the place.”

“You would do that?” he asked in surprise. He looked uncertain for a moment.

“Move into my husband’s home? Yes, of course,” she replied.

“Even if I would prefer moving into Burwick House?”

She grinned despite seeing his dejected expression. “Oh, Jeffrey. It can all be fixed,” she assured him.

“It will take a good deal of blunt.”

“Yes, it will,” she agreed, her gaze going to the top of the stairs. “Show me more?”

He offered his arm, and they climbed the marble stairs. She peeked into the parlor, arching a brow in surprise at seeing its larger-than-usual size.

“My mother had a wall removed. She insisted the parlor be large enough to host all her friends,” Jeffrey explained, his arms going out from his hips to indicate the wide gowns so popular only two decades earlier. Although the furnishings, including three settees, were worn, the parlor was clean and bright due to three west-facing windows. He lifted a finger to his chin and tapped it.

“Oh, dear. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you display that expression,” Annabelle said softly.

He grinned. “I was thinking there would be room to set up Benton’s toy soldiers on a table over there,” he mused, indicating one corner.

Annabelle inhaled softly. “He would love it,” she replied, angling her head to kiss him on the cheek.

“I admit to a bit of selfishness on my part,” he murmured. “I should like to be ready should Whitehall need my services again.” He dipped his head. “I might be an earl now, but I’ll always be a soldier at heart.”

Across the hall was a salon set up with a sofa, *escritoire*, and small tufted chair. The room obviously hadn’t been used in a long time. “This is quite nice,” she remarked.

“It’s yours,” he said.

She grinned as she peeked into the last room on the corridor. The scents of vellum and vanilla wafted past her nose. Even in the gloom—the room’s only window was covered with dark drapes, and the walls were clad with paneling—she knew it was the library.

“I spent many an afternoon in here,” Jeffrey mused as he stepped up to stand behind her. “This is where my tutor taught my brother and me.”

“Then this is where Benton and his tutor shall spend their days,” Annabelle said, thinking she might pay another call on Lady Natalie. Perhaps Tidworth House would require more staff than she could afford to take from Burwick House.

The thought of Lady Natalie brought to mind her brother. If she could get word to him, would he come to The Lyon’s Den that evening? Provide a bit of support should she need it?

From Anthony’s reaction to the admission she had employed Mrs. Dove-Lyon, she knew he was unfamiliar with The Black Widow of Whitehall’s unusual method of matchmaking. What would he think if he watched the spectacle with her?

“A penny for your thoughts,” Jeffrey murmured.

Annabelle inhaled softly. “Lord Covington. My brother. Should I invite him to attend this evening?”

Reminded of his first encounter with the young man, Jeffrey displayed a wince. “For what purpose?”

About to say “support,” she sighed. “To be a witness to my betrothal, I suppose.” Her brows furrowed. “My mother will probably be there, though.” She hadn’t sent word to Lucy Billings of the arrangements Mrs. Dove-Lyon had made, sure the matchmaker had already done so. “If there is an opportunity, I’ll be sure to introduce you to her.”

Jeffrey stilled. “No need,” he replied. “I paid a call on her.” When Annabelle’s eyes widened as if in alarm, he held up a staying hand. “To seek her approval was all.”

Dipping her head, Annabelle scoffed softly. “You hardly need her approval.”

He shrugged and allowed a wan grin. “I like your mother,” he stated.

Annabelle huffed. “Most men do.”

“She’s a good head on her shoulders. Knows what it takes to survive,” he remarked. “I think you learned much from her.”

Not about to counter his words, Annabelle placed a hand on his upper arm and kissed him on the cheek. “But I benefitted from a bit of luck,” she whispered. “Having you as my first.”

Jeffrey wrapped his arms around her and kissed her thoroughly. “It was my honor,” he whispered. “Each and every time.”

His words, said with such conviction, had her inhaling softly. Everything he had ever done to her came back in a flash, and her body reacted in kind. Her breasts swelled, and the space at the top of her thighs began to throb.

She grinned. “We have at least another floor to go,” she murmured. If they didn’t leave the library very soon, she was going to begin undoing his buttons right then and there. “A bedchamber or two?”

Jeffrey visibly swallowed. “At least two,” he replied, offering his arm.

They made their way out of the library and to the next flight of stairs. “You seem nervous,” she remarked when they reached the top.

“I wanted to make a good impression, but I fear the more you see of this pile, the less likely you’ll—”

“It’s fine, Jeffrey,” she interrupted. “A bit of paint and some repairs, a larger staff to see to the cleaning, and it will be good as new.”

He winced.

“What is it?”

Jeffrey pulled her toward the second door down the hall. “It bothers me it will require Burwick’s blunt to bring it up to snuff.”

“You know it’s not his blunt any longer.”

Giving a start, he paused before pushing on the door handle. “But it was,” he said.

“Would it bother you so much if you thought of it as Benton’s blunt? Because it is now,” she reminded him. She placed her hand over his and pushed on the door. It opened to reveal a room with the walls covered in peach silk and a bed dressed in pale green velvet. A japanned dressing screen stood in one corner, and a dressing table sat between two windows draped in green velvet. Although the Turkish carpet was worn, everything else looked fairly new. “This is the mistress suite?” she asked in awe.

“It is,” he acknowledged.

“It’s beautiful.”

“It’s yours. I ordered it be made ready for you, should you wish to move in tonight,” he said, ushering her into the room.

“Jeffrey,” she breathed.

“I may not be able to afford much for you, but I promise I will do what I...”

Annabelle faced him and placed her lips against his. A moment later, they were kissing as if their lives depended on it.

“Make love to me,” she whispered when he finally pulled away to take a breath. She had already reached up to his cravat, her fingers deftly undoing the knot in the silk.

His eyes darkened. “Anything you wish,” he murmured, his finger fumbling with his topcoat buttons.

“Anything?” she repeated, her fingers moving to his waistcoat buttons.

He inhaled softly. "Tell me what you want me to do," he whispered.

"Do it the way you used to. When you thought you had to prove yourself or risk not having me another night."

His brows furrowed. "Is that all?"

She felt the heat of her sudden blush. "I always thought it more than enough."

Jeffrey had her turned around and was undoing the fastenings down her back when he said, "I took great pride in pleasuring you," he murmured.

Sure, he was tempted to simply rip open the back of the gown. Annabelle said, "As did I for you."

"It will be my pleasure to see to yours. Always." He had the gown falling to the floor while she saw to removing his shirt from his breeches.

"I will see to yours as well," she whispered.

"No," he replied, removing his shirt as he kicked off his shoes.

"Why not?" She undid her stays and tossed them to a nearby chair, her gaze taking in his naked torso. Despite the years since she had last seen him undressed, he was still a fit man. His belly wasn't rounded as Burwick's had become over the years, and the dusting of curls on his chest was still blond.

"I'll need my strength for tonight. If I... if I *cum*, I fear I won't last through two matches." Even as he spoke the words, he feared he would lose control. His cock had been engorged since the moment they had entered the bedchamber.

About to argue, Annabelle let out a yelp of surprise when he had her in his arms and then on the bed, her chemise and stockings still on her body. His hands slid up her sides, bunching the thin fabric of the chemise until her breasts were bare. A moment later, he had his mouth covering one of them, his tongue laving over her pebbled nipple as one of his hands covered the other.

Annabelle threaded her fingers through his hair, her breath held in anticipation. “Oh, how I’ve missed this,” she murmured. “How I’ve missed you.”

Jeffrey paused in his ministrations and let go of his hold on her breasts to stare at her. “You missed me?”

Heat flooded her face as well as the rest of her body, her skin pink with it. “Every day since you left London,” she admitted.

SWALLOWING, HE DROPPED his head, so it rested against her chest. “I should have taken you with me,” he whispered. He kissed the space between her breasts and trailed his tongue and lips down the front of her body. “I would have provided protection,” he added, at the same moment he lifted her silk-clad legs to spread them apart. He imagined the ribbon ties at the tops of her stockings a sort of decoration on a present at Christmastide, one where he already knew what could be found inside.

He kissed her inner thighs above the ties, thrilled when she angled her hips so her quim was open to him. The earthy scents of woman and arousal had his nose trailing through her soft curls, his tongue darting out to lick and caress her womanhood, timing his actions to her breathless mewls and gasps as he provided the pleasure he had promised.

Holding her thighs against the sides of his head, he suckled the swollen nubbin of her womanhood until he knew she was near to breaking, then shoved his tongue into her wet haven. Her hips met his thrust as she succumbed to the waves of her climax, her soft cry muffled by the pillow when she arched her back and turned her head to the side.

Desperate to take his own pleasure, Jeffrey couldn’t stop himself. Despite what he had told her earlier, he reared back, mounted her, and entered her in a single thrust. Riding her waves with three more thrusts, he allowed his release on the fourth, cursing softly in what could have been a prayer of thanks.

When he was completely spent, he lowered his body to hers and nearly wept when her arms wrapped around his back and he heard her whisper, “Stay in me.”

“Your wish is my command,” he managed. Darkness enveloped him, and he sighed as his head ended up on the pillow next to hers.

He had no idea how long he was out, but when he awoke, his entire body shivered when fingernails gently scraped his head.

“I must be on my way home,” Annabelle whispered. “I’m expected for an early dinner.” She didn’t wait for a reply but slid out from under him and immediately began dressing.

“I’ll take you,” Jeffrey said, a yawn nearly interrupting his words. He groaned as he stretched his body on the bed, well aware she had paused to watch.

“You should sleep. You’ll need your strength for tonight.”

He inhaled sharply as she leaned over the bed and drew a fingernail down the middle of his chest, through his crisp curls to his navel.

“You continue doing that, and neither one of us will be leaving this room tonight,” he warned with a wry grin.

“I’ve considered not going to The Lyon’s Den,” she admitted as she straightened. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“An expensive loss for the both of us,” he quickly replied, the thought enough to have him rising from the bed. “Twenty-five thousand pounds of debt for me.”

Annabelle gasped. “She wouldn’t.”

“She would,” he countered. “She already warned me.” Despite their conversation, he knew Annabelle watched as he pulled his shirt over his head, knew she paid witness to his erection. He couldn’t help his reaction to her closeness, to the sight of her wearing only her chemise, stockings, and stays.

“Would it be, though? A loss?” she asked in a whisper.

He had pulled on his breeches and was stuffing the hem of his shirt into them when her words had him pausing. “I thought you were speaking of the blunt you had to pay Mrs. Dove-Lyon. What I had to pay her for the buy-in.”

Annabelle dipped her head. “I suppose I was.”

“I’ll not lose you again,” he said, pulling her into his arms to kiss her. “No matter what happens.”

She gave him a wobbly grin and stepped out of his hold. “Then I shall warn my new lady’s maid she will have to repack all my gowns for the move here to Tidworth House,” she murmured, glancing around the room as she retrieved her gown from the back of a chair. In the late afternoon light, the colors in the room had darkened, making them seem more suitable for a countess.

Jeffrey helped her with the widow’s weeds, redoing the buttons at the back even as he kissed the nape of her neck.

She giggled. “There will be time for that later,” she said, sliding her feet into her slippers. She turned and redid the knot of his cravat, her gaze darting to the clock. “We must leave now, or I’ll be late.”

Jeffrey kissed her one last time before he escorted her down the steps and out the front door.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A Baron Meets an Earl

Later that night, Cleveland Row

ANTHONY DOUBLE-CHECKED THE address Natalie had given him before his gaze slid up the fashionable terrace house located near the end of Cleveland Row. Beyond a brightly lit manor house at the end of the street was Green Park, but given darkness had already settled over Westminster, he couldn't see it.

Lyon's Gate Manor, better known as The Lyon's Den, blocked the view.

A half-dozen coaches had pulled into the street to deposit their occupants onto the cobblestones. Even before he made it to the front door of No. 12, another series of coaches appeared.

He stood between a pair of Tuscan columns and admired the pedimented stone doorcase before employing the boar's head brass knocker. When the door opened, a white-haired butler appeared.

"Lord Covington for Lady Natalie. I am her ladyship's betrothed," he stated, rather liking how the words tripped off his tongue. He held out a calling card. "She's expecting me."

The butler stepped aside, and Anthony entered the large hall. Along one side was an open marble staircase leading to the first floor, and on the other, a series of doors separated by marble-topped caryatids.

“I’ll tell Lady Natalie you’re here,” the servant said before he began climbing the stairs.

Slowly.

About to peek into one of the rooms, Anthony remained in place when the front door opened. He whirled around to see an older gentleman removing his top hat with one hand as he closed the door with the other. When the man turned around, he gave a start at seeing Anthony.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Lord Habberly—”

“You’re not Habberly. I’m Habberly,” the newcomer claimed in a baritone voice.

“Of course, you are, my lord. I’m—”

“Anthony, Baron Covington,” a feminine voice called out from the top of the stairs. “I see you haven’t changed your mind.”

Anthony’s gaze lifted, and he inhaled softly. Dressed in a sapphire blue dinner gown, her hair styled into a riot of curls, Natalie looked as if she could have been royalty.

Meanwhile, Albert, Earl of Habberly, directed a passing glance in his daughter’s direction before settling his gaze back on Anthony.

“I have not changed my mind,” Anthony said, surreptitiously moving his top hat to cover his arousal. “Nor shall I.” He met the earl’s stare. “It’s very good to meet you, my lord,” he said before bowing.

Natalie made it to the bottom of the stairs and hurried over to give her father a kiss on the cheek. “How do, Father?”

“Better than I have in a long time, my darling,” he hedged. He nodded to Anthony. “Covington.” One of his brows furrowed. “Are you Edward Covington’s *only* son?”

“I am, sir.”

“Have you met your sister?”

Anthony blinked. “If you’re referring to Lady Burwick, then yes, I have,” he hedged. For a moment, he feared the earl might know of another.

Albert angled his head to one side and appeared as if he was about to say something before thinking better of it. Instead, he asked, “Why are you here in my daughter’s home?”

Thinking Natalie only had rooms in the terrace house—not the entire house—Anthony blinked. He quickly recovered, though. “Although she claimed I didn’t have to speak with you about the matter of marriage, I wanted to be sure to seek your permission, sir,” he blurted.

Albert stared at him a moment before he turned his expression of confusion on his daughter. “He asked you to marry him?”

“He did, Father.”

“And you agreed?” he asked in disbelief.

“I did, Father,” she replied, adding a huffing sound to the end of her answer.

Albert turned his gaze back to Anthony. “You asked her to marry you?”

“I did, sir. Yesterday. After I took her for a ride in the park.”

Turning his attention back to his daughter, Albert’s brows shot up. “*You* went for a ride in the park?”

“I did, Father.”

“During the fashionable hour?”

“Indeed. I told Anthony he didn’t need to seek your permission to marry me, but—”

“I had to, sir. She’s your only daughter,” Anthony insisted.

“Forgive my momentary disbelief,” Albert murmured. “I have never thought my independent bluestocking-of-a-daughter would ever agree to marry anyone. You must be a man of science, perhaps?”

“I am a member of the Royal Society,” Anthony admitted.

“You don’t mind my Natalie’s knowledge of the world?”

“Oh, I greatly appreciate it, sir. I’m a consultant specializing in ancient artifacts at a local museum.”

Although he seemed momentarily impressed by Anthony’s response, the earl’s expression grew serious. “You know she has a business concern?”

“I do, sir. In fact, it’s how we met. I hired a valet she recommended only this morning.”

“She’s not going to give it up for you,” Albert warned.

“I wouldn’t expect her to, sir.”

Albert straightened and took a deep breath. “Well, then you have my permission, Covington.”

“Thank you, sir,” Anthony said, his sudden euphoria making him feel as if he was weightless and hovering three feet above the carpet. Natalie was going to be his wife!

“Are you aware a fencing tournament is about to take place at The Lyon’s Den this evening?” Albert asked. “One which involves your sister?”

A grimace marred Anthony’s face as he nodded.

Natalie moved to stand next to him. “We are,” she replied. “In fact, Anthony is going to escort me there this evening so we can watch,” she added.

“From your letter, we surmised you might be the referee. Is that the case?” Anthony asked. “As you might surmise, I am rather concerned about who my sister will end up married to after the evening’s contest.”

Albert gave Anthony a nervous glance. “I can only imagine,” he hedged. “Why don’t we make our way to The Lyon’s Den, and I’ll explain what’s about to happen on the way?”

Natalie and Anthony exchanged curious glances before they both nodded in unison. “Lead the way, Father,” she said, her brows arching in wonder.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

A Tournament to Determine a Fate or Two

A half-hour later, The Lyon's Den in Cleveland Row

ANNABELLE STEPPED DOWN from the Burwick town coach with the assistance of her driver, Pickerton.

“Would you like me to see you to the door, my lady?”

“That won’t be necessary,” she replied, shaking out the dark blue skirts of her dinner gown. Despite the early spring chill in the air, she had opted not to wear a mantel. Her nervousness was keeping her warm enough.

Although a number of men were making their way to the front door of the manor house, she opted to use the lady’s entrance on the right side of the building. The female guard, Helena, saw to opening the door for her. “The observation gallery is three flights up, my lady,” she said. “Just past the dining room.”

Annabelle felt a bit of relief she wouldn’t have to pay witness to the fencing tournament in the company of men. Even as far as she was from the main gaming room, she could hear the tell-tale sounds of gambling—occasional shouts and ringing bells, laughter and cheering.

Making her way through the ladies’ dining room and to the railing of the observation gallery, she was surprised to see several other women present. One looked rather familiar.

“Mother? What are you doing here?” Annabelle asked, hurrying to stand before Lucy. Her gaze took in the scarlet red gown her mother wore, deep both in color and in how the neckline was cut.

“Oh, my darling, I wasn’t going to have you endure this evening all by yourself,” Lucy said, clutching her daughter’s hands in hers. “Besides, Bessie is a friend from long ago.” Her gaze darted to the black-clad woman who had followed Annabelle into the observation gallery.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon leaned in to kiss Lucy on the cheek. “Not *that* long ago,” she said, winking. She was dressed in her usual black, but the gown she wore was more appropriate for evening than the frocks she had been wearing when Annabelle had met with her. “I invited Lucy,” the widow admitted. “It’s the least I could do since she was the one who sent you to me.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Dove-Lyon. I’m so nervous, I almost wish I hadn’t eaten the bit of dinner I did.”

“You shouldn’t be too nervous, my dear. Why, I think you’ll like the four men we have scheduled to compete for your hand this evening.” She pulled a lorgnette from her pocket and brought it to her face as she peered over the edge of the balcony. “Besides Lord Tidworth, we have the Viscount Marshallton, Baron Tipton, and...” She paused as she scanned the crowd below. “Oh, there he is—Albert, Earl of Habberly.”

“Habberly is here?” Lucy repeated, her mouth dropping open in pretend surprise. She joined Bessie at the balcony and gasped in wonder. “Why... he’s still quite handsome in his twilight years,” she murmured.

“Lucy,” Bessie scolded. “He’s not even fifty, I should think.”

“He’s five-and-fifty,” Lucy countered. “And no longer in need of an heir.”

Bessie angled her head to one side. “He has an heir, a spare, and a daughter. Apparently, all grown and married off.”

“So why is he in need of *my* daughter, do you suppose?”

Bessie's gaze swept the observation gallery. Annabelle's attention was aimed at Lord Tidworth—and his at her. "Habberly is a special situation. Rumor has it he's been drinking entirely too much because he misses his dear late wife. A match I saw to arranging, I might add," she said, lifting her chin proudly. "He may be a widower, and he could probably have any widow in his bed that he desires, but he wants something more... *permanent*," she explained. "A woman with experience, who likes bed sport."

Lucy continued to stare at the earl. As if sensing he was being watched, he turned his attention up to the gallery. Upon seeing his mistress watching him, he grinned. He kissed his fingers and waved his hand in her direction.

Pretending to receive the blown kiss, Lucy returned the gesture, grinning in delight when he did the same. He continued to watch her for a moment longer before someone in the crowd demanded his attention.

"You're incorrigible," Bessie accused.

"Habberly was the first man with whom I had a contract as a mistress," Lucy whispered.

"What?" Bessie furrowed a brow. "I don't recall that."

"You were the one who helped arrange the contract," Lucy countered. "It only lasted a year. He married, you see, and then I was on to another."

"He obviously remembers you."

"And I, him," Lucy said with a sigh. "I do miss having a man in my life."

Bessie scoffed. "Already? It's only been a fortnight, hasn't it?"

Lucy rolled her eyes. "More like six months. Covington hadn't been well for a very long time before he finally died."

"Why didn't you arrange something else?"

“After thirty years? It wouldn’t have been fair,” Lucy replied. “Besides, now I have a home to call my own and pin money until I die,” she bragged.

“Covington did set you up rather nicely,” Bessie agreed. “I should warn you that Habberly and Tidworth aren’t opponents in the first match, which means if they both win—”

“Habberly is a master fencer,” Lucy stated, her attention going to her daughter.

Bessie inhaled softly. “They will be opponents in the final match. Whoever wins will claim your daughter’s hand.” She couldn’t help but notice the look of uncertainty that crossed her friend’s face.

“Well, Lord Tidworth will just have to win now, won’t he?” Lucy said. A wan grin replaced the uncertainty. “Perhaps I should offer myself as a consolation prize or would that go against your house rules?” she asked as her grin widened.

Bessie inhaled and said, “I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.”

From somewhere down on the gaming floor, a shout sounded, and the noise level due to gamblers and those who were there to pay witness to the fencing tournament died down to a murmur.

“Welcome to The Lyon’s Den,” Titan called out. “Tonight’s special wagering event is a fencing tournament. We’ll have three rounds. The first two will determine our finalists, and then they will compete for the chance to win...” He paused for dramatic effect. “A wife!”

A cheer went up amongst the crowd before Titan stretched his gloved hand and signaled for silence. “The weapons for this evening’s duels are foils, and their tips are blunted with a blossom.” His comment was met with a few outbursts of disappointment and some booing. “Now, gentlemen, we can’t have our contestants badly wounded.”

“I came for a duel!” someone shouted from a faro table.

“Have another drink!” Egeus called out, which had the crowd laughing.

Once the gamblers had calmed down, Titan waved for two of the men in the crowd to step forward. “Our first contestants are Jeffrey, Earl of Tidworth, and Robert, Baron Tipton. Gentlemen?” He waved a hand to indicate they should take their places on the piste.

The two men, each carrying a foil, stepped to the back of the gambling hell, where the tables had been removed to clear a space about forty feet long by about eight feet deep. Two lines were marked with chalk six feet on either side of the middle line. With the crush of bodies filling the gaming hell, the eight-foot width would probably shrink as the matches progressed.

Beyond the makeshift piste, the musicians were still seated in their usual place, but their instruments had been set aside. Their attentions were on the contestants.

“Gentlemen, if you have not already done so, place your bets now,” Titan called out as several dealers on the floor, dressed in The Lyon’s Den livery, moved about taking bank notes from bettors and writing down names and amounts on clipboards with charcoal pencils.

Meanwhile, Jeffrey removed his top coat and waistcoat, handing them both to Egeus. He took a few practice swings while Tipton lunged and rolled his shoulders.

“Haven’t seen you at Angelo’s of late,” Tipton commented.

“Haven’t been in many years,” Jeffrey replied.

“You practice at home?”

Jeffrey shook his head. “I was fighting frogs on the Continent.” He punctuated his comments with a couple of swipes of his foil.

In reality, he had been up until nearly midnight, dueling against two footmen and his valet in an effort to regain more

of his skills. Although he had struggled at first to recover from lunges—he couldn't do them as deeply as he once could—he'd soon learned his limit and settled into a familiar rhythm he hoped he could employ against Tipton.

Titan held out his hands in an effort to calm the growing clamor in the gaming hall. "Tonight the scoring will be one point for each touch to the torso, and the winner will be whoever scores fifteen points first. If a player should leave the piste, turn his back on his opponent, or switch the hand holding his foil, I will hold up a yellow card in warning. Three warnings will result in a disqualification." He held up a black card, and several men in the audience booed their displeasure.

Titan locked gazes with Quince, one of The Lyon's Den dealers whose faro table had been removed from the floor, and the man nodded. "Gentlemen, step up to your *en-garde* lines."

Jeffrey and Tipton took their places on the piste and faced one another, their foils held vertically in front of them as silence fell over the gaming room. Daring a last glance up at the observation level, Jeffrey gave a nod to Annabelle and then winked.

He almost missed the cue from Titan to begin the play, so when Tipton attacked, he had to fall short. The ploy worked in his favor, though, for his attack caught the baron by surprise, and he gained a point when his blossom touched Tipton's midsection.

The baron attempted a quick attack, but Jeffrey was able to perform a beat, knocking off Tipton's blade and then attacking to gain another point.

"Two-nil," Titan called out, his voice barely audible above the din of the gaming hall.

Emboldened, Jeffrey continued his attacks, parrying only a few times before driving his foil into Tipton's torso over and over again.

"Ouch," the baron complained, looking to Titan for a yellow card to be displayed on his behalf. Before he

determined the referee wasn't about to make a call, Jeffrey took advantage of the opening and touched him again with his blossom.

“Nine-nil,” Titan called out, “in favor of Tidworth.”

The crowd erupted in a combination of cheers and groans as banknotes continued to be exchanged.

From the observation gallery above, Bessie Dove-Lyon watched the proceedings and grinned. “So far, it's all going to plan,” she said to no one in particular.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

A Brother's Skill Surprises

The observation gallery, The Lyon's Den

“**H**ERE YOU ARE,” Natalie said as she joined Annabelle at the railing of the observation gallery.

“Lady Natalie,” Annabelle said in surprise. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here this evening.”

The younger woman glanced over the edge of the railing before scanning the floor below. “Then I take it you haven’t spoken with your brother?” she asked.

“I have not. But then... I have not been at Burwick House most of the day,” Annabelle admitted. “Not since I hired my new lady’s maid.”

“Which one did you decide on?”

“Sanderson. She was the only one who acknowledged my son,” Annabelle said.

“She’ll be an excellent employee for you,” Natalie remarked. “I’m glad my agency could be of assistance.”

“You mentioned my brother. Did you enjoy the ride in the park with him?”

Natalie arched an auburn brow. “Oh, I did, indeed. Very much. And if you haven’t heard from him, then let me be the one to inform you I am to be your future sister-in-law,” she said, beaming in delight.

Her mouth dropping open in surprise, Annabelle startled the younger woman by wrapping her arms around her shoulders and pulling her into an embrace. “Oh, I cannot tell you how happy it makes me to hear it,” she said. She stepped back from the startled younger woman. “I think Anthony fell in love with you the moment he met you.” She glanced around. “Is he here?”

“Of course. But he’s not allowed up here in the ladies’ gallery. I had to leave him downstairs with the horde,” she said as she rolled her eyes. “When he learned you were to be the prize for tonight’s tournament, he wanted to be here. To provide protection, he said.”

Annabelle gasped. “I didn’t tell him about this,” she said. “However did he find out?”

Natalie shrugged. “We sorted it and much more this morning. He’s quite a logical man, if you can believe any of them are,” she said proudly.

A shout from below had Annabelle gasping and her attention directed to the makeshift piste. Titan held up a yellow card, which had a flurry of activity happening at the front of the gaming hall.

“Fourteen-five,” Titan called out, indicating Jeffrey had the lead.

“I don’t know how much more of this I can take,” Annabelle murmured.

“As much as you must,” Lucy said, joining the two younger women.

“Lady Natalie, may I have the honor of introducing you to my mother, Mrs. Lucy Billings?” Annabelle said.

Lucy dipped a curtsy, as did Natalie, her eyes widening in recognition of the woman’s name.

“I believe you’re acquainted with my father,” Natalie said. “The Earl of Habberly?”

If the query caught the mistress off-guard, Lucy didn't show it. "I am, my lady. Why, I first met Bertie over thirty years ago. We've only this week renewed our acquaintance," she said.

"You've made him a very happy man," Natalie remarked. "He's not been the same since Mother's death."

"That was my very first success as a matchmaker," Mrs. Dove-Lyon said as she joined the three women. "It's very good to see you, Lady Natalie." She turned her attention to the older women. "I have the good fortune of sharing an address in Cleveland Row with Lord Habberly's daughter. She has a most fashionable terrace house just down the street."

"One I won't be keeping much longer," Natalie remarked.

"Oh?" Mrs. Dove-Lyon responded. "Am I to arrange a match on your behalf next? There are a number of perfect younger men for you, my lady."

"Oh, I rather doubt that," Natalie said with a grin. "But I am to be the Baroness Covington within the month, I should think."

"My brother proposed marriage to her," Annabelle explained when the matchmaker aimed an expression of confusion in her direction.

"Well, best wishes, my lady. Here I've been led to believe Lord Habberly was about to secure my services on your behalf."

Natalie lifted her chin in defiance of the matchmaker's claim. "My father knows better than to engage in a losing battle."

Another shout from below had them turning to stare down at the piste. Titan was holding up Jeffrey's arm. "The Earl of Tidworth wins the first match and will be one of the finalists later tonight."

A collective cheer went up from the crowd below, and Annabelle aimed a grin of relief at Jeffrey.

“You can relax for a time,” Lucy said, pulling Annabelle away from the railing. The Black Widow of Whitehall had moved on to another cluster of women and was out of earshot.

“Is it true Habberly can beat Jeffrey?” Annabelle asked with worry.

“He can indeed. He probably will,” her mother said on a sigh. “Whatever happens, chin up. It will all work out,” she murmured.

“If Habberly wins, I’ll be mother-in-law *and* sister-in-law to Natalie,” Annabelle claimed.

“He’ll have to marry you for that to happen,” Lucy said, her attention on the piste. Albert was facing Viscount Marshallton, his foil in front of his face. Despite her attempt to gain his attention, he merely stared at his opponent with an expression filled with what looked like rage.

Marshallton crumbled to the piste in a dead faint.

A collective gasp sounded throughout the gaming hall followed by confusion, shouting, and booing.

“The Viscount Marshallton forfeits. The match goes to the Earl of Habberly,” Titan shouted.

Annabelle gasped at the same moment her mother tittered. “Mother,” she scolded.

“Marshallton didn’t have a hope. He was so drunk, I doubt he’ll remember anything of this evening,” Lucy said.

Titan was calling out something down below, so the two turned to listen.

“Our final match will begin in fifteen minutes. Place your bets now for either Lord Habberly or Lord Tidworth.”

From one story above looking down, the resulting movement on the main gambling floor appeared chaotic. Some men opted to return to faro or *vingt-et-un* tables to play while others sought those taking money for the final bet.

Natalie took hold of Annabelle's hand. "Come down to the main level with me. Anthony is worried about you," she said.

"You want to go down into that?" Annabelle asked in alarm.

Natalie leaned over the railing and waved. "I left him in a small gaming room, just there," she said. "He was watching a game of *vingt-et-un*. Claims never to have seen it before." She rolled her eyes as a grin lightened her face.

Annabelle followed her line of sight and gave a watery grin when she recognized her brother just beyond the door to the venue's private gaming room.

Hooking their elbows together, they made their way through the ladies' dining parlor and down the stairs to the main level. They paused before entering what once might have been a parlor where Anthony was seated at a *vingt-et-un* table, a huge mound of chips in front of him.

Natalie scoffed. "I thought you said you'd never played," she gently scolded.

"Oh, I hadn't," he replied, quickly standing to acknowledge her and his sister. "Lord Aston asked me to mind his chips while he watched the fencing matches."

Annabelle scoffed in disbelief. "How many did he leave you with?" she asked, watching him pull another pile toward him.

"Three blue ones." Anthony's eyes lit up. "It's good to see you, Annabelle. Why, I do wish you had told me you were to be the prize for tonight's tournament. I should have been your escort this evening."

Her attention going to the pile of chips, she said, "Trust me when I tell you I had no idea it would be like this. I only employed Mrs. Dove-Lyon to find me a titled husband. Had I known..." She waved a hand to indicate the melee in the main gaming hall. "I would have sought a more traditional matchmaker."

For a moment, Anthony's attention was on the pair of cards he had been dealt, and he flipped them over to reveal an ace and a ten. The dealer shoved another pile of chips in his direction, and Anthony grinned in delight.

"You won *again*?" Natalie asked in surprise.

"It's not a difficult game to play," Anthony remarked. "I keep track of what cards have been revealed, so I can sort what cards are still in the deck."

"You might consider quitting while you're ahead," Annabelle suggested, watching the dealer toss cards onto the green felt table to him and another half-dozen men lined up on one edge.

Lord Aston, carrying a drink in one hand and a betting ticket in the other, hurried up to the table. His bushy gray brows rose in shock. "Good God, man. I left you with a pittance," he said, a huge grin splitting his face. "And now I find you with a small fortune?"

"Yes, sir. I have discovered it's quite an easy game to play, but now that you're back..." He stood and indicated Lord Aston should sit.

"Oh, no, Covington." Aston reached over and plucked a handful of chips from the pile. "I'm off to play faro before the next fencing match starts. The rest are yours. Well earned, I should think."

About to put voice to a protest, Anthony watched the older man make his way through the crowd and disappear. He turned around to regard the remaining mountain of chips and realized the dealer was waiting for him to bet. He tossed a pile of chips onto the felt and turned over his cards to reveal another ace and a king.

"*Vingt-et-un* yet again," the dealer said while the rest of the players at the table marveled at Anthony's luck.

"My father's match is about to start," Natalie reminded him.

“Oh, let me see to exchanging these, and we’ll see if we can’t find a place to watch,” he replied, gathering the chips together. Natalie held out her skirts, and he tossed them into the makeshift pouch. “Where is the cashier?”

“Far corner to the left,” Natalie replied, giving Annabelle an apologetic glance. To get there, they would have to make their way around the perimeter of the larger gaming room, which had become even more crowded now that the main event was about to start.

“I think I shall go back upstairs,” Annabelle said, dipping into her reticule to pull out a mask. She had already recognized at least two gentlemen who had frequented *The Elegant Courtesan*, and she didn’t want to risk being recognized. She held it up in front of her face as she made her way back to the stairs, startled when her arm was suddenly captured, and she was pulled close to a hard body.

“Let go of—”

“It’s me,” Jeffrey whispered hoarsely. “What are you doing down here?”

“My brother and Lady Natalie are here. They’re betrothed now,” she said, relaxing a bit.

“Lady Natalie?” he repeated.

“Habberly’s daughter.”

Jeffrey paled. “Oh,” he managed to get out before Titan’s voice sounded from the other side of the gaming hall. Stiffening, he said, “I’ll come for you after it’s over. No matter what happens. Be right here, won’t you?”

“All right,” she replied. She stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. “Good luck.”

He rested his head on her forehead for a moment. “I love you,” he whispered.

Before she could respond, Jeffrey disappeared into the crowd. Unnerved by his manner—did he expect to lose?—Annabelle slowly made her way up the stairs and back to the

observation room. Nearly every woman was lined up along the edge, their gazes on the fencing match.

Titan's voice rang out, "Three, one."

Before she made it to a place from which she could watch, Titan called out, "Warning!"

"There you are," Lucy said as she hurried over to join Annabelle. "Where have you been?"

"Downstairs, with my brother and Lady Natalie. He's quite gifted at *vingt-et-un*," she replied, her gaze going to the far corner where the cashier's cage was located. Even from where she watched, she could see a woman counting out bank notes while Natalie looked on.

"Lina manages the money for Bessie," Lucy remarked, her head lifting to indicate the cashier. "No one knows what she looks like, though. Her face is always covered."

Annabelle glanced down at the mask she still held. "I can't say I blame her," she murmured.

A shout rang out from the piste. "Warning!"

The crowd hissed, and Annabelle gasped when she realized the yellow card was being held up for Jeffrey. He had left the piste; Albert's prolonged attack had forced him out of the designated area.

"That's two. One more and he'll be disqualified," Lucy said with worry.

"Why is he doing this?" Annabelle asked.

"He loves you. He wants you to be his wife," her mother replied.

"Not Jeffrey. Lord Habberly. I don't even know him. And he's old enough to be my father."

Lucy angled her head, first to one side and then to the other. "Bertie loves a good fencing match, and he knows Jeffrey is the only man that could beat him. On a good night," she explained, her attention on the action down below.

After a particularly long series of parries and thrusts, Titan called out, “Seven-four, Habberly.”

Annabelle inhaled softly. “I take it tonight is not a good night.”

Lucy turned to give her a look of sympathy. “Oh, Annabelle. Don’t fash yourself,” she said. “You should be happy knowing there are men willing to fight in front of a huge crowd to gain your hand in marriage. I know *I* would be.”

“Isn’t Lord Habberly your... your client now?”

Lucy beamed in delight. “Again, yes. He spent the night, and we had breakfast together this morning. Oh, Annabelle, it’s as if the thirty years in between hadn’t happened.”

Annabelle scoffed. “You do realize I could end up his wife?”

“Yes, darling,” Lucy replied, her attention back on the match. “Possibly.”

“Ten-seven,” Titan called out. “Warning!”

Stiffening with dread, Annabelle furrowed a brow and then heaved a sigh of relief when it was revealed Habberly had done something wrong.

The crowd’s reaction was deafening. Those taking last-minute bets couldn’t exchange notes fast enough.

“I don’t know if I can watch any longer,” Annabelle murmured. “I’m going back downstairs.” Despite her mother’s interest in the match, she knew Lucy watched her go before returning her attention to the action. She heard her clapping when Albert scored another point.

By the time Annabelle made it back to the private gaming room, Natalie and her brother had returned from the cashier’s cage. “How much did you win this evening?”

“Over two thousand pounds,” Anthony replied, his grin huge. “I told Natalie I’m going to take her on a most

wonderful wedding trip—”

“Once I have someone to fill in for me at the agency,” she interrupted.

“I’m very happy for you both,” Annabelle said, struggling to keep tears at bay. Aware her mother had joined her, she stood stock still as the sounds of cheering and booing filled the gaming hall.

“Fourteen-eleven,” Titan called out. “In favor of Habberly!”

Natalie patted her arm. “My father would make you a very good husband,” she said. “But—”

“Point! Habberly wins!” Titan shouted. The guard reached over and lifted one of Habberly’s arms into the air.

Annabelle whirled around, her gaze locking with Jeffrey’s despite the crowd separating them. He shook his head ever so slightly, which forced beads of perspiration to drip down his cheeks. His mouthed, “I love you,” was matched with her own.

The crowd suddenly parted to reveal Lord Habberly making his way to her. He still wore what he had for the match—only his shirt and breeches—and evidence of his exertions showed in how drenched both his hair and shirt were. His grin was not one of menace or retribution but rather one filled with happiness. If she hadn’t thought she was about to faint, Annabelle might have answered it with one of her own.

Instead, she dipped a deep curtsy.

When she rose, Habberly merely gave her a nod as he passed by her. He paused before lifting her mother into the air, twirling her about as his grin widened and he laughed in delight.

Annabelle blinked and stared at the spectacle, well aware others nearby did as well.

“—But he intends on marrying your mother,” Natalie finished, her eyes rolling as she watched her father’s antics.

About to ask what was happening, Annabelle couldn't when Jeffrey was suddenly there, pulling her into his arms and kissing her with abandon.

A few whoops and hollers sounded from those who paid witness, but most were returning to their games of chance or making their way to the cashier to collect their winnings.

Behind her, Annabelle heard Habberly's laughter in response to someone's chiding that he had the wrong prize.

"I wouldn't dare take Tidworth's countess from him," he roared. "He's the only decent opponent I'll have on the piste."

A round of laughter followed his pronouncement.

Albert tightened his hold on Lucy. "I did it all for you," he said, pulling her into his arms. He kissed her forehead. "Well, and to have some fun, too," he admitted. "Come, let's be on our way before Bessie comes to scold me," he added, offering his arm to escort her down the steps.

Lucy glanced back at her daughter and gave a demure wave before she placed her arm on the earl's. "Aren't you just a little bit afraid of what she'll do? You've made a public mockery of her match," she reminded him. They were down the steps and out of The Lyon's Den before Bessie Dove-Lyon appeared on the main gaming floor.

"I am not," he replied. "I paid the buy-in. She owed me, after all."

"How so?"

"I was her first matchmaking client by way of these silly contests," he reminded her. "I helped get her started. Anyway, Tidworth was supposed to win your daughter, so now he has."

Lucy grinned as she allowed him to lift her into his coach. "You haven't changed one bit, Bertie, and I love you for it."

"Good. Because you're stuck with me for the rest of your life."

Beaming in delight as the coach made its way back to Green Street, Lucy settled into his arms, a grimace replacing her grin. "I'll ring for a bath as soon as we're there."

Albert chuckled. "Your tub had better be large enough for two," he warned.

Lucy's eyes rounded, but she was soon grinning.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A Final Match Determines Two

Meanwhile, back at The Lyon's Den

“WELL, IT SEEMS as if best wishes are in order for you two,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said when Jeffrey and Annabelle finally parted. Jeffrey used a handkerchief to wipe his face and hair.

“Thank you, Mrs. Dove-Lyon,” Annabelle replied. “I don’t know how you managed to make two perfect matches on the same night. You’re a brilliant matchmaker.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s expression faltered for a moment before she beamed in delight. “Well, it was obvious from the beginning you two belonged together. Do have a good life.” She was about to move on to speak with someone else when she paused. “Oh, and if you have any influence at all over Lord Covington, might I suggest he find a different gaming hell in which to practice his skills at *vingt-et-un*?”

Annabelle glanced at Jeffrey before she said, “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Much appreciated.”

When the matchmaker had disappeared into the crowd, Jeffrey asked, “What was that all about?”

“Two thousand pounds,” Annabelle murmured.

Jeffrey’s brows rose. “Is he always that good at gambling?”

She shook her head. “Beginner’s luck.” She grinned when she realized Natalie and Anthony were watching them. “In *vingt-et-un* and in love. He and Natalie are already betrothed.” She joined them, Jeffrey in tow, and introduced them.

“Did you know you can buy a special license and be married the very next day?” Anthony asked.

Jeffrey exchanged quick glances with Annabelle. “I might have heard something to that effect.”

“Lord Habberly informed me when we walked here from Natalie’s house. I was there to ask his permission for her hand —”

“Which he did not need,” Natalie said with a roll of her eyes.

“So that’s what I’m going to do,” Anthony concluded.

“I think a quick wedding sounds perfect, don’t you, my sweet?” Jeffrey asked.

“Indeed,” Annabelle replied. “I should be happy to fill in for you if you trust me with your business for the time you’re on your wedding trip,” she offered, her attention on her future sister-in-law.

Natalie gasped. “What about *your* wedding trip?”

Jeffrey and Annabelle exchanged quick glances. “We’ll wait for your return,” he said. “I shouldn’t like to take our son away from his new situation too soon.”

“Our son?” Annabelle repeated, her manner suddenly nervous.

“Benton, yes. We’re about to bestow him with an entire regiment of soldiers and a couple of cannons. We should give him the opportunity to grow bored with them before we take him away.”

Annabelle tittered. “Are we speaking of him or of you?” she countered in a tease.

“Him. I would never grow bored playing with tin soldiers,” he claimed with a chuckle. He sighed and turned his attention to the younger couple. “If you two will excuse us, we’ll be on our way to Burwick House.”

“Of course, Lord Tidworth. Covington was about to see me to my house,” Natalie claimed.

Anthony straightened even as a blush suffused his face. “Good night, Sister, Lord Tidworth,” he said as he bowed. He held out his arm and Natalie took it before the two headed down the stairs.

Egeus stepped up, Jeffrey’s topcoat and waistcoat draped over his extended arms. “My lord.”

“Egeus,” Jeffrey acknowledged as he took the clothes. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I hope to never see you again.”

“Very good, my lord.” The guard disappeared into the crowd.

“Shall we?” Jeffrey asked as he offered his arm.

“Yes, please,” Annabelle replied, placing her arm on his.

The two headed down the stairs, pausing only to say their farewells to Titan.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A Night of Passion for All

Later, at No. 42 Green Street

“YOU NEVER DID tell me why you fought in tonight’s tournament,” Lucy whispered. Her head was cradled in the small of Albert’s shoulder, the front of her body sprawled over his. The earl had been especially enthusiastic during that evening’s lovemaking as if he had to prove himself beyond what he had done on the piste.

He tightened his hold on her. “I wanted to be sure I could do it again,” he murmured sleepily.

“Again?” she repeated.

“Win.”

“Win a wife?” she pressed.

He shook his head in the pillow. “Just win.” He opened one eye to regard her with a grin. “Feels good to know I bested another, I suppose. In doing so, I assured Tidworth gets the wife he wanted and that I get you.”

“You already had me,” Lucy said, lifting her head from his shoulder.

He chuckled softly. “But will I have you for the rest of my life?”

“Why, Bertie, what exactly are you asking?”

“For you to be my wife, of course,” he murmured.

Lucy settled her head back into his shoulder. “Is that allowed?”

He was quiet for a time, and Lucy once again lifted her head to determine if he had fallen asleep or not.

He was wide awake.

“I can’t imagine how it’s not,” he finally said. “I’m an earl. I already have my heir and a spare. I think I’m entitled to marry whomever I want at my age.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” she hedged.

Hearing the hesitancy in her voice, he huffed. “But?” he prompted.

She sighed. “I can’t imagine the peers of the realm accepting a former mistress into the *ton*,” she argued. “Even if it is you providing the protection.”

“You are the mother of a viscountess who is about to be a countess,” he countered. “And you are a grandmother to a viscount,” he added on a huff. “You’re already part of it.”

Lucy grinned. “Well, when you put it like that, then, yes, I will happily marry you.” After a moment, she asked, “Does that mean I have to give up this house?”

He chuckled. “Not at all. It does mean I’m moving in with you, though,” he replied. “Since my oldest son is going to be earl someday, he can be master of Habberly House.”

Considering his words a moment, she finally sighed and closed her eyes. “Well, I did say I wanted a man in my life.”

His response sounded as if he said it from far away. “What’s that, my sweet?”

“Nothing, darling. Go to sleep,” she whispered.

Meanwhile, at No. 12 Cleveland Row

“DO YOU SUPPOSE we’ll be doing this every night?” Anthony asked when he finally regained enough energy to lift himself from Natalie’s body so he could roll over onto the mattress.

“Is that a problem?” she countered.

“No. Not at all.”

“Then why did you ask?” She raised herself onto an elbow, which had one of her bare breasts in full view from his vantage.

“I merely wished to know your expectations of me. I want to be sure I make you happy.”

She regarded him with suspicion. “You do.”

“And if I don’t for some reason, will you... set me straight? Tell me what I’m doing wrong?”

She tittered. “I will.”

He nodded into the pillow. “Good.” When she didn’t settle back onto the bed, he asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Aren’t you going to request the same of me?”

Blinking, he considered how to respond. “I can’t imagine that ever happening,” he murmured.

A pillow collided with his chest. “Liar,” she accused.

Anthony chuckled softly as he pulled her into his arms. “Every day I wake up to see your gorgeous face and these...” He pulled one of her auburn curls until it was straight and then let go. “Makes me incandescently happy,” he finished.

“You’ve only done it once,” she argued.

He arched a brow. “Oh. Well. I suppose we’ll see if it continues then, won’t we?”

Although she appeared reluctant to agree, she finally sighed and rested her head on the small of his shoulder. “What if I want you again in the middle of the night?” she asked in a whisper.

Anthony’s responding chuckle soon became laughter. “You will make me the happiest man on the planet,” he claimed before kissing the top of her head.

Natalie tittered and finally fell asleep.

A few minutes later, a very relieved Anthony followed suit.

Earlier, at Burwick House

“IS IT ALL right that I stay the night?” Jeffrey asked as he helped Annabelle out of the Burwick coach.

“If you think I’m going to let you stay elsewhere, then we have more to discuss than our wedding plans,” Annabelle chided him. She waved to Pickerton to indicate he could park the equipage.

Jeffrey offered his arm. “I’m in need of a bath—”

“I’m about to order you one,” she assured him.

“And fresh clothes for the morning.”

“Do you honestly think I’m letting you out of my bed any time before tomorrow’s dinner?”

Jeffrey guffawed. “Of course not. What was I thinking?” he replied happily. The front door opened, and they hurried in.

As they headed for the stairs, Annabelle called out, “Dobbs, we need hot water brought up to my bathing chamber, and Lord Tidworth’s clothes will need laundering in the morning.”

“I’ll see to the bath water straight away, but my lady, a note was delivered while you were out,” Dobbs said before they had climbed the first step. “Earlier this afternoon.”

Annabelle paused and turned to retrieve the folded paper from the butler. “Is Benton in his room?” she asked, suddenly remembering he had been assigned the master suite.

“Mrs. Thompkins thought it best he sleeps in the nursery for a few weeks. At least until his lordship is tall enough to climb *onto* the bed,” Dobbs replied. “She feared if he fell out of bed, it would be a long way down. Should I have him moved?”

Jeffrey and Annabelle exchanged quick glances. “The nursery will be fine for now. I should let you know after some

repairs are completed, his lordship and I will be joining my new husband at Tidworth House.”

Dobbs’ brows lifted, his usual bland expression momentarily uncertain. “Very good, my lady.”

“If you could make the move with them, it would be much appreciated,” Jefferey said. “My butler is of an age to be pensioned, and although we could employ Lady Natalie’s agency to find us a new one, I would much rather have you run the household.”

“I’ll certainly understand if you prefer staying with Burwick House,” Annabelle remarked before Dobbs could respond. “Lady Natalie and my brother are to be wed in a couple of days, so I don’t wish to burden her with my staffing needs.”

Dobbs arched his graying brows in surprise. “Of course, my lord, my lady. Thank you. I... I shall be honored to take on the Tidworth household.”

“I’m so relieved to hear it.” Annabelle popped the wax seal off the note and opened the letter, her gaze immediately going to the bottom. “It’s from Lord Habberly,” she said in surprise. “When exactly did this arrive?”

“Sometime this afternoon, ma’am. One of the footmen answered the door while I was detained. He neglected to mention he had put it in the study.”

“Habberly must have written it earlier today,” Jeffrey reasoned.

Annabelle could feel the heat of her blush as she read the masculine scrawl. “Oh, dear,” she said before she turned and hurried up the stairs.

“What does it say?” Jeffrey asked, following her as quickly as he could manage.

“It’s a warning not to engage you in any ‘strenuous activities prior to the fencing match’,” she quoted.

“What?”

She tittered as she topped the second flight of stairs. “He says if I do, he shall best you handily in the tournament.”

Jeffrey scoffed. “Bastard.”

“He was right, though,” she said, opening the door to her bedchamber. She waved for him to join her. “You let me have my way with you, and—”

“I did no such thing,” he argued. “As I recall, it was *I* who had my way with *you*.” He pulled her into his arms.

“Oh, I remember now,” she teased, kissing him for a moment. “You had me at quite a disadvantage.”

“How so?” He nipped one of her earlobes, and she gasped.

“Your house. Your bedchamber. Your bed.” She rid herself of her gloves and started undoing his topcoat buttons.

“They’re all yours now,” he countered, pushing her sleeves down her arms, trapping them against her sides while he turned her around to undo the few fastenings at her back.

She backed into him and felt the hard ridge of his erection through her gown. “Where are you going to sleep?” she asked, attempting to suppress a giggle.

“Right next to you, in whatever bed you’re in,” he murmured, his lips trailing along the nape of her neck and then down the bumps of her spine as he pushed the gown, stays, and chemise farther down her body.

When the fabric had finally puddled on the floor, he turned her around and knelt before her, kissing her belly. When he glanced up to admire the underside of her generous breasts, he saw her head was tilted back, and her breathing had quickened. Her hands gripped his shoulders as if she needed them for support. Perhaps she did, for when he slipped a finger down through her dark curls to the folds protecting her womanhood, she tightened her hold on him.

He didn’t have to request she spread her legs farther apart when she did it of her own accord. He replaced his finger with his thumb, and gently pressed her swollen nubbin, rubbing

circles around it until he heard her quiet sobs and his thumb was coated with her ambrosia.

“You’ve never done this to me before,” she managed to say before she was forced to inhale sharply.

“I fear once I’m on a bed, I’ll pass out,” he countered, finally coming to his feet. He placed his hands on either side of her waist and lifted her until her feet had cleared the ring of clothing. He backed her up to the edge of the bed. “Lie down,” he whispered, undoing the placket of his breeches.

Annabelle did his bidding, raising her legs so her ankles rested on his shoulders.

This she had done with him before.

When his manhood sprang out from his breeches, he pushed it into her in a single thrust and cursed quietly as he held onto her knees.

“This is not my favorite way of making love to you,” he murmured as he thrust into her over and over.

“It’s not?” she asked in surprise.

He shook his head. “But I love the view.”

Annabelle glanced down the front of her body, realizing he referred to how her breasts bobbed with his every thrust. When he slid his hands down to her thighs to grip the sides of her hips, she knew he was near his release. She experienced her own when his thumb moved to where their two bodies were joined, setting off a series of orgasms that left her breathless and so satiated that she could barely move.

Jeffrey ceased his thrusting and wavered a moment before his head dropped back and he loudly groaned.

When he was spent, he slowly fell forward, forcing Annabelle to wrap her legs around his back and guide him down to the front of her body.

She kissed his forehead. “It was better than I remember,” she murmured.

“For me as well,” he whispered. He placed a hand along the side of her face. “I suppose because you’re mine now,” he added on a sigh. “Or you will be in a day or so.”

“I was yours the moment you proposed marriage.”

He made a guttural sound in his throat. “For about two minutes earlier tonight, I thought I’d lost you. I thought Habberly had tricked me. That he was really going to claim you despite his assurances he only wanted your mother,” he whispered.

Annabelle gave a start. “You mean... you knew? Ahead of time?” she asked in surprise.

He winced. “I wasn’t positive, but I couldn’t imagine why he would join the tournament unless he really wanted to win a wife. Pay a five-thousand-pound buy-in?” He scoffed. “Turns out, all he wanted was to win.”

“A rather expensive game of chance,” she reasoned.

“Indeed. But he did it in front of a huge crowd. One larger than those at Angelo’s, so now he can claim his title as the best fencer in London,” he explained.

“You don’t mind?”

Jeffrey allowed a long sigh. “No. I’m younger than he. I have yet to return to my true fighting form. I’ll be ready when the opportunity arises again,” he vowed.

She drew a finger along the edge of his cheek. “Not at The Lyon’s Den, though,” she warned.

He shook his head. “I’m never going in there again,” he promised. “No, I meant at Angelo’s. Unlike him, I don’t need to win in front of a large crowd.”

“I’m relieved to hear it,” she murmured.

“I only need to win for you.”

“Well, that and... you have to take a bath,” she said with a wince.

Jeffrey screwed up his face in a grimace. “Only if you can help get me out of it when I’m done,” he warned sleepily.

“I shall try,” she replied. He reluctantly lifted himself from her body and sat on the edge of the bed to remove the rest of his clothes.

She watched in fascination as, naked, he made his way into the bathing chamber. Giggled when she heard his moans of relief as he settled into the hot water. And finally joined him in the tub when she heard his soft snores.

She knew the perfect way to awaken him.



CHAPTER THIRTY

Epilogue

Six years later, Tidworth House parlor

WHEN THE LUNCHEON plates had been removed in favor of a tea tray with a cake, Benton, Viscount Burwick, beamed in delight. “You remembered,” he said with a chuckle, stepping away from the huge table upon which dozens of tin soldiers and a line of cannons were displayed to move closer to the tea tray. He snagged a biscuit.

“Of course, I remembered your birthday,” Annabelle responded with a scoff. “How could I not?”

“You always get my age wrong,” Benton argued. “I’m twelve now. Not eleven.”

Leaning over the table, Jeffrey glanced at Annabelle, a knowing grin touching his lips. As much as Annabelle had tried to keep it a secret, he had determined long ago Benton Hutchins was really his son and not Burwick’s.

Besides their blond hair, matching noses, and similar brow lines, the two shared a birthmark on the outside of their knees. He had first noticed it at Mr. Garth’s shop on Jermyn Street when Benton was being measured for his first pair of long pants.

The same day he had recognized Annabelle and begun the pursuit to make her his wife.

Benton’s younger brother, James, barely five, took the opportunity to poke his pudgy finger into the sugar icing

covering the cake.

“James,” Jeffrey gently scolded, pulling his own finger away from the cake to lick the icing from his digit. “You’ll have to eat that piece now.”

The boy grinned as if it had been his plan all along, his appearance an exact match to how Benton had looked on the day of his fifth—no, sixth—birthday. The day he had received a box of tin soldiers, two cannons, and some cannonballs.

The entire set and many more were standing in long lines on a huge table on the other side of the parlor. Although both Benton and James enjoyed playing with the tin soldiers, their five-year-old sister, and James’ twin, Lady Margery, insisted she be included in the strategies of warfare.

Benton didn’t mind overmuch, since she displayed an uncanny knack for coming up with strategies resulting in her side—and Benton’s—winning when they played against their father and James.

“How does she know to do that?” Benton asked, marveling at how she arranged her regiment. The day was rainy, forcing them to celebrate his birthday indoors.

“She’s a girl, son. They are smarter than we are,” Jeffrey replied, setting his own line of soldiers in a defensive position.

“Really?” Benton asked in disbelief.

His uncle, Anthony, bending over the other side of the table to set up his own army, chuckled. “Believe it, or suffer the consequences, young man.”

“I suppose I thought that about my governess when I was younger,” he murmured.

Annabelle grinned. “I recall you once informing me you planned to marry Miss Thompkins.”

Benton’s mouth dropped open. “I liked her, but I don’t remember saying *that*,” he claimed.

“It matters not,” Natalie said, tittering. She held her second babe in her arms, the girl soundly sleeping despite the surrounding chaos. “For Miss Thompkins is no longer unattached,” she announced happily.

“Oh?” Annabelle asked with interest. The servant had left the Tidworth household upon Benton’s eighth birthday when a tutor began seeing to his education.

Besides finding the tutor through her agency, Natalie had arranged a new situation for the governess in a nearby Mayfair townhouse where she was in charge of twin girls. “She married a butler.”

Benton struck his chest with a fist. “I’ve been spurned for a butler,” he said before he chuckled. He turned his attention to his mother. “Will Grandmother and Grandfather be joining us for cake?”

Annabelle and Natalie exchanged quick glances. “I’m afraid not, darling. Habberly has taken Grandmother Lucy to Derbyshire for their wedding anniversary. He sent his regards and a twenty-pound banknote for you, though. It’s in the study.”

“He sent blunt?” Natalie asked in surprise.

Chuckling softly, Anthony leaned over and kissed her forehead before taking the seat next to her. “Your father is a master when it comes to investments,” he murmured. “I can only hope one of these two little monsters will have inherited some of his—and your—business acumen.”

Natalie rolled her eyes. “Edward won’t need it,” she murmured, referring to the sleepy boy sitting with Annabelle. “He’ll inherit a barony. But I intend to educate Annie.”

“Oh, I know you do,” he replied. “I shan’t attempt to convince you otherwise. I could use a bit of help at the museum,” he added.

Benton listened intently. He had never questioned why it was his aunt who had a business concern. His gaze fell on his younger sister. “Margery is very clever,” he commented.

On one of the nearby settees, Annabelle grinned as she pulled her older nephew onto her lap. He had finally fallen asleep after finishing his luncheon. “She merely watches everything you do and strives to do it better,” she claimed, her attention suddenly captured by her husband. He was pointing to a pasteboard box. “Would you like to open the present your father bought for you for your birthday?”

Benton gasped. “May I?”

Jeffrey stepped away from the diorama displaying his last battle as a lieutenant colonel in the British Army and pulled a pasteboard box from beneath an end table. “I thought to give you something different this year,” he said, handing the box to Benton.

His brows furrowing the same way they did on Jeffrey when he was vexed, Benton pulled the lid from the rectangular box. Inside were more flats—tin soldiers—but they were painted to be Roman Centurions. “We can recreate the ancient battles,” Benton said in awe.

“Only if you have the opposing side’s soldiers,” Anthony said, retrieving a similar box from a shelf. He handed it to Benton.

Pulling the lid from the second box, Benton’s eyes rounded. “Greek soldiers?” he asked in awe.

“Well, Carthaginians, I think,” Anthony replied. He grinned as Benton examined the painted flats.

“Thank you, Uncle Anthony.”

“You’re welcome. We can probably start a new battle over here on the card table—”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Annabelle argued. “Some of us were planning to play cards after we finish the cake. I intend to beat you at *vingt-et-un* if it’s the last thing I do.” Although he claimed he didn’t gamble at men’s clubs, he was still rather skilled at the card game.

Anthony furrowed a brow, his gaze going to his wife.

She gave him a quelling glance. “There’s plenty of room on the big map to wage your war,” she gently chided. “But before you start, it’s my turn to give my nephew a gift.”

Several turned to regard her with startlement, including Anthony. “Benton, I’ve arranged for you to have your very own valet starting tomorrow morning,” she announced.

Benton grinned and said, “Thank you, Aunt Natalie.” He glanced over at his father.

Jeffrey was in the middle of examining one of the Greek soldiers but paused at hearing Natalie’s announcement. “My valet will be relieved to hear it,” he claimed. “I think he’s had quite enough of lengthening your breeches, young man.”

Having seen to dressing the viscount since he was ten, Jeffrey’s valet was also the only other person in Tidworth House who knew Benton had a birthmark matching Jeffrey’s. When he made mention of it one morning, Jeffrey pretended nonchalance. *They’re rather common, or so I’ve been told.* Jeffrey had decided long ago he would keep his parentage of the viscount a secret. If Benton hadn’t sorted it on his own by the time Jeffrey was on his deathbed, he might tell him then.

After all, he had his heir and a precocious daughter, but most importantly, he had his lady.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Author Notes

Tin soldiers

PRIOR TO 1878 and Britain's manufacture of three-dimensional metal soldiers made in molds, tin soldiers were flat metal cutouts, hand-painted and mounted on oval bases which allowed them to stand. Brothers Johann Gottfried and Johann Georg Hilpert were the first to mass-produce tin soldiers, their female painters applying a single color of paint on a figurine as it was passed around the workshop. "Flats" were also produced in The Netherlands.

About the Author

A self-described nerd and student of history, Linda Rae spent many years as a technical writer specializing in 3D graphics workstations, software and 3D animation (her movie credits include SHREK and SHREK 2). Getting lost in the rabbit holes of research has resulted in historical romances set in the Regency-era as well as Ancient Greece.

A fan of action-adventure movies, she can frequently be found at the local cinema. Although she no longer has any fish, she follows the San Jose Sharks. She is a member of Novelists, Inc. (NINC) and makes her home in Cody, Wyoming. See her upcoming books on her website: www.lindaraesande.com.