

The Duke's Fake Bride



Cobalt Fairy

THE DUKE'S FAKE BRIDE

A HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL



COBALT FAIRY



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ABOUT THE BOOK

“When he touches me, I forget that everything is a lie.”

His father’s will states it clearly: whoever marries first gets to keep the estate. And Duke Owen is not about to lose against his gambling brother. Luckily, the most tempting minx falls right into his arms. And ironically enough, she needs his help.

Making a match is impossible for a shy wallflower like Margaret. Until she is saved by a ravishing duke whose aid comes at a great cost: a fake engagement.

Their arrangement never included Owen hungrily claiming her lips. Yet as the duke’s brother starts lurking over them, Margaret must make a choice: reveal the truth or marry a man who can never love her...

CHAPTER 1



London, England, Spring 1812

“*T*hey speak from beyond the grave,” the solicitor said, holding the will in his hand.

Owen Neal shuddered. His father had been a formidable force in life, and with the reading of his will, it seemed he was to continue his dominance from the afterlife. He glanced at his younger brother, Aaron, who sat stiffly next to him, poised with anticipation as to what might be his, and what might not be.

The matter of the title had been simple enough. As the eldest, Owen had inherited the dukedom immediately after his father’s death, but the will itself was another matter.

“Is all in order, Mr. Landsdowne?” Owen asked.

The solicitor looked at him over his half-moon spectacles and sighed. His firm, Landsdowne and Crippen, had acted as solicitors for the Dukes of

Repington for over a century, and Owen knew Mr. Landsdowne, like so many others, had often found himself on the end of his father's forked tongue.

"Your father made sure of it, in his own inimitable way," the solicitor replied.

"Just tell us what it says, Mr. Landsdowne. I doubt there are any surprises. Owen gets it all, doesn't he? The title, the estate, the income—everything. He's left me with nothing. Ever the second son," Aaron snapped.

Owen rolled his eyes. He and his younger brother had never seen eye to eye. Their life had been spent in constant competition, encouraged by their father, who had liked to play the pair off against one another. The time of birth gave Owen the advantage, and for that, his brother resented him at every turn.

"Don't be so surprised, Aaron. You know how it works," Owen replied, impatiently.

He had been abroad when his father had died, making an idle tour of the Italian peninsula, receiving the message in Florence, where he had spent the winter. Returning to England had not been his choice, but the affairs of the estate awaited him, and whilst he had shed no tears for his father, his sense of duty had prevailed.

The dukedom was one of the oldest in England, a noble name, requiring a dutiful hand, and Owen had not been cowed by his responsibility, even as dealing with his brother had proved tiresome.

“I take solace in knowing he despised us both, just as we despised him. In that, we can agree,” Aaron scoffed.

Owen shook his head. The reading of the will was a mere formality. The title had passed to him, and he was confident as to what he would do with it. The Duke of Repington had certain responsibilities at Court and in Parliament, but Owen hoped to leave the day-to-day running of the estate in the hands of an agent. He had the ambition to continue his travels, perhaps venturing as far as the Orient or the New World.

“As I say, gentlemen, they speak from beyond the grave. That’s the great privilege, and burden, of reading a will,” Mr. Landsdowne continued.

“Oh, just get on with it,” Aaron snapped, banging his fist down on the solicitor’s desk.

Mr. Landsdowne’s sense of theater was lost, and he furrowed his brow, nodding, as he shuffled the papers in his hand. “Very well. The terms are simple. The title passes to Lord Owen—His Grace, the Duke of Repington,” he said.

Aaron groaned. “You dragged me all the way to London to hear what I’ve known since I was old enough to understand *he* gets everything. Haven’t I always known that? Haven’t I always been the spare to the heir?” He turned to Owen with an angry expression on his face.

“And haven’t hundreds before us known the same, Aaron? It’s not my fault I was born first, is it?” Owen snapped back.

The two brothers had always argued like this. Their father would encourage it, baiting them into arguments over inheritance.

“If it was up to me, I’d let you both fight it out—prove yourself worthy of the title,” their father would say, referencing the ancient world, where such rights were not always so clearly defined, and brotherly rivalries could lead to the spilling of blood.

“Bah! You’ve always lauded it over me, Owen. I’m sure you’re enjoying every moment of this. Watching me sit here in humiliation. What am I to do now? Be the younger brother of a duke? I’m not cut out for the Militia or the Navy, and I’d be a poor excuse for a clergyman. The worst sort, in fact—the bitter sort. You can always tell the younger brothers amongst the clergy. Well, what next? Are you going to give me an income?”

Aaron paused in his tirade, and the solicitor cleared his throat once again. “That’s not the full extent of the will, gentlemen,” he reminded them.

Aaron turned to him angrily. “Oh, am I to be tossed a bone, Mr. Landsdowne? Are you going to tell me that my father left me those hideous paintings by Zurbaran? What am I to do with them? Build a dwelling for myself out of pictures of the Virgin and Crucifixion? Hidden away behind gilt frames? I always hated those paintings—the expressions on the faces, the pitiful gestures, the—” he retorted, but now it was the solicitor who banged his fist down angrily on the desk, determined, it seemed, to regain authority in his own domain.

“Not paintings, Lord Aaron,” Mr. Landsdowne said, glaring at Aaron, who

fell silent.

“Please continue, Mr. Landsdowne,” Owen urged.

The solicitor nodded. “Thank you, Your Grace. Your father did leave *you* the title. He had no choice in the matter. Ancient convention gives the title to the eldest male heir. But as for the bulk of your father’s fortune... well, a most interesting clause was added to his will, and only recently, in fact. I was the witness to it.”

Owen glanced at his brother, who was now looking at the solicitor with intense interest. This was what Owen had feared, and it did not surprise him to think their father had played a final card against them.

“And what is it, Mr. Landsdowne?” Owen asked as the solicitor shuffled his papers again.

“Well, it’s quite simple, and quite strange, too. Your father leaves the bulk of his fortune to the brother who marries first,” the solicitor answered.

Owen stared at him in astonishment. It was extraordinary. Their father had never once encouraged either of them to marry, nor had he ever intimated such a clause. It was utterly bizarre, and both Owen and Aaron looked at one another in complete surprise.

“Marry first? You mean... it’s a race to the altar?” Aaron asked.

The solicitor nodded again. “The woman in question should make a free choice in the matter, of course. But yes, it’s a simple yet extremely odd clause. The brother who marries first receives the bulk of the inheritance. Lord Owen—His Grace has the title and rights to the estate, but most of your father’s fortune was tied up in business interests—imports, exports, that sort of thing. Whoever marries first receives the lion’s share of the fortune,” he explained, holding out the will for Owen and Aaron to examine for themselves.

Owen was in a state of shock, even as he felt angry with himself for not having anticipated such a move. This was the final playoff. The late Duke had always pitted the two brothers against one another, and now he was doing it again.

Neither Owen nor Aaron had given any thought to marriage. Aaron was something of a rake, always on the arm of a different woman, and Owen himself was hardly ready to settle down. He had enjoyed many lingering affairs across Europe and could claim to have broken many hearts. But as for marriage...

He had never spent more than a single night with any woman he had seduced, and there had been *many* seductions.

“But neither of us is betrothed,” Owen said, sitting back and shaking his head in disbelief.

“Then it’s a race, isn’t it, Brother? Actually, I’m rather pleased about it. It goes to show he hated us both on equal terms, the old bugger,” Aaron laughed as he rose to his feet.

“Where are you going?” Owen asked, taking the will from Mr. Landsdowne and reading his father’s words all over again.

“It’s a race, isn’t it? I’m going to find a wife,” Aaron replied, waving his hand dismissively and laughing again.

“It can’t just be a marriage of convenience, Lord Aaron,” the solicitor warned.

Aaron turned to him curiously and narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, it has to be a marriage of mutual satisfaction—love.”

“I’m sure any woman could love a man for the promise of money, and what a lot of money there’ll be. Well, good luck, Brother. I wish you well in your search,” Aaron drawled, and smiling to himself, he left the solicitor’s office, even as Owen sat back in his chair and shook his head.

Owen could not believe their father’s extraordinary dictate, even as he knew it was entirely in keeping with his character. The solicitor looked at him sympathetically.

“But... is it legally binding, Mr. Landsdowne? Isn’t there something you can do about it?” Owen asked.

The solicitor shook his head. “I witnessed it myself, Your Grace. Your father

was entirely within his rights to place such a clause on the inheritance. As I explained, the title goes to you, but the material goods were his to dispose of as he saw fit. I admit, it's unusual, but your father was an unusual man, wasn't he?"

Owen nodded. He could imagine the smile on his father's face as he bound the will with his signature. His father had delighted in driving a wedge between his sons, and this was the ultimate example of doing so. They were pitted against one another, and Owen knew his brother would go to any lengths to secure a match, by legitimate or illegitimate means.

"He was, Mr. Landsdowne. I don't know what he expected us to do," Owen said.

The solicitor sighed and shook his head again. "He treated the whole thing with... humor, Your Grace. I think he was somewhat delighted at the thought of the two of you head-to-head in battle. But I'd like to remind you, Your Grace, the marriage *has* to be legitimate. It can't be a marriage of convenience."

Owen nodded. "And how would it be known if it wasn't?" he asked.

"Because your father added a further clause—a separation would forfeit the money. It would revert to the other brother," the solicitor answered.

Owen rolled his eyes.

His father was a shrewd man—cold and calculating. He had thought it all through, taking evident delight in his plan, which had no doubt brought him satisfaction on his deathbed.

“Well, it seems that I must hurry in my task,” he murmured.

The solicitor cleared his throat. “There’s something else, too, Your Grace, though I fear I’m betraying a trust in telling you,” he added, looking suddenly uncomfortable.

Owen groaned, wondering what fresh games were to come from beyond the grave.

“I wouldn’t worry about betraying my father’s trust, Mr. Landsdowne,” he said, but the solicitor shook his head and sighed.

“It’s not that, Your Grace. It’s your brother. He’s fallen into substantial debts. I tell you this because they’ve already impacted the inheritance. Your father made several payments in Lord Aaron’s favor before he died, but merely enough to satisfy his creditors as to the interest. No, the bulk of Lord Aaron’s debts remain, and should he be the one to inherit your father’s fortune, they’ll swallow up everything. You’ll both be penniless.”

Owen clenched his fists angrily. Aaron was nothing but a rake. He knew his brother spent money freely, but his years on the continent had distanced him from the facts, and now it seemed the choice was stark—marry, or lose everything to a brother who, himself, would lose it in turn.

“Thank you, Mr. Landsdowne. I’m grateful to you for betraying that trust,” Owen replied, rising to his feet.

“If I can be of any further service to you, Your Grace, please don’t hesitate to contact me. For what it’s worth, I don’t believe your father was right to pit the two of you against one another. I advised him against it, but... well, you know what he was like.”

Owen nodded. He knew precisely what his father was like, and having shed no tears at the news of the old Duke’s death, he knew he would shed no tears now either.

“Yes, Mr. Landsdowne, I know just what he was like, and your words today have only proved it further. Good day to you.”

Owen turned on his heel and marched out of the solicitor’s office, still unable to believe the task ahead of him, and wondering who would be victorious in the race to the altar.

CHAPTER 2



“We’re going to help you, Margaret,” Anne, said as she and her sisters rode together in a carriage towards the home of the Slatterlys.

Lady Slatterly was holding a ball, and Margaret had reluctantly agreed to accompany her sisters there, even as she would far rather have remained at home with her books.

“Oh, but I’m not like you, Anne. I shy away from all this sort of thing. I don’t enjoy balls. I find them... so awkward. Or maybe it’s just me,” Margaret replied, sighing at the thought of another ball at which she would be left on the wall, and fail to make an impression—apart from a bad one—on the ton.

“Yes, we’ll help you, Margaret,” Hannah, their oldest sister, affirmed.

“But last time was a disaster,” Margaret protested, thinking back to the opening ball of the Season, where she had danced only the sympathy dances and spent most of the time on the wall.

Her sisters exchanged glances across the carriage, and Anne tutted.

“Oh, Margaret, don’t think about that. It’s behind you. An embarrassing opening leads to a grand finale. Isn’t that what they say on the stage?” Hannah asked.

Margaret rolled her eyes. It was easy for her sisters, for they no longer had to worry about making the right impression. Hannah was twenty-seven years old and married to the Marquess of Pemberton. She had two beautiful children—Louisa and Talbot—and was one of the belles of London Society.

Anne, too, had married well. She was the Countess of Weston and was expecting her first child in a matter of months. Only Margaret remained unwed. The younger sister ever fated to live in the shadow of her two sisters.

Margaret was nothing like them. She preferred books to looks and had never shown any interest in balls or the trappings of society. She was writing a novel and enjoyed playing the pianoforte. She was a solitary creature, and the thought of an evening spent in the company of the ton filled her with dread.

“I’m not sure—” Margaret began.

“Really, Margaret, you make every excuse, and yet—oh, think of Mother and Father. They only want what’s best for you. A happy match. You’ve always got an excuse for running away!” Anne exclaimed, her face turning red as she pulled out her fan and flapped at herself, the carriage jolting as she did so.

Margaret sighed. She knew her sisters wanted what was best for her, as did her parents, the Earl and Countess of Dunne. She had grown up surrounded by love, but in her looks, her demeanor, and her outward appearances, she had always felt herself second best to her pretty, vivacious, effortlessly popular sisters.

When they walked into a ballroom, their allure was clear—heads turned, gentlemen bowed, and offers to dance were made in abundance. Even marriage and childbirth had not diminished their attractiveness, whilst Margaret felt herself lagging significantly behind. Her maid, Betty, had tried her best with Margaret’s hair, and her sisters had picked out a pretty dress for her to wear. But Margaret could not help but think of herself as second best—mutton dressed as lamb.

“I don’t, Anne. But I’m not like you, am I? I’ve never been like either of you,” Margaret retorted.

“And that’s why we’re going to help you, Margaret. You need guidance in these matters,” Hannah replied as the carriage pulled up in front of a grand townhouse—the home of Lord and Lady Slatterly.

Margaret’s invitation had come as a result of her mother. She and Lady Slatterly were old friends, and as the three sisters climbed out of the carriage, that of their parents pulled up behind.

“What a terribly bumpy ride,” Lady Dunne huffed, offering Margaret her arm.

Hannah and Anne's husbands had not accompanied them that evening, for both Hannah and Anne were spending some time at their parents' home, where Anne was to convalesce during her pregnancy. She was something of a hypochondriac, and Margaret had been kept busy running errands for her sister and keeping her company in the drawing room.

"Come now, Anne. You shouldn't be on your feet for long," Lord Dunne advised, and the family made their way inside.

They were greeted by a steward, who announced them into the ballroom.

"The Earl and Countess of Dunne, accompanied by their daughters, the Marchioness of Pemberton, the Countess of Weston, and the Lady Margaret Colborne," he boomed.

The ballroom was opulent, decorated lavishly with fronds in large pots, and ivy trailing around the pillars. Musicians were playing at the far end, and a refreshment table was laden with dainty cakes and savories, and, at the center, an enormous glass bowl, filled with punch. The room was already busy with fashionably dressed men and women, feathered fascinators vying for height, and hems of dresses trailing across the floor.

"Ruth, how wonderful to see you," a woman dressed in a flowing peach gown exclaimed, gushing at Margaret's mother, who embraced her with a kiss.

This was Lady Slatterly, and she fawned over Hannah and Anne, commenting on Anne's prominence, the baby being the talk of the ton.

“I’m very blessed, Lady Slatterly, though... oh, it does make me rather... overcome at times,” Anne admitted, fanning herself as Lady Slatterly called for a chair to be brought.

“Oh, my dear, you must sit down.” Lady Slatterly turned to a footman. “Bring some refreshments,” she called.

Margaret was ignored. She was not an object of interest—not for Lady Slatterly or anyone else. A waltz had begun, and couples twirled and whirled amidst the throng, laughing with one another and exchanging smiles. Margaret sighed. It was just the same as it had been at the last ball—as though she was not even there.

“Come and get some punch, Margaret,” Hannah said, taking her by the arm.

They passed several groups of women tittering behind their fans, and Margaret knew they were passing judgment on her. There was the ugly sister, the one who could not carry off her dress, who looked frumpy and out of place, the one whom no one would dance with.

“I wish I hadn’t come,” Margaret whispered, shaking her head.

“Oh, you’re only saying that to be a killjoy, Margaret. These things always take a while to get started. It’s only the second dance. Have a glass of punch,” Hannah said, helping herself from the punch bowl.

Margaret took a sip of the drink and grimaced. It was far too strong, and she made a face, stepping to one side and watching as Anne was helped to the side of the room.

“She really does make a show of being pregnant,” Hannah observed, and Margaret smiled.

Anne was fanning herself as their mother held her hand.

“I think she secretly enjoys it—her hot flushes, as she calls them,” Margaret replied.

Hannah rolled her eyes. “They get tiresome after a while. I gave birth to two children, and I was never like that. Still, if she’s happy—and Jason dotes on her, of course,” she said, shaking her head.

Jason was the Earl of Weston, having inherited the title at a young age. He was devoted to Anne, and she to him, whilst Hannah’s husband, Sylvester, the Marquess of Pemberton, had a more stoical attitude. Nevertheless, there was no doubting the sincerity of their love, and Margaret was glad her sisters had found the happiness they deserved. As for her, she would gladly live out the rest of her life as a spinster, even as she knew her parents—and her sisters—would never allow it.

“And Sylvester dotes on you, in his own way. Didn’t he send you a hundred red roses just the other day?” Margaret asked.

Hannah smiled. “He did, yes, by way of apology for being away on business for a month.” She snorted. “Business? He was up in Scotland with the Earl of Argyll, stalking and fishing. The children missed him terribly. But you’re right, it was a sweet thing to do. Come along, I think Anne’s calmed down now.” She beckoned Margaret to follow her.

Their mother was fussing over Anne, who had now been supplied with a plate of dainty cakes and was eating them with gusto.

“Eating for two,” she said, smiling at Margaret and Hannah, who both laughed.

“That’s not quite how it works,” Hannah replied, just as the musicians struck up another waltz.

Margaret looked around her and sighed. Other women were being hurried from the wall, laughing and giggling as they clutched at the hands of the young gentlemen who had asked them to dance.

“I think I’ll go to the powder room,” Margaret said, but Hannah caught her arm.

“You’re not going to hide in there. That’s cheating. Too many women hide in powder rooms. No, you’re going to stand here and let a man approach you.”

Margaret sighed again. She *had* planned to hide herself in the powder room for as long as possible. It was the only place to get away from the insistent

attentions of her sisters, both of whom had guessed her intentions.

“But... what if no one does?” she asked.

Hannah tutted. “You aren’t giving them a chance, Margaret. If you hide away, no one’s going to ask you to dance. You’ll be a self-fulfilling prophecy,” she pointed out, still holding Margaret’s arm as she spoke.

Margaret had no choice but to remain, looking nervously around her, even as several men appeared to be prowling the periphery. As was always the case on these sorts of occasions, there were more men than women in attendance. The balance of power was tipped in her favor, but there was no doubting the quality of the candidates remaining.

The prettiest young ladies were dancing with the most handsome young men—ever had it been so. And those remaining could consider themselves well matched, too, in terms of looks, even as character was harder to define.

“But who am I to dance with?” Margaret asked.

Hannah raised her eyebrows. “Well, it seems you’ve caught the attention of one person, at least,” she said, nodding her head as Margaret turned to find a short, rotund man wearing an ill-fitting wig and a dirty frock coat eyeing her.

She shuddered, turning back to her sister, even as the man approached.

“Good evening, My Lady,” he said in a high-pitched voice, touching her arm, so as to draw her attention.

Turning, Margaret found him looking up at her expectantly. At close proximity, he smelled of mothballs, and his face was poorly shaven and pockmarked.

“Good... evening, My Lord,” she uttered as the man held out his hand.

“The Baron of Meadowcroft,” he said by way of introduction.

Margaret took his hand and nodded graciously. “Lady Margaret Colborne,” she replied, and the man’s eyes lit up.

“Ah, yes, of course. I recognize your sisters,” he said, nodding to Hannah and Anne.

It was always the same. Margaret’s sisters were the ones to be recognized, and Margaret herself was an afterthought. She would not have minded this—her sisters were different—but forced into the view of Society, Margaret could only feel she was second best.

“I’m sure you do, Lord Meadowcroft.”

“I thought you might like to dance with me. You’re standing here all alone,” the Baron noted, as though it was Margaret’s fault for being alone.

Margaret was about to reply, but Hannah interrupted her.

“She’d be delighted, Lord Meadowcroft,” she said, pushing Margaret forward and taking her punch glass from her.

“Hannah, I…” Margaret hissed, but it was too late, and Lord Meadowcroft’s hand had already closed tightly around hers.

“Come, My Lady. A dance will do you good,” he said as they stepped into the throng.

Margaret did not care for dancing. She found it awkward and was forever stepping on other people’s toes. Lord Meadowcroft was shorter than her, and he found it difficult to lead, so that as they danced—or rather moved ungracefully back and forth—Margaret almost lost her balance on several occasions.

“I’m really quite tired already,” Margaret said, trying desperately to think of an excuse to step back and return to her sisters and mother.

“Nonsense, you’re quite all right with me,” Lord Meadowcroft insisted, drawing her closer into his embrace.

His breath was unpleasant, his eyes were leering, and his hands were running down the small of her back. It made Margaret shudder, even as she tried to

keep him at a distance.

“I really think... I feel a little faint,” she said, stepping back, as the Baron clung to her.

“A little refreshment, perhaps,” he suggested. Taking her hand, he led her towards the refreshments table.

“I need to go to the powder room,” Margaret claimed as he handed her a glass of punch.

“No, my dear. Come with me to the terrace. We’ll look at the setting sun together. Wouldn’t you like that? Then we could walk in the shrubbery,” he said, running his tongue over his stained teeth and smiling unpleasantly at her.

“I really do need to go to the powder room,” Margaret maintained, pulling away from him and hurrying off across the room.

But to her horror, the Baron pursued her. It was clear he would not take no for an answer, determined to have his wicked way with her, come what may. She glanced over her shoulder, trying desperately to think of a way to escape him.

How terrible! What an awful man.

She hurried between the columns and then took refuge behind one of the large fronds. But the Baron appeared to be enjoying the chase. He came after her, rounding the pillar and catching her by the arm.

“A little game is it, My Lady? How marvelous,” he exclaimed as she pulled away from him, hurrying towards the powder room.

But as she rounded the corner, emerging from the ballroom and into the hallway, where a wide staircase led up to a gallery above, she collided with a man, spilling her punch all over him as she did so. He was tall, well-built, with brown hair, blue eyes, and broad shoulders. He was wearing an elegant frock coat and a polka dot cravat around his neck. He let out a cry, and Margaret stared at him in horror.

He was a handsome man, with an aristocratic look, the sort of man to catch any woman’s attention, even as Margaret mumbled an apology.

“I’m so sorry! I was...” she stammered as the man looked her over, taken aback by the accident, even as his eyes narrowed, a smile playing over his lips.

“Well, that was unexpected,” he drawled.

The punch had soaked her dress, too, the material clinging to her uncomfortably, and she could only imagine what her parents would say when they saw her in such a state.

“I’m sorry, I was—” she mumbled, not wanting to admit she was fleeing the Baron’s advances, even as the unwanted aristocrat rounded the corner, his eyes ablaze.

“Ah, there you are, my dear. Still running, aren’t we?”

“I see... running away, aren’t we? Do you need my help?” the stranger whispered.

Margaret knew the game was up. She would have no choice but to submit to his demands, even as she apologized again to the man standing before her.

But to her surprise, and true to his word, the man stepped forward, halting the Baron in his tracks. “She’s not running from anyone. She came to find me. We’re to dance,” he stated, turning to Margaret with a mischievous grin.

The Baron looked perturbed. “But I... well, we were dancing and stepped out of the throng to take refreshment,” he said, sounding somewhat disappointed by the end of his chase.

“And there’ll soon be another dance, which she’s promised to me,” the man countered, holding his own against the Baron, who was at least two heads shorter than him.

“Well... I suppose you’ve... it’ll start soon,” the Baron said, and with a scowl on his face, he slinked off back into the ballroom.

The man turned to Margaret and smiled. “I presume that’s what you wanted—to be rid of him. Nasty little man.” He shook his head.

Margaret blushed. She was exceedingly grateful to the stranger for helping her, even as his crisp, white shirt was now stained purple with the punch she had spilled all over him.

“I’m terribly sorry, My Lord. I was running away from him. I didn’t see you,” she said, pulling out a handkerchief and dabbing feebly at the stain.

He laughed and shook his head. “I’m not the only one, am I? Look at your dress, it’s quite sheer,” he said.

Margaret looked down in horror at herself, realizing there was little of her upper half now left to the imagination.

“Oh, goodness me! I... well, I’ll have to dry it somehow,” she exclaimed, wondering what he must think of her—and what others would say, too.

“I’m sure it doesn’t matter. Shirts can be washed, dresses can be dried, but reputations are far harder to rub the stains off. I think you’ve had a lucky escape from Lord Meadowcroft. He’s well known for his lascivious nature.”

“Oh, dear... my sisters were so insistent on my dancing with someone. Perhaps they didn’t know who he was,” Margaret said, for she felt certain neither Hannah nor Anne would have allowed her to fall into scandal.

“Siblings don’t always know what’s best,” the man pointed out.

Margaret shook her head. “No, that’s very true. Mine won’t be happy until I’m married and cast in their own mold. But I don’t want—oh, forgive me, I haven’t even introduced myself.” She suddenly felt terribly foolish in the company of the dashing stranger.

“It’s quite all right, you were in a hurry. I’m Owen Neal, the Duke of Repington,” the man replied.

CHAPTER 3



Margaret's heart skipped a beat. The Duke smiled at her, offering her his arm. How different this was from her earlier experience. She was flattered and was only too grateful to take it, grateful to him for having come to her aid in her hour of need.

“Lady Margaret Colborne, my father is the Earl of Dunne,” Margaret said.

She feared he was about to say what everyone else said upon learning her name—her relation to her sisters. Margaret was never Margaret. She was the sister of the Countess of Weston or the Marchioness of Pemberton. But to her surprise, the Duke smiled and nodded.

“What a beautiful name,” he complimented as he led her towards the throng.

“I heard about you. You’ve only recently inherited the title. I’m sorry for your loss,” Margaret said, hardly able to believe she was in the company of a man such as the Duke of Repington, let alone on his arm.

It was one of the most prestigious titles in the country, with an estate in Buckinghamshire, and responsibilities at Court. The death of the previous Duke had been a source of both mourning and drawing room conversation, and Margaret recalled her father suggesting there would be few tears shed for Owen's father. Nevertheless, she felt sorry for him. Inheriting such responsibility was a burden, and one she did not think would be easy to bear.

"Oh, don't feel sorry for me. Not for that, at least. I... well, it hardly matters. My father wasn't a very nice man, I'll make no secret of that. I've been abroad for the past five years—the Italian peninsula, Sicily, as far as the Greek islands... all aimless, of course. I was forced to return three months ago, when I learned of my father's death. But I'm boring you, I'm sure. Women aren't interested in those sorts of things. But look, we should... retreat. Lord Meadowcroft won't give up on his intentions. Come this way," the Duke said, smiling at Margaret, who was still astonished at finding herself in his company.

"Oh, but I am, Your Grace. Where have you traveled to? I think it's wonderful. I've never really left London, unless you count Bath as somewhere exotic. We have an estate in Kent, but we hardly go there," Margaret replied as he led her down a side corridor, past a row of paintings, and away from the hustle and bustle of the ball.

The Baron was nowhere to be seen, and Margaret breathed a sigh of relief, glad to be away from him.

"Look at this. We're both covered in punch! How much was in that glass?" the Duke exclaimed, and Margaret blushed.

His shirt was covered, and her own dress was stained all across the bodice.

He pulled out a handkerchief, wiping his shirt to no avail, before turning his attention to her.

“No, really, it’s quite all right,” she said, glancing back down the corridor in fear of being discovered unchaperoned.

“Come now, let me,” the Duke insisted, dabbing at her dress, his hand pressed to her bosom.

Margaret gasped, and her eyes grew wide.

The Duke smiled. “I’m rather glad we bumped into one another. I was getting terribly bored. Having a pretty young lady throw punch over me was just what I needed,” he said.

Margaret blushed. Her heart was beating fast. His hand was still on her breast, dabbing at the stains. She had never known such a touch, even though it felt pleasant, strangely so.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated.

He laughed. “It’s quite all right. There, now... that’s a bit better, isn’t it?” he said, replacing the handkerchief in his pocket.

He had a swagger of confidence about him, and Margaret could not help but be swept along by his charm and demeanor. How different he was from the

Baron—his allure, his touch, his words...

“Much better,” she agreed as he looked down at her and smiled.

They were alone in the corridor, with only the portraits watching them, and Margaret smiled, surprised at the force of her feelings towards him—gratitude for having saved her from the attentions of the Baron.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you before,” the Duke noted, still with his eyes on her damp bodice.

Margaret shook her head. “It’s my first Season, and I’m not doing very well at it, so far. I don’t really like dancing, I’m not very good at it. And I don’t like all the inane chatter. It’s always so vacuous—who’s wearing what, who’s dancing with whom, who’s going to dance with whom. I prefer... more stimulating conversations.”

The Duke smiled. “Well, that’s... refreshing to hear. I’m sure I can be... stimulating,” he admitted.

“So, tell me, please, where did you travel to? What did you see?” Margaret asked as the two of them stood together in the corridor.

“Well, I spent a lot of time in Florence. I think I’ve seen every church in the city, and every painting of note, too. There was Venice, too, and Milan. Rome, I found fascinating, but filthy. I went to Sicily for the cleaner air—the scenery quite took my breath away,” the Duke replied.

“I’ve read about it, and the volcano, too. Mount Etna, they call it, don’t they? A smoking god,” Margaret said, and the Duke smiled.

“It’s a remarkable sight,” he agreed, and Margaret could only imagine the things he had seen and the places he had been.

She felt terribly provincial, and whilst she had read a great deal, and thought even more, she was yet to experience those things that the Duke—and men like him—had experienced for themselves. How she longed to break free from the narrow constraints of society, with its rules and expectations, and live differently.

“I’d love to see it. There’s so much I want to see. I feel... deprived,” she said.

To her surprise, the Duke reached out and brushed the hair back from her cheek. “Well... we wouldn’t want that, would we?” he said, leaning forward.

Margaret fancied he would have kissed her, had the sound of voices at the far end of the corridor not caused him to look up.

“One can’t trust the Regent, he’s nothing but a posturer,” a man was saying, and the Duke drew back.

Margaret blushed. “Perhaps we should... return to the dance floor.”

He nodded. “Some more punch, perhaps,” he replied, smiling.

He took her arm and escorted her to the refreshments table, where he helped them both to a fresh glass of punch.

“I’ll try not to spill it all over you this time,” Margaret said, blushing as she looked again at his purple-stained shirt.

“Please do, but really... I’m only too glad to have been of service. One can only imagine what the attentions of such a man must be like.” The Duke glanced at Lord Meadowcroft with a look of disdain on his face.

Margaret smiled. She was not used to the attention of a man—of any man—let alone such an interesting one as the Duke of Repington. He was older than her, perhaps thirty or so, and she wondered why he was still a bachelor when his good looks and charm were abundantly evident.

The memory of his touch lingered, as did the thought of him kissing her. It was not the behavior of a rake, but rather behavior that she, too, had encouraged, desirous of an encounter, as she imagined the possibility of something more between them.

“The experience was... far from pleasant,” Margaret replied, and the Duke laughed.

“Well... you’ve avoided him for the evening. I’m ever so glad to have made your acquaintance.”

Margaret blushed. No one had ever been glad to make her acquaintance before. They had been glad to know her associations of birth—that to her sisters and mother and father—but as for being glad of her own company, that was another matter. She was flattered, and the Duke showed no signs of wishing to step away from her or seek the company of others.

“Are you here alone?” she asked, for though she had heard of him by name, she knew little of his personal circumstances.

“Well... yes, in a manner of speaking. My brother’s here somewhere, but... he’s of no consequence. Lady Slatterly invited us. It seemed churlish to refuse. I’m so out of practice at these things, though. On the continent, it’s all masquerades and outdoor dancing. But I’m in a different position, now. I’m the Duke of Repington, as if I needed reminding. I’ve got responsibilities to live up to, as arrogant as that sounds,” he replied.

Margaret did not think he sounded in the least bit arrogant. He had inherited a weighty responsibility, and now he was to live up to it. She admired him for that, and she could not help but think that he had already proven himself more than worthy of his position—in relation to herself, at least.

“I think you’re doing admirably,” she stated, and he laughed.

“But, please, tell me something about yourself. You say you read. How refreshing. I doubt half the people in this room have ever read a single book, apart from those forced on them by governesses and tutors,” he said with a disparaging tone.

Margaret laughed. It was true. She knew her sisters cared nothing for reading, and it was refreshing to find someone from whom she did not feel the necessity to hide her light under a bushel.

“I love to read. My father has a fine library, and I borrow books from my godmother—she was a great influence on me. Lady Catherine MacCulloch. She has a salon, of sorts. All sorts of people come to it,” Margaret explained.

Catherine was a dear friend, and a refuge for Margaret, who often felt out of place at home, despite knowing the affections of her family. Catherine had never married, and she was entirely happy living the life of a spinster, entertaining all manner of interesting people in her drawing room, and maintaining a wide variety of interests from butterfly collecting to bookbinding. It was this model of spinsterhood Margaret would happily have emulated, had her family not had different ideas.

“How marvelous. I remember the libraries in Florence. Quite remarkable, though the books were all in Latin, of course. Do you play music? Speak French?” the Duke asked.

Margaret smiled. “Yes, I do everything expected of a young lady.”

He laughed. “Forgive me. It’s far too easy to make assumptions. I merely meant... well, what music do you play? Do you have a favorite composer?”

This was music to Margaret’s ears—a man who wanted to know about her musical preferences. Her heart skipped a beat, and she smiled, thinking of all the composers she knew and the music she loved to play.

“Well, it’s so hard to choose. I find music suits a particular mood or feeling. Sometimes, I feel like playing something happy, and sometimes, I feel like playing something sad. But Mozart, he’s my favorite,” Margaret replied.

The Duke nodded. “Mine, too. I heard a lot about his work on the continent. How talented you must be to play his pieces,” he said, causing Margaret to blush even further.

Margaret was shy about admitting her talents. A young lady was expected to have a modicum of ability on the pianoforte, to speak a little French, and to produce the occasional watercolor. But Margaret excelled in everything she turned her hand to. Her French was perfect, her watercolors adorned every room in her father’s house, and she played the pianoforte with all the skill of a master at a concert. She knew this, and yet she hated to be extolled for her abilities, always shying away from demonstrating them, and never liking to be praised—even when it was her due.

“How wonderful,” Margaret replied, for if she had not been enraptured by him before, she was now.

The ball was coming to an end, the musicians lowering their instruments, and Margaret did not know what was expected of her now. She wondered if the evening spent in the Duke’s company had been only a flight of fancy, a passing moment of pleasure.

Would he suggest a further meeting? Would he call on her? Or were her expectations foolish?

“I enjoy all the arts. To see a beautiful painting or hear a piece of heavenly music transports one to another world. It’s a delight,” he said, and Margaret could not agree more.

She did not want the evening to end, even as she knew it had to, and she knew it was not her place to suggest a further meeting, even as she hoped the Duke himself would do so.

You’re being foolish.

She glanced over her shoulder to where her parents and sister were saying their goodbyes to Lady Slatterly.

“I’m very glad to have met you this evening, Lady Margaret,” the Duke said.

Margaret blushed. “I’m only sorry it was under such unfortunate circumstances,” she said, glancing again at his shirt, the purple stain now having firmly taken hold.

“Think nothing of it. Won’t you allow me to walk with you to the door?” He offered her his arm.

She was only too happy to oblige him, and they joined the throng of guests taking their leave. But as they emerged from the ballroom, a couple approached them—a man and a woman, closer to Margaret’s age than Owen’s.

The man bore a resemblance to the Duke, whilst the woman on his arm was a tall, blonde-haired woman, with cold blue eyes. She was very beautiful, but her expression was one of disdain, and she held herself haughtily at the man's side, even as Owen stiffened.

"Owen?" the man said, he and the blonde woman blocking the way ahead.

"Ah, Lady Margaret, might I ask the greatest impertinence of you?" the Duke whispered.

Margaret looked at him in confusion. She did not understand, even as she assumed the man to be the brother the Duke had spoken of earlier.

"Well, I..." she stammered as the couple now approached.

"Aaron, Brother, I'd like you to meet... Lady Margaret Colborne," Owen said, and the man looked Margaret up and down and gave a curt nod.

The blonde woman did the same, though she made no effort to hide her obvious judgment of Margaret's dress and appearance.

"Aaron Neal, Owen's brother, and this is my betrothed, Lady Jessie Bowles," the Duke's brother said.

Margaret held out her hand. She had heard of Jessie Bowles, and the description was not flattering. She was the daughter of the Marquess of

Hensingham, a Society belle who had left a string of broken hearts in her wake, including Anne's husband, Jason, who spoke of her in the most disparaging of terms.

"I know Lady Margaret—well, we have a mutual acquaintance. Tell me, how is your sister?" Jessie asked.

Margaret blushed. "Quite well, yes," she stammered, still not knowing what the impertinence Owen had spoken of was.

"You never mentioned the lady's name before," Aaron said, smiling at Margaret, who glanced at Owen in confusion.

"My name?" she asked.

Aaron nodded. "Yes. It's quite important, I think. Owen's been talking about you all day. We didn't realize you'd be here. He's kept the whole thing a great secret. But we're pleased for you, of course," he replied as Owen turned to Margaret with a nervous smile.

"Yes, I don't know why I didn't mention your name. But it doesn't matter now, does it?" Owen said, and Margaret shook her head.

"I'm sorry—" she began, but Aaron interrupted her.

"We're so glad to meet the woman he's going to marry. The new Duchess of

Repington. Who'd have thought it. Owen's betrothed."

At these words, it was all Margaret could do not to faint with surprise.

CHAPTER 4



“*Y*ou make a charming couple, you really do,” Jessie said, even as Margaret could hardly find the words to speak.

She did not understand what was going on. She was not the Duke’s betrothed—she had known him all of an hour—and now he was claiming something quite extraordinary. For a moment, she thought herself the victim of an elaborate trick—a joke, even. Were all three of them laughing at her?

“Yes, and we’re so very happy. I suppose this is... our coming out, if you like,” the Duke explained, smiling broadly, though with an urging look in his eyes, as though imploring Margaret to play along with his deception.

“Ah... yes, it’s all been marvelous fun,” Margaret stammered, even as she did not know if Owen was being sincere in his words.

She felt like a fool. He had been playing a cruel trick on her, and now it was all she could do to prevent herself from bursting into tears.

“Well, I must say, it’s been a delight to meet you at last. He kept mentioning you, of course. A mysterious woman to whom he was betrothed. You met at... I forget where—” Aaron furrowed his brow.

“Dagenham Park, over dinner,” Owen interjected.

“Dagenham Park, that’s right. Well, we mustn’t keep you. Good evening, Lady Margaret. I’m sure it won’t be long before our paths cross again,” Aaron said, and with a curt nod, he led Jessie away, the latter glancing back at Margaret with a disdainful look on her face.

Owen breathed a sigh of relief, even as Margaret stared at him incredulously.

“I don’t understand. What was that all about?” she demanded, for she could only think she had been made a dreadful fool of.

Aaron and Jessie were no doubt laughing at her, and Owen would soon join them. The whole evening had been a joke, and Margaret was at the heart of it. Perhaps the whole ton would know of it—a cruel joke played at her expense.

“I’m so sorry, Lady Margaret. I... well, I feel I owe you an explanation. I *do* owe you an explanation.” The Duke sighed.

“You certainly do!” she hissed, but before he could utter another word, her mother and sisters approached, and Owen looked at her fearfully.

“Meet me on the terrace in a few moments. Say you’re going to the powder room. I’ll explain everything then,” he said, and there was a look of genuine sincerity in his eyes, such that Margaret nodded, watching as he slipped off into the crowd.

“Well, goodness me, Margaret, haven’t you done well? From the slippery eel Lord Meadowcroft to the handsome Duke of Repington,” Hannah gushed.

Anne was fanning herself, and she smiled at Margaret, shaking her head in disbelief. “It seems you didn’t need our help, after all. Oh... goodness, I think I need to sit down again. I can’t walk more than a few paces,” she groaned, and Lord Dunne came to her aid.

“I’ll take you out to the carriage, my dear. Leave Margaret to say goodbye to her new beau,” he said, winking at Margaret, who blushed.

She did not have the heart to tell them what she suspected to be the truth, even as her mother embraced her.

“Oh, I’m so proud of you, Margaret. I was beginning to think... well, it doesn’t matter now. I wish he hadn’t hurried off like that. Go and find him, say goodbye, and suggest he calls on you,” Lady Dunne advised, smiling at Margaret as she and Hannah followed after Anne and Lord Dunne.

Margaret was left alone, torn between her desire for an explanation, and her fear of being the butt of the ton’s joke. But curiosity got the better of her, and with her mother’s blessing, she went in search of the Duke. She found him standing alone on the terrace.

“The moonlight becomes you, Lady Margaret,” he praised, looking up at her with a smile.

But Margaret did not smile back. She felt angry and confused, hurt at the thought of having been played a fool and laughed at by Aaron and Jessie.

“What happened just now? What was the meaning of it?” she demanded, and the Duke turned to her and sighed.

“Lady Margaret, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked you to play along with such a ruse. But in the heat of the moment, I panicked. I thought... well, I helped you get away from Lord Meadowcroft, and I thought perhaps you’d be willing to help me, too.”

Margaret narrowed her eyes at him. His tone was sincere, and he was looking at her apologetically. He was right, he *had* helped her, but that still did not explain the extraordinary words his brother had used.

“And I did, didn’t I? But I don’t understand what it all meant. Betrothed? I’m not your betrothed. I barely know you,” she said, and he shook his head and turned to look back across the empty gardens, where the silver moonlight caught the branches of the trees, making them appear luminescent against the dark sky.

“As you know, my father recently died, and I inherited his title. It’s the normal way of things. Your own father was presumably the eldest son of your grandfather, and when he dies, his title will pass to his nearest, eldest

male relative. That's the order of things," Owen began.

Margaret did not think the order of things to be particularly fair, but this was not the point of the conversation, and she merely nodded, urging him to continue.

"Yes, and what's that go to do with me?" she asked, still entirely puzzled by what he was saying.

"When my brother and I went to my father's solicitors for the reading of the will, a surprise awaited us. Our father, ever one to delight in pitting us against each another, had placed a clause in his will, such that the bulk of his fortune would pass to the first son who marries. It's quite astonishing, but there it is. I inherit the title, but if my brother marries first, he receives the fortune."

Margaret stared at him in astonishment. It was an extraordinary revelation, and she could think of no other example of it in her reading, which had included many volumes about law in her father's library. It was perfectly permissible for a clause to be inserted in a will, but given the favoring of inheritance, it seemed remarkable to make that clause something of an obstacle to be surmounted.

The former Duke had pitted his sons against one another, and Margaret now realized, to her astonishment, what the Duke had done in introducing her as his betrothed.

"You mean... your brother thinks you've won?" she asked.

“I *had* to do something. He and Lady Jessie are so close. There’s some delay with the license, or the banns, or something like that. In a fit of desperation, I told him I was betrothed. We don’t move in the same circles. He wasn’t to know I wasn’t. But ever since... well, he’s been eager to meet the woman with whom he finds himself in competition,” the Duke replied.

Margaret was amazed. It was one thing to rescue a woman from lascivious attentions, and quite another to introduce her as the woman to whom he was to be married. It was too extraordinary for words, and she stared at Owen in disbelief.

“But... it’s a lie. We’re not to be married, and I’m not your betrothed.”

“Ah... but I wondered. Well, you spoke so eloquently of the things you love—of your desire to travel and the books you read. I share your passions, and if... we were to marry, there’d be no end to the possibilities we’d have together.”

Margaret’s heart skipped a beat. She had known the Duke for just a few hours, and admittedly, she had found herself attracted to him. He was everything she might desire in a husband—everything any of the women at the ball that evening might desire. He was handsome, with good conversation and wit. He had a title, lands, and money—albeit wrapped up in a rather odd clause. To marry him would make her the Duchess of Repington, outranking all her family members. There would be no one who could look down their nose at her, and she would be feted amongst the highest echelons of society.

“I admit... I was—I enjoyed our evening together. But to marry you for... a clause in a will... It’s hardly romantic, is it?” she murmured.

Owen laughed. “Not in the least, but... there’s more. My brother has terrible debts. If he marries Jessie Bowles, it’ll only swallow our father’s money in paying his creditors. If I inherit, I can help him use the money to make more money.”

“But if he takes the money, what becomes of you?” Margaret asked, glad to hear of his generous nature, though fearful of what he might receive in return.

Owen looked grave, shaking his head and sighing once again. “Aaron was always jealous of me. He hated being the second son, and when our father died, he thought I’d crow over him in victory. I did nothing of the sort—it’s a great burden—but now, he thinks he can win against me. If he secures the money for himself, we’ll both be left with nothing—a penniless title is all we have to show for it,” he answered, looking glum.

It was a terrible dilemma, one Margaret could only feel sorry over, even as she was still somewhat angry at having been dragged into the middle of it.

“And you really think I can help you?” she asked.

He looked at her and gave a weak smile. “I’ve already made assumptions about you, Lady Margaret, but allow me to make another. You aren’t betrothed, are you? Or even courting? Or even interested in anyone, if the events of this evening are anything to go by—at least, save the unfortunate Lord Meadowcroft.”

His words might have been impertinent had they not been true. Margaret had not enjoyed a successful start to her first Season. She was forever being

compared to her sisters, both of whom had made favorable matches immediately. She knew her mother was worried about her—what mother did not want what was best for her daughter? In the eyes of the Countess, a suitable marriage was paramount. It was all that mattered, even if Margaret far preferred to think of more interesting pursuits.

“That much is true,” Margaret admitted.

“And do your parents and sisters want you to make a match?”

Again, Margaret nodded. “They do, though I don’t,” she clarified.

“Then we could be of beneficial assistance to one another, couldn’t we? The match must appear to be genuine. That’s why my brother’s match with Lady Jessie Bowles is suspect. I fear he’s told her some untruths, like the extent of the fortune he’ll supposedly inherit. But it’ll all be swallowed up by his creditors unless I help him. She’s not going to be interested in him when he’s penniless. If you and I can convince the world of our sincerity, it’s certain the inheritance will be mine,” Owen reasoned, looking at Margaret imploringly, his face taking on a silvery hue in the moonlight.

Margaret *did* feel sorry for him, and she was willing to believe she had not been the victim of an elaborate joke, even as she had found herself at the center of a most remarkable situation. But to agree to marry him was something quite different. This was her whole life, and he was asking her to commit an act of deception—to her own family, as much as anyone else.

“I’ll consider it,” she replied, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

“That’s all I ask of you, Lady Margaret. Let me call on you in the coming days. We’ve danced at the ball, and it’s hardly unusual for a gentleman to follow through with his attentions. It’ll make the whole thing seem eminently believable. I can charm your parents, and—” he began, but Margaret interrupted him.

“I said I’ll think about it,” she reminded him, for she was not about to give a definite answer until she had seriously considered the matter for herself.

He was not asking her to the theater, or to join him on a picnic. This was the rest of her life, and it was a decision not to be taken lightly.

He nodded, bowing graciously, and taking her hand in his. “I understand, Lady Margaret, but I *do* intend to call on you in the coming days,” he said.

She nodded. “And I’ll be glad to receive you.”

Margaret was secretly pleased at the prospect of a visit from the handsome Duke, even as he was asking something quite extraordinary from her.

He breathed a deep sigh of—perhaps—relief, and nodding to her, he took his leave. Margaret was left alone on the terrace, thinking over the extraordinary events of the evening. She shook her head, hardly daring to believe it could be true. At that moment, footsteps caused her to look up, and Hannah appeared on the terrace, beckoning her to hurry.

“They’re closing the place up, Margaret. Come along, don’t be idle. What did he say?” she asked, hurrying Margaret through the ballroom, where footmen were hurrying to and fro with brushes.

Margaret was not about to tell her sister the truth. No one could know what had happened between her and the Duke. Besides, she rather liked the sense of illusion. Her sisters, and the rest of the ton, would think her the object of the Duke’s desires. No one could pass judgment on her now or tell her she was not trying hard enough in her attempts at courtship.

The Duke was a prize catch, and whilst some might, uncharitably, question why he had so readily taken to a woman like Margaret, she herself could only smile at the thought of what others would think of her good fortune.

“He’s going to call on us in the coming days,” Margaret replied.

Hannah let out a squeal of delight. “Oh, how wonderful! I’ll delay my return home for another few days. And to think how worried we were about you, Margaret,” she exclaimed.

Neither Hannah nor Anne had directly voiced such concerns, but Margaret was not surprised to hear them mentioned. Her sisters had spent the whole winter impressing on her the importance of her coming out, and with the beginning of the Season, the stakes were high. But Margaret had disappointed them—she knew she had—and now was her chance to redeem herself.

The thought of accepting the Duke’s offer was becoming more attractive by the moment. It would solve so many problems and prove to her family she

could be the woman they wanted her to be whilst remaining the woman *she* wanted to be.

“It’s all happened so fast,” Margaret said.

Hannah shook her head. “Why wait when the moment comes so readily?”

Margaret nodded.

The last of the carriages were now leaving, and only one had returned to collect the party from the ball, Lord Dunne having decreed they could all travel together. Anne, the Earl, and the Countess were waiting, and expectant eyes turned to Margaret as she climbed into the compartment, which was lit by candles hanging in glass lamps.

“He’s going to call on us in the coming days, with your permission, Mother,” Margaret said.

Lady Dunne clapped her hands together in delight. “Oh, Margaret, you’ve quite outdone all our expectations!” she exclaimed.

Margaret smiled, glad to think her family were happy, even as she herself was filled with doubts.

CHAPTER 5



“*Y*ou can’t do this, Owen. It’s utterly ridiculous,” Edwin Davis said, shaking his head in utter astonishment.

Edwin Davis, the Viscount of Finch, was Owen’s closest friend. They had been at school together, their fathers both having chosen the most unpleasant institution for the education of their sons. Both had survived the ordeal because of the other, and Owen trusted Edwin more than any other person he knew.

They were drinking at Boodles Club, and Owen had explained the remarkable situation of his father’s will, as well as what he intended to do about it.

“What choice do I have?” Owen asked, swirling a glass of brandy in his hand.

It was the night after Lady Slatterly’s ball, and Owen had spent the day mulling over his encounter with Margaret. He had taken a considerable risk, even as he hoped it would pay off, given the lies he had told his brother.

Owen had acted on impulse, but he was yet to call on Margaret and was in two minds as to what he should do.

This could not be a marriage of convenience, even as he feared what would happen if his brother were to inherit their father's fortune.

In the first moments of his and Margaret's encounter, his thoughts had been only chivalrous—to remove her from the attentions of Lord Meadowcroft. But the fact of their having almost kissed, and his somewhat risqué use of his handkerchief—not to mention her willingness to agree to his idea—had given rise to a genuine desire on Owen's part for something more. There was now no doubting the spark of feeling he felt towards her, even though he knew it would be foolish to pursue it, in truth, given the circumstances in which he found himself.

“You can challenge it in the courts. It's a ridiculous clause. Whoever heard of a title without a fortune? How are you expected to manage the estate without an income? And we both know what Aaron's like with money,” Edwin said, shaking his head, as he poured himself another glass of brandy from a decanter on the table standing between them.

“There can't be a challenge. I've already discussed it with Mr. Landsdowne. My father was entirely within his rights to stipulate whatever clause he wished in his will. There're no grounds to challenge it. He didn't disinherit me. I'm still the Duke of Repington, I just don't automatically receive the money,” Owen clarified.

He felt somewhat despairing as to the facts of his circumstances. Aaron and Jessie would marry soon enough, the legalities would soon be settled, and their father's fortune would be swallowed up by Aaron's debts. Owen knew

he had been rash in asking Margaret to be his wife, and if Aaron knew it was for anything other than love, he would be the first to challenge it. But he felt he had no choice but to act rashly if he was to save not only his fortunes but the estate and title, too.

“It’s utter nonsense, Owen. You know what’s going to happen. Aaron will marry, the fortune will disappear, and you’ll be left a penniless aristocrat, living on the charity of others—mine, for a start,” Edwin said, shaking his head.

“It won’t come to that. I always pay my way,” Owen insisted.

His father had given him and his brother an allowance, and whilst Aaron had squandered his, Owen had always been careful with money, even as his tastes favored the finer things—especially fine wines and brandy.

But the thought of losing it all filled him with dread. He would not see his brother destitute and was only too willing to continue his allowance. But the same would not be said for Aaron, who would merely squander their father’s fortune and leave them both penniless.

“And what about this woman? Lady Margaret Colborne? Where does she fit into all this? She’s the daughter of the Earl and Countess of Dunne, isn’t she? I know her sister Hannah a little. Well, I know her husband, the Marquess of Pemberton. But do you really mean to tell me you asked her to marry you last night?” Edwin asked.

Owen laughed. It really did sound quite ridiculous when put like that. But he

had done so, and she had told him she would think about it. It was a bizarre situation, but it was his only chance of securing his father's fortune.

Everything rested on Margaret, for Aaron believed her to be Owen's betrothed, and if she refused Owen—which she had every right to do—the money was as good as lost.

“Yes, I did. It was in the heat of the moment. Aaron and Lady Jessie were there in front of me. I had to say something. It just... happened,” Owen replied.

Edwin groaned. “You've dug your own grave, Owen. She's not going to marry you, is she? Think about it. Her father wouldn't let her, and you've said yourself, it can't be for the sake of convenience either. She's got to fall in love with you. Besides, she's the bookish one, isn't she? Hardly the belle of the ball,” he said, rolling his eyes.

Owen sighed. His friend was right. Margaret *was* different from other women. But whilst she did not possess the same striking looks and vivaciousness of her sisters, there *was* something about her that he found attractive.

The way her dress had hugged her body, covered as it had been in punch, outlining her bodice... The thought was certainly a pleasant one. She had an attractive figure, even though she had shied away from his touch, and his kiss—or had she?

She had a naive charm about her, and he could happily have conversed with

her the whole night long. She was pretty, in her own way. He wondered what might have happened had they not been disturbed.

He shook his head, ready to defend her, even as he knew Edwin would not believe him.

“But I... well, she was a delight. I mean it.”

Edwin laughed. “Delightful enough to spend your whole life with? This isn’t a game, Owen, whatever your father might’ve thought. A marriage can’t just be discarded a few months down the line. It’s for life. She’ll be the bearer of your children—your heir—think about that.”

Owen *had* thought about it. He had thought about it a great deal. This was not a game. It was deadly serious, and that was why he believed Margaret a far better candidate than some foolish slip of a woman who would giggle her way to the altar and marry him merely for the position it would afford her.

“Don’t you think I know that? Oh... but it’s an impossible position. My father was always like that, though. He’d pit us against one another. He enjoyed seeing us at one another’s throats. I’m sure he laughed his way to the grave thinking what this would do to us both,” Owen scoffed, shaking his head.

Edwin looked at him sympathetically. He himself was not married, though he had been courting a young lady on and off for several years. Owen had believed the two of them could remain in a perpetual state of bachelorhood, enjoying all its benefits, and without ever having to take their responsibilities

seriously. But duty now beckoned, and, even if Owen had not been weighed down by the clause in his father's will, he knew marriage would have been necessary to secure the line.

Better now than later.

"I'm sure he did. But you're not the one laughing back. I don't know... You could marry her, I suppose. If she even consents. But would you be happy?" Edwin asked.

"I'd be happier than if I saw my father's fortune flitted away to my brother's creditors," Owen replied.

He took a sip of brandy, sighing, as he sat back in his chair. The choice was stark, and it was a choice not entirely in his own hands, either. Could he really expect Margaret to marry him on a whim?

"Then you've got a choice to make, Owen. Marry this woman and live an unhappy and loveless life, or end up penniless and without any claim to what's rightfully yours. It's a stark decision," Edwin said.

And put in those terms, it certainly was a stark decision.

* * *

"I thought he might've come, by now," Anne said, pulling back the drawing room curtain for the umpteenth time that morning.

The drawing room of Lord Dunne's townhouse was on the upper floor, a pleasant room looking out over the street and park. It was here the three sisters spent their time at home together reading, drawing, writing letters, and talking. Since the marriages of Anne and Hannah, such times had become rarer, and Margaret was glad to have both her sisters with her, even as the sole topic of conversation had been her encounter with the Duke of Repington two days prior.

"Perhaps he's not coming. Perhaps I was a fool to assume he would," Margaret muttered, and her sisters tutted.

"You mustn't be so defeatist, Margaret. He promised to call on you, didn't he?" Hannah said.

Margaret nodded.

She had not revealed anything of the Duke's extraordinary confession on the terrace, and as far as her sisters were concerned, she had been wooed by the handsome Duke of Repington, who intended to continue his advances by calling on her at any moment. They knew nothing of the ruse, and they would surely be horrified at the thought of it.

But neither did they know how close she and the Duke had come to kissing, and it was the memory of that possible encounter Margaret kept returning to. There was nothing of a ruse about it. Indeed, Margaret was beginning to wish it had occurred, her desires aroused by the possibility of what it could mean—what it *had* meant. She was willing to hear more of what the Duke was proposing, even though she was doubtful that anything would come of such an astonishing scheme.

But the thought of the kiss lingered. It had seemed real, not rakish, born of a genuine desire, now tempered by the ruse.

“I know, but... I’m sure he’s inundated with calling cards,” Margaret replied, looking up from her book, as Anne let the curtain fall back and waddled over to a chair by the fireplace.

Anne sat down heavily, taking out a fan and sighing. “Oh, I can’t sit still. Sometimes I’m too hot, sometimes I’m too cold. I just don’t know what to do with myself. It’s an extraordinary thing, being with child.”

Margaret tried hard to suppress a smile, glancing at Hannah, who rolled her eyes. Her eldest sister had been entirely stoical in her own experiences of childbirth. Hannah had never once complained, nor shown any signs of discomfort. She had borne the burden admirably, whilst Anne’s experience had been conveyed in somewhat different terms. To hear Anne speak, one would think no woman had ever given birth, let alone suffered as she was.

“I’m sure it is,” Hannah said, shaking her head.

“I just hope I can be a good mother,” Anne murmured, fanning herself vigorously.

“I’m sure you’ll be an example to us all,” Hannah replied.

Margaret could not help but giggle, even as Anne appeared not to notice.

“Oh, I hope so. Children need their parents. I know it’s not fashionable to say so, but I think of Mother. Dear Mother. We love her dearly, but... she was always absent. I remember the governess better than her,” Anne said.

Hannah shut the book she was reading with a pointed snap. “Are you suggesting I neglect my children?” she asked.

Anne shook her head. “Not at all, that’s not what I’m saying. Though... you’re here, and they’re... not.” She blushed slightly as she sat up awkwardly in her chair.

“I don’t need my children around me all the time. Besides, they’re quite happy with the nanny,” Hannah replied defensively.

Margaret was used to her sisters bickering. They were too alike. Both were pretty, both were well married, and both had enjoyed the best of prospects in their younger days. Margaret was the odd one out, even as it seemed Hannah and Anne believed she was about to join them in making an excellent match and living happily ever after.

“But I couldn’t leave the child alone. Not for a day,” Anne argued, shaking her head.

“Believe me, Anne, you won’t be saying that when the nanny hands him or her to you over breakfast, or when you’ve just put on your nightgown. Let them grow up, then enjoy their company,” Hannah said.

Anne was about to reply when the sound of a carriage rolling up the drive was heard from the street below. Her eyes grew wide, and she struggled to her feet, hurrying to the window and letting out an excited cry.

“It’s him, Margaret. The Duke—he’s here!” she exclaimed.

Margaret got to her feet, went to the window, and looked over her sister’s shoulder. Down below, she could see the Duke climbing out of his carriage. He was just as handsome as he had been on the night of the ball, and her heart skipped a beat as she thought back to the moment of their first encounter—his hand on her breast and the kiss they had almost shared.

She was surprised he had come, and even more surprised to find herself pleased he had done so. She had not expected to see him again—the astonishing revelation of his father’s will, the bizarre introduction to his brother, the question of marriage. It had all seemed a joke, or at best, a flight of fancy. But the look on the Duke’s face was serious, and the door to the drawing room now burst open, her mother appearing in a state of the utmost excitement.

“He’s here, Margaret—oh... you’ve already seen. I’ve instructed he be shown into the morning room. Your father’s going to join us. Hurry now, come with me. Oh, I didn’t think about your dress. It’s rather plain. Quickly, ribbons and a shawl. They make all the difference!” Lady Dunne exclaimed, and with the help of Hannah and Anne, Margaret’s appearance was hastily transformed with red ribbons and a peacock blue shawl.

“Don’t take your book, Margaret. It makes you look... bookish,” Hannah advised, snatching the volume of poetry from Margaret’s hand.

Margaret scowled. “But I like to look bookish.”

Hannah tutted. “But he won’t,” she replied, tossing the book aside, as their mother seized Margaret by the hand.

“Come along, dear. He’ll be waiting for us,” Lady Dunne urged.

Margaret was hurried out of the room, her sisters whispering encouraging words as the voice of the Duke could be heard from the hallway below.

“This way, Your Grace. His Lordship’s waiting for you in the study,” the butler said, and Margaret listened as Owen thanked him, his footsteps echoing on the marble floor below.

Margaret turned to her mother, whose expression was one of rapture.

“The Duchess of Repington! Oh, to think of it... all three of my daughters married to high rank. It’s more than I could ever have dreamed of,” Lady Dunne gushed.

“But I barely know him, Mother. He’s not come to ask for my hand,” Margaret said, even as she feared he might have.

The decision was close, thrust on her entirely unexpectedly, even as she knew it was an attractive offer.

Margaret had no intention of marrying a man like Lord Meadowcroft, but a man like the Duke of Repington was different. He had promised her something else—the life of bookish leisure she longed for, the possibility of travel, and the sight of new places and experiences. But could she really marry for arrangement and convenience? She had to talk to him, even as her heart was beating fast, and she felt anxious as to what was to come.

“Oh, but he might have, Margaret. I was so worried about you, but now... oh, what a happy day!” Lady Dunne exclaimed.

Before Margaret could object any further, her mother had hurried her down the stairs and through the door of the morning room, where the Duke of Repington awaited.

CHAPTER 6



*A*s Margaret entered the room, the Duke rose to his feet. Her father was there, standing by the window. Owen bowed to her, and she bobbed a curtsy at her mother's prompting. Their eyes met for a moment, an understanding—a memory—passing between them. Margaret wondered if he was thinking the same thing as her—of his touch, of the kiss they had almost shared.

“Good morning, Lady Margaret,” Owen greeted.

Margaret smiled. “Good morning, Your Grace,” she returned as her father indicated for her to sit.

“Well, this is quite a turn-up, isn't it?” the Earl began, and Margaret blushed.

The Duke's attentions had proven her parents wrong, and it seemed they were delighted to have been proven so, even as she remained surprised at their change of heart.

“We’re so glad you’re here, Your Grace,” Lady Dunne said.

“As am I, Lady Dunne. I must say, it was the greatest of pleasures to... bump into Lady Margaret at Lady Slatterly’s ball,” the Duke offered.

Margaret blushed, glancing at his crisp, clean shirt and wondering if the punch stains had come out of the one he had been wearing the other evening.

“And you’re here to make your intentions clear?” the Earl asked.

The Duke nodded. “I am, Lord Dunne. I’ve come to ask if... well, if your daughter and I might begin a courtship. I know I’m some years older than her, but... I don’t think that matters if you don’t.”

Margaret knew her parents would not mind such a detail. His title and dukedom trumped all else. As with most aristocrats, her parents, as kind and delightful as they were, possessed something of an obsession with rank. To marry a duke was second only to marrying royalty, and Owen could have been hundred years old and still considered a worthy candidate.

“Not at all. We thank you for coming to speak with us, don’t we, my dear?” the Earl said.

Lady Dunne nodded. “We do. Certainly, we do.”

The Duke smiled. “I must say, I was delighted to make Lady Margaret’s

acquaintance at the ball. I didn't expect to meet anyone like her. She was... ever so understanding of my circumstances," he said, glancing at Margaret, who smiled.

Margaret still did not entirely understand the nature of those circumstances, or what precisely it was he was asking her to do. She wondered now if it was merely a matter of show.

Would they be betrothed before quietly separating? The possibility of scandal was high, but the Duke had seemed entirely sincere in his proposal—and entirely honest, too.

"A duke comes with unusual circumstances, but you have a title nobler than most, and estates and good fortune. I knew your father a little. He was... an interesting character," the Earl ventured.

The Duke laughed. "That's one way of putting it. My father was... not an easy man. I've spent a great deal of time on the continent in years gone by. We didn't get on very well, I make no secret of that. But that's all in the past. I'm here to forge a future, and that's what I hope Lady Margaret feels, too."

Margaret smiled. It was difficult to have a conversation with her parents in the room, and it seemed her mother sensed this, beckoning to the Earl to excuse them.

"I'm sure the two of you can be trusted to talk without a chaperone. Why not walk in the garden? We can watch you from the drawing room, but you can speak in private" Lady Dunne suggested.

Margaret nodded, rising to her feet, as her father opened the morning room doors leading onto the terrace at the back of the house.

The garden was long and narrow, bordered on one side by larch trees, and on the other by beds of flowers blossoming in the late spring sunshine. Owen offered Margaret his arm, and the two of them stepped outside into the warmth of the May sunshine, alone at last.

“I’m glad you received me,” he said.

Margaret laughed. “I wasn’t going to refuse to see you.”

He turned to her with a sheepish expression on his face. “I just feel... well, you can say no, of course. It’s all rather odd, isn’t it? What I’m asking of you, I mean. At the ball, I... rather took it for granted. But I shouldn’t have. You’re free to say no. It’s utterly ridiculous—all of it. Marrying for inheritance. My father was mad, and my brother is no better. He and Lady Jessie—oh, forgive me!” he exclaimed, but Margaret took his hand in hers, shushing him, even as he appeared despairing.

She had thought long and hard about his proposal, and given the alternative—represented by Lord Meadowcroft—she was at least willing to go along with his plan and see what would become of it. He intrigued her, and she was only too glad to think of those things they might share together.

“It’s quite all right. You don’t need to apologize,” she said.

The Duke looked at her and sighed. “You’re very kind, Lady Margaret. But I do need to apologize. I’ve behaved appallingly. I must say, you played your role with all the skill of a Shakespearean actor, even as it was thrust upon you. But courting, pretending, even marrying... can I ask that of you? We’re perfect strangers, and I couldn’t impose on you in such a way.”

Margaret shook her head. “I think it’s all rather fun. And don’t worry, I’m perfectly able to think it through for myself. I’ve still got a lot of questions, though. What does it really mean? We marry and that secures your inheritance?” she asked.

The Duke nodded, raising his eyebrows, a hopeful look now coming over his face. “Precisely. My brother’s debts are insurmountable. If he marries first, the creditors take it all. If you and I marry, I claim the inheritance—my rightful inheritance—and I help my brother, too. As for you and I... well, we’d be bound by marriage, of course, and we all know how difficult it is to extract oneself from that, though I often wonder why, given our Church was founded on a divorce. Anyway, I’d expect nothing of you, and you’d be well taken care of, I promise. You’d be free to do as you please, to go where you wish, and make of my fortune your own,” he said, smiling at her with a resigned look as she nodded.

It sounded all too good to be true, but Margaret could not help but wonder what would become of him, too. Would happiness factor in this? And what about an heir to his dukedom?

They had come to the far end of the garden, where a bench stood beneath a rose arbor, the buds close to emerging, and the slightest scent of perfume hanging in the air. They sat down facing one another, the Duke looking resigned to his fate, even as Margaret still had further questions.

“I want to help you, I really do. I mean it. I think it’s awful what your father did, and it seems your brother can’t be trusted with the fortune he seems hell-bent on claiming for himself and Lady Jessie. But what about you? Don’t you want to fall in love? And what about an heir to the fortune and the dukedom?” she asked.

Owen sighed and shook his head. To her surprise, he reached out and took her hand in his, their eyes meeting, his narrowing. “I fear my own happiness lies dashed on the rocks,” he said.

Margaret felt terribly sorry for him.

“Oh, don’t say that. It doesn’t have to be that way. I suppose... if you fell in love, I’d not be jealous,” she murmured, even as it seemed a strange way in which to live, and one she could hardly condone.

Her parents and sisters would be horrified at the very suggestion, and Margaret knew such a lie would be difficult to live with.

The Duke looked at her and shook his head, still holding her hand in his. A shiver ran through her. His touch reminded her of the ball, the intimacy as he had dabbed at her dress, the near kiss. She shifted a little, moving closer to him as she did so.

“I couldn’t do that to you, Lady Margaret. No, it’s not fair, and it’s not fair on you either. What if you fell in love yourself? I’d be a cruel companion if I forbade it. No, it’s not right!” he exclaimed, pulling back his hand and rising to his feet, as though his mind was now made up.

But Margaret seized his hand in hers, pulling him back to her with an imploring tug.

“Please, it doesn’t have to be like that. Haven’t we already discovered that we have many shared interests and pleasures? Literature, the arts, music, the possibility of travel and seeing far-off places? Mightn’t we become... friendly companions?” she asked.

He looked at her and smiled, sitting back down next to her, this time closer, the folds of her skirts pressed against his leg, their bodies almost touching, holding her gaze with his deep blue eyes. “Really, Lady Margaret, you’re quite a remarkable creature,” he said.

Margaret blushed. She did not think of herself as being remarkable, not at all. Compared to her sisters, she was nothing, or so she believed.

“I’m nothing of the sort, Your Grace. But I want to help. I think it’s dreadfully unfair what your father has done, and besides, I think it’s for our mutual benefit.”

The Duke looked at her curiously. “I don’t understand. How could solving my problems benefit you?” he asked.

Margaret smiled. She thought back to the attentions of Lord Meadowcroft at the ball. If he was the sort of man she attracted, she was glad to think herself freed from the possibility of such a courtship.

The Duke of Repington represented a far better prospect than anyone else. In his company, in a marriage to him, Margaret would be free to pursue her own interests—to read and write, practice her music, develop her interests in botany and art. There was no end to the possibilities this match represented, not to mention satisfying her parents and sisters.

“Because I’m nothing special, Your Grace. I’ve lived my whole life in my sisters’ shadow. They excel in everything, whilst I remain a shrinking violet. For once, I want to forge my own path. You’ve presented me with a choice—a very unusual one, I admit, but a choice, and one I’m glad of. I’ve considered your proposal, I’ve asked you all manner of questions, and I’m satisfied you’re not playing me for a fool, or the object of a cruel joke. If I can help you, I will. And perhaps we can be friends, too.”

The Duke sighed and shook his head, reaching out and taking her hand in his. “On the contrary, Lady Margaret. I think you’re a very special woman indeed. I can’t say I understand entirely why you’ve agreed to do this with me. But I assure you, I’ll do all I can to make your life comfortable. I can’t promise I’ll always be the best of husbands, but... well, we can muddle along, can’t we?”

Margaret nodded. “I think we can do more than that. I’m willing to try, at least,” she said, and he smiled at her. To her surprise, he leaned further forward and kissed her on the cheek.

“Then I suppose we’d better make a good pretense at it, hadn’t we? If we’re to court, it needs to look right. Balls, picnics, the theater—that sort of thing.”

Margaret shook her head. “No balls. Well, not unless we have to. Couldn’t we... break the mold a little?” she asked as they rose and walked together

back towards the house.

“I’d be pleased to. But what did you have in mind? What might we do to be seen in Society? You know what it’ll be like. We’ll be talked about far and wide,” the Duke reminded her.

Margaret nodded. She remembered the frenzy when Anne had married Jason—it had been the talk of every salon and drawing room in London—and she had no doubt the same would be the case for her and Owen.

“I know, but I don’t want to be ogled over at balls. Why not a visit to Kew? We could tour the botanic gardens together. They’re always adding new plants to the collection. I hear they’ve plans to build a glass house, too,” she suggested, for plants were a particular interest of hers, and she was keen to see the new exhibits at the botanic gardens.

The Duke smiled and nodded. “What a marvelous idea. We can go together. Forget the Season, we don’t need it any longer, do we?”

Margaret smiled. She had almost expected him to laugh at her, to ridicule her for such an interest, but he appeared genuinely glad of her suggestion, and it was agreed they would go to Kew the following day, along with a visit to Covent Garden and the opera house, where a performance was to take place on Friday evening. Lady Dunne was thrilled, and she assured the Duke of her gratitude on Margaret’s behalf.

“We’re so pleased, Your Grace. Really, it’s the most wonderful news we’ve had in months,” she gushed as the Duke was shown to the door.

“Well, I think it’s... rather wonderful for me, too,” he replied, glancing at Margaret, who smiled.

“Good day, Your Grace,” she said as Owen took his leave.

As the door closed, Lady Dunne let out a cry of delight, turning to Margaret and seizing her by the shoulders.

“I’d never have thought it. Oh, I had you resigned to spinsterhood. The maiden aunt, poor Aunt Margaret, she never married and lived with our grandparents until they died—that’s what I feared Louisa and Talbot would say about you, Margaret. You’d be pitied from here to Bath, compared to your sisters at every turn. But now... well, a duchess in the family. You’ll outrank us all, Margaret!” she screeched, clapping her hands together in delight.

Margaret was somewhat taken aback by the admission of her mother at having so readily written her fortunes off and consigned her to the shame of spinsterhood. But there was no doubting her mother’s evident joy, and the rest of the day was spent in a mood of happy celebration, as the entire household rejoiced in Margaret’s apparent good fortune.

“The botanic gardens? What sort of a place is that to go?” Hannah said as they sat in the drawing room later that afternoon.

“I like the botanic gardens, and he likes them, too,” Margaret replied.

Anne smiled. "If you want to go to the botanic gardens, Margaret, you go to them. I'm sure it's charming, and he's certainly a dear to indulge your wishes. He's clearly besotted with you. Entirely in love," she said, pulling out her fan as she spoke.

Margaret smiled. It was a strange situation. Love did not come into it, but she felt certain a mutual affection could be established, one from which both parties benefitted. She wanted to help Owen, and it seemed he was willing to make her life comfortable in return.

But as she looked forward to their next meeting, she could not help but wonder how it would really work, and whether it was possible to enact a marriage without the slightest hint of feeling between the two of them.

CHAPTER 7



“*S*he’s really going ahead with it?” Edwin asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

He had been waiting for Owen’s return from the home of the Earl and Countess of Dunne. He had wagered a small sum against Owen, finding himself disappointed, but now he stared at him in astonishment as the Duke threw himself down in an armchair and smiled.

“Why wouldn’t she? I think it’s... all rather wonderful,” Owen said, even as he, too, was surprised at Margaret’s acceptance.

Owen had expected to be rebuffed, even fearing Margaret had revealed everything to her parents. But the Earl and Countess could not have been more enthusiastic as to the match, and Margaret, too, had been entirely in agreement.

“But she can’t possibly marry you. It’s outrageous!” Edwin spluttered, pacing back and forth in front of Owen, who laughed and waved his hand dismissively.

“Is it really so unlikely? She’s a delight. I think we’ll be perfectly happy together,” Owen said.

Edwin groaned. “It’s not about being happy together. You’re going to live a lie. You *can’t* be happy together—neither of you!”

But Owen *was* happy. He had taken a risk, and that risk had paid off. It was certainly surprising, but a welcome surprise, and one he was not about to object to. He had given Margaret every opportunity to refuse him. She had not done so. Indeed, she had given him every reason to think she was happy with their unusual arrangement.

“She doesn’t want to marry some awful rake like Lord Meadowcroft. I told you how miserable she looked with him chasing after her. Well, I’ve given her a way out. Her parents were breathing down her neck, and her sisters had both married into high society. I think she feels somewhat second best,” Owen replied.

He had felt sorry for Margaret. She lived in the shadows of others and existed in a world where caring about appearance mattered more than taking an interest in books or learning. Margaret could not be the woman she was, not if she was expected to make a suitable match, and Owen wanted only to help her, as much as he knew she would be helping him, too.

“And you’re going to throw away your own chances of happiness for this—for what?” Edwin continued, throwing up his hands in exasperation.

“What happiness? If I don’t marry, my father’s fortune goes to Aaron, and then it goes into the pockets of every creditor in London. There’s no happiness in that, is there?” Owen retorted.

Edwin sighed and shook his head. “No, I suppose not, but I still think you’re making a mistake. The will could be contested,” he argued, but Owen had heard enough.

The will was not about to be contested. It was as it was. Owen knew his brother was treating the whole thing as a game and had already concluded his own victory. But he was not about to allow the matter to pass without a fight. Aaron would not inherit the fortune, nor would that fortune be squandered to creditors. Owen intended to be fair, but his brother could not be trusted with money, and Owen was not about to make the mistake of allowing him to be so.

“No, Edwin. Trust me, please. Wait until you meet her. You’ll see. She’s... different,” Owen insisted.

He had been impressed by Margaret. She was not like so many other women. She knew her mind and spoke it. Owen had answered her questions. He had been honest with her as to the practicalities and implications of their arrangement. There were no secrets hidden from her, and he was only too happy to think the arrangement could be settled between them.

“I doubt that. And I doubt she’ll make it easy for you, Owen. Once you’re married, she’s got you over a barrel. Think of the demands she could make of you,” Edwin pointed out.

Owen knew his friend—his closest friend—was only trying to protect him. But desperate times called for desperate measures, even as he thought back to Margaret’s words about friendship.

A marriage should be based on friendship—and love, ideally. But a marriage of convenience was different. Theirs would not be the first, far from it. But whilst other marriages of this sort often failed—and for good reason—Owen felt certain that theirs could work, if only the spark of friendship could continue. He had never allowed himself to become friends with a woman—in the past, it had seemed a sign of weakness—but in Margaret, he found something of a kindred spirit, and he felt certain that the two of them could be friends.

“And the alternative?” Owen asked.

At that moment, the door to the drawing room opened, and Owen’s manservant, James, announced Aaron’s arrival.

Owen had been staying in his London townhouse since the reading of the will, and Aaron was lodging close by—the race, it seemed, better run in the capital, rather than amongst country Society, where choice was limited. Owen groaned; he had come to loathe the company of his brother, even though he knew he could not be rude.

“Ah, Owen. Good day, Edwin,” Aaron drawled, entering the room a moment later.

“Aaron,” Owen said, rising to his feet.

His brother wasted no time in helping himself to brandy from the sideboard, and Edwin made his excuses, promising to call on Owen later in the week.

“I’ll let you know what happens next,” Owen said as he bid his friend goodbye.

Aaron sat down in a chair by the hearth, swirling his glass of brandy in one hand and tapping his fingers on the armrest with the other.

“Well, Brother. Lady Margaret Colborne. You’re quite the talk of the ton, you know,” Aaron said, smiling at Owen, who sat down opposite him and shook his head.

“I am sure of it, Aaron,” Owen said, and his brother laughed.

“They’re saying how surprising it is we both find ourselves betrothed at the same time, after so many years of bachelorhood.”

“Let them think what they like. I’m not about to reveal the clause in our father’s will to the world,” Owen scoffed.

Aaron narrowed his eyes. “And does Lady Margaret know about it?” he asked.

Owen felt suddenly uncomfortable, shaking his head and waving his hand dismissively. “No. Why should she? It hardly matters, does it? The happy fortune of falling in love.” He was not about to give his brother a claim to a false betrothal.

The marriage had to be one of genuine appearance to all, including Aaron.

“Because if she *did* know, she might be marrying you for the wrong reasons,” Aaron said, setting down his glass and bringing his fingers to a point.

“I could say the same for you and Lady Jessie Bowles,” Owen countered.

It worked both ways. Aaron could not marry for convenience, and neither could Owen. Whoever claimed the prize had to claim it legitimately, and not by false appearances.

Aaron laughed. “Oh, we’re very much in love. She knows... nothing,” he said, still smiling at Owen, who felt certain his would-be sister-in-law knew everything.

“I’m sure you are. As am I with Lady Margaret. Tell me, Aaron, are you any closer to securing your marriage license?” Owen asked.

This was Aaron’s Achille’s heel. Not only did the marriage have to be genuine, but it also had to be legal. There were certain ramifications as to a betrothal, and securing the legalities was not entirely easy. Should the validity of the marriage be challenged, Owen could have a claim against it,

and vice versa.

Aaron looked suddenly angry. “There’s been a delay. I don’t know what over. But there’s been one. But it won’t be long, I assure you,” he gritted out, finishing his brandy in one gulp.

“I’d hate to think you experienced a delay,” Owen drawled, enjoying his brother’s discomfort, as Aaron rose to his feet.

Aaron shot Owen a glare. “Oh, I assure you, Owen, there won’t be. We’ll be married before you know it, and then... well, you’ll see.”

Owen sighed. “And what about your debts, Aaron? Did Father think about those when he placed this ridiculous struggle between us?”

Aaron’s eyes grew wide with anger. It was clear he had not expected Owen to say such a thing, and he stepped forward angrily.

“What about them? They’re none of your business!”

Owen shook his head. “They’re certainly my business. It’s *my* money you’ll be using to pay off your debts. Whatever Father’s silly little games seek to prove, I’m the rightful heir. This shouldn’t ever have happened,” he said, his anger boiling over.

Aaron pointed his finger angrily at him. “Yes, there you go again, just as

usual, Owen. You're entitled, aren't you? Quite literally. It's your title, your estate, your fortune, your future. And you don't like it, do you? You don't like the fact our father gave me a chance to get the better of you. I've spent my whole life subordinate to you. Well, now you know what it feels like, Owen. You don't like it, do you? The chance you could lose, just because it's not your right to win. Well, I for one am enjoying myself," he said, a smirk coming over his face.

"But don't you see what's going to happen, Aaron? If you take the fortune, it'll be gone in a matter of weeks. You've got creditors demanding money at every turn. You can't hope to pay them off," Owen pointed out, longing for his brother to see sense.

The clause in the will was clear enough, but if the two of them could come to an amicable agreement, it could be annulled. A challenge would not be successful, but if they agreed for one of them to marry in the fullness of time, the fortune could be used to benefit them both. Owen did not want to see his younger brother destitute, but he feared he would have no choice if Aaron was determined to force through his marriage to Jessie before Owen could enact his own plan.

"You know nothing about it, Owen. You don't care about my debts or helping me. If you did, you might've been more understanding in the past, and realized what it's like to be the second son, the spare to the heir." Aaron shook his head.

Owen sighed. There could be no reasoning with Aaron. He was angry—rightly so, perhaps—and Owen knew he could not persuade him to the right course of action. This was Aaron's fight, and he had taken it as a personal challenge, one Owen could only fight and hope to win.

“But I do understand, Aaron. At least... I’ve tried to,” Owen replied, but his brother only laughed.

“Nonsense. You don’t care about me. Not at all.” And with that, Aaron turned on his heel and strode out of the room, banging the door behind him.

Owen was left alone, sighing at the thought of what was to come, and feeling terribly guilty for having dragged Margaret into the middle of it. He felt angry with his brother and was more than willing to give him the fight he wanted if that was his only choice.

What more can I do?

His only consolation was the thought of Margaret’s company the following day.

Apart from Edwin, she was the only person he could talk to about the sorry mess in which he now found himself. She seemed to understand, even as she had been somewhat surprised by the revelation and the part he had asked her to play.

“You can’t afford to ruin it,” he muttered to himself, pouring a glass of brandy and swirling it ponderously in his hand.

Owen did not want to ruin it. Margaret was a kind and caring woman—a good woman, and one he had no intention of hurting. But more so than that, he was beginning to feel something more for her. Those first moments at the

ball, the excitement he had felt in rescuing her from the Baron, that first encounter...

She's a sweet creature, very pretty, and so witty. Quite unlike the other silly girls.

And the more he thought about her, the more Owen realized there was more to his feelings for her than mere gratitude. He wondered if there could be more to their marriage than convenience...

CHAPTER 8



When the knock sounded at the front door, Margaret was waiting. She had seen the Duke's carriage from the drawing room window, and she hurried downstairs to greet him, reaching the door, just as her mother emerged from the morning room.

"Oh, Margaret, you look a picture!" Lady Dunne exclaimed as the butler hurried to open the front door.

Margaret blushed. She was grateful to her mother for her compliments, even as she found it somewhat amusing to be told she looked pretty. It was Hannah and Anne who were pretty, who received compliments accordingly. But as the door was opened, Margaret felt pleased to think of herself as the object of attention, rather than her sisters, who stood at the bottom of the stairs, watching as the Duke bowed.

"Lady Margaret, you look... beautiful," he praised.

Margaret smiled. "Oh, it's nothing, really," she said.

“Your Grace, I must say, what a delightful idea to walk together in the botanic gardens at Kew. So much nicer than a stuffy ballroom,” Lady Dunne gushed.

Margaret smiled. She knew her mother did not really think this—she had been as surprised as Hannah and Anne at the suggestion—but she was grateful to her for saying it, as the Duke now offered her his arm.

“Shall we go, Lady Margaret? The carriage awaits,” he said as the maid, Betty, hurried to join them.

“Goodbye, Margaret. Have a wonderful day,” Hannah called out, and Margaret smiled, amused at finding herself the center of attention.

The carriage was parked outside, the two horses standing to attention and the driver holding open the door for them.

“Thank you, Simpkins,” Owen said, helping Margaret into the compartment.

Betty would ride on the buckboard—the courting couple trusted to be alone in the compartment, if not amongst the flower beds at Kew.

Owen sat back with a sigh, smiling at Margaret, who sat opposite him.

“It’s terribly nice of you to humor me in this way,” she said.

Owen laughed. “I’m not humoring you at all, Lady Margaret. A walk in the botanic garden at Kew will do me good. I’ve been looking forward to it, and to your company, too. It was... ever so pleasant before,” he replied as the carriage set off down the street.

Margaret blushed, wondering if he was referring to the kiss they had almost shared at the ball. Had it meant the same to him as it had to her? The memory of it had lingered, even though she had been uncertain what it meant.

“You don’t need to pretend, Your Grace,” Margaret said.

The Duke shook his head. “I’m not, I assure you. I’m... glad of your company. As you said, the two of us can be friends, and this is what friends do. I’m looking forward to you showing me the various plants and telling me what you know about them. Flowers are... so beautiful,” he replied, smiling at her.

There was a sincerity in his voice, even as Margaret did not entirely believe he was as enthusiastic about the botanical gardens as he claimed. She had brought a volume about flora and fauna with her and hoped to identify many of the plants listed—with the help of the Duke, of course.

“I hope so. But you mustn’t feel we’re to do everything together. I know we’re trying to create an impression. But later, when we’re married... you mustn’t feel we’ve got to continue the charade. I’ll be quite happy in my own company. I usually am,” Margaret said, smiling at him as the carriage trundled along.

Margaret was used to doing things alone. Her mother and sisters were not interested in the same pursuits as her, and her father was always too busy to join her on excursions and outings. She enjoyed her own company, but it was refreshing to have that of another, and as they arrived at Kew, the Duke reiterated his gratitude for what she was doing.

“I can’t thank you enough, I really can’t,” he said as the carriage driver opened the door for them.

“There’s no need, I assure you. I’m only too glad to help you. It’s a pleasure. We each receive something from this arrangement,” Margaret returned as he helped her down.

A pleasant scent lingered in the air. They had left the dirt and filth of the city behind, and the air here was fresh and perfumed. The gardens stretched out on either side, a long walkway encircling lawns where beds were planted with all manner of different flowers and shrubs.

“What a marvelous place. I’ve never been here before, would you believe it?” Owen said.

Margaret smiled as Betty followed after them, keeping a watchful eye on them.

“It’s quite something. Let’s go and see the ferns. They’re my favorite. They make me think of lost worlds,” Margaret said, taking Owen by the hand and leading him along one of the paths, into an area planted as a woodland, where tall trees gave shade to the plants beneath.

There were foxgloves in purple and white, rising from fronds of ferns, and a deep pond was covered in water lilies, with their white flowers and large, flat, platelike leaves. Margaret took out her book, examined the index, and turned to the entry on foxgloves.

“What remarkable flowers,” the Duke observed.

“They’re quite poisonous, but beautiful, too. I wonder if they could be propagated in pink, crossing the two to make a third,” Margaret said, stooping down to examine the flowers and wondering if such a thing was possible.

“What an imagination you have, Margaret—Lady Margaret,” Owen said, and Margaret turned to him and smiled.

“If we’re to be married, I’m sure you can call me Margaret.”

The Duke laughed. “Very well, but stop using my title if you would. If I’m to be your husband, I can be Owen to your Margaret,” he countered.

Margaret smiled and nodded. “Margaret and Owen. It sounds rather fetching,” she admitted.

The Duke laughed once more. “Tell me more about the ferns. There’re dozens of them.” He looked around the wooded area, where the ground was covered in tall ferns and the air was heady with the damp scent of the earth.

Margaret consulted her book, and the two of them spent a pleasant hour or so together identifying the different species and taking examples of the leaves to press and dry.

“I think we’ve found at least twenty different varieties. I’d never have looked so closely on my own,” Margaret said.

The Duke appeared genuinely interested—or was remarkable for his ability to act the part. He had listened patiently as Margaret had read the varying descriptions to him and asked all manner of intelligent questions, some of which she had been unable to answer.

“I’m going to catalogue each of them and write a description of the leaf. I wonder... your estate in Buckinghamshire, does it have extensive gardens?” she asked.

The Duke nodded. “More than extensive—parkland, meadows, woodland. It’s a vast estate. Why, are you thinking of establishing a garden there?” he asked, smiling at her.

Margaret nodded. “Well, a duchess needs something to do. But think about it. We could establish our own Kew there. If we traveled as you proposed, we could bring back plants from the four corners of the earth. They plan to build a hothouse here, a sort of glass structure, heated inside. One could grow anything there. I think it’s wonderful,” she said, for she had read a great deal about such things and was eager to see one in reality.

The Duke smiled at her. “An excellent idea. I’m sure we’ll consider it,” he said, straightening up from examining one of the ferns.

Margaret felt pleased at the thought of what she could do as Duchess of Repington. She imagined the library filled with books and the garden filled with plants. The winter would be spent reading or traveling to warmer climes, and the summer would be spent establishing her garden, a place to rival Kew itself.

“I hope so,” she murmured as he offered her his arm.

They made their way from the wooded area, following a long walkway, where roses grew on either side and all manner of flowers were waiting to bloom in the late spring sunshine.

Margaret felt at ease in the Duke’s company. There was nothing overly formal in his mannerisms, not at all. He was a model of politeness, charm, and wit. She enjoyed his company. He was the first man, except her father and several distant cousins, with whom she had ever developed any meaningful connection. It felt strange—though pleasant—to be in his company, albeit with Betty only a few paces behind.

“I can’t believe I’ve never been here before. It’s marvelous,” he admitted as they sat together in a pavilion, where tea and coffee were served along with dainty cakes and savories.

Around them, other fashionably dressed men and women were sitting, and Margaret could feel herself being watched, recalling the words of her sisters.

Will we really be the talk of the ton?

She felt certain no one could possibly be interested in her and Owen.

“It’s lovely to be accompanied. I’m allowed to come here alone, sometimes, with Betty, of course,” Margaret said, glancing at her maid, who was sitting at the side of the pavilion, gazing out across the gardens.

“I’ve enjoyed it. I really have. You’re... delightful company, Lady Margaret. I mean it. When I’m with you, it’s as though... well... I think back to when we first met,” Owen murmured.

Margaret blushed. She did not consider herself to be delightful company. Far from it, in fact. She considered herself dull, and compared to her sisters, she was, or so she told herself. Her conversations were limited to books and music, along with the pleasures of gardening. She knew nothing about the gossip of the ton—people and intrigues. Such things did not interest her, even as they interested others.

But as for when they had first met, she, too, had those same thoughts in mind. His hand against her breast, their closeness... their lips almost meeting.

She looked down at her hands. “I’m really not. I don’t think I’m very interesting at all.”

Owen shook his head. “I think you rather downplay yourself, Lady Margaret.

You've been made to believe yourself uninteresting. But you're quite the opposite, I assure you. I'm so glad our paths crossed, and not only because, well... you know." He lowered his voice, glancing around the pavilion as he slipped his hand into hers.

A shiver ran through Margaret at his touch. It always did. Whenever he took her hand, she was reminded of their first encounter, the feeling of his hand against her breast...

"Do they believe us?" Margaret asked, leaning forward.

Owen nodded. "My brother came to me in quite a fit of excitement. He's convinced, and if only the matter can be hastened, I might still have a chance. I don't mean to rush you, but if the marriage was announced soon, we'd have no trouble enacting it. He and Lady Jessie Bowles are still waiting for their license. It's taking some time, but there's no reason for us to delay."

Margaret's heart skipped a beat. It was one thing to think about it, to promise it, even. But to know it was to come true...

"Yes, I see that. You can't delay the matter. If you do... well, the consequences would be unbearable. It has to look right, though, doesn't it? A couple doesn't simply marry immediately, do they?"

Owen shook his head.

Margaret thought back to her sisters. They had courted for several months

before an engagement was announced, and then the preparations for the weddings had taken a considerable amount of time. Each had been a large Society affair, with hundreds of guests in attendance. But Margaret did not want that. She saw no reason to invite a group of people she did not particularly like—the ton—to a wedding designed only for show. They could marry quietly with just their family and a few witnesses. Owen could claim his father's fortune that very day, and equilibrium would be restored.

“No, we've got to do it properly. We need to be seen again in public, several times, then ask your father's permission, of course,” Owen replied.

“He'll not say no. They're thrilled at the thought of my courting a duke. I'll outrank both my sisters and my parents,” Margaret said, laughing at the thought.

Owen smiled. “I really do want you to be happy, Margaret. If you ever want to step back from this, you only have to say.”

Margaret shook her head. “I've made a promise, haven't I? Besides, I'm growing accustomed to the idea now. Plenty of couples marry for convenience. Indeed, I think a lot marry for far less—the necessity of a match, the insistence of their parents. At least the two of us know what we're entering into, and are doing so freely,” she pointed out.

Owen nodded. “You're right. I just feel... well, I've placed a considerable burden on you.”

Margaret shook her head in reassurance. “Not at all. I'm not burdened, if

anything, I'm relieved. Was Lord Meadowcroft really the best I could've hoped for?" she asked.

The Duke laughed. "Ah, but you mustn't feel burdened by me. If there's another man whom you encounter..." he trailed off.

Margaret blushed. She could not imagine herself enjoying such good fortune again. Other men were quite different, and she would be happy to play along with the ruse for appearances' sake, even as she knew the Duke himself might think differently.

"I'm sure I won't. But you must..." she replied, feeling suddenly awkward.

The Duke blushed. "Well, no... Anyway, I'm glad you feel the way you do," he said, and Margaret nodded.

Her mind was made up. She had every intention of helping him and was only too glad to think she could do so through a marriage beneficial to her, too.

Despite her earlier misgivings, Margaret rather liked the thought of being spoken of in the salons and drawing rooms of the capital. She had proved the chattering tongues wrong. She was not a shy, retiring wallflower, but a woman capable of securing the affections of none other than the Duke of Repington himself. They had spent a pleasant day together, and as they climbed into the waiting carriage later on, she felt certain further pleasures awaited them both.

“Will you still deign to join me in Covent Garden on Friday evening? It’s Shakespeare, I believe, though I forget which play—a comedy, I think,” Owen asked as they rode together in the carriage.

“*The Comedy of Errors*. I checked. And yes, I’d be delighted to. My sisters might come, too. They’re quite obsessed with my making a match. Their husbands must feel quite neglected,” Margaret replied, for neither Hannah nor Anne had shown any signs of a desire to return to their respective homes.

Anne wanted to remain in London until the baby was born, and Hannah would not be left out—not for anything.

Owen laughed. “I’m sure I don’t mind. We’ve kept up the pretense so far, haven’t we?”

The matter was settled, and as they arrived back at her parents’ house, the Duke promised to return on Friday evening, in good time for them to get to Covent Garden for the evening performance.

As Margaret was helped down from the carriage by her maid, the Duke reached out and caught her by the hand, causing her to turn towards him and blush.

“It’s been a wonderful day,” she said.

He brought her hand to his lips, holding it in a lingering grasp, looking up at her with a mischievous gaze. “Truly, it has,” he murmured.

Margaret allowed the moment to linger. She was enjoying it—his touch, his attention. It was as though they really were a courting couple.

“I really have had the most delightful day,” she said, and to her utmost surprise, he said the same in return.

CHAPTER 9



“Well?” Hannah exclaimed as she and Anne hurried to meet Margaret, even as the butler had only just closed the door behind her.

Betty smiled, and Margaret rolled her eyes. She had known her sisters would be waiting, and now she glanced out of the window, watching as the Duke’s carriage drove away.

“It was very pleasant,” Margaret replied, and her sisters tutted.

“You can’t leave it at that, Margaret. We’ve been waiting all day to hear about it, and all you can say is it was pleasant!” Anne exclaimed, throwing her arms up in the air in exasperation.

Margaret smiled. She remembered waiting for her sisters to return from their dates. She and Hannah, or she and Anne, would do just the same as was now being done to her—a barrage of questions, excited exclamations, and the thrill of hearing more about the gentleman in question. It still felt strange to be the center of attention and to be in the midst of a courtship of her own,

albeit one without true meaning.

“We went to the garden at Kew and looked at the ferns. He was very interested in them,” Margaret replied.

Her sisters exchanged glances.

“Ferns? You had him look at ferns, Margaret? We dressed you up in pretty clothes, prepared you all morning, and you take him to look at ferns?” Anne scoffed, with a tone of exasperation.

Margaret was not entirely sure what she had done wrong. The Duke—Owen—had enjoyed their walk in the gardens. They had not stopped talking, and if his interest had been false, it had been well feigned.

“He has an estate in Buckinghamshire. We talked about the possibility of establishing a garden there, one to rival Kew itself,” Margaret persisted.

But it was clear her sisters would never understand why she had talked of such matters rather than appearing merely interested in those things Owen himself was concerned with.

“If you want him to court you—to marry you—he needs to think you prefer him to anything else. You do, don’t you? Your interests are... somewhat niche,” Hannah advised as the three of them made their way up to the drawing room.

Margaret did not immediately answer. She was not about to sacrifice her interests for those of Owen, nor had he asked her to do so. He was nothing like her sisters assumed, and she had no reason to believe she should behave as they expected her to.

“But he enjoyed our outing. He said so, at least. Besides, I’m seeing him again on Friday evening.”

At these words, her sisters breathed a sigh of relief.

“Oh, thank goodness. We feared you’d put him off,” Hannah said, patting Margaret’s hand, as though they both believed she needed constant guidance if she was ever to achieve what they themselves believed to be their own greatest achievements—marriage and children.

“We’re going to Covent Garden, to the opera house. There’s a performance of Shakespeare—*The Comedy of Errors*,” Margaret added.

Anne clapped her hands together in delight. “How wonderful! We’ll come with you, won’t we, Hannah? Betty won’t want to sit through that, I’m sure,” she said, even as it seemed the maid had no choice in the matter.

Margaret glanced back at Betty, who was following them upstairs, and raised her eyebrows.

“Well... if you’re sure you’d enjoy it. The seats can be awfully cramped, Anne. I’m not sure you’ll be comfortable,” Margaret pointed out.

Anne dismissed her with a wave of her hand. “We’ll have a box. I doubt the Duke of Repington would sit in the pits. No, we’ll have a box, and the whole ton can see you, our sister, courting one of the richest men in the country.”

Margaret nodded. There was no point in dissuading her sister from the truth, and no reason to suggest that the Duke of Repington was *not* one of the richest men in the country.

But Margaret knew the truth, and if their marriage was not soon announced, the Duke would be penniless, and a scandal would be certain to follow...

* * *

“The gardens at Kew? To look at ferns?” Edwin asked, a slight sneer coming over his face.

Owen blushed. He knew it was not quite the risqué encounter of a rake or the brash affair of a monied gentleman, but he had enjoyed his time with Margaret far more than he had expected.

“Yes. We walked in the grounds, she told me a great deal about the plants, and we took tea in a pavilion overlooking the lawns,” Owen replied, thinking back to the time he had spent with Margaret and looking forward to seeing her again.

He and Edwin were drinking brandy at Boodles Club, sitting in their usual position by the window.

“How idyllic. And can you really see yourself doing so for your whole life? It’s hardly the existence I’d have imagined for you, Owen,” Edwin said, shaking his head as he swirled a large glass of brandy in his hand.

Owen had thought a great deal about the time he had spent with Margaret. Edwin was right. It was far from what expectations might have promised.

Most women were more interested in looking pretty and fluttering their fans than discussing the Latin names of ferns and taking samples to press and dry. But it was this difference Owen found alluring—attractive, even. There was something different about Margaret. She was a delightful creature, shy and retiring, even as she could bloom under the right circumstances.

In the gardens at Kew, he had seen that side of her, a side hidden when it came to balls and soirees. He was looking forward to seeing her again, and a visit to the theater would provide ample opportunity to see that blossoming side of her again.

“And what existence would you have imagined for me? To be like my brother? I couldn’t think of anything worse,” Owen retorted.

He knew how his brother behaved. Aaron would stop at nothing to win the game. That was how he saw it. There was nothing serious in the matter—the reputation of the dukedom, or its future worth. This was a game, and he would do anything to win it, even if it meant bringing down the dukedom altogether. He had always been in competition with Owen, always out for his own advantage.

“You’re nothing like your brother, thank goodness. But I urge you to think about your own happiness, Owen. Can you really marry this woman for the sake of your father’s foolishness?” Edwin asked.

It was a question Owen had asked himself. He had dreaded the possibility of marrying for the sake of securing the inheritance, and whilst the stipulation was for a genuine marriage, he had feared he would have to deceive himself if he was to secure the money. Falling in love was not easy. It did not simply happen, even with the intention of doing so—the necessity of doing so.

“Can I love her, you mean?” Owen asked.

Edwin shrugged. “You said it.”

Owen thought for a moment. Margaret was a delightful creature, and there was no doubt as to the blossoming friendship between them, as unlikely as it might have seemed. But as for love, he was uncertain. He had told women he loved them in the past. They had said the same to him, neither of them meaning it.

He thought back to fleeting affairs on the continent, the whispered words of an early morning parting. But that was not love—not true love. Not the sort of love to endure or to base a marriage on. It was that sort of love Owen had never known.

He had never been in love, not truly, and now he wondered if he could ever be so, with Margaret or with any woman, for that matter.

“I don’t know. That’s the honest answer. I can certainly tolerate her. More than that, I can enjoy her company. I can... She’s a delightful creature,” Owen said, finishing his brandy in one gulp and rising to his feet.

He felt suddenly uncomfortable, his feelings for Margaret growing confusing.

“And you’ll go with her to Covent Garden tomorrow and be seen by the whole ton? There’ll be no backing out of it then, Owen,” Edwin cautioned, but Owen dismissed him with a wave of his hand.

“No, I’ve made up my mind. I’ve got to do it, Edwin. I can’t let Aaron take the money and destroy the estate. I’ve worked too hard to allow that to happen.” Owen nodded to his friend, then hurried out of the club, knowing the decision had been made.

CHAPTER 10



“*The Comedy of Errors*? That’s the one set in the Athenian woodland, with all those curiously named characters—Puck and Bottom,” Lady Dunne said.

Margaret shook her head. “You’re thinking of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Mother. This one’s set in Greece, in Ephesus. But it’s about separated twins and the mishaps of identity,” she replied.

The Comedy of Errors was one of her favorite Shakespeare plays, though she had never before seen it performed. It was Friday afternoon, and her sisters had spent several hours getting her ready for Owen’s arrival.

“But who cares about the play? It’s your being with His Grace that matters. A far better choice than a walk amongst some old ferns,” Anne said, tutting, as she struggled to rise to her feet.

Hannah was standing at the drawing room window, and now she gave an excited cry, turning to beckon Margaret to join her. “He’s here. Come and see. We’ll watch him get out of the carriage.”

Anne hurried over, as best she could, and Margaret followed, somewhat less enthusiastic at the mere sight of a man alighting from his means of transportation.

“Isn’t he handsome?” Anne gushed, peering down at the Duke, who was dressed in a blue frock coat, with a scarlet cravat at the neck, a white shirt, breeches, and highly polished black boots.

“I can hardly believe Margaret’s luck,” Hannah murmured.

Margaret was not certain whether to take this as a compliment or not.

Indeed, there had been surprise in many quarters as to the apparent courtship between the Earl of Dunne’s youngest daughter and the Duke of Repington. The visit to the gardens at Kew had not gone uncommented on, and Lady Dunne had returned from tea at a fashionable salon the previous day to inform Margaret she was already the talk of the ton.

“Come now, my dears. We must go and meet His Grace,” Lady Dunne said, clapping her hands.

Hannah and Anne jostled Margaret out of the drawing room, whispering excitedly about the prospect of the evening to come. Margaret was dressed in a red dress, her shoulders covered with an ivory shawl, and she had matching slippers on her feet. She was wearing jewelry given to her by her mother for the evening—pearl earrings and a matching necklace.

“We’ll not crowd you, Margaret,” Hannah assured her, even as Margaret felt certain that her sisters would be watching her every move.

Their mother was coming, too, and she feared there would be little opportunity for her and the Duke to speak in private.

The butler had just opened the door, and the Duke was standing on the threshold as Margaret and her sisters descended the stairs. He smiled at Margaret and bowed.

“Good evening, and how pleasant it is to see you again—all of you. You all look a picture of loveliness,” Owen greeted.

Margaret blushed.

“We’re honored, Your Grace,” Anne returned, holding onto the banister as she did her best to curtsy.

“It’s my honor, truly, and I hope you’ll enjoy the performance this evening. My carriage awaits,” the Duke said as Margaret stepped forward.

He held out his arm to her, and she took it, smiling at him as they stepped across the threshold.

“I’ve been looking forward to seeing you,” she murmured, and he returned her smile.

“I’ve been looking forward to seeing you, too,” he replied, and there was a genuine sincerity in his voice, such that Margaret could not help but believe him.

A footman opened the carriage door for them, and the three sisters and their mother—with some difficulty—enfolded themselves into the compartment. Their dresses took up considerable room, and Anne found it difficult to sit down, even as everyone squeezed in.

Margaret sat next to the Duke, who was trying hard not to laugh as Anne maneuvered her considerable figure into place.

“There, now. I think I’m ready,” Anne huffed as Margaret giggled.

The carriage set off through the streets, the early evening sun casting a warm glow over the buildings, as they joined the throng of carriages on the main thoroughfare leading to Covent Garden.

“I do so love the theater,” Hannah said.

The Duke nodded. “I haven’t been for a while. On the continent, it was all about opera. Warbling women and enormous baritones. I enjoyed it, to an extent. But I far prefer Shakespeare,” he admitted.

Margaret nodded. “Me, too. I’ve seen so many of his plays, but not this one.”

He smiled. “Then we’ll see it together,” he said as the carriage pulled up outside the opera house.

A stream of fashionably dressed men and women were entering the opera house, and Owen helped the three sisters and their mother down, ushering them through the doors and into the entrance hall, where a large crowd was jostling.

“Oh, how awful!” Hannah exclaimed as they were caught up in the throng.

“This way, we’re to be seated in a box,” the Duke informed them as Margaret helped Anne, and Hannah took their mother’s arm.

Owen led the way, and they were soon climbing up a lushly carpeted staircase to a corridor running behind the boxes, where stewards were scurrying back and forth carrying drinks and refreshments.

Despite the light of the evening outside, the theater itself was dark, and the corridor was lit by candles burning in sconces. The Duke led them to the far end, opening a door to reveal a box with an excellent view of the stage. Chairs were arranged at the front, and as they took their seats, Margaret could see the whole vista of the opera house laid out before them.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” she gasped, marveling at the gilding and baroque decoration.

The stage was draped with thick velvet curtains, and there was a sense of expectation in the air, the audience below exchanging hushed whispers as the stewards tried to quieten them.

“I do love the theater, though it can become quite rowdy down there,” Owen said, indicating the mass of people below dimly lit by candlelight.

Only the stage was properly illuminated, a mass of candles burning in candelabras on each side, and with presumably more behind the curtains. Margaret was sitting next to Owen, and to her surprise—though unexpected pleasure—he slipped his hand into hers.

“Draw a little closer to the balcony edge. Then we’ll be better seen. These boxes are full of aristocrats. If we’re not already being talked about, we will be soon,” he whispered in her ear.

Margaret looked across the theater to the boxes on the far side, and she was surprised to see several pairs of opera glasses pointed in their direction. It continued to astonish her just how the simple fact of a man and a woman showing interest in one another was enough to elicit an endless stream of gossip, intrigue, and speculation, and she wondered if the ton had anything better to do than reside in a permanent state of speculation.

“I suppose we should be glad to be seen,” Margaret replied, and the Duke nodded.

“We’ll be the talk of the ton,” he said, smiling at her.

Lady Dunne was in deep conversation with Hannah and Anne—perhaps purposefully—and Margaret was pleased to have this opportunity to speak with the Duke.

“I hope you enjoyed seeing the gardens at Kew. I’ve pressed the ferns we collected. There was a dozen of them, and I’ve labeled each of them,” Margaret said.

The Duke smiled. “You’re really quite different from other women, aren’t you?”

Margaret blushed. She did not know whether to take this as a compliment or not, though she had never been overly concerned about being different. She was happy in her difference. She liked it and had no intention of changing, not for anyone.

“And are you different from other men?” she asked.

Margaret still did not have the full measure of the Duke. She knew his predicament, and those things he had told her about himself and his brother. But as for who he was—who he really was—that was still to be seen.

“I hope I’m different enough,” Owen replied.

“How so?” Margaret asked, turning to him with a smile.

His features were enhanced in the candlelight—his handsome face, his smile, the look in his eyes...

A shiver ran through her, and he leaned forward to whisper in her ear, “Because I want to be. I don’t want to be like those other men who court silly women for their own pleasures. I know you’re different.”

Margaret did not know if this was all part of the act, but as the curtains rose, and silence fell on the theater, his hand was still clasped in hers, even though no one could see them.

“Proceed, Solinus to procure my fall, and by the doom of death end woes and all...”

The play began, the actors emerging into the center of the stage as the audience applauded.

Margaret sat back, her hand still clasped in Owen’s, whether for show or genuine purpose, she was not sure. He *was* different, but how different remained to be seen.

* * *

“Nay, then, thus: we came into the world like brother and brother; and now let’s go hand in hand, not one before another,” the actor said as *The Comedy of Errors* came to an end.

There had been much mirth and laughter during the performance, and Margaret clapped enthusiastically as the actors came to take their bows. Cheers rang out from the audience below, and Owen rose to his feet, applauding with a “*bravo!*”

“Marvelous, absolutely marvelous!” he exclaimed, turning to Margaret, who had also risen to her feet.

“Did you feel it to be somewhat personal?” Margaret asked, for it had occurred to her that a story about brothers was something to which Owen could surely relate.

He smiled at her and nodded. “I don’t think Aaron and I will ever go hand in hand, not one before another. If anything, he wants to push me aside and take the prize,” he replied as the applause died down.

“Did you enjoy the performance, Margaret?” Lady Dunne asked as they gathered themselves and made their way out of the box.

“I thought the actors were superb. It was wonderful!” Margaret gushed, for she had thoroughly enjoyed the evening, and the company of the Duke, who now took her arm and held her back.

“I wonder, Lady Margaret, would you like to meet the principal actors? I know them. We could go backstage,” he offered.

Margaret nodded.

It was a marvelous idea, and with her mother and sisters already making their way down the corridor, the two of them turned around, heading in the opposite direction, those in the other boxes having dispersed, leaving the corridor empty.

“Do you really know the actors?” she asked as they found themselves alone.

“No... I just... I wanted a moment alone with you, that’s all. It’s so difficult, isn’t it? We’re supposed to be a courting couple and yet... we’re not trusted to be in one another’s company without a chaperone. Come in here,” Owen said, pulling back the curtain of one of the boxes and ushering her inside the plush interior.

The theater was dark now, and the box was lit only by the guttering ends of a candle. Margaret’s heart was beating fast, and she felt his hand slip around her waist. Was this, too, part of the ruse? Were others meant to think they were sharing an intimacy they were not?

“Should we be doing this?” she asked hesitantly, knowing that her mother and sisters would be waiting for her.

“Oh, but... why not? We’re meant to be together, aren’t we? Let them think what they want. I wanted... well, oh, I don’t know. It’s all so confusing, isn’t it?” Owen replied, his arm still around her waist.

Margaret, too, was confused. She did not know why he should be saying such things. For, all intents and purposes, they appeared every bit the courting

couple. First a chaperoned walk in the gardens at Kew, and now an evening spent together at the theater. The scene was set for further courtship, and it was certain that the chattering tongues and whispers behind the fans would relay this scene far and wide. For it to be known they had been alone, and yet...

“I don’t understand,” Margaret murmured, her heart beating fast, his arm drawing her further into his embrace.

“I wanted to... kiss you,” Owen whispered. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers.

Margaret had not expected it, but now she was caught up in it, filled with delight at the sensation of his lips against hers. As they parted, she felt breathless, not knowing what to make of it, even as Owen reasserted himself.

“Goodness,” she breathed.

Owen laughed. “Well... I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking. It just seemed... Oh, this isn’t easy, is it?” he exclaimed.

Margaret smiled. She slipped her hand into his and squeezed it. “Come along. They’ll be wondering where we are. It’s not easy, I know. But... it might be if we really want it to be,” she replied.

They joined the throng leaving the theater, but as they emerged from the theater and into the dusk of the late evening, Margaret saw her mother and

sisters huddled together, and Anne now let out a cry.

“Oh, goodness me, I felt... No, it can't be,” Anne cried, clutching at her stomach.

Lady Dunne let out a cry of fear, and Hannah swiftly took Anne by the arms, supporting her as Margaret hurried over and Owen left to summon his carriage.

“It's too early for the baby to come,” Lady Dunne gasped, fanning at Anne, who looked as though she was about to faint.

“Quickly, get her into the carriage,” the Duke instructed as his carriage pulled up and the driver and footman jumped down to assist.

They had some difficulty in getting Anne into the compartment. She had fainted, though she was now regaining consciousness, and they placed her on the seat, laying her back, as the rest squeezed onto the other side, with Margaret next to Owen, who called for the driver to make all haste to return Anne home.

“What's happened to her, Mother?” Hannah asked, as she, too, fanned Anne, trying to revive her.

“It was terribly warm in the theater. She shouldn't have come. Oh, how terrible! We'll have to send for Jason at once, and a doctor, though a midwife might be more appropriate,” Lady Dunne replied in a rush, her face set in an

anxious expression.

Margaret glanced at Owen. He looked terribly worried, and she patted his hand, giving him a reassuring smile. "I'm sure it'll be all right," she said.

"I can't help but feel responsible," he whispered, but she reassured him there was nothing more he could have done.

She was grateful to him for the swiftness of his actions, and when the carriage pulled up outside the house, Owen hurried up the steps to summon the servants to help Anne out of the compartment.

"Is it the baby? Where's Jason?" Anne asked, opening her eyes, as Hannah stood fanning her and several of the footmen from the house helped her up the steps.

"You've just had a funny turn, Anne. It's not the baby, I don't think," Lady Dunne said, following, as Anne was escorted inside.

Margaret watched them go inside, standing alone with Owen at the bottom of the steps, all thoughts of a chaperone forgotten in the excitement of Anne's fainting. The Duke looked embarrassed.

"Well, that was quite a thing, wasn't it?" he said.

Margaret snorted. "She's just being overly dramatic. They all are. She

shouldn't have come. She got too warm and fainted. I love Anne dearly, but she's a foolish creature. And now, we'll have Jason here, too. He's just as bad," she said, for she knew her brother-in-law would be insufferable when it came to Anne's condition.

"It sounds like you might need an excuse to escape," Owen teased, and Margaret smiled.

"Can you provide one?"

"A picnic, perhaps? Isn't that what courting couples do?"

Margaret did not really know what courting couples did, but the thought of a picnic was certainly pleasing.

She nodded, glad to have an excuse to be absent from the inevitable excitement of the coming days.

"I'd like that. If you're sure, that is," she replied, looking up at the Duke, who smiled back at her.

"I'm certainly sure. I greatly enjoyed our evening together, Margaret. You can be assured of that. I hope you did, too."

Margaret nodded. "I enjoyed it very much. The play, and the company."

At that moment, the front door opened, and Betty hurried out.

“Oh, My Lady, you’re wanted inside,” she called as Margaret stepped back from Owen.

Margaret smiled at Owen, who bowed to her and nodded.

“Goodnight, Lady Margaret. I’ll be in touch to arrange our next meeting. I really enjoyed our evening together. Please give my best wishes to your sister, and my thanks to your mother,” he said, then climbed into his waiting carriage.

“Goodnight, Your Grace,” Margaret replied, and she watched as the carriage drew away, before turning to Betty, her thoughts lingering on the kiss she and Owen had shared, confused as to what it might mean.

“They’re in the drawing room, My Lady. You’re to come at once,” Betty said.

But Margaret lingered, watching as the Duke’s carriage disappeared around the corner.

“It was a lovely evening, Betty,” she said as they made their way inside.

“He seems a charming man, My Lady,” the maid noted.

“He is,” Margaret agreed, for in this second encounter of their apparent courtship, she had seen another side of Owen.

He had proved himself a good and decent man, summoning his carriage and assisting Anne in her moment of need. His chivalry had shone through. It had been no act, but a genuine demonstration of his true personality. Other men might easily have shrunk back from taking responsibility, but Owen was not one of them, and Margaret could not help but admire him for it.

The kiss, too, was one she would not forget, even though Owen had apologized for it profusely. But in her mind, there had been no need for an apology. She was glad it had occurred, and hopeful it might happen again.

“Oh, there you are, Margaret. Come and see your sister. She’s awake now,” Lady Dunne said as Margaret entered the drawing room a few moments later.

Anne was lying on the chaise lounge, propped up with cushions, her long blonde hair spread out around her, her face pale, her eyes open and tearful. Hannah was fanning her, and chamomile tea had been brought in, its scent perfuming the air.

“How are you feeling, Anne?” Margaret asked, feeling sympathy towards her sister, even as Anne had a tendency towards drama.

“I think I’ll survive the night,” Anne answered, and Margaret had to suppress

a smile at the melodrama of her sister's words.

“But wasn't His Grace good to us, my dears? The way he summoned the carriage, helped us inside and insisted on seeing us back home safely. If I didn't think he was a gentleman before, I know it now,” Lady Dunne commented.

Margaret was glad to hear her mother say this. There was no need to convince her of the Duke's qualities, and there would be no question of her being allowed to marry Owen when the moment came. It would surely not be long before the matter came to a head, and whilst Margaret was aware of the enormity of her decision, she could not help but feel happy at the prospect of marrying a man like Owen—of marrying Owen himself.

“We owe him a great debt,” Hannah acknowledged, looking up at Margaret, who nodded.

“We're going on a picnic. With your permission, Mother,” Margaret said.

Lady Dunne smiled. “You have it,” she assured her as Anne sat up, suddenly animated by this fresh revelation.

“Oh, how wonderful! You haven't spoiled things, Margaret. Thank goodness for that.”

Whilst Margaret thought her sister's words somewhat unkind, she was glad to think nothing had spoiled the possibility of the match, and that perhaps she

and Owen would continue to grow closer with each and every meeting.

CHAPTER 11



“*A* letter for you, Margaret,” Lady Dunne announced, examining the correspondence brought in by the butler at breakfast two days later.

Margaret set down her coffee cup and took the letter from her mother, opening it with the paper knife the three sisters shared at breakfast. Anne was sleeping late, exhausted by the ordeal outside the theater, but Hannah looked expectantly at Margaret as she pulled out the letter and began to read it.

“Is it from him?” Hannah demanded.

Margaret nodded. “Yes, it’s from him,” she confirmed, seeing the Duke’s signature at the bottom of the page.

The letter was written in a flamboyant script, the words formed with flourishes, somewhat exaggerated.

My dear Margaret,

I write, first, to enquire after your sister, Lady Weston. I do hope the exertions of our excursion to the theater were not too much for her. Certainly, our own were... memorable, though I must apologize again for my indiscretions You were very understanding of my faults.

Second, I write to suggest our picnic takes place tomorrow, Monday, in Queen's Park, a delightful garden off Mayfair, where we might have lunch under the willow trees and walk amongst the spectacular flower beds.

I do hope the day is convenient for you, and I propose to collect you in my carriage at noon. Your maid could act as a chaperone, if your sister, Lady Pemberton, is otherwise engaged.

Margaret would not tell Hannah this, for her sister would be certain to make herself available, and Margaret far preferred the thought of Betty as a chaperone on such an intimate occasion.

“Well, what does it say?” Hannah asked, for she had been staring impatiently at Margaret as she read, as had their mother.

“He’s invited me to a picnic in Queen’s Park, tomorrow at noon,” Margaret replied, feeling unexpectedly excited at the prospect of seeing Owen again.

He was certainly taking their courtship seriously, and if the ton was not yet talking about the match—though surely they were—the picnic, in a park known for its promenading, would settle the matter once and for all.

Lady Dunne clapped her hands together in delight. “A picnic! How absolutely wonderful! You must reply at once and tell him you’ll be glad to accept his invitation. I’ll look for a parasol for you, and you can wear your pretty white dress and a silk shawl.”

Margaret smiled. There was more of the letter still to come, and as her sister and mother discussed the arrangements for her outfit, she continued to read.

Finally, I want to inform you of certain details concerning my brother and his betrothed. They continue to await their license to marry, though I fear they might seek to hurry the process. If they do, we shall need to move quickly. The announcement of a betrothal will come as a surprise so early in our courtship, and the haste of the wedding, too, will cause tongues to wag.

I want you to be absolutely sure of what we are doing. I will not be angry if you wish to step back from the arrangement. But I want to assure you of my affection for you. I hope you realized it in my rather fumbled attempts at showing genuine affection for you.

I have so very much enjoyed the time we have spent together, and I want to thank you for what you have already done, and what you are doing.

I shall be forever grateful, whatever your final decision may be.

Sincerely yours,

Owen.

It made her smile to read his words. Not about the necessity of urgency, but the affection he held for her. He did not have to say such things, nor pretend that there was anything more between them than a business arrangement.

But in the lingering memory of the kiss they had shared—despite his apparent apologies—there was a sense in which something had changed. A kiss was not necessary, and in kissing her, Owen had shown something of his earlier desires, a desire Margaret, too, now shared.

“What else does he say, Margaret?” Hannah asked.

Margaret blushed. “He says... he has greatly enjoyed our courtship,” she replied, for she had no intention of sharing the truth about their courtship with anyone, not even her sisters and mother.

They would not understand, and it would only make them think ill of the Duke, even as Margaret was growing fonder of him by the day.

“I’m so happy for you, Margaret. You’ve found love, at last.” Lady Dunne beamed.

Margaret smiled. “I suppose I have,” she replied, even as it seemed strange to admit it.

* * *

“But are you sure you don’t want me to come, too?” Hannah asked, looking somewhat hurt, as Margaret put on her gloves in the hallway.

They were waiting for the Duke to arrive, and Betty was standing by the door with Margaret’s parasol, instructed by Lady Dunne to act as a chaperone.

“You’d only be bored, Hannah. It’s a picnic, there’ll just be the two of us and Betty,” Margaret replied, for she really did not want her sister to accompany them.

Betty would sit quietly some distance away, observing discreetly, but without any intention of joining in the conversation or making her presence known. Margaret knew the case would be different if Hannah was to accompany them.

Her sister would insist on sitting near them, talking to them, offering her opinion. Margaret wanted to be alone with Owen, as far as such things were possible. She enjoyed his company and the conversations, too. Hannah would insist on talking about Society events and who was courting whom.

It was not that Margaret disliked her sister’s company—far from it—but if she was to continue the pretense of courtship with Owen, she wanted that courtship to be on her own terms.

“But don’t you want me to come?” Hannah persisted, looking hurt.

“It’s not that, but... well, when you were courting Sylvester, did you want

Anne or I to accompany you?” Margaret asked.

Hannah sighed, but it seemed Margaret had made her point, and at that moment, Betty pointed through the window to where a carriage—Owen’s carriage—was drawing up outside the house.

“You’re right, Margaret. Go on, he’ll be waiting for you,” Hannah said as Betty opened the front door for them.

The Duke was just coming up the steps, and he smiled at Margaret, removing his hat and bowing.

“Lady Margaret, how pretty you look,” he greeted, offering Margaret his arm.

She blushed, not certain if he meant what he was saying or not. Did he really think her pretty, or was he simply saying it for effect? She thought back to the kiss they had shared at the theater, the way he had held her, even for that briefest of moments...

“It’s a beautiful day for a picnic,” she said as the carriage driver opened the compartment door for them.

She had hoped there would be no tension between, and there was not—certainly not on her side, as surprising as the kiss had been. It had been unexpected, though not unwelcome. A kiss to savor, to remember, to linger over...

“It certainly is, and that means we’re bound to be seen by those who matter,” Owen replied, raising his eyebrows, as he helped her inside.

Betty followed, and they were soon on their way to the park.

It *was* a beautiful day, and Margaret felt happy in the Duke’s company, thinking back to his words in the letter and knowing she was not about to step back from their arrangement. The more time they spent together, the more she felt certain she was doing the right thing in marrying him, and she felt only too glad to be in his company on that sunny day, the prospect of the picnic lying ahead.

“My sister sends her thanks to you for your inquiry as to her well-being. She’s feeling quite a bit better now. My brother-in-law is coming to fuss over her. He’s always been the same. I don’t know why she insisted on coming here for the Season. It’s as though neither she nor Hannah can possibly believe I’m capable of finding romance for myself.” Margaret rolled her eyes.

The Duke laughed. “I’m glad to hear she’s feeling better. I’m sure they’re merely showing sisterly affection,” he said.

Margaret nodded.

Her sisters *were* showing their concern for her, even as she felt certain she could manage the matter herself. It was not Anne or Hannah who had brought about the match with Owen. Margaret had succeeded in that herself, albeit in an unusual manner and in unusual circumstances.

“I’ve always been treated as the odd one out. Just as I told you. It’s as though they don’t trust me to make the right decisions. They were horrified when I told them we’d looked at ferns in the gardens at Kew,” Margaret recounted.

The Duke looked at her curiously. “Why should they be horrified?” he asked.

Margaret smiled. She was glad he did not think her odd for having revealed her enthusiasm for cataloguing the ferns. To many men, such pursuits would be idle, and even a cause for ridicule. But Owen was different, and Margaret felt certain as to the sincerity of his words.

“Because they thought it wasn’t ladylike. I should’ve talked about the weather or taking tea with some countess or other. They thought I’d bored you,” Margaret said, but Owen shook his head.

“I found it fascinating, and you could never bore me,” he reassured her.

The carriage had now arrived at the ornate gates of Queen’s Park, named after Queen Anne, who had gifted the land for the benefit of her subjects towards the end of her reign. A long walkway passed through a meadow, where tall trees grew to provide shade from the sun now high in the sky. Flower beds bloomed with all manner of colors, and the air was sweet with their scent.

“I’ll walk a safe distance behind you, My Lady,” Betty murmured, and Margaret was grateful to her for her discretion.

Several servants had accompanied the carriage, and now they hurried to unbuckle the straps on two large picnic baskets, carrying them across the meadow to a spot designated by Owen.

“Won’t you take my arm?” the Duke suggested, smiling at Margaret as he offered her his arm, and the two of them made their way across the grass towards the shade of a large oak tree.

“It’s such a treat to have a picnic, don’t you think?” Margaret asked.

The servants had even brought a table and chairs so that Margaret and the Duke were soon seated to dine, sharing a bottle of claret as the meal was laid out in front of them. Cold meats, cheeses, savory pies, pâté, and bread were presented, accompanied by a salad of bitter leaves. There was fruit and a cake made with almonds, along with bottles of lemonade and apple juice.

It was a veritable feast, and Owen was the perfect host.

“Picnics are one of my favorite things. I adore them. They remind me of my childhood. I’ve precious few memories of my mother. She died when Aaron and I were very young, but I remember the picnics we had. She’d come to the nursery and tell Nanny to bring us outside onto the lawn. There’d be all manner of good things to eat, and she’d sing songs for us. She was a marvelous singer,” Owen recounted, looking suddenly wistful.

Again, Margaret realized she was learning something more about him, the memories of his past, an intimacy shared.

“We did the same. All three of us sat with our parents on the lawn outside the house in Kent. The sun always seemed to shine there, unfailingly,” Margaret replied, thinking back to the halcyon days of her childhood.

The Duke smiled, offering her a slice of pie.

“It’s funny, isn’t it? The things we remember. There’s no rhyme nor reason to them. We just remember some things and forget others,” he commented.

Margaret agreed, even as she felt certain she would remember this moment forever. There was something entirely right about it, sitting here in the sunshine with Owen, eating a delicious meal, and sharing what could only be described as the happiest of courtships.

In Margaret’s mind, the division between fact and fiction was blurring. They were behaving as any courting couple would. More so than many, in fact.

“I hope we remember this,” Margaret said.

Owen smiled. “Oh, I know I will. It’s all been rather strange, I admit. But... well, are absolutely sure? It’s one thing to be seen in a courtship, but quite another to be known to be betrothed. Once that happens, it must be quick. Aaron won’t waste a moment. I know he’s plotting to marry Lady Jessie just as soon as he can. He thinks he’s got time on his hands, that I couldn’t possibly fall in love so quickly. But he’s about to be proven wrong,” he said.

Margaret nodded. “You said as much in your letter. But I’m ready. I know I

am. We can announce it immediately if you wish. It'll come as a surprise to many, I know. But my parents won't object, and I know how excited my sisters will be."

She could imagine the reaction to the news of her betrothal to Owen. Her sisters would be ecstatic and would speak of nothing but dresses and invitations for at least a week. Her parents, too, would be pleased.

Margaret knew they wanted her to make a good match, and the Duke of Repington was certainly that. But as for herself, she felt certain she had come to know Owen well enough to make a decision.

He had been unfailingly kind to her, and to her family, and had treated her with nothing but respect and courtesy. He had not mocked or ridiculed her for her interests—indeed, he had embraced them—and he had promised her the life she had always wanted, one in which she could pursue her love of reading, writing, music, and plant collecting.

"Then we should think about announcing it soon," Owen replied, and Margaret nodded.

"But for just a few hours, shall we enjoy the delights of this wonderful picnic?"

He smiled. "I think that's an excellent idea."

They lingered over the food for some time, savoring the many different

savory and sweet treats to be taken from the baskets. As they ate, they watched the people in the park—fashionably dressed men and women on parade, wanting to be seen. In turn, they, too, were seen, and Margaret felt certain their courtship was now known across the capital and beyond.

“I think we’ll make a very good match,” Margaret said as they walked arm-in-arm by the ornamental flower beds, their perfumed roses and budding tulips creating an artist’s palette of colors.

“I do, too, though I fear I might bore you. I’m always amazed by the breadth and depth of your knowledge. You can converse on almost any topic imaginable. How can I live up to your conversation?” Owen asked.

Margaret laughed. “Nonsense. You’re as knowledgeable as I am. You won’t bore me. I’ll find plenty of things to do. I’m writing a novel, and I’ve got my musical compositions to perfect, not to mention my plans for the gardens.”

Owen smiled. “You’re a remarkable creature, Margaret. Tell me, what’s your novel about?”

Margaret blushed. She was not used to being asked about the things she was interested in. Hannah and Anne had no time to listen to her talk about her novel, and they usually sat grudgingly through her compositions, telling her they were excellent before hurrying out of the room. But Owen showed such genuine interest, and she felt certain as to the sincerity of his words.

“Oh, are you really interested? Most people aren’t. It’s the story of a young woman. She’s caught up in a terrible scandal and must flee to Bath,

pretending to be someone entirely different. She falls in love, but she's torn between the truth and her feelings. I won't spoil the end by telling you what happens, though I'm still writing it, of course."

Owen nodded. "And I'll be delighted to read it."

Margaret was, again, surprised. Men did not read such things, or so she thought. Her novel was an idle distraction, one she did not believe anyone would be interested in, least of all a man like the Duke of Repington.

"You don't have to pretend," she said, but he shook his head and smiled.

"I'm not pretending, I assure you."

He turned to her, slipping his hands into hers, gazing down at her with a look of utmost affection on his face.

Margaret's heart skipped a beat. There were others close by, men and women who were bound to be amongst those in the chattering classes eager for news of the Duke's marital intentions. Margaret did not know if this was all part of the act or something more.

Don't be a fool. It's just an act. Go along with it.

She kept repeating it in her head, even as Owen leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

Margaret had not expected him to kiss her in public. It would serve as part of the act, of course, but to feel his lips brush against her skin meant more to her than mere theater, even though it might have seemed different to him.

“I... that’s very kind of you,” she stammered, for act or not, she did not know what it meant, or what she should do in return.

The Duke looked suddenly embarrassed. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done that. It wasn’t necessary, was it?”

Margaret shook her head, her cheeks reddening. “No... please, I’m... glad you did,” she replied, for she really was glad, and only too happy to think they might share a kiss again, as chaste as it had been.

She did not like to ask the reason for what he had done, fearing he would brush it off as part of the act, a necessity if others were to believe the genuineness of their intentions. Glancing towards the path across the meadow, Margaret could see several women standing in a gaggle of fluttering fans, watching and whispering to one another.

There was no scandal if a courting couple shared a chaste kiss, but there was certainly scandal in what Margaret and the Duke had agreed on—a marriage based on a false pretense, albeit for noble reasons.

Margaret wanted to help Owen, but she could not help but feel confused as to the feelings she was now experiencing. In private, they had acted differently,

too. In private, she might actually have believed they were together. The kiss they had shared at the theater, the desire he had expressed for her... it was real, even if this was meant to be an act.

“But I shouldn’t have done it. It was wrong of me. I’m sorry,” Owen said, apologizing profusely, even as Margaret shook her head.

“No, it’s nothing, really. We can’t very well get married if it doesn’t look right, can we?” she pointed out, thinking back to her sisters’ marriages.

“I require and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment, why ye may not be lawfully joined together in Matrimony, ye do now confess it. For be ye well assured, that so many as are coupled together otherwise than God’s Word doth allow are not joined together by God; neither is their Matrimony lawful...”

They would be asked this, they would swear it before God, and whilst Margaret did not believe they were committing a sin in marrying as they were, the words of the marriage service still held true.

“You’re right, it has to look... right,” he relented, still looking embarrassed at what he had done.

Margaret smiled at him and held out her hand. “Come now, let’s finish eating. That almond cake was delicious,” she said, beckoning him to follow.

Betty made no mention of the kiss, and Margaret and Owen enjoyed the rest of the afternoon in one another's company.

The kiss was forgotten, the conversation flowed freely, and Margaret could not help but feel at ease in the Duke's company. They talked about art and literature, far-off places, and the beauty of flowers and plants. Margaret told Owen more about her novel, and her hopes of performing her pianoforte compositions for him, too.

"Do your sisters not listen to you play?" he asked.

Margaret shook her head. "No, they're not really interested. I think they find my compositions somewhat dull. But if you'd like to hear them, I'd be only too happy to play them for you. Perhaps you could come to dinner one evening. My mother would be pleased to invite you."

Owen nodded. "I'd like that very much. I suppose I should get to know your parents better. They're to be my parents-in-law, after all," he said, laughing, as he signaled for the servants to clear away the empty plates.

"Shall we walk together?" Margaret asked, for they had been sitting for some time, and she wanted to walk beneath the shade of the trees.

He nodded, and they left the servants busy with their tasks, walking arm-in-arm, as Betty sat reading beneath a tree.

The park was really a set of formal gardens, interspersed with shrubberies,

where little paths disappeared into a maze of hidden ways beneath the trees.

“Isn’t it lovely here?” Owen asked, turning to Margaret, who smiled.

“I’m glad we did this. It’s all very... well, it looks right, I suppose, doesn’t it?” she replied.

He sighed, looking at her and smiling. “You’re very good to do this,” he said.

Margaret laughed as he took her hand in his. “I’ve told you, I’m happy.”

“I’m sorry about what happened at the theater. I don’t know what came over me. Slipping into the box, kissing you like that... it was wrong,” he said.

Margaret shook her head. “I... I liked it,” she admitted, for there was no point in denying it.

Owen looked at her in surprise, their eyes meeting, and he smiled, cocking his head to one side as she blushed.

“Did you, really?” he asked, taking a step towards her.

“I did, yes,” she breathed.

Their lips met in a kiss—not hastily snatched or withdrawn from in embarrassment, but a kiss that lingered and lasted.

Owen pulled her more tightly into his embrace, and she arched her back as he brought his lips to her neck, kissing her with such passion as to make her gasp. It was as though they had both been waiting for this moment, the tension between them breaking as they gave in to the desires of their hearts.

“How beautiful you are, Margaret,” he whispered, resting his forehead against hers.

No one had ever called her beautiful before. No one had desired her before. And in his arms, Margaret felt equal to her sisters, equal to every woman to whom she had always imagined herself inferior. He wanted her, and she wanted him, too.

“Does this mean—I... What happens now?” she asked as he brushed back the hair from her cheek, gazing down at her longingly.

“I... I don’t know. I suppose... well, perhaps we should just enjoy the moment,” he replied, bringing his lips to hers once more.

It was late in the afternoon when they left the park, and Owen took Margaret home, promising to see her again very soon.

“I’ll arrange matters with my mother. You can come to dinner, though I fear you’ll have my sisters to contend with,” Margaret warned.

As Betty got out of the carriage, Owen leaned forward and whispered quietly in Margaret's ear, "I hope I didn't embarrass you. I hope... you won't think me a terrible rake."

Margaret shook her head. "Not at all," she replied, smiling at him as Betty helped her down from the compartment.

Once again, Margaret stood watching the Duke's carriage disappear down the road, smiling to herself at the thought of the pleasant afternoon they had spent together.

She had not expected him to kiss her, nor had she courted the possibility. But the lingering memory of his lips against hers was enough to allow her smile to continue, and as she thought about their next encounter, she felt grateful to the Duke for all he had done for her, and all that was to come.

CHAPTER 12



“*H*e should certainly dine with us. I was going to suggest as much myself. Oh, it won’t be long, Margaret, you’ll have a proposal by the end of the Season,” Lady Dunne squealed, beaming at Margaret, who had just proposed the possibility of inviting Owen over for dinner.

Margaret felt relieved to think she would see him again so soon, even as her feelings towards him were somewhat confused. She *did* have feelings for him, though she was uncertain how to categorize them—were they romantic or platonic?

He was a handsome man, and their friendship was blossoming. But at its heart, their apparent courtship rested on a lie. It was a falsity given for the benefit of others, and the advantage of the Duke against his brother. It meant nothing, and yet it was beginning to mean something.

“Will you issue the invitation, Mother? I want to play some of my compositions for him,” Margaret said.

At these words, Hannah looked up from her breakfast and snorted. “Oh,

Margaret, you can't possibly do that. He won't want to listen to your dirges, however technically brilliant they are. Why can't you compose something we could dance to?"

Margaret rolled her eyes. "He says he wants to hear them. Just like he wanted to see the ferns, and talk about my novel," she shot back, feeling suddenly defensive.

She loved her sisters dearly, but they had little sense of culture or refinement. If it was not a penny novel or a quick step ditty, their interest soon waned. It was impossible to have the sort of conversation she enjoyed with Hannah or Anne. The Duke always listened to her, intently, and when he responded, it was with thought and imagination.

"Oh, really, Margaret. He's only saying that to impress you. But a man can only stand so much. Don't bore him with it. You look so pretty in your dresses. Be content with that and don't try to force him to pretend to like something no one else does," Hannah insisted, shaking her head.

Margaret was forced to bite her tongue. Hannah would never understand. But Owen did, and Margaret knew he would be only too happy to hear her play, just as he was only too happy to speak about ferns and plant collecting, or the latest art exhibition she had seen.

"I'll send the invitation as soon as I've finished breakfast. And we'll *all* listen to you play, Margaret. After all, it's not every day the future Duchess of Repington gives a performance, is it?" Lady Dunne said, and Margaret smiled, pleased to think that her mother's sense of snobbery could be used to her advantage, at least.

* * *

“A letter for you, Your Grace,” Owen’s manservant, James, announced, as he entered the drawing room of Owen’s London townhouse.

The Duke was sitting by the hearth trying to read a book, but he was thoroughly distracted by thoughts of the picnic, and the kiss. It was the day after he and Margaret had shared that kiss, and he was uncertain what to make of his actions, and of Margaret’s response to them.

He was consumed by her, as much as he tried to deny it to himself. He was astonished at the force of his feelings, unable to think why they should present themselves so strongly, even as he now allowed his mind to wander, imagining his hands running over her curves, their lips pressed together...

She had brushed his embarrassment aside, telling him there was no reason to be sorry for kissing her. But in his heart, Owen felt conflicted. He had kissed her on a sudden urge of attraction. It had not been part of his plan to do so, nor had he believed a kiss would add anything to the deception.

In his mind, Owen was conflicted, and his feelings towards Margaret were confused.

“Ah, yes, thank you, James,” Owen said, taking the letter from the silver tray held out by his manservant.

The letter was an invitation from the Countess of Dunne to dine with their family the following evening. The Countess had written to say how delighted

she was to think of her daughter and the Duke of Repington at the beginning of a courtship, and she looked forward to welcoming him to dine with them, and to Margaret playing the pianoforte for them after dinner.

Owen replied at once in the affirmative. He was looking forward to seeing Margaret again and expressed similar sentiments to the Countess as to his pleasure at the beginning of the courtship.

But I still don't understand why I did it. There was such passion...

He was confused as to his own feelings, and wondering what Margaret herself must think about the matter.

Owen had just settled down to his book—or the attempt at reading it, at least—when his manservant announced Aaron's unexpected arrival. Owen was far from pleased. He disliked interruptions of any sort, least of all from Aaron, who had surely only come to cause trouble.

A moment later, Owen's brother stood before him, smirking at him as he helped himself from a decanter of brandy.

“You've certainly been busy, Brother. I've heard nothing but the mention of your name these past few days. You're the very talk of the ton,” Aaron said, sitting down opposite Owen by the hearth and raising his glass.

Owen rolled his eyes. “And why should that matter?” he asked.

“Because I know you’re in the process of a rapid courtship with Lady Margaret Colborne. I must say, I didn’t realize the matter was so far advanced. Not until I heard you’d been seen kissing her in Queen’s Park,” Aaron replied, swirling the glass in his hand and laughing.

“And don’t you kiss Lady Jessie?” Owen shot back.

He was not about to be intimidated by his brother or made to feel he had done something wrong. The haste of a courtship was no measure of its meaning, and Owen knew Margaret was entirely trustworthy when it came to keeping the truth of their arrangement secret.

“Not so publicly as to set the tongues of the whole ton wagging,” Aaron replied.

Owen shrugged. “I have clearly adopted continental ways. But why shouldn’t there be haste in love? If two people fall in love, who’s to say their courtship shouldn’t be rapid?”

He fixed his brother with a hard stare, challenging him to dispute the fact of his love for Margaret.

Aaron narrowed his eyes. “She’s nothing like her sisters, is she?”

“Then we have something in common. I’m nothing like my brother,” Owen replied, growing irritated at Aaron’s inability to say what he was thinking.

Aaron smiled. "What true words you speak, Brother. But I'd never have put the two of you together, except for... convenience's sake."

Owen had heard enough. He rose to his feet, pointing angrily at Aaron, his finger trembling as he spoke. "I object to your tone and your implication. I love Margaret very much, and if I wish to marry her, I'll ask her. It's up to her, of course. I won't force her, nor would I ever consider doing so. If we marry, it'll be for love."

He was surprised by the force of his words, as though he had genuinely meant them.

Aaron looked somewhat taken aback, though he remained seated, still swirling the brandy in his glass. "A touching sentiment, Brother. I'm glad you've fallen in love. But you know the stipulation of the will as well as I do. The first to marry..." he trailed off, his words lingering menacingly in the air.

"You're having trouble with your license, aren't you?"

Aaron nodded. "Yes, but there are... means and ends to that," he said, smiling at Owen, who knew his brother was up to something.

"Why have you come, Aaron? Do you mock me for my choice? Do you think Margaret to be below me, unequal to her sisters, and therefore unworthy?"

The thought was an astonishing one. Margaret was different from her sisters, with interests quite unlike those of a typical debutante. But it was in this

difference her attraction lay, and in defending her—both in his mind and to his brother—Owen was beginning to realize just why he found her so attractive.

Aaron sneered. “I say so because I know you, Brother. In the past, you’d have not given her a second glance. You traveled across Europe, bedding a different woman in every city you visited—your affairs were well known—and now I’m to believe you’ve settled down with a woman who spends her days at the pianoforte or with her head buried in a book. I refuse to believe it, though I don’t doubt you’re doing her a favor by marrying her.

“She was the odd one out, the one her parents worried about. I’ve heard all about your courtship, and the whisperings about Lady Margaret, a woman only the likes of old Meadowcroft deigned to touch. I’m sure they’re quite astonished at the thought of shy, retiring Lady Margaret becoming the next Duchess of Repington.”

“You accuse me of falsity in the matter of our courtship? Tell me, Aaron, will you accuse me of the same during the vows? I plan to marry her,” Owen insisted, knowing he was taking a risk in saying such words, even as his brother smiled unpleasantly.

“And what if I marry first? Won’t that call your bluff? Will you still marry her if you’re penniless and the fortune goes to me? Think about it, Owen. I’d be proved right, and justified in taking our father’s fortune for myself if you failed to marry the woman you claim to love, and yet who appears only to be a convenient means of getting what you want.”

Owen turned his back to his brother, marching to the window, where he stood staring out angrily onto the street. He was seething, but his brother’s words

rang true.

Would he marry Margaret if Aaron took Jessie to the altar first? The thought was unsettling, and now he turned back to Aaron, taking a deep breath, knowing he could do nothing but affirm his apparent feelings for Margaret.

“I love her,” Owen persisted as Aaron finished the brandy in his glass and laughed.

“I don’t think you do, but it’s of no consequence. I’m sure it won’t be long before the license comes through. Then I’ll be married to Jessie, and Mr. Landsdowne can release the money to me,” Aaron said, rising to his feet and nodding curtly to Owen, who shook his head.

“Can’t you see what’s going to happen? You’ll use the money to pay off your debts, and then what? There’ll be nothing left. Without the inheritance, I can’t run the estate, and without the estate, there’ll be no income. You can squander the inheritance, or let it pass rightfully to me. I’ll give you an income. It might take time, but I will,” Owen reasoned.

Aaron shook his head. “And if I did that, would you marry Lady Margaret? Besides, what do you know about my debts? They’re no business of yours,” he said, once again calling Owen’s bluff.

“What’s the point of reasoning with you? You won’t listen. Everyone knows about your debts. It’s a scandal. An utter scandal. But you won’t see that. You’re blinded by the past, by your own feelings of inadequacy. You can’t let the facts of our childhood rest, can you? It’s not my fault I was born first,

is it?”

This was what the matter rested on. Aaron had always been jealous, and their father, in his perversity, had taken delight in playing the two off against one another. He would be only too happy to have known of the wedge now driven between them, a conflict such as to forever force them apart, for how could there ever be a reconciliation when one of them was assured of losing everything?

Aaron shook his head, opening the drawing room door and turning to Owen with a scowl on his face. “It might not be, but that doesn’t mean I have to settle for it, does it?” he replied, and with that, he left, slamming the door behind him.

Owen sighed, sitting back in his chair and contemplating what his brother had just said.

There was now no doubt in Owen’s mind. The marriage between himself and Margaret had to come about, and there was no time to lose.

CHAPTER 13



“No, you can’t possibly wear that!” Anne exclaimed as Margaret entered the drawing room on the evening of the dinner.

Margaret had spent most of the afternoon under Hannah’s tutelage, selecting precisely what she was wearing now. Betty had been kept busy running back and forth between Margaret’s bedroom and her dressing room, fetching different gowns and shawls for her to try, each of which Hannah had offered her opinion on.

“And why can’t she wear that?” Hannah protested, for it was she who had selected the peacock blue dress and yellow shawl Margaret was now wearing.

Anne was lying back on the chaise lounge by the hearth, looking very pregnant, with Jason at her side. The Earl of Weston had come at once upon hearing of the incident outside the theater and had done nothing but fuss over Anne since the moment of his arrival. He was holding her hand, and now he stroked it, looking up at Margaret and shaking his head.

“She’s been fretting about it all afternoon,” he explained in the indulgent tone

he always adopted when speaking about her.

Margaret rolled her eyes. “I like it,” she said.

Anne shook her head. “It’s too prim and proper, Margaret. You look like someone’s grandmother, and not from the fashionable side of the family. All that lace trim and high-cut neck. Are you going to a funeral?” She snorted.

Hannah gave an angry scoff, but Margaret could not help but laugh at the thought of going to a funeral dressed in such a way.

“What should I wear?” Margaret asked as Anne struggled to sit up.

“I wish you’d asked me for advice. I’ve been sitting here all afternoon,” Anne said, tutting.

“You went straight to sleep after luncheon. And why should your opinion be any more valuable than mine? I think Margaret looks very pretty. A funeral, indeed!” Hannah huffed, glaring at Anne, who shook her head, just as the clock on the mantelpiece struck seven o’clock.

“Well, it’s too late now, isn’t it? But take off the shawl, Margaret. You don’t need to look quite as covered up, do you?” Anne argued.

Despite Hannah’s disapproving looks, Margaret took off the shawl. It was easier to compromise than endure a continued conflict, and it was not long

before the sounds of a carriage drawing up could be heard from the street below. The invitation had been issued for half past seven, and the Duke was precisely on time.

“That’s a good sign,” Anne said as the others rose to receive the Duke, who was shown into the drawing room a few moments later, followed by Margaret’s mother and father.

“Good evening,” Owen said, bowing, as Margaret and Hannah curtsied, and Jason stepped forward to shake his hand.

Margaret smiled at the Duke, her thoughts lingering on their encounter in the shrubbery. There was a curt formality to him now, but there, hidden away amongst the trees, she had seen a different, passionate, side to him. She had thought of little else but their kiss, the feel of his hands drawing her into his embrace, the scent of his cologne...

“Good evening,” Margaret replied, holding his gaze, wondering if he was thinking the same.

Anne did not get up, confined as she was by her current circumstances, and the party now sat down to sherry before the announcement of dinner. In a formal setting, it was far harder to share those intimacies they had done during the picnic, and Margaret sat stiffly at Owen’s side, hoping he would not find the attention of her entire family too much of a trial.

“I must say, we were somewhat surprised when we heard of your courtship with Margaret, Your Grace,” Anne began.

Margaret shot her sister an angry look, but Anne had a way of saying just what she thought, and in her current condition, she appeared to believe she could get away with it. Lady Dunne inhaled sharply, but Owen only smiled and turned to Margaret, slipping his hand into hers.

“I see nothing surprising in the matter. Isn’t it just so—when two people meet and... fall in love... they know it to be right,” he said, and Margaret blushed.

Once again, the lines were being blurred., Margaret was not entirely sure whether the Duke was an excellent actor or speaking the truth.

“Quite right, and it’s not your place to be surprised at your sister’s good fortune, Anne. I’m proud of all my daughters. You’ve all married exceptionally well, and I’m so pleased to think Margaret might, too,” Lady Dunne said.

Margaret had known her mother would find an opportunity to mention marriage. It was the goal of any mother with daughters to see them well married, and for Owen, it seemed that tacit approval had already been given, even as the question was yet to come. Had their courtship been a genuine one, Margaret might have feared her mother’s blunt words to be off-putting, but they surely only served to assure the Duke there would be no objection to a swift marriage.

“Oh, I’m so glad to hear you say that,” Owen said, and Lady Dunne looked visibly pleased.

“Well, I’d say that deserves something more than sherry, don’t you think?” she said, and she rang the bell to summon the butler, who was instructed to bring champagne for a toast.

“I understand your father left the estate in disarray when you inherited it,” Lord Dunne threw in as they finished their champagne.

His wife gave him a warning look. “Patrick, that’s hardly something we need to discuss now.”

Owen shook his head. “No, Lady Dunne, it’s quite all right. Your husband does himself credit in asking. If I were the father of three beautiful daughters, I’d want only the best for them. It’s true, my father was something of a chaotic figure and had little interest in administration. He used his estates and fortune for pleasure and left them in disarray. But I’m not like my father. Not at all. He and I never saw eye to eye, but I’m glad to say his faults aren’t irreparable. I’m in the process of correcting the mistakes of the past. You should have no fear of that.”

Margaret was impressed by this eloquent speech, and it seemed her father was, too.

“I meant no disrespect in my question. But you’re right. A man with three daughters must ensure each is to be properly taken care of,” Lord Dunne said, glancing at Jason and Anne as he spoke.

“Well, I’ve been exceedingly lucky,” Anne quipped, as though she felt it necessary to defend Jason’s honor against Owen’s words.

“And I have, too,” Hannah chimed in, just as the gong was sounded for dinner.

Margaret was relieved, and she lingered, allowing the others to proceed from the drawing room as Owen offered her his arm.

“I’m sorry about all that. They can be quite overbearing,” she said, but the Duke only smiled and shook his head.

“It’s quite all right. I expected nothing less. I want to marry you, Margaret, and your father’s naturally keen to ensure the match is a sensible one.”

Again, there was a sincerity in his words. It was as though he genuinely believed he wanted to marry her. It made her think about her own feelings towards him. She, too, *wanted* to marry him, not because of love—or was it?

It’s all so confusing.

The dining table had been lavishly set with the best dining service, crystal glassware, and impressive displays of heavily scented flowers, with candles burning in candelabras along the length of the table. Margaret and Owen were to sit side by side, with Anne and Jason opposite, Hannah on Margaret’s other side, and Lord and Lady Dunne at either end.

“I can’t thank you enough for your hospitality, Lady Dunne,” Owen said as the party sat down to dine.

“But it’s we who should thank you, Your Grace. Anne’s question to you was rather blunt earlier, but we never expected... well, Margaret didn’t make a good start to her Season,” Lady Dunne replied, raising her eyebrows, as Margaret blushed.

It seemed her entire family remained in awed surprise at her courtship with Owen. None of them could believe a woman like her and a man like him belonged together. But the more time she spent with him, the more she was convinced he was different from how others perceived him. The two of them were not the complete opposites they were assumed to be. They delighted in the same things and conversations and were entirely at ease in one another’s company.

“But a poor start doesn’t necessarily mean a poor finish,” Owen pointed out.

Lady Dunne nodded. “Absolutely, Your Grace,” she said as the first dishes were brought to the table.

The meal was a lavish one: two different soups—one made with mushrooms, the other with lobster—followed by a dish of quails with all manner of vegetables, and concluded with a Charlotte Russe, brought to the table with much theater and spectacle.

“One of my favorites,” the Duke claimed as a portion of the impressive cake was placed before him.

“We’re so pleased you’re enjoying it,” Lady Dunne gushed.

“And what are your plans for after the Season, Your Grace?” Hannah asked as she set down her spoon at the end of the meal.

“Will I return to Buckinghamshire, do you mean?”

Hannah nodded. “I suppose it rather depends on your circumstances,” she said, glancing at Margaret, who smiled.

The Duke shrugged. “I haven’t decided yet. Though we’ve already spoken about the gardens, haven’t we?” he replied, turning to Margaret. She nodded.

“Oh, she took you on that dull walk through the ferns at Kew, didn’t she?” Anne said, rolling her eyes.

But to Margaret’s surprise—and delight—the Duke came at once to her defense.

“I found nothing dull about it, Lady Weston. We had a marvelous time. I’ve never learned so much about plants in all my life. Your sister’s a natural botanist, amongst her many other talents. No, you mistake me if you think I’m interested only in societal gatherings and the intrigues of the ton. Nothing could be further from the truth. I was only too delighted to have my knowledge of ferns expanded and to spend such a delightful time in your sister’s company.”

Margaret felt pleased at this vindication. More than pleased, she was delighted. This was no act. There was a genuine sincerity in his voice, and she was in no doubt as to his feelings surrounding the time they had spent together.

Anne looked surprised. “Oh... well, if you like that sort of thing, I suppose,” she mumbled, and Margaret could not help but smile.

With dinner concluded, the party rose, and it was decided to forgo the traditional parting of ways between the ladies and gentlemen.

“I could show you the garden again,” Margaret suggested, glancing at her mother, who nodded.

“I think you can be trusted without a chaperone,” Lady Dunne said, and Margaret was relieved to think she and the Duke would have a few moments alone before his departure.

As they stepped out into the evening air, Margaret could hear a cuckoo in the distance, its call echoing in the still air. A heady scent hung in the gardens, the roses now in full bloom, and the two of them walked arm-in-arm across the lawn and towards the beech trees at the far end of the garden.

“Did I give a reasonable account of myself at dinner?” Owen asked.

Margaret looked up at him and smiled. “To be confronted with both of my sisters, my parents, and Jason—it was a baptism of fire. I wouldn’t worry

about what they think, though. I never have,” she said.

Owen laughed. “Your two sisters are formidable. I feel sorry for Jason, though. He seems to be Anne’s yes-man in all things. He’s quite besotted with her,” he said, shaking his head.

“Wait until you meet Sylvester, Hannah’s husband. He’s just the same. I hope you won’t be like that. If I’m wrong, I want you to tell me so. And if you’re wrong, I’ll do the same.”

Margaret had no intention of being anything like her sisters. She loved them dearly, but their preoccupations with fashion and gossip, and their condemnation of anything vaguely intellectual created a division between them. Margaret was quite different from them, and she was only too glad to have found a man who could share that difference, too.

“I don’t doubt you will. I know you will,” he said, and Margaret blushed.

In his company, she felt a confidence she had not felt before. He brought out the best in her, and she hoped she did the same for him. But the question of what happened next remained.

Was their marriage imminent or did they have time to make plans before its inevitability?

“Do you have any news about your brother and Lady Jessie? Are they close to receiving the license they need?” Margaret asked, for she knew the matter

could not be indefinitely delayed.

The Duke sighed, a sudden look of sorrow coming over his face. “I wish it wasn’t like this. Aaron and I could be friends if only it wasn’t for what our father did to drive a wedge between us. He came to see me just the other day. He’d heard about our picnic in the park, I knew he would,” he replied.

Margaret was not surprised. Their courtship was the talk of the ton, and if her own sisters were surprised at her apparent success in making a match, then it was nothing compared to the surprise of the ton, who had dismissed Margaret as nothing but a forgotten wallflower, ever doomed to spinsterhood.

“And what did he say? Was he angry?” she asked.

“He was curious. I think he suspected our differences—our apparent differences—to be a sign of insincerity. He suspects our intentions aren’t sincere. I suppose he’s right, but... well, I’ll say it again if you’re in any doubt,” he said, but Margaret took his hand in hers, gazing up into his eyes and smiling.

“I’m not in any doubt, I promise you that. If I was, I’d have told you so,” she reassured him.

Owen nodded. “I’m sorry. I just don’t want you to do something you’ll regret.”

Margaret had always known this was her choice to make. If she walked away

from it, she would be none the poorer. However, if she *did* choose to marry, she would be left with only the likes of Lord Meadowcroft to choose from.

It was Owen who needed this match—this marriage—to save his father’s fortune. But in marrying him, Margaret had no regrets, even as she knew it was merely a marriage of convenience. To be the Duchess of Repington would mean a life devoted to those pursuits she already delighted in, and a position in society no one would question. Her parents and sisters would be appeased, and she would have proved the ton wrong in its underestimations of her.

“I wouldn’t do. But how soon? Shouldn’t we hurry things?” Margaret asked.

Owen looked conflicted, as though he felt he was forcing the matter, even as time was of the essence.

“I don’t know. But soon, I fear. It wouldn’t surprise me if... well, there was something in his mannerism. I think—oh, yes, they could, couldn’t they?” Owen whispered, his eyes growing wide with fear.

“But what is it?” Margaret pressed.

“Gretna Green!” Owen exclaimed, and seizing Margaret’s hand, he hurried her back to the house.

CHAPTER 14



Owen knew there was no time to spare and, having thanked his hostess most graciously for her hospitality, he bid Margaret and the others goodbye.

“But I don’t understand. What’s happened?” Margaret whispered as she stood by the open door of Owen’s carriage to bid him goodbye.

“I fear they might go to Gretna Green. If they can’t get a license here, they’ll surely head north. Aaron didn’t say as much, but that’s what he’s going to do. I know it. I’ll go at once to his lodgings. If he’s still there, I’ll be proven wrong and can rest a little easier, but if he’s not... I’ll return in the morning, I promise,” he replied. He took her hand in his and raised it to his lips.

Margaret still looked confused but did not ask any further questions, stepping back, as Owen closed the carriage door and called for the driver to make all haste to his brother’s lodgings.

Aaron rented rooms close to Lincoln’s Inn, a short distance from Jessie’s home. Jessie was the daughter of the Marquess of Hensingham, a man whose

ambition knew no bounds. He had made no secret of wanting a son, rather than a daughter, and such an upbringing had created in Jessie a desire to gain those things she believed to be her right. Aaron had spoken openly of Jessie's ambitions, and Owen felt certain that his brother had promised his betrothed the fortune now within his grasp.

And now that she knows of the possibility of defeat, she'll be all the keener to hurry the matter up.

Owen had enjoyed the evening spent in the company of Margaret and her family. There was no doubting the contrast between them, and had he not known the certainty of her lineage, he might have been surprised to learn she was related to any of those with whom he had dined.

But Owen had not been offended by their questions. It was only natural for a father to desire the best for his daughter, and older sisters were always overly protective.

"It's quite different for brothers," Owen told himself as the carriage drew up outside Aaron's lodgings.

"Wait for me here. I won't be long," he instructed, climbing out of the compartment.

The carriage driver nodded, and Owen hurried up the steps, raising the large brass knocker and banging it down several times in haste. The door was opened by Aaron's manservant, Hicks, who managed only to disguise his disdain with a forced expression of surprise.

“Your Grace, I’m afraid you’re too late to see your brother,” he said, standing in the doorway as Owen peered over his shoulder.

“Where is he? Is he asleep?” Owen asked, but the manservant shook his head.

“No, Your Grace. He left this afternoon. He’s traveling north,” Hicks said.

Owen’s eyes grew wide with fear. His suspicions were correct. There could be only one reason why Aaron had taken flight. The north held no attraction for him, except for the possibility of marriage across the Scottish border at Gretna Green, where the marriage laws required little more than tacit consent. If Aaron got married at Gretna Green, their father’s fortune would be his, and Owen would have lost everything.

“With Lady Jessie? Has he gone to Gretna Green?” Owen demanded.

The manservant looked suddenly uncomfortable.

“I couldn’t possibly say, Your Grace. Lord Aaron didn’t require my presence. He said he’d be back in a few weeks. I don’t know where he’s gone, or who he’s gone with.”

Owen gave an exasperated cry, turning to hurry down the steps as the bewildered manservant looked on.

“He did say that he’d return a far richer man than when he left, Your Grace,” Hicks called out.

Owen turned to him angrily. “Oh, yes, that’s precisely what he’ll do. If I allow it, that is,” he snapped as the carriage driver hurried to open the door of the compartment.

“Where to now, Your Grace?” the driver asked as Owen climbed in.

“To Lambeth Palace. I don’t care about the hour. I must speak to the Archbishop immediately,” Owen barked, urging the carriage driver to make all haste, even as he feared he would already be too late.

* * *

“I think he’s quite charming. A delight. Oh, Margaret, I’m so happy for you,” Lady Dunne cooed as they sat at breakfast the next morning.

“It must be love, given the state of her dress,” Anne scoffed, though she smiled at Margaret across the breakfast table, even as Hannah scowled.

“I still think Margaret looked very pretty,” Hannah insisted.

“Because she *is* pretty. But the dress you chose for her made her look more like a sack of potatoes than a debutante,” Anne retorted.

Margaret knew an argument was about to erupt. She cleared her throat, smiling at her sisters, and was about to thank her mother for her kind words about Owen when the door to the dining room opened, and the butler announced the arrival of the Duke of Repington himself.

“At such an early hour? Goodness, he must be keen. He only left us a few hours ago,” Anne said, laughing, as she helped herself to a piece of toast.

Margaret blushed. She did not know why Owen had arrived so early, even as she feared his haste would have something to do with his words from the previous evening. She found him pacing up and down the drawing room, and as she entered, he looked up and hurried to her side, clasping her hands anxiously in his.

“It’s true. I was right. They’ve gone. They left for Gretna Green yesterday afternoon. They’ll be there within three days if their horses are fast!” he exclaimed.

Margaret now understood the urgency of his arrival, and her heart skipped a beat as she realized what was to come next.

“And then they’ll be married,” she said.

He nodded. “And I’ll lose the fortune to my brother and his creditors. I thought we had time. The delays with the license were to our advantage. But if he and Lady Jessie marry in Scotland, there’s nothing we can do to challenge them.”

He looked as though he had not slept the previous night, his face a picture of worry, and Margaret took his hands in hers, hoping to reassure him.

“I... are you certain about this? If he gained the fortune for himself, would it truly be to your detriment? What if you and I were to marry and then discover he and Lady Jessie had already done so? Would you still be happy?” she asked, for she feared as much for Owen’s happiness as he did for hers.

The Duke sighed again. “I’m sorry, Margaret. This never should’ve happened, but... well, yes, I’d still be happy, but it would be to my great detriment if Aaron secured the fortune before me. I doubt your parents would think much of a penniless duke.”

Margaret squeezed his hand and smiled. “I’d still outrank them all,” she pointed out.

Owen laughed. “I’m glad you can see the amusing side of it. But are you really ready to make such a decision? I need to ask you, Margaret. Will you marry me?”

If Margaret had ever imagined what the moment of her proposal might be like, it was not like this. As children, she and her sisters had played at weddings, though Margaret had always been cast as the clergyman, with Anne or Hannah taking center stage as the bride.

After the disaster of her debut, Margaret had resigned herself to lifelong spinsterhood. She had not wanted to marry a man like Lord Meadowcroft, and with no other possibilities presented to her, the matter had seemed

closed. Owen had changed that, and whilst his proposal was born in haste, it was not without its merits.

“I will,” she said, and the Duke breathed a sigh of relief.

“I went to Lambeth Palace last night. I left a message for the Archbishop. He and my father were acquainted, and the Church has certain landed interests in my estate. I begged him to grant us a license to marry, without the necessity of the usual procedures. I don’t know why Aaron’s request went unheeded, but we can only pray this one won’t.”

“But we’re in his hands until then?” Margaret asked.

She knew little of canon law, but she knew enough to know a marriage could not simply be enacted without the proper procedures. Banns were to be read in public, and the ceremony could not go ahead until the proper legalities had been observed. A special license from the Archbishop could circumvent such necessities, but would they be too late?

“I’ll call again at his residence this afternoon. I’m sure he won’t refuse me. I’m a peer of the realm, and if I can’t use my position now, when can I?”

“Then we’re to be married,” Margaret said.

Their hands were still clasped together, and the Duke smiled at her, holding her gaze as she looked up at him.

“Hastily, I admit, but... I think we can make it work, don’t you?” he murmured.

Margaret *did* think as much, and the prospect of marriage made her feel a sudden elation, despite the haste and difficulties involved. She was to be married to the Duke of Repington, and a world of possibility now presented itself.

But there was confusion, too. Their public stance was a formal one. They had gone through all the motions, and yet in private, things were different. They were pretending to be a courting couple, and yet, there was no pretense in the passion they had shared.

“I’m certain we will. We already have, haven’t we? But we must tell the others. I suppose I need my father’s permission, don’t I?” Margaret replied.

She had no doubt her father would agree to the proposal. Her mother had already as much as given her consent, and her father would do what her mother told him—in this matter, at least.

“Then we should hurry. I’ll return to Lambeth Palace and see if the matter can be resolved today. We can marry in any of the London churches, then. I have a friend at Saint Botolph’s by the Tower—Benjamin Cooper—we were at Cambridge together, though I never much applied myself to my studies. I’m certain he’d be happy to perform the ceremony at short notice. And yes... we already have,” Owen replied, smiling at Margaret, who felt relieved to hear that what they had already shared meant something to him, even if not quite the same as it had meant to her.

“But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Let’s tell my parents,” Margaret said, beckoning him to follow her out of the drawing room.

There could be no going back now. The matter was settled, and Margaret’s future was decided.

CHAPTER 15



*A*s Margaret opened the drawing room door, she found her sisters outside, startled by the sudden exit.

“Oh, Margaret, we weren’t sure where you were!” Hannah exclaimed, glancing at Anne, who smiled.

“Were you listening at the keyhole?” Margaret demanded, knowing she had caught her sisters red-handed, even as she wondered how much of the conversation they had overheard.

“How could I possibly listen at a keyhole? I’m the size of a small calf. No, we were just... ensuring—” Anne replied, but Margaret interrupted her.

“I said yes, but we must speak with Father first,” she said, though her words were drowned out by the delighted exclamations of her sisters, who had clearly already decided the matter was settled.

“Oh, how wonderful! Thank goodness! We feared you’d do something

foolish or principled,” Anne admitted.

Margaret raised her eyebrows, but she was forced to smile as both Hannah and Anne embraced her in turn.

“We’re so happy for you, Margaret. A married woman. A duchess. Goodness me, we’ll all be curtsying to you,” Hannah gushed.

The excitement had brought their mother running, and before Margaret—or Owen—could announce the happy news, Anne had blurted it out.

“They’re getting married, Mother. Isn’t it wonderful?”

Lady Dunne gave a cry of delight. “Oh, Margaret, how happy I am! All three of my daughters making the most excellent matches. What more could a woman ask for?” she squealed, embracing Margaret with tears running down her cheeks.

“Lady Dunne, I feel I ought to speak to your husband about the matter,” Owen interrupted, even as his words were drowned out by the continuous excitement of Margaret’s sisters and mother.

“You don’t need his permission. It’s already given. To think, the Duchess of Repington, *my* daughter. And we thought she’d amount to nothing, absolutely nothing. A maiden aunt to Louisa and Talbot—that’s what you said, isn’t it, Hannah? Dear old Aunt Margaret, the spinster from London coming to visit us for the summer. But not anymore. A duchess—Margaret, a duchess!” she

exclaimed, and this excitable tirade continued as they descended the stairs to the hallway, where the noise had brought Lord Dunne his study.

“Am I to assume from this cacophony the good news of a betrothal?” he asked, looking pointedly at Margaret, who blushed.

“We were just coming to ask your permission, Father. Or rather—” she began, but Owen hastily interrupted.

“That is, I should be the one to ask your permission, Lord Dunne. I wanted to be certain Lady Margaret felt the same, but without your permission—” he said, though he, too, was interrupted, this time by Lady Dunne, who had seized her husband’s arm and was imploring him to get on with giving the permission he had only just been asked to give.

“Patrick, just say yes—the Duchess of Repington. We’ll be first in line to every ball in the capital. I can’t wait to see the looks on their faces at Lady Lampon’s salon. I’ll be the envy of them all. Think about it, a Society wedding. We’ll all need new dresses,” she gushed.

“Oh, yes, but you can’t possibly get married until I’ve had time to recover my figure. We’ll all be on display. It’s not just you being seen,” Anne interjected.

At that moment, and with evident exasperation, Lord Dunne raised his hands for silence.

“Enough. I’m sure you’re all very excited, but a father’s permission should

be sought, free from a mother's interference. But you'll be pleased to know it gives me the greatest pleasure to give my permission and allow my youngest daughter the happiness she deserves. I thank you, Your Grace. You've done me a great service, and I pray a blessing on you both for a long and happy marriage," he said.

Lady Dunne let out a cry of delight, clutching at her husband's arm, as Anne and Hannah embraced. "Isn't it wonderful? Isn't it just wonderful?" she exclaimed.

"We've not got a moment to lose. We'll need to go to the Modiste tomorrow. It'll take them at least a month to make the dresses. And then, there's the wedding breakfast, too. Can we hold it here, Mother, or shall we ask Aunt Hortensia for the use of Fotheringill Place? She's got such a magnificent dining hall, and it's far closer to the capital than our estate in Kent. But which church do you plan to marry in, Margaret? I suppose it doesn't matter just yet. We've got plenty of time to plan these things," Hannah rambled on, speaking so quickly as to almost drown herself out.

Margaret and Owen glanced at one another. This was to be the real test. There was to be no Society wedding, no lavish wedding breakfast, no new dresses. The ceremony had to occur soon—within a day or so—and Margaret knew her mother and sisters would never understand whatever excuse she made for such haste.

"There won't be time," Margaret said, and her sister looked at her in surprise.

"Oh, but there will be. You'll not get married until early autumn. It was three months for me, though it seemed like only a few days. There was so much to do. But fear not, we'll help you," Hannah replied.

Anne nodded. “Absolutely, we will,” she said.

Margaret shook her head, and Owen slipped his hand into hers. “Actually, we plan to marry tomorrow or the day after,” he said.

Margaret’s mother and sisters were subdued into stunned silence, each of them staring at the couple in disbelief.

“Tomorrow or the following day?” Lord Dunne, frowning his brow in surprise.

“And why not? There’s no reason to wait, is there? I don’t want a grand wedding or a new dress. I just want to get married. We’re resolved to do so, and we want to do so immediately,” Margaret insisted.

She knew this to be a poor excuse for what they were proposing. Her sisters had both enjoyed lavish weddings, and no expense had been spared in the preparations. New dresses had been bought, a lavish wedding breakfast held, and guests invited from near and far. It was only natural for Anne and Hannah to expect the same when it came to arranging Margaret’s wedding, even as Margaret knew the difference would be marked.

“But you can’t just get married tomorrow!” Anne spluttered.

“No, you’d need a special license. I don’t understand why you want to rush

into it,” Lady Dunne added.

Disappointment was etched on their faces, and Margaret glanced at Owen, hoping he could speak some semblance of reason in response.

“It’s not that... well, it’s my doing,” he said.

Margaret feared he was about to explain the possibility of losing his fortune. Her parents and sisters could not be privy to the fact of what he proposed. They would never agree to it, so she interrupted him, knowing it was better for them not to know the truth.

“It’s not your doing. It’s mine. I don’t want a lavish affair. I just want to be married. I want the ton to cease its idle gossip, and to live as quietly as I did before, married to the man I love,” she explained.

“No, you don’t understand me, Lady Margaret. I was merely suggesting—I was the one who suggested a swift ceremony. I don’t want a lavish wedding. There’s only my brother when it comes to family, and we hardly see eye to eye. I doubt he’d care if I was married tomorrow,” Owen said, laughing nervously.

Margaret nodded, relieved to hear him say this, even as her mother and sisters continued to look distraught at the thought of their plans for a lavish wedding destroyed.

“Oh, Margaret, you always did have such funny ideas about everything.

But... if it's what you want, I suppose we must agree to it," Lady Dunne relented, and Margaret breathed a sigh of relief.

They would reason she was acting in precisely the way she had always acted—in the complete opposite of them. Whilst her sisters enjoyed tea parties, balls, soirees, and gossip, Margaret preferred music, books, and botany. And whilst her sisters' weddings had been lavish societal affairs, Margaret's would be a quiet and intimate gathering with only a few witnesses.

"It's precisely what I want, Mother. I can't think of anything I'd like less than to be paraded in front of Society in an expensive wedding gown," Margaret replied.

Her sisters looked at her in astonishment, and Margaret smiled, knowing it was precisely that which Anne and Hannah had enjoyed most about their wedding days. But neither of them would deny their differences, and it seemed they would only think her more eccentric than before for this apparently astonishing rejection of social expectations.

"Then if that's what you want, Margaret, that's what you'll have, and you do so with my blessing. Now, if you'll all excuse me, I'd like some peace and quiet," Lord Dunne said, and he turned on his heel to retreat back into his study, leaving the rest of them standing in the hallway.

"I must go. I've got a lot to see to if we're to make the necessary arrangements," Owen declared.

Margaret nodded. "You'll keep me informed," she said, and he smiled at her.

“At every moment. I’ll call on you later this evening,” he promised, taking her hand in his and raising it to his lips.

Margaret felt a shiver of delight run through her, and his lips lingered on her hand. She knew how grateful he was, and yet there was something more, too—a sense of happiness at the prospect of what was to come.

“Thank you,” she breathed as he stepped back and bowed.

“Lady Dunne, Lady Pemberton, Lady Weston, I bid you a good day, and I thank you for indulging my eccentricities in this matter. I know Lady Margaret and I will be very happy together—the happiest of couples,” he said, and with that, he took his leave.

As the door was closed behind him, Anne let out an exasperated cry. “Oh, Margaret, you really are a strange creature. I love you dearly, but I can’t say I’ll ever understand you,” she said, shaking her head.

Margaret smiled. She did not need her sisters to understand her. She knew they loved her, and that was all that mattered.

Anne went upstairs to lie down, calling for Jason to follow her, the Earl having been present for much of the proceedings in stunned silence. Hannah, too, took her leave, telling Margaret and her mother she was going to write to the children and tell them the happy news about Aunt Margaret’s betrothal.

Margaret was left alone with her mother, and the Countess put her arms around her and kissed her on the cheek.

“I might not always understand you, Margaret, but you’re my daughter, and I love you dearly. I’m so happy for you, and I’m sure we can make the occasion the happiest of days,” she said, taking Margaret’s hands in hers and smiling at her.

“I know we can, Mother,” Margaret replied, glad to have her mother’s support and understanding.

“Come with me for a moment, Margaret. I want to talk to you alone—properly,” Lady Dunne requested, and she led Margaret into a small sitting room off the hallway, which looked out over the gardens.

Margaret sat down opposite her by the hearth, curious as to what she was about to say.

“What is it, Mother? You’re not angry with me for rushing into things, are you? I’m not, I promise you,” Margaret began, but her mother shook her head.

“Has he told you he loves you?”

It was a curious thing to hear her mother say. The Countess was usually more concerned with the practicalities of such matters, and when both Anne and Hannah had been married, she had driven herself quite to distraction in her

efforts to ensure perfection. There had been no talk of love—not in public, at least—and both Anne’s and Hannah’s matches had been spoken of in terms of fulfilment of duty, rather than an expression of love.

Margaret smiled. “Well... yes, of course,” she replied, even as no mention of love had ever been made.

She and Owen had reached a point of mutual affection and friendship. Their destinies were entwined, and both would gain from the match. In Margaret’s mind, there was more to it than this, though she was still uncertain how Owen truly felt.

Did he truly desire her? The kiss they had shared, first at the theater, then in the shrubbery, had meant something. But in public, their courtship had been for show, progressing as to expectations rather than a true sense of feeling. By marrying the following day, Owen would secure his father’s fortune, and Margaret would be seen by both Society and her family as having accomplished that which no one had believed her capable of.

Both of them stood to gain, but love did not factor into it, even as there could be no doubting Margaret’s growing feelings for the Duke. She liked him—she more than liked him—and he, in turn, liked her. Of that, she was certain, even though love was not yet a word either of them might use.

“Because it’s very important, even though we don’t speak of it. Not properly, at least. I know you must think me a silly creature, Margaret, but I only want what’s best for you. I want you to be in love, and equally so, I want the man you marry to love you, just as I love you,” Lady Dunne continued.

Her words brought a tear to Margaret's eyes, and she reached out and took her mother's hands in hers.

“That's very kind of you to say, Mother. You're right, it's all that matters. I am in love with him. I know I am. And he loves me, too.”

At that moment, Margaret felt torn between the truth and the lie. Her mother was wearing her heart on her sleeve, and yet she could not be honest with her as to why she was doing what she was doing.

The Countess smiled. “Then that's all that matters. I wasn't entirely sure when it came to Jason and Sylvester. Your sisters were smitten, but there's a difference, isn't there? Young ladies can get so worked up over young men, and the opposite, too. But you're not like that, Margaret. I knew you'd think the matter through, and deeply so. That's why I was so surprised to learn of your intended haste when it came to the date of your wedding,” she said.

Margaret understood her mother's concerns. It was one thing to be eccentric, but quite another to act so uncharacteristically. Whilst Anne and Hannah had surely put Margaret's haste down to her unfathomable eccentricities, their mother had wanted further reassurances.

“And I have thought about it, Mother. I promise you,” Margaret added.

Lady Dunne nodded. “If he loves you, and if you love him, and if your powers of reasoning—which go far beyond the rest of us—have reasoned you to this moment, then so be it. I'm happy for you, Margaret, and I'll be the proudest of mothers when I see you happily married.”

She leaned forward and kissed Margaret on the cheek, a sign of her acceptance and blessing, one which Margaret was only too glad to receive.

CHAPTER 16



“*B*ut I don’t understand the need for haste. Couldn’t you have just told the rector on your estate to read the banns on three consecutive Sundays, hurry the process along, and marry there? Why all this business with the Archbishop? Are you dying?” Owen’s friend, the Reverend Benjamin Cooper, asked, staring at Owen in disbelief.

To Owen’s immense relief, the Archbishop—reminded of certain favors the Dukes of Repington had provided to the Church over the centuries—had granted the special license required for a swift marriage, and Owen had come at once to the rectory of Saint Botolph’s by the Tower to enlist the help of his old friend in the matter of matrimony.

“I’m not dying, no. I’m in love, and I want to express that love in haste,” Owen replied.

Benjamin looked at him as though he had gone quite mad, shaking his head in astonishment. “You’re the last person I’d have expected to hear say that. I must say, there were times when I feared for your soul when we were at Cambridge. You seemed directionless, and you couldn’t wait to get away to the continent, and goodness knows what you got up to there. I shudder to think what a combination of sunshine and exposure to exotic religion can do

to one.”

Owen smiled. If Margaret and her sisters were attracted to opposites, he and Benjamin were the same. His friend was something of a dour clergyman, though he could become animated after a glass or two of sherry, and the two of them had always got on well, despite coming from very different backgrounds.

Benjamin himself was the son of a clergyman and had grown up in the rarefied atmosphere of a country parsonage, coming to Cambridge with the express intention of entering the Church. Owen’s reasons for entering those hallowed halls had been of somewhat less noble intent—he had wanted to get away from his father and enjoy himself. His studies had come second.

“Then I’m here to tell you that I’ve fallen in love and want to get married. I love Margaret, and I know we’ll be happy together. I didn’t want to wait, and I didn’t want a grand Society wedding either. Don’t you admire that? I thought you always condemned lavish weddings where the bride appears in an overly expensive dress and all the guests are drunk by six o’clock?” Owen raised an eyebrow.

Benjamin had often spoken of his disdain for such occasions, where the lavishness of the celebration was of more importance than the sacramental dimension.

He smiled. “Yes... you’re right about that, I suppose. Very well. I’ll marry you. You’ve got the license, but when do you propose to enact the ceremony?”

“Tomorrow at noon,” Owen replied.

He had calculated the time his brother would arrive at Gretna Green, and if he and Margaret were married the following day, they would still have over a day on Aaron and Jessie. The marriage certificate would state the date, and thus the matter would be solved. Owen would have beaten his brother to the post, and Mr. Landsdowne would release the funds as the former Duke’s will stated. The matter would be settled, and Owen and Margaret would begin their married lives together.

It was a strange thought, and one Owen knew his clerical friend would thoroughly disapprove of.

“And you’re certain of no impediment preventing you from marrying? I won’t be a party to sin, Owen. She’s not...” Benjamin began, raising his eyebrows as though the horrible possibility of Margaret being pregnant had just occurred to him.

“No!” Owen exclaimed, for he would not have it thought he was marrying in haste to preserve Margaret’s honor.

Benjamin breathed a sigh of relief. “I had to ask, Owen. It happens. A hurried marriage, and the arrival of a child just a little too early. But I suppose I’m not married. I don’t understand the swiftness with which a couple can fall in love. But never mind that, I’ll agree to it. Come to the church at noon tomorrow, and I’ll perform the ceremony. You’ll be married, and I wish you every happiness.”

Owen shook his friend's hand warmly, thanking him profusely for what he had done.

They were speaking in the vestry of Saint Botolph's by the Tower, and whilst Owen knew his friend would not approve of being presented with such a gift in the midst of a sacred space, he took out a bottle of sherry from his overcoat pocket and handed it over.

"You're doing me a great service, Benjamin. I thank you for it, and I know Margaret will, too," he said as the clergyman swiftly hid the bottle in his robes.

"Well... that's very kind of you, I'm sure. I look forward to meeting her, Owen. You've been fortunate to fall in love. I wish it really was as easy as it seems," Benjamin replied.

Owen shook Benjamin's hand again, and they parted with the assurance of the preparations being made for the following day.

As he left the church, Owen could not quite believe his luck. The Archbishop had been remarkably accommodating, and Benjamin, too, had required little persuasion. He allowed himself a smile at his brother's expense. Aaron was about to lose, and when he returned to London in apparent triumph, he would discover the horse had bolted.

"And now for the final act," Owen muttered to himself, climbing into his carriage and instructing the driver to make haste to Margaret's home.

* * *

“You can’t wear blue, Hannah. I’m wearing blue!” Anne exclaimed, as Hannah entered the drawing room with a dress in her hands, followed by Betty, who had been instructed to take out all the dresses belonging to the three sisters and hang them up for inspection.

“Why can’t we both wear blue? We’re equally her sisters, aren’t we? Or you could wear red,” Hannah replied, shrugging her shoulders.

“I won’t fit into anything but the blue one. Betty has already let it out as far as it’ll go. Any more and I’ll reveal my petticoats. No, you absolutely can’t wear blue. You’ll have to change it,” Anne insisted, folding her arms.

Hannah narrowed her eyes, and Margaret knew further argument would ensue if she did not intervene.

“I’m wearing red, so it makes sense for you both to wear blue. I wouldn’t want to show an imbalance in couture,” Margaret said, hoping this bizarre line of reasoning might be accepted.

Her sisters nodded.

“Well, if you’re wearing red, Margaret, we’ll both wear blue,” Anne relented.

Margaret breathed a sigh of relief at having thwarted yet another conflict in the ongoing preparations for her wedding.

Despite the haste involved, it seemed both Anne and Hannah were determined to outdo one another in their preparations. Hannah had ordered an open-top carriage to take them to the church at a moment's notice, whilst Anne had dispatched Jason to the most fashionable florist in the city with instructions for the preparation of elaborate arrangements to decorate the church and house with.

Lady Dunne had arranged for the wedding breakfast to take place there at the house, and the servants had been kept busy moving furniture and creating a miniature ballroom in the library, where a string quartet was to play after a lavish meal was served in the dining room.

“Those that need to know, know. The four of us, your father, your godmother, Jason, Sylvester, the two children, and Owen, too, of course,” Lady Dunne said, reeling off the names of those invited to the wedding in haste, and those who had no choice but to attend.

“Won't he have anyone there he knows?” Anne asked.

“There's his friend Edwin Davis—the Viscount of Finch—and the clergyman that's going to marry us is a friend of his—Benjamin Cooper,” Margaret replied.

Anne tutted. “It's hardly a societal triumph, a viscount and a clergyman along with all of us,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Two countesses and a marchioness. Two earls and a marquess. I’m sure we’ll make a very happy company. If only we knew the exact time and day.” Lady Dunne sighed.

This was the matter now preoccupying them. It was late evening, and they were yet to hear from Owen as to the precise details of the ceremony. He had promised to communicate the time that day, and Margaret now crossed to the drawing room window, looking out down the street for signs of his carriage.

“I’m surprised the baby hasn’t been born already. I’ve been on edge all day,” Anne said, shaking her head.

“I hope you’re not planning to steal Margaret’s thunder, Anne,” Hannah scoffed, and the two sisters exchanged angry glances.

But at that moment, the Duke’s carriage came into view, and Margaret clapped her hands together in delight. She was genuinely excited at the prospect of knowing when she would be married. She hurried downstairs, followed by Hannah, and with Anne’s instructions as to being informed immediately of the time ringing in her ears. But as she threw open the front door, not waiting for the butler to do it for her, she was surprised to find not Owen, but the carriage driver—a liveried footman—standing on the steps.

“I’m to give you this, My Lady,” he said, holding out a neatly folded piece of paper, sealed with red wax.

Margaret broke the seal and opened it, Hannah craning her neck to see what was written.

My darling Margaret,

I have just returned with the license for our wedding. The reverend of Saint Botolph's by the Tower is in agreement. We are to be married tomorrow at noon, and thus it would be bad luck for us to set eyes on one another before then.

I leave you with my fondest best wishes and the assurances of my affection.

Until tomorrow, I am yours.

With love,

Owen.

Margaret's heart skipped a beat as she looked up to see the Duke's hand emerge from the curtained window of his carriage, waving to her, before withdrawing.

"Tomorrow? I can hardly believe it!" Hannah exclaimed as the carriage driver gave them a curt bow.

"Tell him yes, noon tomorrow at Saint Botolph's by the Tower. And tell him I love him," Margaret said.

The carriage driver looked somewhat embarrassed, and Hannah tutted as he hurried back to relay the message.

“You really shouldn’t relay such intimacies with servants,” Hannah chastised, but Margaret had meant the words she had said, just as she felt certain Owen had meant the words he had written.

She looked down again at the hastily scribbled note. The assurance of affection, the giving of himself, and his love...

“It can’t come soon enough,” she whispered, watching his carriage pull away.

CHAPTER 17



“Come now, Margaret, you’ll be late!” Hannah exclaimed as Betty placed the last of the pins in Margaret’s hair.

The three sisters and the maid had risen early that morning, and Margaret had been washed and dressed, preened and primmed, and made ready for what was, undoubtedly, the most important day of her life.

Now, she was sitting in front of the mirror in her bedroom, wearing a red dress—for there had not been time to fit her for anything different—her hair tied up in a style of Hannah’s suggestion, and wearing the set of jewels each of the sisters had worn on their wedding day—an heirloom passed down from their grandmother.

“There’s still time. It’s only ten o’clock,” Margaret replied, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece.

“They’ve just delivered the posies, but I hope they’ll have the church decorated. Mother’s downstairs, she’s quite frantic as to the preparations for the wedding breakfast,” Anne said, entering the room with Jason in tow.

Jason looked his usual harassed self and was carrying a box of pretty posies, one for each of the sisters, and for Betty, too, at Margaret's insistence.

Despite the haste of the arrangements, it seemed Margaret's mother and sisters were determined to force into a matter of hours what was usually the result of months of planning. They had been frantically going about the preparations, even as Margaret felt remarkably calm. She was getting married, and nothing really mattered but her vows, and what they would mean for her future. As the Duchess of Repington, her life would be very different, even as she was still not certain what that difference would mean.

Lying awake at night, Margaret had thought a great deal about the Duke, and the sincerity of all he had done. For all intents and purposes, they were like any other couple approaching the altar that day, and she knew she would be happy, even though her happiness would be very different from how her sisters might imagine it to be.

"There we are, My Lady. You're all ready," Betty announced, stepping back and smiling at Margaret's reflection in the mirror.

Margaret beamed. "Thank you, Betty. You've made me look so pretty."

"No one needed to do that, My Lady. You already looked pretty. But if a bride can't be pampered on her wedding day, I don't know what the world's coming to," Betty said, as Anne now thrust a posy of flowers into Margaret's hands.

“There, now, stand up and let us look at you,” Anne said as she and Hannah stood back to inspect their sister.

“Do I pass muster?” Margaret asked, and both her sisters nodded.

“I never thought I’d say so, but you do—you look... radiant,” Hannah said, and Anne agreed.

“Absolutely—we three sisters, all of us married. It must be such a weight off Mother’s mind.”

At that moment, the door to Margaret’s bedroom opened and Lady Dunne herself appeared. At the sight of Margaret, she gasped, holding her hands up to her face as tears welled up in her eyes.

“Oh, Margaret, don’t you look a picture? My three girls... all together, what a wonderful sight!” she exclaimed as Margaret rose to her feet.

“Do you approve, Mother?” she asked.

Lady Dunne nodded. “Entirely so, my darling, entirely so. And your father... he’ll be so proud,” she said.

This touching scene continued until the clock on the mantelpiece struck eleven o’clock, and Hannah let out a shriek.

“We’ve got to go. we’ll never get there in time, otherwise. Come along, everyone,” she called, and Margaret was hustled out of the room in a cloud of sweet perfume and talc.

Lord Dunne was waiting downstairs, and he, too, expressed a similar sentiment to that of his wife, praising the beauty of his three radiant daughters.

“It was just like this on our wedding day, wasn’t it, Jason?” Anne said, taking her husband’s arm.

The Earl of Weston had no choice but to agree, and the party was soon bundled into a carriage and making its way through the streets to Saint Botolph’s by the Tower.

“I’m ever so excited. I just hope Sylvester arrives on time with the children. He can be so absentminded,” Hannah said.

“Isn’t Louisa going to be here?” Lady Dunne asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. She’s a funny little thing. One moment I can dress her up like a doll, the next she’s rolling in the mud. I sent word for the nanny to bring her so attired, but... we’ll see,” Hannah replied.

There had been little time to consider such arrangements, but Margaret’s mind was not on practicalities. She was thinking about Owen, and the public

nature of what they were about to enact. It was one thing to display an apparent courtship—the mechanisms had been easy. They had dined and danced together, visited the theater, been seen on a picnic at the gardens at Kew.

But those things were marginal compared to what was about to happen. In a short while, Margaret and Owen would pronounce their vows before God. It was a sacred act, and it meant something. It meant everything.

“If either of you know any impediment, why ye may not be lawfully joined together in Matrimony, ye do now confess it..” That was the question they would be asked by the clergyman, and whilst Margaret knew of no practical reason, the matter of the heart was different.

Is love a reason? God knows the secrets of our hearts. We’re not in love, and yet...

The carriage drew up outside the church, interrupting her thoughts.

“Come along, Margaret. Can’t you hear the bells ringing?” Hannah said.

Margaret looked up from her musing and smiled. “Oh... yes, I can. I’m coming now,” she replied.

Her sister helped her down the carriage.

The church was a fine one, built in the shadow of the Tower of London, and with a tall spire and classical facade in the style of Sir Christopher Wren. A small crowd had gathered outside to witness the arrival of the bride, and there was much craning of necks and applause as Margaret passed by. She could hear the organ thundering inside the church, and she pictured Owen standing at the altar, waiting for her to arrive. She wondered what he would be thinking.

Would he be nervous? Was he having second thoughts?

“Ah, My Lord, welcome to Saint Botolph’s,” a surplice-clad clergyman said, emerging from the open doors of the church.

“Reverend, good morning. This is my wife, Lady Dunne, my daughters, Lady Pemberton and Lady Weston, and the Earl of Weston. And of course, the bride,” Lord Dunne said as the reverend smiled and greeted each of them in turn.

“His Grace is here already. He’s terribly nervous,” the reverend informed them.

Margaret smiled. “Then we mustn’t keep him waiting any longer,” she replied.

He led them to the back of the church, with its box pews and columns, the communion table at the east end, beneath an inscription of the Ten Commandments in gold lettering. Owen was standing there, his back turned to them.

Lord Dunne offered Margaret his arm as the others hurried to take their seats.

“What a happy day,” he whispered as the wedding march began.

Margaret’s heart was beating fast. She did not know why she felt so nervous, but there was a finality in what they were doing and a sense of no turning back. This was her wedding day, and it was certainly not how she had envisaged it, even as the trappings were like any other. But it was all a show, and when it was over, she wondered what life would really be like.

“You’re here,” Owen whispered, turning to her as she came to stand next to him.

“Did you think I wouldn’t come?” she asked, smiling, as he slipped his hand into hers.

“I wasn’t sure... You weren’t under any obligation. If you walked away now, I wouldn’t blame you,” he replied as the reverend came to stand in front of them and cleared his throat.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this Congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God in the time of man’s innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church...” the reverend began, and the marriage service was enacted.

Margaret and Owen vowed to love and cherish one another, in good times and bad, in poverty and riches, in sickness and in health. Their union was blessed, and as the ceremony ended, they shared a kiss.

It felt strange to marry—it *was* strange to marry—and, as the final words were pronounced, Margaret knew there could be no going back. She had made her choice, pronounced her vows, and now they were married in the sight of God and the gathered congregation.

“Thank you,” Owen whispered as they turned to the congregation, who now rose to greet them as they walked arm-in-arm down the aisle.

“It feels... strange,” Margaret replied, as her sisters came hurrying up to greet them.

“I cried the whole way through. It was just beautiful,” Anne mumbled.

Hannah expressed similar sentiments. “The perfect couple, that’s what you are,” she said, and there were many more congratulations before Margaret and Owen stepped out of the church and the crowd of well-wishers cheered.

Louisa, Hannah’s daughter, *had* arrived in time, looking very pretty in a new dress, and, along with Betty, she sat with Margaret and Owen in the open-top carriage they now traveled back home in.

The wedding breakfast was to take place at Margaret’s home, hosted by her mother and father, but she and Owen would spend their first night together as

a married couple at Owen's London townhouse before leaving for Repington Park in Buckinghamshire.

"I'm rather enjoying myself," Owen whispered as he and Margaret alighted the carriage at her parents' house, with Betty and Louisa following behind.

"So am I," Margaret whispered.

The day had all the trappings of a real wedding. It *was* a real wedding, and an onlooker would surely have said so.

"I just hope... well, we've got the certificate. We can prove the date, though I wonder if Aaron and Lady Jessie still got there first," Owen said as they made their way into the hallway, where the servants had gathered to greet them.

"We'll soon find out. But what if they have? What do we do then?" Margaret asked, for there was no alternative plan.

But Owen's answer was cut short by the approach of a man, whom Margaret's husband introduced as Edwin Davis, the Viscount of Finch. Margaret had seen him at the ceremony, and he had followed behind their carriage on horseback. He was one of Owen's oldest friends and, it turned out, was privy to the arrangements of the day.

"I think you've got away with it. Everything's in place. I must say, I was wary when Owen told me of his intentions, but... I'm so happy for you both.

No more rakish ways, Owen,” he warned, winking at the Duke, who looked embarrassed.

“We just have to hope my brother didn’t get there before us,” Owen replied as further guests began to arrive and made their way into the house.

If Aaron and Jessie had gotten married before them, the whole exercise would have been a failure, even as extracting themselves from the marriage would be nigh on impossible. The wedding was the talk of the ton—the new Duchess of Repington, a surprise for all.

Had Owen really chosen the shy, bookish daughter of the Earl of Dunne? He could have had any woman he desired, and yet he had chosen a woman eclipsed by her sisters, and whose prospects at the beginning of the Season had been abysmal.

“Margaret, my darling, how happy I am for you!” a voice behind them exclaimed, and Margaret turned to find her godmother, Lady Catherine MacCulloch, beaming at her.

The merriment was now beginning, and it seemed the illusion of a Society wedding had been given.

“Thank you,” Margaret said as her godmother kissed her on the cheek.

“But I hope, now that you’re a duchess, you won’t neglect your books. You’ll still come and see me, won’t you?” Catherine asked, raising her eyebrows.

Margaret assured her godmother she would.

Lady Catherine, herself unmarried, had always encouraged Margaret's love of books and learning. She smiled, slipping her hand into Margaret's and squeezing it. "I always feared you'd spend your life living in the shadow of your sisters. Women are supposed to marry, produce children, and do little else. That's what counts as success in our apparently civilized society. But you were always different, Margaret. Your success was different, and I hope it continues. We need more women to interest themselves in books and learning, rather than salons and gossip," she said.

Margaret could not have agreed more, and she promised her godmother she would visit her as soon as the excitement surrounding the wedding had died down. She was still the same woman she had always been, and yet it seemed her marriage had brought about an expectation of change. She was no longer the bookish third daughter of the Earl of Dunne, but the Duchess of Repington, a woman of means and influence.

"It all feels very strange," Margaret said to Hannah when the celebrations were drawing to an end, and she and Owen were preparing to depart after the lavish meal and dancing.

"It will do. When I married Sylvester, I didn't know what to think of myself. It's as though one takes on a whole new identity. But you're happy, aren't you?" Hannah asked.

Margaret nodded. "I am, yes. Truly, I am," she replied, and there was no doubt in the truth of it, even though it felt awfully strange to admit such

happiness in the face of such momentous deception.

CHAPTER 18



“*I* think we got away with it,” Owen said as he and Margaret sat in the back of the carriage that evening.

They had said their goodbyes and thanked Lord and Lady Dunne for hosting the celebration. It had been a delicious meal, and Margaret had enjoyed dancing with Owen, surrounded by their family and friends. It was dark now, and the carriage was lit by the glow of candles burning in the glass lamps of the compartment, casting flickering shadows over their faces as they sat opposite one another. It had felt strange for Margaret to leave her home and family behind, even as she knew it had been her own choice to do so.

“We did, though there’s still the matter of your brother and Lady Jessie,” Margaret reminded.

She was still fearful they were too late, and that Aaron had beaten them in the charge. If that were the case, Owen would be ruined, and his fortune would be swallowed up by his brother’s debts. What they would do then, Margaret did not know, and still, she was uncertain how their lives together would be. Would they live separate lives, or would the illusion of a happy marriage be maintained? Margaret hoped for the latter, even as she feared the former. In truth, she did not know the Duke well enough to make a judgment, and the

coming days and weeks would be the test and proof of what was to come.

“We’ll find out soon enough. He’ll return from Scotland in triumph, I’m sure. But when he sees the date on our wedding certificate...” Owen said, smiling at Margaret, who nodded.

“I hope so. I hope we’re in time.”

The carriage drew up outside Owen’s lodgings—a townhouse at the center of a crescent, with a communal garden in front. It was a handsome dwelling and would make for a pleasant place to reside until they left for Buckinghamshire in a few days’ time.

“We will be. They couldn’t have gotten to Scotland in time. My guess is the certificate will be dated tomorrow or the following day. Aaron will return, boasting about his victory, and I’ll have already presented our certificate to Mr. Landsdowne, our solicitor,” Owen said.

He helped Margaret down from the carriage, and the door of the house was now opened by a manservant, whom Owen greeted by the name of James.

“I trust Your Grace finds everything to satisfaction?” James asked as Owen handed him his outdoor coat and hat.

“Yes, we’ll go straight up. I’m tired. Don’t disturb me until late tomorrow morning,” Owen replied.

Margaret had not yet set foot in the Duke's residence, and she looked around her with interest, examining the pictures and paintings in the hallway, where dozens of candles were burning to illuminate the scene.

"It's a beautiful house," she observed as she followed Owen upstairs.

"I prefer London to the countryside at times," he admitted as they came to the landing, where another flight of stairs led to the upper level and doors led off at intervals on both sides.

Margaret was unsure of what came next. A newly married couple would spend the night together. Her sisters had teased her about the matter, suggesting she be "put to bed" in the manner of ancient tradition. But whilst the marriage vows had been real, the idea of consummation was something quite different.

"Where... do we sleep?" Margaret asked, for even though they were married, she felt uncertain about the prospect of their sharing a room, not least a bed.

Owen, too, looked a little uncomfortable, but it seemed he had given the matter some thought, and he led Margaret into his own bedroom, where a door led into a further chamber beyond.

"We'll sleep in connecting rooms, though with total privacy. It's usual for couples to sleep separately. I'm sure your maid won't say anything," Owen replied, raising his eyebrows.

Margaret had not thought about such details. But Owen was right. Betty might think it odd, but she would not make a fuss over it.

Owen showed her into the room, lighting candles on the sconces on the walls, gradually illuminating the canopied bed, red wallpaper, and bay window. The room was comfortably furnished as both a bedroom and a sitting room, with a writing desk and bureau, along with a table and chairs.

“It’s delightful,” Margaret breathed as Owen stood in the doorway connecting his room to hers.

“Well... I’ll say goodnight, and thank you,” he said as Margaret stepped forward and smiled.

She slipped her hand into his, not wanting there to be any awkwardness between them, even as he looked somewhat hesitant.

“You don’t need to thank me. I’m simply glad we’ve managed to make it work. I was worried, of course. But... well, I needn’t have been.”

He smiled at her and placed his hand gently on her shoulder. “I don’t think either of us need to worry, do we? I’m glad you’re here. I’m glad we made it work,” he said, and leaning forward, he kissed her gently on the cheek.

“We will do,” she agreed, a shiver running through her as the touch of his lips lingered on her cheek.

“I think we can be very happy together. I’m certain of it, in fact. Marriages come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Some work, some don’t. Some are forced, and others entered into willingly. I don’t think ours is... well... I’m sure we’ll be happy,” he said.

Bidding her goodnight, he closed the door between their rooms, though Margaret noted he did not pull the bolt across, and neither did she.

Betty was not due to arrive until the following morning—the wedding night not requiring the services of a maid—and Hannah undressed alone and then slipped into the bed, having blown out all the candles. She lay back and sighed, pondering the enormity of what they had done. But Owen’s words rang true—they *would* be happy.

Owen had treated her with nothing but kindness and respect, and she felt entirely at ease in his company. There was no ruse in that, and nothing false about their friendship either. Closing her eyes, Margaret imagined what their life would be like together, and she felt only happiness at the prospect of discovering what the future held.

There are different ways of being in love.

Margaret could only wonder if this was one of them.

CHAPTER 19



“Deviled kidneys, Your Grace?” the footman asked, leaning forward with a silver dish at breakfast the next morning.

Owen shook his head. He could not stomach such a dish so early in the morning, and he refused, opting instead for eggs and toast. He was waiting in the dining room for Margaret, bemused at the thought of what had transpired between them the previous day.

We actually got married.

He picked up his knife and fork and began to eat.

It still seemed remarkable to think about, even as the certificate in his pocket proved it to be true. Benjamin Cooper had signed it. It was official, and the marriage had been conducted according to the rites and mores of the Church. They had not eloped, nor paid a dubious Clerk in Holy Orders to perform the ceremony for them. Benjamin was Owen’s friend and had married them in good grace. The task was accomplished, even as Owen could not quite dare to believe it.

“And now, we wait for Aaron,” he whispered to himself, knowing his brother would be livid to discover he had beaten him to the task.

There was no doubt in Owen’s mind as to what would happen next. Aaron would challenge him. He would seek legal redress and refuse to believe Owen and Margaret’s marriage was legitimate. But whilst the terms of their father’s will had caused many problems, those terms were simple. The brother who marries first receives the inheritance. The marriage could not be one of convenience—though who was to know otherwise—and had to be officially recognized with all the legal proceedings taken care of. That had been done, and in the eyes of the Church, state, and ton—all three being necessarily appeased—Owen and Margaret were married.

And there’s nothing Aaron can do about it.

Owen felt a sense of satisfaction as to what he had achieved. But as for what happened next between him and Margaret, Owen was uncertain. He did not know what it was like to be married, or what was expected of him. Marriage was a foreign concept, and life would certainly be very different from now on.

He was pondering this when the door to the dining room opened and Margaret herself appeared. She was dressed in a pretty blue dress, with a silk shawl around her shoulders, and was carrying a book in her hands. Owen smiled at her. She looked very pretty, and the morning sunlight coming through the window caught her brown hair, making it appear almost blonde. She smiled back at him as the footman hurried to pull a chair out for her.

“Good morning,” Owen said as Margaret sat down.

“Good morning,” she returned, blushing a little under his gaze.

“I trust you slept well.”

Margaret nodded.

Owen wanted her to be comfortable. She had left her home and everything familiar to her for his sake, and for the sake of his dukedom. He was fearful of upsetting her, or of her being miserable, and was determined to do all he could to make her happy in this strange and unexpected new life.

“Very well, yes, though I’ll be happy when Betty arrives,” she added, helping herself to the deviled kidneys the footman now presented her with.

“She comes today, I presume?” Owen asked, for they were yet to discuss the domestic arrangements or the running of the household.

It was the Duchess who was expected to manage such things—just as his own mother had done—even as Owen knew he could hardly expect it of Margaret. She was to be the Duchess only in name, and he had no intention of forcing her into a role she neither courted nor desired.

“I hope so. And perhaps my sisters might, too,” Margaret replied.

Owen feared there were already things Margaret missed about her previous life, even though she appeared happy enough. He was worried about upsetting her, or of her accusing him of entrapping her into something she no longer desired.

“You’re... happy, though, aren’t you?” he asked tentatively.

Margaret nodded. “We had a wonderful day yesterday. It was... a delight.”

Owen breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m glad. I’d hate to think... well, I’d hate to think you were unhappy,” he admitted.

Margaret shook her head. “I’ll tell you if I’m not,” she reassured him, just as the footman returned to the dining room with fresh toast and a pot of marmalade.

Their talk turned to other matters, and Owen felt relieved to know that Margaret was happy—at least for now. With breakfast concluded, he showed her around the house and the garden, finishing in the library, where she marveled at the collection of books.

“Isn’t it wonderful? I don’t know where to start!” she exclaimed, gazing up at the shelves of books in awe.

“Ah, wait until you see Repington Park. The library there... is quite extraordinary,” Owen replied, though he himself had not given it a great deal

of thought or attention over the years.

Books were something Owen had little passion for, though Margaret's enthusiasm was infectious. She talked enthusiastically about her interests and the things she had planned for the future.

"I want to establish a collection of botanical books, along with the garden in Buckinghamshire. It can rival Kew, I know it can. A hothouse, a water garden, an arboretum, and a library of rare works in horticulture," Margaret rambled on, running her fingers along the rows of books.

"I find your imagination quite remarkable. The grounds of Repington Park were designed by Capability Brown. They're quite remarkable, but they need someone with an eye and vision to maintain them," Owen said as they stepped out of the library and onto the terrace, where the sun was warm on their faces. A pleasant breeze blew across the garden.

Margaret clapped her hands together in delight. "Capability Brown? Oh, but that's wonderful! He's quite the greatest of English landscapers. I can't wait to see the estate. It's going to be wonderful!"

Owen smiled at her.

There was something about her—her intelligence, her charm, her wit—he found entirely endearing. Had he not married her for the reasons he had done so, he found himself wondering if he might have married her for the sort of reasons most people marry.

Though I doubt she feels the same.

But despite these doubts, there was one certainty in Owen's mind—he and Margaret had become friends, and on this first day of their married life, he found a sense of contentment at the prospect of what was to come.

So many couples existed in loveless marriages, forced by duty to accept unhappiness. But this was different, and the more time Owen spent with Margaret, the more convinced he was that he had done the right thing in asking her to marry him.

“My sisters are going to call on me in the coming days,” Margaret announced as they ate dinner together that evening, holding up a letter that had just been delivered by the footman.

Owen had been pleased to meet Margaret's sisters. He had known them by reputation, and it was always said that Lord Dunne's elder daughters had married well. He was glad to hear that Margaret would receive a visit from them and was only too pleased to encourage it.

“Marvelous. I'm pleased to hear it,” he said genuinely.

Margaret smiled. “I've enjoyed our day together.”

Owen nodded. He had enjoyed it, too, and was only too glad to think of the days to come.

“I have, too. I wonder... well, it’s going to work, isn’t it?” He sat back and fixed Margaret with a searching gaze.

“I’m certain it will. We’ll make it work. But I’m feeling quite tired now. I think I’ll go to bed.”

Owen nodded once, rising from the table as Margaret did the same. He followed her out of the dining room and into the hallway, and she turned towards him, placing her hand on his arm.

“You will tell me if... you’re not happy?” Owen asked softly.

“I will.” She nodded. “But I am, and I hope you are, too.”

Owen smiled. He *did* feel happy.

He gazed into her eyes, slipping his hand around her waist as he spoke. Margaret did not pull back, and he leaned forward and kissed her. He had not expected to do so, nor had he intended it. But it felt natural, even as he pulled back in surprise.

“I’m sorry,” he said, astonished at his own behavior.

The kiss had lasted but a moment. He turned away, embarrassed by what he had done.

“Oh... I’m sorry, it’s...” Margaret stammered.

It seemed that she, too, was surprised by what had happened.

“Forget all about it. You’re tired. You should go to bed. I’ll be in my study. I’ve got some correspondence to see to,” Owen said, stepping back.

“It’s quite all right,” Margaret replied.

He looked at her curiously. Was this an invitation?

“But... I feel as though I’m taking advantage of you. The things I’ve done, kissing you—I shouldn’t have done it. The corridor, the theater, the shrubbery...” he stammered, feeling suddenly very foolish, even though she shook her head.

“If I hadn’t wanted it, don’t you think I’d have resisted?” she asked.

* * *

Margaret was not embarrassed, nor was she angry at what her husband—for that was what he now was—had done. It was the most natural thing for a husband and wife to kiss one another goodnight.

She smiled at him as they lingered together in the hallway.

“I suppose I just assumed...” Owen trailed off.

Margaret smiled. “You don’t have to assume anything. I want you to know it’s all right,” she said, taking a step towards him.

Owen slipped his arm around her waist, drawing her into his embrace, their lips pressed together in a kiss. Now, there was no drawing back, no sense of fear or trepidation, only the passion of two people at last discovering the feelings they had so long harbored for one another, feelings they could now express.

He slipped his hand into hers, a mischievous smile playing on his face, as he hurried her towards the stairs. They met no one on the landing, and upon entering Owen’s bedroom, they fell on the bed, their arms around one another, their lips pressed together.

“I didn’t realize... I didn’t know if you felt the same,” Owen murmured as Margaret arched her neck and he pressed kisses there, pulling at the shoulders of her dress.

“I don’t think either of us knew. I think we pretended—Oh, we fooled ourselves,” she replied as he looked down at her, brushing the hair from her cheek, before bringing his lips to hers, his hands running down the length of her body as she felt him stiffen against her.

The snatched kisses at the shrubbery were nothing compared to this, and Margaret closed her eyes as he pulled the ties of her bodice apart, exposing

her breasts to his touch, to his lips...

“But it doesn’t matter now. It’s not a ruse, it means—Oh, Margaret, I didn’t think you’d feel the same, but...” he trailed off as she pulled at his belt, exposing him to her touch. He gasped.

Margaret knew nothing of such pleasures, save for the whispers of her sisters, whose accounts of lovemaking had made her fear the act, even as a shiver of pleasure now ran through her.

Her breasts were exposed, and pulling at her skirts, Owen revealed her thighs, her legs—her whole body now his to pleasure. She gasped as he traced a gentle line of kisses across her skin, searching out her pleasure with his tongue.

“Owen!” Margaret exclaimed as a wave of heat ran through her loins. She fisted her hands in his hair, caught up in this strange and overwhelming sensation.

“What more shall I do for you?” he asked, grinning mischievously at her. He slid himself up to kiss her, his fingers still toying with her bud.

Margaret closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation of his touch, the closeness of their bodies, the press of his lips against hers. She had never imagined such intimacy, even as he rose above her. She took hold of him, running her fingers along his length as he shuddered and, with a sudden cry, spilled across her breasts.

Breathless, Owen lay down next to her, slipping his arms around her and drawing her into his embrace.

“I... didn’t know...” she panted.

He smiled. “But you do now, and... well, will you stay with me tonight?” he asked.

Margaret nodded, wondering what more was to come, surprised but gladdened by what had occurred between them.

CHAPTER 20



“Good morning, Your Grace. I wasn’t expecting to find you up so early,” Betty said as she entered Margaret’s bedroom the next morning.

Margaret had only just slipped through the connecting door, realizing her maid would come to wake her as she had done every morning back at home. She had no regrets about spending the night with Owen. He was her husband.

“Oh... yes, I’m quite all right. Thank you, Betty. I’m just a little tired, that’s all,” Margaret replied.

“You had a long day yesterday, Your Grace, and then... well, the wedding night. I think it’s nice to have connecting rooms,” the maid commented, smiling, as she helped Margaret to bed.

“Yes... It’s... lovely,” Margaret replied, glancing at the connecting door.

She wondered if the bolt was drawn on Owen’s side, it being still pulled

across on hers. She wondered if he would come to her again that night. Their passion had not been planned, a moment of madness, even amidst the certainty of marriage or the true expression of a love now shared. There was no reason why they should not share a kiss—or more—and yet, Margaret could not help but wonder if Owen would feel guilty when he awoke.

“You make such a lovely couple, Your Grace. You, a duchess. The Duchess of Repington. I still can’t get used to it. My sister wrote and told me she’d have to curtsy to me now,” Betty said, laughing, as she folded Margaret’s dress.

“I’m not used to it either, Betty. It’s quite extraordinary, isn’t it?” Margaret agreed.

But it was not her new title, or the perception of others, she found the strangest, but the lingering memory of the intimacy they had shared. They *were* married, and what they had done was the most natural thing in the world, even though their circumstances made it somewhat odd to do so. She hoped there would be no awkwardness between them, even as she feared Owen might think an unfortunate line had been crossed.

“I’m glad your sisters are visiting you soon, Your Grace. It’ll be nice for you to see them,” Betty said, and now she fussed around the room, helping Margaret to dress and get ready.

But as the morning progressed, Margaret could not help but feel something had changed between her and Owen.

Something *had* changed between them—they were married—but there was something else, too. A lingering confusion in her own feelings. One, it seemed, Owen possessed, too. What were her feelings towards him?

“We’re friends, and now we’re married, and... oh, I don’t know. He’s everything I ever thought a man should be, but wasn’t,” she whispered to herself, wondering what the Duke was thinking, and hoping it would be the same as her.

Anne and Hannah had arrived after breakfast the following day, and the three sisters had taken a pleasant tour of the house and gardens, before settling down to tea in the drawing room. Margaret had not seen the Duke that morning. He had not come down for breakfast, nor had he sought her out in the morning room before her sisters had arrived. Margaret feared he was angry with her—or with himself—and she hoped the intimacy they had shared would not sour relations between them.

Owen had been quiet and brooding over the previous days, and they had barely exchanged two words with one another. He had brought up the excuse of work, but Margaret feared it was the intimacy he feared to speak of.

“One shouldn’t shy away from such things. It’s not a pleasant business, but you’ll know soon enough, I’m sure,” Hannah was saying.

“I doubt it,” Margaret replied, and her sisters raised their eyebrows.

“But you know what’s expected of you, don’t you? You’re to bear the heir to the dukedom. That’s your function,” Hannah reminded in a matter-of-fact

tone.

Margaret did not like to think of herself as a mere receptacle of inheritance, but her sisters differed in their opinion. As far as they were concerned, a woman's success rested in the male line, and Anne had made no secret of her hopes for her firstborn.

"I'm not sure it's my only function. Besides, I'm not sure we're ready for children. We've only been married for two days," Margaret argued.

"But you have... consummated your marriage, haven't you?" Anne whispered.

Margaret blushed. She knew the matter of children was to be a stumbling block in hers and Owen's plans. The lack of a child could be dismissed for a year or so—they were waiting for the right time or finding it difficult to conceive—but any longer, and serious questions would be asked. A duke needed an heir, and Margaret was the one to produce it.

"I don't want to talk about it," Margaret replied.

Anne groaned. "If you can't talk to us about it, who can you talk to? But you're not... unhappy, are you? It takes a lot of getting used to. When I married Jason, I didn't settle for weeks," she said, shaking her head and sighing.

Margaret rather suspected it was Jason who had needed to make the larger

adjustment to Anne, but far from feeling unhappy, Margaret was certain she had made the right decision, even though her sisters would never have agreed had they known the truth. But the intimacy remained a confusing element in the matter, and Margaret was fearful as to what it meant, even though she could not ask either Anne or Hannah for advice.

“I’m quite settled, thank you. I feel... happy,” Margaret replied, and her sisters smiled at her.

“And we’re happy for you, Margaret. Truly, we are,” Hannah said, helping herself to a scone.

The conversation continued in this way for some time until the inevitable question of the Duke’s whereabouts was posed.

“I thought he’d at least step into the room and greet us,” Anne commented.

Margaret could make no excuse as to why the Duke had not done so. He was conspicuous by his absence, and it was certainly odd not to have his company.

“I’m sure he’s just... finishing some correspondence,” Margaret ventured after her sisters had been with her for over two hours, and with no sign of the Duke appearing.

“We mustn’t stay for much longer. Mother wants to come on her own. She’s desperate to see you, of course.” Hannah rose to her feet.

“And I hope you’ll both come back soon. I’ll miss you terribly. I know I will,” Margaret said, helping Anne to her feet.

The arrival of the baby was imminent, and Anne had expanded to such a size as to make herself appear twice the woman she was. Margaret kissed her on the cheek and did the same to Hannah, bidding them goodbye and leading them out into the hallway.

“We’ll come back soon, I promise. And Mother won’t be far behind us. I think she’ll come tomorrow,” Hannah said, slipping her hand into Margaret’s and smiling.

The house was long and narrow, and the hallway led along a passageway to the bottom of the stairs, where, to Margaret’s surprise, she found Jessie standing by the table.

Jessie looked up at Margaret and her sisters, raising her eyebrows and turning so as to expose the wedding ring on her finger. “We’ve come to share the good news. Aaron and I are married,” she announced.

Anne and Hannah looked at Margaret in surprise.

CHAPTER 21



“*M*arried? What nonsense. Do you really expect me to believe it?” Aaron exclaimed as Owen held up the marriage certificate signed by Benjamin and dated two days prior.

“It’s all there in black and white. Can’t you see it?” Owen retorted, pointing to the date and the signatures.

The marriage certificate had been witnessed by Lord Dunne and Jason. It was signed by both Owen and Margaret and had Benjamin’s signature as officiant, too. There could be no doubt in its legality, even as Aaron seemed determined to challenge its legitimacy. He had arrived just after Margaret’s sisters, bringing with him Jessie, and the triumphant news of their marriage in Scotland. But their own marriage certificate, dubious as it was, was dated the day after that of Owen and Margaret’s wedding.

Whether their marriage was legitimate or not, the date would not allow them to make a claim on the inheritance. The terms of the will were clear, the first brother to marry inherited the fortune, and Owen’s certificate proved it was him.

“I won’t believe it. You’re not married. You... you... conceived it as a ploy to gain the fortune! It’s a marriage of convenience,” Aaron snarled, snatching the certificate from Owen’s hands and scanning it with narrowed eyes, as though willing it to show signs of forgery.

“We married at Saint Botolph’s by the Tower. It was Benjamin Cooper who conducted the ceremony. There’s no doubt as to the legitimacy of our marriage. We had dozens of witnesses, including all of Margaret’s family. I’m sorry, Aaron, but the matter is settled. I’ve written to Mr. Landsdowne to tell him. You can protest all you wish, but it won’t change anything,” Owen said.

He had known his brother’s reaction would be like this. Aaron was angry. He had thought the inheritance was his to claim, and Owen had spoiled that notion, along with Aaron’s hopes for the future. It was no wonder he had reacted the way he had, and whilst Owen felt a modicum of sympathy, he was relieved to think the money would not be squandered on Aaron’s debts.

“You did this deliberately. You knew I was going to marry Jessie! You knew I’d gone to Scotland!” Aaron growled, tossing the marriage certificate at Owen and banging his fist down on the desk.

Owen huffed in indignation. “And didn’t you do all that deliberately, Brother, if, indeed, you’re to accuse me of such a thing? Wasn’t it a deliberate act to marry Lady Jessie? You could be accused of just the same thing. But you’re wrong. I didn’t do it deliberately. I love Margaret, and I know we’ll be happy together. I can only hope the same for you and Lady Jessie.”

Owen knew Jessie would not take kindly to the news of Aaron having failed to secure the inheritance. The daughter of the Marquess of Hensingham was an

ambitious woman, and she would not accept a penniless second brother as a husband, even as it seemed she now had one. Aaron had surely married her on the promise of his father's fortune, even though his debts would have surely swallowed almost all of it up.

Now, Aaron glared at Owen, seething with anger at the perceived injustice. But Owen was not a cruel man. He had every intention of helping his brother, albeit knowing Aaron would not have returned the favor.

"Jessie... you know what she'll say," Aaron mumbled.

"I'll not leave you destitute, Aaron. You can have an allowance from the estate," Owen reassured, but his brother shook his head.

"I don't want an allowance. I want what's mine. You were always getting the better of me. You've married under false pretenses, Owen, and I intend to expose you for it!"

There would be no talking sense to him. Not whilst he was so angry. And Owen could only hope they would eventually find a compromise. As far as he was concerned, the matter was over, even as thoughts of the intimacy he had shared with Margaret plagued his mind. He had barely spoken to her in the previous few days, nervous as to what she might think of him, and anxious at the thought of having crossed a line between them.

"I married the woman I love, Aaron. I won't see you destitute. Besides, I'm sure Lady Jessie didn't marry *you* for convenience, did she? She'll be happy as your wife for richer or for poorer," Owen replied, raising his eyebrows.

Aaron cursed him under his breath. “I’m going to challenge you. You won’t get away with it. I’ll ruin you!” he growled. Turning on his heels, he marched out of the study.

Owen followed behind. But to his surprise, he found the hallway full. Jessie was there, along with Margaret and her sisters, Hannah and Anne.

“I was just telling Margaret and her sisters about our wedding,” Jessie said, but upon seeing the expression on Aaron’s face, the smile was wiped from her lips.

“Yes, the wedding that took place the day after theirs, if *he’s* to be believed,” Aaron snapped, pointing at Owen, who was glancing nervously at Hannah and Anne.

Margaret’s sisters knew nothing of the deception, and he feared there would be terrible consequences if they discovered their ruse. They would accuse him of being false to their sister, even though Owen had discovered feelings for Margaret he had not expected to experience.

“The day after?” Jessie asked, stammering, as she stared at Owen in angry disbelief.

“We were married at Saint Botolph’s by the Tower. Owen has the certificate,” Margaret clarified.

Owen nodded. "It's true, Lady Jessie. But we needn't talk about it now," he said, wishing Hannah and Anne had not come to visit on the very day the circumstances of his marriage were discovered.

"Oh, but we do need to talk about it, Owen," Jessie drawled, her tone soft and menacing.

"You arranged all this for your own advantage, Owen. You knew we were getting married in Scotland, and you knew I was the one to inherit. But no, you had to play the older brother, the one who always gets what he wants. And so, you did. You married this woman out of convenience, and I intend to make sure everyone knows the truth," Aaron snapped, beckoning Jessie to follow. The two of them marched out of the house.

"I think I need to sit down," Anne murmured, and Margaret hurried to help her into a chair next to the hallway table.

Hannah was staring at Owen in disbelief, and he shook his head, glancing at Margaret, who sighed.

"I don't understand. What did he mean? That's your brother, and he's married the daughter of the Marquess of Hensingham? I didn't see it announced in the Society pages," Hannah said.

Owen's brow was growing sweaty, and he fumbled at his collar, knowing the truth could not remain hidden forever. He had no doubt as to his brother's intentions, and he knew Aaron would have no qualms in revealing what he was now convinced was a sham marriage.

“No, they married hastily in Scotland. It was because...” Owen began, his words trailing off, even as Margaret came to his rescue.

“Because of a clause in Owen’s father’s will. The first brother to marry received the inheritance. Aaron married Jessie Bowles on a whim. That’s why they went to Gretna Green, because they couldn’t get a license here in London. We had to bring our marriage forward because of it. We’d have waited otherwise,” she explained.

Owen’s relief was palpable. The truth was ugly, but Margaret’s words had softened it and made it seem as though it was Aaron and Jessie who were in the wrong.

Anne had pulled out her fan and flicked it back and forth, shaking her head in astonishment. “I’ve never heard of such a bizarre clause in a will. What was your father thinking?” she asked, fixing Owen with the gaze of someone intent on defending their sibling from unfortunate circumstances.

“Thinking wasn’t always my father’s strong point—certainly not thinking about others. But it’s true. He inserted a clause in his will stating the necessity of marriage for inheritance. The first of us to marry would receive the inheritance. But I assure you, my own motive for marriage had nothing at all to do with my father’s will, though it had everything to do with Aaron’s haste to Gretna Green,” Owen replied.

If Margaret chose to reveal the truth to her sisters, there would be nothing he could do. He thought back to the kisses, and the passion they had shared. But Margaret had risen to his defense, and now she assured her sisters of the

legitimacy of their marriage.

“This was nothing to do with money. Nothing at all. Owen and I are in love, but we had to act quickly to preserve the fortune of the Repington estate. Aaron’s reputation precedes him. His debts are substantial, and if he’d inherited the money, it would all have gone to his creditors. But Owen won’t see him destitute. Will you, Owen?” Margaret turned to the Duke, who shook his head.

“No. I’ll give him an allowance, and the means to make his own money by way of paying his debts. But I couldn’t allow him to take my father’s fortune, whatever games the old man wanted us to play,” Owen said, cursing his father’s name and the foolishness of the legacy he had left.

It should have all been simple—the simple matter of inheritance—and yet it had been complicated beyond any reasonable means and would go on being complicated until Aaron had accepted his defeat.

“Well... I can’t say it’s an ideal situation. But I’m glad you’re the one to inherit and not your brother. We only care about Margaret’s welfare,” Hannah interjected.

Owen knew she was giving him an ultimatum.

“As do I. And I promise I’ll do all I can to make her happy,” he assured her.

The three sisters bid one another goodbye, and Owen and Margaret stood at

the door, watching as Hannah and Anne climbed into their waiting carriage.

“How terrible,” Margaret said as the carriage pulled away. They returned inside.

“I’m sorry, Margaret. It wasn’t meant to be like this, none of it was. I’m sorry about what happened the other night. I can’t bear this awkward silence between us. And now, it’s all out in the open, and... oh, what a mess!” Owen sighed.

He could not believe how foolish he had been. He had married a woman who did not love him, in the hope of securing a fortune under false pretenses. Was it any wonder the whole thing was unraveling around him? And what was more, he had made it even more complicated by revealing his growing feelings for Margaret with an ill-timed kiss and the seduction of the bedchamber.

Had he ruined her? He could only imagine what she must think of him, even though, to his surprise, she now slipped her hand into his.

“It’s quite all right. You don’t need to worry. My sisters understand. At least, they understand enough not to say anything foolish. It’s a perfectly reasonable story, don’t you think? We married hastily to prevent the catastrophe of your brother doing so first. There’s nothing strange about it, is there? I’m sure either of them would’ve done the same. Besides, didn’t we agree there was no harm in what we shared?” Margaret reasoned.

Owen turned to her and smiled, wondering what he had done to deserve such

kindness in the face of his own stupidity.

“Well... I... It’s very good of you, and... the other night, I... Can we just forget about it?” he asked.

Margaret shook her head. “I can’t forget about it. I’ve been thinking about it ever since,” she admitted, still with her hand in his.

Owen faltered. He had hoped they could put the matter behind them and behave as though it had not happened. He felt embarrassed, even as she squeezed his hand. Could she really feel something for him, too? His heart lifted with the possibility.

“I’m sorry I’ve been... distant,” he murmured.

“Let’s sit down,” Margaret said.

She led him into the drawing room, where the detritus of coffee cups and a plate of half-eaten scones stood on the table between the chairs in front of the hearth.

They sat together in the chaise lounge, and Margaret turned to Owen, waiting, it seemed, for him to speak.

“You’ve done so much for me, Margaret. I couldn’t have asked for more. But it was wrong of me to kiss you, to seduce you, to ask you to stay the night

with me. You must've thought me terribly forward in my actions—" Owen began.

Margaret shook her head. "Don't married couples kiss one another? Don't they share a bed? Don't they make love? Though I can't say I've ever seen my mother and father do so—kiss, I mean," she said, laughing.

Owen blushed. "Well... yes, I suppose they do. But... we're not married in that sense, are we?"

He felt confused, not knowing how he should feel towards her, or what she wanted him to feel. His heart was beating fast, and Margaret took his hand in hers once again, smiling at him and shaking her head.

"But we are. And isn't it natural we should feel something for one another? Something like this?"

He realized now what she was saying, and his heart skipped a beat, as he felt astonished at what he was hearing. Did she really possess those same feelings he possessed for her? It was remarkable to think it, and he smiled, taking her other hand in his and edging closer towards her.

"I care for you deeply. But I didn't know... well, it was all very confusing. When we made our vows, I truly felt something for you. I know we agreed, but I couldn't help it. This was all meant to be so simple. An arrangement between two parties, and yet... I can't help but feel something more," he confessed.

Margaret smiled shyly. “I feel the same. I don’t know what it means. I’ve never felt like this before, but I like it. I like to feel this way. I was reticent at first. But in the gardens at Kew... well, it was like meeting the man I’d always imagined myself to meet. Why shouldn’t we have come together like this? I know it’s the wrong way around—developing feelings after marriage instead of before. But that doesn’t matter, does it? What matters is how we feel now.”

Owen nodded. It had all come about so unexpectedly. He had fallen in love with Margaret, even though he was only just now admitting as much.

“You’re right. I hadn’t thought about it like that. I feel the same. Our marriage doesn’t need to be... well, a convenience. It was never a convenience. I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done, but I don’t want you to think that I feel like this simply because of that. We met in unusual circumstances, but that doesn’t matter. We met, we discovered all manner of shared delights, we wanted to help one another, and yet, now... those feelings have developed into something more,” Owen said, still with his hands clasped in Margaret’s.

It was not so unusual. It was perfectly normal. This was how couples met and fell in love. Theirs had merely been a topsy-turvy romance, and Owen had been so caught up in his dealings with his brother that he had failed to see the feelings growing between him and Margaret. The kiss and intimacy had been an outward expression of that, and an entirely natural one, too.

“And that’s something to rejoice in, isn’t it?” she asked.

Owen smiled. It was, and he did, even though the feelings had come to him quite unexpectedly.

He nodded, moving forward and holding Margaret's gaze as he continued to smile. "I think so, yes, and I do," he replied.

For a moment, they gazed into one another's eyes, and it seemed inevitable as to what would happen next.

Owen leaned forward, and Margaret did the same, their lips meeting in a tender kiss, their foreheads resting against one another's. Owen let out a deep sigh.

"You see, I don't mind you kissing me, or touching me. Not at all," Margaret whispered.

Owen did so again, this time, allowing his lips to linger against hers, the scent of her perfume hanging heavily in the air.

As they parted, he smiled, sitting back and shaking his head. He had not believed her feelings for him to be the same. Quite the opposite, in fact. But now, there was to be no holding back, and there was no deception either. They were married, and they had discovered the feelings natural to any married couple. Theirs had been a strange coming together, but it was certainly a happy one, and Owen could only rejoice in having found the love he feared would have eluded him otherwise.

"I'm glad to do so again, and—Ph, Margaret, you will tell me if you're not happy, won't you?" Owen asked.

Margaret nodded. “But allow me to tell you I am happy, too,” she replied as she leaned forward, and their lips met in another kiss.

CHAPTER 22



Upstairs, when it came to parting ways at the door connecting their bedrooms, Margaret did not want to be alone. She wanted to be with Owen. There was no doubting her feelings for him, or, it seemed, his feelings for her. They had shared a bottle of claret, and now as he kissed her goodnight, she slipped her arms around him, wanting to remain in his embrace.

Owen seemed surprised, but pleasantly so, and their kiss grew more passionate before he led her to his bed, the two of them lying in one another's arms. Margaret felt his arousal against her.

"I want to stay with you tonight," she whispered.

He nodded, brushing back the hair from her face and smiling. "And you can. I want you to, but only if you're sure," he said.

Margaret *was* sure. She was *certain*. She undid the buttons on his shirt, kissing him, as he pulled at the shoulders of her dress, exposing her breasts to his touch.

There was a gentleness in his caress, no longer a snatched and uncertain passion, but a deliberate pleasuring, and as she lay back, Margaret closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation of his lips against her skin, his hands tracing a trail along her body, arching over her as she raised her arms above her head.

“I know I’m sure,” Margaret replied, enjoying the sensation of his lips against her core, the gentleness of their foreplay, the familiarity they now shared.

It felt normal. It *was* normal.

As they shared their pleasures, Margaret could not help but feel that they were doing as any normal married couple might do. Owen took her in his arms, drawing her into his embrace, his lips meeting hers in a kiss. She smiled at him, running her fingers along the muscular planes of his chest, taking his arousal in her hand and gently pleasuring him. He sighed, closing his eyes as she kissed him.

“I love you, Margaret,” Owen whispered, opening his eyes.

Margaret smiled at him. “I love you, too.”

* * *

“You’ve not stopped smiling this morning, Your Grace,” Betsy observed as she helped Margaret wash and dress before breakfast.

Margaret had awoken to the sounds of Owen getting ready next door, and she had lingered in bed, imagining him in his shirt sleeves at the shaving mirror, choosing which cufflinks to wear.

“I feel happy, Betsy. I feel I made the right choice in marrying Owen,” Margaret replied.

The maid smiled. “I’m glad to hear you say that, Your Grace. It’d be a sad thing to realize you hadn’t so soon after the wedding day,” She shook her head.

Margaret smiled. She had not meant it quite like that, but the maid was not to know the truth. Yesterday, after much heartache and uncertainty, Margaret had realized she *had* made the right decision in marrying Owen. She had fallen in love with him, and she was only too glad to know he had fallen in love with her.

They had a bright future ahead of them. The inheritance was secured, and they would soon make the journey to Repington Park, where Margaret was excited to think of all she could do in the gardens designed by Capability Brown.

As she finished dressing and went downstairs for breakfast, Margaret allowed her daydreams to wander, picturing grand hothouses and exotic plants, tall trees, and blooming flowers. She could almost smell the scent in the air as a thousand different blossoms perfumed the breeze.

“I’ve got some bad news,” Owen announced as Margaret entered the dining

room.

The Duke was sitting at the table, with several periodicals spread out in front of him. They were from the gutter press, the sort of publications replete with offensive drawings of the Monarch, and bawdy jokes masquerading as news. He held one up, and Margaret took it, her eyes growing wide as she read the story printed at the top of the page.

“Sham marriage... disgraced clergyman... coercion... scandal,” she read, staring at the words in disbelief.

“And repeated in every single one. It’ll be all over London by now, and I can only assume as to who’s responsible,” Owen added, tossing aside the page he was reading and sitting back with a sigh.

Margaret sat down at the table, hardly able to believe what had happened. It was not true, none of it was true, and yet the gutter press had written their lies and published them for all to see.

“But why are they doing this? What do they hope to achieve? There’s no scandal in the clause of your father’s will. And our marriage was entirely legitimate. We were married by a clergyman of the established Church. We’ve got the certificate to prove it. No one can deny the facts of the matter,” Margaret scoffed.

She refused to believe that the words written in these horrible publications would make any difference. Not to the inheritance, and not to the fact of her love for Owen, and his love for her.

“But it gets worse,” Owen uttered. He handed Margaret another scandal sheet, shaking his head and sighing.

Margaret read it over, and she looked up at him with an anxious expression on her face.

“Letters? But what letters? And how could anyone have gotten hold of them?” she spluttered.

The scandal sheet claimed there were letters written from Owen to Margaret, and back, detailing how she should behave, and what they were to do to enact their ruse.

“But there were letters. I wrote to you, and we discussed the matter, albeit with reserve. Oh... I don’t know, but isn’t it enough to have it written down for everyone to see? No one cares about the legitimacy of the sources. They read what’s written and believe it. I’m guilty of it myself. I’ve read gossip pages and scandal sheets enough to know what sells. The ton wants salaciousness, and they’ve got it here, all right,” Owen said, sighing, as Margaret tossed the offending article aside.

She knew her sisters delighted in reading such horrible publications. They would see it that very day, as would half of London. Owen’s name would be tarnished, and he and Margaret would be shunned for their scandalous behavior.

“It’s all right. We can weather the storm. And what does it matter, anyway?”

How can anyone prove we married for anything other than love? Didn't last night mean anything?" Margaret asked.

Owen looked up at her with a dejected expression on his face. "It meant everything. But if they can prove our initial intention was deception, the inheritance becomes void. It passes to Aaron. That's why he has printed this. He has probably paid a servant to steal the letters. I dismissed a footman only the other day for petty theft, so it wouldn't have been difficult for him to have slipped the letters into his pocket. I had them in a drawer in my study. Or perhaps it was one of your acquaintances—I don't know, but the damage has been done."

He looked thoroughly miserable, pushing aside his plate and refusing to eat any breakfast.

Margaret collected the scandal sheets and tossed them into the fire. She had no desire to read any more falsities about herself or Owen. She could not believe anyone of her own acquaintance could stoop so low, even as it seemed that someone they had once trusted had betrayed them.

"It's just horrible. Why would anyone want to do this?" Margaret mumbled, brushing a tear from her eye.

She had awoken that morning with such optimism amidst the happy prospect of sharing her future with the man she was falling in love with, the man she called her husband. But now, further doubt crept in, and she looked up at Owen, who was cursing under his breath.

“For revenge. Because my brother wasn’t going to come second this time,” he replied.

But Margaret did not care about the fortune. Not materially, at least. She knew Owen needed it to shore up the estate, but their vows before God had been clear—for richer, for poorer.

“Owen, does this change how you feel about me? Everything we said last night – does it change it? Don’t you want me as your wife?” she asked.

At these words, Owen looked up and shook his head. He reached across the table and took her hand in his. “Don’t think that, Margaret. Please, don’t ever think that. I love you, and I’ll go on loving you, whether with fortune or not,” he reassured.

Margaret breathed a sigh of relief. She felt the same. It had never been about the money. In Owen, she had found a man who did not expect her to be the sort of woman her sisters and the rest of the ton expected her to be. He had offered her the freedom she had always dreamed of, and now she felt only glad to hear his words and know that, whatever happened, they would continue to fall in love, just as they were now.

“And I’ll love you, too, whether poor as a church mouse or with whatever fortune fate delivers us,” Margaret vowed.

Owen smiled at her. “You’re a remarkable woman, Margaret. I love you, and that’s all that matters—knowing you love me. But... Aaron seems determined to ruin us, and I can only imagine what’s being said about us in

the dining rooms and salons this morning.”

But what was being said did not take long to reveal itself, and as the clock in the morning room struck ten o'clock, the butler announced the arrival of Lady Dunne, Lady Pemberton, and Lady Weston.

* * *

“It’s everywhere. It’s all anyone’s talking about, Margaret. I can’t believe it... It’s just terrible!” Lady Dunne exclaimed, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief.

Margaret wondered why her mother *did* believe it. Was the written word an infallible truth? Did she believe *everything* she read?

Margaret was sitting on the chaise lounge, opposite her mother and sisters, the three of them lined up as though interrogating her for some terrible crime. They had arrived full of tears and emotions, waving the scandal sheets in their hands and demanding an explanation. Margaret had tried to explain, and yet she was interrupted at every turn as a barrage of insults and criticism was directed at her.

“And you gave us such assurances. You told us it was for love,” Hannah said, shaking her head, as Anne sobbed next to her.

“But it was for love. It *is* for love. There was convenience, of course, but a convenience for us both. None of that matters now. We’re married, we’re in love. Can’t you see that,” Margaret insisted.

“I see my daughter used in a wicked ploy by a wicked man. I see her name shunned and ridiculed across the ton! Your reputation is ruined, Margaret. How can you ever recover? Oh... ruined, you’ve ruined yourself!” Lady Dunne sobbed.

Margaret had expected such melodrama from Anne, but her mother’s reaction was startling. She did not understand why they were so ready to believe what they had read in the scandal sheets, rather than seeking the true explanation she was giving.

“But I haven’t ruined myself, Mother. There was no impropriety. We behaved as any other courting couple would have, and then we married,” Margaret said, folding her arms in angry defiance.

It had always been the same, her mother and sisters lauding it over her and making out as though they knew better. But Margaret was married now. She outranked them all, and she was tired of their criticism.

“But the letters, Margaret. You and the Duke wrote letters to one another, and in them, you discussed your plans—how to play the part, how to make it seem as though the marriage was real. They’ve printed them in the scandal sheets for everyone to see,” Hannah argued, holding up the offending articles and jabbing at them with her finger.

“And who displayed the greater morals? The one who wrote them or the one who stole them?” Margaret demanded.

Her sisters both gave her a look, and it seemed they were more concerned for

Margaret's apparent fall from grace than the moral failings of the one who had stolen the letters and published them for Margaret and Owen's ruination.

"Margaret, don't you see what this means? You made your vows under false pretenses—'as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment, why ye may not be lawfully joined together in Matrimony, ye do now confess it ... that so many as are coupled together otherwise than God's Word doth allow are not joined together by God; neither is their Matrimony lawful'—don't those words mean anything to you? You heard them spoken on your wedding day," Lady Dunne said, shaking her head as fresh tears rolled down her cheeks.

Margaret was surprised by her mother's recall of the prayer book, but she was right, and Margaret knew the words could be used as a reason for the marriage to be declared unlawful.

"But we're in love, Mother. There's no reason to think differently. It's... not how it seems," Margaret stammered.

"But it *is* what it seems, Margaret. It's all there in black and white. Your marriage was arranged under a lie. You and Owen planned it, and now he's dragged you down into the mud. Can't you see that?" Hannah pressed.

"And what if he has? I love him, and I know he loves me, too. I admit it was a marriage of convenience at first, but that's not how it is now. It truly isn't. We love one another," Margaret maintained, defiant in the face of such dreadful consequences.

Hannah threw her hands up in the air in despair. “A penniless duke, his fortune snatched from him under the most bizarre circumstances. And what are you left with? Doors closed in your face, and nothing but poverty to live on. You won’t find any friends in the ton, Margaret,” she warned.

But Margaret had heard enough. Her sisters always knew better. They always knew what the damned ton required of them. But Margaret was tired of it. She had no desire to do what was expected of her. The ton had long since made its judgment of her—a failed debut, lowly prospects for a future match, and the dismissal of her as nothing but a bookish wallflower. But she had surprised them by marrying the Duke of Repington, and knowing Owen’s love for her, she cared nothing for what was thought of her now.

“I didn’t have any friends there, anyway. I don’t care about the ton or what they think of me. I don’t need to find a match or make friends. I’ve found my match, and I won’t say I regret it. Let them think what they like,” Margaret retorted.

“And what about us? What about our reputations? Did you even think about that? Poor Jason... I can only imagine, and the baby... oh, it’s going to grow up knowing its aunt brought scandal on us all,” Anne cried, bursting into sobs. Hannah put her arm around her.

Margaret huffed loudly. As much as there was certainty in gossip, so, too, was there certainty in today’s scandal becoming tomorrow’s forgotten news. It would not be long before a new piece of salaciousness found its way into the scandal sheets and a marriage of convenience between a duke and the daughter of an earl was forgotten.

“I hardly think your child is going to suffer on account of me,” Margaret

scoffed.

Anne looked up at her angrily. “How can you say that? How can you think it? How can you—” she exclaimed, before suddenly clutching at her stomach, her eyes growing wide.

“Anne?” Lady Dunne said worriedly, turning to Anne.

Anne groaned. “I... I think it’s coming.”

Margaret leaped to her feet, calling for help.

CHAPTER 23



“*I* had the Archdeacon knocking on my door at seven o’clock this morning!” Benjamin complained, holding the scandal sheet up.

Owen sighed. He had wondered how long it would take for his friend to arrive. The footman had, indeed, announced Benjamin’s arrival moments after Margaret’s mother and sisters into the morning room.

“Yes, and I’m sorry for that. I didn’t mean for it to be like this,” the Duke replied.

“And what did you mean it to be like? You deceived me. I officiated your wedding under false pretenses. Do you know what that means? I could be dismissed from the clerical state. It’s a grave sin—not only for you but for me!” Benjamin exclaimed, his face red with anger.

Despite having failed mostly all his divinity examinations, Owen knew enough about the perils of the soul to know it was his own sin, and not Benjamin’s, they were dealing with. But in Owen’s mind, the matrimony enacted had been entirely right and proper. The declaration of love had come

later, but the marriage had been entered into without any sense of falsehood on either side. There was no sin, and, in this, Owen's conscience was clear, even though his friend disagreed.

"But we love one another, isn't that all that matters? I admit, I wanted to marry Margaret because of what my brother intended. We met at the Slatterly ball, just like any other courting couple might meet. I liked her, we were talking, and I realized the chance I had," Owen said.

Benjamin shook his head, still red with anger, and he banged his fist down on the table in frustration. "Yes, and then you concocted a plan, whereby she would marry you for the inheritance your brother was intending to take. It's grounds for annulment. He can claim the whole thing was false. And I'm in the middle of it. You told me you were in love with her," he growled.

"And *I am* in love with her. I love her, and she loves me, there's no disputing it," Owen retorted.

Benjamin sighed, sinking into the chair opposite Owen's desk and putting his head in his hands. "*When the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed*—it doesn't need the day of judgment for that to happen, just the printing of a scandal sheet. How can you ever live this down? And what are you going to do now? Your brother's going to challenge the inheritance. He might've married later—if only by a day or so—but if he proves his own marriage to be legitimate, and yours to be the opposite, he's won. You'll be penniless," he said.

Owen did not need this to be explained to him. He knew the consequences, and he intended to fight them. The terms of the will were clear. There was to be no arrangement to the advantage of either party, and Owen knew he had

broken those terms, even as he knew, too, his feelings for Margaret. He loved her, and he wished he had realized it sooner, even though he had been desperate to make the match.

“I’ve been dragged through the mud. There’s nothing these people like better than to see the mighty fallen. The Duke of Repington, disgraced by scandal. I won’t live it down, but it doesn’t mean I won’t go on living,” Owen replied.

“But do you really love her?” Benjamin asked.

In this, Owen had no doubt. He *did* love Margaret. She was everything he desired, even though it had taken him some time to realize it. In her, he had found everything he had ever longed for—a woman of charm and wit, his equal in all things, and his surpassing, too. She was magnificent, and he was proud to call her his wife, even though the ton would dismiss the match as idleness and folly.

“More so than I can ever tell you. Isn’t that all that matters? I made my vows with a secret—a secret we both knew. But does any couple come to the altar in the full knowledge of their love for one another? Doesn’t love grow and blossom as life moves forward?” Owen said.

At these words, the clergyman nodded. He sighed and shook his head.

“I was angry with you, Owen. We’ve been friends for many years, and I wish you’d told me the truth, that’s all. I’d probably still have officiated your wedding, but now... you’ve made a rod for your own back. It’s not going to be easy for you.”

Owen knew this, even though he had hoped for the matter to pass unchallenged. He was waiting for a summons from Mr. Landsdowne or the arrival of a letter of instruction from a solicitor acting on Aaron's behalf.

The challenge was coming, but Owen was ready to face it, knowing his love for Margaret was sincere, as was hers for him. In this, he had no doubts.

"I know that, but I'm ready to face it head-on. I won't—" he began, but his words were cut short by a scream echoing through the house.

Owen leaped to his feet, and Benjamin stared at him in astonishment.

"What's happening?" Benjamin asked as footsteps echoed in the hallway.

Owen hurried to the door, opening it to find Margaret and Hannah standing there, just as another scream came from the direction of the morning room.

"It's Anne! She's having the baby," Margaret exclaimed.

Owen and Benjamin hurried out of the study, following them to the morning room, where they found Anne stretched out on the chaise lounge and her mother kneeling at her side.

Lady Dunne shot Owen a withering look, but there was no time for

arguments or unpleasantness. The baby was coming, and all of them would have to play their part.

“But I can’t have it now. What about Jason? Where’s Jason?” Anne cried.

She was clutching at her mother’s hands, and now Hannah instructed her to lie back and raise her legs.

“She can’t possibly...” Lady Dunne stammered, but there was no time to wait for either Jason or anyone else.

The baby was coming, and without decisive action, there could be terrible consequences for both mother and child. Hot water and towels were brought, and with Margaret’s and Hannah’s assistance, Anne was made as comfortable as possible.

“Now, you need to push. You can hold my hand. I’ll count, and you push. Like this. One, two, three, push!” Hannah said.

Anne took hold of her sister’s hand, squeezing so hard. “I can’t, oh... it hurts too much,” she groaned.

But Hannah was adamant, and again, she urged her to push, counting to three, as Margaret did the same.

Owen looked on in astonishment, not knowing whether to stay or go, but

wanting to prove his worth.

He joined in with the exhortations.

“You can do it, Anne. One push at a time. Keep breathing. Good, deep breaths. That’s it. One, two, three, push,” he said, and again, Anne squeezed and let out a cry of pain. She released Hannah’s hand.

“You’re doing it, Anne. The baby’s coming,” Margaret gushed, looking up at her sister with a smile.

“It’s your fault!” Anne exclaimed, but again, Owen and Hannah urged her to push as Lady Anne held Anne’s other hand.

The labor took some time, and there was much screaming—and even some cursing—on Anne’s part. Benjamin excused himself, promising to call again at a more convenient time and assuring Owen of his support in the matter of their discussion, even though he was still not happy about it.

“I’ll speak to the Archdeacon,” Benjamin whispered before slipping out of the room.

Owen, too, was holding Anne’s hand, and it was going numb, even as he continued to utter encouraging words to her.

With a final, monumental effort, the baby was born. It was a boy, and as

Margaret held up the screaming bundle of joy, Owen breathed a sigh of relief. It was only then that the doctor arrived, hurrying into the room just as Margaret placed the baby in her sister's arms.

"Oh... you did it, Your Grace!" the physician exclaimed as Anne cradled the baby in her arms.

"Quite magnificently so," Lady Dunne agreed, smiling at Owen.

The Duke shook his head. "I only did what anyone else would do," he replied, glancing at Margaret, who smiled.

"Don't be modest," she whispered, coming to slip her hand into his.

A commotion in the hallway signaled the arrival of another visitor, and the door burst open, revealing Jason, who stared at the scene before him in astonishment.

Anne looked up at him angrily. "Where were you? I've given birth, and you weren't here," she cried as he hurried to her side.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I didn't know... oh, forgive me," Jason stammered.

Owen and Margaret exchanged glances.

“You can sit over there until the physician has examined me,” Anne huffed, and Jason did as he was told.

“We owe you a debt of gratitude,” Hannah said, looking apologetically at Owen, who smiled and shook his head once again.

They owed him nothing, and he was only glad to see the baby born and doing well.

Owen felt sorry for Jason, who was now sitting quietly on the opposite side of the room as the doctor examined Anne and the baby.

“Let’s slip out,” Margaret whispered, and the two of them stepped out into the hallway, where several of the servants had gathered and were whispering to one another.

“You can go back to your duties. The baby’s been born. There’s nothing else to see,” Owen ordered.

The servants dispersed, leaving Margaret and Owen alone.

Margaret sighed and put her arms around him. “Thank you for what you did for Anne. I don’t know what we’d have done without you,” she said.

Owen blushed. “Really, it wasn’t anything at all. I just... well, someone had to take charge,” he replied.

“And how glad I am it was you. My mother and sisters were giving me a terribly hard time over the matter. That’s why they came. Anne had worked herself up into such a frenzy, it was hardly surprising the baby was born.”

Owen smiled. “Well, all’s well that ends well,” he murmured.

Margaret shook her head. “For Anne, yes. Though I don’t think she’ll let Jason forget his absence. But what about us? What did Benjamin say?” she asked, slipping her hands into his and looking up at him with a fearful expression on her face.

Owen sighed. “He wasn’t happy. But he didn’t stay angry for long. I explained what happened. He understands, but it’s a difficult position for him. I don’t know what’s going to happen next.”

He could not give Margaret any guarantees. He loved her, but he could hardly blame her if she walked away. Their marriage could be annulled—even if it was valid—and a line could be drawn under the brief happiness they had shared. How could she still love him, when he had driven such a wedge between her and everyone she cared about?

“We’ll stand by one another, that’s what,” Margaret affirmed.

Owen was surprised to hear her say that. He had expected doubts, and questions about their future.

“Are you sure? I wouldn’t blame you if you walked away,” he asked.

Margaret shook her head. “I made a vow, and that means something, doesn’t it? We both made vows, and I won’t renege on mine. Will you?”

Owen stared into her eyes lovingly. “The more I come to know of you, the more I fall in love with you.”

Margaret smiled. “We’ll face it together,” she said, leaning up to kiss him, assuring him everything would be all right in the end.

CHAPTER 24



When Margaret returned to the drawing room, she found Jason holding the baby. It seemed he had been forgiven for his tardiness, and Anne was sitting up, covered by a blanket, as the physician checked her pulse.

“Much better,” the physician murmured.

Anne smiled. “I can hardly believe it. I’m a mother. Oh, isn’t it wonderful?” she said, beaming at Margaret, who came to kneel at her side.

“You’ve done so well, Anne,” Margaret praised.

The baby began to cry.

“You’ll need to feed the child,” the physician said, and arrangements were hastily made to shield Anne with a large blanket whilst she breastfed her baby.

Jason looked embarrassed, and Lady Dunne rolled her eyes as she pointed him towards the window. “Just stand there for now. We’ll tell you when it’s over,” she said, and the Earl did as he was told.

Hannah caught Margaret by the arm. “Owen did so well, Margaret. We owe him a great debt. If it wasn’t for him... well, I fear far worse might’ve happened,” she admitted.

Margaret smiled. She was glad to hear of her sister’s change of heart towards Owen.

“But it didn’t. We’ve got a beautiful new nephew, and... well, I hope you can see that Owen has every good intention at heart,” she replied.

“I do, but... you can understand why we were so worried, can’t you?”

Margaret *did* understand why they had been so worried. It was only natural, and she knew she would feel the same if either Jason or Sylvester had caused such a scandal. But she hoped her sisters—and her mother—would understand why she had done what she had done and would support her in her decision to remain at Owen’s side.

“Yes, and I want you to realize that I’m happy. I *do* love him. It’s not a marriage of convenience, whatever those horrible scandal sheets might say. We married hastily for a reason. I admit that much. But if Aaron—Owen’s brother—inherits the fortune, there’ll be no fortune left. He can’t be allowed to gain it, for it would be a disaster. That’s why Owen did what he did, and

it's why I agreed to help him. But we've fallen in love, Hannah. I can't say anything truer than that. I love him, and I know he loves me," Margaret said.

Hannah slipped her hand into her sister's and smiled. "Then that's all we need to know, Margaret. We're your sisters, and we love you. We want you to be happy. But I hope you know what you're doing. You're making a choice, the scandal or—" she began, but Margaret interrupted her.

"Or being the shy, retiring wallflower. The maiden aunt to Louisa, Talbot, and the new arrival. I don't want that, but neither do I want to be married to some awful man who treats me as a silly child and a plaything. I'm not interested in balls and soirees and gossip. I like what I've got—a husband who treats me as his equal, and whom I've simply come to adore."

Margaret had surprised herself by the strength and feeling of her words. But they were true. She would not settle for marriage to just anyone, but nor could she be happy alone. She had found her soulmate, and whilst circumstances were difficult, she took her vows seriously.

"For richer, for poorer" did not only mean in wealth or in poverty but moments of hardship, as well as joy. Margaret had vowed to stand by Owen in times of plenty and in times of difficulty, and she intended to live that vow as she had promised.

"I'm glad to hear it, Margaret. And it seems he loves you, too," Hannah noted.

Margaret nodded, just as their mother stepped back with the blanket,

revealing a contented baby lying on Anne's breast.

"All done," Lady Dunne declared as Jason turned back from the window.

"It's all getting a little too much for me..." he stammered.

Anne rolled her eyes and tutted. "Oh, nonsense, Jason. Come and sit down. We still need a name for the baby. Come now, what are we going to call him?"

"Something sensible," Jason ventured, but his words were ignored.

Margaret was surprised that her sister had not given the matter any thought, even as it turned out many names had been considered, but all of them discarded.

Due consideration was now given, and having discounted all manner of possibilities, Anne let out a cry of delight.

"Oh, I've got it. Apollo!" she exclaimed.

The others looked at one another in surprise. Apollo was not a name Margaret had considered, even as it seemed her sister was delighted with the choice.

“Apollo, the Earl of Weston,” Jason murmured, his eyes growing wide, as though horrified by the suggestion.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Anne said, beaming at them, as she held up the newly named child, who was, of course, entirely oblivious to the fate now resting on him.

“Anne, are you sure?” Lady Dunne asked, but Anne’s mind was made up. The baby would be called Apollo, though she would allow Jason to choose his middle names, citing Owen as one possibility.

“He *did* help deliver the child, after all,” Anne pointed out, and she seemed thoroughly pleased with herself for having thought of the name unaided.

Margaret smiled to herself. There would be no convincing her sister any differently, even though Owen’s role had been somewhat minimal, and she was only glad to see the baby safely delivered.

“Well, we shouldn’t take up any more of your time, Margaret,” Lady Dunne said after it seemed that Anne had suitably recovered from the ordeal of childbirth.

Hannah glanced at Margaret, clearing her throat, and then looked pointedly at their mother, who sighed.

“The matter we came about, Mother,” Hannah hissed.

Lady Dunne nodded. “Well, yes... you and Owen. I must say, I was disappointed in you, Margaret. But Owen proved himself today. I want you to thank him, and I want you to know we support you,” she said.

Hannah and Anne nodded.

“Oh, absolutely, we do. Apollo owes his life to the Duke,” Anne agreed as Jason helped her to her feet.

Margaret was pleasantly surprised at their change of heart, and whilst Owen had retreated to his study, she promised to pass on their thanks to him once again.

“I’m still not sure what we’re going to do,” Margaret admitted as she followed the party out in the hallway.

“We’re going to do what sisters always do—support one another. Don’t worry, Margaret, we know all about Lady Jessie Bowles,” Hannah reassured, smiling at Margaret and tapping her nose.

Margaret did not know what her sister meant by this, but she was glad to have such support, and having bid them goodbye, she went to find Owen in his study. He was poring over a pile of papers, and he looked up at her as she entered the room with a worried expression on his face.

“I’ve just received word from Mr. Landsdowne. Aaron and Lady Jessie are making a formal, legal challenge to the legacy. They’re claiming our

marriage was enacted falsely,” he said, shaking his head sadly.

Margaret went to put her arms around him, resting her chin on the top of his head.

“My sisters are going to help us. They’re so grateful to you for helping us. My mother and father, too, and Jason—they’ll all help us,” she said.

Owen sighed. “But what can they do? How can they help us?” he asked.

Margaret did not know. But there was one thing she was certain of—her sisters would not abandon her to her fate, and if the love between her and Owen could be proved, the marriage, and all it meant, could be saved.

“I don’t know yet, but they’ll do something. I know they will,” she replied, kissing Owen on the lips, knowing there was still hope in the love they shared.

CHAPTER 25



“It’s a strange name, don’t you think? I don’t know anyone called Apollo,” Owen commented after Margaret had told him the name of Anne’s baby.

They were sitting at breakfast the next morning, and Owen had received an official letter from Aaron’s new solicitor, a man named Mr. McKirahan, stating Aaron’s intention to challenge the legality of their marriage. The challenge was set, and Owen was now composing a letter in response.

“I think it’s nice enough, though I’m not sure my mother’s convinced,” Margaret said, watching as Owen scribbled with his quill.

“I’m not going to allow this to go unchallenged. His own marriage was enacted by a blacksmith. It hardly counts,” Owen stated, glancing up at Margaret, who nodded.

“Couldn’t he be persuaded to drop the matter? You could come to an arrangement whereby you both receive a share of the money.”

Owen shook his head. “You forget one thing. My brother isn’t a reasonable man,” he replied, and Margaret knew that much was true.

There could be no amicable arrangement, even though Owen was willing to make one. Aaron wanted the inheritance for himself, and he would go to whatever lengths necessary to secure it. It was a sad fact, but a true one, and Margaret could see no hope of reconciliation between the brothers. Not while their feud deepened in this way.

“And without the money, what do we do then?” Margaret asked, for she was curious to know what would happen to the estate and Owen’s lands. Would they really be left with nothing?

“We’ll have to sell Repington Park and most of the lands. We’ll buy a smaller estate, I suppose, and make things work. But it doesn’t have to be like that, not if we can challenge Aaron’s claims. You and I are married. We were married both in front of witnesses and by a minister of the established Church. If anyone’s marriage can be called into question, it’s theirs, not ours. But they claim the letters between us prove we were intent on falsity, and on a sham marriage for the sake of claiming the inheritance,” Owen replied, hastily adding his signature at the bottom of the letter he was writing.

Margaret sighed. The claim was true, but that did not mean the consequences were. She and Owen had fallen in love. There was no marriage of convenience. Not now.

Margaret felt desperate. She would have gladly shouted it from the rooftop of Saint Paul’s. She wanted the world to know she was in love with Owen, and only too glad to be his wife.

“But it’s not true. Any courting couple might write to one another, and there are all sorts of reasons why people marry. I don’t see any difference between us and the dozens of arrangements made every day,” Margaret argued.

Owen held up a handful of scandal sheets and shook his head. “This is where the difference lies, Margaret. I’m the Duke of Repington, and as far as the ton is concerned, I’ve led you into a scandal,” he said, tossing the offending papers aside.

Margaret shook her head, angry at the thought of someone publishing such rumors about them. There was no accountability, just empty words, believed in every salon and drawing room from Mayfair to Piccadilly.

“But you didn’t. We’re not living in sin. We’re married. Why can’t anyone realize that?”

But as she spoke, the butler entered the room, carrying the carefully folded pages of the periodicals on a silver tray. They had been pressed upon their arrival and were brought to the dining room for Margaret and Owen to read over breakfast.

Margaret groaned.

“Let’s see what they’re writing about us today,” Owen drawled, taking the first from the pile and opening it.

Margaret watched him read, hardly daring to take one herself lest she read

something more awful than that previously written. But to her surprise, Owen's eyes grew wide, and he laughed out loud, a look of astonishment coming over his face.

"What's wrong? What is it?" Margaret asked as Owen handed her the periodical, open at the scandal sheet.

"Read it," he said, clapping his hands together in delight.

Margaret began to read.

An elopement to Scotland!

Lady Jessie Bowles' father, the Marquess of Hensingham, is said to be angered by...

He disowned his daughter....

Lady Jessie Bowles married only for money...

The creation of a scandal...

Her eyes widened as she realized what had happened.

“Someone’s turned the tables on them. But isn’t that what so often happens? One can be the belle of the ton one moment and see it turn on them the next. Isn’t it marvelous?” Owen said.

Margaret shook her head in astonishment.

The periodicals were full of the same story. No longer the apparent scandal of the Duke’s marriage to Margaret, but of his brother and the woman he had eloped to Scotland with. It seemed the Marquess of Hensingham had not taken kindly to the fact of Aaron having married his daughter, but there was more...

“But look at this. It’s claimed she’s been having an affair with the Baron of Rothschild, and that she was only intent on marrying Aaron for his money,” Margaret said, reading further down the page.

“Which I’m sure she is. Theirs was just a marriage of convenience. Except, unfortunately for her, there’s no guarantee of any money,” Owen scoffed.

“But what does this mean for us?” Margaret asked.

She did not know who had provided the information to the scandal sheets, but she suspected her sisters had something to do with it, and she could—for once—only be grateful to them for their keen ear for gossip and scandal.

“It means we’ve got something to bargain with. The cards are laid out, the stakes are high, but we’re accused of just the same thing as they are. The only

difference being that our marriage was the one rightfully conducted, and ours is the one resulting in true love. Lady Jessie doesn't love Aaron. She'd rid herself of him immediately if it was certain the money passed to me. She's only married him for that and for that alone. Thank goodness. I'll contact Mr. Landsdowne at once," Owen replied, rising from the breakfast table as Margaret did the same.

She hated the periodicals, with their bawdy cartoons and salacious writings. But in this case, they had been used to an advantage, and the advantage was theirs.

As Owen retreated to his study, Margaret summoned a carriage, intent on visiting her sisters and discovering the truth as to where the rumors about Lady Jessie Bowles had originated.

* * *

"Well, what did you expect?" Hannah asked as Margaret sat with her and Anne in the drawing room of their parents' home a short while later.

Anne was holding Apollo, and she and Hannah exchanged glances, smiling at one another across the room.

"But is it true?" Margaret asked.

She did not think it right to have anyone's name dragged through the proverbial thornbush of the scandal sheets, even though the words in those scandal sheets had been to her advantage.

Hannah tutted. “Oh, Margaret, isn’t truth something... debatable?”

Margaret raised her eyebrows. She had read enough books of philosophy to know this was not the case. The truth corresponded to the facts, and it was the facts that mattered.

“Not if the matter is tested before a judge,” she countered.

“Oh, Margaret, everyone knows what Jessie Bowles is like. Her affair with the Baron isn’t a secret. Far from it. And it was obvious enough what Aaron was doing in marrying her. She’s always been ambitious, and it would be just like her to marry a man for his fortune, split the money between them, and continue her affair with the Baron. He’s a married man, too, of course,” Anne said, cradling Apollo in her arms.

Margaret could not help but smile, even though she did not entirely approve of what her sisters had done. But what they had done had helped her, and they had proved the strength of familial bonds.

“And we weren’t going to sit here and let her write such dreadful things about our sister. Sometimes, one has to... take a more underhand approach,” Hannah said, and Anne nodded.

“Does Mother know about this?” Margaret asked, for she could hardly believe her mother would approve of such a thing.

But to her surprise, her sisters nodded.

“Oh, yes. It was her idea,” Hannah replied.

Margaret stared at her in astonishment. “Really? But that’s extraordinary. Mother never—oh, well, it doesn’t matter now, does it? What matters is what I do next.”

At that moment, Apollo woke up and began to cry, stealing Anne’s attention. She was, obviously, still adjusting to the demands of motherhood.

“Oh, goodness me. The poor thing. Who knew being a mother could be so tiresome? I simply must get home soon—when will Jason have the nursery finished? I need a wet nurse and a nanny, and a governess, and—oh, what do I do?” Anne exclaimed as Hannah hurried to help.

Margaret was not entirely sure why her sisters were still at their parents’ house, but she was glad they were there, even though she was astonished as to what they had accomplished in her name.

Jessie’s name was ruined, and the drawing rooms and salons of the ton would be alive with the salacious rumors of her affair with the Baron, and hers and Aaron’s falsely enacted marriage.

With the baby calm, and Anne’s nerves settled, they sat down again, and Hannah fixed Margaret with a serious look.

“You need to be strong, Margaret. Don’t let Aaron and Lady Jessie get the better of you. You and Owen need to show the strength of your love for one another. You need to appear in public as the happy couple you are.”

“I don’t understand,” Margaret said.

Anne tutted. “The ball at Lady Catherine MacCulloch’s. You’ve not forgotten it, have you?” she said.

Margaret gasped. She *had* forgotten the ball at her godmother’s house. It was the only ball of the Season she enjoyed, and, as a child, she had been taken there by her mother, watching her sisters pretend to be ladylike in their dresses and gold slippers. She and Owen had been invited, but the excitement of the previous days had caused her to forget the invitation, even though she knew they could not avoid it.

“Oh, yes, I had, but... is it wise for us to go?” she asked, for she did not think her godmother would take kindly to the presence of scandal at such an event.

“Perfectly so. You *should* go. You’ve got every right to. Dance with Owen, show the ton that you love him, and that he loves you. Then we’ll see whom they believe,” Hannah said.

Margaret knew the risks involved, and she wondered if Owen would even agree to accompany her. But Hannah was right, even though the stakes were high. If she and Owen were seen together, and if they could prove the sincerity of their love, Aaron’s claims against them would be rebuked, and the scandal sheets would claim Jessie as their victim, rather than Margaret.

“Then I suppose I’ve got a ball to get ready for,” Margaret murmured, and both her sisters smiled.

“We’ve done what we can for you, Margaret. It’s up to you now,” Anne replied.

EPILOGUE



“*Y*ou look very smart,” Margaret said as Owen ran his finger over the ridge of his collar, grimacing as he jerked his head to one side.

“It just doesn’t seem to fit anymore,” he complained.

Margaret smiled. “Perhaps you’ve put on weight,” she commented, and Owen raised his eyebrows.

“My collar size hasn’t changed since Cambridge, thank you,” he replied, trying hard not to laugh, as Margaret slipped her arm into his and rested her head on his shoulder.

They were in a carriage, traveling to the ball at Lady Catherine’s house. Despite the lightheartedness of their conversation, Margaret knew Owen was worried. But she had persuaded him as to the sense of what they were doing, extolling the possibility of exonerating themselves in the eyes of the ton.

“When they see us together, they can’t possibly believe anything other than

us being in love,” she had said to him, having explained what her sisters had said about the scandal sheets and Jessie’s reputation.

“And what if the two of them are there? Won’t they make a show of it, too?” Owen had asked.

But that was a risk they had to take, and there could be no escaping the possibility of a confrontation. The lines were drawn, and in the days since the publication of the salacious gossip, further rumors had circulated on both sides.

“We’re here now,” Margaret said, glancing out of the carriage window as her godmother’s house came into view.

It was a handsome dwelling, approached by a long drive, and lying in a parkland south of Greenwich. Lady Catherine had never married, but she was the first daughter of a duke, and she had received the house by grace and favor from her brother upon inheriting their father’s title. It had a magnificent library, and her salon was well-known for its conversational soirees and intellectual talks.

But tonight, the ball was what mattered, and half a dozen carriages were lined up in front of the house as they approached.

“Entering the jaws of death,” Owen muttered as a footman opened the carriage door for them.

“Come along. A few odd looks are a small price to pay for your restoration to Society,” Margaret whispered.

“A society neither of us likes. Still, you’re right. If we can get through this...” Owen trailed off as Margaret slipped her arm into his.

They walked up the steps to the open doors, where liveried footmen stood to attention on either side.

As they entered the hallway, where a master of ceremonies was announcing the arrivals, several couples glanced at them, and there was a fluttering of fans and whispering as they passed.

“The Duke and Duchess of Repington,” the master of ceremonies boomed.

Heads turned, the room taking in a collective breath as Catherine came to greet her.

Margaret was unsure as to how they would be received, but her godmother seemed unperturbed, kissing her on both cheeks and welcoming her with enthusiasm.

“My dear, how lovely to see you! And Your Grace, thank you,” Catherine gushed, turning to Owen, who smiled.

“We’re grateful for your hospitality, Lady Catherine,” he said as Margaret’s

mother and sisters came hurrying over.

For someone who had only recently given birth, Anne had regained her figure in a remarkable short time. She was dressed in an elegant purple gown, in a style matching Hannah's dress, which was pink.

"You came then, and now you'll show them all just how in love you are," Hannah whispered.

Margaret looked around her. It seemed the attention of the whole room was on them, even as she feared the possibility of failure. What if they were not convincing? What if it all appeared to be an act?

"But how?" Margaret asked just as a waltz struck up and a throng of couples surged forward to dance.

"You don't have to pretend you're in love. Not anymore," Lady Dunne said.

Margaret smiled. "We're not pretending. Not at all. But how do we *show* it?"

"Like this. You dance," Hannah replied.

Owen held out his hand to Margaret, who smiled and nodded.

The two of them entered the fray, and it felt good to dance, even though Margaret usually detested it. She twirled and whirled back and forth in Owen's arms, caught up in the romantic delight of the music. Any observer would surely consider the two of them to be very much in love, and Margaret was not sure what more they could do to prove the fact of what they both knew to be true.

"I do love you so very much," Owen said.

Margaret smiled at him. "And I love you, too. With all my heart, I love you. I want everyone to see it. I want everyone to know it," she whispered as he slipped his arms around her and brought her closer into his embrace.

Their lips met in a kiss, and a couple next to them stared at them with scandalized astonishment.

"If they don't believe us now, will they ever?" Owen asked.

But as the music came to an end and the musicians tuned their instruments for another waltz, Margaret noticed a pair of familiar figures coming towards them. This was the moment she had feared, yet the moment she knew was coming, even as her heart now beat faster. She clutched at Owen, who turned to see Aaron and Jessie approaching them.

"What do you think you're doing here?" Aaron demanded.

"Much the same as you, I suppose," Owen retorted.

“It was you, wasn’t it? It was you who wrote those dreadful things about me,” Jessie snarled, pointing an accusing finger at Margaret.

Margaret shook her head. “I didn’t write anything about you. Though I’d be pleased to know who it was who wrote those horrible things about *me*.”

“They were the truth,” Jessie hissed.

But Margaret shook her head again. None of it was true. Or, rather, the truth had been interpreted in such a way as to make her appear in a bad light, even though her love for Owen was very real.

“They weren’t the truth. I love Owen, and he loves me. We married for love,” Margaret insisted.

“You married for the inheritance,” Aaron countered.

By this time, their confrontation had attracted quite an audience, and Margaret saw her sisters and mother, along with her godmother, standing on the periphery of the circle of onlookers.

Emboldened by the presence, Margaret had no qualms about retorting. She pointed an angry finger at Aaron, who was standing defiantly at Jessie’s side.

“And what about *your* marriage? Wasn’t that for nothing but the claim of the inheritance?” she shot back.

Aaron faltered. He could hardly deny it, even as Margaret and Owen stood their ground, their hands clasped in one another’s.

“We married legitimately,” Aaron argued.

“A day late, and you can’t very well call it a marriage when she’s having an affair with the Baron of Rothschild, can you?” Owen retorted.

Gasps went up from the assembly, and Jessie looked around her angrily. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. It’s nonsense,” she scoffed.

“That’s not what your maid says. The maid you mistreated and sent away, accusing her of stealing and failing to give her a reference. She tells a very different story, and I’m pleased to have taken her on myself,” Hannah interjected.

At these words, Jessie’s eyes grew wide, and she rounded on Aaron, clenching her fists over him in angry frustration. “It’s ours, isn’t it? The money? Tell me it’s ours?” she snarled.

Owen shook his head. “We’ve reached a stalemate, I believe. You claim we married for convenience, but I assure you, our love grows stronger by the day,” he said, raising his and Margaret’s hands in the air.

“But at first...” Aaron stammered.

“At first, I admit there was the necessity of finding a match, but the clause only stipulates love. It doesn’t say when or how. As for you, you and Lady Jessie were never in love. She was having an affair the whole time. She doesn’t love you, Aaron. But you can either protest and claim the money on the strength of an easily contested marriage in Gretna Green or admit there was no marriage and allow yourself a lucky escape from a woman who only wanted you for your money,” Owen replied.

Margaret watched as the expression on Aaron’s face changed. He faltered, shaking his head, even as Jessie let out an angry cry.

“But the money...” Aaron stammered.

“I wouldn’t ever allow my brother to be destitute. You’ll have your allowance, and I’ll help you in whatever way I can. You need only admit your fault, Aaron,” Owen reassured.

“Aaron, no!” Jessie exclaimed, clutching at Aaron’s wrist.

But to Margaret’s surprise, Aaron shook her off.

“Owen’s right, it wasn’t—it’s wrong. We weren’t ever in love. But... I can see it in his eyes. Don’t I know my own brother? I know he’s in love,” he said as Jessie let out a cry of anger.

“I told him we should’ve acted quicker. You’re a fool, Aaron,” Jessie growled. She turned on her heel and marched off through the throng.

A hum went up around the ballroom. There was much fluttering of fans and whispering, but Owen stepped forward and held out his hand to his brother.

“You might not believe this, Aaron, but I never wanted to be the firstborn. I’d have been quite happy playing second to you. Father played foolish games with us. He was a nasty man, and I won’t shed any tears for him. He played us off against one another, delighting in seeing us at odds. But it doesn’t need to be that way, does it?”

Aaron shook his head. “I’m sorry, Owen. I was so... caught up in the idea of the money, but Jessie... no, she didn’t love me, not like Margaret loves you. I can see it in your eyes. The way you look at one another. I wish... well, I wish I could know a love like that myself. I admit it, Owen, it was all a ruse. We married at Gretna Green, but it won’t be difficult to annul the blacksmith’s words. You won,” he said, shaking his brother’s hand.

“I didn’t win, Aaron. No one won. Our father played us both for fools. But why not put those differences behind us? We can play him at his own game if we put our past differences aside. I won’t leave you desolate,” Owen promised.

Aaron nodded. “I’m grateful to you, Owen. And I’m sorry. I was greedy, and I’ve paid the price for my greed.” He hung his head in shame.

The two brothers embraced, and Catherine called for the music to begin

again. The crowd dispersed.

Margaret and Owen were left with Aaron, Hannah, Anne, and Lady Dunne, and she put her arms around him, resting her head on his chest.

“What a terrible way to behave! But that’s what Lady Jessie is like,” Hannah exclaimed, tutting.

“She was always ambitious,” Anne added, shaking her head.

“Let’s leave Margaret and Owen to their own company,” Lady Dunne said, and Margaret was grateful to her as she led Hannah and Anne away.

“I should go, too. We can talk about all this tomorrow, Brother,” Aaron said.

Owen nodded, and Aaron retreated from the room.

“I think I’d like to step out for some fresh air,” Owen told Margaret.

They stepped out onto the terrace, and down into the gardens below, where dusk was falling.

It was a starry night, the moon high in the sky, casting its silvery light across the gardens. The chill of the night had not yet fallen, and there was a pleasant

scent in the breeze—lavender and roses.

They sat on a bench in an arbor below the shrubbery, out of sight of anyone, the gardens still and quiet. Margaret rested her head on Owens's shoulder as he put his arm around her, drawing her into his embrace.

"I'm so glad it's all over," Margaret whispered.

Owen smiled. "As am I. Aaron certainly had a change of heart. I think he saw what Lady Jessie was really like. I wonder if he loved her. I was never certain of it."

"She was having an affair, how could she love him? No, it was all about the money. That's all. She wanted to marry him so he could claim the fortune. They were just the same as us, at first, but... well, they didn't fall in love," Margaret said.

That was the unexpected moment she had realized her growing feelings for Owen, and his for her. It had been in the gardens at Kew when she had first realized it, though she had tried hard to ignore those feelings, telling herself it was nonsense. But, like a budding, blossoming garden, her love for Owen had grown gently over the weeks of their courtship, and now, there was no doubting her feelings.

This was love, and Margaret had married the man she loved—for richer, for poorer.

“It was unexpected. I thought... well, I suppose I just—oh, I don’t know. I can’t explain it. I just know that I love you. Why does it need an explanation or a demonstration? I don’t even know what my father meant by his bizarre clause. Love grows. It isn’t something tangible. I just know it,” Owen said, turning to Margaret, who smiled.

She understood just what he meant. Before she had fallen in love with him, she had thought love to be something to be seized or grasped. Love was something to fall into and know immediately you were enveloped by it. But that was not the case. Love was the gradual realization of a feeling, a feeling of an all-encompassing joy. Only then did it envelop. It was not something instant but recognized later, when it was too late to prevent it, if one could even speak in such terms.

Margaret had tried to resist, but knowing that Owen felt the same, she had allowed that love to blossom and grow.

How happy it had made her.

“And I know it, too. I know that I love you, and that’s all that matters,” she replied.

Owen looked at her and smiled. The moonlight illuminated his face, and he leaned down and kissed her on the lips, resting his forehead against hers.

“We’ve got so much to look forward to. No more pretending, no more deception. We don’t need to appear in this or that way or practice how we behave. It’s all as it is, that’s all that matters,” he said.

“You’ve certainly endeared yourself to my sisters. And that’s no easy task,” Margaret teased.

The Duke laughed. “It isn’t every day someone helps deliver one’s baby. But I’m glad. I want your sisters to like me. I want your mother and father to like me. I want your godmother to like me. I want everyone who cares about you to like me. Because I love you, and I want the whole world to know it.”

Margaret smiled, and he kissed her once again.

“And I hope your brother likes me, too,” she returned.

Owen smirked. “Well, he’s only just started liking me again, but I’m sure he will. Just give him time. I hope one day he’ll be as happy as I am.”

She gazed into his eyes, and he gazed back at her, a mischievous smile playing across his face.

“What are you thinking?” she whispered, and he leaned forward to kiss her on the neck.

“I’m thinking about... the first time... in the shrubbery... it was more than a kiss,” he murmured.

Margaret smiled. "I'm thinking about it, too," she admitted as his hand slipped around her waist, drawing her into his embrace, and their lips met in a passionate kiss.

The sounds of the music drifted in the air, but in the garden, they were alone, and taking her by the hand, Owen led Margaret into the shrubbery, turning to embrace her, the two of them caught up in the passions no longer forbidden, the pleasures no longer denied.

With his arms around her, Owen pulled at the ties of her bodice as Margaret tugged at his belt and breeches, exposing him to her touch. Her dress fell to the ground, and they lay on top of it, surrounded by the heady scent of the garden. An owl hooted above them.

"I love you, more than I can ever tell you," Owen whispered, bringing his lips to Margaret's neck, his hands caressing her body, as she arched her back, allowing the sensation of his touch to overwhelm her.

"But you can show me," she gasped as he brought himself to bear on her, their bodies as one, caught up in the pleasure of their union.

There was no holding back, no embarrassment, no uncertainty. They were married, they were in love, and this was the culmination of their love.

A warmth was rising in Margaret's loins, overwhelming her, and as she gave forth, she gasped, clutching at Owen, their lips pressed together, as he, too, gave way to his pleasure. Breathless, they lay for a moment, holding one another as the feeling grew less and their passions subsided.

“Isn’t it wonderful to be in love?” Margaret asked.

Owen smiled at her and nodded, brushing her hair back as a shaft of moonlight illuminated her face. “It’s the most wonderful thing in the world. I’ve realized I couldn’t live without it, even though I was prepared to for the sake of money. But what’s money without the joy of someone to share it with? What’s life without the joy of someone to share it with?”

Margaret smiled. “We’ve got one another, that’s all that matters,” she replied, and as he brought her again into his embrace, she knew she had found her happiness and the love she, too, desired.

The End?

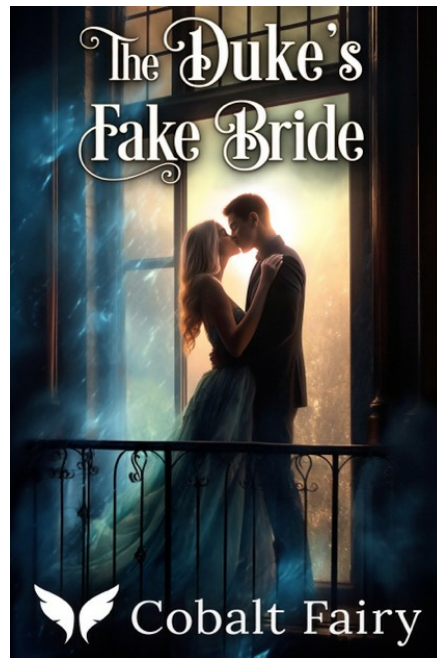
EXTENDED EPILOGUE



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