

ASHTYN NEWBOLD

A man and a woman in 19th-century attire stand on a balcony overlooking a valley. The man is on the left, wearing a tan coat and dark trousers, looking towards the right. The woman is on the right, wearing a white lace top, a long pink skirt, and a large hat, looking towards the left. The background shows a lush green valley with rolling hills and a stone balustrade in the foreground.

LORD
BLACKWELL'S
PROMISE

Larkhall
Letters
BOOK 5

L O R D
B L A C K W E L L ' S
P R O M I S E



A S H T Y N N E W B O L D



OceanofPDF.com

Copyright © 2022 by Ashtyn Newbold

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Names, characters, and places are products of the author's imagination.

Cover design by Ashtyn Newbold

Three Leaf Publishing, LLC

www.ashtynnewbold.com

OceanofPDF.com

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

32. [Epilogue](#)

[Stay Connected](#)

[Larkhall Letters Series](#)

[Also by Ashtyn Newbold](#)

[About the Author](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

CHAPTER I



If Margaret was to properly maintain her hatred toward the Earl of Blackwell, then it was of the utmost importance that she only listen selectively at church.

She crossed her ankles beneath the pew before crossing her arms in a similar fashion. The vicar had been prattling on about how to ‘love thine enemy’ for at least twenty minutes, and she had endured quite enough. Letting her eyes drift closed, she drew a deep breath. The humid summer air did little to soothe the hot anger that festered in her chest.

“Are you unwell?” Mama’s voice was a soft whisper.

Margaret opened her eyes, giving a quick shake of her head in her mother’s direction before focusing on the vicar again. Perhaps it was age, or experience, or simply a matter of having a better heart than the one Margaret had, but Mama somehow managed to endure her hardships without despising the man who had caused them.

Could Margaret even call Lord Blackwell a *man*? She bit her lip as her eyes narrowed. No. He was a snake. A vicious, ugly snake.

She didn’t think of him often—she tried not to—but when the word enemy was being echoed repeatedly through the church, she couldn’t help it. He was arrogant and cruel and

wealthy beyond reason. Margaret's parents were humble, kind, and yet they were poor beyond reason. How was that fair? How had the man who cheated her father out of his fortune been blessed with such good fortune himself?

She glanced down the pew at her father, who was listening intently to the sermon, and her three younger brothers, who were taking turns pinching one another's hands as hard as they could. All three boys laughed quietly, despite the red marks appearing on the backs of their hands. Their trousers were too short, with holes forming in the knees. The thread on Mama's sleeves had begun to unravel. Papa's jacket was missing two buttons.

"As you see, that is why we must love our enemies." The vicar's melodious voice came back to her attention. "That is why we must forgive all those who trespass against us." He opened his bible. "Ye have heard that it hath been said, thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you—"

Margaret cleared her throat a little too loudly. She preferred to stop reading after that first part.

When the congregation was excused, she stood and threaded her way through the crowd and out the door. The scent of wildflowers flooded her nose. While she waited for her family to reach her, she tipped her head up toward the sky so the sunlight could warm her face beneath her bonnet.

Pain shot up her arm, and she jerked her hand away from Philip's tiny fingers. She gasped, turning toward her youngest brother with a scolding frown. "You mustn't allow George and James to teach you that pinching is acceptable." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Especially at church."

For a moment, Philip looked truly remorseful, staring down at his fingers with a scowl. Margaret tousled his ginger curls, drawing his gaze back up to hers. “That only applies to your sister, of course. You may pinch your brothers as much as you would like.” She winked, and a smile tugged at Philip’s lips.

He raced off to find George and James, who were already on their way down the hill toward their cottage. Mama linked her arm through Margaret’s as she stepped up beside her. “What a lovely day. The heat of summer shall be upon us soon.”

“How are the crops?” Margaret asked in a low voice. “Has there been any improvement?” She knew not to ask such questions in front of Papa because of the worry it caused him, but Mama always spoke with a hopeful tone.

Today, however, Mama’s blue eyes darkened. “I’m afraid not.” Her lips pressed together and she looked down at the grass as they walked. Her pale lashes shielded her eyes from view, but Margaret had already seen the worry within them. Papa was still conversing with one of their neighbors near the doors of the church, and even from the distance, Margaret noted the slump of his shoulders, as if two boulders were resting atop them. Not only that, but he was ill. If he hadn’t been so intent on going to church, he should have been at home in bed with a cup of warm broth. His skin had turned pale, and his eyes were bloodshot from all his coughing and poor sleep.

Margaret’s jaw tightened as she watched her brothers running down the hill with their torn trousers nearly halfway up their calves. If they couldn’t even afford new trousers for the boys, then how would they afford to eat through the

winter? Her heart thudded a shallow rhythm in her chest. She should not have left her position as a lady's maid, not even for a brief visit to her family. They needed as much money as they could possibly earn.

"I will continue my search for a governess position," Margaret said. "Surely there is a family who won't know of Papa's reputation."

Mama gave a weak nod. Being a governess was a more respectable position than a maid. Shortly after her family's fall from society, which had been caused entirely by that odious earl, Margaret had been fortunate to have been given a position with the Northcott family at Larkhall. But soon they had no longer needed her. The master of Larkhall, Matthew Northcott, had been beyond generous in helping her find work as a lady's maid afterward, but when she had heard of her father's declining health, she came home immediately to help her mother care for him and her three brothers.

In truth, she felt rather helpless no matter where she was.

As a maid, she hardly brought in enough money to significantly help her family with their needs. And being so far away, she could hardly eat or sleep because of her worry over her family. The worst of it was, her family had nothing if not their pride. The Northcotts had offered to help support them financially, but her parents had always refused. Margaret had too. It bruised her to her core to be so dependent on others.

It hadn't always been that way.

As she walked arm in arm with Mama, she could recall many similar instances, but they had been walking into a ballroom instead. They had both been dressed in fine gowns. Mama had been smiling, proud to be the chaperone of such a refined daughter.

Papa often blamed himself for all they had lost. He had made the foolish decision to gamble their fortune on a business scheme involving Lord Blackwell. But it hadn't been his fault that the earl had planned to steal it all from the beginning. It hadn't been Papa's fault that Lord Blackwell had protected himself from scrutiny by proceeding to accuse Papa of cheating in a game of cards, publicly disgracing him, even after he had taken nearly every last penny from his pocket.

"Margaret, your cheeks are turning red," Mama said with a scolding tone.

Margaret gave a frustrated sigh. Simply because Mama chose to be forgiving and submissive didn't mean Margaret had to. When they had so little, she couldn't bring herself to let go of her resentment. It wasn't only toward Blackwell—but toward the world itself. How could so much unfairness exist without consequence? How could such a wicked man be thriving in his enormous estate?

She could envision him now, sitting at the head of the long dining table, feasting on an assortment of meats and breads and desserts, counting the crystals on the chandelier. Well, she couldn't entirely envision him. She had only seen him once, fleetingly, when he had been leaving a meeting with Papa in his study. He was young, she knew that much. Handsome, according to the ridiculous opinions of ignorant young women. But if a man's soul was not also handsome, then his face was simply a dangerous mask.

Mama raised a hand to shield her eyes from the sun. Her posture stiffened. "What is George doing?"

Margaret followed her gaze down the hill to where a large willow tree leaned over a pond. As she squinted, George, the eldest of her three brothers, came into view amid the branches,

balancing near the top of the tree. James and Philip stood at the bottom, watching their brother as he took a step closer to the edge of the limb. His head was tipped down toward the pond.

Margaret's blood froze. Was he going to jump? Panic gripped her muscles. Her brothers didn't know how shallow that murky pond was. It was no more than two feet deep. She could easily imagine George complaining of the heat of the day and concocting the horrible idea of jumping into the pond to cool off. But from the top of the tree? He would hurt himself.

Margaret groaned, tugging her arm away from Mama's and running down the hill. "George!" she shouted, waving her arms in an attempt to draw his attention. "Stop!"

Philip and James turned at the sound of her voice. George looked up, and the moment he saw her, he stumbled, bending over to catch himself.

Margaret froze, her heart sinking when she heard the crack of the branch. George fell backward, flailing for what felt like an eternity before landing with a shallow splash in the pond.

"George!" Margaret's chest squeezed with dread as she raced toward the water's edge.

To her relief, George's head came up from the water. Not a second later, he let out a soul-shattering scream.

She charged into the murk, her boots immediately filling with mud and rocks. Her skirts weighed her down as she trudged closer to George. Sitting on the bottom of the pond as he was, George's face was nearly submerged as he cried, coughing between breaths.

When Margaret reached him, she could feel the jagged rocks under her soles. “I’m here,” she said in as gentle a voice as she could manage. “Tell me what is hurting.” She squatted down in the water, tucking her arms under his shoulders to raise him higher. He let out another scream.

“Is it your leg?”

He trembled with a sob and nodded. “And m-my arm.” His voice melted into another chorus of sobs.

Margaret glanced back at the edge of the pond. It was so far away. She didn’t trust herself to carry him out without tripping over her skirts or the rocks. “I need you to float on your back. I’ll help you.” If she could manage to bring him closer to the edge, then Mama could help pull him out safely.

George gave a weak nod as she slipped her arms under his back, lifting him to the surface. He whimpered at the movement.

His leg floated up first. Her stomach lurched. She took a deep breath to calm herself. Not only was his leg broken, but it was broken through the skin. It could not have possibly been healthy to have an open wound in such dirty water.

He needed to be out of the pond at once.

She managed to compose herself enough to focus on his face. “Look up at the sky,” Margaret said in a quick voice. “What do you see in the clouds? Do you see the rabbit?” She didn’t actually see a cloud shaped like a rabbit, but it would keep him searching. If he saw his leg, he would panic and sink.

His arms floated up, and she assessed the damage. His right forearm appeared to be broken and bruised, the curvature far from normal.

She kept her hands firmly under his back, walking as quickly as she could toward the bank. Mama was standing there now, both hands covering her mouth. She started stepping toward the water.

“Mama, go fetch the physician.” Margaret kept her voice even, though her heart was pounding hard in her ears. She could hardly hear herself.

“I d-don’t see a rabbit,” George whined between sobs.

“It’s right there.” Margaret pointed upward in a random direction, biting her lip as she rotated him in the water until his head was facing the edge of the pond. She shuffled behind him, keeping her hands under his shoulders as she stepped onto the grass.

She glanced behind her. “James, Philip, go home and wait for us there.” The two boys were watching, eyes rounder than saucers. She didn’t know whether they had seen his leg yet or not, but she hoped to prevent such a thing if possible.

They exchanged a glance before starting back up the hill, walking backward so as to still observe the situation. “Quickly,” Margaret said in an exasperated voice. Her breath came fast, her hands shaking with nervousness. The two boys took off faster.

“Keep your eyes on me,” Margaret said from above George’s face. “I’m going to pull you out of the pond.” She could see the blood from his leg swirling amid the murky water.

Tucking her arms under his shoulders, she rocked back on her feet. “One, two, three.” She leaned back and dragged him as carefully as she could onto the grass, angling his body toward the left side to avoid further injury to his right leg and

arm. She fell backward, landing hard on her backside on the soggy grass.

His crying continued, and he craned his neck upward, as if to sneak a glance at his leg.

“George!” Margaret took his face between her hands, hovering above him. “You did so well floating on your back. Do you remember when Papa taught you to swim? Do you remember that big, deep pond by our house?” Her heart ached at the wistful gleam in George’s bright blue eyes. Even at the age of nine, he remembered clearly their old house, the manor that Papa had been forced to sell.

She smoothed the wet strands of blond hair from George’s forehead. For the first time, she was grateful that the seams of her dress were already tearing. She took hold of one layer of her skirts and tore it from the waistband, draping the large piece of fabric over his leg to hide it from his view. She didn’t know the best way to stop the bleeding, so she prayed that the physician would arrive soon.

Chills erupted over her arms as a breeze took to the air.

She slumped with relief when she saw Mama and the physician running down the hill. When they reached her, she rolled awkwardly aside, her wet skirts twisting around her legs so Mama could hold George’s face instead.

A few men who had been in the churchyard were hurrying to their aid, gathering around the place where George lay on the grass. Margaret rose to her feet, glancing down at her torn dress.

Mama’s face was twisted with panic. “Where are James and Philip?”

“At home.”

“Go look after them.”

Margaret nodded, head spinning. She stole one more look at George before making her way back to their cottage. She stopped outside the door, wrenching off her boots. They made a suctioning noise as she managed to free her feet from the mud and sharp rocks. She poured the water out onto the grass and left them outside to wash later.

“Philip? James?” She opened the door and caught sight of her two brothers sitting on the sofa, brows drawn together with concern.

“James told him to do it,” Philip said, pointing a finger at his older brother.

James’s lip quivered, his straight blond hair hanging over his ears.

Margaret sighed. “That doesn’t matter. George still chose to climb that tree, even though Mama has told *all of you* not to do that. Perhaps if I had not shouted his name, he wouldn’t have lost his balance.” Margaret’s stomach pinched with guilt. Was it her fault? Sudden tears sprang to her eyes but she blinked them away before her brothers could see. “He will be all right. The doctor is treating him now.”

She gulped, taking a seat on the sofa beside them, momentarily forgetting how wet her dress was. It was a serious injury, one that would take months to heal. *If* it could even heal properly. She squeezed her eyes shut. How could they afford the constant attention of a physician, not only for Papa, but now for George as well? A surgeon would also be necessary, she imagined, given the state of his leg. Her stomach lurched again as the image of his bone came back to her mind. Her hands shook.

Poor George.

At least he would live. It could have been much worse.

After a few minutes, the door opened, and the physician carried George through the doorway. Mama, Papa, and two of Papa's friends followed. Mama walked ahead, leading the physician to the room that George shared with James and Philip. The first time George screamed, Margaret took her two brothers by the hand and led them outside.

Her heart hammered, stomach twisting.

She tried her best to keep the boys entertained, but there was a heaviness in the air that suffocated them all. Eventually, they all sat on the grass in silence, waiting for someone to come out of the house.

After what must have been an hour, the door opened, and Mama walked out. The corners of her mouth were turned downward, a deep furrow between her eyes.

Margaret stood, leaving her brothers at their place on the grass. She still hadn't changed out of her wet dress, but the warmth of the day had dried much of it, leaving behind streaks of dirt and grime from the filthy water on both the fabric and her skin.

Margaret wrapped her arms around Mama's frail shoulders, pulling her into a hug. "He will be all right," she whispered.

Mama pulled back, nodding as a tear rolled down her cheek. "I cannot bear to see him suffer."

Margaret nodded, fighting the lump in her throat.

From over Mama's shoulder, Margaret saw the surgeon walk out, a grim look on his face. Margaret squeezed Mama's

arm, gesturing in the man's direction. Papa followed behind him. His gait was staggered from the stress of the day. He needed to be resting, but he joined the physician by Mama's side.

"The damage to his bone is significant," the surgeon said. "I—I'm afraid it is beyond my expertise to repair properly. There is a specialist in London by the name of Doctor Jonathan Gulliver who has treated similar injuries before. I will refer you to him." He glanced at the house, with its various states of disrepair before returning his gaze forward. His throat bobbed with a swallow. "I'm afraid he does ask a lofty price for his services. It is not necessary for the boy's survival, but he is likely not to walk properly again without the experienced care that Doctor Gulliver can provide."

Margaret's heart sank, and a lump gathered in her throat. She tried to breathe in, but the air was too thick. How could they ever afford it? They already struggled to afford Papa's physician. And if it came to a choice between obtaining care for George or Papa, Margaret knew in her bones that Papa would choose George. She couldn't lose her father, and she couldn't bear to see her energetic brother never walk or run properly again. There was no way to win.

They had never needed money more than they did now. Margaret felt a keen responsibility to find work, with good pay, or their family would continue to suffer. She tried to stay positive, but her hopes were fading. Was all of this misfortune because she hadn't listened in church that day? She cast a quick repentant prayer heavenward before walking back to where James and Philip still sat on the grass. Philip's pale brows were drawn together, eyes brimming with tears.

Margaret pulled him into her arms, resting her chin atop his ginger curls. “Hush, all will be well. George will be all right.”

She hoped it wasn't a lie, or she should have to repent again.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2



“Shouldn’t you be on your wedding trip by now?”
Peter Trafford, Earl of Blackwell, had never known his voice to croak more than it did with that statement. He cleared his throat, meeting the gaze of Matthew Northcott as he stood above where Peter lay on his—as the doctor had so graciously called it—*deathbed*.

Even more surprising than the state of his own voice was the fact that Mr. Northcott had called upon him at all. The two were not friends. Not in the slightest. They were acquaintances. Even that might have been too generous. Peter was fairly certain Mr. Northcott considered him much closer to an enemy than anything else.

“My wedding is next week,” Mr. Northcott said. He stood tall, his dark hair and black jacket nearly blending him into the surroundings of the dimly lit room. “Before I leave, I wanted to ask you one last time to make matters right with the Lovell family.”

Of course that was what Mr. Northcott was here for. He never ceased to guilt him over the matter. Peter groaned, rolling to one side. “What makes you assume that I will change my mind from the last time we spoke?”

“You are dying.” Mr. Northcott’s voice was flat, his jaw tight. “Everyone in town knows it. I had hoped you might be wishing to right a few of your wrongs for fear of Purgatory.”

Peter raised his eyebrows, shocked by the man’s bluntness. He coughed into his blanket, scrunching his brow against the pain in his chest. “If you think I have achieved so much in my life by fearing *anything*, you are mistaken.”

“How does it benefit you to leave the Lovell’s with nothing?” Mr. Northcott gave an exasperated sigh. “I know you are selfish, but you cannot access your funds if you are no longer living, so what purpose could you possibly have in depriving the Lovells of the smallest sum?” He stepped closer, blue eyes flashing with anger. “*You* are the reason they have fallen so far in society. *You* are the reason they can hardly afford to live day to day. You and I have never known what that feels like, but I invite you to imagine it and see if you do not feel the slightest bit of fear.”

Peter’s stomach dropped, but he ignored the sensation. In truth, he had been wrestling with something unusual over the last several weeks. Guilt. It had wrapped itself around his chest like a rope, growing tighter each day. He had thought of his life, and what he possibly had to be proud of, and as he raked through all the memories of twenty-seven years, he had come up with nothing. *Nothing*. He shook himself of his momentary weakness and met Mr. Northcott’s gaze. “If you are so concerned with the Lovells, why do you not offer them some of your own fortune?”

“They will not accept it.” Mr. Northcott let out a slow breath. “I have tried. The last time I spoke with them, they were quite resistant to the idea of charity.”

Peter scoffed, the sound turning into a cough. He composed himself, shaking his head against his pillow. “Then they most certainly will not accept any charity from *me*.”

Mr. Northcott folded his arms across his chest. “Perhaps they will not view it as charity, but as you simply returning the money that is rightfully theirs.”

Peter wiped the sweat from his brow, tightening his jaw against a wave of pain in his head. “Will money truly solve all their problems? You know as well as I that reputation means far more. What is done cannot be undone. They would never be accepted in society again, no matter how much money they have. As for *my* fortune, there is not much I can give to the Lovells without leaving my mother and siblings without sufficient to live on comfortably.” His brow furrowed. “They are my priority. Everything I have done was for them.”

“Confess to your false accusations, then! You are to die soon anyway.”

Blast, why did the man have to keep reminding him of that fact?

Mr. Northcott continued, eyes blazing with restrained anger. “Confess that you accused Mr. Lovell falsely of cheating in cards in order to stop him from being credible when he tried to *rightfully* accuse you of stealing his fortune in a false investment.” Mr. Northcott gave a dry chuckle. “Because who wouldn’t take the word of an earl over the lying, cheating man that you made Mr. Lovell out to be? Is that not how it went?” His voice was cold. “I know the truth. Their daughter Margaret told me everything, and I believed every word of hers over what you manipulated the *ton* into believing.”

Peter's stomach twisted. There was no use denying it. At least he could die a little less of a liar. "You are failing to see it from my perspective." Peter held Mr. Northcott's stern gaze. "If I confess now, my family will be the ones to suffer for it." He fisted his hands beneath his blanket. "I will not leave this world having caused my mother and sisters ruined reputations and poverty. You are ridiculous to ask such a thing of me. I bid you good day, Mr. Northcott. Do not come to Langdale Abbey again." He turned away on his bed, snubbing the man as thoroughly as he could in his current state. He breathed heavily, already exhausted by the brief conversation. His lungs burned.

Peter stared at the opposite wall, waiting to hear Mr. Northcott's footfalls retreating.

The air was silent for a long moment before Mr. Northcott scoffed. "I should not have come at all. I don't know why I thought you would change your mind. You are utterly predictable in your selfishness. I will leave the Lovell's address on your desk in case you decide not to be a complete boor."

Peter's skin prickled as Mr. Northcott took his leave of the room. He pressed a fist to his chest, trying to rid himself of the guilt that swirled up from Mr. Northcott's uninvited lecture. He knocked against his breastbone, as if expecting an answer from something within—but he received nothing but silence. Good. Silencing his emotions was what he had always done. He couldn't stop now simply because he was dying.

He drew a shaking breath, rolling over to stare at the door. Vexation still prickled over his skin like an itch he couldn't scratch. *Utterly predictable?* Is that what Mr. Northcott

thought of his decision not to give away his fortune to the Lovells?

He worked his jaw over nothing, narrowing his eyes at the door handle. If he had the energy, he might have followed Mr. Northcott out for an explanation. Or an apology. Peter was a lot of things, many of which he was not proud of, but *predictable*? He couldn't leave this world being predictable. In Peter's mind, predictable was equal to boring, and that was the last thing he had ever considered himself to be.

"Predictable," he muttered, shaking his head. "Predictable in my selfishness." His heart sank. He had known one other man who he would have described as such. As neglectful as Peter had been of his own character, it seemed he was becoming just like that man. He had never wanted that. He gritted his teeth, closing his eyes as his emotions resurfaced. He knocked against his chest again, jarring the emotions just enough to make them disappear.

The door creaked, and he opened his eyes. This time it was Mother standing in the doorway. The light from the window caught the beading on her ivory gown, momentarily stinging his eyes. Her golden hair was streaked in silver, tight curls framing her face. Peter could take credit for at least half the wrinkles between her eyebrows and on her forehead. He would have liked to take credit for some of the wrinkles at the edges of her eyes, but in truth, he hadn't made her smile as much as he would have liked to. He swallowed, alarmed by the amount of regret that weighed on his shoulders. He had been experiencing far too much of it of late.

As much as he had been trying to prevent it, a lump formed in his throat. "You're back." He swallowed hard, blinking rapidly. Each time he saw Mother, he wondered if it

would be the last time. All that awaited him in the life after this one was...well, he didn't even know.

But what he feared the most was that he would find himself in his father's company again.

A surge of terror gripped his shoulders.

Mother walked forward and sat on the edge of his bed. "I couldn't possibly stay in Brighton any longer."

"You should not have shortened your trip for me." Peter shook his head. "Sally and Rebecca must be disappointed." His sisters had been looking forward to their trip to Brighton for months. They had spoken of little else.

Mother brushed a loose strand of hair off Peter's forehead, just as she had when he was a boy. He never would have allowed it at his age, but something about the tenderness of the gesture put his composure into upheaval once again. "You are far more important to us than Brighton," Mother said. "Your sisters couldn't enjoy themselves knowing that you were here alone and so very unwell." Her eyes glistened with tears. She sniffed, tipping her head back as her voice broke with a sob. "I spoke with the physician. I simply cannot believe it."

"Mother." Peter reached for her hand, his own shaking. "I have ensured that you will live comfortably. I own the estate outright. No one else will have any claim on it. I shall leave it to you in my will, and you and Sally and Rebecca shall have nothing to fear."

"I don't care about the estate." Mother's voice rose, and she squeezed his hand. "It is you that I cannot lose. My sweet boy."

Guilt rose in Peter's chest all over again. She had called him her 'sweet boy' for as long as he could remember, and for

most of his adulthood, he had found it amusing. But now, it rang differently in his ears. It was a lie. Would Mother call him sweet if she knew what he had done to the Lovells? Or if she had overheard his conversation with Mr. Northcott that day?

“I am not sweet,” he blurted.

“Of course you are.”

“I am not.” Peter met Mother’s gaze. “You know that.”

She sighed. “Oh, Peter, you mustn’t be so harsh toward yourself. You have been sweet to me and your sisters, and that is all I choose to acknowledge.”

“Not Rachel.”

Mother didn’t make a comment.

The eldest of his three sisters, Peter had practically forced to marry a man of his choosing for the benefit of their financial situation. She had been unhappy with him for years.

His mind raced with all of the things Mother was not acknowledging. His dishonesty, his unkindness, his public behavior, his approach to courtship and marriage—which had always been flippant. All his mother had wanted was to see him marry, have an heir, and be happy. He had done none of those things. He hadn’t even tried. Happiness ran from him if he ever tried to pursue it, and he was tired of chasing something that didn’t wish to be caught.

“But *I* must acknowledge *everything* now, Mother. Every misdeed I have carried out.” Peter rubbed his forehead. “There have been far more than you even know.” Urgency clenched his muscles. He needed to tell her what he had done. He couldn’t die a liar. He couldn’t die knowing that his sweet mother held him with undue respect. If nothing else, she would know what to do with Mr. Northcott’s request. He

hardly knew how to navigate the situation. He couldn't have admitted to Mr. Northcott that he had been wracked with guilt. His pride wouldn't allow it, but he could admit it to his mother.

"You need not confess your misdeeds to me, my dear." Mother chuckled, wiping a tear from her cheek. "Let us focus on the good of your life."

"What good?" Peter scowled. "I have done nothing good."

"Stop."

"I haven't." He widened his eyes. "At least not nearly enough to balance out the bad."

Mother fell silent for a long moment, searching his face. "Then tip the scale."

Her words rang in his ears. He twisted a loose thread on his blanket. "How?"

"By doing something good. If it will bring you peace, then you must try. If there is business you have left unfinished, if there is guilt in your heart, then remedy it. I will help you." Her eyes still swam with tears, her lips quivering.

Peter drew a deep breath, closing his eyes. He hated to see Mother like this. She hadn't shed a tear when her husband died, but here she was, crying over Peter. Was he really any different from his father? Once she knew what he had done, she might stop crying.

"A family. The Lovells." He cleared his throat. "What fortune we have today was once theirs. I tricked them out of it years ago and left their family in ruin."

Mother covered her mouth as a tear fell down her cheek. "I did fear something like this, but I hoped it wasn't true."

“Father gambled away our fortune before his death. He told no one but me. I was desperate and young and...foolish.” He raked a hand through his sweat-dampened hair. “To do his bidding and trick Mr. Lovell was the only way I knew to ensure we would not have to sell the estate. I was thinking of you. Of Sally and Rebecca.”

Mother was silent, listening with wide eyes.

Peter pressed his fist to his chest. “Matthew Northcott, who once employed their daughter as a governess, called upon me just minutes before you arrived. He wishes for me to make amends with the Lovells. He wants me to give them back their fortune. But their reputation is still beyond repair, and it will be even if they did regain their wealth. At any rate, I couldn’t leave you with so little to live on.” Peter clenched his jaw. “I confess I don’t know what to do.”

The word *predictable* echoed in his head once again. Oh, how he hated that word.

Mother stared at him, and he could sense her disappointment. Good. It almost felt better than feeling her praise and love. Disappointment felt more authentic—more deserved.

“There should be no question as to what you must do,” she said. A furrow marked her brow. “You must remedy this, even if it comes at our expense.”

“No. No—no, Mother, that is something I refuse to do. I will not put the future of you and Sally and Rebecca below that of a family that I hardly know. I could pay them a small sum, one that may sustain them for a few months, but that is all I can spare.”

Mother stood, crossing her arms. “That is not enough.” She paced the length of his bed and back again. “Their reputation must also be mended.” Her eyes were distant, reflecting deep thought.

“They cannot be accepted into society again. There is nothing I can do about that.”

Mother paused, sitting down forcefully on the bed, as if her thoughts had physically struck her down. “Yes, there is.”

“Pray tell.” Peter raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“How old is the Lovell daughter? The one who was the governess?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“Not the slightest?” Mother raised her own eyebrow.

“I suspect between the ages of seventeen and thirty.” He shrugged. “Why?”

Mother gave a slow nod, pressing her lips together firmly. “You must marry her.”

If Peter had the strength, he would have thrown his blankets off of himself in surprise. “Marry her? Are you mad?”

Mother ignored him, twisting the pendant at her neck as she spoke. “If you were to marry Miss Lovell, you could ensure that her family had a comfortable place to live. Langdale Abbey has an excessive amount of rooms, plenty more than I or your sisters could ever use. Their financial worries will be behind them. The union would show that any strife between our families is in the past.” Her words slowed. “Besides that, Miss Lovell would be Lady Blackwell, a

countess. Society would soon forget that her family was ever perceived as anything but respectable.”

Peter frowned, struggling to take in his mother’s suggestion. His head ached. Mother held her chin high, awaiting his thoughts.

“Miss Lovell surely despises me.” He laughed under his breath. “How could she not? Any proposal I offer, she would be sure to reject, no matter the benefits to her family’s station.”

Mother shrugged. “Perhaps she cares for her family’s welfare as much as you care for yours.”

“Perhaps, but would any sane woman marry a man she hates?”

“She might if she knows...” Mother’s voice faded and she looked down at her hands.

Understanding washed over him. “If she knows I am soon to die.”

Mother nodded, pinching the bridge of her nose as she regained her composure.

He should not have doubted Mother’s ability to find a solution to any problem. But perhaps he shouldn’t have enlisted her help. He had never given a great deal of thought to marrying, and certainly not at a time like this and for such a purpose as this. But already, the idea had begun to appease his guilt. All he would have to do is extend the proposal, and if Miss Lovell rejected it—which was likely to happen—then he would know that he had at least done his part to *try* to make amends.

Mother took a deep breath. “I confess it would be a comfort to share the house with another family. Soon enough

your sisters will marry and I will be left here alone.”

Peter’s mind spun. “If I do this...I will still leave the fortune and estate to you, not to Miss Lovell. It will be your decision how you share your income with the Lovells, and you may include my widow in such decisions at your own discretion.”

“It sounds like you have already made up your mind.” Mother sniffed, lifting her chin once again. “I am proud of you.”

Peter’s heart stalled. Even after hearing what he had done, how was she still proud of him? “I suppose I have. But I do think Miss Lovell is unlikely to accept.”

“You must choose the words of your proposal carefully.” Mother stood, walking to the nearby writing desk. She lifted a sheet of foolscap and uncapped the inkwell. Raising her quill, she turned to him. “I shall be your scribe.”

Was he acting in haste? Was Mother acting in haste? Did she truly understand that she would be sharing Langdale Abbey with a family of strangers? She had just barely presented the idea, and now she was poised to write out his proposal. His heart thudded a shallow rhythm in his chest. He had never even met Miss Lovell. What if she was undeserving of the honor of becoming Lady Blackwell? He scowled up at the ceiling. He would hold onto his pride for as long as he could.

Marrying Miss Lovell right before his death wouldn’t instantly make him a respectable man, but it would do one thing.

It would ensure he was no longer a predictable one.

CHAPTER 3



“Is this all you could find?” Mama asked as she kneeled down beside Margaret on the floor.

“At the moment, yes.” Margaret brushed a strand of her straight blonde hair out of her line of vision as she examined the papers she had spread across the floorboards of their cottage. “Each and every one is seeking a maid.” She sat back on her heels. “That income will do little to help us.”

Mama nodded, her features grim.

“We will continue our search,” Margaret said. “I will travel farther this time.”

Mama stood, walking slowly toward the kitchen. As she began stirring the pot that contained their usual stew, the scent of potatoes and carrots wafted through the air.

She hated the hopelessness in Mama’s posture. “Mama—” Margaret sighed. “We will find a way to provide George and Papa with the care they require. I know there must be a way.”

Mama stopped stirring, tipping her head up to the ceiling. “There is no respectable way to earn as much money as we need in so short a time. At any rate, it is not your responsibility to bear.” She glanced at Margaret over her shoulder before returning to the stew.

Margaret scowled at the floor, pressing her lips together. She had been clinging to hope, but it was fading quickly. Mama had always been more optimistic than Margaret, but now it seemed that their roles were reversing. Without Mama's optimism, Margaret hardly knew where to turn for hope. Poor George. Poor Papa. Trying to maintain hope amid their circumstances was a constant strain on her heart, and it was finally ready for a moment of rest.

"What might I help you with, Mama?" Margaret walked toward her.

She shook her head, but paused. "Will you go see if James and Philip are up to any mischief? They are outside."

Ever since George had fallen from the tree earlier that week, Mama and Margaret had both been careful to keep a close watch on the boys at all times. She assumed they had learned their lesson at least a little after seeing George's accident, but young boys were unpredictable in their decisions.

Walking outside, Margaret shielded her eyes from the sharp glow of the setting sun. Once they adjusted, she searched the surrounding land for any sign of her brothers. She spotted James and Philip running across the grass at the base of the hill. Philip appeared to be chasing James, hand outstretched. James was taller, older, and faster, so Margaret could sense Philip's frustration even from a distance.

She walked down the hill until they saw her. James stopped running, and Philip took the opportunity to catch him. "Got you!"

"Only because I stopped," James grumbled. He crossed his arms, looking down at the ground. "I wish George could play with us. He was fast."

“I’m fast too!” Philip scowled up at his older brother, his freckled cheeks red from the exertion of their game.

James cast a look of long suffering toward Margaret. She smiled, but her heart ached. What if George could never run again? Her throat was dry. She shook away the dismal thought, bending down to look straight into James’s eyes. “I’m fast. Did you know that?”

James cast her a skeptical look. “*You?*”

“Do not doubt me.” Margaret placed her hands on her hips, raising her chin. “I am even faster than you.”

A sly smile tugged on the edges of James’s lips. “Are you going to play with us?”

Margaret shrugged, holding still for several seconds before taking off in a run as fast as she could. She lifted her skirts, racing across the grass toward the house. She glanced back, and both James and Philip were chasing her. Their laughter was labored as they struggled to reach her, but she made it to the house before they could.

“See?” She caught her breath, brushing the loose strands of hair off her face. “I am indeed quite fast.”

“You are even faster than George!” James said through his giggles. His eyes were round with shock, as if she had just demonstrated a magic trick. He had likely never seen a woman run so quickly. That was because most ladies did not make a habit of running. She smiled down at him. “Perhaps when George recovers, I shall challenge him to a race.” The words fell painfully on her ears. There was nothing she wouldn’t do to ensure he ran again. If only she knew *what* she could do. Frustration bubbled up in her chest.

“Margaret,” Mama’s voice came from the cottage.

“Yes?” Margaret glanced up, surprised to see Mama’s eyes—round with shock—staring back at her from the doorway.

“What is the matter?” Margaret rushed forward.

“Nothing—er—well, I suppose it is quite peculiar.” She pulled the door open wider and ushered Margaret inside. She did the same with the boys. “Philip, James, come eat.”

Margaret closed the door behind them. “What is it?”

Mama walked to the table and picked up a folded piece of parchment. She turned it over in her hands. “I haven’t yet told your father that this arrived. I wasn’t certain if I should inform you either. It—it has been troubling me all day. I fear it might upset you, though I haven’t the slightest idea of what the contents might be.”

Contents? Was it a letter? Margaret’s confusion only intensified. “Let me see it?”

With a hesitant step, Mama extended the letter to Margaret. She watched her with a look of trepidation.

Margaret’s name was listed as the recipient, but her stomach flopped when she read the name of the sender.

Lord Blackwell

Her face grew hot and her heart pounded. She nearly dropped the letter in a mixture of disgust and shock. What purpose could Lord Blackwell possibly have in writing her a letter? She had never even met the man. He was connected to her family only by his misdeeds toward them. “What the devil is this?” Margaret muttered.

“Oh, hush.” Mama cast her a disapproving look, glancing at the boys. “Philip, James, go visit with George in your room. He has been quite lonely today.”

They obeyed, walking away from the kitchen.

“I’m sorry.” Margaret had been told to take care with her choice of words near her impressionable brothers. “But I—I do not understand.”

“Nor do I.” Mama lowered her voice. “I have been most anxious to see what it is. My curiosity couldn’t be delayed any longer. I should have given it to you this morning when it arrived.”

“I might have been equally wary about opening it.” Margaret swallowed, the crease between her brows deepening. With a heavy breath, she tore the seal and unfolded the letter. Her hands shook. She hated to even be touching something that the despicable earl had also touched. That alone felt like a betrayal to her resolve to hate him.

“What does it say?” Mama asked almost instantly.

“I haven’t read it yet.” Margaret’s heart was beating so fast she could hardly focus.

“Well, read it aloud.”

Margaret couldn’t breathe, so she most certainly couldn’t speak. “One moment,” she choked.

Miss Margaret Lovell,

I do not believe we have been formally introduced, but I suspect you are well aware of who I am. While I presume you are apprised of the details of my past interactions with your father, you may not have been informed of my current situation. I am dying. My physician has told me that I have a

matter of weeks at most to live out the rest of my life. These circumstances have led me to contemplate how I might make amends with your family, help you regain your place in society, and ensure your future wealth and comfort. After much consideration, I have decided upon a solution that will be beneficial to your family and will not be detrimental to my own relations.

Consider this letter a formal proposal of marriage.

Margaret's eyes darted over the words. Heat crept up her cheeks as she continued down the page.

I know you are likely to reject such an offer, but I invite you to consider the generosity of it. I stand to gain nothing but a cleared conscience from this arrangement. I offer you my hand, Miss Lovell, and with it, I offer you a promise.

I will die shortly after our wedding.

As my widow, you will be Lady Blackwell, and you and your family will be permitted to live in comfort at Langdale Abbey in the company of my mother, who will be the rightful owner of the estate, as well as my sisters. Your family will be in connection with the highest ranks of society, even higher than you were previously, and you will be able to enjoy the splendors that come with such a respectable connection.

You may inform me of your decision by calling upon me at Langdale Abbey. My days are few, so your promptness is imperative.

Sincerely,

Lord Blackwell

Margaret threw the letter to the floor, stepping away from it like it was some venomous snake. She covered her mouth, shaking her head. She must have misread it. There was no possible way that Lord Blackwell was...proposing to her? She tried to breathe but the air was caught in her throat. It couldn't be true.

Mama lunged at the letter, swiping it up and holding it in front of her face.

Margaret paced in a circle. She scarcely knew what to think. Though she hadn't eaten dinner yet, her stomach twisted with nausea. She wrung her hands together as she watched Mama's face. When Mama gasped, Margaret suspected it was right after she read the most horrific part of the letter.

Consider this letter a formal proposal of marriage.

When Mama finished reading, rather than throwing the letter to the floor, she clutched it against her chest. Margaret's stomach sank at the flash of hope in Mama's eyes.

"Mama...I—" Margaret choked on her words. She drew a deep breath. Her mind raced so quickly she couldn't grasp onto a single thought before it flew away.

"Do you understand what this means?" Mama's voice was shrill and shaky. "George's leg. The specialist in London. All of us...all of our problems would be behind us." Mama studied Margaret's face for a long moment before she took a handful of the hair at the front of her head, looking down at the floor. She closed her eyes. "This is madness. I could not

ask so much of you. I know how you feel about that man. At any rate, your father would take a great deal of persuasion to agree to this.”

“It would not be his choice,” Margaret whispered so Papa wouldn’t hear her from his room. “It would be mine. I am old enough not to require my father’s permission to marry.”

Margaret’s stomach twisted with dread. Beggars could not be choosers. Her pride would die the day she took upon herself the title of Lady Blackwell, but did she have a choice? George’s future was far more important than her pride. Papa’s health did not allow him to work. They would all soon starve if their lives did not change. Her heart thudded with the possibility of attending balls again. Of going to the modiste and having pretty new dresses made. Of eating all the delicacies she had been raised to love. Even for those selfish reasons, she was already considering the proposal.

“Are you minded to accept it?” Mama’s eyes flew up to hers.

Margaret hesitated. What if the man was plotting some new scheme against their family? What if the proposal was done in mockery? She searched for any reason that he might offer a fake proposal, but could come up with nothing.

But the most difficult thing to believe about it was that he did not benefit from the arrangement at all. A selfish man like Lord Blackwell did not simply do things out of the generosity of his heart. Her eyes narrowed with suspicion.

She let out a long sigh. “I will not accept it immediately. I must take time to consider.”

“He said your promptness is imperative.” Mama pointed at the final line of the letter. “If he dies before you can wed...

then this arrangement will be impossible. The benefits to our reputation could only come if you are his wife. Or rather, his widow, in this case.”

“I know, but I must call upon him first to ensure this proposal is in earnest. I will also verify his condition with the physician and with my own eyes.” Margaret swallowed. Her legs were shaking. She had always imagined what it might be like to confront Lord Blackwell, but she had never guessed it would be in light of his proposal. She had given up all hope of marriage after their fall from society, but now she had a chance to become a countess. George could receive his treatment. He might very well walk and run again. Papa would never have to work another day in his life. She dragged her fingertips down her cheeks as she let out an anxious breath.

Heavens, she would faint if she was not careful. Her mind spun, making the room spin with it. “I will go to Langdale Abbey tomorrow,” Margaret said in a firm voice. “Do not tell Papa. He cannot know until after I am married. He will try to stop me.” Married? Margaret nearly vomited at the prospect of being married to a man as wicked as the Earl of Blackwell. *It is temporary*, she reminded herself. She would only have to endure his company for a very brief time, and even then, she could avoid him as much as she wanted.

Mama nodded her agreement, folding the letter up and handing it to Margaret. She slipped it into her bodice.

Mama put a bowl of stew on one tray. Margaret put one on another. They exchanged a glance and paused to gather their wits before taking the food to Papa and George. Margaret’s hands still shook, rattling the spoon against the bowl.

Her duty had always been to her family, not to her pride or to her heart. And if she married Lord Blackwell, her duty

would be to ensure he knew how she felt about him and his greed.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4



Margaret had passed Langdale Abbey dozens of times, each from a distance, and each with a great deal of disdain. The estate was within two miles of home, so she had decided to walk there, if only to exert herself so she could forget her nervousness for a moment.

She climbed the final hill that led to the vast front lawn of Langdale Abbey. She had never imagined herself straying from the path and making her way to the front doors, yet here she stood.

She drew a deep breath, glancing at her feet. Her worn boots poked out from beneath the dirty hem of her dress. Other ladies might have been concerned with not appearing presentable in front of an earl, but Margaret was more concerned with not having enough dirt on her boots that she could track onto Lord Blackwell's pristine floors. Let him think her indecorous. She searched for a puddle of mud to step in, but found nothing.

The perfectly symmetrical house loomed before her with its weathered stone, dozens of windows, and broad, intimidating front doors with a horseshoe staircase surrounding them. Two wings stretched out to either side,

encircling Margaret like two arms presenting an unwelcome embrace.

In contrast with the daunting appearance of the house, the gardens surrounding it were bright and full, adding color to an otherwise intimidating structure. It was strange to think that beyond the beauty of the land and exterior of the house, its owner, not even thirty years of age, lay dying in his bed.

Margaret gulped, twisting her hands in front of her. Why hadn't she moved? Her legs seemed to have taken root on the path, unwilling to take the first step toward the house. Her mind rattled with reasons to turn back. Perhaps the letter had been a joke. It could have been forged by someone who knew how much she despised him. Would Matthew Northcott do such a thing? The immediate answer that came to mind was no, he would never. She exhaled slowly through her lips. She was being ridiculous.

Her heart raced as she forced her legs to move. Her forward motion was abrupt, but she kept the momentum. *Be confident*, she ordered herself. She couldn't allow him to sense her hesitancy or fear. Not even her hatred. Not yet, anyway. She needed to appear emotionless and tactical. This was a business meeting, after all. It would determine her family's future.

As large as the house had appeared from afar, it was even more so up close. She held back a gasp of awe as a trio of dark birds took flight from the rooftop. It struck her that this house could soon be hers. Well, not hers to keep, but hers to live out her days in. She could take a daily walk in the gardens or a ride through any part of the vast property. She could even host balls and parties. The very ground she walked on now could be filled with the coaches and horses of her guests as they

walked toward the horseshoe staircase by the glowing light in the windows, dressed in their finest clothing and prepared to eat the finest of meals. Her stomach grumbled at the thought, and it expelled just a bit of her nervousness.

She couldn't deny that Lord Blackwell's offer was very generous. Perhaps being so close to death had changed him for the better. She stopped herself, shocked that any positive thoughts concerning that man had dared enter her head. It was only because of the beauty of his estate. Beauty on the outside of anything did not always mean beauty existed on the inside.

She reached the doors and raised the knocker, striking it three times. Her heart leaped to her throat when she heard the door unlatch. She hadn't gone through the formalities of leaving a calling card, but she hoped the urgency of the situation would be cause to forgo it.

Keeping her hands clasped together, she rocked on her heels until the door was tugged open at the hands of the tall, thin butler.

"Good day," she said, her voice hoarse. She cleared her throat. "My name is Margaret Lovell. I—I have come to..." she hadn't properly rehearsed her words.

The butler stopped her, ushering her forward with the flick of one hand. "The master is expecting you."

She clamped her lips shut, stepping inside the vestibule. Her mind spun with the possibility of welcoming her own guests inside through those doors. She removed her bonnet, smoothing back the straight, unruly strands around her face. As she had expected, the floors were pristine. Her ragged boots didn't suit the polished marble. She turned her attention to the ceiling, taking in the paintings and tapestries on the walls. One particular painting caught her attention.

A tall, handsome man with a stern brow rested his hand on the shoulder of a young boy. The boy's face was soft, curious, with a sweet disposition much like that of her brothers. His hair was blond, eyes a golden brown.

She studied the painting, momentarily distracted.

The butler took her bonnet and instructed her to follow a footman to Lord Blackwell's bedchamber. Her stomach writhed with discomfort at the thought of holding their meeting in his bedchamber rather than the drawing room, but all it could mean was that he was not well enough to leave his bed.

The grand staircase seemed to go on forever, and when she finally reached the top, her legs burned. She caught her breath. It had been too long since she had climbed so many stairs.

The footman, however, was unaffected by the climb. He directed her down the corridor, stopping at the second room. He knocked, leaning close enough to the door for the white curls of his wig to touch the wood. Margaret thought she heard a muffled reply, but from where she stood, she couldn't be certain. The footman took it as confirmation, opening the door and stepping inside.

Margaret stood a pace back. Her throat was dry, her fingernails digging into her palms.

"Miss Margaret Lovell." The footman presented her in a curt voice, stepping aside so Margaret could enter.

It took all her concentration, but she kept her shoulders and spine straight, chin high. She had been raised a lady, after all, and had been preparing her entire life for a debut in London with which she might find a husband. This felt like another

kind of debut. A more important one. She didn't have to prove that she was desirable.

She had to prove that she was not to be trifled with.

Lord Blackwell likely did not remember her. She had only seen him briefly during a meeting he had with her father at their home. She needed Lord Blackwell's first impression of her to leave a mark. She couldn't have him thinking she was desperate or submissive, nor weak or shy. Perhaps all her training hadn't been for a debut in London, but for this very moment.

Before she could lose her nerve, she walked forward. Once she had traveled a few paces into the room, she looked up. The bed, ornate canopy drawn, sat in the corner of the room. Tucked within the maroon blankets and satin pillows, was Lord Blackwell.

A jolt of surprise made her legs unsteady. She had expected him to look unwell, but he looked...well...rather wild.

His head and shoulders were visible above the blankets. The fabric of his shirt stuck to his skin with sweat. His hair was a dark blond, mussed and long, hanging almost to his shoulders. His facial hair was overgrown and unkempt, his prominent cheekbones devoid of color. His eyes, dark and weary, were locked on Margaret as she made her way cautiously to his bedside. How close should she stand? She opted to keep her distance, planting her feet two yards from the edge of his bed.

Her jaw tightened when she caught sight of his lips—there was a slight smile on them. A smirk. Was he surprised that she had come? Or was he amused by her appearance? Surely he had noticed the dirt on her hem and the tears in her sleeves,

but anything she lacked in fine clothing was entirely his fault. Her cheeks flamed with anger and he hadn't even spoken a word.

She gave a curtsy, slowly raising her gaze back to him.

The smirk on his lips only intensified. "You must be my bride." He paused. "Or rather, my *blushing bride*. I didn't know I could have such an effect on women even in my current state." His voice was less labored than she had expected, deep and clear and dripping with amusement. To her dismay, he started to laugh. It quickly turned into a cough instead. He rolled to one side with a groan. When the coughing subsided, he sat up straighter, even more attentive than before.

"I am not blushing, and I am not yet your bride," Margaret said. She was proud of how firm her voice sounded.

He tipped his head to one side. "Your cheeks are indeed red. I do not have much to boast of at the moment, but I still have my sight."

Margaret couldn't help but defend herself. "They flush when I'm angry." She regretted the words the instant they escaped her. Why was she telling him she was angry? She clamped her lips shut.

His eyebrows rose. "Were you angry upon receiving my proposal? Have you come to reject it?" His gaze swept lazily over the room, as if he had finished his appraisal of her and was now more content to look at something else. "Anything you might have to be angry with me about, Miss Lovell, can be now put to rest. I have given you a generous offer."

She grunted in protest before thinking better of it. "Your offer was generous, indeed, but surely you must realize that it doesn't change the suffering you have caused my family for

the last four years.” Every intention she had of staying silent and presenting herself as thankful for his offer disappeared. She scowled at him. The way he was wrapped up in his maroon blankets and gold satin pillows made him look like a swaddled infant. But with a much more masculine face.

His features lifted in surprise, but the smirk remained on his lips. “You are rather headstrong for a woman who has so much to lose. I could withdraw my offer right now if I wished to.”

“And die a dishonorable man? Is that not what you were trying to avoid?” Margaret swallowed hard, hoping he didn’t notice the movement in her throat.

He studied her for a long moment. “If you are right, and my generosity will not repair the past, then I will die a dishonorable man either way. I have nothing to lose. Well, besides my life.” He scoffed at his own joke, eyelids growing heavy. “But in truth, that is still not much to lose.”

Margaret looked down at the floor, momentarily forgetting that she was supposed to act confident. It truly was a dreadful situation. No matter who it was, she hated to see such a young person speaking lightly about his death. He had come to terms with it, that much was certain. It almost seemed as though he...looked forward to it.

“Anything I have done to your family,” he continued, “will be more than repaid. In fact, I will die with you and your family in my debt.” He gave a satisfied smile before coughing into his blankets. “By dying, I will be doing you a service.”

Her cheeks flamed hotter. “You forget that I have yet to accept your proposal.”

“I can presume from the way you’re looking at me right now, that my death will be reason for you to rejoice whether you are married to me or not.” The lightness in his tone only unsettled her further.

He was obviously trying to make her uncomfortable, so she would not let him see that it was working. He must have been accustomed to women swooning over him. Beneath all his overgrown hair, she could tell he had a handsome face. That, combined with his wealth, would have made him quite attractive in the eyes of any eligible young lady. At least those who didn’t know his true character.

“I suppose you are right,” Margaret said in an offhand voice. “Since you seem so eager to point out the obvious, yes, I do find you most disagreeable, and yes, I have despised you since the day you destroyed the happiness and comfort of my family.” She took a step closer. “Now that we have acknowledged that, allow me to say what I came here to say. Because of my devotion to my family, and for that reason alone, I will accept your proposal.” The deep breath that followed her words lifted her shoulders. She lowered them dramatically and raised her chin. “But do not expect me to thank you for it.”

He chuckled, watching her from his bed as if she were some character in a satire. “Brava, Miss Lovell. You have done what any sane woman would do. I congratulate you. But not even a word of gratitude?”

She wished she could slap the grin off his face. “I didn’t hear a word of apology from *you*. Perhaps if you offer one, then I will be more likely to do the same. But I have a suspicion that you are too proud to apologize.”

In a fleeting moment, the smile of his face flickered to a look of irritation. “I wondered if you would be foolish enough to decline my proposal for the sake of *your* pride.”

“I fear I don’t have any left.” Every word from the man’s mouth grated on her. She no longer felt it necessary to hide her dislike. “Marrying you will take the last of my dignity.”

“Be sure to save a little of your pride to lose when we actually marry. Besides that, save a little of your dignity for when you become Lady Blackwell. For what is a noble without their dignity?”

Margaret shrugged. “You.”

He reared back an inch.

Drat it all, she needed to be careful. Lord Blackwell’s offer was not permanent. She was being far too outspoken. George was at home with his broken bones, and she was here nearly throwing away her opportunity to help him. Her cheeks flushed again.

Before Lord Blackwell could reply, the door opened, hinges creaking.

Margaret turned, eager for a distraction. Her pulse pounded in her ears, and she willed her cheeks to cool. A woman stood in the doorway. Her golden curls were streaked in grey, and her kind brown eyes settled on Margaret. She wore a white morning dress, the lace details of which were elaborate. Given the woman’s age, Margaret could only assume it was Lord Blackwell’s mother.

The current Lady Blackwell.

Unfurling her fists, Margaret gave a curtsy.

“Mother, I asked you to stay in the corridor,” Lord Blackwell said in an exasperated voice.

“Did you think I would miss the opportunity to meet my future daughter-in-law?” Lady Blackwell cast a warm smile in Margaret’s direction before stepping forward. “Assuming you have accepted his proposal, of course.”

Margaret nodded, and she banished the lingering scowl from her brow. She tried her best to replace it with a smile. “I have.”

Lady Blackwell leaned closer with a whisper. “Please accept my apology on my son’s behalf. He can be quite... difficult at times.”

“What are you whispering about?” Lord Blackwell snapped.

“About how vexing you are,” Lady Blackwell said without hesitation. She threw one more smile at Margaret before stepping past her to walk to her son’s bedside.

Margaret liked the woman immensely already. How had such an agreeable woman produced such a dreadful son?

“The physician is here.” Lady Blackwell placed the back of her hand to his forehead. “How are you feeling today?”

“As unwell as ever.” He smiled and shifted uncomfortably. When his eyes met Margaret’s, she looked away. Seeing Lady Blackwell dote upon him was strange to say the least. Didn’t she realize how hateful he was? If she had heard how he had been teasing and taunting Margaret just moments before, she might have been slapping his cheek rather than stroking it affectionately as she was now.

“I will handle the upcoming wedding arrangements with Miss Lovell while the physician tends to you.” Lady

Blackwell walked away from the edge of his bed, returning to Margaret's side. "Come with me." She waved Margaret toward the door.

Margaret stole one more glance at Lord Blackwell as they left the room, but this time, he wasn't smirking. He was watching her with an unmistakable scowl.

Heavens, he looked like a wild man with his overgrown hair. The scowl only made his appearance more unpleasant. Not only that, but Margaret's neck still flushed hot with vexation. His personality was just as unpleasant as she would have assumed.

The door closed, blocking him from view. The corridor was empty besides a footman and the physician who had just made his way up the long staircase. The man huffed a heavy breath, wiping at his brow. "I have yet to grow accustomed to those stairs." He was short with graying hair and spectacles. The buttons of his waistcoat stretched over his belly.

"Doctor Larsen," Lady Blackwell said, gesturing at the man. She hesitated for a moment as she looked at Margaret, perhaps wondering whether to introduce her to the physician as her son's betrothed, or as an acquaintance. The reasons for the marriage would have to be kept quiet, or fabricated into a story that would ensure society believed any feud between their families had been mended. "Allow me to introduce Miss Margaret Lovell," Lady Blackwell paused for a moment before adding, "my future daughter-in-law."

The physician's eyes rounded behind his spectacles. "She—she is to marry...the earl?" His voice was raspy as he choked on the question.

"Yes, as soon as possible." Lady Blackwell gave a sweet smile, chin held high and regal, unruffled by the physician's

shock.

His throat bobbed with swallow. “Does she...does she know?” his voice fell to a whisper, as if Margaret wouldn’t still overhear.

Margaret took it as her opportunity to verify Lord Blackwell’s condition, stepping forward. “I am aware of his current state, though I did wish to ask you how long you expect he will endure?” She didn’t wish to appear insensitive, especially not with his mother standing beside her, but the matter was quite important.

“A matter of days, I’m afraid. A fortnight at the very most.” The wrinkles on his forehead deepened. “I’m afraid a wedding might not be possible...or advisable.” His eyes flickered to Lady Blackwell.

The woman’s eyes were heavy, her lips pinched together, and Margaret regretted reminding her of what little time her son had left. “It is my son’s dying wish to wed Miss Lovell, so that is what shall happen. You may go see him now.” She gestured at the door.

As soon as Doctor Larsen was out of sight, Lady Blackwell turned to face Margaret. “You must be quite overwhelmed.”

Margaret studied the woman’s kind features, surprised to see a hint of resemblance between her and her son. In the features, that was, not the kindness part. “Is it so obvious?” Margaret let out the tense breath she had been holding. “I daresay you are even more overwhelmed that I am. I must offer my sincere condolences. It must be quite difficult to see your son in such a condition.”

Lady Blackwell gave a grim nod, and her eyes shone with suppressed tears. “Yes.” She lowered her voice. “What makes it most difficult is knowing that he is disappointed with his life. Not only that it is being cut short—but with the way he lived it. I am so very sorry for the suffering he caused your family. I insisted that he extend this proposal to you to make amends. I hope it will be a good first step.”

Understanding washed over Margaret’s shoulders. So it hadn’t even been Lord Blackwell’s plan. Of course not. How could he have thought of such a selfless thing on his own? It had all been his mother’s doing. Knowing that it wasn’t entirely the earl’s offer made it much easier to accept.

Margaret smiled. “That was very generous of you. I thank you most sincerely on behalf of my entire family.”

Lady Blackwell nodded. “Peter *did* truly wish to repair his misdeeds toward you. I cannot take so much credit.” She was silent for a long moment, looking down at her hands. “I do hope...you can come to forgive him.”

“Of course.” She couldn’t tell Lady Blackwell that she had no plans to forgive him.

Lady Blackwell wiped at a stray tear on her cheek, drawing a deep breath. “In the event that we are granted our special license in the next few days, let us plan to have the wedding this Saturday, here at Langdale Abbey. I will be sure to keep you informed of the plans.”

Margaret’s stomach heaved. In a matter of days, she would become Lady Blackwell. Her husband would be the man she hated most in the world. But at the end of it all, she was promised to be a wealthy widow for the rest of her days.

Surely it would all be worth it.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5



“**Y**ou might have at least had your valet shave your beard.” Rebecca, the youngest of the Trafford sisters, wrinkled her nose in dismay as she hovered at Peter’s bedside. “Your mustache is growing over your lip like some sort of...caterpillar. And soon enough, your hair will be as long as mine. Did you even comb it?” Rebecca’s voice was a few notes higher than usual. Peter’s appearance gave her far more anxiety than it gave him. He had always wondered how he might look with a beard and long hair, so he thought it fitting to grow it out at the end of his days when he no longer had to make public appearances.

Under different circumstances, his own wedding would have been reason enough to look his best. But he quite liked the idea of Miss Lovell being just as dismayed as Rebecca. With all that Miss Lovell was gaining through this marriage, she couldn’t possibly complain about the state of her husband’s facial hair, could she?

He smiled to himself at the memory of Miss Lovell standing in his room a few days before. She really did hate him. That much had been obvious. He had never seen anything quite like the shade of red on her cheeks and her tightly fisted hands. She certainly didn’t hide what she felt. Nor did she bother to hold her tongue. He had been shocked by her

willingness to insult him when her future was in his hands, but he had also been reluctantly impressed by her pluck. He couldn't very well marry a boring, predictable woman.

He sat up in his bed, breathing heavily with the effort. He rubbed a circle in his chest, trying to rid himself of the burning sensation in his lungs. He had tried to eat that morning, but his appetite had been dwindling for weeks.

"Heavens Rebecca, give him a bit of space to breathe." Mother strode into the room, dressed in her finest as usual. Her lavender gown matched the bouquet of flowers that had been placed on the table beside his bed. They were for Miss Lovell.

"Rachel and Cornelius have just arrived," Mother said, bustling around the room with no clear objective. She fluttered her hands, but touched nothing. "Is everything in order? The Lovells will be here any minute."

A surprising jolt of nervousness struck Peter's stomach. Facing Miss Lovell had been one thing, but facing her father was quite another. Years ago, he wouldn't have blinked an eye at the prospect, but now he wanted to sink into his pillows with both eyes shut. For a man who had rarely felt shame over anything, it was shocking how he now seemed to be drowning in it.

He caught his breath, struggling to keep a consistent rhythm. He ordered his lungs to absorb the air he breathed, but they were rigid.

In the doorway, his sister Rachel stood, hand looped through her husband's arm. Her dark hair was swept atop her head, wide dark eyes fixed on him. Her mouth hung open.

He hadn't seen Rachel or Cornelius for several months. He had been surprised to hear that they were coming to the

wedding at all. Rachel had been forthright about her disapproval of Peter's behavior over the years, and once she had married, she hadn't bothered to return to Langdale Abbey, not even when she learned of his illness. A wedding apparently held more weight than the simple matter of bidding farewell to her dying brother.

He smirked when he met her gaze. "You may stop staring. I am well aware of how handsome I look." Peter stroked a finger over his beard for good measure. He knew it wasn't only the beard that shocked her, but he would rather blame her shock on that than his thinness and pallor. "Do not tell me to shave it. Rebecca has already tried."

Rachel walked into the room, sharing a glance with her husband. Peter had only exchanged a few words with the man when they had discussed Rachel's dowry. Cornelius was a quiet man, rather serious, with pale hair that curled against his forehead. As he looked at Peter, his expression was even more grim than usual.

Rachel let out a slow breath through her lips. "Am I to assume that you are too stubborn even to abandon your will on a day like today?"

"Today?" He feigned confusion. "Ah, my wedding day? In this particular instance, I don't think it ought to be called a special occasion."

Rachel scoffed. "How could it not be? I seriously doubted you would ever marry."

"Did you think no woman would ever have me?"

"I thought *you* preferred to have many women." Rachel crossed her arms, casting her gaze upward.

Peter laughed under his breath, but his stomach sank further. Was this how his family would remember him after he was gone? Would they remember him only for his mistakes and poor choices? Even knowing he was soon to die, his own sister had little sympathy for him. His behavior had impacted her more than he realized. After their father's death, Peter had been reckless in his attempts to save them from financial ruin. He had even pressured Rachel to marry Cornelius when she had obviously not been in love with him. Perhaps she had only married in order to escape living in the same household as Peter.

He swallowed, crossing his own arms in front of him. "Whether you can believe it or not, Miss Lovell has chosen to have me." He shrugged one shoulder. Mother had already informed the family of the purpose behind the marriage. It was amusing to pretend that Miss Lovell had chosen him and not simply his money and status.

And that she wasn't eagerly awaiting his death.

Peter lifted his chin with a smirk. "And regardless of what you all think, Miss Lovell happens to like men with beards."

"I don't recall saying that." A defensive female voice came from the doorway. Peter's eyes darted in that direction. Miss Lovell stood with her chin high, pale brows drawn together. Her corn silk hair had been straight and falling out of its arrangement during her last visit, but today, it was piled elegantly atop her head with curls framing her forehead. Even from across the room, the flush of her cheeks was evident. She wore a simple white gown, one that was fitted perfectly to her figure. He couldn't manage to look away as she walked into the room with confidence in her stride.

If he hadn't been the cause of her fall from society, then she would have surely made a good match with some gentleman. He might have asked her to dance in a ballroom himself.

"You didn't have to say it," Peter said, addressing her denial that she liked beards. "I could see it in your eyes."

Miss Lovell raised both eyebrows, lips clamped together. It was obvious that she was holding her tongue. If she couldn't say what she really wished to say in front of his entire family, then it could only have been an insult.

He locked eyes with her, unrelenting in his stare, daring her to speak her mind—to declare before his mother and sisters that she despised his beard as much as they did.

Her neck was flushing with the effort, but she managed to keep quiet. It was quite a shame, really. Peter grinned to himself as she broke their eye contact first, turning to greet his mother.

"You look beautiful." Mother led Miss Lovell around the room by the arm, introducing her to Rebecca, then Sally, who had been sitting in the corner of the room with a book, then Rachel and Cornelius.

With Mother otherwise occupied, Peter's stomach twisted as Mrs. Lovell walked into the room to stand beside her daughter. He had met her many times before when doing business with her husband. She didn't look quite the same as she once did. She had been like his mother, standing tall and regal, but now, she appeared somewhat timid as she hovered near the doorway. Was Mr. Lovell coming? There was no one else in the hall behind her.

Mrs. Lovell twisted one strand of her hair, eyes darting around the room until they settled on him. He lowered his head in a bow. “Mrs. Lovell.” His heart pounded with guilt as she took a few steps farther into the room. He pushed the feeling away, uncomfortable with the shame that encircled him. “Thank you for coming with your daughter today. I know my offer cannot repair the past, but I hope it will provide your family with a better future.” He couldn’t seem to form his words into a direct apology. It didn’t feel like enough. He didn’t expect Mrs. Lovell to reply, so he quickly asked another question. “Will your husband be coming today?”

She watched Peter with wary eyes, like a mouse traipsing around a sleeping cat. “I’m afraid not. He is unwell.”

“I am sorry to hear that.” Peter swallowed, his throat raw.

Thankfully, Mother had finished her introductions with Miss Lovell. She hurried to Mrs. Lovell’s side.

His bride-to-be remained near Rachel. Over the past several months, Peter had realized that when one was ill in bed, others seemed to forget they could still hear. Rachel spoke about him as if he was not even there, just as his mother and the physician had on many occasions.

“Peter will make the very best sort of husband, I assure you. He will keep to his room, he will not bother you for attention, and you will soon benefit from all the positive aspects of being married without having a husband at all.”

Peter’s jaw tightened and he closed his eyes. When would this blasted wedding begin? He already wanted it to be over and behind him.

“I am very sorry.” Miss Lovell’s voice was softer than Rachel’s, and Peter had to strain his ears to hear it. “The

prospect of losing your brother at such a young age must be troubling for your entire family.”

“It is.” Rachel paused for a long moment. “Especially for mother. She has always only seen the good in him. Perhaps because that’s all she has ever wanted to see. It is better for her health to see him this way, doing something good for your family before his death.” Rachel lowered her voice, and Peter was barely able to decipher the words. “In truth, I wasn’t going to come today. But when I learned the purpose behind this wedding, I simply had to be witness to it. It might be the only good thing Peter has ever done with his life.”

Peter kept his eyes closed, a trickle of sweat trailing down his temple. His chest ached. If he had known his life would be so short, he might have lived much differently. Regret choked him, and it took all his concentration to simply inhale. His first instinct was to be defensive, to open his eyes and declare that he had overheard Rachel’s words, but any defiant flame inside him had been snuffed out. He was nothing but a burned wick with a trail of smoke. Useless. Worthless. Dull and dim. He had spent the last several years of his life trampling on others. All he could do now was sit still and quiet and allow himself to be trampled on. He deserved nothing better.

He opened his eyes. Miss Lovell was watching him, blue eyes inquisitive. She looked away instantly, clasping her hands together in front of her.

Rebecca walked sideways, inching her way closer to Peter’s bedside. Her tight curls bounced with the motion. “I quite like her. But did you really think I needed yet another sister?” She raised one delicate eyebrow, glancing first at Sally, then at Rachel. “There shall be far too many females in this house, even once Rachel returns home.”

“Not to worry,” Peter said. “If I remember correctly, Miss Lovell has three young brothers. They shall nearly outnumber the girls.”

Rebecca’s eyes widened. “Three?”

“There shall also be Miss Lovell’s father.”

Rebecca’s cheeks paled. “Is he...like Papa?”

“No.” Peter exhaled through flared nostrils. “Not at all.”

Her shoulders relaxed.

From what Peter remembered, Mr. Lovell was a kind, trusting man. And yet, he had still betrayed him. And now he too was unwell? Was that why Miss Lovell had so easily accepted his proposal? If her father’s health was too poor for him to come to the wedding, then he must have also been unable to work.

A man walked through the door and was greeted by Peter’s mother. It wasn’t Mr. Lovell. It was the clergyman.

Peter’s entire body trembled with effort as he sat up completely, hoping to indicate that he was prepared to begin the wedding. The sooner they began, the sooner it would end and he could be left alone.

“Shall we begin?” Mother asked, calling the attention of everyone in the room. She cast a look at Miss Lovell, who gave a hesitant nod.

The clergyman bustled forward, arranging an array of papers on the writing desk. With the help of Cornelius, he lifted the desk and moved it closer to Peter’s bed. He gestured for Miss Lovell to walk forward.

When she reached him, he directed her to stand across from Peter.

The clergyman then moved until he faced them both, with the table between them. He placed the Book of Common Prayer on the desk, flipping it open to his desired page.

Miss Lovell twisted a loose thread on her glove, drawing her lip into her mouth and biting it nervously. She seemed intent to look at anything but him.

The clergyman cleared his throat and began, “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...”

Peter watched the signs of unrest on Miss Lovell’s face until she finally met his gaze. It was brief, however, and soon she was looking down at her gloves again. He hardly heard a single word the clergyman said, until he angled himself toward Peter.

“Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?”

“I will.” Peter’s throat was dry, but he tried to swallow.

The clergyman turned, repeating similar words to Miss Lovell. She drew a deep breath, and it shook on the way out. “I will.”

Peter’s chest burned as he struggled to draw his own breath. He had never imagined himself in the position of marrying, but here he was, right in the middle of it.

The room was still, his heart hammering a shallow rhythm as the clergyman brought Miss Lovell’s hand to Peter’s. As instructed, Peter took her hand in his. Her fingers were long

and dainty, with clean, rounded nails. Her skin was soft, and he held her fingers softly, with as much care as he could manage. Miss Lovell had been hurt enough by him—he didn't even want to hold her hand too firmly.

Distracted as he was, he didn't notice at first as the clergyman pointed at the section of the page for Peter to read.

“Here,” the clergyman asserted.

“Sorry.” Peter's voice was hoarse as he drew a painful breath and read. “I, Peter, take thee Margaret, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish...” he met her gaze, half his mouth lifting in a weak smile, “till death us do part.”

Her eyes flashed with a hint of discomfort before she looked away again.

He returned his attention to the book, finishing his paragraph before the clergyman instructed Miss Lovell to read her own section.

Her voice was quiet and fast as she repeated similar words.

“Very well, now...” The clergyman loosed their hands. “The ring.”

Peter hadn't thought of the ring, but his mother had. She stepped forward and handed Peter a simple silver band. He slipped the ring onto the fourth finger of Miss Lovell's left hand. He kept her hand in his, holding the ring against her finger. She looked down, her eyes fixed on their hands. Was she disgusted to be touching him?

“Read here,” the clergyman instructed.

Peter tore his gaze from Miss Lovell's face, returning his attention to the book. "With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow." Endowing Miss Lovell with all his worldly goods was the purpose of this entire marriage, but there had been far more to the ceremony than just that. In the vows, he had made far too many promises than he was comfortable with.

The rest of the ceremony was conducted quickly. The rest of the clergyman's words were muffled in Peter's ears, until they were pronounced man and wife.

He heard that part perfectly.

As expected, there were no congratulations offered, or any manner of cheering or applause. Miss Lovell walked quietly away from him, back to her mother's side. He watched her go, his stomach twisting. Could she not even bear to be beside him for a few moments longer? He shut out all emotions, absentmindedly knocking against his chest once with his fist.

"Well then," Mother's voice was cheerful—enough so that he suspected it was rather fake. "Let us leave Peter to rest for a few hours. Perhaps he will be feeling well enough to celebrate later." She addressed Margaret and Mrs. Lovell. "I will give you a tour of the house."

Without a glance back, Margaret and her mother left the room, followed by Rebecca, Sally, Rachel, and Cornelius. None of them glanced back at him. None except Mother, who threw him a gentle smile before closing the door.

Peter leaned his head back, soaking in the silence. The clergyman's words echoed in his ears.

Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only

unto her, so long as ye both shall live?

How long would it be? Days? Weeks? Whatever it was, he could not take his vow lightly.

He never broke his promises. Not anymore.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6



FIFTEEN YEARS BEFORE

“In business, one must be selfish. That is the simple fact of the matter.” Papa sat back in the chair in his study. He opened his snuff box, taking a pinch between two fingers before raising it to his nostril. He sniffed through his left nostril, then his right. “The moment you begin worrying about the outcome for the other parties involved, you have set yourself up to lose. There is nothing wrong with being ruthless, and the sooner you learn that, the better. Life is not fair, so why should we be?” He watched Peter through half-lidded eyes. “Do you understand?”

Peter nodded, twisting his fingers together.

“You are never too young to begin learning such things,” Papa continued. “I was near your age when my father taught me the same lessons. I do believe in teaching by example, so I will inform you of my current business schemes with Mr. Jones and Mr. Fildue. I have convinced them to invest in a business in India which is, at present, nonexistent. So long as they remain ignorant to that matter, I can secure a great deal of their money before informing them that their ‘investments’

failed to produce a return.” He took a drink of brandy from his glass. “They shall never know that the entire thing was fabricated. I will pretend to have suffered a great loss myself.”

Peter kept his shoulders squared as Papa had always taught him to do in his presence. “That is quite clever, Papa,” Peter said in a quiet voice. Complimenting Papa usually made him less likely to become angry. Peter watched the glass in Papa’s hand, amber liquid swirling.

“They shall be none the wiser,” Papa continued. “When they come to dinner this evening, you must promise that you will not divulge any detail of our discussion here today. I am trusting you with this information so you may learn. One day you will take my place, and you must know the proper way to navigate business procedures such as these. One can never have too much money, no matter where or how it was obtained. But you must be cautious. These practices are not to be taken lightly. At times my schemes are...not entirely lawful.” His dark eyes narrowed. “Do you promise to keep this conversation a secret?”

Peter nodded. “Yes, Papa.”

“Say it.”

Peter swallowed. “I promise.”

“Very good.” He looked down at the papers on his desk before raising his eyes dismissively. “You may go.”

Peter gave a brisk nod before walking backward toward the door and stepping out into the cold corridor. He looked down at his shaking hands before tucking them behind his back. Mama was standing outside the drawing room, bent over holding Rebecca’s small hand as she walked beside her, dragging a blanket across the marble floor.

He stared at Rebecca, a surge of envy suddenly enveloping his heart. If he were still so small, he would not yet have any responsibilities. He would not be entrusted with such destructive secrets. Perhaps he shouldn't have been trusted yet at the age of twelve.

"Peter?" Mama's face lit up with a smile. It quickly fell. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Mother." Peter turned on his heel and walked down the corridor. Mama likely didn't even know the secrets of Papa's business schemes. He didn't trust himself to speak to her without revealing any part of it.

Time passed slowly before dinner, and when Peter met his family in the drawing room to meet their guests, he stared at Mr. Jones and Mr. Fildue. Their wives stood beside them, and Mama stood beside Papa. Peter was introduced to them all, one by one. They were very kind.

His eyes slid to Papa, who was smiling and laughing as he conversed with them. With the way he was acting, they would certainly be surprised to know that he planned to steal their money. Peter swallowed, crossing his arms in front of him.

"Our financial difficulties have only worsened due to the bills our daughter Emmeline has run up in London," the wife of Mr. Fildue said. "We might not be able to afford a season for our next eldest daughter. Besides that, our son has been gambling again."

"That is a disagreeable habit, indeed," Papa said with a shake of his head.

Peter frowned. Papa gambled every week.

A dreadful feeling sank into the pit of Peter's stomach. He didn't quite understand why, but he couldn't rid himself of it.

He looked down at the floor, listening to Mrs. Fildue continue on about all the things they could not afford. Yet Papa only wanted their money so he could afford to continue to gamble.

Without properly excusing himself, Peter slipped into the corridor, staring down at his feet the entire way. He thought he might have escaped unnoticed, but Mama missed nothing.

A few seconds later, she was standing behind him. She took his arm in her gentle hand, forcing him to face her. "What is the matter, Peter? Where are you going?"

That ill feeling continued to swirl in his stomach. "I don't want to speak with Mr. Jones and Mr. Fildue." He drew a shallow breath. "I might accidentally tell them something I should not."

Mama's brow furrowed. "I don't know what you mean."

The truth was bursting out of him, scratching its way up his throat. "Papa is going to steal their money," he blurted. "He is lying to them about a business investment. He told me not to tell them but I am not good at keeping secrets." He clamped his mouth closed. His shoulders slouched with relief.

Mama did not look as surprised as he expected. Instead, she looked concerned. "He will never stop, will he?" A flash of fear crossed her face. "Go back to your room." She pressed a quick kiss to his forehead.

Peter's chest tightened with panic. "Don't tell Papa."

"I won't. I must try to persuade him to give their money back to them, but I will tell him that I discovered such information by looking through his study...not from anything you told me." She squared her shoulders, lifting her chin. "Go on."

Peter hesitated before hurrying back to his room. He closed the door and locked it before climbing onto his bed. He pulled his knees to his chest, resting his chin atop them. Nervousness gripped his stomach and all the muscles in his body.

But somehow he managed to fall asleep.

He awoke to the sound of heavy footfalls in the corridor. He rubbed his eyes, squinting in the darkness. Then came Papa's bellowing voice. "Peter!"

The sound sent a chill over him. He sat up and scrambled to his feet.

The door jostled in the frame but didn't open because of the lock. "Open this door at once!" Peter could envision Papa's face, red and fuming.

He kicked at the door from the other side, and then the lock broke.

Papa strode inside, his towering body filling the doorframe. His eyes flashed dangerously. "Did you tell your mother about our conversation?"

Peter hesitated, heart racing. If Papa was this angry, what might he do to Mama if he believed that she had been searching through his study? He didn't want Papa to hurt her. She could not take the blame for him if it meant Papa would turn around with his blazing eyes and find her instead.

He felt himself shrinking. His voice came out weak and quiet. "Yes."

Papa lunged toward him, arm outstretched, and Peter could already feel the pain that was coming.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7



Margaret's boots clicked against the wooden floor in the vestibule as she made her way to the front doors. She gazed up at the paper mache ceiling with its intricate design. Her stomach fluttered with awe as the realization came over her.

This was her home now.

She was Lady Blackwell.

The woman in front of her was now the dowager countess, though she would still be referred to as Lady Blackwell. Margaret could hardly believe she shared that title now. She must have been dreaming; her mind must have been concocting all of it. Whether it was a dream or a nightmare, she had yet to decide.

The soft pink wallpaper, fine paintings, vibrant Persian rug, and chandelier were making her think it was a dream. The man who she had just tied herself to was making her think the opposite. She swallowed past her dry throat, choosing to forget him for the time being. There was too much beauty to be seen at Langdale Abbey. She refused to allow it to be soiled by that man.

Her husband.

She gulped, circling around the table at the center of the room. A large bouquet of flowers was displayed in a vase atop it, with the chandelier hanging directly above.

“This room certainly makes an impression,” Margaret said, casting a smile in Lady Blackwell’s direction. “Your guests must always be quite impressed.” Margaret hadn’t taken time to admire the room when she had first come to Langdale Abbey, but now she saw it in an entirely different light. Yes, it belonged to Lord Blackwell, but that didn’t mean she had to hate it.

“You are very kind, Margaret.” Lady Blackwell paused. “Do you care if I address you so informally?”

“Not at all.” Margaret studied the woman’s kind eyes. Eyes like hers did not see wickedness in people, at least not at first. Margaret hardly knew Lady Blackwell, but she seemed the sort of person to be a constant optimist. Perhaps that was why she still held her son in high regard. Margaret hadn’t been able to understand why. He was ridiculous. His comments about his beard had tied her insides in a knot the moment she had entered his room that day.

A knot that was most vexing to untangle.

He seemed to delight in making her angry. Perhaps he couldn’t help it.

All he had to do was breathe too loudly and her skin had reason to prickle with distaste. She stopped her thoughts. She wasn’t meant to be thinking of him during the tour. She was meant to be admiring the lovely furnishings.

She walked past a set of red velvet settees on her way to the front doors. Lady Blackwell opened them, leading Margaret and Mama out onto the landing of the horseshoe

staircase outside. The golden stone shone brightly in the afternoon sun, and Margaret had to squint to look out across the expansive front lawn.

“What has been your favorite part of the house, Margaret?” Lady Blackwell asked as they walked down the right side of the staircase.

“The library.” Margaret didn’t hesitate. Papa had sold nearly all of their books when they had been in desperate need of money, so it had been far too long since Margaret had seen such a selection of books to read. She could hardly wait to peruse the shelves and settle into the large leather armchair in the library to read in solitude. She had once done that every day. She would make it her ambition to read every single book on the shelves before her life was through. A sigh almost escaped her lips just at the thought of it.

“The library is Peter’s favorite room as well,” Lady Blackwell said, putting an instant end to Margaret’s pleasant reverie. “Before he was ill, he spent a great deal of time there. I suspect he has read nearly every book on those shelves.”

Margaret’s eyebrows rose, and she walked faster down the stairs, coming beside Lady Blackwell. “Has he?” She could hardly envision Lord Blackwell reading for pleasure. He seemed the sort to sit in his study with a snuffbox and glass of port, counting his money repeatedly, perhaps planning how he might obtain more of it in the most dishonest manner possible.

“Oh, yes. I have never known anyone who desires to learn as much as Peter does. When he was a child, I often had to punish him by withholding his books from him.” Lady Blackwell’s smile turned sad. She pressed her lips together, pausing her hand on the stone bannister. She stopped descending the stairs before they reached the bottom. “He

seems too tired to read now. And he will not allow me to read to him.” She sighed. “He says it makes him feel even more inept than he already does.”

“I see.” Margaret didn’t know what else to say. How would she feel if something as simple as reading became so exhausting? It would be devastating. Though Lord Blackwell pretended to be indifferent about his dwindling days, it must have been so difficult to bear.

Lady Blackwell led them out onto the lawn, turning to face the front of the house. The two wings stretched out on both sides, bordering the front lawn in cream stone like a crescent moon. “There you have it. Langdale Abbey. Your new home, one that I am honored to share with you and your family.” The wind tossed Lady Blackwell’s pale curls onto her face, but she didn’t brush them aside. “We shall all be family now.” Her face was weathered much like the stone on the house, and Margaret couldn’t help but wonder what Lady Blackwell was thinking. What had she endured in her life? What wisdom did she have? She was regal and gracious without any apparent effort. Margaret had thought she would be ashamed to have the name of Lady Blackwell, but she could no longer think that, not if this woman was who she could share it with and aspire to become.

“When are your sons and your husband arriving?” Lady Blackwell asked, turning toward Mama.

Mama brushed her hair away from her eyes, crossing her arms with hunched shoulders as the wind grew stronger against her back. “They will be coming tomorrow.” She paused, biting her lower lip. “I should be returning to them soon, in fact. My husband’s health doesn’t allow him to

properly care for the boys. We shall all return to Langdale Abbey tomorrow.”

What neither of them had told Lady Blackwell was that they had yet to inform Papa of the entire arrangement. Margaret was old enough to wed without his approval, and she and Mama had decided it was better to keep him in the dark. He might have advised them against it. Mama was sure to have a difficult conversation ahead of her. Margaret squeezed her hands together, praying that Papa would be grateful and not resentful of the hasty marriage.

“I will be pleased to meet them,” Lady Blackwell said with a smile.

“Soon after, I’ll be taking George to London to see a physician there,” Mama said. “His leg was badly injured. I’m afraid I will not be long at Langdale Abbey until after my son has fully recovered in London. My husband will stay here. I trust your physician will be adequate for his needs.”

Lady Blackwell covered her mouth with the tips of her fingers. “Oh, dear. I was not aware of your son’s injury. I wish him a swift recovery, and I will ensure enough money is allocated to the expense of his treatment. We shall all have time to become acquainted later.”

Mama gave a weak smile, studying Lady Blackwell with wary eyes. Mama seemed to have forgotten that she had once stood just as tall and regal as Lady Blackwell, wearing a gown just as embellished. She watched her like she was a foreign creature, one she wasn’t entirely certain she could trust. Margaret straightened her own shoulders after noticing the distinct difference between Mama’s posture and Lady Blackwell’s.

They returned to the vestibule, and Margaret combed her wind-blown hair with her fingers. The moment they were inside, a footman approached her, clearing his throat. “Lord Blackwell requests an audience with you, my lady.”

It took Margaret a moment to realize he was speaking to her. “Me?”

“Yes, my lady.”

She couldn't very well refuse in front of Lady Blackwell. She exchanged a quick glance with Mama before reluctantly following the footman out of the vestibule and toward the staircase. Margaret wrung her fingers together. It had only been an hour, perhaps a little more, since the ceremony. What could he wish to speak with her about? Her heart beat a little faster as the footman deposited her in Lord Blackwell's doorway. The door clicked shut behind her, and silence engulfed the room.

Lord Blackwell was sitting halfway up in his bed, arms folded in front of him, watching Margaret without saying a word.

The awkwardness might not have affected him, but Margaret felt stifled by it. “You...you asked for me?” She raised her chin, willing herself to appear confident.

“Yes, I did.” He paused for a long moment, his dark eyes studying her intently. “Come in.”

She took a few slow steps forward. Why did she feel like she was being led into some sort of trap? The floor was perfectly even and smooth, yet she walked as if she were on a rocky mountainside, one misstep away from falling to her death.

“Have you enjoyed your tour of the house?” he asked.

Margaret's brow furrowed. "Yes, very much."

"Did you see the library?"

Margaret nodded. "Your mother told me it was your favorite room."

"Indeed." He gave a half smile, his eyes never leaving her face. He drew a breath, one that seemed quite labored. "I hope you will enjoy spending time there. Read a book or two on my behalf."

"Very well." Margaret tapped the tips of her fingers together in time with the ticking clock on the wall. Several seconds passed in silence. Her confusion rose. "Was there a reason you called me here?"

He chuckled under his breath, and a slow smile curved his mouth. "Does a man need a reason to want to see his wife?" One eyebrow rose.

Both of Margaret's rose, and her words slipped out before she could stop them. "Please do not call me that."

"Call you what, exactly?"

"Your wife." A vile taste filled her mouth even as she said the words.

He laughed, a hoarse sound in his throat. "You do recall what we did this morning, yes? We were married."

"I know, but..." Margaret sighed, glancing heavenward, "but I prefer not to view it in such a way. We were married, yes, I suppose, but what we really did was finalize a business agreement."

"We made vows to one another." He shifted his body in order to sit up straighter, grunting with the effort. His chest rose and fell with shallow breaths. "Promises." A soft smile

tugged on his mouth, one that was closer to a smirk. “I do not break those.”

Margaret scoffed, crossing her arms tightly against her chest. Infuriating man.

“What is it?” Lord Blackwell cocked his head to one side. “Do speak your mind.”

Her cheeks grew hotter as anger boiled under her skin. She hesitated only for a moment. He had given her permission to be frank with him, so she would. “How can you say with such confidence that you do not break promises? You act as if you are an honest man with integrity to spare, when your dealings with my father were anything but honest.” She took one step closer, leaning forward to emphasize her words. “Forgive me, my lord, if I don’t believe you when you say that you *don’t break* your promises.”

Lord Blackwell’s features flattened, the traces of his smile disappearing. His jaw tightened. “You do not know me. All you know are the things I have done in the past—things which I am...rather ashamed to own up to.”

“Who is a person if not their actions, my lord?” Margaret shook her head. “I *do* know you. I know you as well as I ever will. If you could do such a terrible thing to an innocent family, then that is all I need to know of your character.”

“Do you not believe that people can change?” Lord Blackwell’s brow was furrowed now, his eyes sharp and somewhat desperate as they stared into hers. “I do not wish to be that man anymore.” He tossed his hands in front of him. “I do not care for that man. I spent far too many days caring only for myself. Perhaps I do wish to change—what would you say to me then?”

“It may be too late.”

A surprising surge of pity gripped Margaret’s heart at Lord Blackwell’s defeated expression.

“Perhaps you’re right,” he muttered. “I did make you a promise in my letter.” His brows drew together, his lips a firm line.

He didn’t have to specify what his promise was. He had promised to die. A chill ran over the length of her arms. How would it feel to make such a promise? She could imagine it from his perspective, but she couldn’t know how it truly must have felt.

“I will spend what remains of my days attempting to prove you wrong.” He gave a weak smile. “And you can count my days with the eagerness you surely feel for them to meet their end.”

Her cheeks flamed again, and she took the final steps toward the edge of his bed. “I should like you to make me another promise today, my lord. Promise me that you will leave my family and me alone. Promise that you will not come near enough to hurt us again. I may be your wife, but I am still a stranger to you, and that is how I should like to remain.”

Lord Blackwell smirked, rubbing his jaw as he shook his head. “I’m afraid I will not make such a promise. The promises I do make, I keep, but I will not enter into a promise that I don’t have any intention of keeping.” His eyes met hers, burrowing deep beneath the surface. She felt suddenly vulnerable. “But I *will* promise not to hurt you or your family again,” he said.

Her heart hammered against her ribs, and the centers of her cheeks cooled slightly. She opened her mouth to speak, but

couldn't find the words. She couldn't bring herself to come up with a retort. So instead, she stood in shock like a ninny as he rolled over and buried his head in his pillow.

“I called you here with hope of having a pleasant conversation.” He released a low chuckle, one that was muffled by the blanket. “But it seems such a thing is impossible with you. Since that is the case, you, *my dear wife*, may take your leave.”

“I will do so happily.” Margaret bit her lip, shaking her head in distaste. He had called her his wife again only to vex her. Not only that, but his *dear* wife. She turned on her heel and marched out the door, closing it firmly behind her.

She paused to lean against the wall, letting the cooler temperature of the corridor calm her emotions. Why wouldn't he agree to leave her alone? They obviously did not enjoy one another's company, so why did he seem intent to spend time with her during his final days? She could only hope that he had changed his mind.

She let out a muffled sigh of frustration before squaring her shoulders and walking away from Lord Blackwell's bedchamber. With luck, he would never call her there again.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8



Peter had asked his valet to keep him informed of all that occurred in the house outside his bedchamber. Mother visited his room often throughout the day, but Peter trusted a servant above his mother to deliver gossip in its purest form.

“The Lovells have all arrived, my lord.” Joseph, Peter’s valet, strode into the room to make his delivery of observations. “Mr. Lovell went straight to his room. He had quite a pale, sickly countenance. Mrs. Lovell has already departed for London with her son, George, who has an injured leg. The other two sons are currently running around the property under the watchful eye of the new nursemaid and their sister. Er—your wife.”

Peter swallowed the water in his cup, sitting up straighter in bed. As exhausted as he was, he had still hardly slept the night before. He hadn’t been able to quiet his mind. Margaret had left him with a bitter taste in his mouth, and not even his third cup of water had been able to clear it away.

He set the empty cup down on his blankets, taking a deep breath. His ribs ached as he exhaled. He wanted to walk out of his room, but he hadn’t had the strength to walk without embarrassing difficulty in weeks. The physician had instructed him to stretch and stand each day, with his valet’s assistance,

but besides that occasional movement, and the movement required to bathe and change his clothing, he was stuck in his bed.

His head pounded, every muscle aching. Considering how he felt, he had every excuse to sleep and ignore the world, but his determination outweighed it all. During his restless night, he had made a very important decision.

He was not going to die.

At least not yet. He was going to delay it for as long as possible—as long as was required to prove Margaret wrong—to prove to her that he could change, and that he was not as vile as she thought he was. She was stubborn in her poor opinion of him, and he was stubborn in his desire to change it. He had always loved a healthy competition.

May the most stubborn win.

Joseph stared at him, eyes wide with concern. Perhaps because he hadn't seen Peter smile in a long time.

“Thank you for your observations, Joseph.” Peter paused, rubbing his fingers across his beard. “Will you deliver a message to my wife from me?”

“I can't read and write.” Joseph's eyes only grew wider.

“That is not necessary. This message will be better delivered vocally.” Peter cleared his throat, willing his voice to sound a little stronger. “Tell her that it is my dying wish that she join me here in my room for dinner this evening. When my tray is brought to me, have a tray brought in for her as well. The dying wish part is most important, do not omit that when you deliver the message.” Peter grinned to himself. Not even a woman as determined to hate him as Margaret could deny a

man his dying wish. Could she? The image of her scowling face flashed in his mind. Relentless. Vicious.

Beautiful.

He shook his head to clear it, focusing his attention again on Joseph. “Is the instruction clear?”

“Yes, my lord. I will deliver the message straight away.” He backed toward the door.

“Wait,” Peter said. His heart pounded. “Will you—will you discover if Mr. Lovell is well enough to come speak with me this afternoon? Do not push the subject, but I do wish to have an audience with him at some point.” Peter didn’t want to delay offering the man a sincere apology.

Joseph nodded, straight brown hair bobbing on his forehead.

Peter hoped it wasn’t all too much for the young man to commit to memory. He was a bit thick-skulled at times.

He sat back on his satin pillows, closing his eyes. Now all he had to do was wait.



Waiting proved more difficult than Peter had anticipated. Mother came to see him, then Rebecca and Sally, but by the time evening came, all he could do was stare at the door. He didn’t have much of an appetite, but he had never been so eager for his dinner tray to arrive.

He strained his ears when he heard the sound of footfalls. The repetitive clicking sounded similar to when Margaret had come to his room the day before. He sat up as a knock sounded.

“Come in.”

The door opened seconds after he situated himself on the pillows.

The sun had already set, so the room was only illuminated by candlelight. Margaret stood in the doorway, stepping aside as two footmen with their dinner trays walked past.

“I will take one here,” Peter said, “and you may set the other on my writing desk for Lady Blackwell.” Peter found it strange calling Margaret the name he had heard his mother called throughout his entire life. He much preferred to think of her simply as Margaret. His eyes slid back to her.

In the candlelight, her hair appeared more golden. Even her skin soaked in the rich hue of the orange flames. She wore a pale pink dress, her crossed arms covering the front of it. She stood in silence until the footmen left the room, closing the door behind them. If they were not married, it would have never been proper to leave them unattended in his bedchamber, but Peter had a suspicion that nothing romantic would ever be occurring between them.

Before he could say a word, Margaret narrowed her eyes at him with skepticism. “Your dying wish?”

He chuckled. “I quite enjoy the privilege of using that against people. Especially you.” He winked before thinking better of it.

“I could turn around and leave you here, you know.” Margaret hadn’t moved an inch from her place near the doorway. “The only reason I came at all was because I didn’t wish to appear insensitive in front of your mother and sisters.” She twisted a loose thread on her gown before muttering,

“they were present when your valet delivered the message. I couldn’t refuse.”

“So you came out of obligation, not to kindly fulfill my dying wish?” Peter’s voice wavered.

“What do you think?” Margaret cast him a few daggers with her eyes before moving slowly toward the writing desk.

“I think there is no place you would rather be than here in this room with me.” Peter grinned as he took a small bite of his bread.

“I know you don’t truly care so much for my company. You are simply bored, and wish to entertain yourself by vexing me.” She sat down at the desk, crossing her ankles and turning to face him.

“You are right about one thing. I am bored. But no, I do not find any delight in vexing you. In fact, I wish I knew how to stop, but I suspect even blinking or moving my fingers is bound to rankle you.” He wiggled his fingers in front of his face in her direction, then blinked his eyes rapidly.

Margaret’s jaw lowered. “If you do so in that manner, then yes. Has your physician mentioned madness as a symptom of yours?” She raised one eyebrow, stirring her soup.

“He hasn’t, but it seems you are prepared to make the diagnosis yourself?”

“I have been since the moment I met you.” She brought her spoon to her lips, sipping the soup while her eyes flitted toward him.

Peter let out a laugh of disbelief. “I ought to be careful when I invite you here. You have a sharp tongue.”

She looked down at her tray. “I cannot seem to help it when I’m around you. But I won’t apologize for it, since every word is well deserved.”

“I suppose that is fair.” Peter had already lost interest in his meal. Instead, he kept his attention fixed on Margaret, a smile hovering constantly on his lips.

She ate in silence for at least a minute before dabbing her mouth with a serviette and looking up at him again. “Dare I ask what has compelled you to waste your dying wish on this meeting?”

“Waste? A man may have as many dying wishes as he desires.”

“Is that so?” Margaret groaned. “I do hope you will spend the rest on other pursuits.”

“What is so unpleasant about this dinner with me?” He paused. “Actually, do not answer that.” He already knew what she was thinking. She didn’t like to be near him. She would have rather been anywhere else in the house besides there.

“Well, why *have* you called me here this time? I feel terrible to have left my brothers to eat dinner in the care of your mother. James and Philip are sweet, but they are often...a bit difficult to bear.”

“I was the same as a young boy, so surely my mother is capable of looking after them. They cannot be any more difficult to bear than I once was.”

“Was?” Margaret watched his reaction from above her goblet as she took a sip.

Peter raised his eyebrows in surprise. Was she amusing herself with him? That was usually his role. “If you’re not careful, I’ll seek an annulment,” he said.

Margaret set down her cup, casting him a quizzical glance. “That would not be the most efficient way to become the changed man you spoke of yesterday.”

“Ah, yes. I suppose I do need to keep you here in order to have a successful change of heart.”

“That is not what I meant.”

“We seem to bring out the worst in one another, so perhaps an annulment would be best after all.”

Margaret took another spoonful of soup. “Or we could simply avoid one another. But you are making that difficult to do.”

“I know you don’t have any desire to know me...and you claim that you already know me as well as you ever could. So I’m not suggesting that we come to know *one another*.” He smiled. “I am simply asking that you allow *me* to come to know *you*.”

Margaret brushed a strand of straight blonde hair from her forehead. The blue of her eyes flashed in the dim light. “I don’t quite understand why you even care to know me.” She scoffed quietly. “There is hardly a point, is there?”

Peter shrugged one shoulder. “I wasn’t entirely certain that I would ever be a husband. I should like to be a good one while I can.”

She was silent for a long moment, staring down at the food that remained on her tray. She picked up her fork and knife, cutting the venison on her plate. “Very well. What would you like to know about me?”

He tapped his chin. “Shall I start by telling you what I already know? You may discredit any of it if you wish.”

Margaret's lips pressed together, eyes heavy with misgiving. "I suppose."

Peter drew a deep breath, hoping to give a little more energy to his slow, dull heartbeat. He could feel it, deep in his chest, and it terrified him. Perhaps he was imagining it, but there were times that he practically felt the life seeping out of him, little by little. The physician would be coming the next day, and he was already dreading the visit.

He cleared his throat, focusing his attention on Margaret. Sitting in the shadow of the candle, she was rather stunning. Her skin glittered, warm and soft. Well, he didn't know whether or not it was soft or warm, and unfortunately, he would never know. He stopped himself. It was not wise to dwell on her beauty. It would only depress him more.

"I have not known you for long, but I have guessed a few things about your character," Peter said. "I know you are fiercely loyal to your family. Would you own that?"

"Yes." She shifted in her chair, looking at anything and everything but him.

"I have also noticed that you are very...how do I say this...*bold*. Yes, you are very bold. At first, you struck me as somewhat timid, but I have learned that you are not timid in the slightest."

Margaret gave a brief nod, one side of her mouth lifting at the corner. "Nothing good is ever achieved by being timid. I believe boldness of character is the most effective way of achieving one's objectives." There was a defensive tone in her voice.

"I did not say it was a flaw." Peter shook his head. "I find it most admirable, though it has come at the expense of my

own dignity. But you are right, any bold words from you are well-deserved on my part.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “Then I shall not cease to give them.”

“I do not doubt that you will,” Peter said with a laugh. “I welcome your criticism. If I am to transform myself with my limited time, then I will need your help.”

She didn’t reply, keeping her eyes fixed on him as if he might indeed transform at any moment, but into some sort of monster, not a better man.

“Besides those two attributes of your character, I have also noticed that you seem rather...” he paused, searching for the right word. His search yielded nothing that would be flattering. “You may correct me if you disagree, but you seem rather... like a sepulcher.”

“A sepulcher?” Her brows shot up before falling into a deep furrow. “What on earth do you mean by that?”

“Forgive me, it was the first word that came to mind.” He laughed under his breath.

“What about me makes you think of...a tomb?” She stared at him as if he had lost his mind. Perhaps he had.

“My thoughts have been centered around death for too long, it seems.” He waved a hand through the air, attempting to dismiss the subject.

“No, no. Please do explain.” Margaret turned to face him fully. “I am quite curious now.” A warning hung in her eyes.

Peter never thought he could be so intimidated by such a petite woman, but she was not to be trifled with. Even so, the

scowl on her face was far more attractive than she would ever realize. It was just as endearing as it was threatening.

“A sepulcher is made of stone—thick stone—intricately designed and beautiful.” He lifted his eyes to her briefly, hoping she would at least take a slight compliment from what he was saying. “It is meant to keep everything out. It is meant to be impenetrable. Cold, hard, unyielding, set and unmoving. Built to protect something valuable within.” He kept his gaze fixed on her. “That is why it reminds me of you. You have built yourself into a sepulcher, especially as it concerns me. You are intent to keep yourself hidden inside of it where I cannot find you. Am I wrong in assuming this?”

Margaret’s nostrils flared, her eyes wandering down to her hands. She took a deep breath, lifting her chin again. “If what you assume is true, then I am quite proud of my work. It seems you are intent on breaking into my ‘sepulcher,’ but I assure you, it is quite a stronghold.” She crossed her arms. “And do you blame me?”

“Not at all. You have very good reason to hate and distrust me.” Peter’s guilt had only been growing in the past several days. His chest swam with remorse, but nothing he could say would ever prove that to Margaret. No apology would be enough. It wasn’t fair to ask for her forgiveness. “But even if you must cling to your past reasons for hating me, I wish to remind you that I will never give you another one.”

Margaret’s lashes fluttered downward before she snuck another glance at him. “Haven’t you ever had a reason to dislike someone before? It is not so simple to forgive such harsh misdeeds.”

Peter’s jaw tightened. “Yes. I know.”

Margaret watched him with a curious look. “Who has earned your resentment?”

He shook his head. “I will not bother you with the tale. It is not a happy one.” Nothing lowered his spirits more than reflecting on the years he had spent in fear of his father. He hadn’t invited Margaret there to share all the details of his past.

“Hmm.” She finished the last bite of food on her plate before standing. “It seems I am not the only one who has built a sepulcher.” She stepped away from the desk, leaving Peter in stunned silence. “I will be taking my leave now. Goodnight.” She gave a quick curtsy.

The suddenness of her departure shocked him, and she was already at the door before he found his own words. “Wait, Margaret?”

She turned slowly, as if labored by the task. “Yes?”

His insides twisted with dread. Desperation overwhelmed his senses. How could he die before ensuring she no longer despised him? Though Margaret seemed to wish it, this could not be the last time they spoke privately. He didn’t know why her opinion was so important to him, but he couldn’t shake away the feeling. What was wrong with him? He had never cared so much for the opinion of anyone. But he would die hating himself just as much as Margaret hated him if he didn’t manage to change her view.

If he didn’t manage to crack through the stone of that sepulcher.

“I have another dying wish,” he said in a quick voice.

She groaned, but there was a hint of masked amusement behind it. “You cannot use that against me again.”

“I will use it so long as your conscience is on my side. How would you feel if you denied me one of my dying wishes, and then learned of my death in the morning?”

He expected her to reconsider, but instead, she shrugged. “Perhaps a little avenged.”

He laughed, but the sound caught in his throat.

Her eyes danced in the candlelight. He couldn’t manage to be insulted when it was so clear that she was taunting him on purpose. He quite liked it, actually. “Well, I will leave it up to you, then. My mother is not here. She is not listening this time. You have no need to feel obligated, but my dying wish is that you visit me here again tomorrow afternoon. Take your pick of any book in the library, and bring it here to read to me.”

Her eyes rounded for a moment. She wrung her fingers together. Her brow returned to its usual scowl as she studied him from across the room. “I will...consider it.”

That was better than a clear ‘no.’ Peter grinned as she turned toward the door and fled the room like a criminal might have fled Newgate Prison should the cell door have been left unlocked.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9



Margaret had considered reading a book to Lord Blackwell, all night, in fact, and the answer was no.

Standing in front of the looking glass, she turned in a full circle. Her new lady's maid, Sarah, had arranged her hair in a perfect pile of curls atop her head. She had spent an hour the night before tying her hair in rags, though Margaret knew her hair well enough to predict that it would fall straight again by the end of the day.

"Thank you," Margaret said, meeting Sarah's gaze in her reflection.

The girl gave a curtsy. "O' course, milady."

It would take quite a while for Margaret to grow accustomed to being called that. She smoothed her palms over the white fabric of her morning dress, willing a smile to come to her cheeks. She had missed having a maid to arrange her hair each day. It made her morning routine so much easier, though part of her had come to take pride in her independence, so she was already missing it. It was a strange paradox.

She examined the interior of her room, still memorizing all the details. She had been shocked by the beauty of the blue canopy bed, intricate frame, tapestries, and gold wallpaper. She had requested that her room not be the one adjoined with

Lord Blackwell's, and Lady Blackwell had been gracious and understanding of her wishes. As temporary as the marriage was to be, there was thankfully no reason for their rooms to be so easily accessible to one another. The marriage would not be consummated, that much was certain.

Margaret still preferred not to think of it as a *marriage* at all. It was a peace offering.

Margaret swallowed, taking a deep breath. It was quite strange how determined Lord Blackwell was to come to know her. Didn't he have more important matters to be worrying about? Such as his funeral?

Her stomach twisted with nerves as she recalled their conversation the night before. Lady Blackwell had told her that she had asked to read to him before, but he hadn't allowed it. Why then would he ask Margaret to do it? She would feel so...uncomfortable sitting at his bedside and reading aloud. He would surely find a way to prolong her visit, perhaps by declaring even more of his strange observations about her character.

She tightened her jaw, tugging on her sleeves to straighten them. How could he claim to know a single thing about her? What a ridiculous man. She could not stand him.

In one swift motion, she turned, making her way down the hall toward the room that James and Philip shared. At first, she took a wrong turn, but quickly corrected it. It had only been two days and she was quite proud of herself for how she had learned to navigate the house. Within a week she was sure to have it all memorized. While she enjoyed the size of the house and its many rooms, it did provide far too much space for James and Philip to run about and make mischief. With Papa

ill and Mama on her way to London with George, it was left to Margaret to keep an eye on them.

She stopped, opening the door slowly. Thankfully, the lock on the door was broken, otherwise her brothers might have locked Margaret and their nursemaid out of the room. James was standing on his bed, and she could only assume that he had been jumping moments before. Philip was still tucked under his blankets, watching his brother with a smile.

“Good morning,” Margaret said in a cheerful voice. Their trunks had already been unpacked and put away, and Lady Blackwell had instantly found a nurse and one other nursemaid to help dress and care for the boys. Margaret still wanted to do what she could to help, especially since they would be missing Mama.

James jumped down from his bed as Margaret reached for the bellpull. She stayed until the nursemaid arrived to help her brothers dress and then made her way down the hall with James and Philip following closely behind her.

“Is George’s leg all better yet?” Philip asked, eyes wide.

“Not yet. He and Mama are on their way to London, don’t you remember? The doctor is going to help repair George’s leg.”

“Yes.” Philip’s pale ginger brows drew together. “Can they nail it with a hammer?”

Margaret grimaced. “No, that would not be pleasant for George.”

“Why not?”

“Because it would hurt,” James said in an exasperated voice, attempting to prove his superior intelligence over his younger brother.

“Why?” Philip asked.

Margaret sighed. “Would *you* like someone to put nails in your leg?”

A deep voice came from inside the nearest doorway. “Good heavens, leave the poor boy alone.”

Margaret glanced up, her cheeks warming. It was Lord Blackwell’s room. From the open doorway, she could see him sitting on a chair, his valet standing over him as he adjusted his collar. She hadn’t seen him out of his bed. He was much taller than she had expected. Well, he still wasn’t standing, but his long legs stretched out in front of him. His arms were crossed against his chest, unruly hair combed out of his face. His facial hair was still overgrown, hiding his cheeks and upper lip as he smiled. His brown eyes danced with amusement.

“That was not what it sounded like,” Margaret said in a quick voice. “You didn’t hear the entire conversation.”

“Oh, I heard all I needed to hear.” His gaze widened in mock terror, but a smile still twitched at the corners of his mouth.

Margaret threw him a scowl, one that he laughed at, before hurrying her brothers along down the corridor. If she didn’t act quickly enough, Lord Blackwell would wish to be introduced to them. What had put him in such a jovial mood? She hadn’t yet seen such a broad smile on his face. She shook the image from her mind as she made her way down the staircase.

When she reached the breakfast room, Lady Blackwell, Rachel, and Cornelius were already standing at the sidebar. Rachel and Cornelius had decided to stay at Langdale Abbey for much of the summer in order to become better acquainted

with Margaret. Rebecca and Sally were sitting at the table, forks in hand. They all fell silent when Margaret entered the room, hushing one another abruptly as if they had been discussing some great secret.

“Good morning,” Margaret said in a quiet voice, eyes darting around the room. They all stared at her, hands and arms frozen over their food.

“Good morning, Margaret. James. Philip.” Lady Blackwell walked forward, a bright smile on her face. Her eyes were wet and her cheeks were flushed. “Please eat as much as you would like.” She ushered them forward.

Something was amiss. Rachel exchanged a glance with her husband. Rebecca exchanged a glance with Sally. Lady Blackwell beamed as if it were the happiest day of her life, but each time she looked at Margaret, her smile faltered just a little.

“Th-thank you.” Margaret took slow steps into the room. Even her brothers seemed to sense the others’ strange behavior. They kept close to Margaret’s skirts as they approached the sidebar with all the eggs, ham, bread, and fruit. Margaret’s stomach growled, yet she could hardly focus on the food.

The silence persisted. Margaret threw a curious glance at Lady Blackwell. “Is something...amiss? You are all rather quiet this morning.” She smiled politely and kept her voice light, even though Rachel’s intent stare was particularly unnerving.

“No, no, nothing is amiss.” Lady Blackwell smiled. “We have received a bit of news this morning. It is very...good news, for—well, very good news for our family.”

They certainly weren't acting like they had just received good news. Margaret had half-expected to be told that some dreadful fate had befallen her mother on her journey to London. Her heart slowed. "I am glad to hear it." She took James's plate and put an egg on it, then a slice of bread. "May I ask what the good news is?"

Lady Blackwell exchanged a glance with Rachel. Every last one of them was quite obvious with their shared glances. Margaret bit her lip in anticipation.

"Yes, of course." Lady Blackwell wiped at the corner of her eye. "Doctor Larsen came to see Peter this morning. He tended to your father as well, not to worry." Her voice was quick. "After his visit with Peter, he has informed us that he has reason to believe that Peter's condition has...improved since his last visit."

Margaret's stomach sank like a boulder in the sea. Her head spun as she struggled to grasp onto what Lady Blackwell had just said. Had she heard her correctly? Her heart hammered against her ribs. She searched for words—any words—but her tongue was tied.

"He was quite shocked by the improvement, in fact," Lady Blackwell continued. "He called it a miracle of sorts." She took a deep breath, her throat shifting with a nervous swallow. "We are all just as surprised as he was, but quite overjoyed."

Improvement? She felt like the most wicked person in the entire world for the ice cold dread that plunged through her at the word *improvement*. "That is wonderful," Margaret choked. Her breath caught in her throat as she accidentally dropped the serving fork onto the dish of ham. The resulting clatter was deafening in the quiet room.

Lady Blackwell took a step closer. “I know it is not what you expected, but—”

“Truly,” Margaret blurted. “It truly is wonderful. You must be so very happy. Has the physician said—has he said how long this...improvement is expected to prolong his life?”

“He did not make any such predictions, but he was quite optimistic. He claims that he may have compared Peter’s illness too closely to another patient of his, one who has since died. He may have mistaken his condition for something far more serious. He isn’t entirely certain yet, but we are hopeful.” She sniffed, wiping at her eyes again.

Margaret kept her expression even, though her insides writhed and twisted like a den of snakes. She was no longer hungry. She could hardly manage to draw a breath. With a false smile etched on her face, she returned her attention to the food. “That news must have come as a great relief.” She didn’t know what else to say. She couldn’t allow even a drop of her terror to show through her facade.

“It did, indeed.” Lady Blackwell watched Margaret with concern.

Rachel’s voice cut through the tension. “You do not have to pretend to be happy.” She walked away from her husband’s side. Her brown eyes were soft and playful at the edges. “We know you hate him.” Her lips twisted. “As you should. This outcome was most certainly not what you were told to expect. If you wished for his condition to worsen again, I could not fault you for it.”

“Oh, no, of course not,” Margaret stammered. “I would never wish for such a horrible thing. He is your brother.” She turned to Lady Blackwell. “And your son.”

“And *your* husband,” Rachel said with a grimace. She leaned closer, lowering her voice. “I am very sorry.”

Margaret’s stomach twisted again, her breath coming faster. Mama wasn’t even here to help her sort through this turn of events. Perhaps the physician had been wrong. But how could a man in his profession make such a mistake? He had been so certain that Lord Blackwell would die within weeks or even days.

Margaret shushed her thoughts and the emotions that came with them. Guilt strangled her. She should never wish death upon anyone, not even her worst enemy.

But her husband? Perhaps that was the least acceptable option of all.

Was it wrong to wish that his promise could be kept?

He said he always kept his promises. She should have never taken the word of such a dishonest man, even if this recovery was entirely out of his control.

She cringed, horrified at her own thoughts. How selfish and cruel she would be if she felt even the slightest bit of disappointment at the news. Lady Blackwell looked so overjoyed. No, Margaret wouldn’t have any problem with Lord Blackwell’s recovery...if only she had the power to reverse time and never go through with marrying him.

Though she hadn’t eaten anything yet, she felt ill enough to vomit. She finished gathering food onto plates for Philip and James before setting them down at the table. What was she to do? The image of Lord Blackwell’s broad smile when she had passed his bedchamber that morning flashed in her mind. She glared down at her empty plate. No wonder he had been so happy. The greatest source of his joy was likely not

even his own increased odds at survival. He must have been happiest to know how terrified Margaret would be at the news.

The wicked man had tricked her, unintentionally perhaps, but she couldn't help but feel betrayed. His unexpected recovery was most certainly not what she had bargained for. She had married Lord Blackwell with the intention of becoming a widow, not a wife.

She needed to speak to Papa. She had been too afraid to face him after she and Mama had kept their plan a secret from him, but she couldn't allow her panic to fester in her own heart without seeking comfort from someone who might understand.

Rachel had seemed to understand. She certainly spoke her mind. She was the only one in Lord Blackwell's family who didn't coddle him and find him without flaw. His younger sisters seemed to look up to him immensely, though they disapproved of his facial hair.

Papa would understand. He might not be sympathetic though, since he surely would have tried to convince Margaret not to accept the proposal if he had been informed. She swallowed. Perhaps it would be better to leave Papa out of it until after Lord Blackwell's recovery was more certain.

There was still a chance that the physician had made a mistake.

All Margaret knew was that she would not be reading a book to Lord Blackwell that day, or ever. It was best to simply avoid him. If there was a chance that they would be married forever, he needed to understand from the beginning that she wanted nothing to do with him or his smirking face ever again.

“You shouldn’t be so hopeful, Mama.” Rachel was standing by Lady Blackwell, one hand on her shoulder. “It is all speculation. I should hate to see your hopes be destroyed. We must maintain a realistic outlook. Peter may be showing signs of improvement today, but when the physician returns again, he could have a different opinion. Time will tell.”

Lady Blackwell sniffed, nodding as she drew a shaky breath. “You are right. I cannot help myself. It has been far too long since I’ve had any hope.”

“All I advise you to do is to be careful with it. Hope can be rather destructive.”

Lady Blackwell shook her head, the corners of her eyes dropping. “No, my dear, it isn’t hope that’s destructive. Circumstances will come, and whether we hope for them or not, it doesn’t matter. They will still come either way.”

A shiver ran over Margaret’s arms. Her chest was hollow, her skin cold. There was nothing she could do to change the circumstances that were unfolding at Langdale Abbey. Either Lord Blackwell would live, or he would die.

Her conscience forbade her to hope for either option.

As Rachel had said, only time would tell.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10



“Mother?” Peter finished his soup, setting the spoon down in the bowl. He moved the tray off of his lap and onto the bed beside him. He had been waiting all day for Margaret to come, but now that he had spoken with his mother over dinner, he had realized why she hadn’t.

Mother had told her the news.

Stopped near the door, Mother turned to face him. “Yes?”

“Would you kindly ask Margaret to come to my room before she retires for the evening? I should like to speak with her about the...developments of this morning.”

Mother gave a hesitant nod. “She did seem quite distraught over the matter.”

Peter tried not to be offended by the words. “I would have expected nothing less.” He struggled to sit up straighter, still exhausted by the effort. The physician might have claimed that he was improving, but he most certainly wasn’t healthy yet. Doctor Larsen had made his declarations based on a few simple tests such as listening to his heart and lungs through a rolled stack of foolscap. Peter didn’t know whether the man was inept at his profession, or if Peter had truly undergone a miracle.

Either way, Margaret could not have been pleased.

Without warning, his chest constricted with panic. He didn't like when circumstances were out of his control. He had promised Margaret a certain outcome when he proposed to her, but now it seemed to be taking an unexpected turn. He was grateful to have a little hope of living a longer life, but by living, he would only give Margaret another reason to resent him.

That, and the fact that he was sending his mother to invite her to his room. He already knew that Margaret couldn't refuse a request from her.

He smiled to himself.

"I will find her at once." Mother opened the door, casting one more smile in Peter's direction. "You are looking better already, my dear. I don't think the physician was mistaken."

"*You* are mistaken, Mother," Peter said in a dry voice. "I have not looked good in months."

"That is your own fault. You could at least allow your valet to shave your face."

Peter groaned. "Why does everyone despise my beard?" He quite liked it. He needed some way to feel masculine when he was trapped in bed with no ability to hunt or fence or ride his horse.

"We like to tease you, that is all." Mother had never been good at lying. She hated his new look just as much as his sisters did. He combed a wayward strand of long hair out of his face. Perhaps it was time for a trim. Or he could keep it forever and continue to vex them all. That was the way he usually liked to conduct his decisions, but he *was* trying to change. Perhaps he should appease them.

Mother left the room, and Peter waited several minutes before a knock came at the door.

“Come in.”

He watched the doorway as Margaret came into view. Rather than hovering against the wall as she had done the previous day, she marched straight inside, only stopping once she reached his bedside. Her blonde hair was falling loose from her coiffure, and her cheeks were rosy.

“Are you going to explain the meaning of your threats about putting nails in your brother’s leg this morning?” Peter asked, arching one eyebrow.

She ignored him. “You lied to me.” She planted her hands on her hips. “I have been thinking all day, and the only explanation I can find is that you and your physician have been scheming together all along.”

“I’m afraid I do not catch your meaning.”

“You were never going to die. You simply concocted a story so that I would marry you.” She released a huffed breath.

Peter gave a laugh of disbelief. “What on earth do you think I stood to gain by tricking you into marrying me?”

“Well, I’m certain you couldn’t convince *any* woman to marry you unless by trickery. You might have thought me the sort of woman to be easily persuaded.”

“I don’t think anyone would consider you, Margaret, as someone who could be easily persuaded. In fact, I have never met anyone more stubborn.”

“Me?” Her hand flew to her chest. “I am not nearly as stubborn as you. You have been so determined to have me

come speak with you that you sent your mother to make your request *again*. Not only that, but you are only keeping that hair and beard because you know that your family does not like it.” She lifted her chin. “That is evidence enough.”

“Very well, we are both stubborn.” Peter narrowed his eyes. “But perhaps you are wrong. Perhaps now I shall only be keeping this hair and beard because I know that *you* don’t like it. If you are going to be so upset to hear that my life might be prolonged and that you might be forced to be my wife for longer than you hoped, then I will ensure that you never find me attractive.”

She gave a hard laugh. “You were never at risk of being found attractive by me, my lord. A man’s character is far more important than his appearance.”

Frustration rose in his chest. “Once again, you are assuming that you know my character. You are assuming that I tricked you, when I am just as surprised to learn that my condition has improved as you are. But on the contrary, I was quite pleased to hear it, not painfully disappointed.”

Margaret’s eyes fell, her shoulder’s slackening. “I didn’t say I was disappointed to hear it.”

Peter tipped his head back with a laugh. “Are you now going to pretend to be genteel? You have already made your disappointment quite obvious.”

She glared at him. “I am shocked, that is all. My emotions have run away with me.” She shook her head at the floor. “For your sake, and the sake of your mother, I do hope that you live a long life. I do hope that the physician was not mistaken today. I simply wish that, if that is the case, I had not married you. Being a widow and being married to you for the rest of my life are two very different expectations.”

“I understand. You may express your frustration over the matter as much as you would like. I will not take offense.” Peter tightened his jaw. He shouldn’t have expected Margaret’s opinion of him to change drastically already. It had only been a few days. A sepulcher could not be broken into with one blow. He would have to be patient, and now, with the news he had received that day, he might actually have time to be.

But it wasn’t only Margaret whose forgiveness and good opinion he wanted. He would also need to speak with her father. Mr. Lovell had been the one he had directly wronged, and the impact had spread farther than Peter had realized was possible. He regretted the day he ever listened to a single word from his father.

Margaret put a hand to her forehead, letting out a long sigh. “I would not have even agreed to any of this if not for my brother, George. He fell from a tree and broke his leg badly just days before your letter arrived. Our surgeon claimed that he could not help him. He advised us to seek a specialist in London, one that we could not afford. The timing of it all was the only reason I felt so obligated to accept your proposal. If not for George’s misfortune, I would have burned the letter.” She breathed sharply, staring down at the floor. “I felt that it was my fault. George was standing on the tree and I startled him. My mother has taken him to London where he will now have the attention he requires. That is all that matters. My happiness is unimportant.”

Peter’s heart sank. “I didn’t know. I—I hope his leg heals well and that he is kept comfortable.” He paused for a moment, studying her face. She refused to look at him. Had she truly already decided that she could never be happy if he was her husband? The idea rankled. “If it is of any comfort to

you, the outcome is still uncertain. Though you assumed that I fabricated this entire illness, you cannot deny that I still do not look well.” Peter’s chest ached. “You might have your way after all.”

Margaret’s glare returned. “I didn’t say that I wished such a horrible fate upon you. You cannot make me the villain now when you still have not even...*apologized* for what you did to me. You have offered me a home, and wealth, and an elevated place in society, but you have not offered an apology.” She studied him from the top of his head to the blankets that covered him. “I wonder if you even truly regret what you did.”

Peter sat up straighter, a sudden surge of frustration gripping him. “I have regretted it every day. I can see now that I have hid my emotions behind my arrogance for far too long. I pretended that I didn’t feel remorse because...I-I didn’t wish to appear weak.” He drew a breath, his lungs burning. The confession rang true in his ears. “My actions toward your family were the result of a promise, one that I made to my father.” He stared at the wall behind Margaret, unable to meet her gaze. “It was his dying wish.”

After several seconds, he dared a look at her face. The shadows from the candlelight deepened the furrow in her brow. She was silent.

Peter fought the images from his past as they rose up in his mind. “From a young age, my father taught me his detestable methods for obtaining money. He punished me severely if I ever stepped an inch out of line. I was his puppet, and it was all I ever knew.” The words spilled out of him. He hadn’t planned on divulging anything from his past, but his urgency to explain, to help Margaret understand *anything* was overcoming his rational thought. “He taught me to keep my

promises, and showed me what would happen if I did not. More punishment. When he was dying, he began preparing me to manage the estate and provide for our family. I was too young for such responsibility. I was too overwhelmed and... compliant to his requests.” Peter’s head pounded. “On his deathbed, my father informed me that he had gambled away a great deal of our money. If something did not change soon, Langdale Abbey would be lost. He informed me of his plan, a scheme to steal the fortune of another man who was lower in society, but successful in his trade.” Peter swallowed, leaning his head back against the headboard. He glanced at Margaret. Her eyes were unreadable as she stared back at him. “That was your father.

“He gave me instruction, every step. I was convinced that our family would lose everything if I did not carry out his plan. I loved my mother and sisters too much to subject them to the disgrace that would follow. I was responsible for them. Their lives were in my hands.” He shook his head. “Hearing myself say this aloud further proves that my actions were inexcusable. I could have found a different solution. I could have been less of a coward.” He glanced up, a lump forming in his throat. “But I wanted you to know the truth.”

Margaret looked down at the floor, her face pale. She twisted her fingers together in front of her. For several seconds, she didn’t speak. When she did, her words surprised him. “I’m sorry your father was so cruel.”

Peter waited, but she said nothing more on the subject. She shifted uncomfortably, her gaze darting to his for a brief moment. “I—I am quite tired,” she said. “I should retire for the evening.”

“Of course.”

She backed away before turning around and starting for the door.

He stopped her before she could open it. "Margaret?"

She turned with her fingers on the handle. "Yes?"

"I am sorry. For everything."

She held his gaze for several seconds, something like confusion hovering in her eyes before turning in one swift motion and escaping into the corridor.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER II



Papa's room was dim and smelled of flowers. Margaret opened the drapes, letting a little light in for the daffodils that Lady Blackwell had ordered as a gift of welcome and well wishes for Papa. It had been so long since he was well, Margaret had begun to forget the days when he would cut flowers from their garden for Mama.

"How do you feel today?" Margaret asked, turning away from the window.

Papa was tucked under the blankets. He had kept to his bed ever since arriving at Langdale Abbey. Margaret hadn't seen him since she had married Lord Blackwell, simply because she had been too nervous to face him. Her throat was dry as she waited for a response from Papa. When she had entered the room, his only greeting had been the subtle movement of his eyes. Was he really so upset with her? She had done what she had to do in order to help George. And Papa. She certainly hadn't done it because she had wanted to.

He blinked at her, the sides of his head buried in the pillow. The top of his head was balding, with flecks of grey entering the dark brown of his hair. His weary eyes closed for a moment. Was he ignoring her?

“How do I feel? I feel...useless.” He let out a deep sigh, opening his eyes and fixing his gaze on her. “If I hadn’t been so useless, you wouldn’t have felt the need to go through with Lord Blackwell’s absurd plan.” Papa inhaled too sharply, sending himself into a fit of coughing. He caught his breath.

“Papa, you are not useless.” Margaret walked closer, relieved that he hadn’t scolded her. “You have worked very hard for our family. It is not your fault that you are so unwell. Any rest you are taking now is well deserved. I—I didn’t tell you about Lord Blackwell’s plan because I didn’t want you to try to stop me. It is my turn to look after you now. You have done so much for me for my entire life.” Margaret sat down on the edge of his bed.

Papa reached for her hand, a weak smile tugging on his mouth. “That is what fathers are meant to do for their children. Not the other way around.”

Margaret’s thoughts traveled back to her conversation with Lord Blackwell the night before. Her throat was dry as the image of his face came back to the forefront of her mind. His features had been so...sad. So haunted. He never had the sort of father she had. His father had manipulated him—schooled him into becoming a copy of himself. Margaret had been shocked to hear that the entire scheme against her family had been his father’s idea to begin with, one that he had convinced his young, impressionable son was acceptable.

She still could not excuse Lord Blackwell of all of the blame, but the story about his past had certainly rattled her.

She bit her lip, falling deeper into her thoughts. He had claimed that everything he did had been to help save his mother and sisters from financial ruin. He loved them. How could he not love a woman as admirable as Lady Blackwell?

Margaret didn't know his sisters well yet, but he imagined they were also deserving of comfort and happiness. She only wished he hadn't stolen hers.

She thought of his face again, and the image stuck in her mind.

Lord Blackwell's regret was tangible. It pierced her chest like a needle, embroidering one little word—one emotion—on her heart that she had been hoping to avoid.

Sympathy.

She stopped herself. It wasn't good to dwell on his excuses. He could have fabricated every single one of them.

"How do *you* feel, Margaret?" Papa's voice cut through her thoughts. "I still cannot believe that, under any circumstances, you would ever agree to tie yourself to the man you hate most in the world." Papa's voice wavered with a hint of amusement. "I was shocked to say the least, not only because of the proposal, but because you accepted it."

Margaret sighed. "It still doesn't seem real. I think I may be dreaming, but then I remember that I am not. This house..." She looked up, waving her hand around the room. "All these beautiful rooms are ours to roam. To host parties in. To live comfortably. You shall not have to work in such arduous conditions again, Papa."

"You did always enjoy parties." Papa chuckled, a raspy sound. "It will be a joy to see you spinning in a fine ballgown again with your mother. And soon enough you shall not have to be Lord Blackwell's wife. Simply his widow. I suppose you did make the right decision. I'm glad you didn't tell me. I would have surely tried to stop you."

She swallowed. Oh, yes. She hadn't told him about the news the physician had left with the household the day before. Did he already know? She studied his face and all the creases and lines. It didn't appear so.

She almost relayed the news, but decided to keep her mouth shut. She didn't want to worry him. He needed to rest and be free from his cares. "Perhaps being married to Lord Blackwell for so brief a time will not be so very bad. So long as I can manage to avoid him entirely." She smiled, masking the turmoil she felt at the prospect.

Papa's chest rose and fell with a deep breath, his thick, dark brows inching closer together still. "All I ask is that you do not trust him. He is very...persuasive. Lord Blackwell knows how to wear a disguise. He knows to choose his words according to what he assumes you want to hear. You already know he has no qualms about lying."

"I know, Papa." Margaret set her jaw, looking him straight in the eye. "I am not a fool."

"No, indeed." Papa's voice was a hoarse whisper. "But neither is he."

A shiver ran over Margaret's shoulder blades. It was the reminder she needed. She shook herself of the sympathy she had begun to feel a few minutes before, replacing it with unease. She needed to be more careful.

"I will leave you to rest," Margaret said. "If there is anything you need, please send for me. I should hate for you to be lonesome here in this room."

"Thank you, Margaret. Do not forget what I said." Papa gave a slight smile before closing his eyes again.

Margaret slipped out the door, crossing her arms in front of her as she walked through the corridor. She wrinkled her nose at the floor, head spinning. She hadn't been wavering, had she? Her feet stopped and she let out a huffed breath. It seemed that she had. Overnight, in just a matter of hours, she had allowed her long-standing opinion of Lord Blackwell to falter. Never again.

At any rate, if he truly was recovering, then he would no longer have any 'dying wishes' or any strange desire to become a changed man. He would surely go back to his old habits and Margaret would be much better off keeping him at arm's length.

Or, better yet, at *England's* length. Even if he was an entire country away, it still wouldn't be enough. Since that was impossible at present, she would have to simply avoid him within the walls of Langdale Abbey. With so much to explore, she could keep herself busy and distant. She would look after her brothers and keep with their pace, learning all she could about their new home.



There was a secret passageway behind the tapestry in the library. Margaret hadn't been looking for it, but after stumbling off the final rung of the ladder, she had backed into the wall. The tapestry had shifted, revealing a flat handle and latch.

She leaned closer, ignoring the pain throbbing in her knee. She had twisted it, all for the sake of reaching her favorite collection of Wordsworth's poetry she had spotted on the top shelf. She set the book down on one rung of the ladder before pinching the latch of the hidden door and wiggling it. The

metal screeched as the door came unstuck. She turned away from the cloud of dust and rubbed her eyes, allowing it to clear before she inched the door open farther.

It was dark—perhaps as dark as one would expect from a secret passageway. She didn't dare step forward for fear of what could be lurking inside. Her mind drew up an image of spiders and rodents crawling on her skin, and it made her take a step back.

She glanced over her shoulder. The library was completely empty. No servants, no other members of the household. Lady Blackwell, Rebecca, Sally, and Rachel would be gathering in the morning room soon, and Margaret had been invited. She looked forward to tea each day, along with the sweet and savory offerings that were always on the tray.

Over the past fortnight, Margaret had managed to not have a single interaction with Lord Blackwell. He hadn't requested to see her, and she had been careful not to walk past his room when the door was open. Not only had she avoided any more contentious conversations, but she had even avoided seeing his face for the entire fortnight.

She had been surprised that he hadn't called for her. Perhaps he had finally learned that she was not interested in forming any sort of unnecessary bond between them. They were husband and wife on paper, but strangers otherwise. It seemed he had given up.

Margaret didn't even know what conclusions the physician had drawn during his visits to Lord Blackwell. Lady Blackwell and her daughters had been very hushed about the subject when Margaret was nearby. Lord Blackwell was rarely mentioned, but when he was, the subject was changed. It was obviously done for Margaret's sake. During their visits, the

women focused their conversation on fashion, courtships, gossip about their acquaintances, and learning more about Margaret and her family.

Margaret was also learning more about her new sisters-in-law. All three women were agreeable like their mother, but each with a very distinct personality. Rebecca was quick to voice her opinion, loyal, and enjoyed making the others laugh. Sally was rather quiet, unless the subject turned to books and music. Rachel was, perhaps, the most unusual, though Margaret quite liked her. She seemed to be the only one who understood Margaret's reservations about her new marriage. She spoke of her brother's faults often, in fact. Nearly every word that came from her mouth had a sardonic tone and was accompanied by a mischievous smile or smirk. She held her head high like her mother and was just as regal, but she was far less cheerful and optimistic.

Margaret didn't know whether she preferred to speak less of Lord Blackwell, or whether she was uncomfortable not knowing whether he was going to be her husband for long or not. Even if he was, she reassured herself that she could carry on the way she had been—exploring the house, spending time with the more agreeable members of the family, and looking after her father and younger brothers.

At the thought of James and Philip, Margaret closed the door behind the tapestry, covering it the way she had found it. If her brothers discovered something like this, she didn't dare imagine what trouble they might find themselves in. Did Lady Blackwell know about the hidden door? Surely she did. If the house had been in the family for generations, then Margaret couldn't have been the first person to discover it.

She did wonder where the passage led to. If she was ever feeling brave or adventurous, perhaps she could light a candle and explore. But at the moment, she was simply happy to have the library all to herself.

With a contented sigh, she sat down on the armchair by the window with her Wordsworth book in hand. It had become her favorite place to sit. She had a lovely view of the countryside and the warmth of the sun against her face. Tucking her feet underneath her, she opened the pages of the book. She still had a few minutes before tea.

She jumped when she heard a loud creaking noise. The library doors opened.

She lowered the book, craning her neck to see who was walking inside. At this hour, it was often a maid coming to dust the shelves.

Her heart jumped to her throat when she caught sight of the visitor.

It was Lord Blackwell, walking perfectly on his two legs, broad shoulders nestled snugly in a navy blue jacket.

Long hair, beard, smirk, and all were moving straight toward her.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 12



“**W**hat are you doing?” The words blurted out of Margaret’s mouth before she could stop them.

Lord Blackwell had always been tucked under his blankets, hardly moving an inch. She didn’t know what to do with him advancing toward her like that. She pinned her body against the back of the armchair, careful not to blink. Her heart pounded in her ears.

“I have come to read a book.” Even his voice was different. It was stronger. His lips were still curved in his tell-tale smirk. “I thought I might find you here.”

“B-but I—” Her voice trailed off as he walked past her and went straight for the shelf. How had he changed so much in just a matter of weeks? She turned in her chair to watch him. Heavens, if he suddenly had the strength to climb a ladder, she might faint.

He lifted his arm, pulling a book from the second highest shelf without any need for the ladder at all. She studied his frame, surprised by his size. He had appeared so small in that overly large bed of his, buried by blankets and satin pillows. She looked away as soon as he glanced at her.

“I see you have already taken my favorite,” he said.

She met his gaze, shaking away her confusion the best she could. “You are an admirer of Wordsworth?”

“On a day like today, yes.” He grinned. “Look at all the beautiful nature out that window. I look forward to exploring it again.”

Margaret tried to swallow, but her throat was dry.

He strode past her chair, choosing the smaller, wooden one directly opposite hers. His movements were still a little slow, but nothing that would indicate he had been lying in bed for weeks on end. His eyes locked on her face, the sunlight from the window reflecting on his irises, bringing out gold tones in the brown that she hadn’t noticed before. “I see you have also chosen my favorite place to sit.”

Margaret could hardly form a sentence, the shock of seeing him there was like a hand around her neck, squeezing until she couldn’t breathe. She composed herself. “The best seat always belongs to the first person to enter a room.”

“That is a true statement.” The corners of his eyes lifted with his smile. He folded his arms across his chest, taking a deep breath. It still sounded a little labored, but it was nothing compared to what it had been before. “But if you are a selfless, generous person, I suppose you would choose a seat that was not the best, simply to allow others the opportunity.”

“Are you meaning to say that I am a selfish person?” Margaret raised one eyebrow.

Lord Blackwell shrugged one shoulder. He was trying to get a reaction from her, that much was obvious.

Even though she knew it, she still couldn’t help but oblige him. She closed her book, sitting forward. “Forgive me, my lord, but I was not expecting you to prance through that

doorway as if—as if you haven't been on your deathbed for weeks.”

He shook his head. “You do not need to call me ‘my lord.’ We are married. Call me Peter.”

“I prefer not to remember that we are married.”

He leaned forward on his chair, just as she was. The action brought his face far too close to hers. She shifted uncomfortably, but didn't sit back. She didn't want him to think she was too weak to face him so directly.

His dark lashes cast a shadow on his cheek. “Very well. Pretend we are not married. But there is still no need for formalities.”

There was something far too...familiar about using his Christian name. Calling him Peter would turn him into a different person. *Lord Blackwell* was the man who was sitting across from her. *Lord Blackwell* was the man she had always hated. If she called him Peter, then she might risk forgetting that.

“I will only call you Peter if you promise to never call me ‘your dear wife’ again.” Margaret shuddered. “That was truly horrifying.”

Peter tipped his head back with a laugh, rubbing his palms together. “I am glad to hear that it had the desired effect.”

Margaret's jaw lowered. “You are incorrigible.”

His grin only widened. “There are many things that I would like to change about myself, but my ability to tease you is something that I should like to maintain forever.”

Forever.

Margaret's stomach tied itself in a knot. She had been unsure about Peter's recovery, but now that she saw him, sitting across from her lively and engaged, she had the sickening sense that the word forever was one she would have to familiarize herself with. She would be married to him... *until death do they part.*

"If that is the case, and your teasing shall never cease, then I shall continue to avoid you." She picked up her book, opening the pages. She had come to the library to read, not to engage in a verbal battle.

"Avoiding me will be much more difficult now that I am leaving my room."

She glanced up from the book. "I did wonder when you were going to acknowledge the fact that you are walking without any apparent struggle."

He bit his lower lip, nodding. "Ah, yes. It is not as easy as I make it appear. My limbs have grown unaccustomed to it, but it did feel rather fulfilling to surprise you with my entrance. I have missed your visits this past fortnight."

Why was he suddenly admitting to all his schemes as if they were something to be proud of? He seemed to be writing a list in his mind of each time he managed to draw any sort of emotion out of Margaret, counting himself victorious for each one, boosting his already elevated ego with the accomplishments.

She remembered what Papa had said. She couldn't trust a single word he said. He was trying to gain her favor by telling her that he had missed her. For what nefarious purpose, she didn't know, but surely there was something. How could that mischievous smile mean anything sincere?

Margaret scoffed as she leafed through the pages of the book, searching for one of her favorite poems. “Yes, you have missed your daily allowance of entertainment. I’m sorry I was unwilling to provide that.”

He laughed, leaning back in his chair and allowing her a moment to breathe. Why was he so unsettling to her composure? She hadn’t noticed before, but her heart had picked up speed. Perhaps she was flustered because she hadn’t expected him to walk into the room? Or because she had been thinking too hard about what he had told her about his father and the blame he shared for what happened to her family. Either way, she scolded herself for feeling so out of sorts.

“Will you read to me?” Peter asked. “Since you took the book I was planning to read. It is my dying wish, remember?”

She met his eyes. “It appears to me that you are no longer dying.”

He pressed a hand to his chest. “I am, I assure you. But slower. It may take me fifty years, but I will be there eventually.”

She kept her lips pressed together. She didn’t find him amusing, only ridiculous.

She checked the long case clock in the corner between two bookshelves. “I’m afraid my plans for a quiet morning of reading in the library have been...corrupted.” She gave him a pointed look. “And I have an appointment with your mother and sisters that I cannot miss. Good day, my lord.” She stood, marching toward the exit as quickly as she could.

“Good day, my dear wife.”

She whirled around. “I said—”

“We had an agreement.”

Oh. She hadn't used his Christian name. Her hands perspired, so she clutched the sides of her white muslin morning dress. She was being absurd. Using his name would not change how she saw him...not unless she felt she was already in danger of that.

She shook herself of her worries, meeting his gaze with confidence from across the room. It was harmless. It was only a name.

“Good day, Peter.”

She ignored his victorious smile as she took her leave of the room.



Margaret's hand shook as she lifted her teacup to her lips. The steaming, flavorful liquid burned down her throat as she swallowed. It needed more cream.

She steadied her hand before reaching for the cream pitcher and added another splash to her cup. Lady Blackwell and her daughters sat on the settee and chairs surrounding the tea table, and Margaret sat by herself on the opposite sofa. She looked forward to the day Mama would return to Langdale Abbey and join them. Though Lady Blackwell was very warm and hospitable, it was still clear that Margaret was the stranger in the room. The new arrival. The center of attention. Most of their conversations seemed to be skirting around the subject of greatest interest in the house—Peter's unexpected recovery.

Margaret wanted to tell them that they didn't have to hide their opinions and feelings about it any longer...she most certainly knew he was becoming well again. He had made that very clear in the library that day. It was not a secret. She had

been contending with the truth for the last hour, but now she had reluctantly accepted her fate. She was not going to be a widow in the near future.

She took another sip of tea, and the porcelain rattled when she set the cup back on the saucer. If the other ladies would not bring up the subject, then she would, simply so they knew it was not offensive to her.

“I saw Peter in the library just now,” Margaret said. “He looked well. He was walking without any struggle.”

Lady Blackwell dropped a cube of sugar into her cup, eyes widening. “Did you?” She shared a glance with Rachel before her lips quirked upward in a smile. “I knew he had begun walking small distances down the corridor, but I didn’t expect him to venture as far as the library on his own. I did not know he had the energy.” Her voice was bright with excitement.

It must have been his determination to vex Margaret that gave him such energy. She rolled her shoulders back, focusing on her manners rather than the unease in her stomach. “Yes, he did not seem fatigued in the slightest. It is extraordinary that he has made such progress in such a short time.”

“Indeed.” Lady Blackwell gave her an inquisitive glance. She must have been wondering why Margaret was so accepting of the turn of events, but she didn’t ask any questions.

Sally, who had done little to hide her boredom before, was now listening with rapt attention. Her blonde curls bounced as she leaned forward on her chair. “Do you think he will be well enough to dance at the ball, Mama?”

Lady Blackwell paused as she stirred her tea. “At this rate, I think so.”

“A ball?” Margaret asked.

Lady Blackwell’s eyes flitted up to Margaret, an apology in her gaze. “Yes. I neglected to tell you that Rachel and I have been discussing the idea of a ball to take place in a fortnight. We have not made the plan official yet, nor did we want to trouble you with the planning until we knew if Peter would be well enough to attend. As the new countess, you most certainly should be involved in the preparations and act as hostess for the evening.” She gave a soft smile. “If you are inclined, of course. Say the word, and we shall abandon the idea entirely.”

“No, of course not.” Margaret returned her smile, though her stomach twisted with nervousness. “I love parties. Do you think...people will attend?” It was not a secret that news of Lord Blackwell’s marriage had reached every noteworthy family in England, and that most were quite...skeptical about the match and what had brought it about. His illness had also been a favorite subject of any gossip paper, and the news of his recovery was too recent to have been spread.

People had already begun guessing at what might have motivated him to marry Margaret when he was so close to death. If anyone attended the ball, Margaret suspected it would be purely out of curiosity, not admiration or respect for either family involved. The Lovell name had been crushed a long time ago, and the Blackwell title might not have been enough to revive it.

“I’m not certain how many guests we will have,” Lady Blackwell said. “But invitations will be sent nonetheless. If no one attends, then we shall have our own ball with only our family to enjoy the delicious food and lovely music. We cannot go wrong.”

Margaret's heart soared at the idea of wearing a ballgown again. She had already been to the modiste earlier that week to have a variety of new dresses made. Morning dresses, day dresses, spencer jackets, pelisses, and a few evening dresses as well. She had chosen a soft lavender fabric for one of the ballgowns, and now that she had an event to wear it to, she was even more eager to see it finished.

Lady Blackwell smoothed her hands over her muslin skirts. "If people do come, however, it will be the perfect opportunity to show the bond our families have made. The bond you and Peter have made."

Margaret didn't particularly like the word *bond* being used in relation to herself and Peter. She fiddled with the handle of her teacup, turning it one way, then the other. "I suppose it will."

"It will be essential for helping your family reclaim the status you had before the unfortunate...proceedings between Peter and your father." Lady Blackwell gave a distinct nod. "We will ensure that we are well prepared for any speculation that may arise from the guests. We must make the party...unforgettable."

Rebecca and Sally both nodded, lips stretched with wide smiles. "It will be the perfect place to practice for our first season," Rebecca said. "My dancing will be best in the ballroom here, since that is where I have been practicing."

"May I play some of the music?" Sally asked, wide brown eyes tipping downward like a begging puppy. "I would rather play the pianoforte than dance."

Lady Blackwell gave a quiet laugh. "Of course you may, if Margaret approves."

Margaret's eyebrows shot up when she realized what Lady Blackwell meant. Margaret was hostess. Surely Lady Blackwell would help her, but Margaret would have to fill her shoes. The thought was rather daunting.

"Yes. Sally would delight all the guests with her music, to be sure." Margaret took a deep breath.

Rachel scoffed. "Perhaps you should hear her play a quadrille before you make such an assumption."

Sally gasped, whirling on her sister with a scowl.

"Rachel," Lady Blackwell scolded.

Rachel shrugged, half her mouth lifting in a smile. "I must do something to stop her from becoming too proud. We already have one sibling with such a tendency." Her eyes slid to Margaret. She must have meant Peter.

Margaret smiled back. She could always rely on Rachel to make subtle jabs at him.

Rachel let out a long sigh. "In truth, Sally is absurdly talented; it is entirely unfair. If I had half her musical abilities, I might have been able to catch the attention of a few more gentlemen during my season. Instead I was forced to settle for ___"

"Very well," Lady Blackwell interrupted with a sharp breath. "Now that we have discussed the ball, and Margaret approves of the idea, I will have the invitations sent."

Margaret studied Rachel and her sharp, arched eyebrows. She stared down at her teacup as she took a long sip. She hardly seemed offended that her mother had interrupted her. Nothing ever seemed to cause her distress. She spoke facts plainly, without any reservation. Her manners were questionable, but that didn't stop Margaret from liking her.

“Is Peter still in the library?” Lady Blackwell asked.

Margaret nodded. “That is where I left him.” She wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that he was still chuckling in that empty library. She could envision it quite clearly, in fact.

“If you will excuse me,” Lady Blackwell said with a smile, “I am going to go congratulate him.”

He didn’t need his mother’s congratulations. Surely he was still busy congratulating himself.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13



P pausing to catch his breath, Peter leaned against the wall in the corridor. His legs still quaked a little beneath him, but he didn't know whether he should attribute that to his illness, or the fact that he was about to knock on Mr. Lovell's door.

As soon as Margaret had left the library, he had made his way to Mr. Lovell's room in the west wing. The walk had been more exhausting than he had expected. But he couldn't delay the conversation any longer. He had already been driving himself mad in his room anticipating it.

He had sent a servant to prepare Mr. Lovell for Peter's visit, to ensure he was awake and not caught by surprise. Surely the man was not looking forward to it any more than Peter was. How Mr. Lovell must have hated him. If his daughter hated him so much, Peter could only imagine how much more Mr. Lovell would resent what he had done.

Peter had personally committed crimes against him. He had cheated and lied and stolen from him. He had convinced society that he was a dishonest man in order to save himself. The man had a right to challenge him to a duel, or demand that Peter take responsibility for his false accusations. He could

murder him that very day, in that very room, and Peter would not blame him.

His heart beat a wild rhythm in his chest as he raised his fist to knock on the door. He barely heard the voice from within, but it was clear enough.

“Come in.”

He stepped inside the dim room, taking a moment to allow his eyes to adjust. The curtains were partially closed, letting only a fraction of sunlight through the window.

Mr. Lovell was propped up on his pillows, eyes locked on Peter. He had aged a great deal since their last conversation four years before, hair speckled with more grey, and his face lined with more wrinkles. Even his shoulders appeared more sloped, as if they had been bearing far more weight. And they had.

All because of Peter.

He didn't recall Mr. Lovell ever being intimidating before, but now Peter felt the urge to shrink into the floor. He deserved to feel that way. He deserved to be *torn apart* by the man in front of him. His chest tightened as he took his first step forward.

To Peter's surprise, Mr. Lovell spoke first. “You look remarkably well for a man who is dying.”

Had no one told him? Peter's feet froze on the floorboards. “My physician has given me surprising news. I assure you, I did not expect it, but he now claims that my condition has improved and I am likely to...recover.” He swallowed. “Fully.”

He hadn't meant to start their conversation with that subject. He hadn't come to cause the man even more distress;

he had come to apologize.

Mr. Lovell's face twisted in surprise, his thick brows pinching together, much like Margaret's always did. But it was far less endearing when he did it.

"You told my daughter that you would die shortly after you married her, did you not?"

"I did." Peter sighed. "And I did intend to keep my word. I had no hope or expectation that my condition would change for the better as it has."

Mr. Lovell let out a long exhale. His next inhale turned into a bout of coughing. The sound rattled in his lungs, and Peter could practically feel it in his own chest. His ribs were still sore from how often he had coughed in a similar manner. Concern tingled over the back of his neck. Was Mr. Lovell's condition worsening since arriving at Langdale Abbey? Or had he always been so unwell? He needed to ensure the physician was giving him proper attention.

When Mr. Lovell's coughing stopped, his face was crimson. "The only thing I have consoled myself with, when considering my daughter's decision to accept your proposal, was the promise that you would not be her husband for long." His voice was raspy, heavy with regret. "Does she know?"

"Yes." Peter took a few steps closer. "She is aware, and just as disappointed as you might imagine, though she is too polite to say it directly." *Polite* wasn't the first word he would use to describe Margaret, but he couldn't speak unkindly of her to her father. "But I hope to prove to her, and to you, that I can be the sort of husband she deserves, even if she does not want me." Peter paused, collecting his thoughts. "I understand that these new circumstances are not ideal, but I will do what is best to ensure she is cared for."

Mr. Lovell watched him, eyes flooding with skepticism.

“But I did not come here to deliver this news. I came to offer my most sincere apology.” Peter felt like a child again, standing before his own father, waiting to be scolded or struck for the things he had done wrong. His heart hammered in his chest. “I am sorry for the pain I have caused your family, the suffering, the confusion, and the heartache. I was a fool. I am one still. I was selfish. I acted rashly according to the advice and plans given to me by my father. I thought it was the only way to save my family from financial ruin. That fate was never yours to bear, and though it is hardly any consolation, I did hope that by marrying your daughter I could give you back your place in society and the life of comfort your family has always been entitled to. I wish to return to you what I stole, no matter what it takes.” The last of his words hung in the air as he awaited Mr. Lovell’s reply.

The man simply stared at him, pale eyes reflecting deep contemplation. His jaw was tight, working over nothing. The seconds ticked by, and Peter began to wonder if he would reply at all. He searched for more to say. “And...I—I would understand completely if you want me to confess my misdeeds to the *ton*.”

Mr. Lovell’s brow furrowed again. “Why would I have you do that now that you have married my daughter? It will be a miracle if her reputation is saved at all, even by being connected to your title.”

“What else would you have me do then to make amends? I will do whatever you ask.” Peter’s limbs cried out in exhaustion, but he kept his posture tall.

Mr. Lovell watched him carefully for several seconds before clearing his throat. “You said you would do all you

could to ensure Margaret is cared for.”

“Yes.” Peter nodded.

“As her father, I still take that as my responsibility.” Mr. Lovell’s eyes flashed with determination. “There is only one way that you can ensure Margaret is kept safe and happy. You must keep your distance from her. Do not force her to fulfill any role that might be expected of her as a wife. Allow her to live her life at Langdale Abbey as she originally planned—without you. That is my request.”

Peter looked down at the floor. He felt like he had been struck. He couldn’t blame Mr. Lovell for thinking the worst of him, but it still stung more than he cared to admit. “I have reason to think she might not hate me as much as she once did.” Peter had seen glimpses of understanding in her expressions, even if she did try to hide them.

“Give me your word.”

Peter looked up, his heart thudding against his ribs.

Mr. Lovell’s voice was weak and quiet, but by the way it was piercing Peter’s chest, it could have commanded an army. “If you are to live within these walls alongside my daughter, promise that you will stay away from her.”

Peter gave a weak nod, confused by the sinking sensation in his stomach.

“I promise.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14



There were few things Peter's mother liked more than surprising people. He shared the trait, but with one obvious difference.

Mother only dealt out pleasant surprises.

Peter was finding that he was better at the other sort. His recovery seemed to come as an unpleasant surprise to most people he encountered. Well, at least Margaret and Mr. Lovell. Peter was still trying to decipher Rachel's reaction when she had seen him walk into the drawing room that evening.

The dinner was a surprise that Mother had put together earlier that day, as soon as she had realized that he was feeling well enough to join them. She had thrown the kitchen staff into a panic as she instructed them to prepare Peter's favorite four-course meal for a celebration with the family.

Mother was dressed in her most formal navy blue gown, eyes and mouth plastered in an unrelenting smile. "Oh, Peter, you look so very handsome." She gasped with delight, turning toward the others in the room. "Does he not?"

Sally nodded with a sweet smile. Rebecca glanced up with a skeptical eye. Rachel matched it. "If I could see his face beneath that beard and hair, I might be able to give my opinion a little better."

“My hair is not in my face, Rachel.” Peter pointed at his head. “My valet combed it back.”

Rebecca interlaced her fingers on her lap, eyeing him with one dainty eyebrow arched. “It *is* still rather distracting. Wouldn’t you agree, Margaret?”

Just at the mention of her name, Peter’s stomach lurched. He had avoided looking in her direction when he had walked into the room. His conversation with her father was still pounding in his ears, repeating in his mind over and over like a musician attempting to tune a broken violin.

His eyes took her in with one quick glance, but then they lingered.

Her golden hair was arranged atop her head, with a few limp curls framing her face. Her sharp eyes studied him unabashedly as she must have been considering Rebecca’s question. The petal sleeves of her ivory evening gown extended past her narrow shoulders, and her collarbones caught the candlelight, drawing his eye to the emerald pendant at her neck. His throat went dry, and it felt like minutes instead of seconds before her response came.

“Yes, very distracting.” She looked away as soon as she voiced her agreement.

Peter wanted to offer a retort, but he lacked the wit at the moment. She was rather distracting herself. And after his promise to her father, he was now forbidden to be near her. That must have been the reason his stomach was twisting into one great knot at the sound of her voice. Her disinterest in him would make it easier for him to keep his promise, even if it did bother him even more than it had before.

As distracted as he was, he didn't notice Cornelius stand to offer Rachel his arm. Mother's voice was muffled behind his thoughts, but he gathered that it was time to go to the dining room.

Margaret drifted toward him, taking hesitant steps. He escorted her silently to the dining table, and he felt her gaze on the side of his face. It flickered to him and away again repeatedly. She must have been surprised that he wasn't saying anything that would upset her. Or saying anything at all.

The first course was Peter's favorite, white soup, followed by an assortment of vegetables, breads, and a *fricasee* of veal and mushrooms. When it came time for the desserts, Mother had already expressed her joy at seeing Peter at the table once again at least six times. He smiled, but it felt forced. How could he be happy to be there if he knew he was inconveniencing the Lovells? So long as Margaret was not happy that he was there, he couldn't manage to feel it himself.

He caught her eye across the table as the baked apples and meringues were placed on the table between them.

His frustration multiplied by the second. He was helpless to change her opinion now. He couldn't approach her without feeling like he wasn't keeping his word to her father. If only he could read her thoughts—then he might be offended enough to be happy about keeping his distance.

The ladies removed to the drawing room after the meal was finished, leaving Peter with Cornelius at the table. He didn't linger for very long, staring down at his glass of port rather than drinking it. He didn't like the formality. It was a dinner meant to celebrate his recovery, but there were no guests to impress—no one to see whether they followed the customary routines of a dinner party.

He stayed for only a few minutes before leaving his place at the table to rejoin his mother, sisters, and Margaret in the drawing room.

A song had already begun on the pianoforte, the slow, haunting melody drifting through every room and corridor of the house. It bounced off the walls and floors, filling every inch of the space. The song was complex, one that he didn't recognize. Considering the skill with which it was played, he could only assume that it was Sally. She had been determined to rest her fingers before her first season in London though, so he was surprised that she would be abandoning that conviction for an occasion with only her family listening.

He stopped in the drawing room doorway. It wasn't Sally at the pianoforte.

It was Margaret. The turquoise wallpaper was a deeper blue in the dim light, and when Margaret looked up from her sheet music, her eyes matched the walls. She didn't miss a note, carrying on with her performance. She drew her lip into her mouth in concentration as her fingers moved deftly over the keys.

Peter slipped into the room, sitting on the empty settee adjacent to the pianoforte. Margaret swayed with the music, never losing her perfect rhythm as she played the song. When the last note rang through the air, Mother applauded, and his sisters joined her.

Peter gave his own applause, unable to stop his smile. He never would have guessed that Margaret was so accomplished on the pianoforte. He had imagined her as the sort of young woman who had been too headstrong and impatient to give proper time to developing the talent. It seemed he had

misjudged her. Perhaps before he had ruined her life she had been patient and serene.

Her eyes snapped up to meet his as she hesitantly stepped away from the pianoforte. She glanced around the room before walking in his direction. He hadn't meant to, but it seemed he had chosen the seat beside hers.

"That was a remarkable performance," Peter said as she sat down beside him. He tried to ignore the soft scent of roses that accompanied her. "I didn't expect such talent from you." He bit back his words, immediately regretting them. He hadn't meant to phrase it quite that way.

Her eyes rounded, then narrowed. "You must have forgotten that I was raised as a lady. I had the same level of instruction as your sisters have."

"Yes, forgive me."

"I know you like to think me inept at everything." She sat up straighter. "I'm sorry that my surprising musical ability has disappointed you."

"While we are making apologies..." Peter tipped his head to one side, "I'm sorry to have disappointed you by *breathing*. I would stop, but my physician has advised me against it." He lowered his voice, ensuring she was the only one who could hear the words.

Margaret crossed her arms, leaning back in the settee. "I am not as cruel as that."

"Your face tells a different story. I daresay you slipped a bit of poison into my drink in the dining room this evening."

She gave an exasperated sigh. Then she leaned closer, eyes flashing with malice in the candlelight. "That might very well be the first good idea you have ever had."

Peter laughed under his breath, but Margaret did not appear amused. Her jaw was tight as she turned away from him. He shouldn't have been trying to continue the conversation, but he couldn't stop himself. A surge of frustration was tearing the seams of his resolve to keep his word to her father. He glanced around the room. Mother had moved to sit between Rachel and Sally, and the three were engaged in a conversation of their own, likely about the music Sally was planning to learn before her season. Rebecca was reading in the opposite corner of the drawing room.

Satisfied with the privacy of their conversation, Peter leaned forward until Margaret's eyes finally shifted back to him. "If you plan to murder me, at least give me the courtesy of a swift death," he said. "Better yet, do it while I am asleep."

Her lips pressed together and she looked down. It was becoming increasingly difficult to decipher her reactions. At one moment, he was certain she hated him more than any creature who had ever walked the earth, and the next, she seemed amused by him. Could someone be amused by someone they hated? He would have to ponder on that question later that night. It would likely keep him up far later than he wanted. But by the way Margaret seemed to actually be considering his words about murder, falling asleep that night might not be a wise decision at all.

She sat up straighter. "Are you asking me to help you keep your promise?" There was a sly edge to her voice that he hadn't heard before. It was a little disconcerting.

"Which one?" He had made a great deal of promises of late.

"The one in your letter."

He swallowed, a laugh of disbelief catching in his throat. “How very generous of you to offer to help me *die*, but I will have to decline.”

For a moment, her blue eyes danced with amusement, the corners wrinkling slightly. But she hid it well, tucking it behind another frown. “A pity.”

Peter stared at her with shock. “You are far more nefarious than you appear.”

“I don’t appear nefarious? I will take that as an insult.”

“I would never expect a woman with a face as beautiful and seemingly innocent as yours to have such wicked intentions. Nor would I expect such...*vicious* words to come from your mouth.” His gaze flickered to her lips for a moment, the corners upturned ever so slightly. Her upper lip was just as full as her lower, edged with a perfect cupid’s bow. He looked away, choosing to ignore the way his stomach flopped. “Unless...you are teasing me?”

She scoffed and lifted one hand in denial. “No. I’m not.”

“Why? Because I might mistake it for flirting?” He raised one eyebrow.

She rotated slightly to face him. “Is that what I should call *your* relentless teasing? If so, then I should become even more wary of it.”

“Why should I flirt with my wife?” He shook his head dramatically. “That would be preposterous. Entirely unheard of.”

Margaret leaned forward, brows furrowing. “I told you not to call me your wife.”

He leaned forward with one elbow on his knee, matching her position. He locked eyes with her. “Of course. If you plan to murder me, then I might as well practice calling you my widow instead.”

She studied his face for a long moment. He didn’t move, taking the opportunity to study her features just as carefully. Her eyes were deep, perhaps more so than the sea. Her nose was short with a rounded tip, her cheeks flooded with a hint of color. He took special care not to look at her mouth again.

Her eyebrows twitched as she gave her reply, but the rest of her expression didn’t falter. “If I do murder you, then you shall be dead and all your practice will have been in vain.”

Peter grinned. She was relentless.

Margaret’s gaze flickered upward and to the left. Her eyes rounded, and her cheeks darkened.

Peter followed her gaze. Mother stood between them, eyes wide as she stared down at Margaret. He had been too distracted to see her approach. Judging by her expression, it seemed she had overheard Margaret’s last statement.

He stifled a laugh by clearing his throat, leaning back into the settee.

This would be entertaining.

“Lady Blackwell.” Margaret gave a stiff smile, shifting awkwardly to face her. “I didn’t mean...I—well...—” She paused to take a breath, a sheen of perspiration on her forehead.

“We have all wished to murder Peter at one point or another,” Mother said, waving a hand through the air with a smile. “Haven’t we, Rachel?”

Rachel gave a nod that was far too emphatic. He scowled at her.

“Indeed.” Mother gave Margaret a reassuring smile, but there was a hint of worry in her eyes that only Peter would recognize. He looked down in an attempt to hide his growing smile. Let Mother think Margaret was a madwoman with a propensity for revenge. Perhaps she was. He was learning new things about her every day. Surprising things.

“I don’t actually wish to murder him. I was...jesting.” Margaret’s voice was quick, and it cracked on the last word.

Peter leaned closer to Mother with a whisper. “That is what all the best murderers say.”

Margaret shot him an exasperated look.

Mother tipped her head back with a laugh. She touched Margaret’s shoulder. “Oh, I do not doubt your innocence, my dear. Whatever Peter said to provoke such a statement from you was undoubtedly well-deserved. You are far too sweet.”

Sweet was not the word Peter would use to describe her. Mother did tend to use that word a little too freely.

“Not only that, but you are a master at the pianoforte. I was just speaking with Sally, and she agreed that the two of you must learn a duet for the ball.” Mother swept her skirts under her and sat down on the other side of Margaret, pulling her attention away from Peter. He tapped his fingertips on his knee, stealing another look at Margaret. His heart thudded weakly at the sight of the smile she was giving his mother. Why couldn’t he earn one of those?

He crossed his arms over his chest, observing the conversation while his mind wandered back to his conversation with Mr. Lovell. He clenched his jaw. What did

‘staying away from Margaret’ mean, exactly? He and Mr. Lovell had not spoken directly of the terms of their agreement. He had said that he wanted Margaret to be able to live her life at Langdale Abbey as she had originally planned—without Peter. But there were only certain things that were within his control. Margaret could go where she wished, and if Peter happened to be there, then was he allowed to stay?

If she was the one to start a conversation with him, could he finish it?

As husband and wife, they would be expected to have some interactions, especially when they began to go out in public and host guests. He would do his best to keep his word, but the simple truth of the matter was that the terms of his promise to Mr. Lovell were too vague.

Vague enough that he could justify almost anything.

After a little convincing from Mother, Margaret stood to find another piece to play on the pianoforte. As soon as she was gone, Mother moved a little closer. He felt the sharp arch of her eyebrow before he even saw it.

“Have you been being kind to Margaret?”

“Yes,” he said with a quiet sigh. “Very kind. Yet nothing seems to work.”

“Work?”

He shook his head. He didn’t need to involve his mother with his problems. He wasn’t a child.

Mother touched his arm, calling his gaze back to her face. “She has undergone a great deal of change. Give her time. She may come to like you eventually.” The soft, reassuring tone of her voice always served to calm him. “Don’t give up. She has spent years thinking you are the most horrible creature to ever

walk the earth. Such a firm opinion cannot change so quickly. Your actions toward her family cannot be so easily forgotten. Do not simply tell her that you have changed. *Show* her.”

Peter’s gaze drifted to Margaret. She was searching through their selection of sheet music, brow furrowed in concentration. He wanted nothing more than to convince her that he was a better man than the one she thought she knew. It was what kept him awake at night, what kept him motivated to face each day. And it was, quite possibly, what had kept him alive.

“Are you going to tell me why she was speaking of murdering you?” Mother asked in a whisper. Her voice shook with amusement.

“It was a verbal match, that was all.”

“It seems she won.”

Peter laughed. “It seems she did.” He tried to look away from Margaret, but he couldn’t seem to. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, her lips pressing together in thought as she examined each piece of music. A dimple dented her cheek with the expression, one that he had never noticed before. His smile faded, and he tore his gaze away.

What would their future look like? There was no way of knowing. If her father had his way, they would live separate lives within the same walls. But if Peter had his way, they would reach some sort of stalemate of understanding. They would be friends.

He didn’t allow his thoughts to venture past that. Not yet.

He didn’t break his promises. If he was going to stay away from Margaret as her father had asked, he would simply have to find a way to draw her to him. A competition, perhaps?

A slow smile returned to his face. Perhaps it was easy for her to resist his charm, but a competition seemed to be something that she would be unable to resist.

“What are you smiling about?” Mother asked with a hint of suspicion.

He turned to face her, giving her hand a light squeeze. “I am simply grateful to be alive.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15



The morning was dark, the sun buried in clouds. Margaret called her maid to help her dress quickly so she could have a few minutes of quiet time to read in the library before breakfast. She had promised James and Philip that she would play blind man's bluff with them outside that day, so she wouldn't have time for her usual library visit later. She had been thoroughly enjoying reading Wordsworth's poetry again. Each time she did, she loved it even more. And since Peter had interrupted her the day before, she hadn't been able to make it through very many of his works.

The mere thought of him raised a surge of frustration in her chest. There was more than just frustration, though. The mix of emotions that swirled around was causing far more turmoil than she wanted for her quiet morning. She wanted solitude and silence—she didn't want Peter taking up any space in her mind. She had already spent far too much of the night reflecting on their conversations from the day before. It had been humiliating to have Lady Blackwell overhear her words about murdering him. Yet Peter had been smirking, enjoying every moment of Margaret's disgrace. Wicked man. There were times she wanted to throw a facer at him.

He infuriated her, yet the emotion was becoming rather confusing.

The anger had once been entirely directed at him, but now it was partially directed at herself. Why was she allowing him to affect her at all?

Lost in her thoughts, she burst through the library doors, breathing in the familiar scent of paper and leather with a contented sigh.

But then her gaze caught on her favorite leather chair by the window.

Peter sat with his long legs stretched out in front of him, a book propped open on his lap. His hair was combed back away from his face as it had been the night before. She scolded herself for how her stomach fluttered nervously at the sight of him. What was wrong with her? Her brow pinched, and her fists curled at her sides.

He glanced up, his head cocking to one side with a lopsided smile. “Good morning, Margaret. I didn’t expect to see you here.” The tone of his voice combined with his grin contradicted his words. He *had* expected it.

Her hopes of a quiet hour of reading vanished like a trail of smoke. She froze where she stood, crossing her arms. “Good morning.”

“You sound upset.” Peter sat up straighter, eyes filled with curiosity. “What is the matter?”

Whatever game he was trying to play, she would have no part of it. “I’m not upset. I simply came to find my book so I could go read in my room.” She marched toward the bookcase. Gathering her pale blue skirts into one hand, she climbed up the first step of the ladder. From the corner of her eye, she saw Peter stand and walk toward her.

She ignored him, keeping her attention fixed on the shelf. She scoured the shelf for any sign of the book she had been reading the day before. Where was it?

“Are you looking for this?”

She almost jumped. Peter’s deep voice came from right behind her.

“You are going to make me fall off this ladder.” Margaret whirled around, glaring down at him as he held the Wordsworth book in front of him. “But no, that is not the book I was looking for,” she lied. He was standing so close. From her place on the second rung of the ladder, she was slightly taller than him. It was a strange vantage point, and it gave her a clear view of his eyes. The brown and gold tones were illuminated by the dull morning light. The teasing glint was unmistakable. His lips, still partially covered by that ridiculous mustache, were pinched together in a victorious smile.

She stepped down one rung, but that did not make it better. Now their eyes were level, his face far too close to hers. Why wasn’t he moving? It would be much easier to step down from the ladder if he wasn’t standing so close. Her stomach did another of its wayward flutters. She drew a deep breath. Now was not the time to become shy. She looked straight at him. “Pardon me.” She gave a pointed look at the ladder, then at him.

He finally moved back to give her enough space to step down, but only just. Her arm brushed his as she hurried away from him.

“What book were you looking for if not this one?” he asked.

She turned to face him. “It was...Shakespeare. Perhaps a book of his sonnets.” She placed one hand on her hip. “I had read enough poems about nature and was feeling inclined to read about something different.”

“About love?” He leaned against the ladder. “I daresay that was Shakespeare’s favorite subject in his sonnets.”

“That is true.” Margaret cleared her throat. “But I did not see one on that shelf.”

Peter took a step toward her, leaving just enough distance to keep her from panicking again. “You do not strike me as a romantic.”

“Why not?” Margaret wasn’t certain she wanted to hear the answer, but she had asked the question without thinking.

His eyes narrowed in thought, but the smile never left his face. “I already know you fantasize about revenge more than you do about romance. Especially when it pertains to me.”

The mere idea that she would be fantasizing about anything romantic with Peter made her cheeks grow hot. She prayed he wouldn’t notice any color on them, and if he did, he had better not point it out. She would throw her face then for certain.

He raised one eyebrow with a grin. “*Murderer.*”

Margaret put a hand to her forehead. “I cannot believe your mother heard me yesterday. She must worry for your safety now.”

He chuckled. “She still thinks highly of you. Truly. There is something you must know about my mother. Once you obtain her good opinion, you are sure to never lose it. She likes to see the best in everyone, and she clings to it.”

Margaret looked down at the floor. “That is a good quality. I admire your mother very much.” Margaret shared Lady Blackwell’s stubbornness of opinion, but in the opposite way. Margaret was clinging to the bad, not the good. It was terrifying and vulnerable to look for anything good in Peter, because part of her knew she would find it. And she didn’t want to. It was too strange and contradictory to everything she knew. All those nights she had cried in bed, wishing for a different future, she had been able to blame someone. Her hatred and anger had been like heavy dirt, and she had shoveled them over top of her emotions.

If she no longer had anything to bury her emotions under, what would happen?

A chill ran over her skin as she looked up from the floor and Peter’s gaze locked with hers. She didn’t want to find out.

“Since I didn’t find my Shakespeare...” She took a step forward, snatching the Wordsworth book from his hand in one swift motion, “I will read this instead.”

She didn’t have time to observe his reaction. She spun around and walked straight toward the large armchair by the window. Since he couldn’t see her face, she allowed herself a victorious smirk of her own.

A gasp escaped her as two strong hands gripped her waist from behind, tugging her backward. She didn’t have time to think before Peter slipped past her, lunging toward the armchair and practically throwing himself into it before she could.

She stood in shock as he shifted into a casual position. His face was smooth, as if the chaos of the last few seconds had not even occurred. “As you said yesterday, the best seat always belongs to the first person to enter a room. I was here

first, therefore, this seat is mine.” He ran his hand over the soft tan leather like one might stroke their dog or cat. His lips quivered as he fought a smile.

Any thought she had entertained about Peter being ‘good’ fled her mind. He was wicked to the core. She gaped at him, composing herself just enough to speak. “As I recall, you said that a selfless, generous person might choose a different seat to give others the opportunity.”

He leaned back with a satisfied sigh. “Hmm. I think this chair is too comfortable for selflessness or generosity. I should like to sit in it every day of my life.”

Margaret scoffed. “We will see about that.”

He raised both eyebrows.

She didn’t explain, turning on her heel instead. She raised the book in the air above her head as she walked away, making sure he knew that he hadn’t won *everything*. The library doors swung shut behind her, and she didn’t stop walking until she reached her bedchamber. The nerve of that man would never cease to shock her. She could practically still feel his hands around her waist. What made him think it was acceptable to... to...handle her in such a way? And then he had scurried past her like a dog intent on catching a scrap from the table.

And how he had grabbed her waist without warning!

That particular detail kept coming to the forefront of her mind.

She had finally been settling into Langdale Abbey by finding a peaceful place for herself in that library.

But Peter had just turned it into a war zone.



Rolling out of bed the next morning, Peter tugged the bell pull for his valet. He raked a hand through his hair, smiling inwardly. Everything had gone according to plan. He had awoken Margaret's competitive nature just as he had hoped, and with luck, they could share more conversations when their paths crossed in the library each day. He hoped they would eventually become more amicable, but for now, this was a start.

He checked the time. It was half past eight, thirty minutes earlier than he had arrived in the library the day before.

The moment he was dressed, he hurried through the corridors until he reached the library. He caught his breath before entering. Walking long distances was still exhausting at times, but he was becoming more comfortable with it. He could feel his legs growing stronger each day, and his lungs no longer ached so much.

With one push against the door, it swung open, and he strode inside. The early morning light came through the windows, illuminating the tall shelves that ran across both sides of the room. Sitting in the armchair by the window, with her feet tucked under her and a book in hand, was Margaret.

“Good morning, Peter.” She glanced up lazily, but he caught a faint grin on her lips before she hid her face with the book again. “I did not expect to see you here.” Was her voice shaking? He couldn't be certain. She was using that book to hide her face, so he suspected she was amusing herself thoroughly.

She wouldn't be congratulating herself so much if she knew that he had planned the entire thing.

"But since you have decided to come, I have saved this chair for you." She gestured at the stiff, wooden rocking chair that was positioned across from the armchair. The small, red velvet cushion that had previously been on the seat was missing. Had she purposely taken it off to make it even more uncomfortable?

He fought the smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"How very generous of you." He walked forward. As he had suspected, the book she held was the Wordsworth one. She peeked at him from above it before hiding her gaze from his once again.

With a sigh, he sat down in the wooden rocking chair, setting it in motion. "Where did you put the velvet cushion?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Margaret lowered the book as she turned a page, her lips twisting in a smirk.

Peter reached forward, lowering the book all the way down to her lap. She snatched it away from his reach.

He captured her blue eyes with his. "Where did you hide it?"

She shrugged, tossing a strand of hair off of her face.

"Margaret. This chair is very firm. If you do not tell me, I am sure to become numb in places that I should not like to." He gave her a pointed look.

Her eyes rounded in shock, and then a laugh bubbled out of her throat. He grinned. He had never made her laugh before.

The sound was light, with a raspy tone to it, much like her voice, but the sound of her laugh was even more pleasant. The way it lit up her face made his stomach flutter unexpectedly. He contracted the muscles in his abdomen to stop the sensation. He crossed his arms over his chest, keeping all his emotions and strange sensations tucked inside.

“Perhaps you might simply *leave* before anything becomes numb,” she said. “I do prefer my solitude when I read.”

“You are a monster.”

She gasped. “Me?”

“Not only did you take the best chair, but you made this one worse. I know you hid the cushion, and I am going to find it.” He stood, casting his eyes around the room.

She closed the book and set it down on her lap. “Do not bother looking. You’ll never find it.”

Peter glanced at her from over his shoulder, raising one eyebrow. Was it possible that she had discovered the secret passage? It didn’t seem likely. The only reason he had ever known about it was because his father had told him, and his father before that. If Peter ever had a son, he planned to share the secret with him as well.

But considering how his marriage was faring, he doubted he would ever have one.

Margaret did seem clever enough to have discovered the secret passage. And she *had* been spending so much time in the library. But what reason would she have to move the tapestry? Testing his luck, he walked toward the space between the two bookcases. Pushing aside the heavy, woven tapestry, he reached for the latch. It clicked, and he stole a look at Margaret’s face.

Her smile was gone.

He tugged the old door open. The resounding creak that followed was a nostalgic sound. He had opened it many times as a child. “Could it possibly be...in here?” He threw her a winning smile when he caught sight of the velvet cushion, wedged just inside the doorway.

He stooped over to pick it up, then waved it in the air. “Did you truly believe that I wouldn’t know about this door when I have lived in this house my entire life?”

Margaret scowled at him, folding her arms with a groan. Her lips twisted as she pressed down a smile. “I hoped you wouldn’t.”

He walked back to his chair, patting the dust off the cushion before placing it on the seat. “You do not give me enough credit.”

“That is because you already give yourself plenty of it.” She lowered her lashes and glanced at him from under them. At least she was becoming a little more timid with her insults. He would consider it an improvement.

He sat down, crossing one leg over his knee. “In this instance, credit is only due to all the past earls of Blackwell. The secret of that door was passed on through the generations. I am impressed that you managed to discover it yourself. How did you find it?”

“It was an accident. I stumbled when stepping off of the ladder one day and ran into the wall. The tapestry shifted.”

“Have you explored inside?” Peter asked in a mysterious voice.

She shook her head. “Of course not. It is far too dark in there. And I suspect there are all sorts of creatures. Mice and

spiders and...”

Peter leaned forward. “Ghosts?”

Her throat moved with a swallow, and she blinked fast. “No. I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“It is a confirmed fact that there are ghosts in that secret passage. I saw one when I was a child.”

“Do not lie to me.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t steal the cushion. Even ghosts need a place to rest their head at night, you know.”

“Stop. I don’t believe you.” Margaret’s features were hesitant, but curious. “I know there aren’t any ghosts, but I do wonder where it leads.”

Peter watched her for a long moment. She was staring at the tapestry, brows drawn together. “Would you like to find out?” he asked.

She shook her head fast. “When I first discovered the passage I was tempted to explore, but I already decided I am not going in there.”

“That was when you were alone. I will go with you.”

She cast him a suspicious look. “That makes matters worse, actually.”

He dipped his head with a laugh. “Don’t be absurd. I will protect you from any manner of ghosts or mice.”

“Spiders?”

He grimaced. “Those, I’m afraid, you will have to contend with on your own.”

“Very well, but so will you.” Margaret stood, setting the book down on the chair behind her. “I will only agree to this

because I have been quite curious. We will need candles.”

“I’ll fetch them now.” Peter smiled as he walked away.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16



When Peter returned with the candles, he handed one to Margaret. She wrapped her fingers around the cold metal handle, focusing her attention on one drip of wax as it traveled down the stick. “Will this be enough light?”

“I hope so.” Peter started toward the tapestry and the partially hidden door. He had left it open. She studied his back, trying to decide if she should trust him or not. What if he left her in the dark alone? What if he trapped her inside and no one knew where to find her? According to Papa, he was not to be trusted, no matter how convincing he could be. Now that he knew he was likely to live a long life, he could easily be plotting a way to rid himself of his responsibility toward her. Perhaps he didn’t want a wife.

Her stomach twisted with nerves. Why had she agreed to this? Surely it was some wicked scheme. What else could it be? He had seemed far too happy about the plan, and far too eager to go fetch the candles.

“Are you coming?” Peter glanced back at her. He gave a cajoling smile. “Don’t be afraid. I’ve been inside many times. You’ll be safe with me.”

She hesitated for a few more seconds. He was still a bit weak, wasn’t he? If he did try to overpower her, she could

push him to the ground and run back to the library. She tucked away her ridiculous thoughts and took a few steps forward. Stopping behind him, she peered into the empty, dark space. “Is it even worth exploring? Perhaps you should tell me where it leads.”

“That would ruin the surprise.” Peter motioned toward the entrance. “After you.”

Margaret didn’t particularly like the idea of him being behind her, but she also didn’t want to appear as scared as she was. With a determined breath, she walked inside. The candle was bright enough to illuminate the space for several feet, but nothing past that. She shuddered as she caught sight of several cobwebs in the upper corners of the passage. The stone walls weren’t the same as the stone on the outside of the house; instead they were rough and unfinished. The space was wide enough for Peter to walk beside her, so he caught up as soon as they were both inside. He was still slightly behind her, leaning down to speak close to her ear.

“Watch your step,” he said. His breath rustled the hair against her neck. “The floor isn’t smooth.”

Margaret shrieked as a large spider scurried across the wall near her right shoulder. She leaped in the opposite direction, nearly dropping her candle.

Peter steadied her, one hand wrapping around her shoulder. Her back was pressed against his body, and when his deep laugh echoed, she couldn’t just hear it—she could feel it vibrating through him.

She immediately stepped forward, ignoring the way her heart thudded. “Did you see that?”

“The ghost? Yes. I wondered if you saw him too.”

“The spider!”

He was only teasing her. There weren't any ghosts. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment to gather her composure. Oh, how she hated spiders. If there were any more of them, she would turn around and go back. She walked forward as quickly as she could, the floor beneath her taking an upward slope. “It was very large. It almost touched my shoulder.”

“I never promised I would protect you from those. You cannot be angry with me.”

Her heart continued its elevated rhythm as he walked beside her, his voice close to her ear. With both their candles, the light stretched a little farther. She looked up, shivering as she caught sight of two small spiders in a web just a few feet above her head. Peter was much taller than her. At least he would be the one to collide with the cobwebs before she did.

“How far does this go?” she asked.

“I think we are almost th—” he jumped toward her with a yelp and dropped his candle. He frantically brushed at his arm for several seconds before catching his breath. He scooped up his candle, but the flame had already gone out. His eyes were wide with terror as he turned to Margaret.

She burst out laughing, unable to stop herself. “Is something amiss?”

He shuddered, letting out a long groan. “That spider *did* touch my shoulder.”

Her stomach ached as she struggled to contain her laughter. She had been doing all she could not to laugh at anything Peter said or did, but his genuine fear had been enough to break her strong will.

A slow smile broke over his face, and he shook his head. “You may laugh all you want, but if that happened to you, you would have done the same thing.”

“Let us hope it doesn’t, or we shall lose both our candles.”

Peter lifted the wick of his candle to hers, lighting it once again “There. Now we can lose yours without any problem.”

She turned to him with a gasp. “Do you wish such a horrible fate upon me?”

His eyes danced in the candlelight, the smile in them so sincere that it made her breath catch. He drew a step closer. “Yes.”

She glared at him, even though her heart was in her throat. “Then I hope that spider finishes its descent onto your head.” She pointed above him.

He ducked, running several paces ahead.

She covered her mouth to hide her laugh.

His expression shifted to an accusatory one. “There was not a spider above my head, was there?”

“No, there was not.” Margaret slipped past him, holding her chin high. From the corner of her eye, she saw his smile of disbelief. She really needed to stop teasing him. He seemed to like it far too much, and she most certainly didn’t want him to confuse it for flirting.

She filled her lungs, holding her breath as she moved down the tunnel-like space. He walked with one hand on the small of her back, leading her forward. One half of her wanted to slap it away, but the other half voiced its protest.

“Is that the door?” she squinted in the dim light. As she drew closer, the outline became more clear. The door looked

almost identical to the one in the library. Small, wooden, with black metal details. Peter shifted past her, wiggling the handle until the door opened.

As eager as she was to escape the darkness, she strode forward.

“Wait,” he said, blocking the way. She nearly crashed into him. “You have to guess where you think it leads.”

“The kitchen?” she asked. “That would have enabled you to smuggle all your favorite foods into the library during your childhood studies.”

He flashed a smile. “Not quite.”

“That is my only guess. Please open the door.” Margaret’s skin crawled. Her imagination was spinning with images of spiders again.

Peter slowly eased it open. He pushed what appeared to be another tapestry out of the way, holding it back so Margaret could escape.

Natural light flooded her vision, and she blinked fast to allow her eyes to adjust to the brightness. The details of the room came into view. There were two small beds and two small tables, one in each corner. A wardrobe and desk sat against the opposite wall beside the window, heavy velvet curtains hanging open at both sides.

“James’ and Philip’s room?” Margaret hurried to close the door, and Peter dropped the tapestry back into place. Thankfully her brothers were with the nursemaid, likely already at breakfast, otherwise they would have discovered their new favorite place to play. How they hadn’t found it already was a mystery. Surely they hadn’t listened to her instructions not to touch the tapestries and other furnishings.

Peter's eyes darted around the space. "This was my childhood room. I took the secret passage to the library every morning rather than going there through the main corridor. It was far more adventurous that way. And when I didn't wish to perform my studies, I hid from my governess inside it."

Margaret shook her head. "You sound like you were a horrible child."

"I was." He laughed. "I was often caught misbehaving in one way or another. But my father ensured I learned my place." He looked down at the floor, his smile fading for a moment. "I became quite the opposite of that reckless child, actually. I became fearful and timid. Strictly obedient—often to a fault—as you know. I listened to my father when I should have had the courage to defy him, even after he was gone." His jaw tightened as he looked around. "It is strange being in this room again. I was often afraid to leave it, for fear of facing my father and the expectations he had of me. But I was also afraid *not* to leave it, because I knew if I didn't, he would punish me for being indolent. I can recall many mornings standing by my bedside, frozen, terrified to do anything." He took a shaky breath, then cleared his throat as if to hide it.

Margaret's heart ached with that blasted sympathy again. But she couldn't help it. For a moment, she could picture him as a boy like George or James, living in fear each day of his own father, a man he should have been able to feel safe and secure with.

Peter shook his head. "I'm sorry. I didn't expect this room to have such an effect on me." He folded his arms, staring at the door again. "The lock was never repaired." His chest rose and fell heavily, and Margaret took a step closer.

“How did it break?” Her concern deepened when he didn’t reply. “Are you all right?” She studied his profile and the muscle jumping in his jaw.

“Peter?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “Forgive me. I was lost in my thoughts. My father broke the lock. Sometimes it feels as though he is still in these halls. I can only imagine how disappointed he is in me.”

Margaret scowled, tipping her head to one side. “Is that not a good thing?”

Peter cast her a curious look.

“If he was as cruel as you say, then his objectives should not align with yours. I daresay you should *make it* your objective to disappoint him as much as you possibly can.”

Half his mouth lifted in a smile. “You’re right. I have thought of that many times. I don’t want to be like him.”

“No,” she said.

Margaret could almost see the fragments of his past reflected in his eyes, making them appear heavier. She could see the pain. “And even if it would upset him, remember that he cannot hurt you anymore.”

Peter’s brow twitched, and he nodded. “For a moment, the prospect of dying felt like a relief. I thought I might be released from my responsibilities to look after my family. Now I have your family to care for as well.” He drew a deep breath. “I hope I can do so adequately. That is my fear...that somehow I will fail.”

Margaret had never seen him so serious, so—uncollected. She took a step closer, drawing his gaze to her face. “You do

not have to do it alone. Do you think my parents and I would leave it up to you to care for us and my brothers? I have felt the same responsibility, and I know the weight of it can be overbearing. I felt a responsibility to give away my hand in marriage in order to help my family. And I did it.” She pushed a strand of hair from her forehead, tucking it behind her ear. “You are not alone in your sense of responsibility. And I think you have learned not to perform your duties according to what your father wanted. If you have been granted a second chance at life, then show your father that you plan to disregard everything he taught you.”

Peter stared at her for several seconds. The silence was heavy with understanding, and it passed between them like a secret, soft and quiet, meant only for the two of them. Warmth rushed every inch of her skin, pouring into her chest. She pushed away the feeling, too afraid to associate it with him.

“At least I won’t be joining my father in purgatory,” Peter said. “At least not soon, I hope.”

Margaret placed one hand on her hip. “What happened to the man who had an ambition to change? Why should you expect *ever* to endure purgatory?”

To her surprise, Peter drew a step closer, a hint of amusement returning to his features. “What happened to the woman who believed I deserved it?”

She shifted uncomfortably. “She is still here.”

He leaned down to be closer to her height. “Have I not convinced you yet?”

“Not after stealing my chair yesterday. That is a sin that I’m afraid cannot be redeemed.”

“*Your* chair? You have lived here for less than a month and you have already claimed ownership of the chair I have been using since my boyhood?”

She nodded. “I’m afraid it is mine now.”

He shook his head fast, biting his lower lip. “You have committed the greater sin by stealing *my* chair today.”

She lifted her chin. “And I shall continue to steal it. I suppose we will have to endure purgatory together, then.”

Peter’s eyes roamed her face, a slow smile building on his lips. “I might find it a little less dreadful in that case.”

Margaret’s ears tingled with heat, and she took a step backward. “Well, since you have interrupted my reading time once again, I ought to be going to breakfast to see that my brothers are well.” She would have to take them for their daily visit with Papa as well. He had hardly left his room since his arrival at Langdale Abbey, still claiming to be too unwell to join them for meals. With a bit of convincing, he might be willing to join her, James, and Philip for a short walk that afternoon.

At the moment, she was desperate for a reason to avoid Peter’s company for the rest of the day. He was doing strange things to her insides. Just by the way he was looking at her, she could feel a constant flutter under her ribs, like a bird trapped inside a cage, flapping its wings madly to escape.

She couldn’t allow it. She knew it wasn’t really a bird, but whatever it was that was inside her, causing all of those strange sensations, could not escape. No matter what.

CHAPTER 17



Margaret had fully expected a war to break out in the library, but she hadn't expected it to last so long.

The morning after their walk through the secret passageway, she had decided to arrive even earlier to claim the armchair. Even waking up two hours before the rest of the household, Peter had managed to beat her there. Day after day, she did all she could not to oversleep, jumping out of bed the moment her eyes opened to check the time. Her body seemed to sense the urgency, helping her wake up a few minutes earlier each morning, even if she spent much of the night tossing and turning with anticipation.

After she managed to beat Peter to the chair two mornings in a row, he beat her once again. In the hours before breakfast, when the rest of the household still slept, they each read in their respective chairs. On the days that she lost, she was often too vexed and uncomfortable in the wooden chair to stay in the library for long, bringing her book of choice into her room instead—if Peter hadn't also stolen that. He always laughed when she walked away, but he didn't ask her to stay.

If he did, then she might have.

And that was what terrified her.

She didn't hate his company. She was beginning to tolerate it, in fact. When he wasn't teasing her relentlessly, or gloating about his victory and how comfortable the armchair was, she found that he was actually quite intelligent. He knew the books in the library as well as Lady Blackwell had said. Each time she went looking for a specific volume, he knew precisely where to find it. He had also told her that he was terrible at writing and poetry, yet he still enjoyed it. Their conversations had turned lighter. He spoke of his childhood and the positive memories that he had, and she did the same. There were moments when Margaret found it difficult not to laugh with him. His laugh was far too contagious, and when his smile was genuine, she seemed to forget all about her anger.

The only reason she excused her own behavior was because she was so determined to beat him to the armchair each morning. If she didn't show up, then he would win, and she hated to see him when he was proud.

A man like Peter needed to be humbled. Not only monthly or weekly. Daily. It was her responsibility, really. That was the only reason she continued to go to the library each day. And if she left the armchair early, he would steal it in her absence and still win, so she allowed herself to stay longer in his company on the days when she beat him there. She told herself that it was only because of her victory, but she was beginning to doubt her own words, no matter how many times she repeated them to herself.

Her sleep deprivation was not helping her make wise decisions either. Despite waking up earlier each day to hurry to the library, she had still been retiring at the same time each evening. She made time to play with James and Philip each afternoon and sit with Lady Blackwell, her daughters, and the occasional female guests from the neighborhood in the

drawing room for tea. She often took brief walks with Papa, and then spent the evenings at dinner with everyone. According to the physician, Peter was still recovering adequately so the ball would be his debut back to social activities. After the ball, they would begin accepting invitations from friends of the Trafford family as well—friends who knew of the marriage and were eager to hear directly from them how the match had come about.

After more than a week of what Margaret called ‘the armchair war,’ she was tempted to give up. How much longer could she deprive herself of sleep for something so ridiculous? She was learning that Peter was just as stubborn and competitive as she was. Perhaps even more so. She sensed that he was not planning to give up yet, not after she had managed to claim the armchair two days in a row. He had expressed his determination to beat her the day before. If she wanted to make her victory last into a third day, she would have to do something she hadn’t before.

She would have to go to the library before dawn.

She lay in bed that night, drifting to sleep for an hour or two before waking up in a panic. After realizing it was not time to go yet, she fell asleep again, but not for more than a few minutes at a time. She kept her candle burning so she could see the clock each time she awoke.

When the clock read four-thirty, Margaret rolled out of bed and dressed in one of her new white morning dresses, choosing the only one that was possible to fasten on her own. She tossed her braid over her shoulder and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. All she had to do was make it to the armchair, and then she could fall asleep in it. Picking up her candle, she slipped out of the room and into the corridor.



Peter slunk his way through the house in the dark, grateful for the many windows and moonlight to guide him toward the library. He had made the mistake of not arriving early enough in the library the last two days, allowing Margaret to claim the chair. She often stayed longer when she was in the more comfortable chair, but his own pride insisted that he not allow her to win *again*, even if it meant sacrificing even more sleep than he already had. It was not a wise way to regain his health and strength, but the ongoing armchair war with Margaret was doing more for his spirits than his physician would ever realize.

He smiled inwardly as he reached the bottom of the staircase. He walked with soft feet, careful not to wake anyone in the house—especially Margaret. As he came around the corner, he could see the broad doors of the library in the moonlight.

Or rather, the candlelight.

Margaret was standing in front of the doors, candle in hand. She glanced to the left, then the right, but never behind her. She hadn't seen him. Her golden hair was in a long braid down her back, the shadows from the flame casting a sinister look on her face. She was about to steal his chair for a third day in a row.

But not if he had anything to do with it.

“What do you think you are doing?” he bellowed. It was far louder than necessary, but it had the desired effect.

Her candle clattered to the floor. The flame went out, leaving a trail of smoke. She jumped back, pressing a hand to

her chest. Her eyes flew open wide, and she pivoted to face him. Her expression instantly contracted into a scowl. “You nearly frightened me to death!”

Peter took advantage of her shock. He walked as quickly as he could until he reached the library doors. Without wasting a second, he pushed them open, moving with long strides toward the armchair.

He heard Margaret’s gasp behind him, but he didn’t stop.

His skin prickled with panic when the sound of her footfalls echoed in the room. She was running.

He picked up speed and lunged for the chair, but she was quicker than he had expected. She managed to pass him just before he reached it. Without thinking, he grabbed her by the waist, tugging her backward and wrapping his arms all the way around her. She was trapped.

She wriggled wildly. “Let me go!”

“Very well.” He turned in the opposite direction before releasing her, then lunged toward the chair a second time. She caught him by the back of the waistcoat, taking a handful of the fabric. The sound of tearing seams cut through the air. It shocked him just long enough for her to shoulder past him again.

He snatched her wrist, affording himself just enough time to catch up before she jerked it away. Peter’s knee reached the chair first, and he twisted around to throw himself backward into it. Margaret forced her way onto the cushion with surprising strength, nearly causing him to topple off of it. He rocked toward her, wrapping his arms around her and lifting her just enough to settle himself into the cushion beneath her.

“I was here first!” she said, out of breath, throwing an elbow in his direction. She kicked her legs over his.

He dodged her elbow, spreading his legs wide to claim as much of the chair as possible. Margaret crowded herself in the corner, but she was still sitting halfway on his lap.

“I believe *I* was here first.” Peter tried to catch his breath. His left arm was still around her, and when she turned to him with her usual glare, her face was only inches away from his. The weight of her body leaning against his was something he could grow accustomed to. Happily. Her chest rose and fell with a deep breath, her nostrils flaring. She opened her mouth, as if to scold him, but she snapped it closed again. She looked down at her hands.

One scrap of gold fabric from his waistcoat was clenched in her fist.

When she looked up again, he held her gaze, the ridiculousness of what had just occurred finally catching up with the chaos of the last several seconds. His shoulders shook as he struggled to hold back his laughter. Margaret’s eyes watered and her lips twitched into a reluctant smile. A laugh burst out of her, and she covered her face with the scrap of fabric.

Peter tipped his head back, releasing his own laughter. His stomach ached as Margaret’s giggles shook against him. At one point, he wondered if she could still breathe as she struggled to compose herself. The sound only intensified his own laughter, as contagious as hers was. She wiped a stray tear from the corner of her eye, using the fabric to do so.

“I have a handkerchief,” Peter said in a low voice. “You might have simply asked to borrow it rather than tear a piece of my clothing off like an animal.”

Margaret's giggles continued. It seemed she had no control over them. "I'm sorry," she choked. "This is what happens when I don't sleep enough."

Peter's brows shot up. "You tear things to shreds?"

"No!" She gestured at her face, giggling even harder. "I l-laugh u-uncontrollably."

He grinned, watching her with growing surprise. It was adorable. He couldn't look away from her unreserved smile and the way she threw her head back and covered her face in an effort to hide it. If not for her uncontrollable laughter, she probably would have noticed that she was practically sitting on him. She would have surely moved if she noticed, so he was happy to have her continue laughing. He would listen to the sound forever. He would bottle it and sell it and make a fortune. He had never heard anything better.

As he held her close and listened to the sound, he swarmed with heat and sudden longing. With it, came a surge of fear, one just as strong as he remembered feeling as a child when deciding whether or not to leave his room.

If he made one mistake, he could end up hurt.

By acknowledging his growing feelings for her, he would open his heart a little too much. For all he knew, Margaret would never care for him at all. If he made himself too vulnerable, she could tear up his heart just like she had so easily torn his waistcoat.

Margaret's laughter subsided, but she still covered her face. She must have finally realized how close she was to him.

"Shall we call this a stalemate?" Peter asked in the silence. He could hear his own heart in his ears. What was she doing to

him? Every inch of his skin was alive with sensation and warmth, just because her legs were draped over his. If he had reason to believe that she wouldn't run away in terror, he would hold her there in his arms and kiss her all morning. He pushed away the thought. It was not helping his goal to avoid becoming too attached to her.

Margaret slowly uncovered her face, which also didn't help.

Her eyes, wide and hesitant, connected with his. They appeared even more blue than usual from the tears of laughter that still lingered in them, even in the faint light. The sun had just begun to rise. "I don't think there should be any question who the champion is in this instance." She held up the fabric scrap again.

"I disagree," Peter said. "I think I am the clear winner. I managed to sit in the chair. All you have managed to do is sit on *me*."

"I'm on the chair." Margaret's face flushed as she patted the very edge of the cushion.

The red of her cheeks only made her even more endearing. He counted it as a victory of his own that she hadn't run away yet.

He laughed. "Hardly."

She let out a huffed breath, but a smile still lingered on her face. "Well, until you admit that I have won, I am going to stay here."

He gave a flirtatious smile. "All you've done is given me a reason to never admit such a thing."

For a moment, her forehead creased, but then she caught his meaning, and the shade of her cheeks deepened. Her face

was only a few inches away. Against his better judgment, he looked at her lips. Another surge of longing tore through his heart, and he almost lost his restraint. She didn't even realize the effect she was having on him. He hadn't known she was capable of it. Until that morning, he had been denying the feelings that Margaret had been awakening in him. He had been convincing himself that the time they were spending together in the library was all a game. And it was, but he hadn't realized his heart was becoming a pawn.

To his surprise, Margaret still didn't move. Her eyes were locked on his, cautious, perhaps a little nervous. She didn't scowl at him for flirting like he had expected.

He swallowed, willing himself to stay still. He couldn't kiss her. Not yet, no matter how much he wanted to.

But then her eyes flickered to his mouth.

Did *she* want him to?

The moment the question crossed his mind, she leaned away from him.

It seemed his question was answered.

He could see her indecision, a battle of sorts, playing out on her face. He already knew what she was thinking. She didn't want to stay because it would leave the two of them in their extremely close position, but if she left the chair, she would be handing the victory to him.

All at once, she seemed to make her decision. With surprising speed, she climbed out of the chair, brushing her hands over her skirts. "It is yours. I surrender." She drew a deep breath, avoiding his gaze as she set the scrap of fabric down on the nearby table. "I am sorry about your waistcoat.

Before I begin laughing uncontrollably again, I should go back to bed.”

Peter stood. “I’ll walk you to your room.”

“No—no. That is not necessary. I—I will see you at breakfast.” Why was she in such a hurry to escape him? His chest ached. This was why he had to be careful. If his feelings were not returned, then they would only cause him pain.

He sighed, raking a hand through his hair as the doors closed behind her.

The rising sun outside the window filled the space with just enough light that Peter could read if he wished to. But instead, he collapsed into the armchair with another sigh, crossing his arms over his chest. He stared into the emptiness of the room for several minutes, his mind racing.

What victory was a blasted armchair if he couldn’t have Margaret? His heart stung with what felt like a clear rejection. The idea of being close to him was worse to her than admitting her own defeat. Coming from a woman as competitive as Margaret, that was a devastating blow.

He rubbed a circle over his chest before knocking against it, jarring his emotions back into their proper place as he always had. He closed his eyes, but he couldn’t manage to fall asleep. All he could think about was how empty the chair felt. He considered going back to bed, but he doubted that would make a difference. He was hopelessly awake, left to contend with his own thoughts. Watching the sunrise was a welcome distraction, but he couldn’t seem to rid himself of the hollowness in his chest.

He recalled the advice his mother had given him. He needed to give Margaret time. He couldn’t lose sight of the

progress they had made. She had just been smiling and laughing with him, when the week before, her sepulcher was far from cracking. She had shown him glimpses of who she was inside, and he was already craving more. He liked that he knew little facts about her, like the one he had learned that day. She laughed uncontrollably when she was lacking sleep.

He, on the other hand, drove himself mad with pining when he was lacking sleep.

Rather than stay there all morning, he made his way to his study. He needed to write his feelings down, to compose them into something he might better understand. He was turning into a romantic, and he wasn't certain how to feel about that.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 18



When it came time to go to breakfast, Peter's fatigue was finally making itself known. His limbs and eyelids were heavy as he walked into the breakfast room. He rubbed his eyes before trying to blink away the stinging sensation. His stomach had been growling for hours. The scent of fresh bread, pastries, eggs, and ham wafted through the air. Since regaining his appetite, he had been eating far more than usual in order to build back his strength. His body reminded him to eat frequently.

He walked straight to the sidebar without greeting his family. Distracted as he was by the scent of the food, he hadn't immediately noticed the others in the room.

Mother sat at the table with Rachel and Cornelius. Margaret hadn't arrived yet, but only seconds after he noticed her absence, she walked through the door behind him with her brothers and the nursemaid. She looked just as tired as he felt. Her eyes were puffy and slightly darker underneath.

She still wore the same dress she had been wearing early that morning, but now her hair was arranged more properly atop her head. He had liked the long braid too. It suited her. But it was not a style meant for public appearances. Somehow the fact that he had seen her hair in such a style made him feel

more like her husband—someone who was allowed to see her in private, not just in public—in the early hours of the morning and the late hours of the evening. He hated the fact that their encounter that morning had been an accident. He wanted to see her again without all his family around during those secret hours of the day. But he wanted it to be intentional.

He cast her a smile when she met his gaze. She returned it, but quickly looked down at the floor. Was she embarrassed about how she had acted that morning? He hadn't seen her so uncharacteristically shy. There wasn't a reason for it. He had behaved with equal immaturity when it came to their race to the armchair.

“Peter...” Mother's voice was full of concern. “What on earth happened to your waistcoat?”

He froze as he reached for a plate. He had completely forgotten about that. He hadn't even examined the damage, but it seemed that, based on the piece Margaret had been holding, that she had torn a shred of the exterior fabric away from the lining. Rather than have to explain what had happened, he decided to act ignorant.

He craned his neck, attempting to glance at his own back. “What is the matter with my waistcoat?”

“It's torn.” Mother stood from the table, striding toward him with a furrowed brow. She touched the center of his back. “A piece of the fabric is missing.”

“Is that so?” He feigned surprise as he made eye contact with Margaret. She pinched her lips tight to contain her smile, but the corners of her mouth twitched.

“How could this have escaped your notice?” Mother asked. “Did your valet not mention it?”

“No, he didn’t. How peculiar. It seems some sort of vicious animal must have caught hold of it.”

A faint snorting sound came from Margaret’s throat, but she tried to hide it by coughing into her arm. Her eyes watered as she hurried past him toward the sidebar where Mother couldn’t see her face.

“I suspect it had large claws,” Peter continued. “How else could it do such damage to this fine piece of clothing?” He stared at Margaret’s back, at the way her shoulders were stooped over and vibrating as she filled her plate. A slow smile climbed his cheeks.

When he managed to pull his gaze away from her, he caught Mother staring at him with one eyebrow raised. She could always recognize a sardonic tone in his voice. There was rarely any detail that slipped past her notice. She even seemed to have caught the way Peter had been watching Margaret at the sidebar.

Mother’s eyes were now darting between them with suspicion. “If there is an animal with very large claws living in this house, I think that should be of greater concern than the condition of your waistcoat.” She cast him a quizzical look. She was begging for an explanation, but he didn’t plan to give it. His morning in the library with Margaret was their secret. Every detail. At any rate, Margaret would never forgive him if he told his mother what had truly happened to his waistcoat. And if Mother knew that Margaret had torn it so viciously, she might begin to have real concern for Peter’s safety being married to her.

He almost laughed out loud before composing himself. He cleared his throat. “I agree, Mother. I will keep my eyes open for any sign of such a creature.” He kept his gaze fixed on

Margaret until she turned around and walked to the table, meeting his eyes with a suppressed smile.

His heart warmed. Perhaps he didn't need to be quite so hopeless.

"You have no need to be afraid," Rachel said in an offhand voice. "One glance at your beard and the creature will run away in terror."

Peter stroked his chin as he had made a habit of doing when his sisters insulted his facial hair. He returned to the sidebar and picked up a plate. "You are only envious that you lack the capability of growing one yourself."

Cornelius's eyes rounded and he set down his fork. "She isn't, but I am."

Rachel whirled toward her husband. "You like his beard? You would grow one just as thick if you could?" She studied his bald chin.

"That is the beard of a *man* if I've ever seen one." Cornelius chuckled. "I understand why he feels so inclined to keep it."

"And the long hair?" Rachel scoffed.

"If anyone can make it look fashionable, it is Peter."

"Thank you, Cornelius." Peter beamed, popping a grape in his mouth. "There is a reason I have always been fond of you."

Cornelius gave Rachel's arm a pat. "Do you not realize that the more you complain about his hair, the more inclined he will be to keep it the same?"

Rachel stabbed at the scrambled eggs on her plate. "Oh, I don't care. He may do as he wishes. It is only Margaret who I

pity. If my husband donned such a look, I would be hesitant to be seen with him.”

“As I am,” Margaret said with a smirk.

She was focused on cutting Philip’s ham into smaller pieces. Did she actually hate it? Or was she teasing him? The question would bother him all day. The only reason he had grown his hair and beard in the first place had been because he thought his life was over. Out of stubbornness, he had kept it the same, but his beard was becoming a little unkempt. He pushed the subject from his mind and finished filling his plate quickly before joining the others at the table.

He sat beside Margaret, with her two brothers, James and Philip on his other side. He hadn’t had the opportunity to interact with the boys as much as he would have liked. They had only had a few brief meetings over the past few weeks, and both boys had been a little shy toward him.

“Good morning, James, Philip.” Peter smiled at each of them in turn.

They both looked up from their plates. Both pairs of eyes were blue like Margaret’s, and James shared her blond hair. Philip’s hair was a vibrant rust, his cheeks dotted with freckles.

“Good morning,” James muttered.

Philip simply stared up at him.

“Did you know I am your brother now?” Peter asked. “Since I married your sister, that means we are all brothers.”

James’s nose wrinkled. “You are too old to be our brother.”

Philip slapped a hand over his mouth, giggling.

“I am only twenty-seven.”

“Well, I am only *seven*,” James said, throwing him a skeptical look.

Peter shared a glance with Margaret, who seemed to be fighting against her laughter again.

Even her brothers seemed to have been taught not to accept him. He gave a relenting sigh. “Very well. I understand how ancient I must seem. Twenty-seven is quite old, indeed. You may call me Grandfather instead.”

James stifled a laugh, baring his toothless grin. He turned to Philip, who appeared more confused than anything.

“May I have one of your grapes, Grandfather?” James asked amid his laughter.

“Yes, of course.” Peter plucked a plump red grape from the bunch on his plate before placing it in the center of James’s hand.

“May I have one too, Grandfather?” Philip asked in a shy voice.

“You may.” Peter gave a dramatic bow as he offered a second grape to Philip.

Rachel watched the exchange with a horrified expression. “You are ridiculous.”

Peter didn’t care, so long as the boys were laughing.

“Rachel is correct,” Margaret said with a grimace. “You cannot teach my brothers to refer to you as their grandfather.”

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that.” Peter gestured at the boys, who now stared at him with rapt attention.

Margaret groaned, sitting back in her chair. “I don’t know how I will explain that to my mother when she returns from London with George.”

He leaned one elbow on the table, tipping his head closer to her. “So long as you are not also calling me Grandfather, she will tolerate it well enough.” By the way Margaret seemed intent to avoid any flirtation or closeness with Peter, she might as well begin calling him Grandfather.

Margaret’s eyes rounded and a laugh burst out of her. “She would assume we had both lost our minds.”

He lowered his voice. “She might not be wrong in that assumption.” He held her gaze, hoping she was thinking of the same moment from that morning that he was: When they had both lunged for that armchair like their very lives depended on it.

“What are these secretive smiles about?” Rachel asked, one eyebrow raised. She tipped her head to one side, making the tight ringlets on her forehead shift out of place.

“Nothing at all,” Margaret turned her attention back to her plate, all traces of her smile gone.

Peter observed the others at the table. Mother was watching them with the same curiosity.

Mother’s gaze shifted to Margaret. “Margaret, you look quite...tired.”

“Do I?” she gave an awkward laugh.

“Peter does as well,” Rachel added with a smirk. She took a slow bite from her plate, eyebrows lifting mischievously.

Margaret’s cheeks flushed.

“Have you been sleeping well in your room?” Mother asked.

Margaret gave a quick nod. “Yes. It is very comfortable.”

“Are you certain? If you would be more comfortable in a different room, do not hesitate to send instruction to the housekeeper. I would be happy to do so for you if you would like. The room adjoining Peter’s is always available.”

“Mother.” Peter gave a subtle shake of his head, knowing how the offer would make Margaret uncomfortable. Mother and Rachel would be severely disappointed to learn that the only reason he and Margaret appeared to be lacking sleep was because of a prolonged war over a leather armchair. There was nothing romantic about it, but quite frankly, it was not their place to speculate.

Awkward silence hung in the air. Margaret pushed her chair out and stood. “Come along James and Philip. Let us finish our breakfast with Papa. He would like that very much.” She excused herself with a polite bow before hurrying her brothers out of the breakfast room.

Peter watched them leave, then turned to Mother with a sigh. “You made her uncomfortable.”

Cornelius had already finished his meal and was making to leave as well, likely eager to leave the awkwardness behind. Rachel followed suit, leaning toward Peter as she passed behind him. “*You* have been making Margaret uncomfortable simply by being alive.”

He gritted his teeth. It took a lot from Rachel to vex him, but she had succeeded with that comment. He waited for the door to close behind her before speaking again. “Before you ask—no, Margaret does not even like me yet.”

Mother cast him a dubious frown. “I disagree. She seems to like you far more than the last time we spoke about the matter. She smiles more in your company—and more in general.”

Peter traced his finger over a grain of wood on the table.

“Has anything...romantic occurred between you?”

He looked up, just as vexed by her curious smile as he had been by Rachel’s commentary. “No—Mother—and if anything had, you would be the last to know of it.”

She raised her hands defensively, laughing. “Very well. I was simply curious. I thought you had a reputation for charming women.”

“Not Margaret. She is not like other women.” His heart thumped in confirmation of that fact. She was unlike anyone he had ever met. “She doesn’t seem to be a romantic at all. She is stubborn. The very idea of being near me seems to terrify her. She is very content to remain my rival. A friendly rival, at best.”

“Hmm.” Mother leaned her arms on the table. “That is unfortunate. If only there were something I could do to help you.”

“I do not ask for your help, Mother.” He gave her a pointed look to emphasize his words. “Please don’t involve yourself. I—I will learn to be just as content with the current situation as Margaret is.”

Mother’s lips twisted mischievously, but she said nothing more on the subject. He eyed her with suspicion as she stood from the table. “Very well. I am glad you have resigned yourself to it. That is better than having unrealistic hopes.” She walked behind him and patted his shoulder.

His heart sank. Mother was always the optimistic one. Was it really so obvious that Margaret wasn't capable of ever caring for him? And why did it bother him so deuced much?

Mother was right. He should resign himself to his fate. He put his head in his hands as she bustled out of the room.

One by one, he banished every single unrealistic hope that had dared cross his mind that morning in the library.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 19



It was *absurd*.
Completely absurd.

Margaret walked past the library doors with a knot in her stomach. She never would have expected to miss something as ridiculous as the armchair war, but she couldn't deny that she was disappointed that it was over.

She hadn't gone back to the library in the three days since her surrender, too nervous at the prospect of seeing Peter there. The only reason she had been avoiding the library was because of him. She could only hope that feelings were like memories—*with enough time away from them, they would fade. Vanish. Become forgettable.*

What she had felt in the library three days before had been entirely unacceptable, and she blamed it on her lack of sleep. She had scolded herself repeatedly for enjoying the feeling of his arms around her, and for entertaining—even for the briefest moment—the thought of kissing him.

She had gone mad.

That was all it was. She hadn't actually wanted to kiss his grinning lips, nor had she wanted him to kiss hers. In the days since that moment, she had been doing all she could to avoid

being alone with him, and she had succeeded. They conversed in passing and at meals with the others at the house, but never privately, and that was the way she wanted it to remain. She had handed him the victory with their armchair war, but she would not so easily hand him her heart. If she did, there was no telling how badly he might break it.

She had been holding tightly to Papa's words about not trusting Peter. It was exhausting, but it was the only thing keeping her from doing anything foolish. The more time she spent with Peter, though, the more she doubted Papa's words of caution. Peter didn't seem dangerous or wicked at all, not anymore. And the more she learned of his past and heard about how his father treated him, the more her heart ached for him. There was a reason she had been so resistant to coming to know him better. Perhaps a small part of her had known he wasn't as bad as she wanted him to be.

But why did she want him to be bad? Was it so she could feel justified in all her years of hatred? Letting go of it all felt impossible, and risking her heart in the process was not a good idea. She couldn't read Peter's thoughts, no matter how badly she wanted to. Anything she interpreted as flirting could have been a game to him, something to smile and laugh about but not something to indicate devotion. She didn't want him to love her simply because she was his wife and he ought to. She wanted him to love her because of who she was.

She stopped herself at once.

She didn't want him to *love* her at all.

Her throat burned as she tore through the corridor at a faster pace. Lady Blackwell was awaiting her in the drawing room to plan the final preparations for the ball the following

evening. Pausing at the door, she breathed in, releasing the air slowly. Any thoughts of Peter only made her anxious.

“There you are,” Lady Blackwell said as Margaret entered the room. She wore a pale pink dress with tiny rosettes along the bodice. Margaret could hardly wait until Mama returned to Langdale Abbey and could dress in a similar fashion. She would love every moment of it.

“Our meeting should not require a great deal of time today. We already have our invitations sent, musicians, menu, decorations...” she glanced up from her paper as Margaret took a seat across from her. “There is just one more matter I would like to discuss with you.”

“Yes?” Margaret couldn’t imagine what it could be. They had been thorough in their planning, and Lady Blackwell had been an excellent teacher in preparing Margaret to host her own balls and parties one day.

Lady Blackwell paused, staring into the distance as she seemed to collect her words. She gave a small smile. “I have been hesitant to breach this subject, but I do find it rather necessary.”

Again, Margaret searched for any idea of what it might be. Her heart thumped with nervousness as she watched Lady Blackwell continue to delay her words.

“There is no reason to be hesitant,” Margaret said with a reassuring smile, though she wasn’t quite certain that was true.

Lady Blackwell clasped her fingers together in front of her. “Well, as you know, we have discussed the importance of showing our guests that our two families have formed a strong enough union to overcome the troubles of the past. Society

still believes that your father was to blame, and for the sake of all involved, it is still better that they believe that.”

Margaret nodded her agreement.

Lady Blackwell continued, “But people will wonder why Peter chose to marry you. They have already been skeptical, forming their own opinions. You see, society does not like to be told what to believe and what to think of anyone. They do not like to be manipulated. Peter’s original goal in marrying you was not only to provide your family with wealth and comfort, but also with an elevated status. I’m afraid that if people believe that the two of you married only as a way to make recompense, they will still continue to look down on your family. They might think that your father paid Peter an immense dowry in the hopes of obtaining the connection for his own gain.” She let out a sigh. “A marriage is a connection, to be sure, but love is a far more enticing one.”

Margaret shook her head. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

Lady Blackwell leaned forward. “I know you may not particularly like Peter, but if we wish to convince our guests that Peter married you for no reason other than passion, then it is important that the two of you act as if you are in love at the ball.”

Her heart leaped, and she looked down at the tea table. “Oh.” The tips of her ears tingled and her hands began to sweat. “How do you suppose we do that?”

“I will leave that up to you. All I ask is that you refrain from glaring at him, or anything of the sort.” She gave a quiet laugh, covering her lips with her fingers. “Your expressions have not escaped my notice.”

Margaret's face burned, and she gave up a reluctant smile. "I apologize. He brings out the worst in me at times."

"It is refreshing to see Peter sufficiently humbled." Lady Blackwell's dark eyes searched Margaret's. "You have made an impact on him, to be sure. From the moment you walked into this house, I have noticed a change in him. It warms my heart to see him so eager to live each day, especially after I nearly lost him. It has been a very long time since I have seen him so happy."

"Oh, no, surely it isn't because of me." Margaret shook her head fast.

"We may all have our own opinion." She flashed a warm smile.

Margaret twisted her hands together, scowling at the floor.

"Are you willing to act your part at the ball? I truly do believe it will be very beneficial. I am not usually so accepting of deceit, but if it is as harmless as this, then I will support it."

Harmless. Why was that so difficult to believe?

Margaret swallowed. "I will try. Have you...told Peter of this plan?"

"Not yet, but I will today." Lady Blackwell paused, one eyebrow arching slightly. "Although I don't think it will require a great deal of acting from him in order to be convincing."

Margaret cast her a questioning look, but Lady Blackwell had already looked away, folding her paper before standing. "That was all I wished to discuss. I have other matters to attend to at the moment, but I thank you for agreeing to my plan. It is imperative."

All Margaret could do was give a weak nod as Lady Blackwell took her leave.

Her stomach twisted with nerves. How could she pretend to be in love with Peter in such a public way? She understood why it was necessary, and she wanted to do all she could to please Lady Blackwell, but the thought still set her pulse racing. And what had Lady Blackwell meant when she implied that Peter wouldn't have to act? Did she think he was falling in love with Margaret? She wiped her damp palms on her skirts. He wasn't. She was sure of it. She had done nothing to encourage such feelings.

Her mind raced until she could hardly sit still. She moved to the pianoforte, choosing the most difficult piece of music she could find. She needed a distraction, and music was the best one she could think of at the moment. There was no better way to clear her mind and lift her spirits. The moment her first note rang through the air, she felt the weight on her shoulders lighten. Each time her finger struck a new key, she pushed Peter Trafford, Lord Blackwell, further and further from her mind, until all that remained was the song.



The sun was bright the next morning when Margaret awoke. She had been sleeping later the last several days, catching up on the many hours she had missed during the armchair war. The moment she gathered her senses about her, dread began gnawing at her stomach.

It was the day of the ball.

She had been looking forward to it for a fortnight, but now all she could do was dread it. Signs of her nervousness were

manifesting themselves already. Her palms perspired again, her throat was dry, and she could hardly move her legs. Drat it all. How would she make it through the long day ahead with such painful anticipation of the evening? If only Mama could come back. What would Mama think if she knew all that had occurred at Langdale Abbey in her absence? She was likely still awaiting word of Lord Blackwell's death. It was better that Mama wasn't there. She would worry too much. Margaret could face her challenges on her own.

She squared her shoulders and called her maid to help her dress for the day. She was late to breakfast, so she ate alone before going to find her brothers with the nursemaid. She did her best to entertain them and encourage James in his reading, but Papa had decided not to fret about the education of the boys until Mama and George returned from London so she could be more involved in the decisions about their choice of school or hiring a governess. Margaret knew what it was like to be a governess, and it was no small task. She sympathized with the nursemaid, Kate, and tried to help as much as she could.

Margaret made her way to James' and Peter's room, but found it empty. She checked the nursery where all the books and toys were kept, but still, they were nowhere to be found. How strange. She walked to Papa's room, knocking on the door three times before easing it open. Papa was still in bed, and he stirred when Margaret entered.

"Who is there?" he rasped, eyes fluttering open.

"It's Margaret. I'm sorry to have awoken you. I was looking for James and Philip. Have they come to see you today?"

"Not that I recall." Papa's voice was slow and labored.

Margaret paused in the doorway. “How are you feeling, Papa? Is the physician coming again today?”

He nodded, closing his eyes again. “I’m tired, that is all.”

She bit her lip with concern. Why was his condition not improving? He had been ill for so long, having better days and worse days, but never recovering for more than a few days at a time. She had wondered if he was simply avoiding interactions with the Traffords by keeping to his room so much, but she had begun to fear that his health was truly declining with each passing day.

“Are you going to try to make an appearance at the dinner and ball this evening?” Margaret asked. “Lady Blackwell has spoken to you on the subject, has she not?”

“She has.” Papa groaned. “I may come, but I will not dance.”

Margaret smiled. “I would not expect that of you. Surely no one will expect it.”

“But I cannot promise that I will be there. The guests are sure to look at me with a great deal of speculation, and I would rather not be the object of it.”

“I daresay the greater object of their speculation will be Lord Blackwell and me,” Margaret said with a scoff. “Everyone will wonder why he would choose to wed a woman who was so far beneath his status.”

“They might also wonder why I, as your father, would ever encourage the union after he told every notable man in England that I cheated in cards.” Papa grunted. “But what they can never know is that I did not. If Lord Blackwell is seen as a liar for telling them as much, then we will all suffer for it now that we are irrevocably tied to him. And that, my dear, is why I

do not like the idea of going to the ball tonight. *I* will be seen as the villain, not Lord Blackwell.”

“Is he truly such a villain?” The words slipped out of her mouth before she could stop them.

Papa’s eyelids had ceased to droop. He was staring at her now, raw surprise in his features.

“I mean to say...is he *still* such a villain? Of course he *was*, but—” she shook her head, “nevermind. It is a subject I have been pondering on of late, but I will not bother you with it. I need to find James and Philip.” She turned to leave, embarrassed that she had given Papa any indication that her feelings toward Peter had changed.

“Margaret.” Papa’s voice was firm, urging her to turn back.

“Yes?”

“Take care.” He sighed. “I only caution you because I was fooled by him once. He seemed trustworthy, amiable, and very persuasive. He has a way of accomplishing his motives. I was shocked to find that he was none of those things. It is not impossible that he has changed—but I would be...wary if I were you.” He gave a weak smile. “Perhaps I am too pessimistic.”

“No, Papa. You are right.” Margaret’s heart sank at his reminder. *He has a way of accomplishing his motives*. If his motive was to convince her that he was a good man, then he could pretend and trick her all he wanted. She no longer wanted to assume the worst of him, but she couldn’t allow herself to assume the best of him either, not at the risk of being severely disappointed. “I hope to see you at the ball this evening.”

Papa closed his eyes. “The more I consider it, the less I want to go.”

She laughed. “I will not blame you if you wish to keep to your room. I wish I could do the same.”

“But you love attending balls.”

She pressed her lips together. “This one may be a bit different than the ones I once loved.” Her stomach lurched with another bout of nerves. She had considered telling Papa about the act she would be putting on that night, but decided not to trouble him with it. She severely doubted he would come.

Papa opened one eye to look at her. “Enjoy it. You have been waiting far too long to dance in a ballgown to be dreading this evening.”

His words did little to reassure her, but she pretended they did, thanking him with a smile before closing the door. She *had* been waiting far too long, but not to dance in a ballgown with *Lord Blackwell*. The idea of dancing with Peter sent a thrill across her shoulder blades.

No. Unacceptable. She marched through the corridor, turning her thoughts back to her brothers. Where on earth could they have gone? She passed the nursery again, surprised to find Kate inside the doorway.

Her large brown eyes blinked in surprise beneath her cap as Margaret nearly collided with her.

“Oh! Forgive me, my lady.” Kate gave a curtsy.

Margaret’s brow furrowed as she glanced behind the nursemaid and into the empty room. “Are James and Philip with you?”

“No, I left them to your husband’s care this morning. He insisted.”

Margaret frowned. “Why would he do that?” she had asked the question aloud, not expecting an answer from Kate. The nursemaid gave a subtle shake of her head.

“Thank you,” Margaret muttered as she pivoted in the opposite direction.

The last place to look was outside, so she made her way down the stairs and to the windows in the morning room that overlooked the grass behind the house. When she opened the door, she found Rachel and Sally sitting on two separate sofas, each with an embroidery hoop in hand.

“Good morning,” Margaret said in a quick voice. “Have you seen James and Philip? And...Peter?”

“No,” Rachel said, pulling her needle through her fabric. “Not since breakfast.”

Sally shook her head.

Margaret hurried to the window. The grass was trimmed neatly, stretching back to the distant treeline. She spotted Peter with a blindfold over his eyes, walking with both arms outstretched. James and Philip ran in circles around him, ducking and skirting past his hands.

She watched them for several seconds, her heart skipping against her will. James and Philip were laughing, though she couldn’t hear the sound. She could see it in their faces. Her gaze focused on Peter. The way he stumbled about trying to find them with his blindfold on should have made her laugh. Instead, it flooded her chest with warmth and suspended her breath in her lungs. She couldn’t move. That blasted bird was fluttering its wings in her ribcage again.

Everything Papa had just warned her about came pouring back to her mind, but it already carried less weight than it had just minutes before. She was looking, searching, as hard as she could, but she couldn't manage to find a villain in that man with the ridiculous grin on his face and a blindfold over his eyes. She swallowed against her dry throat.

"He does have a habit of making a fool of himself," Rachel said from behind her.

Margaret jumped a little. She hadn't heard Rachel move away from the sofa.

The sunlight from the window illuminated gold tones in her brown eyes, just like Peter's. She was watching the trio out on the grass with a smirk.

Margaret turned away from the window, resting one hand on the windowsill. "I don't think I've ever heard you say one good thing about your brother." Margaret gave her a teasing smile.

Rachel sighed, a smile still lingering on her mouth. "To do so would be too... torturous."

"Why?" Margaret had been curious about Rachel's constant scathing remarks to Peter. There was a bitterness behind them that seemed too genuine. "Have you and Peter ever been close?"

Rachel stared at him through the window, deep thought reflected in her eyes. "As children, yes. But when our father died, Peter changed." She shook her head at the floor. "He became like him in many ways. He seemed to care more about money, status, and Langdale Abbey than he did about me. He began ignoring my mother and I, even Rebecca and Sally. He kept to himself when he was home, and spent as much time

away in London as he could. I felt that I had lost my brother long before he became ill. It was difficult for me to mourn the recent possibility of his death, because I already felt that he had died a long time ago.” A crease appeared in her forehead. “My first season, he planned my meeting with Cornelius. I expressed my disinterest in him to Peter, but when Cornelius proposed, Peter insisted that I marry him. Like a fool, I allowed him to control me, but I hated him for it.” Her voice shifted to a whisper. “I didn’t love Cornelius. I resented Peter for throwing me away to the first man who offered, convincing me to believe that it would be my only chance. I felt like a burden, and so I gave in to his persuasion.”

Margaret’s heart thumped. Papa’s warning came to mind again. *He is very persuasive.*

“Fortunately,” Rachel continued, “Cornelius surprised me. I grew to like him.” She eyed Margaret with a half-smile. “Much like how you are growing to like Peter.”

“Perhaps it isn’t quite the same.” Her voice was too defensive.

“You are tolerating him well, at least.” Rachel’s face lit up, but her lips were still twisted in a smirk as she watched her brother out the window. “Even if you do not like him, he most certainly likes you. It is refreshing to see him struggle to impress you. It has always been far too easy for him to impress people with his title and wealth and handsome face.” Rachel made a retching noise. “I cannot stand it. That is why I like you.” She turned away from the window, leaning one hip against it with a tilt of her head. “You are not easily impressed.” She laughed in her throat. “You are making a fool of my brother, and I am thoroughly entertained.”

Margaret pressed her lips together, sneaking another glance at Peter as he caught Philip by the arms. He tore the blindfold off his face and pumped a fist in the air to signify his victory. Then he pushed back Philip's curls with a gentle hand and helped him tie the blindfold around his eyes.

A flutter erupted in Margaret's stomach again at the thought of that evening. Had Lady Blackwell told Peter the plan yet? She didn't want to go into the evening without discussing the details with him, but that made her almost as nervous as she was to enact the plan itself.

Margaret turned to Rachel. "Would you like to join me outside?"

She shook her head. "Thank you for the invitation, but I will stay here." She walked back to the sofa, a grin still lingering on her lips.

Gathering her courage, Margaret went on her own. At some point between when she had left the morning room and when she stepped outside, Peter had put the blindfold back on his own face. He was in pursuit of James now, hunched over with both arms stretched out in front of him. Peter's sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, his hair tied back at the base of his neck.

When James saw Margaret, she held a finger to her lips, creeping closer to where they played their game. Feeling suddenly daring, she walked directly between James and Peter. Her brothers stifled their laughter as Peter came straight for Margaret. She began regretting her actions the moment his hands collided with her, catching her by the elbows.

"Got you!" He froze. "That...is not James." He slid his hands slowly up her arms until they settled on her sleeves.

Framed in his hands as she was, she called every last bit of her wisdom into question. Why had she thought it a good idea to interrupt their game like this? Already, her face was burning. The sun beat down on her. She had forgotten a bonnet.

She remained silent, reaching for his blindfold and lifting it away from his eyes. He blinked against the sunlight before his gaze focused on her face. His confusion melted into a surprised grin.

“I thought my brothers had run away and become lost,” she said in an accusatory voice. She couldn’t help but scold him, even though she found far more to admire about the circumstances than to resent.

“We were playing Blind Man’s Bluff with Grandfather,” James said in his defense.

“Do *not* call him Grandfather.” Margaret sighed, meeting Peter’s gaze again. A laugh hovered in his eyes, and she nearly lost her composure.

Ducking under his arm, she stepped three paces away from him. She could think much more clearly when he wasn’t touching her.

“Why not?” James asked with a frown.

“Because he is your brother-in-law, not your grandfather.”

“What is a brother-in-law?”

Margaret spoke slowly in the hopes that he would understand. “Since I am your sister and I married him, he is now your brother-in-law, and you are his. You do not have the same parents as him, so he is not simply called your brother like Philip or George. Does that make sense?”

“Yes. But I still think he is too old to be my brother.” James grimaced. “Can he be my uncle?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because you already have uncles. Your uncles are Papa’s brothers and brothers-in-law, and Mama’s brothers and brothers-in-law.”

James was silent for a long moment, casting his gaze upward in deep thought. His eyes rounded as he reached his conclusion. “That means when you and Lord Blackwell have children, I will be an uncle?”

Margaret’s nostrils flared, and she wrung her hands together. “That is what that means, yes.” She refused to look at Peter, a hint of warmth tingling on the edges of her cheeks. “The point I wished to make is, there are many reasons why you cannot call him grandfather, especially not in public.”

James shrugged, a mischievous smile on his lips. She doubted he would obey her, especially if Peter continued to encourage it for the sake of his own entertainment. He would likely encourage it only because he knew it vexed her.

James waved Philip over to his side, and then tagged him before running off in the opposite direction. He was apparently bored with the conversation. Philip chased him on his short little legs, shouting in protest.

Margaret dared a look at Peter’s face. The blindfold was still on his forehead, but he quickly discarded it.

“My brothers seem to like you,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. “I cannot imagine why.”

He had grown accustomed to her harsh comments by now, and she trusted that he wouldn't take them too seriously. As she hoped, his mouth twisted into a lopsided smile. "They are excellent judges of character."

She looked down at the grass with a suppressed smile, shifting awkwardly in her boots.

"Are you looking forward to the ball this evening?" his deep voice made her nervousness rage all over again.

"Well, there are certain aspects of the evening that I anticipate more eagerly than others." She studied his face for any sign that he knew what she was referring to.

He laughed under his breath. "I know you are most eager about our charade, but you must be careful not to over-exaggerate your feelings for me. I know it will be difficult to restrain yourself, but I implore you to try."

She stared at him, gritting her teeth. Everything about him was flirtatious, from his casual posture to his searching eyes and devil-may-care smile. She took a deep breath, trying to stay afloat, but the fact of the matter was that she was hopelessly drowning in all of it. How would she survive the evening?

"I thought it prudent to have a *serious* conversation about our plan," Margaret said, keeping her voice even. "Your mother emphasized the importance of our charade. That is the only reason I agreed."

Peter took a step closer, his deep brown eyes still searching hers. "Is that really the only reason?"

"Yes!" Margaret scoffed. "Stop doing that."

"What?"

“Looking at me.” She cleared her throat. “In that manner.”

He tipped his head back with a laugh, a genuine smile lighting his face. “Very well.” He looked at her again, his dark lashes casting a shadow over his cheek. “I’ll save it for this evening.”

She opened her mouth to offer a retort, but her mind was blank.

He gave a teasing grin. “There is nothing to discuss. Play the part as best you can. If we prepare too much, it will appear rehearsed.” He started walking away, backing up a few steps. “If you will excuse me, I have a few matters to attend to before the ball.”

Margaret gave a nod, watching him with a skeptical eye as he turned around. A smile flashed on his lips, and then he was walking away.

She tore her gaze away from his back, pivoting in the opposite direction with a huffed breath. James still ran as fast as he could across the grass as Philip struggled to keep up. If she could run away from her responsibilities that evening, she would. If she could run away from Peter’s infuriating charm and ridiculous comments, she would. Why did he still make her so angry? She kicked the toe of her boot into the grass, struggling to comprehend her feelings—and too afraid to inspect them closely enough.

She could not allow him to persuade her into thinking anything that wasn’t true. She could not confuse their act for reality in any manner, especially when he looked at her in the way he just had.

He had been practicing for that evening, that was all.

She comforted herself with that thought as she watched Philip unexpectedly catch James by the back of the shirt.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 20



The lavender gown had arrived just in time. It was satin, overlain with a sheer fabric with silver threads. Margaret spun in a circle in front of the looking glass in her bedchamber while her lady's maid stood by to admire her work on Margaret's hair. The curls had managed to hold from their rags the night before, which was rare. With the silver pendant at her neck and her cheeks properly pinched, Margaret was as prepared as she could be to be presented to the public eye as a countess.

She gulped, digging her fingernails into her palms. In her reflection, her eyes flashed back at her with determination. She was going to act in order to help her family. Society would have no doubt that she and Peter had married for love, not any strange arrangement or obligation. Her family would slowly regain their respect and live as they had before their ruin. It was up to Margaret to convince society. In the meantime, she had to ensure her heart didn't *convince* her of anything else. Or Peter, for that matter.

A few special guests had been invited to dinner before the ball, so Margaret would need to be downstairs soon to ensure all the arrangements were in place before making her way to the drawing room. She would have to act as hostess, which was not aiding her nerves. How could she manage so many

tasks at once? Lady Blackwell was prepared to assist her as much as she could, but Margaret would still have to be very social and polite and endure countless introductions.

The staff was adept, so she didn't worry that anything would go amiss when it came to the meal and the ball. She simply doubted her own ability to give a convincing performance. She was thinking too much. It wouldn't be so difficult. All she had to do was stay by Peter's side, smile at him adoringly, and laugh. Dance with him a time or two. Surely that would be enough.

She waited a few minutes before going down the kitchen where the servants were finishing the meal preparations. Her mouth watered at the variety of warm, hearty smells. Her stomach had been in knots all day, so she hadn't yet eaten. At least she had the food to look forward to.

She made her way to the drawing room next. When she arrived, Lady Blackwell was already standing inside, peeking out the window to catch a glimpse of the courtyard.

"Oh, Margaret, you have arrived just in time." Lady Blackwell looked beautiful in her ivory satin gown and gloves. Her hair was arranged with intricate braids, curls, and a dramatic feather. "You look lovely."

"As do you." Margaret smiled, already a little more at ease. Lady Blackwell knew of the charade. She would be there to reassure Margaret if necessary.

Her palms perspired in her gloves as she anticipated Peter's arrival in the drawing room. She watched the door while Lady Blackwell watched for guests out the window. First Rachel and Cornelius arrived, then Rebecca and Sally. Where was Peter?

The door opened again, and her heart dropped to her knees. She held her breath as the doorway widened. It wasn't Peter.

“Papa?”

He gave a weak smile as Margaret rushed toward him. His shoulders slumped, and his cheeks were pale. Even so, he was dressed in a black jacket and white cravat. She could hardly remember the last time she had seen him so formal.

“I didn't think you would come!” she exclaimed. “Are you certain you're well enough?” She studied his paleness again.

“I would not miss your debut as a countess.” His eyes were kind as they swept over her face. “You look like one.”

“Are you certain you are well enough? Do not exert yourself too severely. If you need to leave, I will explain your absence to the guests.”

“I will manage.” He took a deep breath, but there was already a sheen of perspiration on his brow.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes. Do not coddle me.”

She laughed. “Thank you, Papa.” Her smile froze as she realized that Papa didn't know about Lady Blackwell's plan. She had been so certain that he wouldn't be coming to the ball, she hadn't thought it necessary to tell him. But now that he would be there to observe her and Peter, her chest tightened with urgency.

“Papa, there is something I must tell you about this evening,” she said in a low voice.

Before she could say another word, the drawing room door opened again.

This time it *was* Peter.

All the thoughts that had been spinning in her head, the desperation to tell Papa about the plan, vanished at the sight of his face.

His clean-shaven face.

His dark blond hair was cut short and arranged in a mussed, careless style that suited him. His snug black jacket clung to his broad shoulders, and he wore a crisp white cravat and silver waistcoat. She couldn't tear her gaze away, not even as an amused grin tugged on his lips. She had never seen all the details of his face that his smile influenced before, covered by hair as it had been. There was a crease at one corner of his mouth, and a dimple dented the opposite cheek. His jawline, square and sharp, was better off hidden for Margaret's sake. His eyes were still the same—deep brown with gold flecks and dark lashes. They raked over her, the intensity of his gaze making her pulse thrum in her neck.

Her first instinct was to glare at him for choosing to shave and cut his hair at the most critical moment, but she refrained. Her throat was dry, and she felt suddenly weak as he approached her.

Papa moved to the nearest seat as soon as he saw Peter, as if to escape any conversation with him.

Before Peter reached her side, Lady Blackwell gave a dramatic gasp. "Oh, Peter, you look so very handsome!" She beamed, lifting her hands as if she wished to cup his face between them. "Don't you agree, Margaret?"

Peter dodged her, his smile twisting more to one side as he met Margaret's gaze.

He knew. He knew the way his new look would affect her, and he was loving every moment of her speechlessness.

She collected herself, speaking more to the floor than to Lady Blackwell. “He does.”

Lady Blackwell seemed nearly on the verge of tears over the sight of Peter’s clean-shaven face. “What a marvelous surprise, Peter. I didn’t think you would ever listen to us.”

Peter had reached Margaret, watching his mother with an amused grin. He leaned closer to Margaret’s ear. “I didn’t do it for them.”

She forced herself to look up at him, heart in her throat. “I hardly ever spoke a word against your beard and hair. In fact, I might have preferred it.”

His smile fell so instantly that she stifled a laugh.

“You cannot be serious.”

“I’m not.” She swallowed. “You do look far more... presentable this way.” She couldn’t bring herself to call him handsome, even if the word was screaming repeatedly in her mind.

“Are you implying that I was not at all presentable before?”

She shrugged. “Perhaps more so when you combed your hair.”

“I combed it every day.”

She smiled, enjoying the defensiveness in his tone. “That does not matter. At least it was combed today. We have to make an impression this evening.”

“Of two people madly in love.” The quiet depth of his voice sent a chill over her shoulder blades.

To be in love with Peter would be mad, indeed. She gathered her wits about her like a hen gathering her chicks. She would need them that night. This was not the time for weakness or foolishness.

She glanced at Papa, who was already watching them. A crease marked his brow, but he looked away as soon as Margaret caught him looking. What would he think of the charade? Her face burned at the thought of Papa observing her attempts at showing the guests that she was in love with her husband. He wouldn't know it was fake. He would be horrified by all of it. She would have to explain to him the truth about the evening the moment it was over.

When she glanced up at Peter again, he was walking to Papa's side. He stopped and offered a bow. “Mr. Lovell, I am glad to see that you felt well enough to join us.”

Papa grunted under his breath. “We shall see how long I last.” His tone was heavy with vexation. He met Peter's gaze, holding it there for several seconds. What was he thinking? Margaret's stomach writhed. She might become ill herself by the end of the ball. There was still a great deal of tension between the two men, and for good reason. Margaret hadn't seen them speak since she and Papa had moved to Langdale Abbey. Was this their first conversation? Or had they spoken privately before? Unspoken words seemed to be passing between them as Papa held Peter's gaze with unrelenting force.

Lady Blackwell moved forward to greet the first guests walking through the door. “Lady Andover, welcome. Lord Andover.”

“Ah, Lady Blackwell,” the woman who must have been Lady Andover gave a warm smile. “Well, I suppose I shall now call you the dowager countess.” Her eyes slid in Margaret’s direction.

There would only be three couples joining them for the dinner portion of the evening, all of whom were old friends of the Traffords. Lady Blackwell had specifically chosen the most influential of her acquaintances for dinner invitations. She wanted them to be the first to form their opinions of the bond between the two families without hearing any of the gossip at the ball.

Peter returned to Margaret’s side. He held out his arm for her to hold.

If she was going to do this, she had to do it flawlessly. Act one of their charade was already beginning, but Margaret wasn’t certain she was prepared. With a deep breath, she threaded both her hands around his elbow, holding him close. She sneaked a look at his face as they approached the viscount and viscountess of Andover. He was already looking at her, a knowing smile on his lips.

Peter cleared his throat. “Lord Andover, it is a pleasure to have you at Langdale Abbey once again.”

The viscount was short and round, with one tuft of gray hair remaining on each side of his head. His wife stood an inch taller than him, skeletal shoulders enrobed in blue chiffon sleeves. She lifted her chin as she studied Margaret thoroughly while her husband conversed with Peter.

“Blackwell, I almost didn’t believe the news about your miraculous recovery, but I must confess, you do look well.” Lord Andover chuckled. “I see why you were so encouraged

to survive with this lovely young woman to greet you each day.”

Peter smiled down at Margaret. “She is the sole reason I look forward to each morning.” His voice was gentle and disarming. Margaret would have to remind herself repeatedly throughout the night that Peter was only acting, or she might melt into the floor. “And I have not yet properly introduced her to you. Lord Andover, Lady Andover, might I make known to you my wife, Margaret, Lady Blackwell.”

After Lady Andover’s prolonged study of Margaret, the conclusion she drew seemed to be still undecided. Her lips did not flinch toward even the slightest smile. “A pleasure,” she said in a hesitant voice.

Margaret gave her most elegant bow, holding fast to Peter’s arm. At least she didn’t have to face so many intimidating lords and ladies alone. He would be by her side. He had experience in this world of titles and prestige that she lacked.

Lady Andover still watched Margaret. “You must have been exceedingly relieved to find that your new husband was recovering so well.”

“I was, indeed. I was overjoyed.” She gave a bright smile.

“I confess I was rather surprised to learn of the match,” Lady Andover said in a low voice, “considering what has passed between your families.” One delicate brow raised into a triangular arch. “It would seem that most of my acquaintances agree. It was quite...unexpected.”

“Ah, love does enjoy being unpredictable.” Peter’s hand covered Margaret’s hand on his arm. “Not only is it unexpected, but it is healing. Our families have reconciled and

forgotten any squabbles of the past. We have only a happy future to look forward to.”

“I admire your forgiving nature, Blackwell.” Lord Andover glanced at Papa, who still sat alone on the settee.

“There was little to forgive on my part,” Peter said in a quick voice. He seemed to struggle for the right words. He couldn’t deny his accusations of Papa without condemning them further, though Margaret sensed that he wanted to. “Often what is thought to be a heinous misdeed is simply a misunderstanding. As you become further acquainted with my *family*, you will learn that each person has an outstanding character.” Hearing Peter refer to her and her father as his family was strange, but admirable.

Margaret nodded. “My father was even kind enough to join us for the party this evening, even though he has not been feeling well.” She walked back a step, bringing Peter with her. “Papa, might I make known to you the viscount and viscountess of Andover. This is my father, Anthony Lovell.” Papa stood with a suppressed groan, offering a polite bow.

“Forgive me, my health is not at its best at the moment.” He gave a smile, and Margaret couldn’t imagine how anyone wouldn’t instantly like him. Her father had a very kind smile.

She observed Lord and Lady Andover closely as they greeted him. There were no obvious signs of contempt from Lord Andover, but Lady Andover was more difficult to read.

The other guests arrived in quick succession, filling the room with even more intimidating faces and names. A marquess and marchioness and their two daughters, as well as a baron and baroness. After all the introductions had been made, the group made their way to the dining room. Throughout the meal, Margaret fought her shyness, attempting

to be social and confident as she conversed with Lady Andover, who had been seated beside her.

“Do you have children?” Margaret asked between courses.

Lady Andover nodded, rotating in her chair to face Margaret more fully. “Yes, four daughters, all of whom are now married.”

She dabbed her thin lips with her serviette, casting her eyes downward. “I do wonder if your husband used the same tactics to win your heart as he did my youngest daughter Emma.” Her voice was barely above a whisper, only loud enough for Margaret to hear.

“Pardon me?” Margaret’s stomach lurched.

Lady Andover smirked, but there was a bitterness behind it. She gave a light laugh. “Surely you are aware of his reputation, yes? He was the catch of the season for many years, but never chose a wife. He seemed to make a game of winning the hearts of all the new debutantes, my daughter included. I was shocked to hear not only that he had finally chosen a wife, but that it was...well, one with a ruined reputation.” Her face was dripping with disdain. “I was equally shocked to learn that you had accepted him after he made your father’s disgrace known to the whole of England. Forgive me for speaking so plainly. You must know how shocking it all has appeared.”

“Love will not be stopped.” Margaret’s voice shook. She cleared her throat. “I—I didn’t wish to fall in love with him, all because of these reasons you have stated. But I could not help it.” Her heart hammered as the words tried to sneak their way into her heart and make a nest there for that blasted bird and its fluttering wings. All her feelings were entangled together in one, none of it making sense.

She clasped her hands together in her lap, squeezing her fingers together. “What are these tactics you speak of? The ones he used in order to win hearts?”

“Oh, I will not trouble you with it. You are married and in love, and that is all that matters.”

“No, please, do tell me. I am curious.” She feigned an amused smile.

Lady Andover pursed her lips. “According to my daughter, he has a way of flirting that is unlike any other gentleman. He has a level of confidence that is unmatched. He gives persistent attention and is very convincing.”

There is was again. *Convincing*...persuasive, one in the same.

“My poor Emma was heartbroken when she realized it was all a game to him.” Her jaw tightened. “He was also known to give such attentions to multiple women at once. He could never be satisfied with just one.” She gave Margaret a pointed look. “Not to worry, I have forgiven him for his treatment of my Emma, simply because I am a very generous person.” She brushed a curl from her forehead. “I do wonder what he found lacking in her. He was always determined to marry the ‘perfect’ woman. I should be glad to come to know you better so I might find out why he chose you and why he found you superior to my daughter.” Her smile might as well have been painted on her face for how false it appeared.

Margaret gave a nervous laugh, looking down at her plate. “I don’t think it is superiority of any sort that causes love. It is compatibility.” Her lungs were heavy. “Peter and I were compatible from the start.” *Except for the years she spent hating him.* Her face burned, Lady Andover’s words echoing in her ears.

He could never be satisfied with just one.

How long would it be before he would grow weary of Margaret's company? She banished the thought from her mind. Why should it matter to her? He could do as he wished. Peter was accustomed to winning the heart of any lady he wanted. At times he acted like he wanted her, but was it simply because he had to? He had married her thinking that he would die shortly after. If he had known he would live, he would have chosen some other lady who was much prettier and much more accomplished—one who he didn't have to pretend to love in front of his acquaintances in order to tug her out of the depths of ruin.

Her chest ached, unexpected pain radiating from her heart out to her fingertips. She had never considered his side so fully before. She had thought of how she regretted marrying him, but she had never thought of how much he might regret marrying her. If it was so easy for him to win any lady of his choosing, then Margaret would have never been on his mind.

Even this Emma, daughter of a viscount, had not been enough for him. How could Margaret ever be?

There was only one conclusion to be drawn, then.

When he gave all of his flirtatious comments and when he had seemed close to kissing her in the armchair...

He was still playing his game.

She was no longer hungry. She stared down at her plate with gritted teeth. He might have won the armchair war, but he would not win this time. Her heart was not a prize, and her emotions were not to be toyed with.

No matter what, she would remain strong and not allow herself to be *convinced* as so many others had been. As soon

as the night was over, her act would be over.

And she would make sure he knew she wanted no part of his game.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 21



Peter did not envy Margaret's companion for conversation at the table. Lady Andover seemed to lack any sort of restraint when it came to what was inappropriate to actually say aloud. Based on the way Margaret glowered down at her plate, he could only imagine that Lady Andover had said something insulting.

He kept his eyes fixed on Margaret, hoping she would glance up so he could try to reassure her somehow. But she seemed intent to avoid his gaze. Her cheeks were flushed, and when he caught a glimpse of her eyes, they seemed to be a little wetter than usual. She eventually lifted her chin, jaw tight as it was when she was determined about something, and she resumed her conversation with Lady Andover.

Peter surveyed the rest of the guests. He hadn't expected Mr. Lovell to join them, and it was obvious that he was displeased with Peter's apparent closeness to Margaret. He hadn't been keeping his promise as he was supposed to, and Mr. Lovell had berated him for it, all with one look in the drawing room. Peter wanted a word with him, but finding a private moment would be difficult.

As soon as the meal was finished and cleared away, the ladies stood and removed to the drawing room. Peter stayed

behind with the men as their port was poured into glasses. He moved down two chairs until he was closer to Mr. Lovell, leaving the other men to continue their conversation about their race horses.

Mr. Lovell glanced up from his cup, a sheen of perspiration on his brow. “Have we exhausted you yet?” Peter asked. He tried to sound friendly, but Mr. Lovell did not seem in the mood for geniality. With the other men sitting at the other end of the table, Mr. Lovell couldn’t act overly hostile, so for that Peter was grateful.

Mr. Lovell opened his mouth to speak. Peter braced himself for an accusation about not keeping his promise.

“You shaved.” Mr. Lovell took a sip from his cup.

Peter shook himself of his surprise for long enough to nod. “Yes, I did.”

“Good. I did not wish for my daughter to be seen beside such a wild man.”

“That is the very purpose behind my decision to shave.” He gave a half smile before gathering his thoughts. “I must apologize and confess that I have not been keeping my promise to stay away from Margaret as well as you would have hoped for. I do thoroughly enjoy coming to know her and spending time with her, but only when she initiates such interactions. She is my wife, and I think it is better to make efforts to know her character and allow her to know mine than to avoid her. I hope you will agree.” Peter debated whether or not to tell him about the act they were putting on that night. He decided against it. Because for him, it wasn’t an act. He didn’t want Mr. Lovell to think that he was pretending in his apparent affection for Margaret. It was all real, even if hers was not.

He hadn't realized how dangerous it was to engage in such a plan. When she had clung to his arm in the drawing room and smiled up at him, he had found himself desperately trying to memorize the moment and feeling. He might never have it again.

Mr. Lovell was silent for a long moment, swirling the port in his glass. "I do agree, but only if your words are true—if your devotion and regard for her is genuine."

Peter's throat was dry, his heart pounding in confirmation of Mr. Lovell's words. "It is, I assure you."

Mr. Lovell grunted. "I hope you are being truthful with me, Blackwell. This time, I truly do."

"You may rely upon it." Peter looked him straight in the eyes. "Margaret is very dear to me." The moment the words left his mouth, his heart picked up speed. How had it happened so quickly? His feelings had been nothing but a whisper, but now they screamed at him, no longer willing to be ignored. He could confess them to her father of all people, yet he still didn't know how to tell Margaret. She would laugh at him. Accuse him of lying, perhaps run away like she had when they had been sitting together in the armchair. Could he blame her? He had a history of lying, one he was desperate to leave behind. She was right to be cautious, and he needed to be more patient.

But that night, he could do and say as he wished. He could tell the truth in ways he never had before.

Let Margaret assume it was an act. It might make it easier to lay his heart bare.



Margaret had never been more eager to play the pianoforte. If it meant she could escape Lady Andover's side, she would have climbed out the window if given the opportunity. She had missed wearing dresses and eating fine meals, but was it worth the cost? The woman had made a verbal list of all the young ladies whose attentions Peter had secured and then deflected, all of whom had come from titled, rich families with perfect curls and unblemished skin. As the conversation went on, Margaret felt more and more foolish. Her confidence waned, and she found herself wishing to be back in that cottage beyond the hill, with Mama and Papa, George, James, and Philip, and no Lady Andover.

No Peter.

She had begun making a list of her own in her mind of all the ways in which she must have been falling short of his expectations. She was overly aware of all her flaws, counting them one by one, all because of Lady Andover's comments.

She sat at the pianoforte and began playing a lively piece. She struck the keys harder than usual. She pressed her lips together, fighting the tears that burned at the back of her eyes. What was wrong with her? What was happening to her composure? She had never been so lacking in confidence, but now she felt like sinking into the floor. She had found it ridiculous how hard Peter had seemed to be trying to impress her and win her good opinion, and yet, now she was desperate for the same. That wasn't what their marriage had been intended to be, so why did she care what he thought of her? Why was her heart aching so deeply? Her throat tightened. She had none of the answers.

The door opened and she blinked hard, catching sight of the men as they walked into the room. Peter led the way, and

when his eyes met hers, she missed a note.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Lady Andover cringe.

She stumbled over a few more keys before struggling to find her place in the music again. Her cheeks were hot as she played what remained of the song. As soon as she finished, she stood and rushed back to her place on the settee beside Lady Andover. Fortunately she and Peter were expected to be social with their guests, so she didn't have to sit beside him. At the moment, she found she preferred Lady Andover's company. At least the woman couldn't rattle her composure to the extent that Peter could.

"You are very talented," Lady Andover said with another of her painted smiles. "I am certain hardly anyone noticed your mistakes."

She had, apparently, and couldn't resist acknowledging them. Margaret's nostrils flared.

Lady Blackwell finished her applause for Margaret before sitting forward on her chair. "Now that the men have joined us, give us your opinions. Shall we enjoy a few minutes of poetry before the ball, or additional music?"

"Poetry," Peter said, crossing one leg over his knee. He had chosen a chair near Papa by the unlit fireplace. "We shall have plenty of music at the ball."

"Excellent point." Lady Blackwell smiled. "Who would like to read something first?"

The marquess, Lord Filton, was the first to volunteer. Rather than read his poem, he recited one he had committed to memory. *She Walks in Beauty* by Byron. His voice was deep and entralling to the very last word, and his wife stared up at him with rapture the entire time.

“The moment I read that poem I demanded that he learn it and recite it for me whenever I wished.” Lady Filton sighed. “It is so very elegant and romantic.”

Lord Andover chuckled. “Well, now I feel quite inferior. I have not a poem to recite for my dear wife.”

“Oh, yes, you do.” Lady Andover cast him a pointed look, one sharp enough to impale him. “There is the one you wrote for me.”

Lady Blackwell gasped in delight. “Oh, an original? You truly must share so your wife does not feel neglected.”

Lord Andover rubbed a hand over the back of his neck before standing with a reluctant grunt. “Very well, you have all persuaded me.” After taking a deep breath, he recited a short verse about ‘the lady with the green eyes.’ It seemed to be the story of how he had met her while walking through a cobblestone street. He finished his poem with an embarrassed sigh, even as all the guests in the room applauded him.

“I have not been a poet since, but this woman inspired me the one time.” He chuckled, and when he sat down, the buttons on his waistcoat stretched wide over his belly. “I fell in love with her faster than she fell in love with me.”

“To be sure,” Lady Andover added with a smirk. “He did not recite that poem to me until after we were married, as embarrassed as he was.”

Lady Blackwell laughed with delight. “A love poem is nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“What of you, Blackwell?” Lord Andover raised his eyebrows in Peter’s direction. “Have you written any poetry for your dear wife? If not, it seems you ought to do so at once

if you wish for her not to feel ‘neglected’ as the dowager countess has put it.” He laughed in his throat.

Margaret sneaked a look at Peter. He smiled, staring down at his lap for a brief moment. “I have, in fact, written one.”

“Then by all means, share it with us.” Lord Andover’s voice was close to a bellow. “There is no need to be nervous. Surely it will be better than mine.”

Peter’s gaze flickered to Margaret. “I have left it in my study. I will return shortly.”

Margaret’s heart pounded fast. Had he truly gone to such lengths for their act? He was far more prepared than she had expected.

Why was it making her so nervous? While she waited for him to return, she practically held her breath the entire time.

He came back through the door with a sheet of foolscap. He seemed to spend an eternity smoothing the creases from it. His eyes skimmed the page like he was reading it over in his mind, perhaps questioning whether he should share it or not. “I am not a poet by any means,” he said with a breathless laugh. “I have never attempted to write a piece before now. It is less of a poem, and more of a letter. I cannot explain the method, only that it is most certainly not Byron’s.”

The guests laughed, but Margaret’s breath was still lodged in her throat.

His eyes locked with hers for a long moment before he looked down at the page again. “My words are rather wild and unorganized, but then, so are the feelings that inspired it.” His throat bobbed as he swallowed. And then he began in a soft voice. “There is nothing so merciless as love. Love has not mercy for the reluctant man, nor does it surrender for the

cautious one. Love's greatest pride is to be unpredictable, unrelenting, and constant." He paused, shifting on his feet. His brow twinged. "I hold my pen in agony as my heart demands what I have not the strength to confess. Words are nothing to the feelings in my chest, but still...I shall try to tell you how I am yours."

The room was taut with silence. Every beat of Margaret's heart knocked against her breastbone as she awaited his next words.

"In the early hours of the day, you never see my longing stare. War rages on, but not only for a leather chair." His eyes shifted to hers at the same moment his lips twisted with a smile. But then the smile faded, and he returned his gaze to the foolscap. "My heart is begging me to tell you how I am yours."

Margaret's fingers were numb from how tightly she was squeezing them. The guests were watching her just as attentively as they watched Peter.

His voice cut through her, cracking another layer of her composure.

"In the late hours of the night, when sleep evades me still, my body heals, but something else now makes me ill. How can I explain to you how I am yours? How I long to hold you, to whisper in your ear how I treasure you and watch you cling to every word. How I long to know you more perfectly than any other man has, or ever will. How my eyes have never seen anything lovelier than your angelic face. How my ears have never heard anything cleverer than your riposte, or more enchanting than your laugh."

He looked up from the page for a moment, his chest rising and falling heavily before he returned to the words. "Even

each breath and beat of my heart is yours. For what else should I hope to live? Life has given me a second chance, and it is you I wish to spend it with. I am hopeless, I am mad, I am lost. My days, weeks, years, I shall give them all to you, for *yours* is all I should ever wish to be.” He paused again before continuing. “In the looking glass, I see a man who I do not recognize. He is a new creature, a better one, a changed one—because he is yours.”

Several seconds passed in silence before Lord Andover began his applause. Margaret couldn't move, her hands frozen in her lap. *It isn't real*, she told herself.

It isn't real.

It isn't real.

“Oh, Lady Blackwell, you must be quite enamored,” Lady Andover said from beside her. “I have nearly swooned myself.”

Margaret looked up from her lap, unable to look in Peter's direction. She couldn't breathe. It took a moment for her to remember that she was supposed to be acting her part. The guests were waiting for her reaction, and stunned silence was likely not what they would hope for. She gave the best smile she could manage, tipping her head in Peter's direction. “That was beautiful, thank you. I am a very fortunate woman, indeed.” She feared her voice was not convincing enough; it shook, just like her legs.

She tore her gaze away from him and stole a glance at Papa. His eyes were wide. Surely he was utterly confused by Peter's words since he didn't know about their charade. Margaret hadn't even known that the charade would go to such an extent. The women were swooning and the men were surely planning how they might be more debonair to match Peter's

status. Peter's goal had been to convince the entire room that he was madly in love with Margaret, and he had accomplished it flawlessly.

Margaret tried to be amused by the effort Peter had put into the scheme. She tried to think of the line of his poem about the leather chair, not about his 'longing stare,' or how each breath and beat of his heart was hers. But she couldn't be amused, not with the way her heart was racing. It was no wonder Papa had cautioned her to be careful. Peter was just as skilled in the art of persuasion as he had said. He could manipulate anyone to believe what he wanted them to believe. Even Margaret, who knew full well of their act, was finding herself confused.

At least not *all* the women in the room were swooning. Rachel slouched in her armchair, mouth hanging halfway open and eyebrows furrowed as she stared at her brother. She whipped her head to the side to say something to Cornelius, lifting a gloved hand to hide her lips. She looked more appalled than impressed. She must not have expected her brother to have such romantic words.

Margaret certainly hadn't. Fake or not, he had still written them.

She spent the final few minutes in the drawing room gathering her wits about her again. They had scattered for a moment. She folded her arms tightly across her chest, tucking her emotions back to their proper place.

When it was time to go to the ballroom and begin welcoming the many other guests, Margaret stood too abruptly, trying to appear confident as she approached Peter.

He met her halfway, gazing down at her with a soft smile. "You look angry."

“I-I’m not.” She took a steadying breath. “I came to tell you...well done.” She glanced to both sides. The guests were too close for her to compliment him on his ‘performance.’ She leaned a little closer, lowering her voice. “And yet, I do not understand why you told me just this morning that there was ‘no need to prepare’ for this evening. You have obviously done a great deal of preparation this afternoon.”

He laughed, but it was softer than usual. His eyes met hers again, darker in the candlelight. “I didn’t write it today.”

Her neck flushed with warmth, that set of wings fluttering in her stomach again. What did he mean? When *had* he written it then? She shushed her thoughts before they could go in a dangerous direction. If he hadn’t done it that day, he must have written it the day before as soon as his mother told him of the plan. Yes, that must have been it. The words were *not* sincere—they couldn’t be. She refused to believe that he had composed those words without the charade in mind.

Lady Blackwell called the attention of the room, and Margaret was grateful for the distraction. “Let us be off to the ballroom.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 22



The ballroom glittered with candlelight and satin fabric. Considering the recent events within his family, Peter hadn't expected so many people would come.

Margaret held tightly to his arm, keeping close to his side as they circled through the crowd to welcome each guest and make Margaret's introductions as Lady Blackwell. She gave her most polite smiles, but he could see that the effort was exhausting her. She seemed intent not to look at him, and occasionally he felt her hands shaking against his arm.

He should not have read his poem in the drawing room. He had terrified her.

He should have kept it to himself for a while longer as he had planned to, but he had been impulsive. He hadn't planned to read it for the entire room, but when Lord Andover had given him the invitation to, he had thought it to be a good opportunity.

He was wrong.

He calmed the turmoil in his chest, telling himself that Margaret believed it was fake. He could allow her to believe that for a while longer if it gave her any consolation. His jaw tightened. It was obvious that she dreaded the thought of him falling in love with her. But he was. He could no longer deny

it. If he could stop the process, or at least slow it down, he would, but he was helpless to do so. Margaret had stolen his heart without even trying. And hers, well...it was still inside that sepulcher.

Her blue eyes flitted up to his expectantly.

The first dance was about to begin. He had been too distracted by his thoughts to notice.

He turned to her with a bow. "My dear wife, may I have the courtesy of this dance?"

The curl had begun to fall from the strands of hair framing her face, leaving them limp and straight. He liked how it looked. It was very...Margaret. Her cheeks were a faint pink, and her eyes glinted with accusation. "You cannot call me that," she whispered.

He gave a mischievous grin, taking her hand and walking her to the center of the floor. He leaned close to her ear. "I think you can make an exception for this evening."

She turned to face him as he released her hand, standing across from her. She watched him from under her lashes as the music began. "Was the waltz your idea, or your mother's?"

They stepped together, and he slipped one hand around her waist, holding her closer than he had ever dared hold another partner before. "Mine."

There was no risk of ruining the lady's reputation or giving the other guests the wrong impression. This was his wife, which meant he could hold her close enough to ensure every man in the room knew she was unavailable. Rather than leave his hand at the edge of her waist, he threaded it all the way around to the small of her back, anchoring his fingers there.

She breathed sharply, meeting his gaze with round eyes. Her hand slowly rose to his upper arm, resting lightly on his jacket. He took her opposite hand, turning three rotations to the music before letting her slip away as she waltzed in a circle around him. They stepped together, then apart, the violins directing each movement, until his arm was around her waist again. He leaned his head down as they turned, bringing his face just inches from hers. His heart raced. His emotions were brought to life by the music, and they gripped him until he could hardly breathe. Margaret's eyes held him captive, and he couldn't begin to decipher all that they held. The universe was less vast.

When the dance ended, she lingered in his arms a moment longer than the other couples, and he couldn't help but wonder if it was because of the act or not. How could he be feeling so much, if she was feeling nothing? Not only was it implausible, but it was unfair. Life never promised to be fair, and neither did love. His heart was a traitor.

He smiled down at Margaret as his hand slipped away from her waist. He glanced around the room, taking note of all the eyes that were fixed on them. The more scandalous their dance had appeared, the better. He couldn't leave anyone with any question that he had chosen Margaret and she had chosen him. In the eyes of the crowd, they had to be lovers, not enemies. If they weren't yet convinced, he didn't know how else he could show them.

"Smile," he said in a quiet voice, leaning close to her ear again. The scent of roses wafted up from her skin. "We are being watched."

She stumbled back a step, laughing under her breath. The sound was false.

Did she truly hate that he was leaning so close? She had jumped back, as if on instinct. He steadied her with his hands, joining her in the laughter for the sake of their observers.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She pressed her lips together, nodding. “I’m tired, that is all. I might need a breath of fresh air.” Her brow contracted, eyes darting toward the open doors. “I do not like being watched.”

True concern unfolded in his chest. “Come with me. The guests will expect us to be eager for a few moments alone together. They won’t question it.”

Margaret seemed to be questioning it herself as she took his outstretched hand. Weaving through the crowd, he led her to the doors and out into the vestibule. A few people had gathered there to rest from their dancing and escape the crowd, but Peter knew of a better place. He pulled Margaret through the front doors and out onto the balcony of the horseshoe staircase.

The air was refreshing and cool, and the night sky was free of clouds. Countless stars dotted the black sky. The half moon was centered perfectly in front of them. A slight breeze rustled the nearby trees, and he stood in silence, listening to the sounds of the night—the leaves, the muffled music and voices from the ballroom, and his own quickened heartbeat.

Margaret walked past him, stopping when she reached the balustrade. She leaned her arms against it, looking out at the moon.

He took a few cautious steps forward until he reached her side.

In one abrupt motion, she turned toward him, a ripe scowl on her face. “I am curious about something.”

“What is it?” Peter tried to hide his amusement at the suddenness of her words.

She tapped her fingers on the stone of the balustrade. “Why did you never marry before now? Surely you have had opportunities. Before you became ill, you must have had plenty of young ladies pursuing your title and estate. Why did you not choose one of them?”

He exhaled through his lips. “That was the problem. They wanted my title and estate.” He cast her a sidelong glance.

She raised one eyebrow. “That was the only reason *I* married you.”

He gave a half-smile. “I thought I was going to die. I no longer cared. And there was a difference between those ladies and you. I owed you a debt.”

Margaret gave a slow nod.

“But I must add that the debt I owed you is not the only difference between them and you.” Peter turned so he faced her fully, leaning one elbow against the balustrade. “There are many other differences.”

She looked up, wringing her fingers together. In the dim moonlight, her eyes were like dark glass.

“You do not flatter me,” Peter said with a laugh. “You humble me instead. You do not pretend to like anything about me or agree with anything I say. You care more for your family than you do for yourself. You are polite and kind, but you have an unmatched, rather vicious wit when given the opportunity. You enjoy books, and you will abandon your

pride and dignity in order to claim the best seat in the room.” He smiled. The list went on, but he stopped himself.

The breeze caught hold of a strand of hair at Margaret’s temple, tossing it into her eyes. He brushed it away, slowly tucking it behind her ear. His heart ached as his fingertips traced the curve of her cheek. He had wanted to do that for a while.

Her lips were parted as she stared up at him, and he nearly gave in to his longing to kiss them. “You are beautiful, yet you seem not to know.” He slipped his fingers under her chin, applying just enough pressure to tip her head up toward his. He waited, and when she didn’t resist, he leaned closer. He skimmed his lips across her cheek, bringing them to her ear. “Therefore, it is my duty to tell you.”

Her eyelids grew heavy, her chest rising and falling with a faint sigh. Her breath rustled against his neck, sending a shiver over the length of his spine. Now that they were away from the watchful eyes of the guests, she wasn’t pushing him away. He gave her every opportunity to leave his arms, but she remained still.

A flame ignited in his chest. His lips still hovered near her ear, and he felt each of her quick breaths on his neck. He touched her waist, carefully placing a single kiss on the soft skin behind her ear. His heart raced as he pulled back just enough to glimpse her face, to ensure he had permission to continue. Her gaze was on his mouth.

But then she shook her head fast, taking a frantic step back.

Peter’s hands fell away from her. “That cannot be all, can it?” she asked, meeting his eyes. Her brows drew together, each inhale coming quicker than the last. “There are other

differences too, ones you have not mentioned.” Her voice was raw.

Peter scowled at her with confusion. “What is the matter?”

“You did not mention the most important way I am not like those other women whose hearts you toyed with in London. Lady Andover told me of your tricks. But since I am not like them, I will not fall in love with you just as easily. This is another of our competitions, is it not? You should like to see how easily you can win my heart, and I should very much like to keep it.” She held her chin up. “The marriage we are portraying to the guests tonight is not real. We should not pretend that we ever meant it to be anything more than a debt repaid, as you said. If you think my heart will be stolen as easily as that armchair, then you are mistaken.”

Peter was taken aback, staring at her profile. She stared out at the trees, as if she wished to end the conversation right then.

He wanted to contradict her words, but a surge of frustration rose in his chest. “Why should you give heed to anything Lady Andover says?”

“Why should I give heed to anything you say?” Margaret’s eyes flashed. “My father has told me repeatedly to be wary of you and your ability to persuade.”

“I cannot persuade you to love me, Margaret.” Peter gave a hard laugh. “Love does not give in to persuasion.”

Her eyes softened at the edges, battling the anger in her posture. “Then perhaps you should no longer try. I preferred when we battled over that armchair and reluctantly spent hours together in the library. It felt as if we were...friends. I think that is enough to aspire to in our marriage. Friendship.” She

gripped the balustrade with both hands, her voice weak and hoarse.

Peter's defenses rose like a fortress around him, his heart aching. Was she hiding her feelings for him, or were they truly not there at all? He had hoped that he had managed to crack through her sepulcher, but it was back, stronger than ever. Blast Lady Andover and her gossip. He didn't even want to know what she had told Margaret. The worst of it was that it was all true. He hated the man he used to be, careless and ruthless when it came to every area of his life—courtship included. Could he never escape that man? He wanted to explain, to try to convince Margaret that he would never treat her heart so carelessly. He would be loyal to her, and her alone, but he couldn't find the words, at least not any that she would believe.

“Very well.” Peter crossed his arms across his chest. He forced a smile to his face. “We shall be friends, then.”

She glanced at him, crossing her own arms. “At least that is better than enemies.”

“Much better.”

Her shoulders seemed to slump with relief, and she gave a shaky exhale.

He swallowed, squaring his shoulders. “I must apologize for my...well, my advances on the balcony just now. It will not happen again.” He couldn't help himself from casting her a teasing smile. “Unless you want it to.”

Her look of dismay was a relief. He backed away, moving toward the front doors. “If you would like to rejoin the party, I will be awaiting you to dance the quadrille.” He held her gaze with a smile until she finally gave up a reluctant one.

“I will be there shortly,” she said.

He ducked inside, closing the door behind him. He knocked his fist against his chest, shaking himself of the disappointment he felt.

He had enough friends.

He only had one wife.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 23



What exactly would be so wrong about kissing her husband? Margaret pulled her covers up to her chin as she lay in bed that night, glowering at the ceiling. If she thought of that moment on the balcony for too long, she could practically still feel Peter's lips against her skin. Her cheeks heated at the memory of his arm around her waist, his whispered voice against her ear, and the chills that had coursed over her entire body as his lips grazed her cheek and neck. It had taken all her willpower to step away from him as she had. It was only out of stubbornness. If she wasn't so intent on beating him in his game, she would have kissed him as thoroughly as he surely would have kissed her.

She banished the thought from her mind. She had set the clear boundary. They were going to try to be friends. She could not go from hating him to loving him so quickly. There had to be something in the middle. She liked their place in the middle. It was safe. Comfortable. Free of difficult emotions and the risk of heartbreak. She was not prepared for anything more than that, and based on the way her heart had nearly burst out of her chest that evening on the balcony, she was most certainly not prepared for any more romance with Peter.

Yet the romance was all she could seem to think about.

She already knew she would be awake for hours as she attempted to rid her mind of every last trace of it. She had asked to be his friend, but was that truly what she wanted? She buried her face in her pillow, gritting her teeth. How on earth could she want to kiss the man who she had hated for so many years? The man whose name she had once been unable to say aloud?

She wanted to scream, but her pillow was not thick enough to muffle the sound. If Peter came to her room to investigate, she very well might not allow him to leave. Her strength was waning. With a deep sigh, she pulled her blankets all the way over her head, squeezing her eyes shut. Her heart had clung to every word he had said about the differences he saw between her and the other women he had met in the past. Though she knew he was a skilled actor, she couldn't come up with a reason why he would have still been acting when they were on the balcony. They had been alone.

What reason could he have to deceive her? To fabricate his affections? She had been acting emotionally. She had been so afraid.

She closeted her emotions, locking the door behind them. She would need to make certain rules for herself if she was going to try to be Peter's friend. The first, and most important one, being that she was not allowed to think about kissing him. How mortified Mama would be if she returned home from London and found that not only was Peter alive and well, but he and Margaret had fallen in love. She couldn't allow such a ridiculous twist of fate to occur. For the sake of Mama's health. And for the sake of Papa's, she needed to be a better caregiver. She would be able to distract herself easily enough by spending more time with Papa and her brothers. Lady Blackwell and her daughters were pleasant companions as

well. Soon, all the fragmented pieces of her life would be back in line, and she would forget all about that evening.

Satisfied with her resolve, she rolled over and blew out the candle at her bedside.



“Did the party wear on you?” Margaret tugged open the curtains in Papa’s room, letting the late morning light fill the dim space. Tiny droplets of rain dotted the window. “How do you feel?”

Papa sat up in bed with his breakfast tray on his lap. She had wanted to invite him on a walk, but even the slight rain worried her. She didn’t want him to be caught in a storm if it suddenly came down heavier. He did seem more tired than he had the night before. His skin was paler.

“It wasn’t the party that made me so weary. It was the people there.” He sighed, scratching his head. “I don’t care what they think of me so long as you are comfortable and happy. Even if society does not fully accept us, at least we are not struggling to survive each day. I am eating the finest meals I could ever dream of, and I cannot complain.”

Margaret smiled, moving away from the window to sit on the edge of his bed. “It is strange, is it not? I seemed to have forgotten how tiring it is to interact at social events. I’m not entirely certain the agony is worth the delicious food.”

Papa gave a low chuckle, nearly choking on his bite of bread. “Agony is the right word, indeed.”

Margaret handed him his cup of water. He drank, and when he looked at her again, his smile was gone. “I could not

help but notice your interactions with Lord Blackwell. You seem to...like him. I sensed that you no longer hate him, at least. You appeared to be nothing less than a newly married couple in love. I confess it took me by surprise.” His brows lifted. “Am I wrong in this assumption?”

She looked down at the floor with a groan. “Oh, Papa, I meant to tell you the moment you arrived in the drawing room yesterday, but I didn’t have the chance before the other guests arrived.” She rested her hand on his arm. “Lady Blackwell insisted that Peter and I pretend to be in love at the ball. It was a charade of sorts to ensure that no gossip about any other purpose behind our marriage could come about.”

Papa’s brow creased. “Was Lord Blackwell also acting in this charade?”

“Yes. Anything you witnessed between us last night was part of the act. The poem he read, the dance, any apparent affection he had for me...all of it.”

Papa’s jaw tightened as he poked at his plate with his fork. “That is not what he told me.”

Margaret frowned. “When did you speak to Peter?”

“In the dining room at dinner, over port.” His eyes narrowed. “If that man lied to me again...” His nostrils flared.

“No, no, Papa, tell me what he said.” Margaret’s heart pounded. She patted his arm to calm his sudden anger. If she had inherited her temper from anyone, it was surely Papa, not Mama.

He sighed. “He said that you are very dear to him. He assured me that his devotion and regard for you were genuine.”

She acted nonchalant, smoothing her hands over her skirts.
“What inspired such a conversation?”

“He wanted to assure me that he was caring for you as he ought.”

She frowned. “Had you even spoken with him any other time since arriving at Langdale Abbey?”

“Yes.”

Margaret’s words burst out of her. “When did you speak to him before?”

“Weeks ago. He came to my room to offer his apologies—to try to make amends. It was very sincere, I confess, though I have tried not to give him so much credit. But without being able to undo the past, he has certainly done all he can otherwise to remedy it. In truth, I commend him for it.” He grunted, shaking his head. “But now that I know his affection for you was an act, I don’t know what to think. He might have deceived me again.”

Margaret’s mind spun. She hadn’t known that Peter had come to her father to apologize. Part of her had wondered if he had been too afraid to face her father, but it seemed that he had done so as soon as he began recovering. She banished the admiration that rose in her heart. “No, Papa, do not condemn him for the charade. If he said I was dear to him, or that he had true devotion and high regard for me, I do believe that is true. We have agreed to try to be friends in our marriage.” She gulped. “We are going to make the most of it now that we are stuck with one another.”

Papa raised one skeptical eyebrow. “Do you not have any other feelings for him?”

Margaret hesitated for too long before she shook her head. “Oh, no, of course not. All that you witnessed of my behavior yesterday was a result of my acting skill.”

Papa did not appear convinced. “I didn’t know you were a skilled actress.”

“Well, I am.” Margaret stood, brushing her hands over the front of her skirts. “Now, I am going to fetch James and Philip, and the four of us might enjoy a book together. I’ll return shortly.”

She was shocked to hear Papa laughing behind her.

She whirled around. “What is so amusing?”

“You are breaking one commandment while finally adhering to another.”

“Pardon me?”

It had been a long while since she had seen such a genuine smile on Papa’s face. He coughed into the crook of his elbow, adding unnecessary suspense to his explanation. When he could finally speak again, he said, “you are lying to me now. But at least you are finally learning to love your enemy.”

“Papa!”

His laughter continued, raspy and deep. Her face warmed as she planted her hands on her hips. “I am learning to tolerate my enemy. Not...*love*.” The word sent a prickle over her arms. She rubbed them, willing the sensation to go away. “If you continue to accuse me of such things, then perhaps I will *not* be returning shortly with the boys.”

He leaned back with a content exhale. “That is well enough. I should like to go back to sleep.”

Margaret wrinkled her nose at him before rushing out of the room. Even Papa seemed to be on Peter's side now.

She tore through the corridor in the direction of the staircase. She hoped she would find James and Philip there instead of outside with Peter playing Blind Man's Bluff again. Her feet echoed louder than usual on the staircase as she made her way up to the nursery, her frustration manifesting itself in the force of her steps. As the staircase curved, she gasped, nearly colliding with another person.

She looked up, holding tight to the bannister. It was Peter.

"Good morning," she said in a friendly voice. "I—I was looking for my brothers. Have you seen them today?"

She was still growing accustomed to his new appearance. Without his beard, his face seemed...kinder. More gentle. Perhaps it had nothing to do with the beard and more about her perception of him. She preferred to blame the beard.

"I haven't, but I will help you find them if you wish." He leaned against the bannister casually.

"Oh, no, there is no need for that. You seem to have been on your way to accomplish some other important task." She flashed him a quick smile before stepping past him. Her heart did wild things around that man.

"I was on my way to find you, actually."

She turned to face him with a swallow. "Why is that?"

"I wanted to see that you were well after the eventful evening we had yesterday. It seemed to wear on you, and I wanted to ensure you were in good spirits." The sincerity in his eyes might as well have been a key to the lock she had placed on her heart.

She cleared her throat. “That is very kind. I-I am in good spirits, indeed. Are you?”

He nodded, a slight smile tugging on his mouth.

“Good.” She made her way up two more stairs before adding, “I hope you will claim the library today. I have made other plans for how to spend my day. Enjoy a book or two on my behalf.”

“I will.” He lowered his gaze to the steps. “Good day, Margaret.”

“Good day.” She watched him as he turned away, making his way down the staircase.



Peter observed the swish of Margaret’s blue skirts as she followed his mother and sister from the dining room that evening. He had been cautious about his intake of port, but tonight he would indulge himself.

He had spent part of the day in his study going through the account books, and the other half in the library, wishing Margaret was there with him. He hadn’t realized how much he hated solitude until he had experienced what his life was like without it. He had spent so many years pushing people away, keeping his relationships on the surface. Margaret had dug a deep tunnel into his heart, and without anything to fill it, it was hollow and empty.

Cornelius poured himself a glass of port, taking a generous swig. It was only the two of them that evening. Mr. Lovell had kept to his room. Peter scowled at the opposite wall, drinking slowly from his cup.

“Are you all right, Peter?” Cornelius eyed him from over his own glass, pale brows contracting. “You look as if you might cast your cup across the table. Or crush it in your fist.”

Peter sighed. “I’m frustrated, that’s all. Why should winning my own wife’s heart be so blasted difficult?”

Cornelius pursed his lips, and Peter caught sight of a faint blond mustache growing above them. A matching tuft was on his chin. Rachel would not be pleased. “I know precisely how you feel,” Cornelius said with a laugh. “You know the character of my wife. Rachel is not easily impressed.”

Peter rubbed the back of his neck. He never thought he would find a kindred spirit in Cornelius, but the man seemed to be in the same situation Peter was in. Except Cornelius had spent years in it.

Cornelius took another sip from his glass, shaking his head in amusement. A high-pitched chuckle escaped him. “I know she does not reveal her feelings publicly. In fact, she likes to make it seem that she barely tolerates me, but Rachel has indeed come to care for me. She used to avoid me as often as she could, but now she enjoys my company...at all hours of the day.” He winked.

Peter cleared his throat, looking down at the table. He preferred not to think of Cornelius’s romantic pursuits with his sister, but he was glad to hear that their marriage wasn’t as burdensome as Rachel made it seem. He had caught moments when she smiled at her husband or laughed at his comments, and it was true—she did seem to remain by his side more than she once had. Part of Peter’s guilt during the days he had been reflecting about his misdeeds on his deathbed had been about his treatment of Rachel and the marriage he had forced her into.

“How did you manage to change Rachel’s opinion of you?” He hesitated to ask Cornelius for advice, because he was...well, he was *Cornelius*, but he didn’t have any other options at the moment.

Cornelius’s eyes lit up, seemingly honored that Peter had asked. “It did take a great deal of strategy on my part.” He gave a sly smile. “At first, she insisted that we interact as rarely as possible. I found moments to be in her company, but still, she resisted. I continued trying to seduce her through my flirtations, and at times, I believed she liked the attention.” He puffed out his chest, squaring his shoulders. “Her feelings for me were reluctant, to be sure, and she seemed intent to run from them.”

Peter was shocked by how similar his experience with Rachel was to his own with Margaret.

Cornelius paused, leaning forward. “It was then that I realized I had been doing everything wrong. Women like Rachel and Margaret do not know what they want.” He traced the rim of his cup with one finger. “They are stubborn and set on their first impression or opinion. By attempting to change their opinion, we only cause them to resist more.”

Peter bit his lip in thought. “That does make sense.”

“Rachel only realized what she wanted once she no longer had it.” Cornelius’s smile was surprising, the pale blond mustache hairs forming a devious V. “I ceased to give her the same attention that I had before. I was polite, never flirtatious. I even began avoiding her on occasion. It took all of her pride to finally admit that she wanted me.”

Peter laughed. “Margaret would never admit such a thing.”

“You might be surprised.”

Peter took another drink from his glass. It was a ridiculous idea, yet he was considering it. Was he truly about to take advice from Cornelius?

“Trust me, my friend.” Cornelius leaned back in his chair, raising his glass. “She will be running into your arms by the end of it.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 24



Sitting in the armchair in the library, Margaret watched the clouds drift slowly across the sky out the window. She closed her book, setting it in her lap with a scowl. How had she once found the solitude of the library so peaceful? She could hardly concentrate on any of the books she tried to read. She had been coming every day for five days, and Peter had not even come once.

She didn't care, of course.

She chewed the fingernail of her forefinger before stopping herself. When she had suggested that they be friends, she hadn't meant that he should avoid her altogether. But perhaps he wasn't avoiding her—he had many responsibilities to manage for the estate now that he was well again. But even when she saw him at dinner he only spoke to her with passing remarks. He had begun sitting on the opposite side of the drawing room. Lady Blackwell seemed to have noticed his change in behavior, though she hadn't mentioned it. Margaret was not imagining the change. It was obvious that Peter had taken her words on the balcony to heart.

Her troubled thoughts continued swirling through her mind as she picked up her book again. Attempting to read might not have been the best option. It was a beautiful day, and she had

been stuck inside for the last several days because of the constant rain. She needed a distraction that was more invigorating than a book.

Fetching her bonnet from her room, she made her way downstairs and out the back doors of the house. A smaller version of the horseshoe staircase was on the back of the house, and it did nothing but remind her of the night of the ball. She held tight to the stone balustrade as she ran down the steps and out onto the grass.

The warm breeze rustled her skirts and hair. The sun was covered by clouds, but at least the air felt like summer. The scent of the roses from the nearby bushes flooded her nose, and she breathed deeply. This was what she wanted, was it not? The peace and tranquility of nature and the freedom to explore her new home without any of the turmoil that came from a husband.

Her chest ached in protest, but she ignored it, cupping the bud of a white rose in her palm as she examined the velvet petals.

Perhaps she should ask the groundskeeper for a pair of shears so she could make a bouquet for the library windowsill. Now that the chair was successfully hers again, she could add her own feminine touch to the space. She tried to smile, but her cheeks felt weak. If only Peter would come for just a few minutes a day, she could at least gloat that she had the better seat. They could laugh and talk about ridiculous things and she could insult him and he could tease her.

He was simply not doing his duty as her friend.

She scowled down at the rose as if it were somehow to blame, but truly, Margaret was the only one to blame for the distance he was placing between them. Did he not understand

the difference between friendship and acquaintanceship? Or between friendship and romance? They could still spend time together.

Her mind refused to slow down, lamenting over things that it should not have been. She shushed it, snapping the rose off by the base of the stem.

The sound of hoofbeats reached her ears, muffled on the grass. She spun around, the severed rose in hand.

Peter was approaching on the back of his white mare, hessians shining in the sunlight beneath his fitted knee breeches, shirtsleeves, cravat, and a blue waistcoat. Why was it that men appeared far more attractive when astride a horse? She scolded her heart for leaping as Peter drew closer. He pulled the reins back, leading his horse to the right side of the rose bush.

“Shall I ask the groundskeeper to bring you a set of shears?” he asked.

Margaret looked down at the rough edge of the rose that she had just snapped from the bush. “No, thank you. I only needed the one.”

He gave a polite smile. “For what purpose did you need this one rose?”

“The library has a rather masculine atmosphere, and I thought since I am the only one using it of late, I should add a few feminine touches to the space.” She hadn’t meant her words to sound accusatory, but that was how they escaped her mouth. She quickly added, “It has been a very peaceful week. I have not had to fight anyone for my chair.”

“That is good. I’m glad you finally have what you wanted,” he said without a hint of teasing.

Her heart sank. Why did it feel that her chair and quiet time in the library wasn't what she wanted at all? *It was*. But the more she told herself, the more it felt like a lie. She stared at the grass, perplexed by the fierce objection her heart was giving.

"I have never seen you riding before," she said, tracing one finger over the petals of her rose. "Do you go often?"

"I've only recently begun again. I usually go a little earlier in the morning than this, but today I overslept." He rubbed the top of his horse's head.

Margaret walked forward and stroked the space between the mare's eyes. Her dark brown eyes gazed into Margaret's. "There was a time when I thoroughly enjoyed riding. We couldn't afford to keep horses for several years, so I haven't ridden for a long while. I do miss it."

Peter nodded. "It is a very enjoyable pastime, indeed."

Margaret frowned as she continued stroking the short hair on the horse's nose. Was he not going to invite her to join him? She didn't want to be a bother, but she was surprised that he hadn't offered. Perhaps he enjoyed his solitude on his horse more than she had been enjoying her solitude in the library. Her pride fought against her, but she managed to choke out a few words. "If you are ever in search of a riding companion, I would be happy to join you." She couldn't look at Peter's face. If he was about to reject her request, then she would rather not witness it.

"Very well. You may join me today if you wish."

If you wish? Margaret peeked up at him. Did he not want her to join him? He was looking out at the hills before his eyes finally, and rather reluctantly, settled on her face.

“Well, then. I will go change into my riding habit.” She hadn’t yet had an opportunity to wear the navy blue one she had purchased in town during her first week at Langdale Abbey. She whirled around and hurried back to the horseshoe staircase. She called her maid to help her dress and left the rose with her, asking her to place it in a vase in the library. Peter was acting so strange, and it was all her fault.

She shook herself of her worries as she met him near the stables. The clouds over the hills in the distance had turned a darker grey than they had been just minutes before, but she didn’t allow them to concern her.

Peter walked forward, his brown eyes settling on her face. “Come inside and choose your horse.”

She followed him into the stables. Two grooms were busy mucking out the stalls, and they glanced up when Margaret entered.

Peter strode a few paces ahead of her, pointing out two of the horses as they passed. “These two have a gentle, passive nature, so I think they may be the best option for you.”

Margaret smiled. “Do you truly believe that I would be most compatible with a horse with a ‘passive’ nature?”

She expected him to take the opportunity to tease her, but instead he turned around with a serious expression. “Hmm. I suppose you are right. I will have the groom saddle Casper for you instead.”

“Casper?” Margaret watched as Peter instructed one of the grooms to prepare the horse at the end of the stables—a large, chestnut brown stallion.

Peter walked back toward Margaret. “He is obedient and well-trained, but he does have a mind of his own at times. I

trust you are a capable rider?”

“I am.”

“Good.” Peter strode past her again and back outside the stables without another word.

She looked down at the straw around her boots, willing her expression to remain smooth. She couldn't show the irritation she felt, nor the confusion. Drawing a deep breath, she followed him, leaving as much distance between them as he seemed to prefer. She waited just outside the doors until her horse was led out to the mounting block. As she mounted her horse—Casper, as he had been called—Peter mounted his beside her. She clutched the reins with both hands, leading the horse away from the mounting block.

Peter kicked his heels, setting off in the direction he had been heading before. Margaret set her horse into a trot to catch up. What was the purpose of riding with him if he was not going to engage her in conversation? Her horse trailed slightly behind and to the left of his as they made their way around the front of the house and toward the nearest hill. She didn't know the route Peter usually took on his rides, so she allowed Casper to bring up the rear.

They continued in silence for a few minutes before Margaret finally spoke. “We received an invitation to a soiree next week. It came from Lord and Lady Andover. I am not eager to attend, but it might be prudent to keep their good opinion. They might speak highly of us to their other guests.”

He glanced over his shoulder, offering another of his infuriatingly polite smiles. What had happened to the teasing ones? She hadn't asked for those to go away. “My mother told me of the invitation, and I do plan to attend.”

She nodded, tugging on the reins as Casper stopped to try to graze on a patch of tall grass. They climbed the hill before coming down to level ground on the other side. She would have liked to stop to admire the view at the top of the hill, but Peter kept his horse moving forward.

A clap of thunder rattled through the sky, and Margaret froze. "Perhaps we should go back," she said in a loud voice. He was so far ahead of her. "The rain might start again."

Peter turned his horse, nodding his agreement. He cast his gaze up to the sky, a crease marking his brow. "We ought to hurry. We are about to be poured on."

Margaret led her horse carefully up the hill again, but by the time they reached the crest, fat droplets of rain had begun falling. At first, it was just the occasional drop, but then they multiplied, and within seconds her riding habit was soaked. The brim of her hat was too small to shield her face from the water. She blinked to keep the droplets from blinding her as she went carefully down the slope of the hill.

"Take care, Margaret," Peter said, his voice urgent. "There is a lot of slick mud." He slowed down, turning on his saddle to watch her descent behind him. Casper's hooves slipped, and she gasped. He caught himself, and she led him around each puddle as best she could. Peter's shoulders were tense as he watched her.

When they finally reached the base of the hill, Peter turned to face her with one hand shielding his face from the rain. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." She was glad to see that he was at least concerned for her safety, even if he didn't seem to care for her company. "Are you?"

He nodded, wiping the rain from his brow. “Shall we go a little faster?”

Margaret set her horse into a trot and Peter followed all the way to the stables. She anchored her leg tightly around the side saddle; the rain had made it more slick. When they reached the stables, Peter dismounted in one smooth motion before rushing to her side. She hadn't yet reached the mounting block, but Peter didn't seem inclined to wait. He reached up and gripped her by the waist, lifting her down to the ground with surprising ease. With one hand on her back, he rushed her into the shelter of the stables. The grooms went out to fetch the horses while Margaret caught her breath, leaning against the door of the nearest stall. She wiped the soaked strands of hair out of her eyes, suddenly self-conscious.

Peter leaned against the same stall door, his own hair soaked. Droplets of water cascaded down his face, catching in his lashes and landing on his lips. His soaked shirtsleeves clung to his arms. He took her softly by the shoulders, lines appearing between his brows. “Are you certain you're all right?”

She nodded, her pulse thrumming in her neck. Warmth spread across her cold skin. “I am.”

Peter immediately dropped his hands, taking a step away from her. His countenance shifted, becoming more stoic. “I didn't expect the rain today.” He raked a hand through his wet hair, releasing more droplets. “I'm sorry to have invited you on a ride at the most inopportune time.”

“You didn't invite me, I rather invited myself.” Margaret shrugged one shoulder, casting her gaze away from him.

“Ah, then I will allow you to take the blame.” A hint of his teasing smile touched his mouth, but it faded instantly. “I cannot possibly be any wetter than I already am, so I will go fetch a blanket for you and have the fire lit in your room.” Peter began walking toward the doors. “Once the rain stops, you should go straight back to the house to dry off.”

“I don’t need a blanket.” Margaret shook her head. “Please, it is not necessary.” She would much rather have him stay with her.

He glanced over his shoulder, but didn’t stop walking. “It is no problem at all.”

The stable doors swung closed behind him.

She leaned back with a huffed breath. Several minutes passed before the doors opened again, and not Peter, but a partially drenched footman presented her with a blanket that he had been protecting with an umbrella. He handed both the umbrella and the blanket to Margaret before walking back out to face the rain.

She had been hoping it would be Peter. She didn’t know why it upset her so much. He had done her a service by going out in the rain to provide her with a way to return to the house, warm and dry. She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders and held the umbrella above her head as she marched out onto the grass. The walk did not take long, and when she reached the top of the horseshoe staircase, she pushed through the doors.

Peter was nowhere to be seen.

Her heart twinged with regret. What was wrong with her? Why on earth should she miss their past infuriating interactions? She rolled her shoulders back, brushing aside the

feeling of neglect. She was being absurd. This was what she had asked for.

This was what she wanted.

She repeated the words at least ten times as she squelched her way to her room in her wet boots.

This was what she wanted.

Papa was right. She was becoming a perpetual liar.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 25



Cornelius failed to mention how difficult it would be for Peter to pretend he was not interested in Margaret's company. Leaving her in the stables with her large blue eyes staring up at him had taken all of his determination. He would have much rather tugged her into one of the stalls and kissed her until the rain stopped.

As taxing as it was to keep his resolve, he had to continue with the plan. It already seemed to be working. He caught Margaret looking at him during dinner and in the drawing room each night, the tell-tale creases between her eyebrows informing him that she was not content with his choice to sit on the opposite side. When she spoke to him, she was more shy and cautious, and he could practically see her pride forming a wall between them.

Margaret might have been too stubborn to give in. Still, he would continue trying. Each conversation he had with Margaret, he kept brief, leaving her wanting more. He could see the battle in her eyes each time he walked away prematurely. He faced his own battle though, so he couldn't pity her too much. Each time he heard her voice and saw her walking through the doorways of Langdale Abbey, all he wanted to do was finish what he had started that night on the balcony. He could still smell the roses, feel the softness of her

skin against his lips, and he could still hear her faint sigh against his ear. As tender as that moment had been, he couldn't begin to imagine how it might feel to kiss her lips and to have her return his affection. He would have to continue to be patient. As much as he adored her, he hated to see the turmoil he was causing her.

But...he enjoyed it all the same.

It was necessary pain. He never would have expected Cornelius to be so full of brilliant ideas. He smothered his grin as he walked into the breakfast room.

Mother sat alone at the table, angled toward the window. "You have just missed Margaret. She left just a moment ago."

"That is all right." Peter filled his plate before joining Mother at the table.

She eyed him, lips pursed with disapproval.

He lifted his fork. "What have I done?"

"I have noticed that the two of you seem more...distant than you did before the ball. I have been meaning to ask if it was because of my plan. I hope it didn't cause any...awkwardness between you."

"I don't know what you mean." Peter didn't wish to involve his mother in any of the details of his marriage. Having Cornelius involved was enough. He didn't need anyone else meddling in his affairs.

Mother cleared her throat, calling his eyes back to her face. "I hope you are not hiding your true feelings for her. I know you, Peter, and I know you could not write such heartfelt words for a woman unless they were true."

At her reference to his poem the night of the ball, he feigned nonchalance. “You underestimate me, Mother.” He bit a grape in half before popping the other side into his mouth.

Mama’s eyes pierced him just as easily as his teeth had the grape. “Do you mean to tell me that you don’t love her?”

Peter groaned, sitting back in his chair and abandoning his fork. “Yes, I do.” The moment the words escaped his throat, it went raw. His heart echoed his confession. He didn’t feel any better now that he had admitted it. Only emptier.

“Then why are you avoiding her?”

“It is what Margaret wants.” Peter refused to give her any details of his conversation with Cornelius. Mama would surely attempt to put a stop to that behavior in an instant.

Mother rubbed her chin with the edge of her thumb, casting her gaze upward. “That poor girl is simply confused. Hate is a strong emotion—a terrible one, and it can linger for as long as we allow it. She is holding onto it, and I think it is because she has fallen in love with you too. From what I have observed, it seems Margaret has made a habit of running away. What if she had nowhere to run?” The devious smile on Mother’s lips was not a good sign.

“Mother. As I have said before, please do not involve yourself in my marriage.”

“I did not say I was going to do any such thing.”

“You have a devious look on your face.”

She gave an exasperated sigh. “I am only devious when it comes to matters of love.” Her eyes grew heavy at the corners. “I always dreamed of love. I was not blessed with a marriage filled with the love and happiness that I wanted. My children—you and your sisters—are the greatest gift that came from

those years married to your father. I would not trade it for anything, but I simply cannot refrain from hoping that your marriage will be what mine was not.”

Peter’s heart stung, and he fought the memories of those years with his father at Langdale Abbey. His mother had lived in just as much fear as Peter had.

Mother touched his arm across the table. “If love, even the whisper of it, is to be found, you must cling to it with both hands. It will blossom, but first it must be watered.”

“All I ask is that you do not try to be the gardener.” Peter gave her a soft smile. “I am capable of navigating this situation on my own.” He patted her hand before returning his attention to his plate.

Mother sighed. “Very well.” But her mouth still lifted on one corner. He watched her with misgiving as she walked away from the table.

If she was up to something, he didn’t dare wonder what it was.



Margaret bit her lip with worry as she closed the door to Papa’s room. Ever since the ball, his health seemed to be declining more rapidly. He claimed to be feeling better than he appeared to be. His forehead was hot and he had stopped eating all the food on his plates. The physician would be coming the next day, and even though Papa’s poor health was not uncommon, she still worried for him. Each time he began to feel better, he was struck by another bout of illness.

He was also becoming worried about Mama and George. They hadn't yet received any letters from them. Margaret was just as anxious as Papa to learn how they had settled into London and how George's leg was progressing. She could see the frustration Papa felt for not being well enough to go to London himself.

Margaret apologized as she walked into the dining room late. Peter stood as she found her seat at the table. His dark eyes flickered away from her as they had constantly for the last week. In truth, it was driving her mad. It had been several days since their ride in the rain, and he had been scarce ever since. The only time he had paid her any attention had been at the Andover's soiree the night before, and she could only assume it was in an effort to continue their act, because the moment they returned to the coach, he resumed his polite distance from her.

How could she tell him how she hated it? She was slowly losing her sanity over the way he smiled and laughed with his sisters and even her little brothers, but then treated her like a stranger. On occasion, he did pay her attention, but each time, it was fleeting. Every day that passed, she found herself more and more irritable. Each time he noticed her scowls, he asked her what was wrong, but she couldn't dare tell him. How, after all she had said to him, could she admit that she was wrong?

She didn't want to be his friend.

If *this* was what that meant, then she didn't want any part of it.

She wanted to be 'his dear wife', for heaven's sake.

She was fairly certain she had lost her mind, and Peter was the one to blame. Her heart ached as she took a spoonful of her white soup. She must have been right about him all along. If

he could so easily change his behavior toward her, then any feelings she had suspected he might have had for her must have been as false as she feared. Perhaps he had been acting all along, and only now was he showing the truth of his feelings toward her.

Thankfully, Lady Blackwell's voice pulled Margaret out of her thoughts. "Now that we are all here, I wish to make an announcement." Her smile spread wide on her cheeks. "It is not often that we have a new marriage to celebrate, and given the circumstances of how it came about and the rush of events following Peter's recovery, I realized that Peter and Margaret never had a chance to properly celebrate their union." She turned her gaze in Margaret's direction, eyes fluttering. "My dear, I am so very grateful to have you in our family, and I apologize if you have felt overwhelmed by our company during the past month."

"Not at all," Margaret said, lowering her spoon.

"You would never admit such a thing, so that is why I have planned a very special surprise for you and Peter. I have arranged a short...escape for the two of you."

Margaret's heart leaped, her eyes darting to Peter. He looked just as surprised as she was. He stared up at his mother, jaw tight.

"That—that is not necessary," Margaret said. "I should like to stay here with my father."

Lady Blackwell dismissed her words with a wave. "Oh, nonsense. I will ensure he is well cared for. It is a very brief trip, just a half day's journey to the coast. You will spend two days at the bridge house of the small castle my cousin recently inherited. He has offered me use of the house whenever I wish, and so I have sent two servants to prepare it for you and attend

to you during your stay. The arrangements have already been made, you see, so you cannot refuse.” Her smile grew and she clapped her hands together in front of her. “If you will accept my gift to you, then you will leave in two days.”

Margaret felt the blood rush from her face. She couldn't possibly refuse Lady Blackwell's generosity, especially after all the preparation she had put into it. Peter took a long drink from his cup, and when he set it down, his eyes met Margaret's. They lingered there for a long moment. Was he just as reluctant to accept as she was?

“Perhaps Cornelius and Rachel would like to go instead,” Margaret said. Her voice was too quick.

“No,” Rachel and Cornelius said in unison. They exchanged a glance before focusing their attention on Peter and Margaret again. Why was Cornelius grinning?

Peter seemed to be waiting for Margaret to speak first. He was leaving the decision up to her, it seemed. She had been silent for too long—the awkwardness was tearing her to shreds. A choked sound came from her throat before she managed to speak. “You are very generous, thank you. I do love the coast.”

“Ah! It is settled then.” Lady Blackwell snatched up her spoon. “I am glad you accept. It will be a lovely trip, of that I am certain.”

Margaret could no longer eat. She stared down at her soup. She felt Peter's gaze on the side of her face, and it might as well have been burning a hole through it. Was he dreading the idea of spending two days with her? They couldn't so easily escape one another's company if they were traveling in the same carriage and staying in the same bridge house. Panic clutched her chest. She was suddenly lightheaded.

This was a belated wedding trip.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 26



“I told you not to involve yourself in my affairs.” Peter crossed his arms, raising one eyebrow at his mother, who sat at the vanity in her room, combing through her curls. Her reflection smiled at him, unfazed by his accusations.

“I wanted to help you celebrate your marriage. I thought it was a very kind gesture.”

Peter exhaled, raking one hand through his hair. Mother’s lips pinched together as she tried to hide her mischievous grin.

“Are you not looking forward to it?” She set down her brush, turning on her chair to face him. The gray streaks in her hair appeared more silver in the morning light.

“I am.” Of course he was looking forward to it, but it also made him nervous. He had been following Cornelius’s advice for over a week, and Margaret didn’t seem to be close to admitting her feelings. All she seemed to be doing was resigning herself to Peter’s new behavior. Had he gone about it all wrong? Perhaps he had taken it too far, distancing himself more than what was necessary. He could see that it vexed her, and there had been moments when he felt a glimmer of hope—that perhaps she did have feelings for him. Was it enough? Could he admit his feelings to her now, or should he wait until

she gave in as Rachel had? He didn't know what his next step should be, and he refused to ask Cornelius for help again.

He was on his own.

“Then I don't see what the problem is.” Mother shook her head, casting her gaze upward with a look of long-suffering. “Two days should be plenty of time for the two of you to sort out your feelings. You will thank me when you return and all your miscommunication and games are resolved.”

He tugged on his cravat. It was suddenly too tight. “Did you see how terrified Margaret looked at the prospect of being left alone with me for two days?”

“It is not *you* she fears. It is her feelings.” Mother took far too much delight from the situation, if her smile was any indication. “She must face them, one way or another. As I said, she has been running from them, and with this trip, I have removed her ability to run away.”

“If she knew how cunning you were, she might not like you so much,” Peter grumbled.

“Perhaps she would like me even more.” Mother gave her own reflection a satisfied smile before rising from her chair. “Has your trunk been packed? The coachman plans to convey you there this afternoon. You should arrive shortly before sunset.”

Peter nodded. “Yes, my trunk is packed. Are there any other details I should know about this bridge house? Why have I not heard of it before now? It is all too mysterious for my liking.”

“That is because you like to be in control of every detail of your life.” Mother stepped toward him, placing a gentle hand on his cheek. He wanted to shrug it away, but he couldn't.

“For once, try to let go of the small details. All will unfold as it should. You do not need to have all the answers and solutions.”

Her words calmed him, and he took a steadying breath. Perhaps the reason Margaret made him so nervous was because she was unpredictable. He had never wanted anything more than her love and friendship, yet he could not have it in his own way or time. It was frustrating to no end. Everything else he had ever wanted in life, he had been able to obtain with enough effort and determination. Why was it that the thing he wanted most felt so out of reach?

“Go have a wonderful time.” Mother’s hand left his cheek, and she dismissed him with a wave. “I will be at the carriage this afternoon to see you off.”

Despite her meddling, she truly did mean well. Peter gave a relenting sigh before flashing her a grateful smile. “Thank you, Mother.”

Time passed at a sluggish pace all day. Peter was the first to arrive at the waiting carriage. He stood outside of it, watching the front doors as Margaret stepped out onto the balcony and made her way down the left side of the staircase. She wore a pale blue gown, one he had never seen her wear before. It had a gold satin ribbon at the waist and gloves to match. The interior of her straw bonnet was trimmed with the same fabric, and the outside was decorated with white flowers. As she came closer, the blue of her eyes danced in the sunlight, brought to life by the color of her gown. Had she worn it knowing how well the color suited her? Had she hoped to impress him? He studied the signs of nervousness in her posture and in the way her gaze darted away from his.

He wanted to tell her how lovely she looked, but he had decided, after much debate, to keep to his rule.

He was not allowed to flirt with her.

He would test Cornelius's plan for two more days, but with a few adjustments. He would not be quite so cold, and he would not avoid her. He simply would continue to refrain from any flirtation or romance. If, after this trip, she had not cracked, then he would abandon his efforts to fate. Mother was right—he could not control every detail of his life. But he could at least try to influence them.

The first order of business was to put her at ease. At the moment, she was looking as if she might cast up her accounts all over his boots.

He extended his hand to help her into the coach, leaning toward her with a smile. "I wonder if the bridge house has any secret passages."

She took his hand, her gloved fingers soft as a feather. As he had hoped, her brows straightened and a look of relief washed over her. "If it does, I shall not be going inside this time. I have still been having nightmares about those spiders." She stepped into the coach. He followed, choosing the seat across from her rather than the space beside her as he would have preferred. Still, their knees touched in the cramped space, and she made no move to adjust hers. She watched him, wringing her hands together in her lap. He had noticed her do so on a few other occasions. It meant she was nervous.

"If it is part of an ancient castle, there are sure to be ghosts at the very least—more ghosts even than the ones that haunt the passages of Langdale Abbey."

“Passages?” Margaret raised her eyebrows. “I didn’t know there was more than one.”

“The others are still a secret.” He gave a knowing smile.

A spark of anger flashed in her eyes, but her lips were upturned. “I am mistress of the house. I deserve to know.” She leaned forward on her seat, her fiery gaze capturing him.

“You must earn such important knowledge. It cannot simply be given to you.” Peter looked out the window. He had missed their banter. It warmed his soul like a hearth in the dead of winter. He hid his smile as he cast her a sidelong glance, checking her reaction. “You must tell me a secret in exchange for each one,” he said. It was the first thing that came to mind. Margaret did not seem the sort of woman to keep many secrets, but if she was, he wanted to know them all.

Fortunately, she seemed to be enjoying their conversation as much as he was, though she tried to conceal her smile. “How many passages are there?”

“Three, including the one you already know about. So it seems you owe me two secrets if you wish to discover the others.”

She crossed her arms. “Or I could find them myself when we return home.”

He liked that she called Langdale Abbey her home. “That will be a great challenge, I assure you. They are much more difficult to find than the one in the library. I would not advise you to go searching for them. It is rather dangerous.” He added a flare of drama to his voice.

“Then I suppose I shall have to look at a time that you won’t be able to stop me.”

He grinned. “When I am asleep? That is the only time I am left defenseless.”

She gave a mischievous smile, her eyes lighting up with amusement. “Yes. As I recall it was also during your sleep that you requested that I murder you.”

Mother cleared her throat in the open doorway of the coach. Her eyes were wide. “The coachman is prepared to leave.”

Margaret’s face flushed scarlet, and Peter leaned his head against the cushion, exerting all his strength not to burst out laughing. How had Margaret managed to speak of his murder in front of his mother a second time? And right before they departed for a solitary trip, no less.

“Lady Blackwell—” Margaret laughed into the palm of her hand. “I—”

“If my son does not return alive, I should know who to blame.” Mother winked before closing the door halfway. “I hope you have a joyous time together.”

“Goodbye, Mother.”

“Goodbye.” Margaret groaned as the doors closed. “She must think me mad.”

“She would not be the only one.”

Margaret gaped at him, but there was also a sheen of joy in her expression. She had missed their verbal battles too, and they both had had enough time to replenish their arsenals.

She stared at him, a mixture of caution and relief. “Tell me honestly...did you know of her plan to send us away to the bridge house?”

“No. She surprised us both.”

The carriage began moving, jostling over the cobblestones.

Margaret looked down at her lap. He hadn't noticed before, but she had brought a book with her.

"Shakespeare?" he asked, one eyebrow arched.

"Yes." She gave a half smile, and looked down at the leather cover, smoothing one hand over it. He couldn't bring himself to look away from the corner of her lips. With that half smile, there was a crease near the edge of her mouth, and he wanted to kiss it just as badly as he wanted to kiss the rest. Of course she had brought a book with her. She could hardly pass a day without one. He found it unjustly endearing.

"Ah, so you have become a romantic," he said.

"No." Her voice was defensive. Too defensive.

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, keeping his smile at bay. "Will you read to me this time? We have a few long hours of travel ahead of us."

"I told you, you can no longer make dying wishes."

He opened one eye. "I can if you are going to murder me in my sleep tonight."

"Why should I wait until tonight? You seem intent to fall asleep right now."

He sat up and stared at her in shock.

She laughed into her glove.

"I will now be sure to stay awake for the entire journey," he said.

Her gaze met his, the corners of her eyes wrinkling with a genuine smile. "Good. I shall be glad for your company." The

moment the words left her mouth, her smile fell, as if she had just confessed to some heinous crime. With a nervous twitch, she picked up her book, seemingly frantic for a distraction.

Peter masked his grin. Cornelius very well might have been a genius after all. Had all his distance from her shown her how much she enjoyed being with him? She still seemed to be too stubborn to admit it, at least not directly, but he could read the signs in her movements and see them in her face.

She had missed him.

“If you won’t read to me,” Peter said, reaching across the coach and snatching the book from her hands, “then I will read to you.”

A sound of protest escaped her throat before she sat back with a smile. “Very well.”

He turned to a random page, reading in a clear voice as Margaret listened. When he finished the poem, she reluctantly offered to read the next one. They alternated their reading, taking a moment to discuss each one. Their conversations strayed to other subjects before they returned their attention to the book again. The hours passed much faster than Peter had expected, and soon he felt the speed of the horses reduce.

The sun was setting, casting a dull peach light on Margaret’s skin.

They had arrived at the bridge house.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 27



The sun was disappearing behind the horizon. Only a few faint tendrils of light remained. Margaret could only see the outline of the arched, stone bridge as the carriage stopped beneath it. She hurried to open the door before all the light was gone. She wanted to catch sight of this mysterious bridge house before it was swallowed in the darkness.

Peter stepped down to the ground, offering his hand to help her.

At the sight of his dark eyes in the fading light, her stomach flopped. All sorts of emotions had been spinning inside her during their carriage ride; there were too many to name. She had been wrung out like a rag by his avoidance of her over the past weeks, and it was as if she was now dried out enough to be lit on fire. She could no longer pretend to hate his company. She could no longer push him away. For the first time, the thought of losing him again scared her more than the thought of keeping him. The realization was so fresh that it washed over her shoulders with a tantalizing shiver.

Was it her words on the balcony that had caused him to be so removed during the past fortnight? Or was it his own disinterest? He might have only been being so friendly because they were forced to be together for the next two days.

It would have been too awkward if he continued to ignore her. She hadn't the slightest idea.

She was overly aware of Peter's gaze and movements as her feet touched the ground beside him. The bridge house was shrouded in those final remnants of daylight, lofted up by an archway that spanned a wide stream. The grey stone was overgrown with ivy, the spires of the castle fading into the darkness of the sky as the sun finished its descent. She could hardly wait to see it in the morning, when the colors of the surrounding trees and moors could be seen. The coast must have been nearby—she could smell the saltwater and fish.

The door to the bridge house was straight ahead, tucked inside an alcove within the arched stone entry. Two servants, one older woman and a young man, walked toward them with lanterns in hand. The candles flickered, casting their stoic faces in warm shades of orange. After offering their curtsies and bows, the woman led them inside while the young man fetched their trunks.

"I'll show ye to yer room." The woman opened the door and began marching her way up the spiral stone staircase. The space was cramped, an eerie chill in the air. But that was not what bothered Margaret.

It was the word *room*.

She had not misheard her, had she? Her heart raced. Lady Blackwell knew that Margaret preferred to have her own room, quite separate from Peter's. She tried to appease her sudden panic. Lady Blackwell was not to blame—they were married, for heaven's sake. It would have been strange for them to request separate rooms on a trip like this one. Not that she and Peter had been given any say in the matter. It seemed Lady Blackwell had intended it to be a belated wedding trip. A

traditional one. One where the newly married couple would never wish for separate rooms.

Margaret was dizzy from the tight, vertical spiral they had just climbed. The consternation in her stomach did not help. A quaint sitting room greeted them at the top of the staircase. To the right, she could see the kitchen, and to the left was a tall wooden door with a black metal latch.

““ere we ‘ave the sitting room, kitchen, and water closet.” The woman bustled forward. “I’ve left a bit of food for ye in the kitchen for this evenin.’ Thomas and I’ll be staying in a separate part o’ the castle, but we’ll return tomorrow ta prepare yer breakfast and a picnic ‘ccording ta the dowager countess’s request.”

Margaret twisted her fingers together as the tall wooden door swung open and her worries were confirmed.

This was not the door to a separate corridor with multiple rooms. It was the door to one room, with one large four-poster bed against one wall. The red and gold fabric of the covers and canopy would have been very inviting if not for the current circumstances.

“Thank you.” Peter’s voice came from over her shoulder, and she almost jumped.

The woman gave a curtsy before taking her leave. The young man she had called Thomas left their trunks inside the room before following the woman back down the spiral staircase. They had left several candles lit throughout the space, giving the small bridge house a warm glow that reminded Margaret of the cottage she and her family had lived in for the last several years. She had been content and comfortable there.

Now, every inch of her screamed with discomfort. Peter strode into the room, apparently unfazed by the sleeping arrangements. She tried to act the same, but her voice betrayed her, cracking in her throat. “I need to use the...water closet.”

She hurried away from the doorway. It hadn't been a lie. She had been in a carriage for the last several hours. She tried to calm her racing heart as she went about her business, keeping the water closet door closed. She stayed inside for much longer than necessary, listening to the creaking of the floorboards as Peter walked around the bridge house. When she finally gathered the courage to leave her enclosed space, she found Peter already sitting on the bed. He held a tray of food on his lap, and a second one was resting on the bed beside him.

She hovered in the doorway as if there were some invisible barrier preventing her from stepping inside the room.

She thought she saw a hint of amusement in Peter's eyes, but she couldn't be certain. “Are you not hungry? Come eat with me.” He gave an inviting smile.

She removed her bonnet, setting it on the vanity table at the right side of the room. With slow steps, she approached the bed and climbed on top of it, crowding herself into the corner farthest from him. She picked up the second tray, balancing it on her lap. The bowl of beef and carrot stew, a slice of bread, and a pile of roasted potatoes made her mouth water.

She picked up the bread in silence, taking a bite. She sensed Peter's gaze on the side of her face.

“I hope this doesn't make you uncomfortable,” he said with a laugh. “I assure you, I did not know of my mother's plan, nor would I have encouraged it. Husbands and wives might share a bed on occasion, but we are *friends*.” He gave

her a reassuring smile before returning his attention to his tray. "I know how you feel about being referred to as my wife."

Margaret's shoulders relaxed a little, but the disagreement in her chest caught her off guard. She pushed it away. Why had she liked it better when he resisted her ideas about friendship? He was all too accepting of them now. It scratched at her with irritation.

"I am not uncomfortable, so long as you keep to your side and I keep to mine." Margaret took a bite of bread that was a little too vigorous.

"I cannot make any such promise."

She snapped her gaze in his direction, heart pounding.

His eyes smiled over his cup as he took a long drink, leaving her in suspense. "Once I'm asleep, there is no telling where I'll move. I might roll right against you for all I know."

Margaret swallowed, allowing herself a small smile. "I will be sure to push you off the edge if such a thing happens."

"I would expect nothing less from you."

The ease of their conversation put her nerves to rest, yet a small part of her was still rising in dismayed opposition. Why was he acting so...comfortable with the situation? So indifferent? Did he not find her...attractive at all? Would it not require any restraint to have her laying in his bed beside him? She quickly snapped her thoughts back into line.

She finished her meal quickly, correcting her scowl each time she felt her forehead crease. Her bites were a little too aggressive.

When she set her tray aside, Peter was already finished. She sat back against the headboard. There was no need to be

uncomfortable with the situation at all. They had sat together on the sofa much closer than this on many occasions. The fact that it was a bed should not make any difference. They had certainly been closer than this on the leather armchair that one morning in the library. “Do you know what your mother has planned for us tomorrow?” Margaret asked.

Peter tucked one hand behind his head, leaning back. “Aside from the picnic, I think she has left the rest up to us. Surely there is much to explore on the grounds alone, and I think we should take our picnic to the beach.”

She nodded. “We will have an eventful day, it seems. I-I think I will go to sleep soon, then.” The idea of wearing her night clothes in front of Peter made her heart pick up speed again. She could go change in the water closet, but he would still see her when she returned to the room. The clothes she wore to sleep were not attractive by any means. The loose, billowy white dress swallowed her. And how could she undress on her own? Her maid had laced her stays tight that morning. Why hadn’t that woman who had led them inside stayed to help her? She had probably assumed that Peter would be the one to undertake such a task.

Margaret gulped, trying to formulate her plan in her mind.

“I will give you your privacy. Call to me when I am welcome back inside.” Peter made to leave, shifting toward the other edge of the bed. “Unless you would prefer that I sleep on the sofa?”

It was then that something caught her eye, hovering just above his head.

She shrieked, pointing one finger at the large spider—at least half the size of her palm, that was descending its web from the ceiling.

Peter looked confused at first, but then his eyes shifted upward. He yelped, ducking out of the way and rolling toward her. In one motion, he tugged his boot off his foot and thrust it toward the creature. It fell onto the headboard and began scurrying toward Margaret's head. She jerked away from it, landing with a bounce on her back. Peter lunged for it with the boot a second time, crossing over top of her with one outstretched arm. He cried out in disgust as he struck and seemed to miss.

The spider was right behind her, she knew it, but she couldn't move. The weight of Peter's legs came down on top of hers as he scrambled back and tried one more time. Margaret squeezed her eyes shut as she heard the horrifying crunch.

"Did you kill it?" she squeaked. Her senses came back to her. She could hear Peter's quick breathing above her. Not only that, but she could feel it. His chest rose and fell against hers before he readjusted his position, shifting his weight off of her.

She opened one eye. He was grimacing at the sole of his boot, leaning his head on one elbow. His face was just above hers. He tossed the boot to the floor behind him, and as soon as he did, his eyes settled on her face. "Murder has occurred tonight after all," he said.

She laughed so hard that the bed shook beneath her. Drat it all. She was tired *and* nervous, a terrible combination for controlling her giggles. The sound of Peter's hearty laugh joining hers made her heart ache with sudden longing. She blinked up at him, her breath stalling when she recognized the same emotion in his eyes. His eyes strayed to her mouth, and she held perfectly still. He was only inches away. Why would

he not kiss her? She very nearly reached up to bury her fingers in his hair and pull his head down to hers. He wouldn't resist, would he? The bird with its fluttering wings in her chest was breaking through its confines—she could practically feel the cage bursting.

“I thought you said you wouldn't protect me from spiders,” Margaret muttered.

One side of his mouth lifted. She watched the movement, fascinated with the shape of his lips. They looked so soft. They moved when he spoke, still suspended in a smile. “I was not protecting you. I was protecting myself.”

Her gaze flicked to his eyes. That teasing glint that she had missed so much was mingled with an intensity that stole the air from her lungs.

All at once, he moved, sitting up straight again. His chest still rose and fell quickly, but his expression was nonchalant. “I hope that spider does not have a family, but if he does, then it is your turn to commit the murder.” He hurried off the bed, gripping the opening of his jacket. The muscles in his hand were clenched and corded. “I will leave you to prepare for sleep.”

Margaret watched his back as he strode out of the room much faster than she would have expected. She sat up, willing the rate of her heart to decrease. She had wanted him to kiss her. *Devil take it*, she really had. She pressed a hand to her chest, regret looming there. It was her fault he hadn't. She had been pushing him away, and it seemed he had fully accepted his role as her friend. But she was too nervous to tell him that her mind was changing. Perhaps her heart was too.

She groaned, covering her face. She was wasting time. With swift movements, she stood and strained her arms behind

her back to unbutton the back of her dress. She managed to do it on her own, stepping out of the layers of fabric. She draped the gown, then her chemise, over a nearby chair and set to work on her stays. She managed to find the end of the tie and give it a firm tug. The laces loosened enough for her to turn her stays around and finish untying them. As soon as she was sufficiently enrobed in her billowy nightdress, she set to work on the pins in her hair. Once her hair was loose, she tied it into a quick braid over her shoulder.

Tugging back the covers of the bed, she jumped under them and pulled them up to her chin. For good measure, she blew out the candle on the table by her side. The less light in the room when Peter returned, the better. She closed her eyes and tried not to think of spiders or the way Peter had been looking at her. Both scared her, but for different reasons entirely.

She took a deep breath. “Peter? You may come back in.”

He opened the door after a few seconds, and she averted her eyes instantly. He had removed his waistcoat and cravat. She only saw him in his shirtsleeves for a brief moment, but it was enough to intrigue her. She closed her eyes in an attempt to fall asleep before she could hear him climb into bed beside her.

It didn’t work. The bed and covers shifted, and she was aware of the space he had filled. She kept her back turned to him, counting to ten in her mind.

Her curiosity burned in her chest. She knew he was there, so why did she feel the need to peek at him just to make sure it was all real? She waited another ten seconds. He was probably closing his eyes, or turned the other way. She could sneak one look and then close her eyes again. Ever so slowly, she turned

so she was on her back, keeping her eyes closed. Again, she waited ten seconds. Her eyes flickered open as she turned her head to sneak a glance in his direction.

His eyes were not closed. He was staring up at the ceiling. He exhaled roughly before taking a deep breath. She had meant to only sneak a quick look, but her eyes lingered on him. Why wouldn't he look at her?

In one quick motion, she turned away from him again, closing her eyes.

“Goodnight, Margaret,” Peter said in a quiet voice. She heard him roll over.

“Goodnight.” The wild rhythm of her heart was not making it easy to fall asleep.

The rest of the light fled the room as he blew out the last candles, all the flames extinguished.

But the one in her chest burned hotter than ever.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 28



Obscure light bled through Peter's eyelids. He opened them, rolling over on his pillow. He had nearly forgotten where he was. The early morning was grey, barely giving him enough sunshine to see his surroundings. Margaret was still asleep beside him. Her eyelids fluttered, the brown, straight lashes folded on one side as they pressed into her pillow. Her golden hair was mussed, a few strands sticking out above her head, while the rest was tucked neatly in a braid.

He smiled, overcome with sudden emotion.

He wanted this. Every day.

He wanted to be able to reach out and touch her cheek without shocking her. He wanted to run his fingers through her hair and put an end to all the pretenses. He wanted to tell her how he felt, but he couldn't find the right time. It hadn't come yet.

With cautious movements, he slipped out of bed and crossed the room. He kept his eyes on her as he dressed. She wasn't stirring, buried endearingly in the blankets. He grinned when a light snore whistled from her nose.

Once he was dressed, he debated over letting her continue to sleep or waking her. It was later in the morning than he had

guessed. The clouds had deceived him. He crept closer to her side of the bed. “Margaret?” She didn’t move.

He touched her shoulder, giving it a light shake. “Margaret.”

Her eyes flew open and she slapped his arm away with a gasp. He jumped back, raising both hands in defense.

She seemed to realize where she was, and her cheeks turned pink. “I’m sorry.” She smoothed her hands over her hair, dragging her fingers down to cover her face.

“Is that how you say good morning?” Peter asked with a chuckle. He stole another glance at her. Only Margaret could look so endearing with puffy eyes and her hair sticking straight up.

She tugged the blankets back up to her chin, blue eyes flashing innocently. “That is only how I say good morning to people who wake me when I am still tired.”

“Forgive me for assuming that you would like to enjoy your day exploring the coast rather than sleeping like a lazy hog.” He tugged the curtains open, throwing a charming smile over his shoulder.

She gasped, but her lips quivered. “I will pretend you did *not* just call me that.”

Without another comment, he took his leave of the room, giving her the privacy she surely wanted. The two servants from the night before stood at attention when Peter entered the kitchen.

“Is Lady Blackwell awake?” the woman asked.

Peter nodded. “She is.”

“I’ll help ‘er dress and arrange ‘er hair.” She hurried toward the bedchamber door.

Peter smiled at the thought of Margaret inside that room, struggling to dress herself rather than ask him for any assistance. She would be relieved that the maid had come to her rescue. He immediately banished any thought of what was happening behind that door. It would only make matters worse.

A few minutes later, Margaret stepped out of the room, dressed in a white gown, kid leather gloves, and a simple straw bonnet. A shawl was wrapped around her elbows, a reticule on her wrist. Her cheeks were flushed as she approached him. He couldn’t help the wide smile that spread on his own face. He didn’t have to wonder if he would see Margaret that day, or if their paths might cross in the vast corridors of Langdale Abbey. Today, her time was his. He would cherish every moment.



Margaret held Peter’s arm as they started their day in the nearby village, peeking through the windows of all the charming shops.

Margaret had brought her reticule for a reason.

She found two ribbons she liked, as well as a new pair of gloves. Peter insisted that she buy each item that caught her eye. There was far more that caught her eye than what she purchased, but she didn’t want him to think she would be frivolous with their money. At Lady Blackwell’s encouragement, she had already bought more dresses and

bonnets than she needed. After years of being deprived of such pretty things, she couldn't help herself.

After spending the first half of the day in the coastal town, they walked down to the beach with their picnic. The coast was more stunning than Margaret remembered from her one visit there as a child. The water, grey under the cloudy sky, washed over the golden sand. Dark birds soared through the sky, their voices squawking faintly in the distance. The surrounding cliffs were vibrant green, framing the scene with breathtaking wildflowers and tall grass that bent at the whim of the north wind.

Peter spread their blanket out over the sand of a secluded area, and Thomas brought out the picnic basket. An assortment of fruit, bread, and meat filled it to the brim. When Peter finished unpacking the food, he revealed the bottom of the basket. There was a collection of books. Lady Blackwell had thought of everything.

They ate and read and teased one another mercilessly, and by the late afternoon, Margaret's sides ached from laughing. Her cheeks were cramping. She had removed her gloves to play with the sand and her bonnet rested on the ground. She enjoyed the warm sun on her face, even if her complexion might suffer for it. The picnic was cleared away, and Margaret sat on a large rock facing the sea. The sun was setting. She was enchanted by the variety of warm colors it cast on the water. She wrapped her shawl around her shoulders. The air was always colder by the sea.

Peter sat beside her on the rock, long legs stretched out in front of him as he threw her a mischievous smile. He had just finished telling her about the fish he had caught in one of the ponds on the property of Langdale Abbey. He had slipped it

into the pot of tea his mother had prepared for their guests in the drawing room.

“I knew you were a wicked child.” Margaret gave him a pointed look. “Don’t you dare tell my brothers that story. Especially George, once you meet him. He is the most devious of all my brothers.” She gave a wistful smile. She missed George and Mama. Why had they not written yet? A letter would not arrive quickly from London to Yorkshire, but it seemed that there should have been one by now. She worried for them. But Margaret hadn’t written her mother a letter either—she hadn’t wanted to trouble her with all that had occurred in the last month. There was still so much uncertainty.

“Why should I not tell your brothers?” Peter asked. “They wouldn’t be inclined to follow my example. They think I am an old, strange man.”

Margaret laughed. She cast her gaze downward before peeking at his face again. A faint smattering of freckles covered his nose and cheekbones. She had never noticed them before. Perhaps their day in the sun had brought them out.

She had spent much of the day memorizing the details of his voice and face and laugh. All the details of Peter came together to create something that she had never known she needed. She felt as if...after years of being incomplete and broken, she had snapped back together. Was it only because her hatred was gone, or was it because something else had replaced it? Her heart thudded too loud to hear the answer.

“That isn’t true,” she said in a reluctant voice. “My brothers adore you.”

Peter’s smile softened. “Perhaps *you* should follow their example.”

“I will consider it, *Grandfather*.”

Peter’s nose wrinkled. “That is not what I meant.”

She buried her hands between her knees, rocking back as she laughed.

“I should very much not like to be a paternal figure in your life, thank you.”

“That is all right. My father already fills that role quite well.” Margaret studied the side of Peter’s face. “He told me how you apologized to him. I didn’t know.”

Peter shook his head. “It was nothing. I don’t even expect him to accept it or forgive me.”

Margaret watched a bird dip down to the water, searching for a fish. “I think he has forgiven you, but he would never tell you. He is the sort of man who would keep that a secret.”

A sly smile twisted Peter’s lips. “While we are on the subject of secrets...” he angled his body toward her. “Are you going to tell me one of yours in exchange for the whereabouts of one of Langdale Abbey’s secret passages?” His hair shone more golden than usual under the setting sunlight, his eyes darker.

“I do not have many secrets.”

“There must be something.”

She tapped her chin, searching her mind for one that she could tell him that was harmless. “Very well. I thought of one.”

He raised his eyebrows expectantly.

“You have to tell me about the secret passage first.”

“I would rather show you when we return home. I will pay you what I owe, but you must first tell me your secret.”

She sighed, fighting the ridiculous smile that spread over her cheeks. “I don’t think you will like this secret.”

“Now I’m intrigued.” He leaned one arm on his knee, looking up at her.

She pressed down her laughter, putting on a serious expression. “I once drew a picture of you. It was a very inaccurate representation now that I know what you truly look like. I wrote your name across the bottom in dark black ink.” She paused to create suspense. “And then I tore it to pieces and threw it into the fire.”

Peter’s jaw lowered, eyes wide.

Margaret’s laughter escaped in a snort, and she covered her mouth to contain it.

Peter watched her with suspended amusement. “I knew you hated me, and I knew you had a propensity for vengeful thoughts, but I did not know you were so...violent.”

She looked down at her lap as her laughter subsided. “The violence of my emotions is rather burdensome at times.” She felt the pull of Peter’s gaze on her cheek. She met his eyes. “Whether it is anger or despair or grief or love—I feel each with such ferocity that I hardly know what to do with it.”

He was silent for a long moment. “If you were to draw a picture of me now, would you still tear it to pieces and burn it?”

“No.” The word escaped before she even had time to think.

“What would you do with it then?”

She couldn't tell him she would frame it or put it inside a locket. He would be too flattered by such a confession. "I would give it to your mother."

That was not the answer he wanted. She grinned to herself as he cast his gaze heavenward.

"She would treasure it," Margaret said.

"Would you not?" He pressed a hand to his chest.

She sighed. "Why should I need a drawing of you when I have the real you?" She clamped her mouth shut, immediately regretting the words.

Peter leaned toward her until his shoulder rested against hers. His voice was soft and disarming. "Are you finally claiming me as yours?"

A tingle ran over her skin. There was much that word could mean—*yours*. He was hers by marriage. He was her friend. He was her companion on this trip. But for him to truly be hers was much deeper than that. It implied belonging, wanting, needing, adoring, and loving. The words he had read in the drawing room the day of the ball spilled back into her mind. *My heart is begging me to tell you how I am yours*. Was he simply waiting for her to claim him? Or had the words been fake all along? She wanted to brush aside his question, but it still hung in the air between them.

"I do not give such information out for free." Margaret's voice shook as she tugged on the edge of her shawl.

Peter raised one eyebrow. "Are you going to ask a secret of me in exchange?"

No, she couldn't be so unoriginal. At any rate, the idea of learning Peter's secrets unnerved her. They were shining in his eyes already. All she had to do was ask and he would spill

them all, she was sure of it. “I do not ask for a secret. I would prefer to give you...a challenge.”

A deep laugh escaped him. “What would you challenge me to do?”

She glanced around their secluded section of the beach, then out to the water. The waves washed gently over the sand just a few feet in front of where they sat. What could she tell him to do that would be too inconvenient? If he declined her challenge, then she would never have to answer his question. “I challenge you to go in the water. All the way over your head.”

His eyes rounded. “Right now?”

“Yes.” She raised her chin.

He raked a hand through his hair. “We still have a long walk back to the bridge house. Do you expect me to take the walk dripping wet?”

“That is my challenge. You may decline it if you wish.” She held her breath as he looked out to the sea.

To her dismay, he rose to his feet.

Blast it. She should have known better. He would never turn down a challenge.

“Peter, you don’t have to do it.” She shook her head fast. “It might be very cold and you might—”

He stepped in front of her, giving a slow smile. “I will be fine.” He took off his boots and then started unbuttoning his jacket.

She thought that was all he would remove, but then he tugged at his cravat, slowly untangling it from his neck. When his fingers moved to the buttons on his waistcoat, she glanced

frantically from side to side. There was no one else on the beach, and she was sitting on a rock watching her husband undress like he were some sort of spectacle in the theater. Did he expect her to be applauding?

She sneaked another look at him as he shrugged the waistcoat off, leaving him in his shirtsleeves and breeches. He tugged the shirt out of his waistband in one motion, and she caught a glimpse of the tight skin across the muscles in his abdomen.

“Someone might see you,” Margaret said in a quick voice, lowering her gaze to the sand. Her face burned.

“I believe this challenge was your idea.” His voice was sultry and low, or perhaps she had only imagined it. Was he still undressing? Did he plan to leave...anything on? She kept her gaze fixed on the sand.

“Besides, the only person on this beach who might see me is you.” There was a smile in his voice. “Since you are my wife, I don’t think there is anything wrong with you seeing me...in my shirtsleeves.”

She looked up. She hadn’t been imagining the sultry voice. It was written all over his face as well. It made her face burn hotter.

With a smile, he turned his back to her and jogged the few paces toward the sea, diving effortlessly into the gentle waves. He emerged from the surface, shaking his hair to release the excess water. He pushed the wet strands away from his eyes before standing and walking toward where she waited for him on the shore.

Shirtsleeves, she could manage quite well.

Wet shirtsleeves, she could not.

The fabric, made sheer by the water, clung to his chest and arms. She would have expected him to be more skeletal after his prolonged illness, but all it seemed to have done was remove any layers that might have been covering the muscle on his athletic frame.

“That was refreshing,” he said with a laugh. He shook the sand off his jacket and thrust his arms back into it, picking up his waistcoat and cravat but not putting them on. Margaret never would have thought water to be fashionable, but Peter wore it just as well today as he had worn it in the rainstorm. Her gaze followed the droplets that trickled down his square jaw and neck, passing his collarbone and down the front of his chest.

She snapped her gaze away. Was she ogling him? The horrified realization made her take a step back. She had most certainly been ogling him. Was it a sin to ogle one’s husband? No, not at all. But she still didn’t allow herself to resume. He would notice.

It seemed he already had. His eyes were brimming with the knowledge that she had been thoroughly enjoying staring at him. “Are you going to give me my answer now?”

With his coat back over his shoulders, she could think a little more clearly. Still, her mind raced. “Might I wait until we return to Langdale Abbey? That is what you plan to do with telling me about the secret passages, after all. It is only fair. I told you my secret, you performed your challenge, and we shall both receive our payments later.”

The sun faded quickly on this side of Yorkshire. The light was dimming more with each passing moment. The sky was streaked with orange, and Peter’s dark eyes were streaked with

gold as he took one step closer to her. “I would prefer that you answer my question now.”

Margaret tried to laugh, but the sound was lodged in her throat. “I don’t even recall what your question was.”

“I asked if you were finally claiming me as yours. It is a simple question.”

It wasn’t simple. Not at all. A simple question would not rattle her bones and make her heart beat so wildly. She paced away one step, but he followed her. “I didn’t expect this. Any of this.” The words blurted out of her mouth.

“What did you not expect?”

She stared down at the sand with a scowl. “I didn’t expect...” she gave a huffed breath. “I didn’t expect to ever forgive you, or for you to be anything but cruel. I didn’t expect to enjoy your company. I didn’t even expect you to be alive.” She gave a hard laugh at the way fate had played her for a fool. Her hand crept to her throat as she tried to keep her emotions from being displayed on her face.

Peter took that hand, pulling it away from her throat. He dipped his head and pressed his lips softly to the inside of her wrist. She gave an involuntary gasp as a shiver trailed up her arm. And then he placed her palm against his chest, directly over his heart.

She stared at her fingers against the wet fabric of his shirt. The quickened beat of his heart thrummed against her palm.

“I am alive,” he said, taking a step closer until the length of her forearm rested against him. “I have never felt more so, in fact.”

His deep voice set her ablaze. Her thoughts were not as clear as they had been before, not with him standing so close.

His lips curved into a tempting smile. “Are you going to answer me or not?”

“I don’t know what exactly you meant by your question.”

“I will put it in more clear terms, then.” His dark eyes caressed her face. “I am yours. But do you want me or not?”

Waves of longing cascaded through her. Not only was he hers, but she was his. Entirely. She had fallen in love with him. Panic clutched her muscles, but she couldn’t deny that what her heart was telling her was true.

Peter had somehow managed to make her love him, and she hated him for it.

His question still hovered between them. He was waiting, and something told her he was prepared to act according to her response.

Her breathless whisper came from a place deep in her throat. “Yes.”

Without thinking, she took a handful of the wet fabric of his shirt, tugging him closer. He dipped his head and caught her lips with his in one fierce motion, surrounding her waist with his arms. Margaret’s eyelids collapsed and she melted against him, her heart beating so hard it hurt. His kiss was even more delicious than she would have expected.

And her expectations had been high.

She had never kissed a man before, but she was learning quickly. She explored his chest and shoulders with her hands before sinking her fingertips into his wet hair. Nothing had ever felt more natural, more perfect, more empowering. She pressed herself against him more forcefully, capturing his bottom lip with hers, then the top, tasting each one. They tasted of sea salt. A deep sigh came from the back of his throat

and he tore his mouth away from hers, trailing a string of kisses across her jaw. His mouth paused at the skin behind her ear, and his lips feathered across it just like they had on the balcony. Her involuntary sigh encouraged him to continue.

Her skin was on fire, every inch, and the places he touched turned to ashes. Soon she would be nothing but a pile at his feet. But even if she was, she didn't care. This was worth it. His hand slid up her back, resting between her shoulder blades, and the other cradled the side of her head as he pressed his lips to her cheek, her eyelids, dipping down to the notch of her throat. She was becoming rather faint, but she didn't want him to stop. Ever.

She leaned back enough to see his eyes. They were hazy, but determined. He was not finished. He traced her lower lip with his thumb. His chest rose and fell in rhythm with her own. She leaned forward and skimmed a light kiss over that blasted crease by the edge of his lips. "You have been driving me mad, you know," she whispered against the corner of his mouth. Her heart raced.

He took a strand of her hair and tucked it behind her ear, his fingers coming down to trace the edge of her chin. "I know." His lips touched her hairline, then her cheekbone and jaw. He pressed one taunting kiss to each side of her mouth.

"Now you are doing it on purpose," she said through a hoarse breath.

"I've always done it on purpose."

Her eyes fluttered closed as she savored each touch of his lips to her skin. She hadn't admitted that she wanted him only to have him tease her for it. He ought to continue making effective work of showing her that he wanted her just as much. Her eyes locked with his in the dim light before she threaded

her arms around his neck and pulled his mouth down to hers again. She felt the curve of his smile against her own.

His focus quickly shifted back to the task at hand. His kiss was deeper than before, each movement more confident than the last. She followed his intentional, unspoken instruction, reciprocating the fervor with which his mouth moved. She was drowning in the desire that his kisses sent spiraling through her. She had never felt more wanted in her entire life. She slid her arms underneath his jacket and around his back, holding him close.

She didn't know how long they stayed on the beach, but by the time his kisses slowed, the faint orange of sunset no longer blazed behind her eyelids. The sky was dark. His lips were soft now, tender and slow. Each time she thought he might stop, he seemed to reconsider, kissing her one way, then another. She held his jaw between her hands, leaning away from him with an exhilarated smile. "We should return to the bridge house. You're still wearing your wet clothes."

He seemed to have forgotten. She would have forgotten too if she hadn't been holding him against her for the last several minutes. Without the sun to warm them, the air was cold. His eyes roamed her face with raw adoration, a smile curving his mouth. Had she really just kissed those lips so thoroughly? "If you insist," he said.

After gathering their things, he took her by the hand, interlocking his fingers with hers. Her heart pounded a little faster as they made their walk back to the bridge house. They hardly spoke, but each time Peter looked down at her with a smile, her stomach fluttered. How was it that she was already dreaming about kissing him again? And how was it that she was no longer dreading sharing that room with him?

Her nerves swirled mercilessly, but she felt safe and secure with her hand in his.

As they approached the arched entry of the house, she squinted to see through the darkness. Confusion furrowed her brow. “Is that a coach?”

Peter nodded. “It appears so.” He strode a little faster, pulling her along beside him.

The light of a candle came into view first, then the frantic face of a man Margaret recognized. He was one of the footmen from Langdale Abbey. He was still dressed in his livery, but his powdered wig was askew. He gave a hurried bow. “My lady, I was sent to request your swift return to Langdale Abbey. Your father’s health has declined this afternoon, and the physician fears he will not survive the night.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 29



Peter squeezed Margaret's hand tighter instinctively. His heart sank with dread. "That cannot be true. Mr. Lovell seemed to be improving. He came to the ball just a fortnight ago."

Margaret was shaking her head, covering her mouth. Her round eyes flooded with tears. "He did seem more unwell than he would admit. Ever since the ball his condition seemed to be growing worse."

"I will fetch your trunks at once." The footman rushed off toward the house.

Peter pulled Margaret into his arms, and she buried her face in his chest. He stroked her disheveled hair. His heart stung as she sniffled, leaning back to look up at him. Tears streaked down her face. "What could have caused such a sudden change?"

He cupped her face in his hands. "That physician has been known to be wrong before. He might be mistaken. Your father is strong."

Margaret drew a quaking breath through her kiss-swollen lips. He wiped a tear off her cheek with his thumb. She seemed to calm down a little, but she tensed again when the footman returned to strap their trunks to the back of the coach.

Peter helped Margaret inside before climbing in beside her. The footman sat on the seat across from them as the coachman set the horses back into motion.

Margaret clung to Peter's arm, staring out the window as she sniffed back her tears. He wished he could somehow console her, but there was nothing he could do. If her father's condition was truly as bad as the footman said, then he could only insist that they travel there as quickly as possible. His skin was cold, the wet fabric still clinging to every inch of him.

"What state was Mr. Lovell in when you left this afternoon?" Peter asked the footman.

He swallowed. "He had a severe fever and was unconscious. Doctor Larsen had begun blood-letting just before my departure."

Margaret gave a quiet gasp.

Peter closed his eyes. It did not sound good. His stomach lurched with dread.

"Mama is in London. She doesn't know." Margaret sobbed, covering her face with her hands. "I wanted to keep them all s-safe. I w-wanted to make them all happy. Papa cannot die, he cannot."

Peter's jaw tightened and he held her close, stroking her hair. Why had such a happy day been so corrupted? Margaret did not deserve this. A lump formed in his throat as he struggled for any way—any possible way—he might take the pain from her. If death was coming to Langdale Abbey, it should have come for Peter. He had been the villain, the one whose misdeeds had earned him a shorter life. Mr. Lovell was

a good, honest man, a caring and devoted husband and father—and he always had been. It wasn't fair.

Peter couldn't shake the sense of guilt in his chest as the carriage rattled down the road toward home. Why could he not trade Mr. Lovell places? He couldn't bear to see Margaret so devastated and afraid. If only he had died when he had promised he would, perhaps Mr. Lovell would not have been cursed with this fate. Did death collect people that way? He didn't have the slightest idea, but if there was anything he could do to stop it from collecting Mr. Lovell, he would. Dr. Larsen tended to exaggerate. They might return to Langdale Abbey to find Mr. Lovell awake and thriving. Margaret might not have such a reason to mourn.

The memory of his own father's death clamored into his mind. He had felt guilty then, too. Because he had been relieved. He had been relieved to no longer live in constant fear, but he had also been terrified for other reasons—his new responsibilities to care for his family and dig them out of the debt his father had placed them in. That same terror clutched his chest now as Margaret cried beside him. If Mr. Lovell died, his entire family would be Peter's responsibility. Margaret already was, and he had promised to provide for them all financially, but this would be different. The pressure would be more intense. After all he had done to hurt Mr. Lovell, he could not let him down.

They arrived at Langdale Abbey in the middle of the night. Peter led Margaret out of the coach, and they ran together up the stairs of the horseshoe staircase and into the vestibule. They hurried to the second floor and stopped in the corridor outside her father's bedchamber. Margaret's breathing was labored as her eyes darted around the dark space.

Mother was standing outside the room with a candle. She stood with weary posture, a grim look on her face. Margaret rushed through the doorway, but Mother stopped Peter by the arm. "Is he still alive?" Peter asked.

"Yes." Mother let out a long sigh, closing her eyes. "And he regained consciousness just one hour ago. It does not mean he will survive, but at least you and Margaret made it here to see him."

Peter swallowed, his legs shaking beneath him. He walked into the room. The physician sat on a wooden chair near Mr. Lovell's bedside. Margaret sat on the edge of her father's bed, clutching his hand. His eyes were closed, and wet rags covered his forehead and arms. Based on the steady rise and fall of his chest, he seemed to be breathing without any great struggle. Had the worst of it passed?

Peter joined Margaret at Mr. Lovell's bedside, resting one hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him, a single tear still marking her cheek. "Doctor Larsen said he is going to stay all night to keep close watch on him. His fever is still concerning."

"Do you want to stay too?" Peter asked.

Margaret nodded.

"Then I will stay with you." He sat on the bed beside her.

"Your clothes are still wet." She sniffed.

"I don't care."

"Please, go change into dry clothes. You look so cold." Her eyes bore into his, gentle and soft. How could she be so concerned for *him*?

Unable to help himself, he pressed a soft kiss to her hair. “Very well. I’ll make quick work of it.”

He rushed out of the room, pausing when he caught Mother staring at him with astonishment. She must have seen him kiss Margaret.

He didn’t have time to answer any of the questions spilling from Mother’s eyes. She would have to wait to gloat about how her idea to send them on a trip had been a success.

After changing his clothes with unmatched speed, he instructed two servants to bring one of the sofas from the morning room up to Mr. Lovell’s room. If Margaret was going to stay there all night, she needed to be comfortable. He jogged back down the corridor and joined Margaret at her father’s bedside again.

When the sofa was brought in, they moved it close to Mr. Lovell’s bed. Margaret sat down and Peter joined her. She leaned against him as she watched her father sleep. Her tears had stopped, but her body quaked from the residual shock of the past several hours. Peter fought to stay awake, but eventually slipped into a deep sleep.



He awoke to dull morning light. His eyelids fluttered open and his surroundings came into view. Margaret’s eyes were still fixed on her father. She seemed to sense Peter’s movement, turning to look at him. “Doctor Larsen left.” Two darkened crescents scooped under her eyes. She had not slept at all. Even as she spoke to him, she seemed to be fighting to keep her eyelids opened. Her voice was slurred. “He said Papa’s

condition is unpredictable, but he has confidence that he will endure another day.”

Peter sat up, brushing the hair from her forehead. “You need to sleep.”

“I must look after Papa.”

“I will stay here with him.”

She shook her head, biting her lip with concern.

Peter slipped one arm around her back, tucking the other under her shoulders. “What are you doing?” she hissed in a whisper.

Peter scooped her up off the sofa, carrying her to the doorway. “You must rest for a few hours. I will inform you if anything changes with your father’s condition.”

Margaret sighed, a deep scowl on her brow. The haze in her eyes cleared, and she stared up at his face as he carried her through the corridor to her bedchamber. He set her down softly on the bed, lifting the blankets for her to climb under. Peter leaned down to pull them up to her chin. “Go to sleep.” He gave her a soft smile, and her eyes, heavy as they were, still smiled back.

Her eyelids closed not a second later. He took the opportunity to quietly memorize the details of her face. He worried for her father, but his hope concerning her radiated through him, warm and inviting. He could relive their moment on the beach over and over again. She had finally admitted her feelings. To kiss Margaret had been the most enjoyable experience of his life, the most sacred and treasured moment thus far. She had surprised him with her strength, the way she had taken command of their kiss and held him like she truly

did love him. She hadn't told him as much, but he had felt it. Wasn't that all that mattered?

The light snoring whistled out of her nose again, and he stifled a laugh. Trusting that she was asleep, he pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. "I love you."



Two hours later, Mr. Lovell stirred. Peter sat up on the sofa, leaning forward on his elbows as he observed Mr. Lovell's eyes open.

He stared up at the ceiling, breathing heavily. His dazed expression made Peter hesitate to make his presence known. It would only shock him. After several seconds, Mr. Lovell peeled the rag from his forehead and his bewildered gaze caught on Peter.

"Blackwell." His voice was a hoarse whisper. He cleared his throat, and his voice came back stronger. "I'm glad you're here. I wished to see you."

Peter jumped to his feet. "I should go fetch Margaret. She will be overjoyed to hear your voice."

"No." The word was desperate. Mr. Lovell reached out one hand, beckoning Peter closer. "Not yet."

Peter took a hesitant step toward him. "What is it?"

"There is a letter...on my desk...from my wife. The post was delayed. Read it." Each word seemed to exhaust him. Peter wanted to encourage him not to speak, but his eyes gleamed with urgency.

Peter obeyed, swiping up the letter that was folded on the corner of his desk. He opened it, skimming the page as fast as

he could.

My dear Anthony,

I knew our fortune could not have turned so quickly. The specialist that was meant to treat George's leg, Doctor Jonathan Gulliver, has refused to help us. He will not accept the sum Lord Blackwell sent with us to London. I cannot bargain with him. He knows of your reputation and refuses to sully his name and business with ours. There are other physicians here, but none with his experience. Each one I have spoken to has tried to recommend us to Doctor Gulliver, but I sense that they are just as hesitant to help our family as he was. I fear that they are withholding their service intentionally as well. London society is as ruthless as they say. They do not seem to care that we are tied to the Blackwell name.

Peter looked up from the letter. Guilt stabbed at his chest. He was the reason Mr. Lovell's reputation had been ruined. He was the reason this had happened at all, and why Mr. Lovell had to continue to endure such infuriating treatment. It was all Peter's fault. "Why would Doctor Gulliver refuse to help a child simply because of his father's reputation?" He shook his head in anger. "What can I do?"

"Go to London." Mr. Lovell swallowed, taking a heavy breath. "Try to convince him."

Peter's muscles tightened with urgency. The journey there would take days, and it had already been weeks since the letter

had been written. "I will go at once." Peter folded the letter and replaced it on the desk. "I will offer him any price he asks, and if he will not accept, I will find someone capable who will."

"Do not tell Margaret. Do not breathe a word of it to her." Mr. Lovell's eyes rolled back, and he wheezed. "She—she has enough to fret about with my current state. It will upset her to know that she might have married you in vain. Obtaining treatment from this physician for George was the only reason she agreed to it. Go attempt to resolve the issue, and if you succeed, there will be no reason to trouble her."

Peter paused.

"Promise that you will not tell her. She will rush to London herself if you do. I will not have my daughter undertake this burden."

Peter nodded, but his heart ached at the thought of leaving her for such a long journey. How could he explain his absence if he couldn't tell her the truth? He pushed away his selfish thoughts. She knew how he felt about her, didn't she? When he returned, he could tell her everything about his purpose in leaving. George's health was more important than his own desires. Margaret's dream was to see her brother run again, to see her family well and happy. He didn't have time to waste.

He hurried through the house, making his hasty preparations before his departure. He found Mother in the morning room, sipping on a cup of tea. Her gaunt face indicated her limited sleep from the night before.

He peeked his head through the doorway. "Will you keep close watch of Mr. Lovell in his room until Margaret is awake?" he asked. "I have urgent business in London." He debated telling her the purpose, but he feared word would

reach Margaret through his mother. He hadn't kept his word to Mr. Lovell the first time, when he had asked Peter to stay away from his daughter. He would keep his word this time.

Mother's brows shot up. "London?" She grunted as she pushed away from the settee. "Peter! Do you care to explain?"

"I cannot." He was already walking away. "I leave at once, and I will return as soon as I am able. Goodbye, Mother. Tell Margaret where I have gone. Tell her that I look forward to seeing her again as soon as I return."

He felt Mother's astonished gaze on his back as he raced down the corridor and out to the coach. He prayed that even if Margaret didn't know why he had left, that she would at least know he had left his heart there with her.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 30



Margaret's head pounded with pain, and her vision sparked with white dots. She waited for them to clear before sitting up in her bed. She groaned, pressing the heel of her hand into her forehead. How long had she slept? Was it the middle of the day? Her memories came pouring back, and her eyes flew open wide. The bridge house. Peter. Their kiss.

"Papa," she muttered under her breath, throwing the blankets off of her.

She staggered a few steps before regaining her balance. When she reached his bedchamber, she was surprised to find Lady Blackwell, not Peter, sitting on the sofa. She held an embroidery hoop on her lap.

"Oh, Margaret. I hope you slept well." Lady Blackwell was usually a very confident woman, but today, her eyes shifted and her fingers fidgeted with her skirts.

"How is he?"

A squeak came from Lady Blackwell's throat. "Who?"

"...My father."

"Oh, yes. He has been sleeping most of the day, but he seems to be much better off than he was yesterday. Doctor Larsen seems to have been mistaken once again. I am dearly

glad that he was, but I think it may be time for him to retire for the sake of all of our nerves.” Lady Blackwell began fanning her face with the hoop. There was still a line between her brows.

“Where is Peter?” Margaret was eager to see him. She had been slightly delirious, but she faintly recalled him carrying her to her room. It was strange that he hadn’t stayed to watch over Papa as he had told her he would.

Lady Blackwell pursed her lips. “That is...well, that is what troubles me. He rushed off to London this morning with no explanation as to why. He simply said he had business there to attend to. He seemed quite...urgent to leave. Do you know why he might have gone?”

Margaret’s stomach dropped. She felt suddenly faint, the ache in her head intensifying. Had she misheard her? “London? No-no—I don’t. He already left? While I was asleep?”

“I’m afraid so.” Lady Blackwell frowned.

Margaret’s chest ached, deep inside. Why would he leave without saying goodbye? What had caused him to sneak away so suddenly? “Did he say how long he would be away?”

“No. It was all quite mysterious. But he did ask me to tell you that he looks forward to seeing you as soon as he returns.”

That was little consolation. What was he doing in London? It was a very large place. Was he catching the final festivities of the season? Did he have unresolved business dealings with men there? Could it be Parliament? No, he had already done his duties with the house of lords for the year, he had told her as much. None of these things would have required him to

leave that very morning without telling her. Worry surged in her heart, and she pushed away the sense of betrayal that crept into the corners of her mind. Surely there was a plausible explanation. He had made it clear the night before that he wanted her. But *want* was not the same as love. What if he had decided that she was not enough? All of Papa's warnings about trusting him spiraled through her head. She shushed her thoughts.

"Did you enjoy what little time you had at the bridge house?" Lady Blackwell asked. Her eyes were inquisitive, as if she were searching for clues about why Peter might have left.

"Yes. It was a beautiful day. I enjoyed it very much." Her heart ached in waves, each one more powerful than the one before. She sat down on the sofa beside Lady Blackwell, her legs suddenly weak.

"I'm certain Peter's departure is nothing to fret about." Lady Blackwell placed a hand on Margaret's arm. "I'm certain there is a reasonable explanation for it."

"Has Peter... ever run off to London so abruptly before?"

Lady Blackwell fell silent. "Only one time that I can recall. It was the day after his father's funeral."

"Oh." Margaret wrung her fingers together until they turned white.

"He was quite overwhelmed with his responsibilities and wanted to escape them for a time, at least that is what I gathered from his prolonged absence. Perhaps—well, he might be feeling overwhelmed again? Seeing your father so ill might have shocked him into a rash decision to run away."

Margaret fought the lump forming in her throat. Not only did she laugh uncontrollably when she was tired, but she often

found herself emotional about trivial things. But was this a trivial thing? It felt significant. It hurt, and the pain was spreading like a droplet of ink on a porous sheet of foolscap.

“I hope that is not the case,” Lady Blackwell added. “I would like to believe my son to be capable of facing his responsibilities. He is a better man than he once was.” Her voice was heavy with concern. “But he has always been rather unpredictable.” She took an audible breath. “I don’t wish to trouble you. I am only speculating. Let us hope that your father recovers quickly and Peter finds his way back to us just as soon.”

Every muscle in Margaret’s body was unresponsive, and it took all her energy to nod. She didn’t have any words. How could Peter leave her because he was...overwhelmed? How could he act like he cared for her so ardently, and then abandon her when she needed him? Her father was not well yet—he could easily be struck with another dangerous fever, and Peter had chosen to leave her instead of stay and support her? It didn’t make sense. All the fears about his character that she had put behind her were rising to the surface. Was he truly such a selfish coward? Had he not changed as much as she hoped?

Had she been so blinded by her heart?

She continued to fight her tears, but they were resilient. Her throat was tight and raw. She didn’t want to display her emotions in front of Lady Blackwell, so she rose to her feet again. “I am going to go find my brothers. If my father wakes, he will be happy to see their faces.”

She rushed from the room, and the moment she was in the privacy of the corridor, a tear slipped from her eye. She wiped

it away angrily. There was no need to be hasty in her assumptions. He might not have been running away from her.

She took a deep breath to calm herself.

There could be many other plausible explanations.



“A mistress, to be sure,” Mrs. Halesworth said, lowering her saucer to the tea table. Her thin frame was enrobed in a green taffeta gown. Her coiffed hair curled at the base of her neck. “I will say what the others will not. It is better to be in pain than to be ignorant.”

Mrs. Halesworth was a neighbor who had come for tea on multiple occasions, and she had been invited there again that day. A week had passed since Peter had left for London, and Margaret had been trying not to think of all the distressing reasons he might have gone. She had been spending her days looking after Papa, who had regained a great deal of his strength already. She didn’t speak of Peter. Not to Papa or to anyone else if she could help it. Each time she heard his name, a dagger seemed to drive deeper into her heart.

Lady Blackwell had left the room for a few minutes, leaving Margaret to suffer through the many theories Mrs. Halesworth had come up with to explain Peter’s absence. Sally, Rebecca, and Rachel sat on the other settee, engaged in their own conversation. Margaret hadn’t meant to tell Mrs. Halesworth about Peter’s departure at all, but Rebecca had accidentally spilled the news when she had joined them for tea that afternoon. Sally had then indicated that they didn’t know why he had left, nor when he was coming back. Mrs.

Halesworth had taken the piece of gossip between her teeth like a cat with a fresh kill.

“You mustn’t be naive, child. There are many men who establish mistresses in London and their wives never learn of it. Or they learn to simply accept it as I have. My husband has had many mistresses. I never cared for his company, so it does not bother me.”

Margaret’s hand shook as she tried to take a sip of tea. Lady Andover’s shrill voice came back to mind from the night of the ball; it had been haunting her even more frequently of late. *He could never be satisfied with just one.*

She felt ill. Anger and betrayal raged inside her, attempting to make new walls around her heart, to protect it from Mrs. Halesworth’s words. But despair still fit through the cracks. She was trying to remain optimistic, to have faith and trust in Peter and her own instincts about him. She had sensed that he was good. She had fallen in love with him. So why was she allowing anyone to plant such horrible ideas in her head? She was just as much to blame as Mrs. Halesworth for nurturing such thoughts. It was all she did when she went to bed at night.

After learning of his swift departure, Rachel had been appalled, even venturing to attach a curse word to his name. Margaret liked her for a reason. She had then been silent on the matter for several days, until she explained her own theory that matched her mother’s—that he was running away. He had done the same when their father died. He had distanced himself from everyone who loved him, and Rachel suspected he was doing it again.

Cornelius had even offered his thoughts. He had suggested that perhaps Peter was only trying to distance himself from

Margaret in order to make her yearn for him more.

It was the most ridiculous of all the theories she had heard.

All the ideas that drifted through Langdale Abbey broke her heart, the whispers of the servants that he was regretting his marriage, or that Margaret must have been overbearing, or that he missed his freedom and life of a bachelor. According to Margaret's lady's maid, there had even been one of the servants who speculated that Peter hated Margaret's father and had somehow conspired to cause the decline in his health and had then fled to London to hide from his crime.

Margaret didn't believe that one, but part of it rang true. He had to have been keeping a secret, otherwise he would have told her why he had left.

Mrs. Halesworth was the sort of conversation partner who didn't require a response. She could carry a conversation on her own for hours if one simply nodded and sipped tea across from her. Margaret wanted to defend Peter's character, but all the time passing without him was making her question it right alongside Mrs. Halesworth.

When Lady Blackwell returned, Mrs. Halesworth sat up straighter, ceasing to question her son's integrity. Apparently she had no problem questioning his integrity in front of his *wife*, but Lady Blackwell had an air about her that informed anyone nearby that she was not to be insulted.

At last, Mrs. Halesworth left and Margaret was permitted to leave the stifling room. As she walked through the corridor, she pressed a hand against her chest, as if to keep her heart in one piece. She had hardly smiled all week, and when she did, it was only an act. She had tried to be bright and happy around Papa and her brothers, but she was exhausted. She couldn't

have Papa knowing that she was so troubled over Peter's absence. He had his own problems to contend with.

She missed Mama. All she wanted was to be wrapped up in her embrace and have her whisper that everything would be all right.

And even though she told herself not to, she still missed Peter.

That was what infuriated her the most.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 31



Lifting his arm, Peter sniffed his jacket. He did not smell as horrible as he had expected.

He had been in a carriage with minimal rest for days on end, stopping at all varieties of inns along the way. He leaned his head back on the velvet cushion and closed his eyes. He tapped his foot impatiently on the floor of the coach. He had only a few minutes of his journey remaining until he would be home again. He had been gone for over a fortnight with all the time it had taken to travel to London and back, but fortunately it had been well worth the time.

With a great deal of convincing and bargaining, Doctor Gulliver had accepted Peter's lofty sum and had begun treatment for George's leg. The surgery would not be pleasant for the boy, but George seemed to be just as determined as his sister when there was something that he wanted. Mrs. Lovell had been shocked to see Peter arrive at their rented town house. She had stared at him as if he were a corpse risen from the grave to haunt her, but she had quickly come to like him. At least, he hoped so. She seemed far more forgiving than her daughter.

Margaret. Peter had missed her every day. He had worried about her and what she must have been thinking. Had her

father decided to tell her where he had gone? Or had she cared less for his absence than he suspected? He had been troubling himself with such questions during his entire journey. He had considered writing to her, but the letter would not have reached her before he did. He rubbed a circle over his chest, soaking in the many emotions that coursed through his veins. Though he had only been away for a fortnight, it had felt much longer. He knew it wasn't true, but he feared he had forgotten the sound of her voice and laugh. He was eager to hear them again. To hold her close to him. To see her face, to see her smile. To kiss all of it.

As soon as she learned why he had fled to London so quickly, she would forgive him for any distress it might have caused her. She would be glad to know that George and her mother were well and that she hadn't been given a reason to worry about them prematurely. He had been careful when he delivered the news of Mr. Lovell's health concerns to his wife. He hadn't told her all the details, and he had tried to sound optimistic. He hoped he hadn't given her too much hope. When he had left, Mr. Lovell had been awake and determined, so Peter prayed that he had stayed that way.

With so much to occupy his thoughts, the rest of the drive passed quickly. He nearly cried out with joy when he saw Langdale Abbey in the distance. He was ready to be out of that dreaded carriage, bathed, changed, and fed something besides food from a questionable inn on the side of the road.

Most of all, he was ready to see his wife.

A few minutes later, he walked into the vestibule, setting his hat on the table at the center of the room. The butler stood nearby, eyes wide.

"How is Mr. Lovell? Is he well?" Peter held his breath.

“Yes, my lord. I believe he is outside with his sons.”

Relief deflated the fear in his chest. If Mr. Lovell was well enough to leave his room, that was very promising. “Is my wife here? My mother?”

“They have gone to town today, but they should be returning shortly.” That was good. It would give him time to bathe so Margaret wouldn’t find him repulsive. He smiled. It would also give him time to inform Mr. Lovell that his visit to London had been a success.

On the back lawn, Mr. Lovell sat on the grass with his arms outstretched behind him. James and Philip sat nearby with their toy buildings, soldiers, and horses. They looked up at Peter’s approach.

“Grandfather!” James beamed. His toothless grin warmed Peter’s heart.

“Do not call him that,” Mr. Lovell said with a look of dismay.

He made to stand, groaning with the effort, but Peter raised a hand to stop him, sitting down on the grass beside him instead.

His lined, leathery skin indicated the years he had labored as a farmer. How could this man even speak to him? Peter had taken his life of comfort and turned it on its head. Did a small part of him understand the responsibility Peter had felt to care for his family? The desperation? None of that could justify Peter’s actions. He was in Mr. Lovell’s debt for the rest of his life.

“Blackwell.” Mr. Lovell’s eyes were glassy with anticipation. “Did you just return from London?”

“Not five minutes ago.” He smiled. “I convinced the physician to treat George’s leg. I paid him as much as he asked. Your wife and George are well. They asked me to tell you that they miss you and love you.”

Mr. Lovell slumped with relief. “I knew you could do it. You are very skilled at persuasion.”

“I cannot take any credit. Being an earl makes me rather difficult to argue with.”

Mr. Lovell almost smiled, his lips twitching on one side. “Thank you.”

Peter shook his head hard. “You should not thank me. For as long as I live, I will be repaying a debt to you. That is all. I am glad to see that your health seems to be improving. You gave us all a great deal of panic.”

He sighed. “My body seems determined to work against me, but I hope I have endured the worst of this illness. If not, I shall at least strive to live out the rest of my days honorably, however few there are.” He studied Peter’s face with narrowed eyes. “I hope you will do the same.”

“That is my intention.” He meant it. He never wanted to hurt anyone ever again, especially not the Lovells.

“Do it for Margaret. She cares for you. I have seen it.” Mr. Lovell’s voice was firm. “I trust you return her feelings? She told me about your charade at the ball.”

“It was not a charade on my part.”

“Even the words you read in the drawing room?”

Peter nodded, and a surge of longing struck him again to see Margaret. Why had she gone to town that day? “I meant every last one.”

Mr. Lovell gave a grunt of approval, turning his attention back to his sons as they played with their toys. “Then you ought to go tell her that.”

Peter smiled, jumping to his feet. “I most certainly will.”

After bathing and changing into clean clothing, he planned to go to the vestibule to await Margaret’s return.

But he was stopped in the corridor by a menacing growl.

He froze. Rachel was marching toward him, eyes blazing with anger. He had known she was feisty, but he had never seen her advance toward him in such a manner. He backed up a step. “What are you doing?”

“What are *you* doing?” She struck him in the chest, pushing him back.

He stared at her, bewildered.

“Margaret has been devastated these last two weeks! I have not seen her smile. She has been pining for you. Why on earth did you run away?”

“I didn’t run away!” Peter raised both hands to stop her from shoving him again.

Rachel’s shoulders were still tense, but her face relaxed. “Then why did you leave?”

Peter explained the situation, careful not to spare a single detail. By the end of his explanation, Rachel was much less feral. She let out a long sigh.

“You might have at least told me the reason so I could reassure Margaret that you weren’t up to any mischief! I overheard Mrs. Halesworth attempting to convince her that you were seeing mistresses in London. Mama and I worried

that you were overwhelmed at the prospect of Mr. Lovell's death and so you fled just as you did when our father died."

Dread spiraled through his stomach. "Did Margaret believe Mrs. Halesworth?"

"If I were her, I might have. Why else would a man sneak away to London if he wasn't keeping secrets? Gads, what did you expect? Did you think Margaret wouldn't question your odd behavior at all?"

Peter clenched his jaw. "I hoped that she trusted me enough. I need to explain everything to her at once."

"Her trust in you is so new, Peter." Rachel shook her head. "It is still so fragile. You must nurture it and do nothing to break it. In time, it will become much more solid, but for now, it will require mending."

He paced the floor, raking a hand over his hair. "Do you know when she will return home?"

"In time for dinner, I'm sure. You might have to wait an hour or two."

Peter made a quick plan in his mind, and then he told Rachel, requesting her assistance.

With a groan, Rachel finally agreed. A smile pinched her lips. "Very well."



There was nothing that could console a woman's broken heart better than shopping. It did not repair it, but it did provide her with new things to love. Happy, beautiful things. Margaret loved her new bonnet. She loved her new gloves. She loved her new reticule. When the modiste finished her new spencer

jacket, Margaret would love it too. Perhaps after enough time, she could learn to love those things more than Peter.

She clung to her new purchases, keeping her shoulders pulled back as she and Lady Blackwell walked through the front doors of the house. She had been desperate for anything to make her happy—to make her forget that Peter was gone. She had been eager for anything that would stop her from wondering when he might return, or if he ever would. Each time a worry or thought about Peter rose to the surface of her thoughts, she exiled it instantly. After the first week, she had asked her maid to refrain from sharing the gossip from below stairs. She didn't want to know. Each time she heard a new piece of speculation about him, another fragment of her heart was chiseled off. Papa was feeling better. James and Philip were as cheerful as usual, though they had begun to ask more frequently when Mama and George were returning.

It was strange that Mama hadn't written yet. Was there nothing notable to share? Or had her letters been lost in the post? If Peter had told Margaret he was going to London, he might have offered to deliver a letter from Margaret straight to her mother. But he had disappeared instead. The only person Margaret trusted to give her an honest, reasonable theory about why he had disappeared, was Papa, but he had never offered one. He simply accepted the vague description Peter had given Lady Blackwell—that he had urgent 'business' there.

Good heavens, she was doing it again. She was thinking of him. Her heart stung.

Rachel was there to greet them in the vestibule. She was not usually so friendly, but she came straight to Margaret's side. She took hold of her arm urgently. "There is a new collection of books I must show you in the library. I think you

will like them.” Her smile was peculiar—stretching out to the sides rather than curving upward.

Margaret frowned. “Where did they come from?”

“I purchased them.”

“I didn’t know you enjoyed books so much.”

Her eyes darted from side to side. “Well, it is a new interest of mine. I thought since Cornelius and I will be leaving Langdale Abbey soon, we should offer our thanks with a set of new books for the library.”

“That is very kind, thank you.” Margaret tried to slip her arm away, but Rachel’s grip was firm.

“You must come at once. Leave your purchases here for now.” Without asking permission, she snatched the bags from Margaret’s hands, setting them on the nearby table.

Margaret opened her mouth to protest, but Rachel was already tugging her forward.

Why was she acting so strange?

“Come along, it will only take a moment.” Rachel led her all the way to the library doors before releasing her arm. “Go on inside. I left the books...on the table.” Her voice was quick, that same odd smile still on her mouth. Rachel rarely smiled.

Margaret hid her look of consternation as she faced the doors and pushed them open. She took one step inside before she stopped in her tracks.

Was she imagining things now? She blinked hard against the bright light coming from the window.

The library doors slammed shut behind her. She whirled around, but Rachel had not come inside.

Slowly, Margaret turned back around. She hadn't been imagining it.

Peter was sitting in the armchair by the window like a blasted king, one leg crossed over his knee. His eyes soaked her in like a sponge from head to toe, a wide grin on his face.

An army of emotions rose inside her, battling for dominance. Margaret's fists curled and moisture sprung to her eyes. She marched forward, lunging for him.

The smile was quickly gone from his face as she snatched the leather book from his hand and struck his arm with it twice. "What the devil are you doing in *my* chair?" She dropped the book and glared at him. "Did you think you could suddenly have some claim on it after you have been mysteriously gone for a *fortnight*?" Her face was hot as a tear escaped her eye.

His eyes were round with shock. Had he been expecting her to run happily into his arms?

She turned on her heel, marching away from him with a huffed breath. Infuriating man! She hadn't realized how tender her heart had become. One look at his face had demolished the carefully laid stone wall around her emotions.

She kept her back turned to him, crossing her arms. "Why did you leave? What could have been more important than staying here with me while my father was nearly dying?"

"Margaret." His gentle voice clipped another stitch on her emotions. She heard his footfalls approaching from behind. She wiped at her cheeks again, even more angry that she was crying in front of him.

He stepped around her, coming into view. His brown eyes were round with concern. "Please allow me to explain."

She sniffed, raising her chin expectantly. It took all her energy not to simply throw her arms around him and hold him. She had missed him so much, it hurt. She didn't want him to be any of the things Mrs. Halesworth said he was. She didn't want him to be the sort of man who ran away from his duties. She wanted him to be the man she had fallen in love with—the one who had, against all odds, gained her trust and compassion.

He took a deep breath. “The morning we returned to Langdale Abbey and I carried you to your room to sleep, I came back to your father's bedchamber. He was awake. He showed me an urgent letter from your mother in London. The specialist who was meant to be treating George's leg had refused them service because of your father's reputation. It was decided that I was the only one who could properly convince the man to change his mind and provide him with enough money to make him reconsider.” He gave a soft smile, cautiously brushing the tear from her cheek. “He accepted my offer and is doing all he can to treat George's leg.”

Margaret's heart pounded as she listened to his explanation. Her shoulders fell with relief, but anger still surged beneath it. “But why didn't you tell anyone where you had gone?”

“Your father asked me to promise him that I would keep it a secret from you. He didn't want you to have yet another reason to worry for your family. He wanted me to resolve the issue without concerning you.” He sighed. “At the moment, it made sense. But I see I have concerned you for other reasons. I'm sorry, Margaret.” His voice broke on the last word. His apologetic eyes roamed her face.

Margaret was still struggling to comprehend his words. Papa had known all along and hadn't told her? Had he not seen how troubled she had been? She had been trying to hide it, so he might not have noticed. He had been trying to protect her, but he had only made matters worse. "You already broke your promise about your death," Margaret muttered with a scowl. "Could you not have broken this one too?"

Peter gave a rueful shake of his head. "I already broke one promise to your father. I couldn't break another one."

She frowned. "What was your first promise?"

"That I would stay away from you." A slow smile curved his lips.

She had been doing all she could not to relive their kiss in her mind, but the sight of his grinning lips brought it all back. "You are failing quite miserably at that one." She had many questions about what had caused him to make such a promise to her father, but it could wait. He hadn't meant to hurt her by going to London. He had done what he thought was best to help George. Her anger vanished instantly.

Peter laughed, brushing his fingertips across her cheek. His other hand grasped hers. "I am sorry. I truly am. But I confess I am rather flattered that you missed me so much."

She glared at him. "I did not miss you."

He took a step closer, raising his eyebrows. His smile was too contagious.

"I was excited about the new books Rachel told me were waiting for me here," Margaret said. "I was rather disappointed to find you instead."

He tipped his head back before meeting her eyes again. "Shall your insults be my retribution? Is my apology not

enough to appease you? I suspect you will soon be drawing a picture of me to tear to pieces and throw into the fire.”

A laugh bubbled out of her chest. “I will save that punishment only for the times you don’t apologize.”

Peter bit his lower lip, shaking his head. “That is fair, I suppose.”

Margaret’s laughter subsided. “Thank you.” Her voice was quiet and weak. Her tears had dried, but raw emotion still clawed at her throat. Peter was the man she had hoped he was. The one she loved. He hadn’t betrayed her or deserted her. All he had done was prove that he was devoted to her and her family and their well-being. “Thank you for helping George. Now that I know your purpose for leaving I cannot be angry with you.”

He brushed a strand of hair away from her forehead, a wry smile on his lips. “That is a shame. You’re rather charming when you’re angry.”

She shook her head, laughing. The smile felt foreign on her mouth—it had been too long. “Is that why you always choose to provoke me?”

“I shall never reveal such a condemning secret.” He raised her fingers to his lips, kissing the tip of each one. His eyes met hers, crinkled at the edges with a smile. “While we are on the subject of secrets, you still owe me one for the secret passages.” He lowered her hand, taking her face between both of his.

She could hardly think with the way he was touching her. The warmth of his palms against her cheeks was reassuring and comforting. To have her face held in such a way was vulnerable, yet she had never felt more safe. “I love you.” The

words were hoarse. She swallowed, her breaths shallow. In case he hadn't heard her the first time, she said it again, but with more confidence. "I love you. That is my secret, and don't you dare tell anyone."

He laughed at the same moment she did. His awe-filled eyes searched her face. He pressed a kiss to the top of her hair, then each of her eyelids. The soft, slow touches melted her skin. "Ironically, I have the same secret." He pulled back to look in her eyes. "I am yours entirely, for the rest of my life. I am yours to have, to hold, to taunt, to tease...how does the marriage ceremony read again?"

Margaret laughed, but it was a choked sound in her throat.

"Every word I read in the drawing room the night of the ball was true. I meant all of it. I was not acting. I wanted to tell you sooner, but I knew it would scare you." He leaned his forehead against hers. "I love you, Margaret, more than I can properly say."

She beamed up at him, letting the words soak into her heart. It drank them in one hungry gulp.

With the same sort of hunger, she grasped his lapels and stole his lips with hers. He responded instantly, pressing toward her until she had to take a step backward. In three clumsy steps, her back was against a bookcase and Peter's fingers were buried in her hair. The waves of longing returned to her chest, but with them came waves of hope, belonging, and safety. She could hardly believe that she had ever doubted him. Nothing could convince her that he didn't love her, not with the way he was holding her now—as if he never intended to let go. Each touch of his lips was different than the last. He seemed intent to surprise her. The variety was enticing, and she could hardly choose a favorite.

He pressed three soft kisses to her mouth in quick succession before a smile curled his lips. She would never grow tired of feeling his smile rather than merely seeing it. His playful kisses continued, firm and intense at first, then gentle enough to utterly destroy her. If he was inviting her to join a new library competition over who was the better kisser, she would gladly participate, though she feared she would lose miserably.

But losing, in this instance, she would not object to.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 32

EPILOGUE



“I hope you are not leading me into one of the secret passages,” Margaret said.

Peter felt the tickle of her eyelashes against his palms. He kept her eyes covered as he led her into the library. Disturbed as she was about the prospect of seeing more spiders, Margaret had taken six months to finally agree to exploring the two other secret passages he had revealed to her in Langdale Abbey. And they had indeed seen more spiders.

“Are you?” she asked with dismay when he didn’t respond.

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

He stopped her, lowering his hands from her eyes. He jumped in front of her as quickly as he could to see her reaction.

Her eyes lit up, and she pressed her fingers to her lips with a muffled gasp. “It’s beautiful.”

“It spent eight months on a ship to reach us, but I have it on good authority that it is the most comfortable armchair you will ever encounter.” A grin spread on his cheeks as she walked forward to stroke the leather cushion. “I thought it best to remove the greatest subject of contention from our marriage for good,” he said. “Now there are two perfectly comfortable chairs, and that rigid wooden one is gone forever.”

Her eyes shone with mirth as she walked back to him. An inquisitive expression quickly replaced it. “But how shall we

determine who this new chair belongs to? Are you simply going to give it to me?"

"Of course not." He locked eyes with her for several seconds.

In one motion, he lunged toward it. She made a sound—half shriek, half laugh—grabbing his elbow and attempting to drag him backward with all her weight. He didn't budge. Instead, he made it smoothly into the seat of the new chair.

Margaret stood back with an enraged gasp. He chuckled, resting both his arms on the sides. "It *is* quite comfortable."

She marched forward and climbed onto his lap, draping her legs off the edge. The anger that had blazed in her blue eyes just moments before was gone. "You should be glad that I didn't tear your jacket."

"You did seem to be less desperate to win this time. I'm surprised you didn't claw at me like a vicious animal."

A chorus of laughter escaped her. Her voice took on a flirtatious edge, one he had been happy to discover several months before. "Fortunately I prefer sharing."

He grinned and took her by the hips, tugging her forward. "Fortunately so do I."

She laughed and threaded her arms around his shoulders, raking her fingertips through the hair at the nape of his neck. Her golden hair was arranged in a pile of curls atop her head, but a few strands had escaped, spilling over her collarbone. He traced his lips over the velvet of her skin, making his way up to her mouth. He took his time with kissing her lips, and when he was finished, he took her chin between his fingers and rubbed his nose briskly against hers with a smile. She laughed

in the breathless way that told him even after nearly a year, he was still doing something right.

Her eyes drifted out the window behind them. “Look at George. He is almost faster than James now.”

Peter turned his head, observing the three boys running in circles across the lawn. George’s limp was almost completely gone. He chased his brothers with apparent ease, and though the thick glass of the window masked the sound of their laughter, it showed on their faces.

Margaret’s parents sat on two nearby chairs, hands interlocked as they enjoyed the warm spring weather. It had been a long winter of keeping indoors, but with Margaret to keep him company, Peter hadn’t cared at all.

He pulled his gaze away from the window, observing the sparks of joy in her expression as she watched her brothers run. What had he ever done to earn this life? To earn a wife like Margaret? Nothing. She was a gift, one that he accepted gratefully, despite his certainty that he did not deserve it. He rose with gratitude each morning that life had given him a second chance—and that he had Margaret to spend it with.

OceanofPDF.com

STAY CONNECTED

Thank you for reading! I hope Peter and Margaret made you smile. Follow me on social media for giveaways and behind the scenes peeks at the series and my future works!

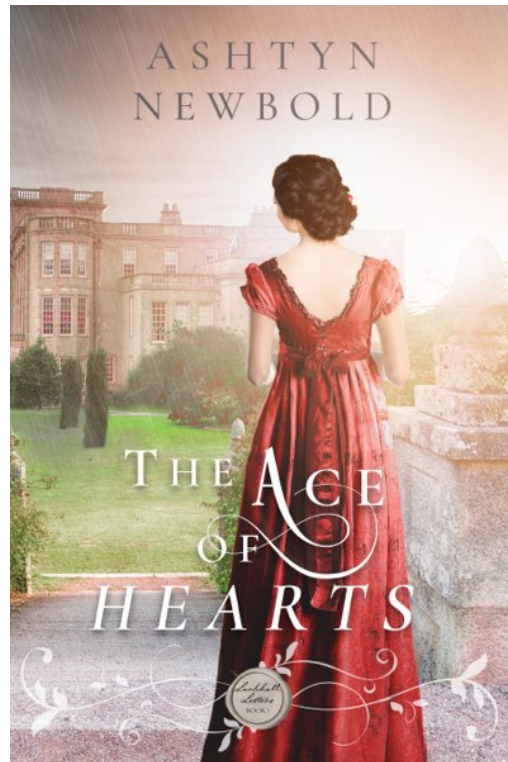
[Instagram](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Newsletter](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

LARKHALL LETTERS SERIES



Start the series from the beginning with *The Ace of Hearts!*

OceanofPDF.com

ALSO BY ASHTYN NEWBOLD

Larkhall Letters Series

The Ace of Hearts

The Captain's Confidant

With Love, Louisa

The Matchmaker's Request

Brides of Brighton Series

A Convenient Engagement

Marrying Miss Milton

Romancing Lord Ramsbury

Miss Weston's Wager

An Unexpected Bride

Noble Charades Series

The Earl Next Door

Standalone novels

In Pursuit of the Painter

The Last Eligible Bachelor

An Unwelcome Suitor

Her Silent Knight

[Mischief and Manors](#)

[Lies and Letters](#)

[Road to Rosewood](#)

Novellas & Anthologies

The Earl's Mistletoe Match

The Midnight Heiress

At First Sight

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ashtyn Newbold grew up with a love of stories. When she discovered Jane Austen books as a teen, she learned she was a sucker for romantic ones. Her first novel was published shortly after high school and she never looked back. When not indulging in sweet romantic comedies and regency period novels (and cookies), she writes romantic stories of her own. Ashtyn also dearly loves to laugh, bake, sing, and do anything that involves creativity and imagination.

Connect with Ashtyn Newbold on these platforms!

INSTAGRAM: @ashtyn_newbold_author

FACEBOOK: Author Ashtyn Newbold

TIKTOK: @ashtynnewboldauthor

ashtynnewbold.com

OceanofPDF.com