



THE SWAN AND THE

Rake

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THE SWAN AND THE RAKE

THE SHIFTER SEASON #4

LAURA GREENWOOD

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BLURB

Letitia has been warned her whole life about the risks of falling for a rake, but that doesn't stop her from getting swept into the arms of a handsome swan shifter.

Philip has no intention of settling down and getting married, but when the two of them are caught in a compromising position, all of that changes.

Now married, can the two swan shifters learn to love one another?

-

The Swan and the Rake is a paranormal Regency romance with swab shifters. It is part of the Shifter Season series. It has a forced proximity m/f romance and is Letitia and Philip's complete story.

ONE



LETITIA

I ENTER the ballroom behind my mother, my head down and demure, though my intentions for the evening are anything but. There is plenty of enjoyment to be had once Mother is distracted by her own friends, which is sure to happen at any moment.

A small part of me has always wondered whether she counted down the days until I was presented and she could entertain herself this way.

Or if it is the only reason she had a daughter in the first place.

I banish the thoughts, aware that they lead nowhere good and it is better for me if I focus on the fun I can have myself now that we're at the ball.

"Mother?" I ask.

She turns to face me. "Yes, Letitia?"

"Would you excuse me so that I may go and see my friends?" I ask, having spotted Georgiana and Mary across the room. If I am hasty, Mary won't disappear before I get there like she is wont to do.

Mother sighs, but I can tell from her expression that she's secretly pleased. "Very well." She waves her hand, shooing me off.

I hurry across the ballroom, nodding to guests I recognise and have been introduced to, but not stopping to speak with

any of them. Small talk can be saved for later in the evening.

Georgiana snaps open her fan, using it in an attempt to divert the stuffiness of the room away from her, while Mary seems to be searching for any reason to escape.

“I see some things do not change,” I say as I reach my friends.

“Have you seen Miss Rodyle anywhere?” Mary asks, still searching for the lady in question.

“Not yet. Are you expecting her?” I ask.

“I am. She promised to make an introduction to Lady Batloam. She’s hosting a gathering next week and I require an invitation.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I don’t believe I’ve heard of Lady Batloam.”

“That does not surprise me, Letty. She doesn’t run in your circles.”

Georgiana smothers her laughter, hiding her face with her fan, though I already know she’s amused at my expense.

“I am able to have an intellectual conversation,” I remind my friends.

“You can,” Georgiana agrees. “But we’re all aware that your attention is often caught by less serious matters.”

“Perhaps you forget that finding a husband is a serious matter for those of us who are not already betrothed,” I point out.

“Mary isn’t engaged,” Georgiana counters.

“She has her books,” I murmur.

“And you have your flirting,” she teases. “Speaking of, isn’t that Lord Cygnus making his way over here?” She flips her fan shut and gestures with it to where the handsome swan shifter is making his way over.

“I believe it is,” I say, straightening my back and resisting the urge to smooth out my dress.

“If you dance with him again, people might start to talk, Letty,” she warns me.

“Let them. There are dozens of couples dancing with one another multiple times. No one will pay us any mind.”

“Yet you don’t have any intention of marrying him.”

“Of course not,” I assure my friend. “It is a flirtation, nothing more. Merely for fun and diversion.”

For a moment, I believe she is going to argue with me and say that I should take these things more seriously, but instead she merely nods.

“Miss Falnor, Miss Rocke,” Lord Cygnus says, dipping his head to each of my friends in turn.

“Lord Cygnus,” Georgiana responds, though Mary is already too distracted to go through the courtesy greeting.

“Miss Swanley,” he says, turning to me and looking at me with his piercing gaze. “Would you do me the honour of accompanying me for the next dance?” He holds his hand out, knowing that propriety says I shouldn’t refuse, and that I have no desire to anyway.

“The honour would be mine, My Lord,” I respond in a sultry tone, slipping my hand into his.

Georgiana makes a small squeak and flicks open her fan in order to hide her response.

Lord Cygnus leads me away from my friends and towards the dance floor where other couples are taking their places. “I dare say that one of these days, Miss Rocke will outright say that she disapproves of me,” he says, amusement dancing in his dark eyes.

“I don’t believe she ever would, My Lord.”

“Because she doesn’t disapprove?”

I let out a small laugh. “I believe it is more likely that she is aware of the disparity between your stations and doesn’t wish to bring any displeasure on her family or her betrothed.”

“Ah, yes, that does tend to stay some people’s tongues.”

“It does.”

“Though what of you, Miss Swanley? Will your tongue be stayed should I displease you?”

“I am yet to find out, My Lord.”

The music begins before either of us can say anything else, which is always a shame. The excellent thing about practising my flirtations on Lord Cygnus is that I know he has no intention of asking me, or anyone else, to marry him. It rather takes the pressure off.

“How are you finding the evening, My Lord?” I ask while we wait for our turn to dance.

“I must admit to it being a bit of a bore, though I believe that is set to change now I am being afforded a moment of your company.”

“Flattery, Lord Cygnus? Do you not worry that I will start to misunderstand your intentions?”

“I believe you are a lady of your word. You say you do not wish to be married yet.”

“And it is true.”

“Though not a sentiment shared by many of your friends,” he observes.

“I believe they see these balls and gatherings as a necessity,” I respond. “Whereas I see them for what they are, a welcome diversion with which to pass the time.”

“Here I was thinking that Miss Falnor was the scholar and not you.”

Surprise rises within me at his astute appraisal of my friend. “I was not aware you spent so much time thinking of Miss Falnor.” I try to ignore the hint of jealousy rising within me. I know Mary isn’t interested in exchanging more than a passing word to Lord Cygnus.

“I do not, but you have mentioned her on more than one occasion, Miss Swanley.”

“Ah.” That makes sense.

“I believe it is our turn,” he says, nodding to the couple coming to stand in place.

I smile and dip into a curtsy, making sure to lean forward just enough that Lord Cygnus is able to appreciate my décolletage.

A small smirk plays at his lips as he bows in response, not taking his eyes off me.

My heart flutters at the attention, though I am not in any way naive enough to think that he does not offer the same amount to every other lady he dances with. I am merely the current object of his attention.

And that is enough for me. I have no intention of this being any more than a flirtation. There will be lots of fun to be had, I’m sure, but it will never go further than that.

While an enjoyable companion with whom to pass a dance set, I do not imagine Lord Cygnus would make a particularly good husband, and that is certainly the minimum I require from the gentleman who will eventually fulfil that role.

TWO



PHILIP

I LEAN BACK in my chair, swirling the brandy around my glass and letting the noise of the club wash over me. The only reason I have chosen to come here this evening is to avoid Mother trying to talk to me about which of the newly presented young ladies would be a suitable wife. I'm aware that she means well, and that her main concern is the grandchildren she believes she should have by this point in her life, but that is not reason enough for me to marry.

Someone clears their throat, and I look up, half expecting one of my usual drinking companions to be waiting in front of me. Instead, Father looks down at me with a combination of annoyance and relief.

"Father, I wasn't expecting you at the club," I say.

"Neither was I, but when you weren't at home, I saw no other option." He gestures for a drink and sits opposite me, leaving no doubt in my mind that he's here to speak with me and not because he wishes to spend time here.

"Is it not something that can wait?" As far as I'm aware, everything is up to date with regard to our properties and assets, and there is nothing more that needs to be done. But perhaps something unexpected has come up and required our attention.

"Your mother is concerned." His drink appears, but he ignores it.

“I don’t know what about. I paid her account at the modiste last week, and settled her latest gambling debt with Lady Felsby.”

“You are doing well in that regard,” Father agrees. “However, she has informed me that you are not giving the proper attention to your search for a wife.”

There is a foolish part of me that wants to inform him that is because I do not wish to have one. At least, not yet. “I do not wish to rush anything,” I say instead.

“Hmm.” His expression leaves no doubt that he doesn’t believe me. Which would be fair, given the status of my thoughts. “Even so, she would like you to consider several of her suggestions, all of which she believes would make excellent future Countesses.”

“Is she so eager to rid herself of that title?” Or perhaps it is him she is eager to be rid of. While there never appears to be any animosity between them, it is clear to everyone that they were not a love match.

Perhaps I should listen to Mother’s suggestions after all. If she is choosing based on the criteria she judges herself on, then there is a chance that the ladies she thinks of as future countesses will mostly leave me to my own devices.

“I understand that finding the right wife is an important duty...”

“I am not sure how true that is,” Father says sternly. “I have heard rather alarming reports of your reputation from members of the ton. If you are not more careful, it may become difficult for us to procure you a wife of proper standing.”

“You’re an earl,” I point out. “I doubt many of those partaking in the Season will be in the slightest bit concerned by my reputation.”

A brief hint of anger crosses his face, revealing some of his true feelings about the matter. “Whether you accept it or not, your reputation is important, both to the Earldom, and to your future marriage. You need to take both of those

commitments a lot more seriously than you do now.” He rises to his feet, not even taking a sip of his drink. “There will be consequences if you do not make reasonable changes to your behaviour and start taking the search for a wife more seriously.”

“Yes, Father.” The agreement stings, but I’m not foolish enough to think that any other response will be accepted.

“Good. Lady Ferrington is holding a ball on Thursday. You should start there.”

“Are there any criteria you have for my future wife?” There’s a hint of bitterness in my voice, but there is nothing I can do to avoid it.

“She should be from a good family with an impeccable reputation. Yours is bad enough for the both of you. Other than that, I have no criteria beyond that she exists,” he responds, choosing not to engage with my annoyance.

“And her shifter type?”

“I have no stipulations,” he says. “Though I do believe there are several eligible swan maidens this Season. There is something to be said for keeping to the same shifter type. But in truth, it is of no matter.”

“Right.” At least that’s something. I do not particularly wish to find myself a wife, but being able to choose from a wider range of ladies is something.

“I will see you on the morrow, we need to discuss a business matter,” Father says.

Shock rushes through me. “Should we not discuss the matters now? You are here already.”

“No.”

I nod, trying not to let his dismissal frustrate me. He is the current Earl of Swancove and I am merely his heir. The decisions about running the earldom come from him alone and I need to accept that, even if I dislike it.

He merely nods to me as a farewell and makes his way out of the room.

I sigh and lean back in my seat. I need to find a way to avoid being rushed into marriage. I've always known that I'd be expected to marry. It's the duty of every firstborn son to find a wife and have children to carry on the family name.

Despite knowing it's something I have to do, I know I'm not ready to be a good husband to anyone. A future countess deserves better than someone with a reputation like mine. But if Father has decided it is time for me to be married, then I am not entirely certain what there is I can do about it except hope I can stall long enough to become the man I should be.

THREE



LETITIA

DESPITE KNOWING I SHOULDN'T, my gaze flits across the ballroom, searching for Lord Cygnus. I have to admit to enjoying his company, even though I know I should not.

My heart skips a beat as I notice him heading in my direction. I flick open my fan and cast my gaze down, trying to appear demure and not as if I've been waiting for him. I know this is foolish, and that it can not go anywhere, and yet something keeps drawing me back to him.

Perhaps because he seems to enjoy a flirtatious exchange as much as I do. If not more.

"Miss Swanley," he says once he reaches me.

"My Lord." I dip into a low curtsy, looking up over my fan once I'm at the lowest point.

Desire deepens in his eyes as he watches, and he clears his throat. "Would you care to dance?"

"I'm rather fatigued from my previous turns on the dance floor," I say in a low voice. "Perhaps you would do me the honour of escorting me for a brief rest instead?" I raise an eyebrow, knowing he'll catch on to my meaning.

Something unknown to me crosses his face, making me fear that he will reject my proposal.

"It would be my honour," he responds, holding out his arm.

I slip mine through his, enjoying the strong feel of his forearm through the fabric of his jacket.

With an eye on the surrounding members of the ton to make sure that no one is watching us too closely, we slip into one of the retiring rooms.

“We should not be here,” Lord Cygnus says.

“And yet we are.”

“I am serious, Miss Swanley, we should stop meeting one another at balls like this.”

I frown. “Have you changed your views on trying to find a wife?” To my knowledge, he does not wish to marry any more than I do.

“I have not, but unfortunately, my family has other ideas.”

“I did not believe men were subject to the same whims as unmarried ladies.”

He chuckles deeply, the sound warm and inviting. “That does not seem to be the case.”

“Then we should make the most of the time before you are wed,” I say, stepping closer to him. “This can not continue once you are.”

“It should not continue now,” he responds, but I can hear how little he means the words in his voice.

And see it in the way his gaze bores into me.

“Neither of us wish for you to ruin me, I am aware of that.”

“Being caught would trap us both in something we do not wish to be forced into,” he says, closing the distance between us so I can feel the warmth radiating from his body.

“I believe that is part of the fun, is it not, My Lord?”

A sharp intake of breath reveals how he is just as affected by our proximity as I am.

“You will be the ruin of us both, Miss Swanley,” he murmurs.

“Only if we’re caught,” I remind him. “And we haven’t been so far.” I purposefully ignore the fact that isn’t true. But nothing came of us being discovered at the Ferrington ball, which means that we have nothing to concern ourselves with.

“I’m going to kiss you,” he says.

“I hoped you would,” I respond.

He reaches out and touches my cheek with his fingers.

My eyes flutter closed as I accept what is to come with barely contained excitement.

His lips brush against mine, tenderly at first, but then more demanding, as if I am the one person in the world he desires above all others. I know that may be a simple fantasy, but it is the one I will take with me into this moment.

In the distance, a door slams closed. It isn’t until there’s a small shriek that I realise someone has joined us in the room and I spring back from Lord Cygnus, trying to put some distance between us despite knowing that it is too late.

“Miss Rocke,” Lord Cygnus says, filling me with both relief and dread.

I peer past him to catch sight of my friend, giving her a weak smile in the process.

“Lord Cygnus.” She dips into a curtsy, then turns her attention to me. “Would you mind giving me a moment with Miss Swanley?” Her voice shakes, but there’s determination in her gaze.

He nods and turns to me. “Miss Swanley.” He lifts my hand to his lips and presses a brief kiss against the back of my glove.

“Lord Cygnus,” I whisper, my voice hoarse with tension and emotion.

He bows to us both and exits the room, leaving me to explain myself to my friend and not having the words to do it.

“What were you thinking, Letty?” Georgiana demands, a stern expression on her face.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “We weren’t doing anything that would ruin me,” I assure her. “Lord Cygnus would never do that.”

“Just being alone together could ruin you,” she points out.

“Because you were never alone with your Captain.” The moment the words are out of my mouth, I regret them. I know how much pain his leaving caused her.

She lets out a low hiss. “Don’t bring him into this.”

“I’m sorry, that was cruel,” I say softly.

She nods. “It’s all right. I know he isn’t going to come back at this point. And even if he does, what can I say to him? He left and didn’t write a single letter.”

“In fairness, you are betrothed to someone else now.”

“Which is how I know you shouldn’t allow yourself to be alone with Lord Cygnus,” she says firmly, taking a seat on the retiring chaise. “It is not just what society will think, but also what your heart will desire. If I had kept the proper distance from Henry...” Her voice cracks as she says his name.

I sit next to her and take her hand in mine. “He is a fool for not writing to you.”

“And I am a fool for believing he would.” She dips her spare hand into her pocket and pulls out a small pebble, rolling it between her fingers.

“What is that?” I ask.

She glances down and lets out a sharp laugh. “His favourite rock. He gave it to me before he left.”

“I’m missing something, aren’t I?”

“It’s an otter thing,” she admits. “I have one too.” She sets the pebble down and gets another one out of her pocket to show me.

“And Henry gave you his?” I know I should use his surname to refer to him if I’m obeying the rules of social conduct, but she’s never told me it.

“Yes. He asked me to look after it for him until he came home,” she says. “It was a promise.”

“Why do you carry it with you still?” I ask.

Georgiana lets out a loud sigh. “I don’t know. It used to be because I’d expect him to walk into one of the balls I was attending at any moment. Now, I am not so certain. Every time I get dressed, I promise myself that it is the day I won’t carry it with me, and yet I always falter.”

“You must love him very much.”

“Loved.” The pain in her voice reveals her falsehood, but I don’t press her on it.

“I’m sorry.”

“You do not have to be,” she responds. “You just need to be careful with Lord Cygnus. I know you find him attractive, but that isn’t reason enough to risk your future by running off at balls to be alone with him.”

I let out a loud sigh. “I know that.”

“Then why do you do it?”

“I don’t want to be married before I have a chance to enjoy myself.”

To my surprise, Georgiana lets out an amused snort of laughter. “And you think you can avoid marriage by being caught alone with an eligible man? It would be wiser to have an affair with someone already married if you don’t wish to be trapped in matrimony yourself?”

“It isn’t an affair.”

“I walked in on you kissing.”

“And that is as far as it has ever gone,” I assure her, hoping she believes me considering that it is the truth.

She raises an eyebrow. “You’ve been alone together before?”

“Ah, you weren’t aware of that?”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“No one knows. Well, almost no one.”

“You’ve been caught before?” She doesn’t try to keep the surprise out of her voice.

“Lord and Lady Ferrington may have come across us at their last ball.”

“Could you be more of a fool, Letty? How have you not already been marched down the aisle?”

“Lady Ferrington asked if it was what I wished, and when I said no, she promised not to tell anyone what she’d seen.”

“And yet you decided that it was worth the risk to be alone with Lord Cygnus again?”

“I truly am a fool, Georgiana.”

“You are.” She pats my hand. “But you are clearly a fool who has feelings for Lord Cygnus.”

“I do not.”

“Perhaps you don’t believe so, but it is obvious to anyone on the outside. Just promise me that you will be more careful in the future?”

“I promise.” And I mean it, though whether I’ll be able to keep that promise seems to be a question we both have.

“Good. Now we should return to the ball before anyone questions why we are missing,” Georgiana says, getting to her feet and slipping her pebbles back into her pocket.

“Can we not just say we retired for a rest?”

“We can, but I suspect it will be better if we do not draw attention to how much or how little you use retiring rooms.”

I let out a small laugh and get to my feet, slipping my arm through hers so we may return to the ballroom.

“You truly are the best of friends, Georgiana.”

“I know,” she assures me with a wide smile. “And one day, you shall repay the favour, I am certain of it.”

“I will,” I say with earnestness. She has proved herself to be my staunchest supporter on many occasions, I do not plan

on letting her down when she needs me by her side.

I have a suspicion that when she needs me, it will be because of her Captain.

FOUR



LETITIA

I FORCE a smile at my dance partner, trying to act as if I'm enjoying myself and not hating the fact that I have to do this. In the week since Georgiana caught me with Lord Cygnus, I've been doing my best to avoid him, despite how little I want to do so. But I know it is the right decision to make if I don't wish for us to end up in a situation that we can't extricate ourselves from.

I spin around and find myself face to face with the next partner in the dance.

My breathing hitches as he steps close and I find myself almost overwhelmed by the familiar scent of Lord Cygnus.

"Miss Swanley," he says in a low voice that almost sounds pained.

Perhaps he is struggling with staying away from me as much as I am him.

"My Lord," I respond, moving forward to touch my hand to his as the dance requires.

The contact makes me weak, and for me to long to be whisked off to a retiring room just to spend more time with him.

"I believe fate is cruel this evening," he says.

"Is that so?"

“I have been trying to stay away from you, and yet I find myself opposite you on the dance floor when we each have different dance partners,” he murmurs too low for anyone but me to hear.

“Perhaps fate has a sense of humour.”

He chuckles. “If that is true, then it is a rather twisted one. Staying away from you is hard enough as it is.”

“Likewise, My Lord.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“You enjoy the thought of me struggling to keep my distance?” I know I shouldn’t flirt with him, and yet there’s nothing I can do to stop the words from escaping. Something about Lord Cygnus draws me to him. Perhaps it is because we are both swan shifters and can sense that within one another, but I don’t believe that to be true. I’ve met many other swans during my Season, and none of them have made me feel the way that Lord Cygnus has.

“I enjoy knowing you feel the same as I do,” he responds.

I turn in the dance, stopping me from replying immediately. Which can only be a good thing, for I wish to invite him to share a moment alone with me, despite knowing neither of us should partake in such foolishness.

We step close together again, for what will be the last time during this dance.

“Meet me in the gardens after the dance is complete,” he whispers as I pass him to return to my original dance partner.

I don’t have time to respond to him, but we both know I’ll listen to his request despite knowing I shouldn’t.

I finish the dance with nothing on my mind except how I might extricate myself from my current dance partner in order to meet with Lord Cygnus. It is foolish beyond measure, but simply the thought of spending a moment alone together sends a small thrill to me.

I dip into a low curtsy and thank my partner for the dance before he can offer to escort me to my seat or to get

refreshments like he is supposed to do. It isn't the best manners for me to brush him off like this, but I have no intention of dancing with him again if I can help it.

I check that no one is paying me any attention and swiftly make my way through the crowd and towards the double doors which lead to the gardens. Lord Cygnus disappears through them a few people ahead of me, and I hurry to follow.

The moment I step outside, he reaches out and takes hold of my arm, pulling me to the side and behind a well-placed tree.

"It is foolish of us to meet like this," I remind him needlessly. We're both aware of what's at stake.

"I had to see you," he whispers.

"Why?" The question is out before I can think about whether or not I actually want to hear the answer. It feels foolhardy to tempt fate with whatever he chooses the answer to be.

"I can not explain."

"Which only makes the decision to meet all the more foolish," I say. "But I understand." I step closer and reach up to touch his cheek with my gloved hand.

"I thought you might."

"Is that why you wished to meet me?"

"I have thought of nothing but you since we last parted," he admits.

My heart skips a beat. "I don't know what that means."

"Neither do I," he responds. "I've never felt this way about anyone before, but there is something about you, Miss Swanley."

"Perhaps you should call me Letitia. Or Letty if you prefer, that's what my friends call me."

"Are we friends, Letitia?" he asks, stepping closer.

Anticipation fills me as the realisation of what's about to happen fills me. And I'm going to welcome it with open arms, even if it isn't the wisest decision for me to succumb to him.

"Letitia!"

Panic fills me at the sound of Mother's voice breaking through the haze of emotions.

I step back from Lord Cygnus, but I know it's too late. Unlike Georgiana, Mother isn't going to turn a blind eye to the situation I've been found in.

"What is the meaning of this?" Mother demands as several other ladies whisper behind her.

I turn to face her, trying to hide the blush rising to my cheeks. My words fail me as I find there's no way to explain the situation she's found me in.

"I..."

"Lord Cygnus, I expected better of you," Mother scolds him despite the fact he's much more senior than Father is in terms of social status.

I glance at the man in question, noticing that his expression is very similar to mine. He doesn't know what to do with this situation either.

"I hope you plan on doing the right thing and marrying my daughter, Lord Cygnus," she continues.

"Mother, I do not think..."

"No, you clearly do not," she says sternly.

I look at Lord Cygnus, hoping he knows that I didn't do this on purpose. Though he should not even consider it a possibility considering he is the one who invited me to meet him out here.

But rational thought does not seem to be a consideration in this situation.

"I will do the right thing," he says, seeming confused and resigned at the same time.

“Then I believe you have something to ask my daughter,” she says, gesturing to me.

Lord Cygnus turns to me with a serious expression on his face. “Miss Swanley,” he starts, and I realise how much I hate hearing him addressing me now. “Would you do me the honour of being my wife?”

I want to tell him that I don’t need him to ask me this, but I know it isn’t true. There is only one answer I can give. “The honour would be mine, My Lord.”

“Then it is done,” Mother says. “We will finalise the details on the morrow. Letitia, come with me.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I don’t dare imagine what she’s going to say to me.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper to Lord Cygnus, leaving before he can respond.

FIVE



LETITIA

“STAND UP STRAIGHTER,” Mother instructs. “You chose a good gown, it will show you off to your best advantage. Though I suppose there isn’t much use for that any longer.”

“Nothing happened, Mother.”

She tuts. “It is of no matter what happened or didn’t, only what is perceived to have happened. And while I might have preferred it if you had secured a proposal in a more traditional way, I can not fault your results. You’re going to be a countess one day.”

Is that all that matters to her? I hold my tongue and don’t ask the question out loud. There is very little point when it will change nothing. She is correct, I am going to be a countess one day, and that would be seen by most of society as an excellent match.

“And he’s a swan shifter too,” Mother continues. “That is also excellent.”

“Does that really matter?”

“No, I suppose it does not, but it does make the match better in many people’s eyes,” she responds.

The door in front of us opens and we’re ushered through into a comfortable-looking drawing room.

My gaze instantly lands on Lord Cygnus who appears to be almost as uncomfortable as I am, though his face softens when his gaze catches on me and he offers me a brief smile.

“Lord Cygnus,” Mother says. “Lady Swancove.”

I turn my attention to Lady Swancove and dip into a curtsy. The countess studies me intently and gets to her feet.

“So this is the girl my son is going to marry?” she says, looking me up and down. “What is your name?”

“Letitia Swanley, My Lady,” I respond.

“Good family. Excellent posture. Not a poor choice, even if the circumstances leave something to be desired.” She shoots her son a disapproving look as she says it.

Guilt flashes across his face.

The doors open before we can continue the conversation, and the Earl walks in along with my father.

The three of us dip into curtsies straight away.

“Lady Swanley, Miss Swanley, it is a pleasure to meet you,” the Earl of Swancove says.

“My Lord,” I say.

“We have arranged for the marriage licence to be procured, and you can be married shortly after,” the Earl says.

“Is that soon enough?” Lady Swancove asks. “The ton are likely to talk about the circumstances surrounding the engagement.”

“I believe there were enough witnesses that it shouldn’t be a problem so long as our children are wed,” Mother says.

“That may be true, but a few well-placed questions have revealed that this is not the first time your daughter has been alone with my son,” Lady Swancove responds sternly.

I wince and avoid eye contact with everyone in the room lest I have to explain the situation.

“Nothing untoward happened between us, Mother,” Lord Cygnus says from his position by the fireplace.

“It does not matter what happened between you,” she retorts. “All that matters is what the ton believes happened, and no one is going to believe that the two of them were

merely talking while closeted in retiring rooms at no less than five different events.”

Tears prick the corners of my eyes. I thought we’d been careful, but it seems that isn’t the case. And I know it won’t have been Georgiana who has talked, which means other people saw us.

“I hope you won’t be this foolish when you are married to my son,” the Countess says.

“Mother, I don’t think that is necessary,” Lord Cygnus says, stepping forward to defend me.

“You are not the one who ruined your reputation,” she points out.

“This is as much my fault as that of Miss Swanley,” he responds. “Perhaps more so, I was the one who suggested we met alone in the gardens.”

Horror crosses the Countess’ face. “Miss Swanley still should not have met you out there.”

“Perhaps she should not,” he says. “But that does not mean she should bear the brunt of your displeasure. You wished for me to find a wife, did you not?”

She purses her lips, a very displeased expression on her face. “This was not the way I had in mind.”

“But you can not deny that Miss Swanley is an excellent choice for a future Countess, despite the circumstances,” he says firmly.

The Earl chuckles in bemusement. “He is correct, my dear.”

“Hmm.”

Dread fills me as I realise that I’m going to have to share a household with the Countess, and if she continues to dislike me then my life may not be as straightforward as I would like.

And that is even without the fact that I will be married when that is the last thing I desired.

“I suppose no one is taking my thoughts into consideration now,” the Countess says.

I bite my tongue in an attempt to avoid pointing out that no one is paying attention to mine either. Though I suppose this situation is of my own making, which is probably why they are not considering my thoughts.

“We should take our leave,” Mother says. “We have many appointments to keep in order to ensure that everything is ready for the wedding.”

The Earl smiles with surprisingly genuine ease. “Why don’t you join us for dinner later in the week?”

The Countess lets out a disgruntled squeak, but doesn’t contradict her husband.

“We would be honoured, My Lord,” Mother says.

Father nods his agreement, and turns to take his leave, having already said his goodbyes.

I’m about to follow my parents out of the room when Lord Cygnus steps forward, catching my attention. “Miss Swanley, do you have a moment?”

I turn to him, ready to respond, only for his mother to get to her feet and pull her son away.

“I do not believe that will be necessary,” she says.

Lord Cygnus appears as if he is going to argue with her, but is pulled away before he can.

I let out a disappointed sigh, trying not to think too much about what this is going to mean for our future union. I may not feel as if I am ready for marriage, but that doesn’t change the fact that we are going to be wed. I need to start preparing for sharing a life with Lord Cygnus.

And it seems as if I’m going to go from contending with my own mother’s sense of what’s important, to what Lord Cygnus’ thinks.

I hurry after my parents, already dreading the rush of the next few weeks while everything is prepared for the wedding.

I wonder if I'm going to be allowed a moment alone with Lord Cygnus before we have to walk down the aisle. I certainly hope so. It felt as if something had changed between us while we were talking in the gardens, but we didn't have enough time to actually talk to one another about it.

Perhaps there is hope for a happy marriage despite the unconventional start we've had.

Or there is a chance that I am fooling myself into believing that will be possible and that the two of us won't end up perfectly miserable when we are required to spend more time in one another's company. I dread to think what the truth of the matter is going to be.

SIX



PHILIP

THE TENSE ATMOSPHERE hanging over the table was almost too much to take, and if it wasn't for the horrified expression on Letitia's face, I would have excused myself already. At least the meal is done and we can move on to the after dinner entertainments.

Mother's eyes narrow at my future wife, scrutinising everything about the way she eats.

"Miss Swanley," I say to get her attention.

She looks up, somewhat startled, but relaxing once she realises it's me speaking with her. "Yes, My Lord?"

"Would you wish to take a turn about the gardens?" I ask.

"I do not believe that would be wise," Mother snaps.

"I don't see any harm in it," Father responds. "They are already to marry, and there is enough light that you will be able to watch them from the parlour should you wish to."

She leans back in her chair and purses her lips, clearly displeased with Father stepping in.

"I would be delighted to join you, if that is what you wish, My Lord," Letitia responds demurely.

A frown pulls at my face. I don't think I've ever seen her like this. She's always so full of life and wit, and now she's acting as if she has none of that.

“It would be an honour for you to join me,” I respond, rising to my feet.

She nods and pulls on her gloves. I watch intently as the fabric slips over her skin and find my thoughts straying to what it would be like to pull them off her.

I suppose it won't be long until we're lifted of the restrictions imposed on us by our desire not to ruin her.

I clear my throat and rid myself of the inappropriate thoughts.

Letitia meets me by the door and smiles up at me apprehensively. I offer her my arm and she slips hers through it, resting her hand on my sleeve.

I lead her out of the dining room, ignoring the unimpressed stare of my mother as I do.

The evening sunshine lights up the gardens in the most delightful way. “I was thinking we could take a turn around the lake,” I say.

“That would be agreeable,” she responds. “Do you often swim on the lake?”

I nod. “Often in the early mornings. You're welcome to join me once we've been married.”

“Thank you.”

I look at her, trying to work out what's causing the stiffness in her demeanour.

“I must apologise for Mother's behaviour,” I say.

She pauses, confirming my suspicions that it is something that is affecting her.

“It is no matter.”

“That isn't true,” I counter. “I can tell that she's making things difficult.”

“She simply dislikes the way in which I procured our engagement.”

“But you didn’t do anything,” I point out. “I was the one who asked you to meet me.”

“And we’re the only two people who know that,” she counters. “There are some people who will believe us, but the majority will see me as the lady who entrapped the son of an earl into marriage.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be.”

“And yet I am.” I lead her through a trellis and out towards the lake. Several ducks glide along the surface of the water, not responding to our presence, which isn’t unusual. My theory is that they can sense we’re like them and don’t see us as something that may disturb their peace.

She lets out a loud sigh. “How are we going to make this work? Neither of us wanted marriage, and yet that is where we’re going to find ourselves.”

“I won’t insult you by suggesting there is some way out of it that we haven’t discovered.”

She lets out a small laugh. “There is no way out. Not unless we wish to drag both of our families through a scandal.”

“That is not my desire,” I agree. “And it would certainly not make Mother like you more.”

“If we weren’t getting married, that wouldn’t be a problem,” she points out.

“Mmm.” At the rate this is going, Mother is going to be an issue. She can’t continue to treat Letitia this way once the two of us are married, but I’m not sure how to make certain of that. Perhaps I could ask Father for his advice, he has several decades of experience dealing with her.

“We shall make this work,” I say to her. “You said yourself that we’re friends.”

She pauses, an indecipherable expression on her face. “Friends,” she repeats. “Yes, I suppose I did say that. Or I implied it at least.”

“That gives us an advantage when it comes to marriage, don’t you think?”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost me.”

Ah, I’m not articulating myself well. “It is just that if we are friends, then we won’t mind one another’s company too much. Perhaps it will even be a marriage that the two of us will come to like.”

“I suppose that is true.”

“Why do you sound so disappointed?” I don’t know why I think it’s a good idea to ask that question, particularly when the answer could cause me pain, but I know I need to hear her answer.

She sighs. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me. If we are friends, then we should be able to share such confidences. You must pretend that I am Miss Rocke for a moment.”

Letitia raises her eyebrow. “You wish for me to pretend you’re an otter shifter from the coast with a penchant for pastries and witty comments?”

I chuckle. “I can claim to be one of those things.”

“It must be pastries, for it can’t be wit,” she teases.

“You wound me, Miss Swanley.”

She startles at my use of her name, and I find myself questioning whether I should have used Letitia instead. But she only asked me to call her that right before we were caught, and I don’t want to be too presumptuous in being familiar with her.

“Very well, I will indulge you, My Lord,” she responds. “While I did not wish to marry yet, it’s not that I never thought I would. I suppose there is a part of me that always yearned for a love match and I hoped I would find that once I was done enjoying myself at the various balls and engagements.”

“Ah, I see.”

“But that is not to be.”

“You could take a lover, once we are wed.”

She raises an eyebrow. “I could not. That would bring even more shame and scandal to us both. And it wouldn’t be the same. That is not the kind of love I wished for. But I promise, it is of no matter.”

“You can still have a love match,” I point out. “Lady Ferrington married her second husband for love.”

“Ah, yes. But we are friends, My Lord, I do not wish you dead in order to find my own happiness.”

I frown, trying not to think about how much I dislike the idea of her being unhappy in our marriage. Especially when the more I think on it, the more I realise that I am not as opposed to the idea as I expected to be.

Taking a wife has been the last thing on my mind for a long while, and yet when I think of living a life with Letitia by my side, the idea of being married doesn’t feel so bad.

I have to conclude that she is the part of the situation that is different.

I open my mouth to try and explain my thoughts, but she gestures towards the house before I can.

“I believe your mother wishes for us to return,” she says.

I manage a thin smile. “It seems as if she does.” Somehow, I doubt this is going to be the last time Mother gets in between the two of us. Hopefully, I’ll get to speak to Letitia alone again before the wedding.

If not, then at least we will have time after. No one will be able to refuse us alone time once we are wed.

SEVEN



LETITIA

I SMOOTH down the fabric of my best dress and attempt to ignore the nerves building up inside me. At least weddings are considered to be private affairs and I am not required to do this in front of dozens of witnesses.

It would help if I had not been kept from Lord Cygnus at every opportunity. If I had managed to talk with him, then I may not feel the same dread I currently am.

Mother fusses with the lace trim of my gown, seeming a little overwhelmed by the emotion of the day.

“You look beautiful, dear,” she says. “And to think that by the end of the day, you will be a future countess.”

I force a weak smile onto my face. That seems to have been the main thing she has paid attention to the entire time we have been preparing for the wedding, and I must admit that I will be glad that I do not have to endure it again. Though I suppose she likely won’t be forgetting my new station soon.

A maid slips into the room and dips into a curtsy. “They are ready for you,” she says.

Mother nods and rises to her feet. “You make a beautiful bride,” she assures me, leaning in to kiss my cheek.

“Thank you.” Despite everything, there is a part of me that is sad to think I will no longer live with her once the ceremony has been completed.

She guides me from the room to where Father is waiting to walk me to the altar. He puffs up his chest proudly and holds out his arm. He hasn't said as much, but I can tell Mother isn't the only one who is pleased with the match I've made, even if they lament the way in which it came to be.

Mother hurries into the church to take her seat.

"Are you ready?" Father asks.

"I suppose I have to be," I murmur.

"We can call off the wedding if you do not wish to go through with it."

"You know we can not," I counter. He is not foolish enough to think that our family could survive slighting the earldom of Swancove, nor could my reputation survive having been caught alone with Lord Cygnus almost embracing.

If I do not go through with the wedding, then there is no future for me in society. And, as little as I wish to be someone's wife, I know that the alternative is much worse.

With nothing else for it, I start to walk beside my father into the church and towards the front where Lord Cygnus and his family are waiting.

I keep my gaze on the floor, not wishing to see a look of distaste or discomfort on my future husband's face as he sees me. Lord Cygnus has told me many times about how little he wishes to marry, and I can't imagine he is feeling particularly excited about today.

It isn't until we arrive at the front of the church that I look up and meet his gaze, surprised to find admiration in his eyes, along with what seems to be a hint of affection.

"You look beautiful, Miss Swanley," he says, lifting my gloved hand to his lips and kissing the back of it.

My breathing hitches and some of my nerves disappear from within me. I'm not sure if it is just because of his presence, or because he doesn't seem to be too angry about the situation we've found ourselves in.

Father retreats, leaving us alone in front of the priest.

I smile up at Lord Cygnus, trying to let him know that I'm not angry about marrying him either. This may not be what either of us want, but in this moment, I'm starting to believe that we can make it work. I know that he is kind, and honourable. And I am well aware of how much I crave the feeling of his lips against mine.

After the ceremony, I suppose that won't be something forbidden to us any longer.

The priest pays us very little attention as he starts the ceremony, going through the long and tedious process of running through everything. Somehow, I manage to repeat the parts that I am needed to, and to hear what Lord Cygnus says in response.

It isn't until he is sliding the jewel-studded gold ring on my left hand that it fully sinks in that we are almost married. His touch is tender, and full of a surprise affection that I had not believed would be there.

"You may now go from this place and henceforth be known as man and wife," the priest says loudly.

I blink a few times, barely believing that it's over and we're now married.

Lord Cygnus smiles at me.

"What happens now?" I whisper.

"We return home," he says quietly.

"Home," I repeat, realising how strange it is to think that a different place had the name this morning.

He nods. "We'll have our wedding breakfast and then you can settle in, I believe your belongings have been sent ahead already."

"I think so."

"And if you'd like to go on a tour of the country, then we can organise that. I haven't had a chance with the wedding being so quick."

"A tour?" I echo.

He nods. "I believe that it is customary, though if you would prefer to wait until the Season ends, we can do that."

"I would appreciate waiting," I say. "My friends..."

"Miss Rocke and Miss Falnor, if I'm correct?" he checks.

"Yes," I confirm warily, hoping he is not about to tell me that I should not see them again. If he dares to do that, then he will regret it.

"You should arrange for them to come for tea once you are settled into the townhouse," he says.

"You would be all right with that?"

Lord Cygnus frowns. "Of course. Should I not be?"

"I thought you might try to make me live a different kind of life."

"I would never wish that for you," he says. "I know your friends are important to you, and I would not wish for you to lose them simply because you are married."

"Thank you, My Lord, I appreciate it."

"You should call me..."

"It is time to leave," the Countess cuts in before he can ask me to use his given name.

I resist the urge to scowl at her, not wishing to start our new familial relationship with poor behaviour on my part, especially when she already seems to dislike me.

"Just one moment," he says.

"The carriage is already waiting. Or are you expecting your bride to walk back to the house?" she responds.

Displeasure flits across Lord Cygnus' face, but he gives a resigned nod and offers me his arm.

I slip my own through his, trying to ignore the nerves within me. They're different from the ones I felt before I entered the church, but somehow, I'm certain that these nerves are going to be more difficult to get rid of.

Especially if the Countess has anything to do with it.

EIGHT



PHILIP

THE CARRIAGE RIDE back to our townhouse is tenser than I would wish it to be. If it were just myself and Miss Swanley alone, then I would offer her some words of encouragement in the hope that she might feel more at ease. Alas, Mother's steely gaze puts paid to that. I know she is displeased about how the wedding came to be, but she has had time to get to know my new wife, and hasn't made any effort to.

I focus on the beautiful woman to my side, admiring the restraint Miss Swanley is showing in the face of someone who clearly dislikes her. Except that I should not be thinking of her as Miss Swanley any longer. Nor does Lady Cygnus seem to fit her properly yet. Then again, I suppose she has asked me to call her Letitia in the past, her given name should be appropriate given the situation.

The carriage pulls to a stop and I hurry to open the door so I can help Letitia out. We may both have expressed our wishes to not marry, but now that we have, I wish to prove to her that I will be a worthy husband, no matter what that takes.

I hold out my hand for her to take, the grateful smile I receive in response making my heart lift.

"Thank you, My Lord."

"I think Philip will suffice while we are amongst family," I say softly.

"Thank you, Philip," she corrects herself.

A smile graces my lips at the sound of my name on hers. I should have asked her to use it before, but I feel that would have involved accepting that I felt more than fleeting attraction to her in the first place.

Mother dismounts the carriage, throwing a disgruntled look at Letitia for no reason.

I offer my arm to my new wife, somewhat relieved when she takes it.

“Would you do me the honour of joining me for a private dinner this evening?” I ask her as we make our way through the grand doors that lead into our London home.

“I...”

“You are escorting me to the Duke of Wentworth’s soirée this evening,” Mother cuts in. “You promised a month ago.”

“Is that tonight? I had not realised. I am sure His Grace will accept my apologies given the situation.”

“He might, but I will not,” Mother responds.

Letitia reaches out and places a hand on my arm. “We can have dinner another night.”

“There is no invitation of the Duke’s soirée for you,” Mother cuts in.

Letitia attempts to smile, but doesn’t quite manage. “I did not expect one, Lady Swancove. I am aware that invitations go out weeks in advance and he wasn’t to know that we would be married before that point.”

“I can send the Duke a note, I am sure there is room for one more.”

“You will do no such thing,” Mother says. “It is the height of rudeness. Your new wife should use the time to get used to her new home.”

I look between the two ladies, trying to ascertain who it would be best to please in this situation. Though Letitia has not stated that she wants anything in particular, I do not wish

to start our marriage off by abandoning her on our wedding night.

“That is an excellent idea, Lady Swancove, I appreciate your thoughtfulness,” she says with a hint of determination in her voice that makes me admire her. I don’t need to ask her what she’s attempting to do in order to know she’s trying to diffuse the situation by making it seem as if she’s agreeing.

Mother purses her lips, clearly able to ascertain what Letitia is trying to do, but being unable to do anything about it.

Which is clearly my new wife’s plan.

“Shall we make our way inside?” I ask. “We should not be late for our wedding breakfast.”

“That sounds most pleasant, My Lord,” Letitia says.

Mother seems less happy, though I am uncertain as to why. She wanted me to marry, and even if the situation isn’t the one she had in mind, the results are more than satisfactory. Perhaps she wrongfully believes that Letitia was trying to trap me into marriage and that is why she dislikes her.

It is a shame that my word seems to mean nothing to her in terms of what the actual truth behind the situation is. I have to hope that over time, she will come to realise that Letitia is going to be an asset to the earldom, and isn’t here because she simply wants to take Mother’s place as the Countess.

The second carriage pulls up behind the first, and Letitia’s parents disembark, which I take as my signal to lead my wife into the house and through to the dining room which is already laid out for the feast to come. Not having had any input into the dishes being served, I’m surprised to see a baked marzipan swan surrounded by flowers sitting in the middle of the table.

At first glance, it appears as if it is a thoughtful touch given the fact we are all swan shifters, but knowing Mother as well as I do, I suspect it has been intended as a way to display our wealth as opposed to being any kind of gesture towards my wife and her family.

I lead Letitia to the head of the table and help her to her seat, receiving a grateful smile for my trouble. Things may not

be off to the best start, but I am looking forward to being able to spend some proper time alone with her where we can talk about what we want from our marriage without any input from either of our parents.

Judging by the way things have progressed so far, it would appear that they are going to be our greatest obstacle when it comes to our marriage and our happiness.

NINE



LETITIA

I ENTER the parlour and try to calm the slight nauseous feeling building within me. If anything, I'm more nervous about tea with Lady Swancove than I was about the wedding to her son. And that says something considering how I felt before that.

“Lady Swancove,” I say as I dip into a curtsy.

“Lady Cygnus,” she responds curtly, a slight hint of distaste in her voice. “Take a seat.” She gestures to the chaise opposite her.

I know there is no reason for me to feel as if I have to do precisely what his mother says, not when there is nothing anyone can do about my marriage to Lord Cygnus. Even so, I have no wish for my marriage to be unbearable, nor for my life at Swancove House to be fraught with tension. There's nothing any of them can do to annul my marriage, but it's the same the other way too. I can't change it, even if there are parts of life that I'm not particularly pleased with either.

Lady Swancove pours a cup of tea for the two of us without asking how I take it.

I simply smile and thank her, knowing there's not going to be a better way to deal with it.

“I wished to speak to you about the expectations that are going to be part of your life now that you are married to my son,” Lady Swancove says. “One day, you will take my place

as Countess, and it is important that you start to act the part immediately.”

“Of course, Lady Swancove, I hope to be an asset to the earldom.”

“Hmm, we shall see about that.” The way she looks at me makes it clear that she doesn’t believe I’m going to be.

“I want to be the best wife to your son that I can be,” I assure her.

“In which case, you can start by acting properly at social events and not sneaking around into retiring rooms when you think no one is looking.” The disapproving expression on her face says everything about her opinion of me and who she thinks is to blame for the situation her son has ended up in.

I suppose to some extent, it is at least partly my fault.

“I can assure you, that is not something that will happen again.” Mostly because Lord Cygnus is the only person I have ever done anything so reckless with. No one else held the same appeal to me, though I’m not sure precisely what that means.

“Hmm.” Lady Swancove doesn’t seem particularly impressed by my promises. “Regardless of what you say, I will need some assurances.”

I frown. “I’m not sure what more I can give you than my word.”

“Then we shall settle for a threat,” she responds. “If you do not behave yourself in a way that is acceptable for the future Countess of Swancove, or if you in any way bring shame to my son or this family, you will find yourself sent to the country and unable to attend any of the social events I’ve heard you love.”

My whole body freezes as I consider what that might mean. I won’t be able to see Georgiana and Mary nearly as much as I do now, nor will I be able to visit with my own parents. While I can’t say I’m particularly close to either of them, I don’t want to lose the ability to see them.

Lady Swancove takes a sip of her tea. “Do we have an understanding?” she asks.

I nod.

“You must say the words, Lady Cygnus.”

I grit my teeth and internally promise myself that I’ll do everything I can in order to make my life here pleasant. “We have an understanding.”

“Excellent. I have set an appointment up with my dressmaker to ensure that your fashions are modest and acceptable. And I’ve already informed the cook of the correct foods to feed you with.”

I blink a few times, trying to come to terms with the fact that she’s going to attempt to control my entire life. And the only way out of this that I could see was to convince Lord Cygnus that I was going to be a good wife to him. While his mother could threaten me with the country all she wished, only he would be able to send me there. Or perhaps the Earl himself, but somehow, I doubted the older man was going to get himself involved.

“I have already accepted several social invitations on your behalf,” Lady Swancove continues, clearly unaware of the thoughts swirling through my head. “You have received a coveted invitation to one of Lady Ferrington’s soirées for married ladies.” There’s a hint of jealousy in her voice.

“Are they good events?” I ask.

“I would not know, she has not deigned to invite me,” Lady Swancove retorts. “Though we have all received invitations to her next ball, so I have sent your acceptances for both.”

“Will I not be managing my own social calendar?” I ask, surprised that she isn’t allowing that, even Mother at her strictest gave me some choice in the matter.

“Not until I can be certain of your behaviour,” Lady Swancove responds tartly. “Until then, I will be overseeing your schedule.”

“I see.”

“Yes, you should.”

“Is that all?” I ask. “May I be excused?”

She sighs dramatically. “Very well, you may go.”

“Thank you for the tea,” I say with a forced smile, rising to my feet and hurrying from the room before she can call me back.

I’m so distracted, that I almost run straight into Lord Cygnus.

“Are you all right?” he asks.

“Yes,” I lie, not feeling like I can go into too many details about what his mother said to me. Perhaps in the future when there’s more trust between the two of us, but not right now.

He nods. “Are you free this evening?”

“I believe so, though your mother said she was organising my social calendar, so perhaps it is best to check with her.” Ah, so much for that resolution.

He frowns. “Why would Mother be managing your social calendar? I would have thought you were capable of doing that yourself.”

“That is just what she told me,” I murmur, hoping this wasn’t going to get me into more trouble.

“I will speak with her,” he assures me. “And if you are free tonight, do you wish to attend the opera with me?”

“The opera?” I echo.

He nods. “I have seats, and I thought you might enjoy it.”

An evening with Lord Cygnus did sound to be an enjoyable use of time. “I would like that.”

“Then I shall arrange it,” he promises. “And if you have another commitment, then we shall go to the opera on another night.”

I smile up at him, hoping that we can go this evening. I could use some time away from this house and out in society,

even if it is going to be strange to be out in society as Lady Cygnus instead of Miss Swanley. At least there won't be any scandals if we are caught alone this time.

TEN



LETITIA

I CLUTCH Philip's arm firmly, trying not to feel overwhelmed by the way the people surrounding us are watching me. I don't think I recall a single moment at any of the balls I attended before our marriage where people watched me so intently, but here at the Opera House, things are different. I am uncertain whether it is because of the location, the slight scandal that preceded our marriage, or because they wish to attempt to work out whether or not we are happy with our new position as man and wife.

"Lord and Lady Cygnus," a jovial voice says, drawing our attention to a smiling Baron Ferrington with his wife on his arm.

The Baroness smiles at me. It seems to be genuine, but I can sense a hint of her trying to make sure I'm truly happy with the situation. Which I suppose makes sense. When the two of them caught us together at their ball, she asked me whether I wanted this marriage and I said no.

Then again, perhaps she is simply unsurprised that we have found ourselves in the position we are currently in.

"It is a pleasure to see you, Lord Ferrington. My Lady," Philip replies, dipping his head to each of them in turn. "I believe you have met my wife already." He turns to me with a warm smile on his face. Perhaps he is not as opposed to our marriage as I feared he would be.

“I have, though I am looking forward to getting to know her better,” Lady Ferrington says. “Which I hope can be arranged soon.”

“I hope for the same, Lady Ferrington.”

The older woman smiles.

“We must take our seats,” Lord Ferrington says. They say their goodbyes and head in the opposite direction to us.

“Where are our seats?” I ask Philip.

“We have a family box,” he replies.

“Oh.”

“You seem surprised?”

“I suppose I’ve always known that your family was an important one, but sometimes it’s surprising how important.”

“They are your family too now you are Lady Cygnus,” he points out, drawing me through a curtain and into a private box lined with all kinds of luxurious fabrics.

“I suppose that is true.”

He leads me to a pair of comfortable chairs and waits for me to take a seat before taking his own.

“I must apologise for not being able to ensure the transition was smooth for you.”

It takes a moment for his words to sink in, especially as I wasn’t expecting them. “It is not your fault, My Lord.”

“Philip,” he reminds me gently. “We are alone for the moment.”

“Until the Countess arrives,” I mutter under my breath.

“Mother won’t be joining us this evening,” he assures me. “She dislikes the opera and tries to avoid attending whenever possible.”

“Oh.”

“It is one of the reasons I suggested we attend this evening.”

“I was simply under the belief that you had an appreciation for the art form that I had not yet discovered,” I say.

Philip lets out an amused chuckle. “I don’t dislike the opera.”

“Your praise knows no bounds. I am surprised you do not show more excitement for the artform, I believe there are many beautiful ladies who will shortly grace the stage.”

“And yet I am most taken by the beautiful lady sitting by my side.”

“Now you are offering empty flattery,” I retort.

“There is nothing empty about it, Lady Cygnus.”

“If I am to call you Philip, then you should be calling me Letitia.”

“I thought I was to call you Letty, as we are friends.”

“And now you are my husband,” I remind him.

“Is that less than friends? Weren’t you the one to say that we should enter this marriage on friendly terms?” There seems to be something akin to hope in his tone, but I don’t want to fool myself into believing something that isn’t true just because I wish for it to be.

I let out a loud sigh. “I do not know. This is new to me and not something I am prepared for. I believed you felt the same way as I about marriage, but you seem to have taken to it much more easily.”

Surprise flits over his face. “I suppose I have taken to it more than I expected,” he agrees. “Though I feel as if we are more strangers to one another now we live in the same house, than before.”

“Perhaps we should change that,” I suggest, my voice coming out barely above a whisper.

Philip reaches out and takes my hand in his. “I would like that.”

Something akin to relief settles within me, though I am unsure about what is causing it. Perhaps it is simply the

knowledge that I am not married to someone who does not wish to know me, though that should not be a surprise. We spent time together before we were caught alone, and he always seemed to be genuinely interested in what I had to say.

“Do you like the opera?” Philip asks. “I should have thought to ask you before we arrived.”

“I enjoy it,” I assure him. “Though I prefer classical recitals. There is something serene about the way the music is played that I enjoy.”

He nods. “I have never thought about it like that. I shall enquire about tickets on the morrow.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I wish to.” He smiles at me. “I wish our marriage to be a happy one, do you not want the same?”

“Of course.”

“Then allow me to do this for you. And anything else you desire. You should inform me of anything you wish for. And the name of your modiste, I should like to have an account set up for you.”

“The Countess already set up an appointment with her dressmaker.” Unfortunately. While I expressed that I wished to use the modiste who has been making my dresses for years, she did not seem particularly pleased by the notion.

“Would you not prefer to use your own?”

“I would,” I agree. “But the Countess was firm in her decision.”

“Then we will have to be firm in yours,” Philip responds. “You must go to your modiste this week and set up an account. I will speak with the steward in order to give you access to the money you will need for your other expenses and needs. I know you are going to tell me it is unnecessary to do so, but that is simply not the case. It will become tedious to you beyond measure if you have to search out someone else in the household any time you wish to spend a small sum.”

“Thank you.” I glance down at my hands, the glittering wedding ring catching the light and reminding me that this is my reality now, and that I am lucky to have someone who seems to wish to be attentive to my needs, even if it is not the epic love I wished to find in years to come.

“You have never told me what you enjoy doing when you are not attending balls and events,” he says.

“I like to draw,” I say. “Though Mother was never particularly impressed when I came to dinner with charcoal staining my fingers. Nor when the servants complained that it stained the insides of my gloves.”

“It seems that having gloves of a darker colour would solve that particular problem.”

“Ah, but it would introduce the problem of being unfashionable,” I counter. “And that would be seen as even less desirable.”

“I can see how that might be an issue.”

“It is. And now even more so. I know you wish for me to be able to stand up for myself against your mother, but I don’t believe the Countess will stand for anything she deems to be unfashionable.”

“I fear you may be right there,” he responds. “But in time, you’ll be the Countess and can make your own rules.”

“The current Earl seems to be in excellent health, and I wouldn’t want to wish any misfortune on him,” I say.

Philip smiles at me. “Which gives us the perfect amount of time to work out exactly what we want to be when we’re in their positions.”

“Do you often find yourself thinking about what kind of Earl you want to be?”

A contemplative expression crosses his face. “I suppose it’s something I’ve given a lot of thought to, yes.”

“You’ve never said as much before.”

“I didn’t think it was in keeping with our promise to not enter a serious courtship,” he says.

“And yet somehow, we ended up in the most serious one of all.”

He chuckles and takes my hand in his, raising it to his lips and kissing the back of it. The warmth of his touch is almost too much to ignore, even through the fabric of my gloves, and there’s a small part of me that wishes I wasn’t wearing one, but while the box gives us privacy as far as our conversation goes, there are several audience members who will still have a good view of the two of us.

Though I suppose to some extent that no longer matters, it isn’t like anyone can make us marry again.

Philip doesn’t let go of my hand even after he lowers it, and I find myself lapsing into silence so I don’t break the spell that’s fallen over us. I can’t explain the way I’m feeling, but it’s almost hopeful, as if this is a turning point towards something I can’t put a name to.

We didn’t exactly plan to end up here, but the least we can do is make our marriage work as friends, and when we’re ready to take our places as the Earl and Countess as Swancove, we’ll be in a position to do our duty for the earldom in the best way we can.

ELEVEN



LETITIA

THE CARRIAGE ROLLS to a stop outside the grand double doors of the Ferrington residence. I search around, half expecting to find Philip beside me as a companion. The carriage feels empty without him, and I have to admit that it's strange for me to be arriving anywhere alone. Now we're married, he is often with me, and when he is not, the Countess is by my side, watching on to determine if any of what I'm doing is acceptable to her, or if I'm risking bringing shame to the earldom. Perhaps one day, she will decide that she can trust me, but that's not going to be any time soon. If anything, she seems to be trusting me even less now I'm married to her son.

But at least she doesn't have an invitation to Lady Ferrington's soiree this evening. I'm uncertain how the deer shifter decides on who is worthy to invite and who is not, but it seems that the Countess has not made the list.

The door opens and I descend, careful not to rip my dress. Philip may have insisted on setting up an account at my modiste, but I didn't want to run up vast debts with her simply because I'm clumsy with my outfits.

The gravel crunches under foot as I approach the doors, taking in the rampant stags on either side. It's a wonder the human world hasn't realised that shifters exist when we can be so blatant at displaying what we are for the world to see. Then again, I suppose it's easy to say that it is simply a stylistic choice when the animal in question is something like a deer. Or a swan.

The doors open, and I step inside.

I hand my cape to a footman and follow his directions inside. The sound of raucous laughter and distant chatter fills the air, adding to my nerves about the evening. I'm unsure what the proper decorum is for an evening amongst the other married ladies of the ton, but I'm about to find out.

I step through an open door and enter a room filled with feathers and elaborate dresses, with each of the ladies doing their best to show off their husband's status, as well as what kind of shifter they are. It's an interesting collection of women who wouldn't necessarily have been companions before their weddings.

I search the faces, half expecting to find my friends amongst them before remembering that neither Georgiana or Mary are married and won't have been able to score an invitation.

"Lady Cygnus, how wonderful of you to join us," Lady Ferrington says with a genuine smile on her face.

"Thank you for the invitation," I say politely, remembering just in time that I don't need to curtsy deeply to her. While her husband is a Baron, Philip's cursory title of Viscount puts me above her in station, not below it.

"Do you know anyone who will be in attendance?" she asks.

"I don't believe so, neither of my close friends are married yet."

"Ah, that would be Miss Rocke and Miss Falnor, if I am not mistaken?"

"How do you know?"

"Before my current marriage, I made it my duty to know who was connected to who within society. It is a habit I suggest you take upon yourself too as it can save many potential disasters from happening."

I nod, taking her advice to heart, especially after I ignored it the last time we spoke alone. "I must thank you for keeping

my dalliance with Lord Cygnus a secret,” I say, not wishing for her to think I hold her accountable for the situation I’ve found myself in.

“You’re welcome, though I don’t believe it seems to have made much of a difference.”

“Let’s just say I’m not good at heeding warnings.”

Lady Ferrington chuckles. “Believe me, Lady Cygnus, I know a thing or two about being unable to resist.”

I frown, unsure exactly what she means. Perhaps it has something to do with her marriage to the new Baron despite being his predecessor’s widow. It certainly caused a few whispers amongst the gossip mongers, but nothing more than that, especially with how distantly the two Barons were related.

“Let me introduce you to some of the younger married ladies,” Lady Ferrington says, drawing me over to a corner of the room where a pair of ladies are sitting and preparing to play cards.

I follow behind her, at a loss for what else I can do when I don’t know anyone already.

“Lady Rennarton, Mrs Peabury, do you have room for one more?” Lady Ferrington asks.

“Of course,” the blonde woman replies.

“Excellent, then this is Lady Cygnus, I’m not sure if you’ve met before,” the deer shifter says.

“Only in passing, I believe. Why don’t you take a seat, Lady Cygnus?” Her smile seems genuine and I try to search my mind for her previous name. Lady Ferrington is right about learning who is connected to who, it would make this interaction a lot easier.

“I’ll leave you ladies to it,” Lady Ferrington says. “Do let me know if you require anything.”

“Thank you for allowing me to join you,” I say as I take my seat.

The blonde lady smiles at me. "I've been in your position," she responds. "I know how daunting all of this can be without a friend by your side." She shoots a warm smile at her companion.

"You've recently married Lord Cygnus, right?" the dark-haired woman asks.

I nod. "I did." Are they going to ask about the way in which it happened? I certainly hope not.

"Don't worry, Lady Cygnus, Victoria knows a thing or two about being caught in a compromising position. How many times were you caught with the Viscount again?"

Ah, so the blonde is Lady Rennarton, the recent wife of the Viscount. Word around the ton is that it was a love match spurned from childhood.

"Only two," she murmurs. "And I believe that's much less time than you spent alone with Mr Peabury before you married."

Mrs Peabury smiles. "See, Lady Cygnus, you are in good company here, we all know what it's like to ignore the rules when we don't believe they suit us."

"Perhaps if we are to be companions in dishonour, you should call us by our given names," Lady Rennarton suggests. "I'm Victoria, and this is Esther."

"Letitia," I respond a little nervously, though their back and forth has put me a little at ease compared to how I felt before. "Thank you for letting me join you."

"It is our pleasure," Esther responds, dealing all of us a hand of cards. "How are you finding married life?"

"It is not what I expected," I admit, taking my turn without really thinking about it. "In truth, I've yet to spend much time with my new husband." Including in the evenings. I had expected the two of us to share a bedchamber at least once, and yet it has not happened. A part of me wonders whether it's the Countess interfering again, or if it's Philip's choice.

“There are a lot of adjustments needed for married life,” Victoria says as she picks up a card. “But the ton has all been abuzz with talk of how Lord Cygnus looks at you, I wouldn’t be surprised to hear of you spending a lot of time together in the future.” Mischief sparkles in her eyes and she reaches up to touch a jewelled necklace, which seems to feature a fox curled up in it.

“I’m not sure what you mean. We’re not a love match,” I respond.

She raises an eyebrow. “That’s not what everyone is saying.”

“I can assure you, it isn’t true.” Disappointment wells up within me as I say the words, though I’m not sure it’s simply because I wished for a love match in the future, it’s more than that. Somewhere hidden in the disappointment is the knowledge that Philip and I aren’t a love match and I wish we were.

I push the thought to the side and focus on the card game and the chatter of the other ladies. It soon becomes clear that they are both deeply in love with their husbands, and know one another very well.

For a moment, all listening to them does is make me sad for my own situation. But perhaps their words also hold the key. If I wish for things to change in my marriage, then I need to be the one to make it happen.

TWELVE



LETITIA

THE LATE AFTERNOON sunshine draws me outside, and I make my way down to the lake. I don't think I intend to shift, but the light breeze coming from the water almost makes me want to. But regardless of my own thoughts on the matter, I've spent a long time ignoring my urge to shift. There have always been too many people around and it would be highly improper for me to undress in front of them in order to change forms.

I walk out onto a small pier and stand at the end of it. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, enjoying the way the lake smells, even if I can't swim on it. There's a peace in being around a place like this that can't be rivalled by anything else, not even the most enjoyable of balls.

"Letitia."

I startle at the sound of my name, but manage to retain my balance. I turn and open my eyes to find Philip at the other end of the pier. Which shouldn't be much of a surprise, he's the only person in the house who would even think of using my given name.

"Is everything all right?" I ask. "I don't believe we have an engagement."

He chuckles. "We don't. I saw you standing here and wished to know if I could join you."

"Oh. Yes, if you'd like." My heart flutters at the mere thought of being able to spend time alone with him. I haven't

seen the Countess anywhere today, which hopefully means she's left the house to deal with her own entertainment.

"Mother is calling on friends," he says, as if sensing my thoughts.

"Am I that obvious?"

He sighs and gestures for me to join him at a small bench by the water's edge.

I leave the pier and follow him to it.

"You are not the obvious one," he promises. "Mother has always been this way. You'll find most of the staff will also keep track of her whereabouts."

I sit on the bench, not leaving much space to my other side so we'll be close together. I haven't had many chances to implement my desire to change the relationship between us, and this seems like a good one.

Philip doesn't seem to notice what I've done and sits down beside me, his knee brushing against mine.

"I'm sorry that I can't seem to please your mother," I say softly. "I know that it must be a point of contention for you." Why did this bother me so much? I never intended to marry him because I never had feelings for him.

Though perhaps I'm going to have to reconsider the truth in that. Georgiana said as much when she caught us together, and perhaps it's time for me to accept the truth in my friend's words.

He reaches out and takes my hand in his. The warmth of his palm seeps through both of our gloves, making me almost dizzy.

"It is not your fault," he assures me. "I doubt anything you could do would make Mother approve."

"Even if I was from a better family, or had better connections?"

"Your family name makes you the perfect choice for the wife of a future Earl," he says.

“Your father must love that.”

“He does.”

“But it makes your mother hate me.” I glance away.

“I’m not sure I’d go as far as saying hate,” he counters. “But it isn’t endearing you to her, no.”

“And what about you?”

“I certainly don’t hate you, Letitia,” he says softly.

“I don’t hate you either,” I respond.

“Even though I trapped you into this?”

“I don’t think that was just you,” I point out. “We were equally responsible, and it was only a matter of time until we got caught.”

“I have to wonder if there wasn’t a part of us that hoped that would be the case,” he responds.

I frown. “What do you mean?”

For a moment, I don’t think he’s going to tell me, but then he takes a deep breath and lets out a sigh. “I mean that we both said that we didn’t want marriage, but we kept meeting in secret and pretending it didn’t mean anything.”

“Are you suggesting that it did?”

“I suppose I am.”

I frown, trying to make sense of what he’s saying, but not quite believing the implications of his words. It almost sounds like he wants this to be more than just a friendly marriage. But I also don’t want to jump to the wrong conclusion.

Philip clears his throat. “The Swan Dance is coming up if you would like to attend.”

“The Swan Dance?” I echo. “I thought that was merely a rumour.”

He chuckles. “It isn’t,” he assures me. “But it is solely for married swans, I don’t believe that you will have had an invitation before.”

“Surely my parents would have.”

“You would think,” he responds. “Though perhaps they have and didn’t tell you?”

“That does sound like Mother,” I admit.

“You haven’t told me much about your family,” he says.

“That is because there isn’t much to say. Mother has always been more focused on what enjoyment she could have out of the events she had to attend for me, and Father mostly keeps to himself. I suspect my sister will be presented next year so Mother can maintain her social life.”

“Could she not attend the events on her own?”

“I believe so, but it doesn’t give her the same level of involvement as chaperoning.”

“Then again, she didn’t do a particularly thorough job of doing that the first time around,” he quips.

I smother a laugh. “In her eyes, she helped me make a good match. You should have heard her when she realised that I was going to be a countess one day.” I can’t help the bitterness that slips into my voice.

“Is it not a position you wanted for yourself?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “I never gave much thought to my future title, there seemed to be more important things in mind.”

“Like how to avoid gaining a title in the first place,” he says.

“Yes, something like that.”

“I do have a question about that.” Philip smooths his thumb over the back of my hand in a motion that I don’t think he’s aware of. I don’t make any move to stop it, enjoying the way it feels and the connection it seems to build between us. I know it’s foolish to think too much into moments like this, but I can’t help but think it’s worth it

“What is it?”

“You make it sound as if there was a lot of pressure from your mother to make the right match and to get married.”

“To an extent, yes.”

“Why did you not want to do it so you could have freedom from her?”

A sad smile crosses over my face. “Because marrying wouldn’t necessarily allow me any freedom at all. I could end up with a husband worse than Mother.”

“Or his mother might be worse,” he mutters.

“The situation does suggest that,” I quip. “Is there something I can do to improve my relationship with the Countess?” After the way she’s treated me, I’m not sure whether I truly want to, but I’m equally aware that we’re going to be a part of one another’s lives for a long time to come. It will be better for both of us if we find a way to get along.

“Sadly, I don’t think so.”

“What about a child?” The question slips out before I think twice about it.

Philip’s eyebrows shoot up, which is unsurprising given that we haven’t spent the night together.

“I don’t believe a child is the answer,” he says softly. “Unless this is you telling me that you would like one.”

“I don’t think so,” I respond. “I mean, I know that we will have to have children one day, you will need heirs.”

“Mmm.”

“But I don’t think I’m ready to be a mother yet. Then again, I suppose I wasn’t ready to be a wife either, and yet here I am.”

“Is it so bad to be married?” he asks.

“Not to you,” I whisper. “Though I do wish we could spend more time together.” I don’t know where the words come from, but I can’t bring myself to regret them. The only way for him to know how much I want this to work is if I tell

him. I have to trust in my instincts that we could actually be good together.

His whole face lights up as if I've admitted something he's pleased about. "Truly?"

"Yes, Philip, truly. We spent a lot of time together at balls, and I enjoyed it. Surely we should be doing the same now? Unless the fact we're allowed to be alone together now has ruined the fun."

He chuckles good-naturedly. "The threat of being caught was never the appeal of spending time with you," he assures me.

"Then I see no reason why we wouldn't want to spend that time with one another now."

"Then you'll go to the Swan Dance with me?" There's a hint of hope in his voice, one that I don't want to squash.

"I'd like that," I respond. "But you'll have to find out what I'm expected to wear."

"White," he responds. "Unless you're a black swan shifter." The way he says it suggests that he genuinely has no idea which kind of swan I am. Which makes sense when he's yet to see me in that form.

"I am not."

"Then white, and feathers."

"Ah, nothing like a firm cliché when it comes to dressing."

He chuckles. "I believe the idea is that the whole event shows off everyone at their best, which means extravagance."

"And impracticality."

"That too."

"Would it be too forward to request some of your feathers for my hair?" I ask, fiddling with the fabric of my skirt with my free hand as I ask. "I believe it is customary for the wives of avian shifters to do as such."

He nods. "I believe you are correct. I will see that some are delivered to your room for you."

"Thank you." I look at him, my gaze straying to his lips. We haven't kissed since our wedding, and it's as if we're in a place where we both know that we have to build up to it again. It's strange how circumstances can change in the blink of an eye.

But from everything that has happened since we got caught alone together, this conversation is the one that gives me the most hope that we can turn our marriage into something real.

THIRTEEN



LETITIA

I ENTER THE DRAWING ROOM, disappointed to find it empty when Philip's message said to meet him here. A part of me had been hoping that after our talk by the lake, he was doing something to prove that the two of us could spend more time together, but perhaps that isn't the case.

"Ah, Letitia."

I spin around, bringing myself face to face with Philip. A smile lights up his face, making my heart skip a beat and my mouth to go dry.

He reaches out to steady me, placing a hand on my upper arm. "Are you all right?"

I nod. "I was startled, that is all."

"I didn't intend that."

"I know." I place a hand on his chest, acutely aware of the pounding of his heartbeat.

"Do you have a moment?" he asks.

"You asked me to meet you," I point out. "You know that I do."

"Ah, yes." He rubs the back of his neck. "I'm more nervous than I thought I would be."

A frown pulls at my features. "Have I done something to make you feel that way?"

“No, not at all, but I have something to show you.” He offers me his arm.

Surprise flits through me, but I go along with it. “What is it?”

“Telling you would ruin the surprise.”

“What if I dislike surprises?” I slide my arm through his and rest my hand against his sleeve, fleetingly enjoying how good the white of my short lace gloves looks against his dark jacket sleeve.

“I hadn’t considered that.” He leads me through the house, staying on the ground floor and heading to one of the rooms I’ve never been in before. “I can tell you, if that would be preferred.”

“No, it is all right. I trust you.”

A smile lights up his face, making me certain that it was the right thing to say.

He leans forward and opens the door, forcing my hand to slip off his arm. I instantly regret the loss of contact between us, but I remind myself that there will be plenty of opportunities in the future for us to touch again.

Philip gestures for me to enter and I step inside the room, my eyes widening as I take in the sideboard covered in boxes, and the ornate drawing table facing the window.

“What is this?” I whisper.

“This is the second drawing room,” he says. “Mother doesn’t like to use it because it’s small, but I think it has an excellent view of the gardens and lake to make up for it.”

I hurry over to the window, unsurprised to discover how right he is. I can see most of the lake, as well as several of the neatly arranged flowerbeds, and the copse of trees that is situated at the border of the estate.

“I had the servants rearrange everything for you so that you could use it for yourself,” he says. “It’s set up at the moment for if you wish to draw, but if you let them know, they

can rearrange it so that you can have private tea with your friends.”

I turn to face him. “You did this for me?”

“It is nothing, Letitia. I wish for you to be happy here.”

“Thank you.” Feeling bold, I go up on my toes and press a kiss against his cheek.

He raises his hand to his cheek and touches the spot I kissed, seeming a little taken aback that I chose to do it, but pleased at the same time.

“I didn’t know which kind of charcoal you preferred, or which paper,” he says. “But if you let me know, I can have more of that one delivered.” He gestures to the sideboard.

I frown and head over. “These are all different charcoals?” I ask, unable to keep the awe out of my voice.

“Yes. I got all of the ones I could find, I hope your favourites are among them.”

“I don’t have a favourite,” I respond. “I never had much pin money, so I couldn’t spend a great deal on charcoals.”

“I did not realise.”

“I look forward to discovering which of them is my favourite,” I say, pulling the lid off one of the boxes before remembering that I’m wearing pristinely white gloves.

I set the lid down and peel off my gloves, only noticing how intently Philip is watching me as I place them down on the sideboard.

He clears his throat and pulls his gaze away.

Interesting. I hadn’t realised his fixation before, but I would remember it for the future.

“Thank you,” I say as I examine each box in turn. It’s evident that almost all of the charcoal he’s purchased for me is of better quality than the ones I’m used to using. “These are amazing.”

“I’m glad you like them.”

“I do.” I turn to him, half wishing I had the courage to kiss him properly. It is strange how something we have done dozens of times now feels like it is something forbidden, especially when it no longer is.

Perhaps it is because we are both aware that a kiss between us now is a very different thing. We’re no longer two single people trying to avoid marriage. We are husband and wife. If we kiss, it will be admitting that not only do we want a marriage, but we want this one, and I don’t know if either of us are truly ready for that.

I meet his gaze, surprised that I don’t discover some of the same turmoil in his eyes as is going through my mind. Instead, Philip’s gaze is determined, as if he’s decided something important. I wish I had the confidence to ask him what it was.

“Philip...” His name comes out as barely more than a whisper.

“Letitia,” he responds, stepping closer and seeming to understand what I’m saying without any of the words leaving my mouth.

“I don’t know how to thank you for any of this,” I murmur.

“You don’t need to thank me,” he assures me.

“That doesn’t mean I don’t want to.” I close the gap between us and place my hand on his chest.

His gaze lowers, and I can tell he’s thinking of kissing me as much as I am of him. Perhaps this can be the moment that changes our reality.

“There you are,” the Countess says.

I close my eyes and let out a small groan. Her timing is truly terrible.

“I wasn’t aware you were waiting for us, Mother,” Philip says, a somewhat stiff tone in his voice, as if he isn’t particularly pleased with the interruption either.

“It is time for Lady Cygnus and I to go to the dressmakers or we won’t have anything to wear for Lady Ferrington’s ball.”

I freeze in place, trying not to think of the horror that would be going to the dressmaker with her. So far, it is something I've managed to avoid, but I've known that it was coming.

"I've already made it clear that my wife is to use the modiste of her choosing," Philip says firmly. "That does not change just because you want it to."

"I hardly find Lady Cygnus' choice of modiste to be acceptable."

"That is not for you to decide," he says. "She is my wife, representing my family, and I believe her taste in dresses is perfectly fine."

"She isn't even wearing gloves right now," the Countess says, horror seeping through every word.

"I was touching charcoal." I gesture to the sideboard.

The Countess lets out a loud sigh. "I see our servants are going to have their work cut out for them thanks to this pastime of yours."

"Mother," Philip chides. "That is unnecessary. Lady Cygnus has done everything possible to prevent that, what more do you expect her to do?"

"She could take up the pianoforte like many other young ladies her age."

"Music is not my talent," I say.

"Nor is behaving in a way that befits a future Countess."

I stiffen, unsure what the best way to respond is, especially when I don't wish to make things even more strained between us.

"I understand that you are disappointed in me for my behaviour, Mother." Authority shines through Philip's tone, and he steps between the two of us, shielding me from the Countess' disapproving gaze. "But that is enough. You are to stop taking out your displeasure on my wife. She is from a good family, and has an excellent character, both of which are qualities you yourself informed me I needed to find in a wife."

The Countess purses her lips, clearly unimpressed, though it's unclear whether it's with Philip being so stern with her, or because she feels like I have influenced him into making this stand against her.

Gently, I reach out and place a hand on Philip's arm. "I can go to the dressmaker," I say. "I've never used the one that the Countess recommends, it may be nice to find new fabrics and cuts." And perhaps it will help his mother to come to terms with the fact I'm going to be in their lives for a long while yet.

Indecision wars over Philip's face, as if he wants to tell me that there's no need to go through with that. But I disagree. I need to find common ground with the Countess, and if she has some say in my dress for Lady Ferrington's next ball, then perhaps that will be the start of it.

"If you are certain," he says.

"I am. I'll just need a few moments to get ready, Lady Swancove."

The Countess nods, seeming appeased by my decision.

I just hope that this means the next time she comes across the two of us alone in a room, she leaves us be.

FOURTEEN



PHILIP

THE BALLROOM IS a blaze of white as various couples take their places for the next dance. Beneath our feet, the floor glitters blue like the surface of a lake.

“This place is beautiful,” Letitia whispers from beside me.

“It is,” I agree. I look at her and the beauty of the room fades away. She looks amazing all dressed in white with two feathers woven into her dark hair. I’ve never thought much about how it would feel to see a woman wearing my feathers, but it wasn’t like this.

“What happens tonight?” she asks, looking around the room for any indication.

“I’m not certain,” I admit. “I’ve never had an invitation to the Swan Dance before.”

“Oh, because you weren’t married?”

I nod. “But I believe we can either take part here in the ballroom, or we can go down to the lake and take part there.”

She glances out of the window and in the direction of the water. I don’t need her to say which she’d prefer.

“Come on.” I take her hand in mine and lead her from the room.

She glances over her shoulder at the assembled swan shifters. “Won’t people talk?”

“Everyone here is married,” I remind her. “And many of them won’t know who we are.” Swan shifts from all echelons of life are here, including those of our station, and the working classes. With the all white dress code, it’s difficult to tell someone’s station without being close enough to see the quality of the fabrics they’re wearing. Not that I’m good enough to be able to recognise them.

I lead Letitia down to one of the swan houses and stop outside. “Why don’t you go in and shift first, and then I’ll follow,” I say.

She frowns, seeming genuinely confused. “This is for shifting in?”

“Do you not have swan houses at home?”

“No.”

“Ah. There’s one at our lake too, but it’s for shifting so you can change in private. You go in, shift, and then there is a doorway out the other side onto the lake.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll go in after you. There’s a lock on the inside so our clothes will still be there once we return.”

“Couples are supposed to go in together, aren’t they?” she asks tentatively.

“Yes.”

“Then we should too.”

“Letitia, we don’t have to.”

“I need help with the fastening of my dress,” she admits.

I frown. “Did the maid not help you with a dress that would be easy to take off?”

“I didn’t realise we would be shifting.”

“Ah, I see.” I pull open the door and gesture for her to step inside. She smiles as she brushes past me.

The inside of the swan house is more luxurious than I expect it to be, with an intricately carved bench and a shelf for

keeping things out of the way. I turn to lock the door behind us, glad that we can have the relative security of knowing that our clothes will still be here when we're done.

Letitia starts removing her gloves, followed by her jewels and the feathers from her hair.

"Would you mind getting the buttons on the back of my dress?" she asks.

I nod and step closer to her, trying to ignore how dry my mouth has gotten. She turns her back to me, looking over her shoulder in a way that's more inviting than I suspect it's supposed to be.

I fumble with the buttons, questioning why they're so small, but mostly to avoid thinking about how close the two of us are right now. I can feel the heat of her skin even through her clothes.

"There you are," I say once I'm done, clearing my throat. "I'll turn around now."

For a moment, I think she's going to protest, but then she nods.

I turn away and start undressing myself, trying my best not to think about the fact she's doing the same.

"I'm going to shift now," she says softly.

"I'll follow you," I respond as I finish undressing and place my clothes on one of the shelves.

A flutter of feathers and a small squawk announce that she's done. I pull forth my own shift, feeling my body change into my other form. I extend my neck in time to see Letitia descend into the water, a picture of grace with her pristine white feathers and long neck.

I waddle down to the water and follow her into it, grateful that I don't have to be as awkward when in the water.

We glide out onto the lake just as a group of musicians start to play. There are a few other couples who seem to have chosen to enjoy the evening in their swan forms, but I believe

most of them have stayed inside, probably wishing to take advantage of the food and drink on offer.

But I only have eyes for one swan.

She dips her head and glides in a circle around me, imitating a dance. I'm not sure if there's something specific we need to be doing, but I lose myself in sharing this with her.

We may not have gotten off to the most conventional of starts, but there is something intimate about the situation we've found ourselves in anyway.

The music floats over the lake, creating a sense of privacy despite the other swans surrounding us, and those still in human form in the ballroom who are able to see us from their positions.

Letitia turns away from me and swims across the lake and towards a spot where reeds poke through the surface of the water.

I'm uncertain about what she's doing, but I follow, sensing that is what she wants me to do.

I cock my head to the side and study her intently.

In an instant, she turns from a swan into the beautiful woman I came with. The water covers her up to her shoulders, and the reeds conceal her from view from anyone but me.

"Can I touch you?" she asks, awe in her voice.

I lower my head, hoping she takes it as the consent that it is.

She reaches out a shaking hand and touches the side of my head, drawing it gently along my beak, and then over the other side. Her touch is warm and gentle, making me more certain than ever that there is something between us that is more than just a contract.

She pulls her hand back. "Thank you. I wish we could talk in our other forms."

Amusement fills me and I pull forth a shift, confident that no one can see us. And even if they do, I suspect most of the

people attending the Swan Dance will choose to turn the other way and not pay any attention.

Her gaze rakes down my bare chest, but she clears her throat and tears it away before I can say anything about it.

I sink down beneath the water. “What did you want to talk about?” I ask her.

She lets out a sigh. “This was easier to think about saying when we were swans.”

“Being swans doesn’t allow for easy conversation though.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“What’s on your mind?” I ask.

“I want this to be a real marriage,” she says quickly. “I want it to be true in more than just name.”

“I want that too,” I assure her quickly.

“I don’t think you understand. I want love, Philip.”

“You have it.”

“You can’t just decide that you love me because I want you to,” she responds.

“I know.” I move closer. “You have my love because I want to give it. I love you, Letitia.”

She sucks in a sharp breath. “You do?”

“Yes. I love you, more than I ever imagined possible. I believe I have loved you for a very long time.”

She frowns. “You have?”

“I didn’t realise it,” I admit. “But no one ever held my attention the way you did. I would flit from one lady to another, flirting and doing much worse before I met you.”

To my surprise, she lets out a small laugh. “I’m aware of your reputation, Philip. Everyone warned me that you were a rake.”

“And they warned me that you were a flirt.”

“I suppose I was,” she responds. “Though I haven’t much since we met. I looked for you in every ballroom I entered.”

“I did the same. Dancing with you was always the highlight of any event.”

The way she smiles at me makes it clear that it’s the same for her.

I move closer beneath the water, only for a rustle amongst the reeds to spook us.

Letitia’s eyes go wide with panic.

“Shift,” I whisper to her.

She nods and disappears into the graceful swan from before.

A duck pushes through the reeds and quacks loudly, causing a small laugh to burst from me, followed by a hiss from Letitia.

“Shall we go home?” I ask her.

She bobs her head in what I assume is agreement and starts swimming back to the swan house, leaving no chance of me misreading the situation.

FIFTEEN



LETITIA

I'M HALF DISAPPOINTED to be arriving home after the Swan Dance. My hair is still a little damp from our time in the lake and I'm unable to rid thoughts of my conversation with Philip.

He told me that he loves me.

Even the memory of the words causes a warmth in my chest that can't be ignored. Especially because it makes me realise how I feel about him. I want to share every part of my life with him, no matter how small.

The carriage rolls to a stop, and Philip jumps out, reaching out a hand for me to take.

I place mine on top of his, sensing that something has changed between us, though I'm not certain precisely what. Maybe it is simply the change in what the two of us know about our relationship.

“Would you care to join me for a nightcap?” Philip says as we make our way back inside our home. It's quiet, suggesting that the Earl and Countess have already retired for the evening.

“Perhaps we should have one sent up for us,” I respond.

He nods, trying to cover his disappointment, which is when I realise that I'm not being as obvious in my invitation as I'm trying to be.

“Let me escort you to your room and then you can call for your maid,” he says.

I nod, not knowing how else to respond when I've already made things more confusing than they need to be.

"I had a lovely evening," I say. "The Swan Dance wasn't what I expected."

"Me neither," he admits. "And I'm glad I got to experience it for the first time with you."

"Do we get to go again next year?"

"I believe so. If you would like to. I don't think everyone goes every year, but there is an invitation for married swan shifters."

"I'd like to go if it means that I can spend more time with you," I admit, hoping he takes my meaning from it.

The two of us start climbing the stairs to the first floor, though it doesn't escape my notice that we're walking slower than we normally would, as if neither of us want the evening to end.

"I'm sure that can be arranged," he promises.

"And another trip to the opera?" I suggest.

"I didn't realise you enjoyed it so much."

"I enjoyed being able to talk to you in relative privacy," I respond.

He chuckles. "Then I shall endeavour to procure us more tickets. Though perhaps a carriage ride in the morning might be more immediate."

"I can't, Miss Rocke and Miss Falnor are visiting and I need to supervise the rearranging of the drawing room."

"Ah, yes, I can see how that might be time-consuming."

"I never thanked you properly for organising for me to have a space of my own."

"It isn't necessary," he reminds me.

"But it is appreciated."

We come to a stop outside my bedroom door, and I turn to him.

“I should bid you good night,” he says, but he doesn’t move away.

“Or you could come in?” I suggest, lingering in the doorway.

Surprise flits across his face, but there’s also a hint of relief in his eyes. “Are you sure?”

“You’re my husband.” I reach out and touch his arm, lingering for a little longer than necessary.

“That doesn’t mean I wish for you to do something you don’t want to,” he says earnestly, only increasing my hope that he’ll say yes and join me inside. After experiencing him undoing the buttons of my dress earlier, it’ll be disappointing to have a maid do it for me.

“And if it’s what I desire?” I look up and meet his gaze, hoping he can tell how sincere I’m being.

“Then that would be different,” he murmurs, his gaze falling to my lips.

“Come inside,” I say, stepping back into my room and leaving it open for him to follow.

For a moment, I worry that he’s not going to accept my offer and I’m going to spend the rest of the evening nursing my wounded pride. But that isn’t the case. Philip steps inside and closes the door, leaving us blissfully alone where no one is going to disturb us, not even a stray duck.

“I feel like we didn’t get to finish our conversation in the lake,” I say slowly.

“You wish for me to tell you that I love you again?” He smiles, but I can see a slight tentativeness in his eyes, as if he’s unsure where our current conversation is heading.

“I do, but that is not what I meant.” I step closer, not wanting there to be much distance between us.

I place a hand on his chest.

“What did you mean?” His voice rumbles through him, and I can feel the tension building in the air.

“That I love you too,” I whisper, realising just how true the words are the moment they leave me. “I don’t just want our marriage to work, I want you.”

He lets out a relieved breath. “You have me,” he promises.

“Then you’ll stay tonight?”

“I’ll stay every night you’ll have me.”

“The former rake in you may regret saying that.”

“Never,” he promises, leaning in.

My breathing hitches and my eyes flutter closed, knowing what’s to come, but realising that it’s going to be different from every other time we’ve kissed. And that this time, we don’t have to worry about any of the consequences of ruining me. There’s no damage the two of us can do.

His lips press against mine. I lean into him, pressing myself against him and enjoying the feel of him by me. He deepens the kiss, allowing every shred of emotion to seep into it. I return it in kind, hoping that it shows him just how serious I am about my words, and about our marriage.

We break apart, both of us caught in a torrent of emotions. He places a hand over mine, and I can feel the warmth of his palm even through my gloves.

“I often find myself thinking that these are in the way,” he murmurs.

“My gloves?”

He nods.

“I don’t think I need them anymore tonight,” I say, pulling my hand away and offering it to him.

Something indescribable fills his eyes as his fingers find the end of my glove. He slowly pulls it down my arm, his fingers trailing over my bare skin and sending tingles along my arm.

I never thought something so simple could feel so intimate.

He finishes pulling it off and drapes it over the sideboard. I offer him my other arm, and he repeats the motion.

“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve thought of doing that,” he murmurs.

“About as many as I’ve had,” I respond.

Philip lets out a low chuckle. “You need to tell me if you’re not comfortable with anything.”

“I will,” I promise. “But does that mean you’re going to stay?”

“For as long as you’ll have me,” he promises, leaning in to capture my lips with his again.

In that moment, I know that everything is going to be all right, and that our marriage is going to be about far more than friendship and the future of the earldom.

SIXTEEN



LETITIA

I STEP into my drawing room, a small smile lingering on my face as I take in the changes the servants have made. It's a cosy space, and I wouldn't want to host tea for more than three in it, but it's perfect for my current needs.

And it's mine. I'm sure the Countess isn't best pleased about me having a space for my own use, but she hasn't done anything to take it away from me. Perhaps it's because I agreed to the dress of her choosing for Lady Ferrington's next ball. She did seem at least a little placated by that, though I'm not under any illusions that it will have made things permanently better between us. Perhaps in time, the Countess will soften to me.

As if summoned by my thoughts, the woman in question appears by my side and studies the room. "The servants have done a good job at making the room suitable for tea," she says, taking me by surprise.

"They have," I agree.

"Which of your friends are visiting our home?"

"Miss Rocke and Miss Falnor, do you know them?" I hope she doesn't find my friendship with the other two ladies an issue. Both come from respectable families, even if their fathers don't have titles.

"I'm not aware of their families," she responds. "But perhaps we can invite them the next time we have a dinner

party.”

“Thank you, Lady Swancove.”

“Hmm.” She nods. “Enjoy your tea.” She leaves the room and I let out a relieved breath. It’s going to take some time for her to properly come around to me, but perhaps there is hope.

I busy myself with making sure everything is ready for my friends.

The door opens and a footman steps inside. “Miss Rocke, and Miss Falnor,” he says.

A genuine smile spreads over my face as my friends enter the room.

“Thank you, Bigley. If you could have the kitchens send up the tea tray, I would appreciate it,” I say.

“Of course, My Lady.” He bows and disappears back into the rest of the house.

“Lady Cygnus,” Georgiana says with a twinkle in her eye.

“Don’t call me that. I’m still just Letty to you.”

“It’s still hard to believe you’re a Lady now,” she responds, taking a seat on one of the chaises.

“Or rather easy to believe,” Mary responds. “She was sneaking off with Lord Cygnus at every ball, it was only a matter of time before they got caught.”

“And I told her as much,” Georgiana responds.

I let out a small groan and try not to think too much about how much she’d done that, and how fair her warnings had been.

“I don’t think it matters too much to her,” Mary says. “Can you see how she’s glowing?”

“Married life does seem to be suiting you,” Georgiana says. “What happened?”

Before I can answer, the door opens and a maid enters with a tray of tea. She sets it down on the low table between us and curtsies before leaving.

“Oh, biscuits,” Mary says, reaching out and taking one from the plate before I even offer it to her.

“Married life is just more enjoyable than I imagined it would be,” I say in response to Georgiana’s question.

“Ah, so it wasn’t the fear of getting caught that attracted you to Lord Cygnus,” she says, her voice betraying the genuine curiosity beneath her tease.

“He told me he loved me,” I admit, relieved that I can get to share such an important thing with my friends.

“It was obvious that was the case,” Mary responds. “You could see it in his eyes whenever he approached you to dance.”

A small blush rushes to my cheeks. I busy myself pouring tea for the two of them.

“I think the only person who wasn’t aware of Lord Cygnus’ feelings was Letty,” Georgiana points out. “And perhaps Lord Cygnus himself.”

“You may be right,” I concede, handing my friend her teacup.

“So, is married life really treating you that well?” she asks.

“The marriage itself treats me well,” I agree. “Philip, sorry Lord Cygnus, arranged for this room to be for my personal use, and he bought me all kinds of charcoals for my drawing.”

“You told him that you like to draw already? It took you months to tell us,” Mary responds.

“I hadn’t thought about it being too soon to tell him,” I say. “He asked what I enjoyed doing, so I told him.”

“Stop, or you’ll even manage to convince me that I want to get married,” Mary says, seeming both amused and horrified at the same time.

“You’ve never seemed opposed to marriage before,” I say.

“I’m not opposed to the idea,” Mary responds. “Though I have to admit that I have certain reservations, particularly

about whether a husband would allow me to continue attending intellectual meetings.”

“It seems to me that a simple solution to that would be to find yourself a husband who is already attending the meetings.” I take a sip of tea.

“That would be a good solution,” Georgiana agrees. “And you’d have plenty in common.”

Mary lets out a small groan. “I know what Georgiana is trying to distract herself from, but you’re supposed to be happily married now, what are you trying to deflect?”

I let out a small laugh. “Perhaps I just want everyone to feel the way I do.”

“Ah, you have become a fool for love,” Mary responds.

“If I’m to believe just about everyone in my life, I’ve been a fool for love for a long time now.”

“And I’m not trying to distract myself,” Georgiana murmurs.

“What’s happened? Has your Captain returned?” I ask, concern for my friend building within me.

She sighs and sets down her teacup. “No, there’s still been no word from him.” She slips her hand into her pocket and I don’t need to ask to know that she’s touching the rocks she keeps there.

“Then what is it?” I prompt, worry for my friend filling me.

“My parents are trying to set a date for my wedding,” she admits.

“Ah. Is there any way you can delay?”

“The only things I could think of saying would end up ruining me,” Georgiana admits. “And I know I shouldn’t do that just to get out of my marriage, not when the reason I don’t want to go through with it seems to have forgotten that I exist.”

“He could still return,” I say, knowing that isn’t quite as likely as it once was.

“I need to move on from Henry,” Georgiana says, her voice cracking as she says it. “I just don’t know how.”

“We’ll help,” I promise. “However we can.”

“Thank you.” She looks between the two of us. “Both of you.”

Mary reaches out and gives her hand a squeeze. “Let’s talk of happier things,” she says, clearly trying to take Georgiana’s mind off the situation.

“Such as?” I ask.

“What are you wearing for Lady Ferrington’s next ball? Will you have a new dress?”

I let out a small groan. “I’ll have a new one.”

“You don’t seem very excited about it. You love getting new dresses,” Georgiana says.

“Not when the Countess has picked out every detail of it.”

“Oh, that doesn’t sound pleasant,” Mary says. “Is she trying to control your entire wardrobe?”

“She would have if Lord Cygnus hadn’t already insisted that I could use my own modiste.”

“Then how has the Countess controlling your dress for Lady Ferrington’s?” Georgiana asks.

“It’s a peace offering of sorts,” I admit. “She’s been rather disapproving of me since I married Lord Cygnus. Well, since before, actually. I had hoped that agreeing to her choice of dress for one event would help make things better between us.”

“Do you think it worked?” Mary asks.

“I don’t think we’ll know for a while yet. She didn’t seem quite as disapproving when she stepped in here before you arrived.”

“She’ll probably be more amenable once you and Lord Cygnus start having children. Securing an heir is your main purpose now,” Georgiana says.

“I’m not sure I’m ready to be a mother.”

“You weren’t ready for marriage either,” she reminds me.

“We shall see.” I’d rather hoped on more time to enjoy our marriage before children became part of it, but if that is what fate has in store for us, then I won’t be as against it as I might have been even a few weeks ago.

It seems as if everything is falling into place for me beyond anything I could have imagined.

SEVENTEEN



LETITIA

I SWEEP the charcoal across the page, admiring the way in which it shades the lake. I stare at the page in concentration as two swans take shape. I can't see any of the creatures on the lake at the moment, but I suspect these aren't just any swans, they're supposed to be me and Philip.

I let out a satisfied sigh, recalling the end of the evening.

A knock on the drawing room door pulls my attention away from my thoughts, and I turn, already knowing who I will find standing there waiting for me. No one else in the house would think to knock, and if I had a guest from outside the household, one of the servants would be announcing them.

"Come in," I call to my husband.

The door creaks open and I turn to find him stepping into the room.

"You don't have to knock, Philip," I say.

"I wouldn't dare to not, this is your space, and I intend to treat it as such."

"I appreciate that, but it's still not necessary." I smile at him so he knows I appreciate the courtesy, even if he doesn't have to give it. Or perhaps that's why it feels good for him to offer it.

"May I see what you're working on?" he asks.

“Of course.” I gesture to my drawing desk. “I know it isn’t the best.”

“It’s beautiful,” he assures me. “I like it.”

A smile stretches over my face at his compliment. “I’m glad.”

“Though I didn’t come to find you to ask about your drawing,” he says.

“Oh? Is everything all right?”

“I wanted to check how you were feeling after last night,” he says.

“I think it’s too early to know if there is a baby on the way, if that’s what you mean,” I quip.

He chuckles. “I’m well aware of that. I wanted to know if you were all right. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable.”

“Oh, Philip.” I reach out to touch him, only to realise my fingers are covered in charcoal smudges and I don’t want to ruin his shirt with them.

He seems to catch my thoughts as he picks up the cloth I’ve been using to clean my fingers and carefully draws it along them, his touch gentle and caring.

“I assure you, I’m perfectly well after last night.”

“I’m glad.”

“In fact, if you are available this evening, I wouldn’t be opposed to a repeat,” I say hopefully.

He chuckles. “Why Lady Cygnus, how inappropriate of you.”

“Inappropriate would be to suggest that we could put one of the retiring rooms at the next ball to better use than before,” I respond.

“Hmm, now there’s a proposition I can entirely get on board with.”

“The way I see it, being caught alone isn’t a scandal anymore,” I say.

“Ah, my wife isn’t only beautiful, she is intelligent too.”

“I’d say you did a good job at choosing me, but we both know it was an accident.”

He chuckles. “That isn’t true. We attracted one another for a reason. Your quick wit was definitely one of those things.”

“It seems like so long ago that we met at that garden party.”

“Yet I still remember it fondly.”

“And here I was worrying that you would think of it as the day your life changed forever.”

“Oh, that it was, but in the best way.” He reaches out and pushes a strand of loose hair behind my ear. “Without that day, perhaps I wouldn’t have the most beautiful wife I could have imagined.”

“You didn’t even want a wife,” I remind him.

“I didn’t *think* I wanted a wife. But that is simply because I hadn’t met you yet.”

“You certainly know how to charm a lady.”

“Only you,” he promises, leaning even closer.

I place my hand on his chest, smoothing it over the shirt there. “We both know that isn’t true.”

“Then now there is only you.”

“I’ll agree to that,” I murmur.

He closes the gap between us and presses his lips against mine, not caring that it’s the middle of the day and that anyone could walk in and catch us.

Though I suppose it doesn’t matter any longer.

I lose myself in his kiss and everything it means for both my present and my future. He’s everything I didn’t know I wanted, and now that I’ve experienced what I can have in this life, I don’t know how I missed it.

We break apart, both smiling widely.

“Do you have any plans this evening?” he asks, his voice low and gravelly.

I shake my head.

“Good, I managed to get tickets for the music recital you wanted to go to,” he says. “I know we have the Ferrington Ball at the end of the week, but I thought a night for just the two of us might be a pleasant diversion.

“That would be nice,” I agree.

“And I’m going to talk to Mother,” he promises. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t try to threaten you with being sent to the country again.”

I frown. “How do you know about that?”

“One of the servants told me,” he says. “But you know that next time, you can tell me yourself.”

“I should hope there won’t be a next time,” I point out.

“I would hope so too,” he says. “But if there is, promise me that you’ll come to me first and we’ll deal with it together.”

“I promise,” I respond.

“Good. I don’t want you to have to suffer silently about anything.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you in the first place.”

“I understand why you didn’t,” he assures me. “But that just makes me more certain that I don’t want you to feel that way again.”

“I’m sure I won’t.” And I mean it. The safety of his arms makes me confident of all kinds of things, and one of them is knowing that his words hold the truth.

“I love you, Letitia,” he says softly.

“I love you too,” I respond instantly, knowing that I mean the words with all my heart, and I have done for a very long time.

EIGHTEEN



PHILIP

LADY FERRINGTON’S balls are always the talk of the shifter ton, and tonight will be no exception. There’s something extravagant about the way the deer shifter puts together an event, from the guest list, to the decorations. And anyone who is anyone in the shifter world is here, save for the main court itself.

Though it wouldn’t surprise me if the Shifter Queen turns up at one of her events in the future.

Letitia’s hand tightens on my arm as we enter and I look at her.

“Is everything all right?” I ask.

“It will be,” she assures me, glancing behind us to where my parents are following us into the ballroom.

Ah, I see the problem. “Next time you can wear a dress of your own choosing,” I promise her, keeping my voice low enough that Mother won’t be able to hear.

“I hope you’re right, but it still might be worth it should it help our relationship.”

I nod, hoping she’s right about that, but knowing Mother, there’ll still be some back and forth between them before things are all settled. If there’s one thing Mother hates, it’s things in her life changing, and having to face the woman who will take her place as Countess seems to be making things particularly difficult.

“Lord Cygnus, welcome,” Lord Ferrington says, a wide smile on his face. “It is a pleasure to see you and your wife again.”

“Lord Ferrington,” I respond with a nod. “It is a wonderful evening.”

“All thanks to my wife.” He glances over in the direction of the red-haired woman speaking with some of the other guests, a dotting smile on his face.

It seems as if I’m not the only one who is deeply in love with his wife. “She does a most excellent job.”

“She does. Now, you must excuse me, I should greet my other guests.” He turns to my parents, giving myself and Letitia the perfect excuse to get away.

“I have an idea,” Letitia whispers, taking my hand and drawing me across the room to where the retiring rooms are waiting for us.

I chuckle. “I believe that would be highly improper, Lady Cygnus.”

“Since when has that stopped you?” she teases. “Besides, we’re married now, the most that would happen is that we’re affectionately called rude. And I doubt that will happen. People are already talking about us being a love match, they’ll no doubt think this is all part of it.”

“We are a love match,” I point out. “It’s just that neither of us realised it until it was too late.”

She lets out a small laugh, drawing the attention of some of the nearby attendees, making it difficult to lip away. “You might be right about that. Though I’m all right if we don’t enlighten anyone as to the real way our relationship started.”

“That is fair.” I smile dotingly at her, wishing that we were at home, but knowing that it is important for us to put in an appearance at events such as this. “I believe Miss Rocke and Miss Falnor are trying to gain your attention,” I say, nodding over in their direction.

Letitia looks over to them and arches an eyebrow. She sighs. “They probably wish for me to introduce them to someone, it can wait.”

“That doesn’t seem likely,” I counter. “Miss Rocke is already betrothed, and from what you’ve said, Miss Falnor isn’t interested in any of the gentlemen attending this kind of event.”

“I feel like I am supposed to chide you for paying too much attention, but I’m too glad that you listen to what I say.”

I let out a laugh. “I aim to please, Lady Cygnus.”

She shakes her head in bemusement. “I should go and see what they want. We shall have to delay our moment alone.”

I raise her hand to my lips and kiss the back of it through her glove, already contemplating how I might remove it later.

Letitia stiffens and her gaze flits between her friends and the doorway.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I’ve never seen Georgiana so pale,” she whispers. “Do you know who the man in the military uniform is?”

I look towards the door, almost ready to disappoint her before I realise that I do know who it is. “I believe it’s Captain Stone.”

“Henry Stone?” she checks.

I frown and try to remember the day I met him at the club. “I think so, but we only met a handful of times. I don’t know him well at all. Why?”

“I need to go.”

“Letitia?”

“I’m sorry, Georgiana needs me.” From the expression on her face, I can tell that it’s serious.

“Of course. Come find me when you’re ready.” I smile so she knows that I’m being genuine.

“Thank you, I truly appreciate it.” She smiles and pulls away, hurrying to join her friends.

“Leaving you at the first possible opportunity, I see,” Mother says from beside me.

I close my eyes and let out a loud sigh. “Mother, this is not the place.”

“Everyone can see that your wife is abandoning you.”

“We’re at a ball where she knows a lot of people, as do I. We’re not expected to spend the entire time together, why does it matter who she is spending her time with?”

“Think about how it looks.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “Mother, you are going to have to be kinder to her. Letitia is part of our family now, and will be the mother of my children. Whether you like it or not, she is going to be around for a long time to come. And I happen to think that she’ll make an excellent Countess when the time comes.”

Displeasure crosses her face, but I know it won’t last. Or more accurately, it will change to focus on something else. That always seems to be how Mother’s ire works.

“Very well. I shall try to be more civil for your sake,” she responds.

“As you should be. She wore the dress you wanted tonight.”

“She did,” Mother grumbles.

“And that won’t be happening again. I expect my wife to dress in the fashion she deems suitable for her position and her personal tastes.”

Mother opens her mouth to disagree, but must think better of it, for she closes it before the words can escape.

“Now, I must go see Lord Rennarton,” I say, spying the fox shifter across the room. I don’t really have anything I need to say to the man, but I feel the need to extricate myself from the conversation before I say something that shouldn’t be

spoken in public. I truly don't understand what Mother's problem with Letitia is, and I hope she realises that it isn't going to help anyone if she continues the way she does.

I stride across the ballroom, searching for my wife as I do. I hope that Miss Rocke isn't in too much trouble, though from the way Letitia reacted, I suspect that is a vain hope. It is of no matter, I will do everything within my power to help Letitia's friend if she needs my help, especially when I know how much it will mean to my wife.



EPILOGUE

LETITIA

I TAKE a sip of tea and lean back in the chair, enjoying the sun warming my skin and the light breeze coming from the lake. I love the peace I can find in the Swancove House gardens, it is better than anything I ever experienced in my own home.

The crunch of rocks under someone's feet sounds from behind me, and I find myself hoping that it will be Philip coming to join me.

“May I sit?”

I close my eyes and brace myself for whatever difficult conversation Lady Swancove is going to put me through.

“Of course,” I respond in a falsely welcoming tone. I've done my best to avoid Philip's mother for the past couple of weeks, and I thought I'd done well at that.

She sits down and folds her hands into her lap. “My son spoke with me.”

“Oh?” Nerves flutter to life within me. I know that Philip has more of a say in the way the household is run than she does, but that doesn't necessarily mean she's going to actually going to change the way she acts around me.

“He has informed me of the seriousness of your relationship to one another.”

I nod, not trusting myself to point out that we're married, which is about as serious as things can get.

“He also told me that you would not be going to the country unless you decide that is where you wish to be.”

“He has made that clear to me too,” I say firmly.

“Hmm.” She lets out a loud sigh. “I suppose you should call me Dolores while we are in private.”

Surprise flits through me. That is not what I expected her to say. “You can call me Letitia, if you wish,” I respond in kind, knowing that it’s polite to reciprocate. Though I will admit that it feels strange to call her Lady Swancove every time we speak.

“Excellent. Then I will leave you to your tea.” She gets to her feet and walks away, not even pausing to say goodbye.

I stare after her, a little confused by the interaction, but hopeful that it means things will change.

I sigh and look back at the lake in time to see Philip leaving the swan house and heading back towards me.

I smile, looking forward to this interaction much more. I never thought I’d be sitting in the gardens of a grand house like this waiting for the man I love to join me, but now that’s what’s happening, I can’t imagine it any other way.

* * *

Thank you for reading The Swan and the Rake, I hope you enjoyed it. If you wish to continue the series, then you can with Georgiana and Henry’s story, The Otter and the Officer:

<https://books2read.com/theotterandtheofficer>

You can also download a free Shifter Season story here:

<https://books.authorlauragreenwood.co.uk/vz9j2lkgod>

AUTHOR NOTE

Thank you for reading *The Swan and the Rake*, I hope you enjoyed it.

Both of Letitia's friends will get stories of their own, with Georgiana coming next in [*The Otter and the Officer*](#), and Mary coming after in [*The Falcon and the Bluestocking*](#). Both Letitia and Philip will show up in future books in the series as side characters too.

The swan shifters took me by surprise at a few points in the story, even with a plot, but sometimes that's the fun part of writing!

If you want to keep up to date with new releases and other news, you can join my [Facebook Reader Group](#) or [mailing list](#).

Stay safe & happy reading!

- Laura

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ABOUT LAURA GREENWOOD

Laura is a USA Today Bestselling Author of paranormal, fantasy, urban fantasy, and contemporary romance. When she's not writing, she drinks a lot of tea, tries to resist French macarons, and works towards a diploma in Egyptology. She lives in the UK, where most of her books are set. Laura specialises in quick reads, whether you're looking for a swoonworthy romance for the bath, or an action-packed adventure for your latest journey, you'll find the perfect match amongst her books!

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