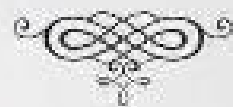




COBALT FAIRY
PUBLISHING



THE DUKE AND HIS
WALLFLOWER

~ The Dowager's Scheme Series ~

TIFFANY BATON

THE DUKE AND HIS WALLFLOWER

A HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE

THE DOWAGER'S SCHEME

OceanofPDF.com

TIFFANY BATON



[OceanofPDF.com](https://www.oceanofpdf.com)

CONTENTS

A Sweet Gift From Me to You

Before You Start Reading...

Do You Love Books?

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

[Chapter 28](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[Preview: Protected by the Duke](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Also by Tiffany Baton](#)

[Loved the Book?](#)

[About the Author](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](http://OceanofPDF.com)

A SWEET GIFT FROM ME TO YOU

Thank you so much for your support on my efforts. Having you on my side is more than I could ever ask for!

And as a thank you gift, to show you how much I appreciate your support, I am offering you a **free book**. *The Dukedom of the Beast* is available exclusively to people who have downloaded one of my books and you can get your **free** copy by clicking the image below or [this link here!](#)



Thank you for being by my reason to smile today!

Tiffany Baton

OceanofPDF.com

BEFORE YOU START READING...

Did you know that there's a special place where you can chat with me *and* with thousands of like-minded bookworms all over the globe?!

Join [Cobalt Fairy's facebook group of voracious readers](#) and I guarantee you, you'd wish you had joined us sooner!

Let's connect, right NOW!



Just click on the image above! ↑

OceanofPDF.com

DO YOU LOVE BOOKS?

If you love reading, and want to be first to know about the newest Clean Regency books by your favorite authors, make haste and click on the link below!

Join **Cobalt Fairy's Newsletter** and enjoy our newest books in the genre we all love!



Just click on the image above! ↑

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE BOOK

“I have spent every day regretting the answer that I gave you.”

The Follet family has never abided by societal rules. Which might explain why Lady Emma is still unmarried, and with no prospects whatsoever. Until her bossy aunt decides to intervene, and promises she will see her married by the end of the season, even if she has to make the match herself.

Following a scandal involving his unwed sister, a man not worthy of being called a gentleman, and a broken nose, Duke Jasper owes a lot to his mother for using her connections to keep it quiet. To return the favor, he has agreed that he will attend any social event she asks of him for a whole year. On one condition: marriage is off the table.

Both pressured to behave by two equally formidable Dowagers, Emma and Jasper quickly find solace in each other's company. Feelings start to bloom between them, but their newfound happiness doesn't last for long. New and old enemies alike wage war on the unlikely couple. And everything will end just as it began: with a scandal..

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

London, England

“Be on your guard, children!” a deep male voice rang through the house so loud it echoed out of the windows and into the garden. “She’s here.”

Emma looked up from where she was standing in the back garden. In one hand, she carried a rose sprig, recently cut. In the other, she clutched her gardening gloves. Slowly straightening up, she peered over the bush at her mother’s face.

“Oh dear,” Frances said, chewing her lip as she peeked beneath her large hat, “my sister always makes us stand to attention, does she not?”

“Rather like a general in the militia?” Emma teased, watching as her mother fought her temptation to laugh.

“You should not talk of your aunt in such a way,” Frances reprimanded, yet she smiled anyway.

“I have a feeling Aunt Judith would find it a compliment.” Emma shrugged.

“Where are you, children?” her father’s voice rang out from inside the house. “Andrew? Emma? Betty!”

“You better go to your father,” Frances urged as she took the gardening gloves out of Emma’s hands. “You know what he is like. Get him in a state, and he’ll be falling down the stairs or tripping over the nearest rug.”

“Or his own feet,” Emma quipped, watching as her mother fought her smile again.

“Go,” she urged, playfully pushing Emma toward the house.

Emma indulged in her own laugh as she took hold of the skirt of her gown and ran toward the house. Bustling past where the bees buzzed, darting between camelia and snapdragon flowers, she dashed into the house, stumbling on the doorjamb as her eyes adjusted from the bright sunlight outside to the dimmer light inside.

She found the house somewhat different from how she had left it. The grand hallway was alive with activity. Bernard, her father, was waving his hands at the butler. The housekeeper urged them to set up the spare room for Aunt Judith, which had somehow been neglected to be prepared. Emma laughed behind her hand as she watched her father. The rather absent-minded nature of her parents meant such things were often forgotten to be passed to the staff, who then had to jump to assist when guests arrived.

“Yes, please, do arrange it when you can,” Bernard asked kindly, then turned, readying himself to call for his children

again. “Andrew! Betty!” He craned his neck through the nearest doorway.

“Watch out for the rug,” Emma called, running after him, but she was a beat too late. Bernard tripped on the rug before hurrying to straighten himself.

“Thank you, Emma,” Bernard said, turning to smile at her. She saw the same honey-colored eyes that matched her own on his face, though they were set above rather pudgy cheeks these days. Whenever Bernard smiled, it lit up that rounded face. “Children!”

“Why do you insist on calling us children all the time?” Emma asked, following him into the sitting room. “We are hardly toddlers running between your ankles anymore.”

“Are you not?” Bernard asked, laughing. “Your mother and I went walking in the garden yesterday when you nearly knocked us into the lake.”

“Ah... I was trying to get to the lake to see the frogs. That was all,” Emma explained with innocence. He still gave her an artful look.

Emma knew that despite their playful ways, they were hardly children anymore. Her brother, Andrew, was old enough to be wed, and Emma had just reached her twentieth year, certainly old enough to be announced in the ton. Betty was only a little younger than her.

“Children!” Bernard called.

“Oh, good Lord, you’ll shout the entire house down at this rate.” Andrew appeared in the nearest doorway, cupping his hands over his ears. The auburn hair that hung down loosely by his ears was the same shade as Emma’s own and just as unruly. “We’re here, father, rest assured.”

“And what have you been doing this morning?” Bernard asked, his hands on his hips.

“I’ve had my nose in a history book,” Andrew explained.

“Don’t tell your aunt that.” Bernard pinched the bridge of his nose then exchanged a worrying look with Emma.

“She is not so bad...” Yet, Emma trailed off when both her father and brother eyed her carefully. They all knew the truth of the matter.

Aunt Judith is a force to be reckoned with.

Aunt Judith was a kind soul, but that kindness was sometimes manifested in the most forceful of ways. She was not vain or arrogant in any way, it was just that she believed in her own opinion and always thought it was the right one. Inevitably, she was keen for others to agree with that opinion.

“You know very well what she thinks of us, Emma,” Andrew said, striding into the room. He sat down in the nearest chair, relaxing back so much that the chair creaked beneath him.

“I do. I sometimes wonder if she looks at us and sees the monkeys from the Tower of London Zoo. We are wonders to her!” Emma said, then she giggled as her brother pulled a face and made ‘ooh’ sounds like a monkey.

“Don’t let her see you do that,” Bernard muttered, hurrying to the door. Ordinarily, Bernard encouraged such laughter. He was not one for excessive propriety, but Emma half wondered if his sister-in-law frightened him at times.

“She knows who we are.” Emma didn’t see the point in pretending to be people we were not. “She should be used to us by now, especially if she is coming to stay for the Season.”

“She is used to us being like monkeys?” Andrew asked.

“Absolutely! Though perhaps we should refrain from swinging from the sconces and the candelabras,” Emma mocked, prompting her brother to smile.

“Betty!” Bernard called in the doorway.

“I’m here, father.” Betty appeared in the doorway seconds later, gripping some sheet music in her hand. A keen musician, she had evidently spent much of the morning practicing her instruments. “Is she here yet? Have you seen her carriage?”

Before the answer could be made, there was a sharp knock at the door. They all flinched, apart from Bernard, who walked into the hallway and didn’t pick his feet up cleanly as he walked.

“Rug!” All three children called out. This time, Bernard heard them and managed to lift his foot higher.

“I sometimes wonder what you all think of me. Am I a monkey too?” Bernard asked, laughing at himself.

“Head monkey.” Emma followed her father, copying his lopsided grin in such a way that her siblings fell about laughing.

As Bernard opened the door, Frances appeared from the garden door, hastening inside and trying to rub the dirt from her cheeks. She didn’t usually bother trying to clean up if she had spent a day in the garden, but today was different.

“Ah, Judith,” Bernard declared warmly as he stepped back. “Welcome. Come in, come in. I expect you’re tired from your journey.”

Emma’s smile faltered a little when her eyes found her aunt’s. Judith was dressed rather ostentatiously in a bold blue gown and a pale cream pelisse, with fur trimming the edges. Her bonnet was so broad that it made her face very small, and the pale grey eyes looked even smaller in that face, piercing as they stared into the house.

“Your butler should greet your guests, Bernard,” she reminded him with a small smile.

“Well...” Bernard glanced back at his wife, looking for encouragement. Frances reached his side and took his hand, giving him the confidence he clearly sought. “I wanted to give

you a more personal welcome. Would you like some tea after your journey?"

"Please." Aunt Judith strode in and handed her pelisse and bonnet to the lady's maid that trailed behind her. "I hope you have taken note, Sister, of the latest fashions when taking tea."

"Fashions?" Frances repeated, curling her nose. Emma felt a protectiveness toward her parents as they exchanged uncertain looks and gestured for them to head for the sitting room. It was always Emma's way. She liked to protect her parents from the realities of the world that they preferred to avoid.

"Oh yes. Tea should be served with cake these days, not biscuits, and certainly not bread and butter. Fashions change, and we must keep an eye on them, mustn't we?" Judith smiled at the words and followed them all to the sitting room. "I see, Emma, you have grown much since I last saw you. Quite the young lady you are now. Here, let me look at you."

As they stepped into the sitting room, Judith caught Emma's arm and urged her to stop on the rug before walking around her in a tight circle.

"Yes, you have blossomed into quite a beauty." The words startled Emma so much that she flicked her head and cricked her neck. "Don't show pain on your face, dear. Quite unladylike."

"Unladylike?" Emma repeated in amazement. "Are ladies made of alabaster and marble?" Her wit prompted her immediate family to snigger and attempt to hide their laughs,

but it was not missed by Judith, who sent them a glower, quietening them quickly.

“I’ll choose not to answer to your wit.” Judith returned her eyes to Emma. “Yes, you are a fine woman. I expect we will see you wed before the end of the Season.” With these words, she walked on, placing her attention elsewhere.

Wait... wed?

“I-I beg your pardon?” Emma stuttered.

“Speechless, Sister?” Andrew said from his place, still reclining in his chair. “It is rare for you.”

She wants me to wed?

Emma looked at her parents, expecting some sort of response. They all knew that Emma could have had her first Season the year before, but none of them were in such a rush. Now with the prospect of her first Season ahead of her, Emma had still not thought about marriage. She had considered more the possibility of making new friends and attending events, not meeting suitors.

“I do not need to marry yet, do I?” Emma asked.

“It is what a young lady does, Emma,” Aunt Judith said as she stopped before Betty and clicked her fingers, urging the girl to her feet.

“Her purpose, is it?” Emma muttered drily. Once more, Andrew laughed with her, but this time, he was the only one.

“Now, Betty, let’s look at you.” Judith circled her too. “Yes, quite a beauty, just like your sister. You are taller than her already, I see.” Betty seemed pleased with this and stood as tall as she could, lifting her chin. “Your hair is tidier too.”

The glance that was shot Emma’s way made Emma fidget with the loose curls of auburn hair that hung down by her ears.

“It won’t be tamed,” she explained. “It is like trying to make treacle sit still.”

“Hmm.” Judith didn’t seem convinced. “Now, lastly, Andrew. Dear, do stand to your feet. One should not recline on a settee in such a way when they have guests.”

“Whyever not?” Andrew asked, looking at his parents, who had retreated to a corner of the room together. They were collecting plates and cups from a cupboard, ready for tea, doing the job a maid should do, though they both seemed eager to do it. Emma rather imagined they did it to avoid Aunt Judith’s judgment.

“Because you look more like a sloth on a tree branch than a gentleman on a *chaise longue*. Now, up.” Judith clicked her fingers. This time, Andrew stood. “Tall, I see. Very tall, indeed.” She rounded him with a small smile on her lips, clearly admiring him.

Emma moved to Betty's side, where the two of them exchanged a look.

"I am so glad she has come," Betty whispered for Emma's ears only. "In her letter, she told Mother she intends to show us how to be a part of the ton."

"Do you wish to be a part of it?" Emma asked, curling her nose.

"Who would not wish to be?" Betty's smile grew with the words.

"One of many who are all alike? I could think of something I'd rather be." Her words didn't please her sister, yet they didn't have a chance to go on, for Judith had started speaking again.

"You will do well at the Season, Andrew. In terms of looks, you are certainly handsome enough to catch a potential bride's eye—"

"Bride?" Andrew spluttered, turning round so quickly he was in danger of falling over.

"Now, who's speechless?" Emma teased him from across the room.

"But behavior... that will need working on." Judith stood in the middle of the three of them with her hands on her hips.

“Worry not, though, my beloved nieces and nephews. I have come to rescue you all.”

“Are we drowning at sea?” Emma’s taunt earned her brother’s smile, but her sister tapped her around the arm, urging her to be quiet.

“I will teach you how to traverse the society you will find in the ton. They are rather different from what you have known at home,” She spoke the words convivially but glanced at her sister and brother-in-law in such a way that it reminded Emma of previous conversations.

She thinks we are all too wild.

Emma was glad of it, though. She’d had a good childhood and a very happy upbringing. Her parents had encouraged freedom of thought and action. As a family, every day, they were laughing at something.

“First, Emma and Betty,” she said, pausing and looking at them. “I have had two gowns made for you for your debut.” She looked to the doorway where her lady’s maid had appeared and nodded at the older woman. The maid ran in carrying two boxes and handed them out.

“Oh, it’s weighty,” Emma huffed as she took the box. “I hope it is the box and not the gown. How is one to walk in this?” She had barely finished when Betty was already opening her box.

“It is beautiful,” Betty gushed, pulling out the pastel blue gown trimmed with lace. Standing tall, she held the dress to her body. “Aunt Judith, how can I thank you?”

“That is sweet, but it is not needed. Emma, let us see your gown too.”

Warily, Emma placed the box on the nearest chair and opened it up. When her eyes fell on the garment, she felt a knot in her stomach tighten. The gown was a pure ivory white. Such pale shades were so easy to dirty and stain that she feared she would ruin the dress before she had even left the house.

“Hold it up,” Judith urged, clicking her fingers another time.

Emma took the sleeves and held the dress up to her body.

“It is quite stunning,” Betty said, still gushing in excitement. She could barely stand still, bobbing on her toes.

“Don’t bob, dear. A lady should stand tall and still,” Judith urged. Betty at once stood still.

“Thank you, Aunt Judith,” Emma murmured, though she was not convinced about the gown at all.

It is too refined for me to wear. I will surely sully it.

“Now, we should begin our lessons,” Judith declared, ignoring the fact that the maid had brought in the tea. Bernard and

Frances sat at the table, preparing to have their tea, but as Emma moved to join them, Judith took her wrist and urged her to stand beside her brother. “Let us see how you curtsy and bow. Betty, you are first.”

Emma gritted her teeth as she looked at Andrew, whose jaw was clenched in a similar fashion.

“I’d rather swing from the sconces,” he muttered for her ears only. She chewed the inside of her mouth to stop herself from laughing.

“That is quite good, Betty,” Judith approved of Betty’s curtsy. “But do not take your leg so far back. There, that’s better. Emma, it is now your turn.”

Emma couldn’t remember the last time she had curtsied for anyone. It was not something they did in their family.

Father said one should feel free with the ones they love. They shouldn’t feel forced into bowing and curtsying.

Yet Emma did as she was told. She curtsied but was so aware of Andrew sniggering at her side that she nearly lost her balance.

“I see we’ll need some work...” Judith grumbled under her breath before moving to stand in front of Andrew. “Now, it is your turn, Andrew.”

As he moved to bow, Emma couldn't help wishing to take revenge for him laughing at her failure, so she was careful to subtly elbow her brother. Somehow, her action seemed to go unnoticed by Judith, but it nearly knocked Andrew over.

"I see your balance is as poor as your sister's," Judith murmured, turning away. As Andrew stood straight, he elbowed Emma back, making her rub her sore rib. "Well, my sister," Judith crossed the room with the words and reached for Frances' side, "do not fear for your children. As I am to stay here for the Season, I will endeavor to guide them with all they need to learn to impress the ton."

"Oh, that is good," Frances said, though she didn't sound convinced. "Thank you."

"Once I am done with them, they will be quite transformed," Judith said eagerly, taking a seat beside her sister.

"Do they need to be transformed?" Bernard asked a little defensively. He went to pour his sister-in-law's tea, but in his clumsiness, he spilled the tea.

"Not in character, just in behavior," Judith assured him as she mopped up the tea, with her brow creased. "Have no fear for them, though, Frances. If all goes according to plan, we will have at least one of them betrothed by the end of the Season." With these words, Judith turned her eyes to Emma across the room.

"Why are you looking at me?" Emma asked aloud.

CHAPTER TWO

“I am going out.”

“You are not.”

The Dowager Duchess’ voice was so strong that Jasper found himself freezing in the hallway. He kept his chin lifted, even as his eyes darted down to the black and white marble floor beneath him. These days, the house seemed darker than it had been before. It was as if there were shadows and a lingering darkness everywhere he looked.

“You made me a promise, Jasper. You cannot back out on it now.”

Jasper pinched the bridge of his nose before he turned in the hallway of the house, fixing his gaze on his mother. It seemed really odd to him the fact that he was now a duke, yet he felt he had no power. Somehow, his mother had control of him.

“One night away cannot be so bad,” Jasper insisted, staring back at his mother.

In the past, Marianne had always been a calm woman. Jasper supposed she liked being in control, and she always had been.

Recent events have clearly tried her patience.

“It was not the promise you made me, Jasper. Remember?” she asked, stepping toward him. The same black hair he bore his mother shared, though hers was coiffed with incredible refinement, even for a day spent at home, with curls at the back of her head. Those curls barely moved as she stepped toward him. “You made a vow, and you will keep it. For this family’s sake. For your... for your sister’s sake.”

Jasper felt a lump in his throat at the mention of his sister. Jerking his head away from Marianne, he paced in a small circle in the hallway, looking at the darkened alcoves. In each one was a marble bust sitting atop a plinth. He could remember how his sister, Lettie, would play around those busts when she was younger. He supposed it was why the house felt so dark now. It missed her presence.

“My sister’s sake?” Jasper scoffed. “You speak as if I am the one who damaged her reputation, Mother.” He shook his head, spinning round to face his mother so harshly that she flinched where she stood and began to fidget with the sleeves of her fine gown. “When can she come home?”

“Not yet.” Marianne shook her head. “It is important for all our sakes that she is away from here for a while. Remember what I taught you, Jasper. Duty... respect... and reputation.”

“I remember.” Yet the words were of no comfort. He glanced at the doorway behind him, wondering how easy it would be

to make an escape from the house. It was what he did most these days: escape the house and the power of his mother.

“You made me a promise, and now you must keep to it.” Marianne stepped toward him and tugged on his tailcoat until he turned and faced her. “You agreed to attend every ball, every assembly, any event I asked of you this Season.”

“I did agree, but it was in the heat of our argument that I did so.” Jasper was trying his best to keep his temper. In the last few months, it was something that seemed almost impossible. Where he was never angry before, he was quick to ire now, ever since Lettie had found herself in trouble. He knew, though, if he was to get his way, he had to try and control his ire. “I do not see how attending all these events will help our family’s situation.”

“Then allow me to explain it to you.” Marianne stood taller, not quite matching Jasper in his towering height. “Our family is on a precipice, Jasper. If anyone hears of what happened to Lettie...” She broke off, swallowing uncomfortably. For a second, Jasper could have sworn there were tears in his mother’s eyes, but she blinked them away. “This family will be ruined. What is more, we have already offended people. You know that as well as I. *Influential* people.”

Jasper tried his best not to think of how the matter with Lettie had ended. Yes, it was true they had offended people with power and influence in the ton, but it hardly concerned him as much as it did his mother.

“Consider this as damage control.” Marianne blinked, pushing away any last sign of tears. “You will come to these events. You will smile, and you will be charming, and you will impress the ton. For my sake... and Lettie’s. Do you agree?”

Jasper sighed deeply. More than anything, did he wish to say to his mother that this was a futile attempt. Surely with those they had offended in the ton they would not be welcomed with open arms, and anything Jasper did would not help. Once again, he could feel his anger rising.

It's always there these days. I long for the time when I did not know anger so readily.

“Please, Jasper.” There was such a desperate tone in Marianne’s voice that Jasper found himself nodding.

“Very well, Mother, I will attend the ball tonight, but first, there is something I must do.” His words seemed to bring huge relief to her, for she smiled a little, and the stiffness left her body.

Filled with determination, Jasper walked past his mother and headed to his study. He might have to go to the ball, but that didn’t mean he had to spend a long time there. If he was to go, then first, he would do something that he truly wished to do. When he was locked safely in his study, he pulled forward some parchment and a quill, then dipped the nib in a brass inkwell and began to write.

Dear Sister,

I long to know how you are. These hallways seem dark and lonely without you here. I hope you are having a better time than I whilst you are in the country...

As he wrote, he thought only of Lettie and prayed she found reasons to smile these days.



“Oh, I do not think I have ever been so excited!” Betty gushed, sitting so far on the edge of her seat in the carriage that she was in danger of falling off it.

“Really? I wouldn’t have guessed,” Emma teased her with a smile, yet Betty appeared not to notice. Andrew did, however, and chuckled at Emma’s side.

On the opposite side of the carriage, Betty and Judith sat together. The lantern that swung over their heads as the carriage moved kept basking them in the warm glow of apricot-tinged light before it faded again.

“Sit still, dear,” Judith instructed kindly. At once, Betty fell still. “I am pleased to see you are so excited, and you look very beautiful in your gown.”

“Thank you.” Betty preened under the praise and straightened her gown the way a bird might attend to its feathers. “I cannot believe we are about to attend our first ball. There is nowhere else I’d rather be.”

“I can think of somewhere I’d rather be,” Andrew whispered beside Emma, for her ears only.

“You and I both,” Emma agreed. It wasn’t unusual for the two to spend evenings together in the library. Andrew would do as he wished, reading up on history and periods that fascinated

him. Emma would either research new plants to tell her mother about, or she'd read of the animal kingdom, something she'd always had a fascination for. "Do you think tonight a wise idea?" she asked Andrew, leaning toward him.

"Wise? No. Necessary... perhaps." He looked unsettled about the idea. "As much as I wish to argue with our aunt, for it is certainly humorous to see her in her element, she may be right in some regards."

"In what way?" Emma asked. She had only felt uncomfortable since her aunt's arrival. As much as she loved her aunt, Emma felt as if she was being poked and prodded at, like a girl carrying a peg doll, adjusting the legs and arms until they are in a perfect position.

"I love our home," Andrew whispered to Emma, "yet we cannot stay there forever. We must find lives of our own to lead."

"And you think we cannot do that by being who we are?" Emma felt embarrassed. All of a sudden, her face grew heated, and she was thankful for the dim light in the carriage: otherwise, the redness of her cheeks would be apparent.

"Perhaps not," Andrew whispered uncomfortably.

Self-consciously, Emma looked down at the gown she was wearing. It was the ivory white dress her aunt had gifted her, and she had worn matching long gloves that reached her elbows. On her wrist was her dance card, something she began to fear might remain empty for the night.

No doubt I would embarrass my aunt if it was to remain empty.

“What a shame your parents decided not to come,” Judith’s words caught Emma’s interest, and she looked up from the dance card.

“They do not enjoy such things,” Emma explained. She knew her parents well and had seen from a young age how Frances and Bernard preferred their own world together. They were happy as they were.

“Perhaps not.” Judith still appeared unsettled by their absence. “Nevertheless, I shall endeavor to introduce you to all of good society tonight. Here are a few pointers ahead of time. Andrew, you must ensure that you ask as many ladies to dance as possible tonight.”

“How many?” Andrew asked, his lips beginning to curl into a smile. “Enough to fill a harem?” Emma guffawed, laughing hard at him, but Judith merely narrowed her eyes. At her disapproval, Betty clearly suppressed her own temptation to laugh.

“Also, do not make inappropriate jests tonight,” Judith warned, shifting her eyes to Emma. “And do not laugh without restraint, Emma. Ladies laugh behind their hands, demurely.”

Her laughter died, and she felt a knot blooming in her stomach.

“Emma, you too must dance as much as you can. Do not turn down any invitation you receive,” Judith instructed calmly.

“Not at all?” Emma asked, feeling a wariness creep into her tone. “What if I do not like the gentleman?”

“Then I daresay you can put up with his company for a couple of minutes as you dance. Patience. It is the key to a fine young lady,” Judith assured her with a smile.

“There are lots of things a fine young lady must be,” Emma murmured, but Judith went on as if she hadn’t spoken at all.

“Now, the two of you should take note of this.” Judith looked between Emma and Betty. “The most eligible gentleman of the Season is Baron Thorne.”

“An unfortunate name,” Andrew murmured.

“Let us hope he is kinder than his name suggests. Do you reckon he’s rather prickly?” Emma teased, prompting Andrew to laugh. They both abruptly stopped laughing at Judith’s harsh glare.

“He is unattached and young enough to be suited to either of you,” she added, glancing between Emma and Betty, “and very wealthy indeed. He has a fortune already for one so young. He is handsome too.”

“You know him?” Betty asked, unable to restrain her excitement as she moved to the edge of her seat. Judith ushered her to sit back a little again with a curt wave of her hand.

“That I do. I have met him before and am friends with his mother. When we arrive tonight, I will endeavor to introduce you both to him at once. If you could dance with him, it would be quite the introduction at your debut.” Judith smiled, beaming so wide that it was plain she longed for their success.

Emma fiddled with her dance card as she looked at her aunt, feeling rather confused. Deep down, she admired her aunt. She thought a lot of Judith’s elegance and refinement, but she wasn’t certain she wished to be the same. All day she had been ushered to practice her curtsying, and she rather feared that as Judith tapped her chin, urging it higher, and trained her where to put her eyes, Emma was changing.

I still wish to be me.

“Ah, we are here.” Judith smiled and gestured toward the door. “Andrew, as the gentleman with us tonight, you must descend and help us all down.” Andrew looked tempted to make some jest, but he did as instructed, climbing down quickly. He helped Judith and Betty down first, but when it came to Emma, she climbed down without his help.

“I rather suspected you were no damsel that needed assistance,” he whispered as he offered his arm to her. This time, she took it, walking alongside him up the driveway of the grand house hosting tonight’s ball.

“If a lady needs a hand to hold to get out of a carriage, then my goodness, she’ll have to hold a hand wherever she goes,” Emma scoffed at the idea.

Judith urged them to be quiet, waving her hand as they approached the house. Emma's attention was quickly drawn by the house. It was a grand place indeed, built at least three stories high and made of yellow Bath stone. Flooded with light from so many candles in the windows, it seemed to dazzle any onlooker as they walked up the gravel drive.

Stepping into the doorway, the sight that greeted them was no less ostentatious. They walked quickly through a vast hallway to a double set of doors that led into a ballroom.

"Oh my," Emma murmured, stumbling on her feet slightly.

"I was going to utter something much stronger," Andrew whispered.

"Then do not let our aunt hear you say it."

They both gazed at the ballroom. Draped in springtime flowers, it was awash with color. Tulips and early roses adorned the tables, whilst jasmine and honeysuckle trailed up standing candelabras and the pink-hued marble pillars. At the far end of the room, a quartet of violinists played with vigor, attending to the dancers.

The ballroom was full of people. Ladies were dressed so ostentatiously that Emma began to think her gown was not too much after all. Some had feathers in their hair and others wore silk turbans. Jewels glittered on necks and on ears until each wearer seemed to sparkle.

“I feel like we have walked into a competition,” Emma murmured. “It is as if every lady is competing to be noticed.”

“I rather think that is exactly what it is,” Andrew remarked.

“Ah, Emma, Betty, you must come with me, for I have seen Baron Thorne.” Judith clicked her fingers at the two of them. “Andrew, you must go and greet any acquaintances you have. At once.”

“Now? May I not at least have a drink first?” His question was answered by a glare.

“Clearly not. Hop to it, monkey,” Emma teased him. He whispered another monkey sound in her ear before he hastened away, clearly doing as his aunt asked of him.

“This way, Emma. You must walk on my right as you are the eldest.” Judith smiled as she led the two of them forward. “Now, remember what I said, ladies. Smile, exude confidence, and remember your manners. That means no tipping your head back and laughing so hard they can see your uvula, Emma.”

Emma felt ashamed enough that her lips clamped tightly shut. As they crossed the ballroom, her nerves grew worse. She was used to wearing heavy boots for gardening, not fine, elegant shoes that felt as if they might slip off at any moment. Everyone around her seemed much more suited to this setting. Despite Judith’s instructions, Emma’s chin began to lower a little.

“Ah, Lord Thorne, it is so good to see you again.” Judith stopped by a gentleman who seemed to be commanding the attention of a small group of people. She curtsied deeply as the Baron turned to face them.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THREE

“Lady Frampton. A pleasure to see you too.” Lord Thorne had a soft voice as he bowed deeply, clearly showing he respected her.

“May I present my nieces to you? This is their first Season.” Judith gestured toward the two of them.

Emma was distracted, busily examining the man before her. Of average height, he cut an impressive figure, with fine, coiffed back blond hair and blue eyes so pale that his whole countenance was one that could have been perceived as angelic. There was even something in his features that was cherubim-like.

Indeed, it is almost the face of a child!

Emma was humored by the idea. She quickly glanced at her sister, who clearly did not share such thoughts. Judging by the way Betty’s cheeks had colored pink and her eyes were fixed on the Baron’s face, she found the gentleman quite handsome indeed.

“This is the eldest, Lady Emma, daughter of the Earl of Hawkins, and this is the youngest, Lady Betty.” Judith gestured toward the two of them in turn, and they curtsied.

Emma was at least relieved that this time she did not lose her balance as she curtsied.

“It is a great pleasure to meet you both,” the Baron said with ease and charm, looking between them. “How are you enjoying your first ball?”

“We have only just arrived,” Emma said, aware that Judith glanced her way, clearly displeased with her answer.

“We are enjoying it very much,” Betty said swiftly. “We both look forward greatly to dancing tonight.”

“Just so.” Judith smiled, clearly much more pleased with Betty’s answer. “Their dance cards are quite empty at the moment. I hope to see them dance much tonight if the right gentleman should ask them?” It was such a leading question that Emma was sure she was blushing in embarrassment. She looked away, wishing she could be anywhere else.

As her eyes shifted, she let them dance across the crowds in the room, wondering if there was anyone else tonight that was there under duress. Her eyes found someone in the space, someone so startling in appearance that she couldn’t help staring.

A gentleman had stridden into the room with an older woman on his arm. He was so tall, his head height seemed to dominate

over others around him, and he was easy to notice. It was the face that interested Emma the most, though. The handsome lines were strong, even angular, and were set in an unmistakable frown.

Perhaps he is not so pleased to be here.

“Well, I would be glad to rectify the matter. Please, allow me to offer to dance with you both tonight.” The Baron’s words tore Emma’s attention back toward him. “Lady Emma, may I have your card?” He offered his hand to her first. She passed the card over, so startled he was being so gallant that she struggled to say anything at all. That was until Judith subtly stepped on her toe under the hems of their gowns.

“Thank you, My Lord,” Emma said hurriedly. “You do us a great honor.”

“Not at all. It is I who am honored to dance with two such beautiful ladies here tonight.” His compliment made Emma rather uncomfortable, but Betty looked ready to sing. She bobbed on her toes until Judith caught her wrist and made her stand still. “I shall see you both later this evening.” Lord Thorne said his goodbye and bowed to the two of them, leaving once he had written his name down on both cards.

As he walked away, Emma couldn’t help laughing at her sister’s manner.

“Calm yourself, Betty,” Emma pleaded.

“Yes, Emma is right. People will stare,” Judith urged. “Though I must say, this is a good start.” She took their arms and began to steer them through the room. “A dance with Lord Thorne will surely bring you both to the attention of every gentleman in the room.”

“Oh? Why is that?” Emma asked distractedly. She found her eyes were slipping across the ballroom. She peered between the honeysuckle-clad pillars, seeking out the tall, dark-haired gentleman she had seen before.

She found him with a drink in his hand, evidently in intense conversation with the older woman beside him. It was then that Emma noticed she was not the only one looking at the gentleman. Others, both ladies and gentlemen, were staring his way too.

“Lord Thorne is the most eligible bachelor here. He has the position every other gentleman covets. Any lady he dances with, others will certainly wish to dance with too.” Judith’s words made Betty beam. She picked up a fan that hung at her wrist and began to cool her face with it.

“I have never known such excitement,” Betty gushed. “I can hardly wait for our dance already. Did you not think him handsome, Emma?”

“Yes, very handsome,” she said distractedly, trying to keep her eyes away from the dark-haired man in the room.

“You do not sound as if you mean that, though I have no idea why,” Betty continued. “He was very handsome, was he not, Aunt Judith?”

“Very much so.” Judith sighed. “If I was younger, you girls would find competition.” She chuckled at herself. “Did you not think him fine, Emma?”

“There was something rather childlike in his features, that is all,” Emma said with a shrug. She quickly judged she should not have spoken at all, for both Judith and Betty glowered at her. Desperate to change the subject, she cleared her throat and pointed across the room. “Who is that gentleman, Aunt Judith?” She sought out the dark-haired man that seemed to mesmerize her so much.

“Let me see... oh.” Judith stood tall, her lips parting wide. “I do not believe it. I did not know he would be here this Season.”

“He?” Betty repeated.

“Yes, Aunt Judith, who exactly is *he*?” Emma emphasized, wanting to know the man’s name.

“He quite challenges Baron Thorne’s position as the most eligible bachelor here. In fact, he might surpass it,” Judith said, giggling with excitement. “Oh yes, a fine man indeed. Now, I do not doubt you think him handsome, do you, Emma?”

Emma chose not to reply, even as she was certain her cheeks were blushing.

“Aunt Judith, you have us on the edge of our seats, well, that is if we were sitting. Pray tell, who is he?” Her jest made them both smile as Judith gestured toward the gentleman and the woman at his side.

“He is the Duke of Waybridge, and the woman at his side is his mother, the Dowager Duchess of Waybridge.”

“A d-duke?” Emma stammered, cricking her neck as she looked toward the man again. She felt ashamed now for daring to lift her eyes to him at all.

Oh well, best abandon thinking of how handsome he is. A duke would not look at a lady who fidgets in her gown, can't walk straight in these heels, and would rather be at home in the garden, watching for what birds and bats would come out to dance in the sky tonight.

“I must introduce you.” Judith stepped forward, but Emma quickly caught her aunt’s arm.

“Aunt Judith, must you?” Emma said as swiftly as she could. “He is of a grand position indeed.”

“Just so. You are the daughters of an earl, last I checked.” Judith waved off her worry.

“Yes, but...” Emma decided her only chance to avoid an introduction was to play up to Judith’s fears. “But perhaps we are not yet trained in refinement enough to meet a man such as him.”

Judith hesitated, hovering so much that she seemed to rock back and forth on her feet.

“Well, at least you can both curtsy properly now. That will do for tonight. No, we must introduce you and cast off our doubts. Come, Betty, follow me.” Judith ushered Betty forward and clicked her fingers at Emma, urging her to do the same.

Oh no, what a mistake this is!

Emma couldn't help fearing what would happen. She had already felt awkward enough being introduced to the Baron, but to a duke? This was another realm of refinement altogether!

Don't embarrass yourself...

She was careful to try and walk in a straight line without her shoes slipping off her feet.

“Your Grace?” Judith called as she got close to the Duke and his mother. The Dowager Duchess turned at the voice and smiled at once.

“Lady Frampton. Oh! How good it is to see you again.” They both hurried to curtsy to one another, then the Dowager Duchess took Judith's hands, clasping them and showing they were old friends. “You are back in London?”

“Yes, for the Season. It has been many years since we have seen one another.”

“Indeed, but I have always enjoyed your letters.” The Dowager Duchess continued to smile before her eyes fell on Emma and Betty on either side of Judith.

Emma was distracted. Her eyes flitted toward the Duke, who was busying himself pouring out another drink.

He is very striking indeed.

“Who are these beautiful ladies you have with you?” the Dowager Duchess asked, gesturing to the two of them.

“These are my nieces, the daughters of the Earl of Hawkins. This is Lady Judith and Lady Betty.” She signaled to them each in turn, and they curtsied.

“How lovely to meet you both,” the Dowager Duchess said, curtsying deeply. “Allow me to introduce my son to you.” She angled her head, looking for her son.

To Emma’s eyes, she rather thought the Duke was trying to hide a sigh as he stepped forward, ready to meet them. She bit her lip, attempting to conceal her humor at what she suspected was some exasperation on his part.

“The Duke of Waybridge,” the Dowager Duchess gestured toward him as he bowed.

“It is a pleasure,” the Duke said woodenly as he bowed, then lifted the glass to his lips, eagerly taking a sip.

“It looks like the pleasure is as much in the wine as in the company,” Emma couldn’t help the words that escaped her lips. She smiled, showing she was in jest as the Duke’s eyes fell on her. Betty laughed, as did the Dowager Duchess, but Judith stepped on Emma’s toe again, warning her to behave.

“Well... I cannot deny it is good wine here tonight,” the Duke said as he stared at her. It was the first time he really looked at her, and Emma felt there was an intensity in his blue gaze. Unlike Baron Thorne’s pale blue eyes, these were darker like the color of the ocean. “Simple pleasures are as good as grand ones, are they not?”

“I quite agree.” Emma stepped forward, intending to try the wine herself, but the Duke beat her to it.

“Allow me.” He poured out three glasses and passed them around. When Emma took the glass, though, she held it wrong. She could feel Judith’s eyes upon her, telling her she was making an error. As Emma attempted to adjust her grasp upon it, the glass nearly slipped from her hand. “Careful.” The Duke’s hand came up over her own, keeping it safe.

Emma felt such a spark pass through her hand at his touch that her head jerked up, her eyes finding his own. She rather suspected he felt no such spark. He quickly averted his gaze and looked down at the glass as he released her.

I know that look.

She had seen it often enough on Judith's face. It was reproach. Clearly, this man was raised with a lot of refinement, and he thought she held the glass very ill indeed.

"You'll have to forgive my niece," Judith said with a pleasant smile. "It is the nerves of her debut. They have made her quite clumsy."

Emma was tempted to make a jest, but she held her tongue as she took a sip from her glass.

"Well, I hope you manage to enjoy your evening, Lady Emma," the Dowager Duchess spoke with ease. "It will be a night you will remember forever, I have no doubt."

"Remember? Oh, dear. If I make a fool of myself, then I certainly hope to forget it." Emma's words made Judith force a smile. Emma's eyes involuntarily turned back to the Duke, though, and she could have sworn a genuine smile was pulling at the rather strong line of his lips.

"I was just saying to my niece that she should dance to make the most of tonight." Judith was doing the same trick she had done with Baron Thorne. Emma purposefully looked away from the Duke and stepped close to her aunt, hoping to convey through her expression alone that she wished for her aunt to be quiet. She rather suspected Judith was avoiding her gaze on purpose. "Yet, she is in need of a dance partner."

"Well, this is fortunate indeed." The Dowager Duchess looked at the Duke. "My son was just talking of his wish to dance tonight too."

“I was?” he asked, lowering his glass from his lips. Emma could have laughed hard at the look of surprise on his face, but she held herself back. She did not want the Duke to feel forced into dancing with her, especially when he clearly thought a little ill of her from the way he had glared at the grasp she had on the glass.

“I would not wish to persuade the Duke into dancing when he has no wish to,” Emma sputtered, hoping it would give him the excuse he needed to avoid dancing with her at all. “I imagine he will be much in demand tonight as a partner as it is. You should save your energy, Your Grace.” She smiled, thinking she had given him the perfect excuse, but to her surprise, he put his glass down behind him on the table and offered her his hand.

“I daresay I can muster the energy. Lady Emma, would you dance with me?”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOUR

Jasper found something strange pass over him as he waited for Lady Emma to respond, with his hand outstretched toward her. She was peculiar and certainly not like the other ladies his mother had so far attempted to introduce him to tonight. She grasped her wine glass as if it were a mug of some kind, and she fidgeted more than once in her gown as if it made her uncomfortable. Most ladies he knew held themselves as if they were statues, holding what they perceived to be elegant positions.

“How wonderful. Yes, you must dance, Emma.” Judith took the wine glass out of her niece’s hands, giving the answer before the young lady could.

When Emma placed her hand in Jasper’s, he didn’t hesitate to lead her away from the others and head toward the dancefloor. She seemed to hang her head a little as they walked, rather than raising it high as many ladies did. Once, he had thought his dance partners were in a competition to see who could turn their nose up to the ceiling the most. When they reached the dancefloor, he caught sight of Emma’s cheeks pinkening.

“Ah, have I embarrassed you, Lady Emma?” he asked, drawing her into the middle of the dancefloor as the dancers changed over.

“That would be my aunt’s doing, Your Grace.” Her eyes met his briefly. “I am sure you did not miss the rather confident way she urged you to dance with me.”

“Well, that is the first time I have ever had a lady acknowledge the art and craftiness in getting me to dance,” he said in surprise, feeling a smile begin to tug at his lips as he stepped back from her, releasing her hand and waiting for the music to begin.

“Not of my own doing,” she reminded him, her voice soft as she curtsied.

As Jasper bowed, he kept his eyes on the lady before him at all times. She was forward speaking, something he had not seen in ladies he met before. He was so intrigued by her different nature that he found his eyes lingering on her.

Emma’s bright auburn hair was rather flattered by the candlelight. Though it was fastened into a tight chignon, it seemed unwilling to lay flat. In addition to the curls that framed her cheeks, more curls had escaped, showing they were reluctant to obey any order. She was rather beautiful with elfin features, petite just like her figure, though the honey-hued eyes were bold on her face.

She is rather beautiful.

As the music struck louder, Jasper realized it was a cotillion and stepped toward Emma, performing the choreography as needed. They began by stepping forward, coming close, then stepping back. Next, they stepped toward one another and

spun around so quickly that they switched places before stepping back again. When Emma wobbled on her feet, nearly falling, Jasper felt his hand come up to steady her. He took her arm, keeping her balanced.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” she muttered, her head hanging low and her cheeks coloring again.

“Do you know the steps?” he asked in sudden panic as he released her, and they stepped back from one another. He rather feared this was not what his mother had in mind. She was keen for him to impress the ton so they could earn some respect again. Dancing with a lady who could not dance might not be so impressive.

“I know the steps, but one’s ability to perform them well is lacking,” Emma explained as they stepped toward one another. This time, he took her hand as they circled one another. “You might regret asking me to dance after this, Your Grace. I fear I will embarrass you.”

“I am sure that is not the case.”

Yet, she began to lose balance again. Her foot practically slipped out of her shoe, and Jasper clung tightly onto her hand, keeping her standing. Despite the blush on her cheeks, he could see a smile beginning to peek through too.

“Shall we wager on it?” she asked. “For I fear the way I am going, I will be flat on my face within seconds!”

He couldn't help laughing with her as they released one another. They circled other couples, forced to part from one another before they came to face each other again. "I apologize. I imagine you have not danced with a lady like me before. Someone who cannot dance without falling and cannot hold a wine glass properly either."

The fact he had noticed how ill she held the glass made Jasper feel guilty.

"Perhaps we should not care how we hold wine glasses," he said softly as he took her hand and spun her under his arm. Her head flicked round to face him, revealing a sudden humored look in her eyes.

"If only someone would tell my aunt that." At her jest, he began to smile.

Jasper had to admit that when he arrived tonight, his mood was morose. He feared his anger returning, as it so often did as of late, but Emma seemed to have shifted that mood. He was smiling quite freely.

"I see. So your aunt is instructing you on how to hold a wine glass?" Jasper asked. "May I say how absurd it is?"

"Absurd, certainly, but after I nearly dropped the glass, perhaps there is some truth in what she says." She turned to face him. They spun around one another and were not supposed to touch, but Emma tripped on her feet. This time, Jasper was so sure she would fall that he reached out for her. His hand found her waist, holding her up.

Any other time he would have been thankful for the busyness of the dancefloor, hiding such action from being visible to any onlooker, but he was too busy thinking of the way Emma looked at him at that touch. Her eyes were wide.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“Well, I would not let you fall, Lady Emma,” he said and released her. They turned around one another as he was certain he began to blush. Worried someone might have seen what he had done, he glanced to the edge of the dancefloor.

His mother and Lady Frampton were standing there, watching the two of them intently. He cursed, hoping they had not spied the touch.

“If I did fall, it might liven up this affair.” Emma gestured to the other dancers. “My brother and I would certainly laugh and find humor in it.” Jasper smiled a little, finding himself becoming more and more intrigued.

“I am sure it will not come to that.” Jasper noticed how Lady Frampton was watching her niece with such intent that he shifted his focus back to Emma. It was good timing, for she slipped on her toes and nearly fell into him. He barely caught her in time, grasping her hands and walking her backward.

“I imagine you are regretting this now,” she murmured.

“Not at all. As you said, it livens things up a bit.” He turned her in a circle and nodded his head at her aunt. “Why is your

aunt issuing such corrective behaviors as how to hold a glass if you permit a stranger to ask such a thing?"

"I see no harm in talking of it." Emma shrugged as they danced as if it was no great matter. "I grew up away from the rather *refined* behavior of the ton."

"Refined? Or demanding?"

"Well observed, Your Grace," she said, nodding her head at him. "As demanding as most school tutors, I do not doubt." Her jest made him smile once again. "I had a good childhood. The happiest, in fact."

They paused in the dance, facing one another and just holding hands, waiting for other couples to circle them.

"I had freedom," she whispered, gazing down at their hands. "My aunt has made it quite plain that is not how the ton works, sadly."

"Freedom," Jasper repeated the word as a bit of envy burned in his stomach. "If only we had all had such childhoods."

"You did not, Your Grace?" she asked, her eyes finding his.

"Well, this is a rather personal conversation for two people who have just met." He released her hand, startled by the warmth that passed between them. They returned to the beginning of the dance, stepping toward one another and then turning around each other.

“I suppose it is, but I would rather talk about something meaningful, would you not?” she asked. “Alternatively, we could talk of the weather and be utterly dull. Did you see it rain earlier today?” she teased him so openly that he laughed rather deeply. He was so distracted by that laugh that he barely noticed the end of the music was drawing near.

Emma slipped a final time, grimacing with it, but Jasper was there once again. One of his hands found hers, and the other found her waist.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her face rather close to his. “I would have fallen many times in this dance if it was not for you.”

“There is no need to thank me.”

“There is. Just as great a need as there is to throw these shoes out when I get home,” she whispered, prompting him to smile again. He noticed the other couples were already curtsying and bowing. He released her, and they did the same before he offered his hand to her, leading her away from the floor. “Shall I apologize again for my poor skills?”

“Pray, do not,” he pleaded with her. “What you lack in dancing skills you make up for in conversation. Believe me, Lady Emma, I know which skills I’d rather be in the presence of.” After they had been so open with each other, he was tempted to tell her that most ladies rather bored him when dancing, but not her.

She is interesting.

The words were on his lips when he noticed someone approaching the two of them. He recognized Lord Thorne at once. The two of them were sort of friends, at least, they called each other that, though Jasper was not sure really how well he knew the gentleman. He doubted Lord Thorne would come out of his way to speak with him, which meant one thing: he was coming to talk to Lady Emma. Surprisingly, it made Jasper reluctant to let go of her hand.

“I suspect your next dance partner is coming to take his turn,” Jasper said and nodded his head at Baron Thorne.

“Perhaps so. I pray he is as good at catching me as you are, Your Grace.” Then, she lowered her voice and leaned toward him. “I apologize for my aunt’s manipulation again.”

“There is no need to apologize and no need to blush either,” he said, nodding his head at her red cheeks.

“You could have just not drawn attention to it.”

“Where would have been the fun in that?” he asked. The two of them smiled as he released her. “I’ll leave you to your dance partner.”

He left her side and crossed the room, heading back toward the drinks table. As he walked, Jasper felt Lady Emma’s strange effect on him. He’d smiled in her company and even made jests. The last time he had made such jests, Lettie had not left for the countryside.

When he reached the drinks table, he poured himself a champagne, but it didn't quite reach his lips. It was stopped by Marianne, who appeared at his side and placed a hand over the glass, stopping him.

"You are not drinking tonight, Son."

"I thought this was a ball. Are we not supposed to be enjoying ourselves?" His sarcasm displeased her, but he managed to free the glass and lift it to his lips, taking a hearty gulp.

"What did you make of Lady Emma then?" Marianne asked, peering past his shoulder and looking to the dancefloor. "She is the daughter of the Earl of Hawkins."

"Yes, I heard," he said, turning to look at the dancefloor too.

"Quite a lady. She'll have a dowry. A good one, Jasper."

"I see... and is she 'quite a lady' just because of that dowry?" His continued sarcasm wasn't helping things. The Dowager Duchess huffed, shaking her head and staring forward.

"She is dancing with Lord Thorne now. She does not seem to be smiling, though." Marianne's words caught Jasper's interest, and he watched Emma closely.

It was true she was not smiling, not as she had done when dancing with Jasper. If anything, she was dancing with even more care, seeming to make a special effort not to slip up.

Though when she did and nearly fell, Lord Thorne did not catch her. She barely caught herself in time.

“She smiled with you,” Marianne pointed out. Jasper felt his spine straighten at the idea.

“We enjoyed the dance, Mother. Leave it at that.” He was no fool. He could tell what his mother was doing.

“It would be the ultimate way to secure our family’s reputation now,” Marianne continued in a hushed whisper, “if you were to marry well.”

“Mother...” He grimaced and looked away from Emma. “We agreed if I came here tonight, we would not talk of the event nor our reasons for being here.”

“I know, I know.” Marianne held up her hands in innocence. “Yet, I cannot help talking a little—”

“Mother.” His words made her fall quiet.

“Very well, I will behave myself.” She stood taller. “Tell me this, at least, Jasper. I have more events to arrange. There are luncheons, tea parties and another ball. In fact, there is a luncheon later this week. You will come, will you not?”

Jasper lowered his glass as he glanced back at the dancefloor. Before this evening, he would have gladly conjured an excuse to get out of such a promise, but now, he was not so sure it was worth it. If attending such events as this meant spending more

time in an enjoyable company such as Lady Emma's, then perhaps there could be some good in it.

“Well?” Marianne asked impatiently. “Will you come?”

Jasper watched as Emma's dance finished with Baron Thorne. She offered a polite smile, but it was all it was. She did not enjoy it as she had enjoyed their dance.

“If you wish, Mother. I will be there.”

“Excellent. I will give you a list of other events we are to attend.”

“Wait... just how many are there?”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIVE

“Please, Andrew, I am ready to beg you,” Betty pleaded, sitting on the footstool before him.

Emma peered over the edge of her book, watching her brother and sister together across the room. Andrew hadn’t lowered his book to look at his sister but kept it firmly in front of his face.

“Then beg. It will not sway me,” Andrew assured her.

“Perhaps if you truly begged? On your knees?” Emma teased. She did not expect Betty to do it, but she did. Emma sat forward, struggling to hold in her laugh as Betty kicked the footstool away and dropped to her knees in front of her brother. “Oh my, she’s doing it.”

“Is she?” Andrew asked, lowering his book enough to see Betty, and his eyes widened. “Well, you must be desperate, Betty.”

“Please, please, please, Andrew,” Betty begged. “Is this not enough to persuade you to help me? All I want is a little practice.”

“Then attend another ball.”

“I wish to improve before the next ball,” Betty said. “Did you not see me dancing last night?”

“I did not pay that close attention,” Andrew said, though his eyes shifted to Emma. “I did see you, however, Emma, as you danced with the Duke of Waybridge.”

“You did?” Emma attempted some nonchalance, fiddling with her book.

“Just how many times did you nearly fall over?”

“Too many times.” Emma tutted at herself. “The poor man must have thought himself dancing with a heron on ice.”

“Exactly,” Betty agreed, clasping her hands together. “This is how bad we are. We must practice. Andrew, please practice with me.”

“Ah, I wish to say no, but seeing my sister on the floor on her knees is pulling at my heartstrings a little,” Andrew confessed, lowering his book.

“At least we now know how to get anything out of you,” Emma called as he stood to his feet.

“Don’t you dare try it,” he warned before taking his place in the middle of the floor. Betty hurried to clear the floor, pushing away a dumbwaiter table and rolling up the rug. “Which dance are we doing?”

“A cotillion. How about *The Captain’s Cotillion*?” Betty had barely finished asking the question before she curtsied to Andrew and began the dance.

Emma abandoned her book entirely and watched her brother and sister practicing their dancing, quickly understanding why Andrew had not danced the night before despite their aunt’s instructions.

“Oh dear, Andrew. You’re worse than me,” Emma called to him.

“I know,” he called back, tripping Betty so much that he had to reach out to catch her.

“You just need to dance more calmly.” Betty urged him to return to the beginning of the dance, “Come, let us try again.” They barely performed two movements together before he tripped over his own feet.

“Perhaps I am more like our father than I realize,” Andrew muttered. “I thought he was the one always falling over. I am glad I did not dance last night. I would have embarrassed you all.”

“I think I did that when I danced.” Emma shifted with her book, turning her gaze on it as she thought of what had passed

the night before. Whenever she turned her thoughts to it, she thought of the dance with the Duke of Waybridge. She had both smiled and cringed during that dance, knowing how embarrassed the Duke must have felt when dancing with her.

“Did you not enjoy last night?” Betty asked as she grabbed Andrew’s arms and tugged him into the correct position. “I loved it.”

“Of course you did,” Andrew scoffed. “It is the sort of event that would please you. I’d rather be free of it. I felt as if we had walked into a prison.”

“A prison!?” Betty spluttered. “Rather fine for a prison, was it not?”

“Very well, an animal enclosure,” Andrew went on. “All the ladies with feathers in their hair and gentlemen standing tall, with their chests pushed out. As Emma said, they were all in competition with one another. Who wishes to live amongst that?”

“I don’t,” Emma agreed.

“Well, I do,” Betty’s voice lost its excitement. The sudden somberness there caught Emma’s interest. “Maybe there is nothing so awful in wanting to be like others sometimes,” she said softly, fidgeting so much with her hands that Emma could have sworn her sister scratched her skin. “I’d like to feel as if I am one of them rather than the odd one in the room.”

Emma and Andrew exchanged guilty looks across the space between them. Emma nodded her head at Andrew, urging him silently to dance again. He clearly understood the message, for he took Betty's hand.

"Let us try again, Betty. From the beginning, yes?"

"Yes."

They returned to their practice, but they were soon disturbed. Judith walked in. When she saw them practicing, she clapped along, giving them a beat to dance to. As Andrew and Betty collided in the dance, Judith's claps halted.

"Well, perhaps the situation is a little worse than I thought," Judith said, striding into the room. "Have no fear. I have hired a dance instructor. They shall arrive later today and will teach you all how to dance. Properly." She added the word, making Emma hang her head a little.

We must have embarrassed our aunt last night.

Judith gave some quick instructions to Betty and Andrew, then urged them to try again before she retreated to the seat beside Emma.

"Shouldn't Emma be practicing instead of me?" Andrew called as he was collared into practicing a second dance. "She was the one who had the most dance partners last night."

“They must have run from the dancefloor afterward, desperate to get away,” Emma mocked herself.

“Hardly. The Duke of Waybridge did not, did he?” Andrew’s jab caught her attention. Emma looked up from her book and glared at her brother as he turned Betty under his arm. “I thought he rather enjoyed his dance with you.”

“Do not tease me, Andrew,” Emma said, feeling her embarrassment outweighing her wish to turn the matter into a joke. “I was the one who danced with him. I saw how he blushed when I first fell and how he looked at the crowds, fearful of being seen dancing with me. I know what the man truly thought.”

“What is that?” Judith asked.

Emma closed up her book, reluctant to put the matter into words. She couldn’t explain why it bothered her so much, the idea that the Duke might regret dancing with her, but it did. It grated, deep in her gut, as if something was wriggling there, unsettled.

“He wished he was anywhere else but in the room at that moment.”

“Did he say as much?” Judith asked, her lips parting in horror.

“Of course not. The man was too gentlemanly for that.” Emma thought of the Duke’s words. “In fact... I suspect him to be rather a kind man.” He had been kind to her and caught her every time she slipped. “Patient too.”

“High praise from Emma. You must like him. You rarely praise anyone if it is not in jest,” Andrew called, yelping when Betty stepped on his toe.

Emma shifted in her seat, worried to see that Andrew had spied the truth.

I did like the Duke.

“Have no fear. I can also joke about how he felt pressured into asking me to dance. He was backed into a corner, was he not, Auntie?” She looked pointedly at Judith beside her, who shrugged.

“It worked, did it not?” she asked. “Emma, you danced last night with the two most eligible men of the ton, plus others.”

“I fell into one’s arms and stamped on the other’s toe. Yes, I’d call that a success.” Emma’s dry words made Judith tut and shake her head.

“It has brought you into the notice of every gentleman in the ton. If we are to see you married, that is what we must do.”

Emma stiffened in her chair.

There is that word again... married.

She waited until she was certain that Andrew and Betty were wholly absorbed in their dance. Every time Andrew went wrong, Betty would berate him and physically put him in the correct position, then she would step on his toe, and he'd yelp again. With them completely distracted, Emma lowered her voice and whispered to her aunt.

“Aunt Judith, why do you speak so much of me being wed? Surely there is no great urgency. There are ladies older than I that have not been called spinsters,” Emma said, only to see her aunt shake her head.

“It is about reputation and opportunities, Emma.” Judith shifted closer to Emma's side and took her hand. “Allow me to speak earnestly with you for a minute, dear. It is the kind of honesty you will not hear from your parents, for they do not wish to speak of ill things.”

“Who enjoys speaking of ill things?” Emma asked, but Judith shook her head. “Not the time for jesting?”

“Not at all.”

“Very well, go on,” Emma encouraged her aunt.

“You have a younger sister,” Judith lowered her voice further and nodded at Betty across the room. “It is a fact of this world that what happens to you reflects on your sister. Marry well, and you thrust your sister into the notice of other equally well-placed and high-ranking gentlemen. She will have every opportunity to marry whomever she wishes. If you should marry poorly, well...” Judith trailed off.

“I understand,” Emma whispered, finding all humor that had been with her minutes ago vanished. “I marry poorly, and Betty cannot raise her eyes to any man in the ton. She will be forced to marry down too.”

“Yes.”

“And if I should not marry?” Emma said, fearful she already knew the answer.

“Then your sister may not marry either.” Judith sighed. “It is an absurd way that the ton works, but it is the truth. I was tasked with the same burden when I was your age, you know.”

“You were?” Emma asked with intrigue.

“Come with me. There is something I wish to show you.” Judith stood to her feet and beckoned Emma to follow her out of the room. They left Andrew and Betty behind them, their attempt at dancing quickly falling into a rising argument.

Judith led their path out of the sitting room and crossed the hallway to the back door. They hovered there, standing in the doorway and looking out to the garden.

“Tell me what you see?” Judith urged.

Emma would have happily spoken of the blackbirds perched on the stone wall, singing heartily, but she knew it was not what her aunt wanted.

“I see my mother and father,” Emma said, with a smile creeping on her cheeks. Frances was gardening with her head bent over a flower beginning to bloom. Behind her, Bernard lay on a stone bench. In his hand was a book of poetry, and he was reading it out to Frances. “They are always so happy.”

“Just so,” Judith whispered at her side. “I was the elder sister, and I am not ashamed to admit that when your parents met, I had no gentleman in mind to marry myself. Seeing the two of them together, it was plain to see how well-suited they were.”

She continued to smile as she gestured toward them. “My sister with her head always in the clouds, and the Earl, quite an emotional man, and one that would prefer to talk of airy things rather than anything serious. They fell in love swiftly. It was both pleasing to watch and nerve-wracking.” Slowly, Judith reached for the garden door and closed it. “The late Earl, your grandfather, was not pleased about the idea of his son making a connection with a woman with little connections of her own.”

“Truly?” Emma asked, startled by the words. It was not a story she’d heard before.

“In fact, your grandfather even counseled your father not to court your mother. I remember it well.” Judith’s manner was troubled as she took a couple of steps away, her hands fidgeting together. “That is when I met my husband, the Marquess of Frampton. To speak plainly, I saw an opportunity.” She looked back at Emma. “If I could marry so well, then the late Earl of Hawkins could have no objection to my sister as a match for his son, not when her sister was a marchioness.”

“You mean...” Emma stepped forward. “You married for my mother’s sake?”

Judith tapped her nose, showing it was a great secret.

“I loved my husband, Emma, but perhaps not as greatly as your mother loves your father. I never regretted what I did, though. My sister has been happy, as you all have.” Judith’s words made Emma long to return to the garden door, to look out to her parents again and see their relationship in a new light. “I tell you this story not to frighten you.”

“Do you not?” Emma asked in doubt. She certainly felt frightened.

“I speak to stress to you the imperativeness of the situation. You cannot stay in your parents’ home forever. You must marry someday, and if you marry well, you give Betty the opportunity to marry anyone of her choosing.”

“She could marry for love,” Emma summarized, then turned in a quick circle. “What if I wished to marry for love, too?” she asked. Emma had long had these thoughts, but she did not speak of them openly, not to anyone. “I have seen how happy my parents have been. Is it so wrong to long for that too?”

Judith smiled broadly as she stepped toward Emma and reached out toward her. She pushed some of the loose auburn curls back behind Emma’s ear.

“There is nothing wrong at all in that, Emma. Nothing. Yet we must be sensible too.”

“So... I must take care to make sure I fall in love with a man of good fortune and standing?” Emma jested.

“Just so,” Judith agreed with a nod. “For now, set your sights on Baron Thorne and the Duke of Waybridge.”

“You say that just because they are both so eligible.”

“Precisely so,” Judith said with eagerness. “Set your sights there, and any gentleman in the ton will wish to dance with you. Do you wish for freedom of choice, Emma? The chance to fall in love? Then continue giving your attention to them. It may work out better than you think.”

“Will it?” Emma was not so convinced. “Aunt Judith, I remember what happened last night. I saw the Duke’s face when we danced together. Yes, he was polite and kind, but I embarrassed him so much. No gentleman such as he will wish to dance with me again.”

“You may be right, but you may be wrong. We shall have to wait for the next ball to find out.”

CHAPTER SIX

“Lady Hasselby’s luncheon? You neglected to mention her name when I agreed to this.” Jasper stepped warily out of the carriage, suddenly uneasy. His mother may have collared him into attending such events, but she also seemed to be doing an excellent job of hiding precisely who he was to meet. “She is a good friend of the Marquess of Hatfield’s. I do not think it a good thing if we should run into him, Mother.”

“He will not be here, I am sure of it. Lady Hasselby assured me of such.” Yet Marianne hid her face as she took Jasper’s arm and steered him forward.

After the last time Jasper had seen the Marquess of Hatfield, he did not doubt the Marquess had spread bad words about him. Jasper didn’t regret what he had done to the Marquess, though.

What else was I supposed to do when he had hold of my sister!?

He could feel that anger rising now. His familiar friend that showed in his darkest moments came to greet him. These days, Jasper rather feared what he would do when he next saw the Marquess of Hatfield.

“Do not think of any of that today,” his mother pleaded, “think only of having a good time and ensuring we make a good impression. So that we may maintain our good re—”

“Reputation, I know.” Jasper sighed deeply as he allowed his mother to steer him through a gate in the open garden wall. They followed the path of other guests, who were all clearly here to attend the luncheon. They circled the house before coming upon a stone terrace laid out with a multitude of tables. On the fine tables were muslin table cloths and so many stacks of cakes and teacups that there rather seemed to be too much food.

“The Duke of Lancaster and the Marquess of Whitfield will be here today. You must speak to them too. Be friendly with them,” Marianne pleaded at his side, her tone desperate.

“Yes, calm yourself, Mother,” he hushed her as they approached their hosts.

Lady Hasselby greeted them warmly, curtsying to the two of them and beckoning them forward.

“Please, enjoy your lunch as you wish. We also have games in the garden if people seek more vigorous activity, and I will encourage anyone to walk the gardens. They are quite fine today.”

“Thank you, Lady Hasselby,” Marianne said, smiling sweetly. “I have been looking forward to today with great excitement.” She gripped Jasper’s arm harder, urging him to speak.

“As have I.”

“You are both so kind.” Lady Hasselby was clearly pleased by their words. “Do enjoy yourselves. There is good company here, and... well, some odd company too,” She uttered the words with a little worry as she glanced over her shoulder.

Jasper followed her gaze, seeking out whom she was referring to. He felt his jaw slacken when he saw just whom she was thinking of.

Lady Emma and her sister sat at a table, with whom he presumed to be their brother sitting on Lady Emma’s other side. Apparently, they were making something of a display of themselves, for Lady Emma picked up some cutlery and was quickly told by her aunt it was the wrong set. Lady Betty rearranged her napkin on her lap so many times it was a wonder it would lay still at all.

Jasper was jerked away by his mother, and they made their way to their own table.

“What did she mean by that?” Jasper asked, his voice pitching high in surprise.

“I believe she was talking of their manners, dear,” Marianne said in a rush. “Lady Frampton explained to me at the ball the other night that the Earl of Hawkins’ three children could do with some *improvement*.”

“So they can be improved the way a sample of embroidery can be bettered? With a few stitches in the right places?”

“Your dryness is not helping.”

“No? It humors me.” He felt his mother lead him toward one of the tables on the far side of the terrace, but his eyes kept drawing back to the other table, where Lady Emma sat with her siblings.

Lady Emma and her brother spoke in hushed tones together. Whatever passed between them had to be a jest as they laughed loudly for it. A smile tugged at Jasper’s lips as he watched them, longing to be involved with the jest too. In the next moment, Lady Frampton shushed them, clearly thinking they should not laugh so loudly.

“There is space at their table for the two of us.” Jasper turned on his heel, taking his mother with him.

“What? No, Jasper. We cannot.”

“I thought Lady Frampton was your friend?” he asked, attempting to draw her forward, but she dug her heels into the terrace stone beneath them. They were both forced to halt, and Jasper did not pull again for fear of making a scene.

“She is my friend, and though I wish her well, I am also sensible of the comments made by such people as Lady Hasselby. If there is a general wariness of the Earl of Hawkins’ children because of a lack of refinement, then maybe we should not be so close with them after all.” She

busied herself with fanning her face and smiling at her acquaintances that passed her by.

“Your tune has changed,” Jasper observed. “I seem to remember a voice in my ear the other night telling me to consider Lady Emma as she comes with a good dowry.”

“Shh,” his mother urged. “Well, perhaps I have considered things more now.”

“Would that be during the last minute when you heard Lady Hasselby’s comment?” His question made his mother’s dark eyebrows pin together.

“That is not amusing.”

“If you forbid me to make a joke, how am I supposed to enjoy these events you force me to attend? I must find a source of amusement somewhere.” His eyes fell on Lady Emma and her siblings once again.

“Let us sit here, Jasper.”

“But—”

“Ah, Lord Withers, so good to see you again.”

Before Jasper could put up any more objection, his mother managed to capture the attention of the gentleman at the table beside them and prompted an invitation for the two of them to

sit there. Jasper sat down and behaved well. He smiled and was polite, always responding to the conversation, but his focus was not on the table. As luncheon was served, his eyes kept flitting to another table on the terrace, wondering what it would have been like had he been able to join Emma's table.

"You have barely paid attention to the conversation." Marianne's words were coupled with her nudging him in his side as the luncheon came to a close. "Are you distracted?"

"Somewhat." Jasper chose not to elaborate on who he was distracted by.

Why do I look so much at Lady Emma?

He supposed it had something to do with the laughter that came from her table. He longed to know of the jests being made and to have as much fun as she seemed to have.

"Well, you must do the rounds now." Marianne urged him to his feet.

"The rounds?" he scoffed. "You make it sound like a duty to talk to people."

"It is. Do I need to remind you of why we are here—"

"No." Jasper hurried to his feet and politely made his excuses to the rest at the table.

He didn't need another reminder from his mother, for every conversation with her seemed to be such a reminder. Even at night, when they played cards together, or when he returned from the gentleman's club to find her waiting for him on the staircase, she would speak of it.

“After what happened to Lettie, we must seek to save this family reputation.”

It was all he ever heard. He was tired of living in a world where they talked of nothing else.

As instructed, he politely greeted his acquaintances, being certain to have conversations with the Duke of Lancaster and the Marquess of Whitfield, as his mother wished him to, though he hurried through the task. Once his duties were done, his eyes fell on the table he longed to sit at. Without hesitation, he walked toward it, aware that pairs of eyes turned toward him as he did so, but he ignored those stares and any gossip that could follow.

“Ah, Your Grace,” Lady Frampton was the first to greet him, moving to her feet. “How are you today?”

“Well, I thank you. And yourself?” he asked politely, his eyes slipping away to look at Emma. She was apparently distracted by his approach, for she hurried to adjust her grasp on her glass, trying to hold it right. He chewed the inside of his mouth to stop himself from laughing, seeing through her attempt to improve herself.

How mad to concern ourselves with how we hold our glassware!

“I am well, indeed,” Judith answered him. “My nieces were just speaking of the ball the other night, and what a pleasure it was to meet you there.”

“Yes, we were,” Lady Betty said, leaning forward in her chair. Jasper’s eyes flicked to Emma, noticing that she had flattened her lips together, apparently trying to hide her smile.

“What an interesting translation of that conversation,” she murmured, talking directly to her brother at her side.

“Yes. At least I am not the only one who thought we were talking of something else entirely,” Andrew added, and the two of them shared a smile.

“Please, Your Grace, do join us at our table for a drink.” Judith took Jasper’s arm and tried to steer him into sitting.

“Well, I...” Jasper faltered, rather startled at the sheer effort she put into persuading him toward her seat.

“Aunt Judith, you are cornering the Duke.” Emma moved to her feet and rounded the table. She spoke with a smile, but Jasper could see the warning there in her tone. “I am sure the gentleman has many to greet here today. We are just a few of many.”

“He can spare a few minutes, I am certain,” Judith said. The discussion ended with Jasper standing in front of a chair, with the two ladies on either side of him. Uncertain of what to do

now, Jasper remained standing. “Let me find a spare glass for you, Your Grace, so you may join us.” Judith turned away.

“Run now whilst you can,” Emma whispered to Jasper. “She will be back in a moment and will no doubt endeavor to persuade you into staying for longer.”

“Is Lady Frampton really so powerful to make a man do what he doesn’t wish to?” Jasper asked, leaning toward her so only she could hear him.

“You are yet to know her properly.”

“I’d like to see her try to make me do anything,” Jasper said and stood taller.

“Ha! You think because you are a gentleman and a rather tall one she would not make you cower like a mouse?” Emma asked, smiling wide. “She makes my brother do everything, and look at him.”

“Am I being mentioned?” Andrew said, standing from his seat on the other side of the table.

“Yes, I was just saying that our aunt has a habit of making us do whatever she wishes. Even you.”

“I’m afraid she does. Apparently, I’m weak-willed. Who knew it?” Andrew laughed at himself before turning his focus on Jasper. “We have not been introduced properly. I’m Emma’s brother, Lord Follet.”

“The Duke of Waybridge,” Jasper finished the introduction and bowed.

“A pleasure,” Andrew bowed with the words. “What do you make of this event here today, Your Grace?”

“Andrew... behave,” Emma warned him.

“I am behaving.” Andrew shrugged as if it was no great matter. “He is a man of the world. I am sure he sees it as we do.”

“How is that?” Jasper asked with interest.

“We were having something of a debate,” Emma whispered to him as if it were a great secret. Jasper found himself stepping toward her to hear her better. “Our sister thinks this event quite beautiful, the best luncheon she has even been to.”

“And you do not agree?” Jasper asked knowingly, watching as Emma’s lips curled into the smallest of smiles.

“Ah, you can read my mind.”

“Only your expression,” he said, prompting that smile to widen.

“We see it as something else entirely,” Andrew continued. “We see it as something of a display. For instance, take a look at

our hosts, Your Grace.” He gestured toward Lady Hasselby and her husband. “Are you not reminded of peacocks when they raise their feathers to impress others?”

Jasper chuckled, thinking it a very apt description, indeed, from how Lady Hasselby fluttered her fan to get attention rather than to cool herself.

“As long as they don’t start squawking in the ridiculous fashion that peacocks do, I daresay I can bear it.” Jasper’s jest prompted the siblings to laugh. At once, Jasper felt he’d made an error here today. He should have spent the luncheon at this table rather than his own. It would have been a good excuse to forget why he was here. For a few moments, he could have ignored the trouble that followed Lettie and his mother’s insistence on cushioning their reputation.

Perhaps, I could have just enjoyed myself.

“Andrew? Andrew, dear.” Lady Frampton appeared suddenly at their sides again. “I must introduce you to Lady May Withers. She has just arrived. It is an acquaintance you must make.”

Jasper recognized in Andrew’s face a fellow gentleman being pushed toward meeting potential brides he did not want to meet. Andrew sighed, though he tried to hide it.

“My advice?” Jasper whispered for him to hear. “Get it done quickly, then it’s over.”

“That is good advice,” Andrew agreed. “Yet, Auntie, I am afraid I promised Emma I would play a game of nine pins.”

“Yes, he did,” Emma said in a hurry.

“Games can wait,” Lady Frampton’s voice brooked no refusal as she took her nephew’s arm.

“Help me,” Andrew pleaded, looking at Jasper and Emma.

“If I knew a way, I’d help, but nothing can save you now.” Jasper’s dry words made Emma laugh at his side, covering her lips in an attempt to hide the laugh.

“You’re no help at all.” Andrew gave him a mock glare before he walked off with his aunt.

“Well, that is the end of the game then,” Emma said, her tone full of disappointment. “I was rather looking forward to nine pins.”

“Then may I offer a solution?” Jasper wasn’t sure why he offered his idea to her, but the prospect of staying a little longer in this good humor and company seemed too much to refuse. “I could play as your partner, Lady Emma. What do you say?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Usual rules apply, Your Grace?” Emma asked as she strode across the lawn toward the nine pins and the bowls, leading the way. The Duke seemed in a hurry to catch up with her as they left the main party, and behind him was Betty, who trailed at the back, looking rather longingly to the main party.

“Of course, but we must agree on something if we are to play a game.”

Emma stopped as she reached the game set up on a long lawn banked by yew trees on either side. She unthreaded the bonnet from her chin and took it off, determined to be free of it if she was to play properly. Betty collected it from her hands and sat on a nearby bench, content to sit and watch rather than play.

“What is that?” Emma asked, encouraging the Duke on.

“What does the winner get?” the Duke asked and picked up the pins, laying them out one at a time.

“Let me think...” Emma tapped her chin in thought, rather startled by this change of events. She was so certain that she

embarrassed the man before her, but if that was the case, why would he offer to play this game with her? Her only conclusion was that he wished to escape the party for a while. “How about the winner gets to ask a question?”

“A question? Ha!” The Duke laughed as he stepped back, ushering her to do the same. They picked up their bowls and increased the distance between them and the nine pins. “Most ladies I know would ask to win something of monetary value.”

“Truly?” The idea seemed absurd to her. “Perhaps I am just a different sort of lady.”

“You surprise me.” His wryness made her fall still and offer him a playful glare. He smiled a little as they took their places, ready to begin their game. “So, that is our terms? Whoever wins may ask the other a question, and they must answer it. Truthfully.”

“We have an agreement.” She nodded. “You may go first, Your Grace.”

“I thought the adage was ‘ladies first?’”

“Perhaps so, but usual winners should be gracious in victory. If I believe I am to win, then I should at least give you a chance, should I not?” she spoke with mock pride and gestured for him to take the shot, watching as his smile widened.

It was the first full smile she had seen on his face, and it lit up those angular features, transforming them. It was like seeing the night sky suddenly lit with the moon and stars. Emma

swallowed, feeling a sudden dryness in her mouth as she admired his handsome face.

“Very well, I will go first.” He took his shot, bending down just enough to roll the bowls into the pins. When all of the pins were knocked over, scattering across the grass, Emma stood straight with her jaw slack.

Oh dear...

“What was that about being confident in winning?” the Duke asked, turning to look at her with a smile still in place.

“Perhaps I have met my match after all,” she mused, taking his place. He walked off to reset the pins and then returned to her side, waiting for her to take her turn. She rolled the bowl and repeated his shot, managing to knock over all the pins at once. “Or maybe I do not need to worry just yet.” Her tease made the Duke chuckle as she replaced the pins and geared up for his next shot.

The next few rounds passed quickly, and they were, indeed, evenly matched. They both achieved clearing the pins another two times, then they both only managed to knock down seven of the pins on their third go. When it came to their next attempt, Emma was aware they were attracting an audience.

Andrew sat on a stone bench beside Betty, clearly having made an escape from their aunt. The two were talking keenly together, watching Emma with the Duke.

I will be teased for this mercilessly later, I do not doubt it.

“The way this is going, Lady Emma,” the Duke said as he returned to her side after setting up the pins, “I will have to become more artful in how I win this game.”

“Oh? Then you would be wise not to tell me of your tactics in advance. Or I might steal them.” She prepared herself for her next shot when she felt a tickle in her neck. She cringed away from the touch as she threw the bowl and managed to miss the nine pins entirely. “What the...”

Andrew’s and Betty’s laughter could be heard from the bench as Emma turned round to see the Duke had a dandelion in his grasp. He twirled it around his fingers, showing exactly what he had done.

“That is not art. That is sabotage!” Emma accused him, moving off to retrieve her bowl.

“Ah, but we did not put in any rules to ban sabotage, did we?” he asked playfully, dropping the dandelion as he took her place ahead of the pins.

“Very well, but you are not the only one who can play at this game, Your Grace.”

She waited until he faced the pins, then took her opportunity. Reaching toward the ground, she placed her bowl down and subtly kicked it forward. The Duke didn’t appear to notice, so when he stepped forward to throw his bowl, he slipped on her bowl and went flying in the wrong direction.

“Watch your feet,” Andrew called. Two other guests at the luncheon that were walking the grounds scattered out of the way of the incoming bowl.

Emma laughed so hard that she quite forgot Judith’s instructions. She only remembered halfway through to cover her mouth when she laughed, hiding her lips.

“Now, that was true sabotage,” the Duke said, turning to face her. “I think you should forfeit a point for that.”

“No, indeed!” she complained.

“Very well, but I win regardless.”

“Why is that?” Emma asked, placing her hands on her hips. The Duke pointed to the pins where one was conveniently knocked over. “How on earth did that happen?” She looked at Andrew and Betty, sitting a short distance away, sniggering together. “Did one of them do it?”

“That I cannot say, but... I win, Lady Emma. Surely, I can collect my prize now?” He walked toward her with his arms folded, standing tall.

Emma couldn’t explain what came over her. There had been something so enjoyable and thrilling about the game with the Duke that she had quite forgotten the luncheon party and her aunt entirely. She had thought only of their fun.

Looking up at him now, with how he subtly smiled at her, she couldn't help longing for this moment not to end. She decided to match his stance, stepping toward him with her arms folded. They both seemed aware of their height difference, smiling at one another.

“Are you trying to stand as tall as me?” he whispered to her.

“Attempting... yet clearly not achieving.”

“Shall I get you a rock to stand on?” he asked, his jesting tone plain.

“Oh, cruel man,” she mocked, watching as he chuckled softly. “Very well, collect your prize for winning our game, though be warned, I still do not think it was a fair one.” She glanced at her brother and sister, rather suspicious that Andrew might have jumped forward when she wasn't looking and knocked down one of the pins.

“I have a question to ask.” The Duke waited until she returned her gaze to him. “Tell me this if you will, Lady Emma. When I came to see your table, you seemed in quite a hurry to be rid of me.”

“Rid of you?” Emma repeated in surprise, her smile falling from her face.

“You told your aunt that I had others to greet, practically urged me not to sit down. Have I offended you in some way?” he asked slowly.

“Oh, good Lord.” Emma shook her head vigorously. “I see I have not made myself clear. It was not my intention to send you away, Your Grace. I was giving you the opportunity to escape my aunt’s rather *forceful* ways before she persuaded you to stay with us for the entire luncheon. I love my aunt, but I am not blind to her craftiness.”

“And pray tell, why did you think I would not wish to stay?” the Duke asked quietly.

“You can only ask one question.”

“Then I ask that one.” There was a slight playful smirk on his lips. She shook her head at him in reprimand but decided to answer him anyway.

“I know of my odd behaviors, Your Grace,” she spoke quietly, nervous to answer him aloud. “A gentleman in a position such as yourself... you no doubt must be embarrassed by my lack of refinement at times,” she whispered the words, watching as the Duke’s lips parted in wonder. “I would not blame you for it in the slightest. My aunt has made it plain it is not the way the ton should act. That is why I gave you a chance to escape.”

“Then might I suggest that your aunt is not right about everything?” the Duke said as he held her gaze. “Maybe it is not what the ton expects. The falling when dancing, the dropping of glasses, the rather wild way you play nine pins...”

“Oh, I mistakenly thought you were about to compliment me, Your Grace,” she teased, watching as he fought his smile.

“This is a compliment.”

“Is it?”

“An unorthodox one, I will admit.” He smiled and gestured toward the pins. “Suffice it to say, Lady Emma, I’d infinitely rather be here, playing a game like this with someone who would cast off such refinement than be back at that party forced to make dull conversation with people. We’d talk of mundane things.”

“Such as the weather?” she asked, reminding him of the conversation they’d had when dancing. “I can do that if you wish. Is the sun not bright today?”

“Oh no, do not bore me now,” he pleaded and hurried off to set the one pin straight. “Let us do a re-match, Lady Emma.”

“A re-match?”

“Well, you must have a chance to ask your own question, mustn’t you?”

Emma was thrilled. She absorbed herself in the second game so much that when Judith approached, she barely took notice. That was until her celebration of a shot was halted by Judith, who took hold of her arm and lowered it.

“Emma, a lady should not act so...” she whispered harshly under her breath, not quite uttering the words. Emma fell still, dropping her arms down by her side. “Forgive me, Your

Grace, for the intrusion, but I must take my nieces and nephew home.”

“Of course.” The Duke bowed a little to her in acknowledgment, but his face seemed devoid of emotion. The smile that had been on his face minutes ago had vanished, and there was none of that lightness in his eyes that had been there as they had played their game. “I wish you a good day, Lady Emma.” He bowed to her next.

“I thank you for the game, Your Grace.” Emma curtsied. From the corner of her eye, she saw Judith gather Andrew and Betty to leave. It gave her a minute more alone with the Duke. “I enjoyed it. Very much.” She wished to say how he had quite rescued her day. She had been nervous and uncomfortable when she first arrived at the luncheon, but the Duke had changed everything.

“As did I. We must complete our re-match another time.”

“Yes, I’d like that.”

“Emma?” Judith called to her. Emma hurried to curtsy a second time and began to run to catch up with her aunt, that was until Judith waved a mad hand at her, clearly warning her not to run.

As Emma reached her side, she felt her arm being sharply taken by her aunt.

“Ow! Why do I feel as if I have done something very wrong indeed?” Emma asked as the four traipsed up the stone steps

that led from the lawn to the terraced gardens, where the guests were slowly leaving.

“If you had seen what I had seen, Emma.” Judith took a sharp intake of breath as if she was suffering pain. “You were quite wild, running to and fro with those bowls and pins.”

“She hardly made a spectacle of herself, Aunt Judith,” Andrew insisted, but he was quietened by Judith’s glare.

“It was not the behavior of a lady.”

“Does that mean it was not the behavior of a lady who holds herself like some fine immobile marble statue?” Emma asked, but Judith did not answer her. Emma was quietened as they reached Lady Hasselby’s side and thanked her for the luncheon. Only when they reached the carriage did the conversation start up again.

“Betty, what did you think?” Emma asked, appealing to her sister for some support.

“You were quite red in the cheeks from all your running.” Betty gestured toward her. “I do not know what the Duke thought about that.”

Emma lifted her hands and covered her cheeks, wishing she could hide them from all eyes in the carriage.

“This is absurd,” Andrew muttered at her side. “All Emma did was enjoy herself. I do not see any harm in that.”

“There is no harm in enjoying oneself, as long as one doesn’t embarrass themselves simultaneously” Judith pointed out.

Emma slumped on the coach’s bench, feeling her spine lose all rigidity. She couldn’t believe how starkly her mood had shifted. She’d gone from having a wonderful time, laughing and enjoying the handsome Duke of Waybridge’s company, to wishing that the ground would swallow her like some small mole.

“Did I embarrass you, Aunt Judith?” Emma asked, her voice quite quiet.

“It is not about me, it is about yourself. You must be refined if you are to marry Emma.” Judith waved a hand dismissively at her. “I do this to help you, not to reprimand you.”

“Shall I be the only one to point out that Emma seemed to capture the Duke of Waybridge’s attention by being herself?” Andrew’s question made silence fall in the carriage.

They all looked at each other as if waiting for one person to offer a feasible explanation for the Duke’s interest. It was eventually offered by Judith.

“As Emma said before, the Duke is polite and kind. We must accept the fact that he could have been humoring her.”

Oh, good Lord. Is that what it was?

CHAPTER EIGHT

“One, two, three, one, two, three...” The instructor, Mr. Rivers, kept counting the music as Emma and Andrew attempted to dance with one another. It was ungainly, and they stepped on each other’s toes frequently despite their keen attempts not to do so. “Oh, my. What little progress we are making!” Mr. Rivers’ said dramatically and threw his arms up in the air.

Emma felt herself being quickly dislodged from her brother’s hands as Mr. Rivers took hold of her instead.

“Lady Emma, one will never stand straight on their feet if they are always looking at them.” His words made her jerk her chin upwards. “There, that is much more elegant. Is it not, Lady Frampton?”

“Just so,” Judith approved from the side of the room.

Emma looked toward her aunt, not feeling elegant at all. She rather felt as if her spine had been replaced by an iron rod.

Her eyes landed on Judith as she sat with Frances, the two of them watching. Judith clapped in time to the music, and

Frances' words kept wandering to other things excitably. Frequently, she would reach out to Betty, who stood beside them, asking how her music practice was going. Betty had lost interest in her instruments and only wanted to dance.

"I thought you loved your music, Betty," Frances said, her words reaching Emma across the room. "You are so fond of the violin."

"Aunt Judith tells me violins are played more by gentlemen. When I do play, I should play the harpsichord, or the piano, or sing. They are the pastimes of young ladies," Betty insisted, standing tall.

"But you play the violin so well," Frances went on. "I remember when you first picked up the instrument. Oh dear, you made the string squeal! What a lovely day it was."

"Frances," Judith said calmly, "shall we return our thoughts to the matter at hand?" She gestured toward the dancing taking place. Frances nodded and didn't speak again for some minutes.

Emma felt her spin slump, hardly enjoying what was taking place until Mr. Rivers' hand prodded her in the back.

"Stand straight, Lady Emma." She did as she was told, then waited for Andrew to come and take her hand. They practiced a few turns until Andrew's arms began to lower, for he did not have the enthusiasm for such dancing. "No, no, stop. Please, Lord Follet, I beg of you."

Emma and Andrew stepped away from each other, both sighing with relief.

“Are we done?” Andrew asked.

“Not by a long way. Lady Betty, if you would please, come take your place with your brother.” Mr. Rivers’ instruction was quickly adhered to. Betty hastened across the room, ready to dance. Emma returned to her seat, flopping down by her mother until Judith eyed her, warning her to sit up straight.

As Betty and Andrew began to dance together, Mr. Rivers took his place at a piano nearby, playing soft music to accompany them. The sound in the room meant Emma could talk with her mother and aunt, with their words muffled by the piano music.

“Emma, dear,” Judith said, peering past Frances’ shoulder, “I hear you were up early this morning. You came in from the garden with dirt on your gown.”

“I did.” Emma was not afraid to admit it. She looked at her mother, who seemed to make a special job of arranging the skirt of her own gown, as if hiding a dirt stain. “My mother and I like the garden, Aunt Judith.”

“Yes, I know. Surely you were not gardening so early, though?” Judith asked, clearly keen to know what Emma had been doing. She sighed deeply, knowing Judith would not rest until she knew the answer. It was easier to come forward straight away.

“I like going to the garden first thing in the morning. When the sun rises, one can see the world fresh. I like to watch the birds in their early-morning song,” Emma explained. “I sit in the summerhouse sometimes, watching them as they sing and hurry to hunt for food in the lawn.”

“What birds did you see?” Frances asked excitedly, turning to face Emma.

“Our robin was out this morning in his usual place, sitting on the stone sundial.”

“How lovely!”

“And there were woodpeckers too. They quite disturbed the peace,” Emma said, sharing a giggle with her mother. That giggle faded when Judith frowned. “What did I do wrong this time, Auntie?” Emma asked.

“It is not customary for ladies to spend their time in the dirt, Emma. You know that without me telling you.”

“Yes, but I still do not see why I should be ashamed of it,” Emma whispered. “I like to watch the animals. Would anyone think ill of me for that?”

“It’s not about that,” Judith said patiently and calmly, “it’s about impressing a suitor with refined and ladylike manners.”

Emma turned to her mother, hoping she would say something in her defense, but Frances was distracted. She was humming

the tune of the music, watching Betty and Andrew dance together.

Emma hung her head, deciding not to argue anymore. The more her teachings went on with Judith, the more she began to dislike herself. She had always been happy with who she was, but Judith made her question everything.

“Oh, it is no good,” Betty abruptly declared and stepped away from Andrew. “Aunt Judith, I will never be any better at this.”

“Of course you will, dear. It simply takes time.”

“We should have learned all of this at a younger age,” Betty insisted. Emma flinched, seeing Andrew do the same thing. Beside Emma, Frances hung her head.

“We didn’t think it was necessary, Betty,” Frances said softly. “We wanted you to enjoy your childhood.”

“Well, I am not enjoying this.” Betty looked quite tearful as she gestured down toward her feet. “I am not enjoying being so poor a dancer that I cannot even control my own feet.” Her manner suddenly changed, and she looked around herself, blushing red. “I’m sorry. I need to be... Forgive me.” Betty hurried for the door and walked out.

Emma held her tongue, watching her sister go. More than anything, she wished to run after Betty and assure her things would be well, but she feared Judith telling her off for running in such a fashion.

Frances did not seem to have such fears, though. She leapt to her feet and ran after Betty.

“Betty, dear! Please, do not hurry off so.” Frances hastened from the room. The two of them disappeared into the far reaches of the house, their voices fading.

“Well, perhaps that is enough instruction for one day.” Judith stood to her feet and gestured toward the door. “Thank you, Mr. Rivers, for your assistance. I shall show you to the door.” Judith was polite and elegant as she showed Mr. Rivers the way out.

The moment she was gone, Emma slumped in her chair, and Andrew moved to her side, huffing and dropping so quickly into the chair that his boots scraped on the wooden floor beneath them.

“Poor Betty,” he whispered, “I think she sees the world quite differently from me.”

“I never would have guessed.” Yet, Emma’s dryness did not pull a smile from Andrew today. Their lessons were clearly getting to them all, for he simply sighed and shook his head.

“She wishes to be one of the crowd, does she not?” Andrew asked slowly.

“She fears being embarrassed.” Emma couldn’t blame her for it. She had felt embarrassed ever since her aunt had pointed out that the Duke might have just played nine pins with her to humor her. “Betty wants to be a fine lady.”

“And? What do you want to be?” Andrew asked, angling his head a little to look at Emma.

“Me?” Emma chewed her lip in thought. “I’d rather spend my time doing what I wished to do, but that is not good enough, is it? I was hoping to go horse riding today, but instead, I am here, trying to dance. I worry I look more like a horse attempting to dance than a lady at all.”

“I am certain I do,” Andrew agreed with a slow nod.

“And you? What do you want to be?” Emma’s question made Andrew sit forward.

“Our father called me an antiquarian the other day, because of all my interest in the past. He talked of a dig that is going on in London at this moment, discovering roman remains.” He smiled a little. “There is nothing I would like more than to go and see it, but what is the betting that our aunt would not approve of a future earl digging in the earth with soil up to his elbows?”

“I would place a high wager on my answer,” Emma murmured, to which Andrew nodded. They both sat there in silence for a minute before Emma shifted and laid her head on her brother’s shoulder. It was a moment of comfort between them, both taking peace in one another’s company. “I am not sure worrying over how to hold a glass and how to dance will make me happy.”

“Nor am I,” Andrew agreed. “Here comes the happiest man I know, though.”

Emma lifted her head, turning to see whom her brother was referring to. Their father walked in, quite distracted by a poetry book in his hand.

“Andrew? Emma? Are you in here?” he called, managing to walk directly toward a dumbwaiter table.

“Table!” Andrew and Emma called at the same time. At once, Bernard came to a sharp halt, practically skidding in his hessian boots. He missed the table by an inch before looking up with his poetry book in his hands.

“Am I getting worse?” he asked, smiling at his own clumsiness.

“No,” Emma answered, though her voice was unconvincing.

“You should learn to lie better,” Bernard said, waving his poetry book. “Why do you both look so glum?”

“We just had another dance lesson,” Andrew explained, gesturing to the empty floor.

“Then I do not blame you for your glumness. Do you know, when I first asked your mother to dance, I fell over?” Bernard asked, standing tall.

“You did?” Emma murmured, sitting straight.

“Quite spectacularly!” Bernard laughed at the memory. “I knocked over two other couples. Your mother was fortunate to remain standing.”

“Weren’t you embarrassed?” Emma asked.

“Of course, that was until Frances helped me up again.” Bernard smiled, his eyes in the distance as if reliving the memory. “She took my hand and smiled at me. Most ladies would have run a mile. I will admit, though, I have not danced for some time.”

Emma stood to her feet and found herself reaching for her father.

“Would you dance with me, Father?”

“After the story I have just told you, is that wise?”

“Very wise indeed! I am looking for a reason to smile, and I’m sure you can give it to me.” Emma was glad of the distraction. As her father danced with her, falling over more than once, she felt the worry of what her aunt had said to her slipping from her shoulders.

If there is a chance to find a gentleman that does not care for refinements, as my parents do not, then perhaps I could be as happy as they have been.

When the image of the Duke of Waybridge appeared in Emma’s mind, she was quick to push it away again.



“I must confess myself surprised at you, Jasper. Since when are you so eager to attend a concert?”

“I find myself taken up by the idea this evening.” Jasper didn’t elaborate as he escorted his mother into the concert hall. She passed her pelisse to a footman as Jasper offered up his top hat, then the two of them walked forward, moving between the chairs and the people that wandered between them.

Everyone was dressed grandly for the event, matching the ornate golden and mural panels of significant events from the past etched onto the walls. Each face was lit by soft candlelight, and fans fluttered in front of ladies’ faces, reflecting that light.

Jasper found his eyes darting between the ladies’ faces, peeking behind fans, looking for one lady in particular.

“Who are you searching for?” Marianne asked, stepping close to his side and fluttering her fan.

“No one in particular. I was simply seeking out who is here tonight. That is all.” His eyes danced over the piano at the front of the room. Soon enough, the concert would begin, and the pianist, accompanied by a quartet of violinists, would hold them all transfixed. Once the performance was over, the chairs were to be cleared for dancing and drinks to be served.

“Truly? Because you are searching this room as a kestrel searches our estate garden, Jasper.” Marianne tutted at him. “I

cannot help thinking there is a young lady you are seeking out.”

“Not at all. Let us sit, Mother. The concert is about to begin.” He gestured toward the front of the room, where the musicians were making their way to their seats.

People sat in a hurry, and Jasper took his place in a chair at the back of the room, with his mother at his side. Though as the music began, his eyes wandered elsewhere across the other listeners. When Marianne conversed with those nearby, praising the pianist’s skill, Jasper knew what she was doing. She was endeavoring to appear as if their family had a refined taste to maintain their reputation. He bit the inside of his mouth to stop himself from laughing, knowing his mother infinitely preferred harp music.

What my mother is willing to lie about just to see this family respected. Quite mad!

Tired of thinking of the family’s reputation and the cause of the tear that had been made to it, his eyes returned to searching the other listeners. Soon enough, he found the face he had been seeking.

Emma also sat in the back row, but much further down the line. In her grasp was a fan that she fluttered a little too eagerly until her aunt took her gloved hand and urged her to calm her actions. Jasper smiled at the sight, watching as Emma and her brother began to whisper. Whatever they said to one another must have been amusing, for they began to laugh quietly.

It is hardly the first time I wished I was sat with her.

Realizing Emma had this effect on him, Jasper shifted his focus to the pianist, attempting to listen attentively. By the time the music came to a close, and he stood to take his bow, Jasper was distracted and angered at himself, wondering why he could not stop thinking about the lady.

“Are you quite well, Jasper?” Marianne asked as they stood to allow the staff to clear the chairs. “You seem distracted.”

“I am perfectly well. I have just seen some acquaintances I wish to greet. If you would excuse me.”

“Yes, of course.” The Dowager Duchess seemed to smile a little as Jasper made his escape.

He walked quickly across the room, his eyes finding where Emma stood. It did not escape his notice that she stood a little taller than before, perhaps with a more sophisticated posture that her aunt had probably taught her. When she was passed a wine glass from her sister, she also held it without error. It seemed that since their first meeting, Emma was transforming a little.

I hope not too much.

Jasper rather liked the memory of their first dance when she kept slipping and he had been there to hold her up.

“Ah! Jasper, there you are,” A familiar voice caught his ear.

“Patrick?” He turned round to see Patrick Rivers, the Earl of Lancaster, approach him, extending his hand. The two had been good friends for years, though in truth, Jasper had avoided him a little as of late.

“Jasper, I have not seen you in a while. Where have you been hiding?”

“I admit, I have wanted to avoid such events as this, but my mother makes me come to them now under duress,” Jasper confessed.

“Then I am glad for it. These events will be more interesting with you here.” Patrick smiled widely, and Jasper tried to match it. The Earl had been a good friend to him since their university years. They may have drifted apart at times, but when they came together again, it was as if they had never been away. “Is there a reason you look eager to leave my side?” Patrick asked with a sudden laugh. “Your eyes seem quite fixed on a place far beyond me.”

Jasper didn’t manage to avert his eyes in time. Patrick clearly saw exactly who Jasper was looking at.

“Well, well, the daughters of the Earl of Hawkins, if I am not much mistaken?”

“I merely wished to greet them this evening. They are acquaintances.” Jasper gestured toward them.

“Truly? Well, much is said about them.”

“What is said?” Jasper flinched, not liking the idea of more gossip spreading through the ton. The gossip he feared followed his sister was enough. He didn’t want to think of gossip following a lady like Emma.

“That is not important. What is more important is this.” Patrick took Jasper’s shoulder and turned him to face Emma across the room again. “Which of the sisters are you looking at so attentively, my friend?”

Jasper was reluctant to answer.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINE

“I must say, Emma, you are doing well tonight.” Judith steered her from the drinks table, taking a central position in the room. Betty and Andrew trailed behind them, lost in a conversation of their own.

“Well? ‘Well,’ at what?” Emma asked, taking a sip from her wine. “It is the pianist who was on display this evening, Auntie, not us. I think we should praise his skill.”

“I am praising yours,” Judith said with a chuckle. “You are quite elegant and refined indeed. You have listened to your teachings well.”

“Staying still like a statue is not so impressive as the pianist, I grant you.” Emma’s wit seemed lost on her aunt, though, who turned to pull Betty into the conversation.

“I was just saying how well your sister is doing, Betty. Quite refined this evening. When the dancing begins, you must both dance, of course. Andrew, you must dance too,” she appealed to Andrew, who froze with his glass half lifted toward his lips.

Emma sniggered behind her glass at her brother’s reaction.

“Did I look that horrified?” Andrew asked with his eyes still wide.

“Rather like a deer at the end of a shotgun,” she pointed out, to which he smiled, his face relaxing a little.

“We saw my latest attempt at dancing earlier today. We can all agree I am not improving. Emma is, though, vastly. Let her be the one to dance tonight.” Andrew waved in her direction. He did a double-take when Emma didn’t object. “Oh, and she does not protest.”

“To dancing? Perhaps not.” Emma made a conscious effort not to look away from her family, for she feared where her eyes would wander. Since her dancing had been improving, she had thought of dancing with one gentleman in particular again.

Is he here tonight? The Duke of Waybridge?

“Speaking of dancing, look who is approaching us now,” Judith said excitedly. She and Betty hurried to curtsy as Emma turned to see whom they were looking at. The excitement that had knotted her stomach quickly dissipated when she found Lord Thorne walking toward them.

“My Ladies, My Lord.” He bowed to them all in turn. “I hope you enjoyed the concert this evening?”

“Very much,” Judith said. “My nieces have been praising the pianist’s skill.”

Emma merely smiled, knowing that by now Judith would happily lie about any conversation they'd had if she thought it made them sound refined and of good taste.

"I know the dancing is to start very soon," the Baron said and turned to face Emma and Betty. Emma could have sworn Betty stood taller, with her cheeks quivering into a smile. "Lady Emma." At once, that smile faltered on Betty's cheeks. "If you are not yet engaged for the first dance, I would be delighted to share it with you."

"Thank you, My Lord, that is very kind. I would be happy to dance." Emma curtsied and thanked him sweetly, aware of the disappointment that her sister was trying to hide.

"Excellent. I will return when the music begins." With these words, Lord Thorne left rather quickly, moving off to greet other acquaintances.

"He's not a man of many words, is he?" Andrew observed. "Though they seem to be rather excessive. He would be 'delighted' to dance with you, Sister!" He laughed at the use of language, but Emma was still distracted, looking at her sister, who was trying to hide her disappointment.

"I wonder why you do not look pleased, Emma." Judith's words pulled Emma's focus back to her aunt. The older woman's nose was curled, and her cheeks had stiffened. "Is this not excellent? How many times have I told you that Lord Thorne is the most eligible gentleman in the ton this Season?"

“If I had a pound for every time you mentioned it, I would not need to marry, for I would be self-sufficient,” Emma’s quip made only Andrew laugh.

“He is a fine man,” Betty pointed out, her head jerking sharply in Emma’s direction. Fearing she had offended her sister, Emma spoke quickly.

“I do not doubt he is, Sister. It is just that he is a little...” She struggled for the right words, glancing between her aunt and sister as they waited on her to speak.

“Say something, Emma, or they’ll think the worst,” Andrew urged her on.

“He’s a little dull, that is all,” Emma muttered.

“Something tells me Emma would rather have another partner altogether.”

“Andrew, be quiet.” Her warning tone merely made him chuckle and lift his glass to his lips.

“Who is this other partner?” Judith asked.

“Do you need to ask, Auntie?” Andrew continued. Emma moved to his side and pulled on his arm, trying to make him quiet. “I am guessing it is the same gentleman Emma danced with her first night and fell into his arms more than once.”

“I was not that bad!” She stepped on his foot. It at least prompted him to lower the volume of his voice so Emma did not have to glance at other groups nearby so cautiously, fearful they’d overhear, but he still went on.

“She also played a rather excitable game of skittles with him at the luncheon last week.”

“The Duke of Waybridge?” Judith and Betty said together.

“Oh, do you not find him a little...” Betty was clearly the one now struggling for words.

“A little what?” Emma prompted her. Betty didn’t answer but wrinkled her nose. “I think him very handsome.”

“Hurrah! An admission at last,” Andrew said with victory, to which she elbowed him. “Ow! your elbows are getting harder.”

“For your teases are becoming too much,” she reminded him. “When you are so fortunate to have a lady turn your head, remind me to be just as insufferable.”

“You are confessing the Duke of Waybridge has turned your head, then?” Andrew asked, his mischievous smirk beginning to grow.

“I said no such thing!” she cried, realizing she had as good as admitted it was the case. “I was merely trying to say that I

would rather dance with a man whose company I enjoy, *such as* the Duke. Not exactly the Duke himself.”

“What’s that old Shakespeare line? The lady doth protest too much, methinks.”

“Andrew.” Her eyes narrowed on him, and he said no more.

“Handsome or not, good company or not,” Judith spoke up, “all of this is irrelevant. The Duke of Waybridge may not be a viable suitor when he has no intention to wed.” She said the words so easily as if she was discussing something menial, lifting her glass to her lips to take a sip, yet they had a startling effect on Emma.

“Oh? He doesn’t?” she murmured, trying not to sound too interested. “Whyever not?” She had only met the man twice, and such a declaration should not have bothered her, but for some reason, it did.

“As you saw, I am friends with his mother,” Judith explained in a quiet voice. “The last I saw you, she spoke of her struggle, saying how she wished to see her son wed, but she now believes he has no intention to ever wed at all.”

“Oh.” Emma didn’t elaborate. She busied herself with sipping from her wine. When Andrew looked at her a little too closely, as if trying to gauge her reaction, she took a bigger gulp, hiding her expression completely.

“So, let that be the end of our discussion about the Duke of Waybridge,” Judith spoke dismissively, putting the matter to

rest. “Let us consider a gentleman who intends to wed and is very eligible. We shall consider Baron Thorne, who is clearly attentive to you, Emma. Coming over to reserve the first dance with you long before it begins, oh yes, that is attentive indeed.”

Emma glanced once more at Betty, but Betty’s expression was not so easy to decipher now. She looked elsewhere across the crowded room, seeking new dance partners.

“What do you think, Betty?” Emma asked slowly, longing for her sister’s opinion. Betty jerked her head to face Emma, prompting the brown curls of her hair to dance around her cheeks.

“I think Lord Thorne is a handsome man and eligible too. A dance with him is a fine thing.”

“Yes, you are right.” Emma nodded, trying to be persuaded by her sister’s words. She may think the Baron a little dull and childlike in his handsomeness, but he was a practical choice for a husband if she had to be wed. He was a good man and had a position and title.

It is all so eligible.

Yet, that was it. There was no spark or excitement that came with the thought.

As music struck up, announcing the first dance was to begin, Lord Thorne returned to them and offered his hand to Emma. She didn’t hesitate to place her hand in his.



“Well, you no longer need to answer my question.” Patrick’s words made Jasper snap his gaze away from Emma to see Patrick chuckling so much that the light brown hair on his forehead jiggled.

“Don’t say it,” Jasper warned.

“It’s Lady Emma, the elder sister, is it not?”

“I need a drink.” Jasper didn’t answer but stepped past his friend and reached for the drinks table. He poured a glass of wine quickly and took a gulp, distracting himself from the envy he felt watching Emma take to the dancefloor with Baron Thorne.

I hardly know the lady. Envy is not something I should feel.

“All right, I know I am testing your patience if you are reaching for the claret with such vigor, so let us talk of something else for a while.” Patrick moved to his side and leaned on the drinks table. “Let us be serious for a minute. How are you? And how is your sister?”

Jasper’s eyes flicked to his friend over the rim of his glass, recognizing the worry that lingered there in Patrick’s dark eyes. If Jasper wasn’t mistaken, his friend had had a soft spot for his sister for some time now, not that Patrick had ever declared any such affection existed.

Out of everyone in this world, what had happened to Lettie was only known by four people. Jasper, his mother, Patrick, and the Marquess of Hatfield.

On that fateful night when Lettie had found herself in trouble, Jasper was the one to target the Marquess and retrieve Lettie, but he didn't take her back through the ballroom. No, they had circled the house together, where they had found Patrick taking some air. At once, he had offered his help. They had taken Patrick's carriage to get Lettie home.

"You know we don't talk about that event publicly," Jasper whispered to his friend.

"I know," Patrick's voice was just as quiet, "yet I am merely asking how you both are. What is the harm in that?"

Jasper sighed, knowing there was no real harm in it. He turned and bumped shoulders with Patrick as they leaned against the drinks table together.

For a minute, he let his eyes dance over the concert hall that had now been transformed into a ballroom, finding himself transfixed by the display. The night Lettie had found herself alone with the Marquess of Hatfield had been similar to this one. Ladies dressed in delicate gowns that seemed to glitter in the candlelight with feathers thrust into hair pieces so that they resembled cockatoos.

"She is well," Jasper said quietly. "I received a letter from Lettie just the other day. It seems she is greatly enjoying her time in the countryside with our cousins." He smiled, relieved it was the case. He had been worried about her being sent

away, but Lettie, in her innocence, seemed almost unaware of the danger that had been left behind her. “She can escape whatever the Marquess of Hatfield might say about her where she is. At least there is that.”

“I am glad to hear she is happy.” Patrick genuinely smiled, comforted by it.

Jasper watched his friend for a second, noticing how his cheeks twitched in the orange candlelight. He supposed he should ask Patrick if his suspicions were right at some point. He often wondered if Patrick cared for Lettie, but Jasper kept hoping that his friend would speak of it himself first if it was the case.

“And you?” Patrick asked. “You have not told me how you are. It’s not only a difficult time for your sister, after all.”

“How am I? That hardly seems important in comparison.” Jasper brushed off the idea with a laugh until Patrick bumped his shoulder again, urging Jasper to return his gaze to his friend.

“I’m still asking,” Patrick reiterated.

“I am...” Jasper turned forward to watch the ton as they danced and talked together. Amongst them, he could see his mother trying to speak to as many people as possible and make a good impression. “I’m tired,” Jasper confessed, amazed to be uttering the words aloud. “My mother is trying to make us appear like a respectable family, in case the Marquess of Hatfield speaks of what...”

“Of what happened, let’s brush on from that bit quickly,” Patrick urged.

“I like it when I have the chance to think of something else for a while,” Jasper whispered to his friend. “Forgive me, I know it’s awful to say, but I’m glad when a distraction offers itself up so I can think of something other than my mother’s fears.”

“I do not think that is so awful to say.” Patrick shook his head and stood tall, almost as tall as Jasper. “Isn’t it how we all survive hard times? We find something good to live for. I’m curious, though. What exactly is the distraction of which you speak?”

Jasper’s eyes slid to that distraction. He found Emma dancing in the center of the room with Baron Thorne. As he watched her dance, something struck him about her manner. She no longer slipped or went wrong in the dance. On the contrary, she was one of the finest dancers on the floor. She might not have elegant arm work, but she moved well, and with her smile, she was striking to watch.

“Does this mean I get to return to teasing you as I have noticed exactly where you are looking?” Patrick’s words prompted Jasper to shush his friend. “Who is she dancing with?”

“Baron Thorne. Do you not know him?”

“I have heard of him. However, I will say this, she does not especially appear to be enjoying his company.”

“Perhaps not.” Jasper was glad of it. What he had first thought was her genuine smile now appeared to be forced on occasion. When she turned her back on her partner, that smile would fall. “If you would excuse me, Patrick, I believe their dance is coming to a close.”

“Yes, go, go. Return to your distraction, my friend.” Patrick’s words encouraged him.

Jasper crossed the room, circling the dancefloor so he was closest to the side where Emma and Lord Thorne were to leave the dancefloor. As the music closed, they bowed and curtsied to one another, then the Baron took her white-gloved hand and led her away from the floor.

As they came his way, Jasper felt his eyes slide to her figure to admire her. Tonight, her auburn hair was more tamed than usual, though a few curls still fought against the updo, escaping down the back of her head. She wore a bold Pomona green gown that complimented her hair and was cinched high on her waist before falling to the ground in soft pleats.

As she and Lord Thorne left the dance floor, they didn’t speak to one another but left in silence.

Oh dear, she must be bored!

Jasper began to follow them a little, attempting to intercept them before they could get too far away. The closer he got to them, the more words he caught of the conversation they began.

“I thank you for the dance, My Lord,” Emma said, her tone rather wooden.

“Do not thank me. It was my honor to dance with you tonight.”

“An honor? Ha! I am no princess or anything else so grand.”

“It is the company I rate, not the title. Like a beautiful flower, My Lady, you were quite intoxicating to dance with tonight.”

At his words, Jasper could have laughed. They sounded as if they had been taken from some poem, probably stolen from a poetry book the Baron had read earlier that evening. Jasper caught sight of Emma’s face and thought she, too, was trying to stifle a laugh, though she covered it up as a small cough.

“Well, if you would excuse me, I think I shall—” Emma was clearly making an escape. She turned to walk away, but the Baron reached out for her arm.

“Lady Emma, wait.”

As he pulled on her arm, she tripped on the hem of her gown and began to fall. Her shoe became tangled in the green silk, and her body tipped backward.

Jasper leapt forward, closing the last of the distance between them. He caught Emma in something of a fuddle as the Baron released her. Jasper had one arm around her waist and his

other hand on her arm as she hovered in the air, seconds away from falling.

“Your Grace?” her voice murmured in surprise.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TEN

Emma blinked a few times, so sure she had been about to hit the floor, when she felt the firm arm around her waist and the soft hand on her arm. She looked up, her eyes finding the face of the Duke above her, who had caught her as if it was nothing to him, like catching a falling glass.

“Are you all right, Lady Emma?” He hurried to put her on her feet and released her. Emma tried her best not to blush, thinking of the warmth spreading through her body at his touch, but it was too late. She could already feel her cheeks heating up. She prayed the candlelight was dim enough to hide something of it.

“Yes, thank you,” she murmured, staring at the Duke. There was a tension on his face she had not seen there before. It made his angular jaw appear to tick before he turned and looked at Lord Thorne, who was still standing beside them.

“Ah, Your Grace,” Lord Thorne spoke with an easiness, “that was a swift reflex indeed. We are in your debt.”

Emma felt her spine go rigid as she stared at Lord Thorne in wonder. She was the one in debt to the Duke, but the way Lord Thorne had spoken of her made it sound almost as if they were

a partnership. She brushed off the idea, supposing he was just trying to be polite.

“Think nothing of it,” the Duke accepted the gratitude humbly.

“Well, Lady Emma.” The Baron shifted his body, facing Emma so fully that it was almost as if he wished to ignore the Duke’s presence standing beside them. Emma’s brows pinched together, curious at the movement. “That was such an enjoyable dance. I could not depart without asking for another. If you would do me the honor.” He offered his hand to her, but Emma kept her hands firmly at her sides.

She had hardly enjoyed the dance. Despite all that her aunt had said, she could not summon any feelings of warmth toward Lord Thorne. What was more, he was the cause of her nearly falling over, yet it seemed with the turn of their conversation, they were just going to ignore that fact.

“Well, I thank you for the offer, My Lord, but I...” She wracked her brain to think of an excuse. She could say she was parched, but Lord Thorne might offer to fetch her a drink. She could also say she needed air, but he may accompany her. “I am afraid I have promised to dance with another.”

The moment the words were out of her mouth, she fidgeted, pressing her hands together and pulling at the fingers of her gloves. The lie sat uncomfortably in her gut, especially as she was about to be caught by the fact that she had no dance partner.

“Oh? Truly?” Lord Thorne lowered his hand. “But the next dance is about to begin, and this gentleman has not come to

claim his dance. Perhaps he has decided to sit this one out. Please, let me take his place?" He stepped toward her again.

"I... erm..." Emma was afraid of rambling as she moved back an inch, her eyes falling on the Duke at her side, who had something of a mischievous smile. She half wondered if he could see the way that she squirmed, longing for an exit.

When their eyes connected, that smile softened, and he cleared his throat. The sound caught Lord Thorne's attention, and he turned to look at the Duke.

"The gentleman in question is here, Lord Thorne," the Duke spoke with ease and raised his hand, offering it to Emma.

Her lips parted in wonder, stunned he offered to help her follow through on her blatant lie just to get her out of dancing with Lord Thorne again.

"Oh. The Duke is your dance partner?" Lord Thorne did not sound convinced.

Emma hurried to take the Duke's hand, aware that as they touched that was a jolt against her skin. He jerked his head toward her. Clearly, he felt that spark too.

"Yes, that's right," Emma said quickly.

"If you would excuse us, Lord Thorne." The Duke bowed his head to the Baron, then led Emma away, moving quite swiftly toward the dancefloor.

Emma only managed a few steps once she was certain the Baron was beyond hearing them before she gave way to her laughter. What startled her was that the Duke laughed too as he drew her to the very center of the dancefloor and released her hand as they faced one another.

“I thought my lie was obvious,” Emma whispered in confession. “I cannot believe you only noticed it.”

“He certainly suspected it. Fortunately, I managed to solve that problem for you.”

“Thank you,” Emma said with a smile. “You have saved me from another unpleasant dance.”

“That bad, was it?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Well, perhaps not. Just a little dull.”

“Do not be too excited yet. I may be even duller and disappoint you.”

“I doubt that.” Her words prompted the Duke to smile. She was aware that they stood there, smiling at one another ridiculously for a few seconds before they noticed the music had already begun. They both jolted, bowing and curtsying to each other before he took her hand and led her into the first few steps of a quadrille.

They walked around each other a few times before parting ways, circling other couples, and returning to face each other. Emma was aware that as they danced, the Duke watched her. His eyes followed her as much as her own did him.

Is it so wrong to hope that perhaps this gentleman looks at me as I do him?

She remembered what her aunt had said about the Duke never wishing to marry, and she snatched her gaze away from his. Instead, she looked down at the connection of their hands as they took hold of one another and began to move back and forth, their feet moving in a box step.

“I see Lord Thorne’s dancing did not please you then,” the Duke’s words urged her to raise her eyes a little.

“It is simply that he and I are not a companionable pair. That is all. I think it surprises my aunt, for she seems convinced of his promise as a suitor,” Emma explained, watching as the Duke nodded his head away from the dancers.

“Clearly, she is not the only one.” His words prompted Emma to look where he was nodding, seeing the Baron standing a short distance away. Beside him was a group of ladies trying to get his attention. Betty appeared to be one of them, though Andrew quickly intercepted and took her arm, leading her away. “Lord Thorne seems quite popular.”

“That he does,” Emma said, smiling at the idea. “My refusal to his offer to dance will not affect him then, at least. He has other more interesting company to soften the blow.”

“Ha! It amuses me, Lady Emma, how you have a habit of putting yourself down.” As the Duke circled her again, he took her hands and twirled them above her head, encouraging her to turn. She spun quickly, returning her eyes to his.

“Would you rather I sang my own praises? Oh! How proud I would then sound,” she mocked the idea, watching as he chuckled.

“It would hardly make you unique amongst the ladies here.”

“A slight, indeed,” She rebuked him as they stepped toward one another and then apart. “Did you just insult the many ladies here?”

“No, far from it,” he said hurriedly, though the look of guilt on his face showed he had a little. “It is merely an observation.”

“What observation is that, exactly?” Emma teased him, encouraging him. They repeated their step, moving toward one another and back again, never quite touching. Emma felt an anticipation growing with each movement and wondered if he felt it too.

“That I have met enough ladies who seek to impress their dance partners by talking of their virtues. Now, I do not necessarily disagree with those virtues, merely as you pointed out. It can be a proud thing to listen to,” he explained slowly, then offered his hand to her. As Emma took it, that anticipation morphed into a pleasure of warmth. Her eyes lingered a little longer on his own, and he seemed to hesitate before he went on. “You, on the other hand, would rather put yourself down in conversation. It is unique.”

“More entertaining, I hope?” Emma continued to jest, just hoping to see him smile again. When he did so, she beamed herself. There was something very pleasing about seeing this gentleman smile so much at her words.

“Yes, indeed,” he agreed. “Though, I do not think you deserve such disparagement of yourself.” The compliment had her standing taller as they switched places with the couple beside them and returned to standing side by side, holding each other’s hand. “For one thing, you haven’t stepped on my toe yet.”

“It is true. I have not!” Her glee prompted him to laugh warmly.

“Last time we danced, I seem to remember there were a few incidents.” His own tease had her shaking her head at the memory. “You are much improved.”

“I am pleased for it.” Emma moved to face him and took both of his hands. They danced facing one another, their eyes never leaving each other.

“May I confess something? I rather preferred it the old way,” he whispered conspiratorially.

“What? With me falling over every few seconds? Yes, I imagine you miss it the way one misses a bee sting.” Her dryness made him chuckle. He lowered one of her hands and raised the other, turning her under his arm.

“Perhaps I am fonder of bee stings than I realized then.” He matched her dryness in tone, urging her to spin her head around to look at him in surprise. “It was rather fun with you falling every now and then.”

“Why is that?”

“Are you asking me why a man wouldn’t want to be the one to save a woman from falling?” His sarcastic question made her chuckle.

“I see. Did you enjoy being the white knight, catching this lady as she fell?” she teased him, watching as his mischievous smile reappeared.

“Perhaps a little,” he murmured as they turned around one another. This time, they were not supposed to touch, but Emma could have sworn their arms brushed together as they walked. It made a tremor of excitement pass through her body.

“Then, I’ll have to make sure that next time we dance I forget how to dance altogether,” she mused.

“I look forward to it.”

“Curious...” she paused, watching him with her head tilted as they came to a stop facing each other. Somewhere in the back of her head, she registered that the music was coming to a close, but she didn’t take too much notice of it. “I could have sworn I embarrassed you last time, Your Grace.”

“Apparently, my smiles look too much like grimaces of embarrassment then.” His words made her laugh, and she lifted her hand to cover her lips. “When I first met you, you laughed without doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“That.” He mimicked covering her mouth.

Suddenly, the other dancers moved around them, leaving the dancefloor. They both hurried to bow and curtsy, then he offered her his hand, leading her away from the dancefloor. Emma followed, thinking of what he had just said.

“Perhaps the way I laugh has changed a little.” It was because of Judith. Her aunt had warned her more than once that a fine lady who wished to catch a husband should not tilt her head back so far to reveal the inner parts of her mouth.

“If I laughed as you do now, I would think I appeared to be ashamed to laugh.” He mimicked what she had done, and she began to laugh, tapping his hand away in reprimand as they left the dancefloor.

“I did not look like that,” she murmured in panic.

“I was the one who saw it, My Lady.”

They continued to smile together as they left the floor, moving to the edge of the room. She expected him to release her hand and depart soon enough. After all, he’d only asked her to

dance to help her out of her lie, but he did no such thing. He escorted her between other couples waiting to dance, past standing candelabras, and toward a drinks table at the rear of the room.

“Laugh as you like, Lady Emma. You should not let anyone tell you how to laugh,” the Duke said as he released her hand. He reached for a wine carafe and poured two glasses for them, avoiding her gaze as he spoke.

“There is nothing wrong with my aunt’s instructions,” Emma defended. When the Duke glanced at her with a raised eyebrow, she went on. “So I am told.”

“Nothing wrong with instructions, no, but orders? Well...” he paused, clearly deep in thought. “I would not like to be ordered around as I order my greyhound when I go shooting.”

“You have a greyhound?” Emma was instantly distracted. He laughed at her reaction.

“That is the part that interests you? Not my point on not being ordered around?”

“What’s his name?” Emma asked excitedly, watching as the Duke continued to laugh.

A short while later, Emma had finished one glass of wine and was on her second as she and the Duke discussed not just his greyhound, but the other animals he kept at his estate. There was an aviary on the grounds, holding exotic birds and such

wildlife that a particularly curious deer who would often come to greet him was named Harry.

“What sort of name is Harry for a deer?” Emma asked him.

“It is a fine name,” the Duke protested, standing straight as he offered to top up her glass. “Have you named any animals? Pray tell so I can tease you for your names too. I warrant they are not as fine as mine.” She shook her head, startled by just how easily they had stood together for minutes at a time, teasing one another.

“I may have called a robin in our garden Roberta. Yet, Roberta the Robin is a fine name.”

“Roberta!” he spluttered, nearly choking on his wine as he laughed.

“It has rhythm.”

“Roberta the Robin, quite so. It also sounds as if the name has been written for a children’s tale,” he taunted her, prompting her to shake her head at him in dismay.

“You do realize, Your Grace, that you and I have quite ignored every other person at this ball for some time now.” She tried to draw the matter to his attention, watching as his laughter softened.

“Ah, is this your way to attempt to be rid of my company?” he asked dryly. “I should have known I was boring you but was

misled by the laughter.”

“You know you were not boring me,” she reminded him, despite his dryness. “Yet we have been ignoring everyone else. Even as I point this out, though, the two of us continue to stay here.”

“That we do.” He gestured toward the two of them. They stayed where they were, facing each other as they stood by the drinks table, neither one of them moving an inch to step away. “Perhaps we don’t want to go anywhere else.” His words made Emma flatten her lips together, attempting not to smile again in his company, for she had done it so much over these last few minutes.

He must think me a fool standing here and beaming at him!

The truth was that she did not wish to leave his side. Here, she didn’t have to think about Judith’s instructions. The Duke encouraged her to be herself. She could be free, talk of things she wished to, and laugh without having to cover her mouth.

“Perhaps so,” Emma whispered, aware that he was staring back at her. The more she looked at him, the more Judith’s reminder came back to her.

This man has said he will not marry.

Even if he enjoyed her company, it would lead nowhere. Even if he stood here with her, talking at length for hours and having fun, it would lead nowhere. He would not consider a courtship.

“I should return to my family.” Emma’s words made the smile drop from his face.

“Did I say something wrong?” the Duke asked.

“Not at all, far from it.” Emma looked around the room. “Yet many pairs of eyes are on us, Your Grace.” At the words, the Duke flinched and followed her gaze. He grimaced when he saw she was right. “I would not wish to be the one to draw you into any sort of gossip of you spending too much time one evening with a young lady.”

“Gossip. I’d be glad to be free of it,” he muttered, his voice taking on a rather dark tone.

“Then I’ll leave you be, Your Grace. Goodnight.” She curtsied, wishing she could tell him just how much she had enjoyed her evening with him.

“Goodnight, Lady Emma.” He bowed.

She turned and left, increasing the distance between them across the room. As she walked, her heart thumped hard in her chest, and her eyes wanted to draw back to him, but she fought the temptation.

“Lady Emma?” Lord Thorne’s voice interrupted her thoughts, and she was forced to stop walking as he appeared at her side. “How about that second dance now?”

Unable to think of a reason to say no, she gave him her hand, reluctantly.

I wonder what my aunt and the ton will make of me dancing a second time with Lord Thorne.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Foolish dog, you’re supposed to run toward the birds, not away from them.” Jasper waved at the greyhound down at his heels, but the dog went nowhere. Instead, the greyhound whimpered and then sat on his haunches. “I know, Frankie, I know.” He tapped the dog’s head and ruffled his ears. “It’s not your sort of place, is it?”

The dog barked as if in agreement.

“Are you talking to your dog again?” a voice called from far ahead in the field.

Jasper looked up to see Patrick striding across the open field with his gun slung over his shoulder and his steward close behind him, carrying a spare and more cartridges. Jasper rested his own shotgun under his free arm and continued to pet the greyhound at his side.

“I always talk to him,” Jasper explained with a shrug.

“I had noticed,” Patrick pointed out with a deep chuckle. “Do you think he understands you?”

Frankie barked in Patrick's direction.

"I think that was your answer," Jasper said with victory and pointed at the sky. "How many?"

"Six, I think, and you?"

"Seven." Jasper smiled when his friend shook his head, disappointed to have lost their competition.

It was an idea Patrick had had early that morning. He had appeared at the house saying that Jasper needed more distraction in his life, not just that delivered by Lady Emma. Determined to offer up such distractions himself, he had dragged Jasper out onto the estate for some shooting.

Jasper was glad of the change. The air might have been cool, ruffling the flaps of his frock coat and making the dog shiver every now and then at his side, but it was pleasant to be out and away from the pleading tones of his mother. Part of him worried that when she realized just where he had gone, she would follow him out here.

"I thought gundogs were supposed to run after the pheasants," Patrick said as he stopped at Jasper's side and gestured toward Frankie.

"They are." Jasper continued to stroke the dog's ears, watching as Frankie nestled his head into the side of his leg. "Something tells me that Frankie doesn't like birds very much. Perhaps not the dead kind."

“The beaters are out, Your Grace,” the steward said from behind him.

At once, there was a rustle on the other side of the field where it met the tree line of the woods. Pheasants launched into the sky, forming a perfect arc across the crest of the tree branches. Both Jasper and Patrick lifted their shotguns and fired. Jasper caught two, and Patrick caught one.

When Jasper lowered his gun, he found Frankie shaking a little more at his side, pressing his head even closer to Jasper’s leg.

“Perhaps that’s enough for one day,” Jasper said, offering his gun to his steward.

“You’re saying that because of your dog, aren’t you?” Patrick countered with a laugh. Jasper bent down to pet his dog some more, to which the dog responded eagerly, falling into his arms. “I swear I haven’t seen anyone with animals the way you are.”

The words caught Jasper’s interest. He made a point of not looking up, in case his thoughts were readable in his expression, as his mind turned back to the conversation he’d had with Emma at the ball after the concert. She had certainly been interested in animals, and when Jasper told her of Frankie, she asked after the greyhound with eagerness.

“There now, all the shooting is done for the day. You can do some running.” Jasper stood straight and reached into his frock coat, pulling out a small wooden ball and holding it in the air for the greyhound to see. At once, Frankie sat back on his

haunches, excited with his tongue lolling out. "Get the ball, Frankie." Jasper tossed it across the field.

The stewards took the guns and returned to the house as Jasper threw the ball back and forth for Frankie, with Patrick staying close at his side.

"You know we cannot go long before I bring up the inevitable," Patrick whispered, clearly wary still of the stewards being a little close.

"If we are to talk of Lettie again, then not now. You said this was to be a distraction," Jasper reminded him before he took the ball from Frankie's mouth and threw it again. The dog shot after it with impressive speed across the field, kicking up dirt behind himself.

"Not your sister, no," Patrick said slowly. "I was going to bring up the matter of the young lady you spent practically the whole ball standing beside the other night."

"It was not that long."

"Was it not?"

With Frankie's fast speed, he was back with the ball in his mouth before Jasper could answer his friend. He took the ball and threw it in a different direction this time, confusing Frankie enough to run in a circle around them before darting off in the right direction.

“Tell me this then, are you planning to court Lady Emma?”

“Court her!?” Jasper spluttered and stepped away from his friend.

“Well, that had a strong reaction. Your eyebrows nearly disappeared into your hairline,” Patrick said, pointing at his face.

“They cannot rise high enough,” Jasper muttered dryly. “I have no intention of courting anyone.”

“Truly? For many were supposing the other night that you would soon be courting Lady Emma. You two seemed engrossed with one another’s company,” Patrick said, following him as he crossed the grass, moving toward Frankie, who was struggling to get the ball out of where it had landed in a rabbit burrow.

“I wonder why,” Jasper murmured. “She is interesting, yes, and certainly quite captivating. I’m not ashamed to admit I respect Lady Emma greatly.”

“Was that what I saw on your face? Respect?” At his taunt, Jasper shot his friend a dark look before reaching the rabbit burrow. He gently nudged Frankie out of the way and grappled inside to get the ball. He barely had it in his hand and out of the hole before the dog tried to snatch it from him. Turning on his heel, Jasper managed to throw it far across the field.

“Respect,” Jasper reiterated. “I have no intention to court, marry, or anything else.”

“Whyever not?”

“Because my mother would have me marry for one reason only.” Jasper turned abruptly to face his friend. “She’d have me marry to secure this family’s good reputation. Now, does that seem like a good enough reason to marry?”

“Ah, I see.” Patrick sighed deeply and folded his arms. “You have never been fond of being told what to do.”

“You know me well,” Jasper agreed wryly. “But that was not my objection. Say I should marry. The lady would have to agree to a marriage of convenience, and for what reason? My reputation, not her own. Is that not cruel and unfair on the lady?”

“Jasper?”

“What?” Jasper said, sharper than he had intended. He was aware that his recent tenseness was returning, and it was directed at Patrick when it shouldn’t have been. Jasper offered an apologetic look, and Patrick nodded, showing he understood.

“It has been months since what happened to your sister... happened. Maybe some people know if it, but it has not landed in the pages of scandal sheets yet, has it?” Patrick reminded him gently. “Maybe your family has escaped such a fate?”

“I wish I could believe that, just as sure as my mother wishes she could believe that too but face it, Patrick. It could appear

there at any point. It's a wonder the Marquess of Hatfield didn't give the story himself." Jasper grew angry just by mentioning the man's name. This time when he threw the ball, he did it with vigor, and it flew so hard and fast through the air that Frankie's paws pelted the ground to propel him forward to chase it.

"Because he would not be covered in glory either if he told the story, would he?"

Jasper nodded, wishing to believe it, but like his mother, he had his doubts. Any time now, Lettie's name could appear in the scandal sheets. The more he and his mother could assure the ton of their good standing before it did appear there, the better.

"How is she?" Patrick asked, walking alongside Jasper as they followed Frankie through the fields.

"I told you how she was the other night," Jasper reminded his friend. He watched as his words offered no comfort. If anything, Patrick was even more anxious at his side.

"You told me a little of her but not where she is. You said she's happy. Does that mean content or truly enjoying herself?" Patrick's eagerness tempted Jasper to smile. It was a relief to have that want of happiness creeping through his anger. "You speak so little of her at the moment that I am left to guess how she is."

"Patrick?" Jasper stopped walking, forcing his friend to do the same.

“Yes?” Patrick stood woodenly as Frankie appeared at their side, wagging his tail and offering up the wooden ball.

“Why exactly does my sister’s state of happiness concern you so much?” Jasper asked the question, wanting to prompt a truthful answer from his friend. Patrick stepped back a little and shrugged as if it was no great matter. “I could prod you with a finger, and you’d fall over this moment. Lost your balance? Or lost your tongue?” His sarcasm urged Patrick to speak at last.

“I have been a friend to you and your family for many years. I simply want what is best for her as I would wish the same for any of my friends.” Patrick managed to hold Jasper’s gaze without looking away.

“Hmm,” Jasper murmured the sound, not quite convinced. When Frankie barked around the ball in his mouth, he turned his attention back to the dog and took the ball. “I almost believed you,” He said the words so quietly that he thought Patrick hadn’t heard him as he followed.

“Oh dear,” Patrick’s words made them both slow in their pace.

“What is it?”

“Look.” Patrick clasped Jasper’s shoulder and pointed back across the fields in the direction of the house.

“I knew it,” Jasper muttered, his tone harsh again. “She couldn’t give me one morning away from thinking of this whole mess. She has to actually follow me out of here.”

“Do you wish me to stay and be more of a distraction?” Patrick’s offer made Jasper clap his shoulder warmly, thankful for his friend’s kindness.

“No, thank you. There is no point in you having to suffer her repeated pleas as well. You go. I will see you soon.”

“Good day, Jasper.” The two shook hands in parting, and Patrick walked across the fields, following the path his steward had taken a short time ago. When he passed Marianne, he bowed, but she moved on quickly.

“She has the bit between her teeth,” Jasper observed as Frankie came to sit beside him, offering up the ball.

The Dowager Duchess was soon close enough to speak. She was hastening forward, her pace so great that her cheeks were pink, and her dress was rather ruffled. Walking out in these fields, her petticoat had become dirty, and she looked down at it with a wrinkled nose.

“Jasper, we must speak,” she pleaded with him.

“It seems we must if you would walk all the way out here to do it.” He busied himself with playing with Frankie.

“It’s about Lady Emma.” Marianne walked around Jasper, standing in front of him to get his attention. When she smiled, Jasper’s movements stilled, fearing where his mother’s conversation would lead now.

“Allow me to guess,” he said slowly, “you warned me once that she and her siblings were not quite refined enough for the ton to accept. Are you to tell me we should not be friends with them now?”

“No, no! Far from it.” She stepped toward him with eagerness. “Did you not observe the other night how elegant Lady Emma is becoming? Her sister, too, they are taking to their lessons well. Lord Follet may not have the same elegance, but Lady Emma is certainly changing.”

The very words made Jasper clench his fingers around the wooden ball as it was returned to him by Frankie. Yes, Emma now knew how to hold a glass, stand better and dance better. This seemed to please his mother too much, though.

“So, are you saying because she can suddenly hold a wine glass properly that she is worthy of our notice?” His sarcasm was so thick that Marianne’s dark eyes narrowed.

“Be sensible, Jasper.”

“I make no such agreement.” He tossed the ball for Frankie to fetch.

“What I am trying to say is you should have heard how people talked of her the other night at the ball.” Marianne clasped her hands together excitedly.

“Gossiped. Hardly talked, I’m sure.”

“Oh, Jasper.” She waved away his words. “They were greatly admiring her. They thought her quite beautiful and elegant—”

“Elegant. It seems to be your favorite word of the moment.”

“She is respected,” Marianne said succinctly, clearly drawing to her conclusive point, “greatly so. A union with her would certainly be a dutiful one.”

“Mother...” Jasper ignored Frankie when he returned and pinched the bridge of his nose, realizing exactly what his mother was saying. “When we first met Lady Emma, you encouraged the idea of a union. You changed your mind after seeing her manners, and now you are changing your mind again. I have seen wasps that change direction in their flight path less than you do with your thoughts.”

“Yes, my mind has changed.” Marianne shrugged, seeing no great problem with the idea. “She could make a fine duchess.”

“A duchess!?” Jasper spluttered. He walked in a quick circle, wishing he could escape his mother, but he expected if he took off across the field, running as Frankie could, that he would never hear the end of it from his mother.

Lady Emma may have been intriguing. She was beautiful, excellent company, and, yes, a rather thrilling distraction. He couldn't deny that when their hands had touched before they had danced the other night, there had been a spark there, plain as day. He was excited by her, but that didn't mean he had to marry her.

Many a man and a lady share an attraction. Such things come and go as the wind changes on an autumnal day.

“Mother, I have danced twice with her. That is all. Do you not think we are leaping ahead a little here?” Jasper asked, swinging back around to face his mother. Frankie hopped between them, impatiently wanting his ball to be thrown again, but Jasper laid a hand on the dog’s head, trying to calm him.

“It is a small jump ahead, that is all.”

“No, it is a great leap. I might as well jump off the folly on this estate to show you the greatness of leap.” Clearly, his exasperation wasn’t helping, for his mother stepped forward, her hands clasped together once again as if she was pleading with him. That, or she was praying.

“You liked her, though, did you not? You danced with her. You smiled at her.”

“If every gentleman married every lady he danced with and smiled at, then the churches of England would be kept very busy, indeed.”

“Oh, Jasper!” She flung her hands down at her sides. Her sudden loudness was the thing that ultimately quelled Frankie’s excitement. He kept his ball in his mouth but skulked off behind Jasper’s leg, hiding there. “Do you truly not understand what marrying could do for us?”

“Mother, you have told me many times, many times, indeed, that marrying would help improve our reputation a little. Yet, surely, you can see too that marrying for such a reason... it is absurd.” Jasper shook his head.

He had refused his mother’s similar pleas not that long ago, not regarding his own marriage, but regarding a suggestion for Lettie. After Jasper had found her in the Marquess of Hatfield’s arms and separated them, one of his mother’s suggestions to protect Lettie from the storm that would ensue was to see her married.

Lettie is too young to be married.

He also did not want to see his sister rushed into a loveless marriage just to protect her name.

“You have a habit of wishing for speedy marriages, Mother,” Jasper reminded her. The words seemed to take the wind out of Marianne. Her spine slumped and her shoulders fell forward a little.

“I am doing what I can to protect this family,” her voice was dark.

“I know. I know.” Jasper held out a hand to her soothingly. He rather imagined himself approaching some wild animal, like a cornered fox, terrified by the hounds, for she kept twitching and hanging her head further. “If the storm falls on our reputation and Lettie’s story does appear in the scandal sheets, then we will deal with it then.”

“And you do not think the story has spread already?” She shook her head, clearly disbelieving the idea. “The Marquess of Hatfield has royal connections. We have been shunned by many of our previous friends these last few months, with no invitations to private events we would have received in the past. You do not think they know of it?”

“Maybe a few families know and whisper some version of the story.” Jasper had to concede it could be true. He used to count several marquesses and dukes as friends. A few of them kept a wide berth of him now. “Yet that is not a reason to wed. Believe me, Mother, if I am to wed someday, in fact, ever, then I will not marry for the sake of seeing our name praised in the scandal sheets. I will marry for a different reason entirely.”

“What reason is that?” she asked.

Jasper didn't answer her. He walked across the fields, heading back to the house, with Frankie hurrying at his side.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWELVE

“**T** here is a gentleman caller for Lady Emma, My Lady.”

The butler’s words made everyone sit to attention in the room. Emma jerked straight, nearly dropping her book on garden birds, and at her side, Betty clasped her hands together excitedly. Judith sat tall on the settee opposite with such a proud smile it was as if she knew such a caller was a foregone conclusion. Beside her, Frances lowered her embroidery.

“Please, show him in,” Judith encouraged.

They all stood to their feet. Emma felt Betty take her hand and start whispering in her ear.

“Who do you reckon it is?” Betty asked animatedly, elbowing her to prompt a reaction from her.

“I do not know.” Yet, Emma had a strong hope as to who it could be. There was only one gentleman she had not stopped thinking of since the concert, one man she had spent most of that evening standing beside.

The Duke of Waybridge.

She looked to the door, waiting as it opened a second time, but as the butler waved in their guest, Emma found the breath she had been holding escaped her in a rush, and her shoulders threatened to slump.

“The Right Honorable Lord Thorne,” the butler announced and retreated to the door.

“Thank you. Please, have some tea arranged.” Judith took command of welcoming the Baron and gesturing for him to come further into the room. “What a pleasure it is to have you with us, My Lord.”

“I thank you for your kindness.” Lord Thorne turned his eyes to Emma. She did nothing, not until Betty elbowed her, reminding her of her manners, and Emma hurried to curtsy. “Lady Emma, I come bearing gifts.”

He revealed he’d been holding a hand behind his back for a particular reason as he proffered a bouquet of flowers.

“Oh my, are they not beautiful?” Betty gushed, with her eyes wide.

“Yes, indeed they are,” Judith agreed. “Emma? Isn’t there something you would like to say?”

“Yes, of course.” Emma shook herself, trying to clear her mind of its frozen state. There was no reason to be rude to her

gentleman caller just because he was not the gentleman her heart had foolishly hoped for. “Thank you, My Lord. They truly are lovely.”

She took the flowers from him and moved to the side of the room, selecting an empty vase from where it sat on the windowsill. Betty followed to help her with the flowers.

“I hope you will forgive me for coming uninvited,” Lord Thorne continued, addressing Judith alone. “Yet, I had to come and see your niece.”

“What a compliment that is. Is it not, Emma?” Judith called to her.

“Yes, it is,” Emma muttered the words quickly, so rattled by the gentleman’s entrance that things seemed to pass in a blur. One minute Betty was whispering to her how exciting it was to be called on by such a gentleman, the next minute they were sat drinking tea with him, though he explained he could not stay for long.

Frequently Lord Thorne talked of himself, something that irked Emma but seemed to go unnoticed by the others. Betty merely gushed, admiring him when he talked of his great sporting achievements, and Judith praised him. When he began to speak of his outstanding business achievements, Emma heard a sigh and angled her head to the side, surprised to see it was her mother. It seemed Frances, too, had noticed his preoccupation with speaking of himself.

“What do you think, dear?” she said distractedly, leaning toward Emma with her embroidery. “It is of the garden.”

“Quite beautiful.” Emma noticed that Roberta the Robin sat in the corner of the embroidery picture. “I like the addition.”

“She deserves her place.” Frances began to hum a soft tune to herself. She would often have such a habit, talking dreamily of one thing and then the next, even if another conversation was taking place, but on this occasion, Emma rather suspected her mother did it on purpose just so they could have a break from talking of Lord Thorne.

When it came time for the Baron to take his leave, he took Emma’s hand and held it a little longer than was customary.

“It was truly a pleasure to see you again, My Lady. Your company is like the sweetness of champagne.”

“As always, you are too kind with your compliments, My Lord,” she smiled, though she meant the phrase in truth. He was effervescent and a little too much to take. He kissed her hand, and she retracted it rather quickly afterward, then waved him off.

When the door closed behind him, Emma sank down into the settee beside her mother, who was still hard at work on her embroidery.

“Well, that was progress indeed.” Judith clapped her hands, clearly pleased with something she viewed as a great success. “A visit from the most eligible bachelor? Promising! Very promising.”

“I am not so sure his affection spreads very far, Auntie,” Emma murmured.

“How can you say that when he bought you these flowers?” Betty called from where she had hurried to the windowsill to admire the bouquet for what had to be her third time that afternoon.

“Because there seemed to be another object of his affections, did there not, Mother?” At Emma’s question, Frances giggled.

“Most certainly. I declare I have never met a gentleman who speaks so much of himself,” France said, laughing harder once she had finished.

“Well, I never.” Judith bristled as if the insult had been about herself. “He is a true gentleman.”

“Did you not think him handsome, Mother?” Betty called, pulling out one of the flowers.

“Yes, very handsome. There was something on his face that reminded me a little of your father when he was young. Oh, Emma, did I tell you about the time your father called on me for the first time with flowers?” Frances spoke excitedly, but Judith waved a hand.

“You have told her that many times. I know it to be true,” Judith reminded her.

“What a pleasant day that was,” Frances said with a contented sigh, barely taking note of her own sister’s complaint. Emma smiled as she watched her mother daydream about the past with such a smile that Emma was quite envious.

What must it feel like to be visited by a man you care so much for?

The image of the Duke of Waybridge appeared in her mind, but she hastily thrust it away.

“Well, perhaps we have just been witnesses to Emma’s first visit from her future husband,” Judith said, waving at Emma.

“Husband?” Emma began to shake her head. “I have not agreed to marry him yet.”

“Who wouldn’t want to marry such a man?” Betty asked across the room, staring at the flower in her hand.

“Then you marry him.” Emma gestured at her sister.

“Need I remind you, Emma, that the Baron is still your best option? You may keep looking to the window hoping that another will visit, but I assure you, he will not. If his mother is right on the matter, the Duke of Waybridge will never court any woman.”

Judith’s words made Emma slump back into her chair, losing her good posture entirely. It irked her that Judith and her

family could read her thoughts so well that she wished the Duke would come. It irked her even more that he would not.

“Do not slouch, dear,” Judith reminded her.

Emma abruptly sat straight, though she bundled her hands into fists as she did so. Before she could object to sitting in such a way, the front door opened, and the clear sounds of someone entering the house approached. Judith moved to the sitting room door and peered through it before her smile vanished.

“Oh dear,” Emma said, pointing at her aunt’s expression “You would think she had seen a spider the size of a man walking into the house.” Frances giggled at her words and playfully swatted her hand, urging her to be quiet.

“That might be more welcome,” Judith said sharply as Andrew appeared beside her in the doorway. “Andrew, what on earth have you done to yourself?”

“What?” Andrew asked innocently.

Even Emma’s eyes widened upon him. He had left the house that morning without any explanation as to where he was going, dressed well enough in a customary day tailcoat and trousers. Now, he had returned with both of them covered in mud. The top hat under his arm was speckled with dirt and appeared to have lived in a hole in the ground all day.

“I think she’s questioning why you resemble a mole, Andrew,” Emma pointed out. “Have you spent the day burrowing in the earth?”

“As a matter of fact, I have.” Andrew went to sit down, but Judith immediately protested.

“You’ll get dirt everywhere.”

“Fine, then I shall change.” Andrew walked out of the room again.

“Wait!” Emma jumped to her feet and chased him out of the room, only managing to catch up with him on the stairs. “Andrew, what did you mean by that? Where have you been?”

He beckoned her to follow him up the stairs, talking conspiratorially.

“I have been to the very place Aunt Judith would have banned me from. You remember our father talking of an antiquarian dig in the lower parts of London?”

“They found something Roman, did they not?”

“They did, and I have been helping.” Andrew had a spring in his step as he bounded across the landing. “Despite what our aunt says, Emma, I intend to continue as I like, and after today, I am not going back. I got too much of a thrill from it.” He was about to enter his bedchamber when he paused, glancing back to Emma. “Something’s wrong, isn’t it?”

“What? No, nothing is wrong.”

He abandoned his attempt to open his door and leaned on it instead, turning to face her.

“I always know when you’re hiding something,” he said slowly.

“How?”

“It comes from being your brother. We’re the ones that snuck tadpoles into the house one day in a jar and attempted to hide it from our parents,” Andrew said with a chuckle. “We gave the housekeeper a nasty fright.”

“That we did.”

“So, I can tell when you’re lying. Out with it. What is wrong?” Andrew encouraged, waving a hand at her.

Emma glanced back down the corridor, checking no one else was nearby before she spoke her thoughts.

“Lord Thorne called on me today. He brought flowers,” she murmured, aware that neither of these things sounded bad.

“I see.” Andrew nodded slowly.

“How do you see? I haven’t exactly explained myself properly.” She placed her hands on her hips, watching as her brother matched her stance playfully.

“I see one thing very clearly. The right situation, a gentleman caller, nice flowers, and all that. Only... it was the wrong gentleman, wasn't it?” he asked, his words quiet.

Emma slowly nodded, afraid to utter the words aloud.

“Ah, Emma. You have only met the Duke of Waybridge a handful of times.”

“I know.” She nodded.

“Yet you like him, anyway, do you not?” He was clearly worried for her, for he slumped further against the door, quite forgetting himself and getting dirt upon the woodwork.

“Clearly, I should not know.” Emma knew it was foolish. The Duke had not come to call on her, and it was conducive with Judith's warning—the Duke of Waybridge had no intention to marry or court any lady. “So, brother, distract me and tell me all about your day digging in the earth.”

“Happy to.”



“What bird is that?” Emma asked, craning her neck so much that she had to hold onto her bonnet to stop it from falling off her head.

“One that flies. Now, please pay attention, Emma.”

She merely shot her aunt a resentful look before returning to gaze to the skies above Hyde Park, trying her best to see what sort of bird it was. Its wingspan was vast and curved at the edges, but what struck her most was the tail—it was forked.

“What a large bird. It must be some sort of bird of prey.” Yet Emma was prevented from looking at the bird anymore. Her arm was taken by Judith on one side and by Betty on the other, who steered her away from the trees and out to the main paths. “Am I making you both despair?” Emma asked.

“I would not be in a hurry to deny it,” Betty agreed, thrusting her forward. “We are here to promenade, Emma, not to stare at the sky with our jaws hanging open. You resembled a fish.”

“I am sure I did not.” Emma was quickly quietened, though, when she saw her sister’s face. “Very well, I will stop staring at the birds.”

“Good. It is important we promenade today,” Judith said with finality as they stepped through a gate and out onto the main path. “Here we are, one of the centers of the ton.”

“I thought that was the Almack’s Assembly rooms.” Emma’s words earned her a shake of Judith’s head. “Don’t people just come here to walk?”

“Ha! Far from it. So much social politics is done in these gardens, between these tall topiary bushes and past the grand bandstand where violinists sometimes take their places. Come this way, Ladies.”

She urged them to follow her, and they did so, arm in arm. “When you see picnics, do not be deceived. Families are trying to look the part. When you see couples walking arm in arm, followed by chaperones, then they are courting. If you see them walking alone, then they are married and trying to keep up the pretense of a happy union,” Judith went on.

“Are we going to ignore the fact you just presumed they would be unhappy?” Emma asked.

“Now, here is the part that interests us most.” Judith hovered on a small footbridge that passed over a babbling stream. Emma and Betty halted beside her, following her gaze to where groups of ladies moved amongst gentlemen. Off to one side, mothers whispered and gossiped, pointing between the couples. “Here, the eligible ladies and gentlemen wander.”

“I’m reminded of the geese in our back garden in mating season,” Emma muttered, urging Betty to laugh at her side.

“Ladies, follow me.” Judith beckoned them forward. “It’s imperative that we come here regularly now the weather is so much improved. With the right connections, we encourage you both to promenade with various gentlemen. Keep your eyes peeled for Lord Thorne, Emma. He is no doubt your best opportunity at this point to make a match this Season. Now, Betty, let us see whom we could partner you with.”

Emma froze, drowning out the sounds of her aunt and sister talking together. She did as she was told and allowed her eyes to search the crowd, looking for Lord Thorne, though she did it with no enthusiasm. She would rather have stayed where she was, trying to determine what the bird was that had soared

overhead than come here just to search for a gentleman that might not even turn up.

Even that morning, Emma had objected to the idea of promenading, but Judith had persuaded her by reminding her that Hyde Park was home to wonderful beauties of nature and such wildlife that she would have been spoilt.

“I’d rather be home looking for Roberta,” Emma murmured to herself, knowing that at this time of day, Roberta liked to hop across the lawn, looking for worms to feed her chicks.

“Have you found Lord Thorne yet, dear?” Judith asked, moving back to Emma’s side.

“No, Aunt Judith, I do not see him. He might not be here at all today.”

“Yes, I suppose that is possible, though ill-timed, indeed. Well, we must take hope in the gift of his flowers.” Judith smiled, clearly comforted by the flowers. “We must keep our eye out in case he sends any more gifts to you. I declare, Emma, for someone who loves nature so much, you did not seem enamored with the flowers.”

“What? Oh, no. They were gorgeous. One would have to be blind not to be flattered.” She decided to leave her point at that. She knew Judith wouldn’t be pleased if she had explained she would rather have had the flowers come from another. That was her only protest.

“Let us look for him again.” As Judith craned her neck back and forth, Emma looked too, only this time, she saw someone. Yet, it wasn’t Lord Thorne.

When his eyes found hers across the park, he started advancing toward her, even though he was not part of the ladies and gentlemen that had come here to court. He was in a distant part of the park, with a greyhound loping at his side with a long gait.

“I do not believe it,” Emma murmured.

“What, dear?” Judith clearly hadn’t seen him yet.

“I see a gentleman, Auntie, but it is not the gentleman you are looking for.” Her tone betrayed a little of her excitement.

It is the one I am looking for.

Stepping easily through the crowds, so tall that he was plain to notice, the Duke of Waybridge approached her.

“Good day, Lady Emma,” he said in a rush and bowed to her.

“Good day, Your Grace.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“This is the greyhound you spoke so much of,” Emma declared and immediately bent down to greet Frankie. “Good day to you, Frankie, and how are you?” The moment she began to stroke him, the dog panted and barked eagerly at her.

“That was him saying he was enjoying himself,” Jasper attempted to translate, prompting Emma to chuckle.

Jasper was quite distracted. When he’d come to Hyde Park this morning to walk Frankie, he hadn’t even thought about the possibility of bumping into Emma. Now that he was here, it seemed a fortunate coincidence indeed.

Her aunt had drifted away to attend to Betty, leaving Jasper quite alone with her. However, he felt they were being watched from a distance. His own eyes were rather busy watching Emma. Her beauty was quite mesmerizing today, and it had something to do with how she had lit up to greet Frankie.

“What a beautiful dog,” she said, standing tall to face him again. The moment she stopped stroking the dog, Frankie whimpered and moved to her side.

“Beautiful but needy,” Jasper corrected her. “Frankie, she will not stand here and constantly pet you.” He pulled on the dog’s leash a little, but Frankie refused to move. Emma giggled and stroked him again. “Believe me, Lady Emma, you’ll be stuck there now.”

“I can think of worst places to be stuck in.” She glanced behind her at her aunt.

“Ah, I see,” Jasper murmured, moving a little closer to her side. “Should I guess you are here under a little duress, Lady Emma?”

“Not exactly. I am here because I was duped!” she said with a dramatic tone for comic effect. “My aunt told me that coming to Hyde Park was all about seeing the beauties of nature. I think she rather lied. She wished me to walk and talk to acquaintances, showing off the new teachings she has given me.”

“Then allow me to offer you an escape.” Jasper said, gesturing down at the dog’s leash. He wasn’t sure what had come over him, but this certainly seemed like an ideal opportunity. He could distract his mind with Emma’s company, as he had done so often as of late, and she could escape the promenade.

“I cannot say no to that.”

He passed her the leash, which she took rather eagerly, and then he gestured for her to walk at his side. Behind them, he was aware of Judith and Betty hurrying on, chaperoning them from a distance.

“Thank you,” Emma said as she began to walk Frankie, with the greyhound happily padding alongside her. “This is infinitely preferable to me.”

“I am sure you are not the only one who thinks it.” He glanced back at the ton, all split into groups. “There must be more like us who feel as if they are performing for an audience rather than acting as their true selves.”

“How well said.” Emma smiled up at him, and he returned that look. When they had been staring at each other for a beat too long, Jasper looked away and cleared his throat.

What is this feeling?

“If you could be anywhere in the world rather than here performing for the ton, as you so rightly describe, where would you be?” Emma asked.

“Oh, a grand question, indeed.”

“As I said before, I infinitely prefer to talk of things that matter, Your Grace. Neither of us is bothered by small talk, are we?” she asked.

“Certainly not, and if you start to talk to me about how brightly the sun is shining today, then I will be disappointed,” he teased her, watching as she tipped her head to the sky and pretended to point in awe at the sun.

“How bright!”

“You taunt me,” he muttered with a mockingly dark tone. She laughed heartily, and he was pleased to see she did not cover her mouth as she did so.

It was something he had observed at the concert ball, how she had adopted this demure laugh that ladies sometimes employed as if they were ashamed to laugh. He was not so fond of it. He preferred it when she laughed freely, without hesitation or restriction. Ever since he had told her to feel free with him, he was relieved to see that she had not done it again.

This is the way she should be. Carefree.

“So, I shall return to my question then,” she mused. “If you could be anywhere else, where would you be?”

“Now, let me think.” He led their path away from the hubbub of the busy park, and they took a lane toward the open woodland to somewhere much quieter. Behind them, Lady Frampton and Betty still followed. Frankie began to strain at his leash, longing to explore. “Cumbria.”

“Cumbria?” Emma said in surprise, jolting her head in his direction.

“A few years ago, I visited the lakes and traveled the countryside. My country estate is in the north, so it was not so far to travel to and from there,” he explained in a hurry. “I do not think I could describe my time there well enough with words.”

“No great poet?” Emma teased him.

“No, indeed. Wordsworth, when he wrote of the daffodils, would despair of me talking of the lakes, I do not doubt.” He shook his head. “It was a freeing time. Have you ever been to Cumbria?”

“Never. What is it like?” she asked with eagerness, clearly keen to know the answer rather than just asking him to be polite.

“You feel as if you are standing at the edge of the world when you stand on that coastline. The wind is bracing, it knocks one from their feet. The wildlife too. Now, that is something to behold.” He could tell he had her complete attention. As they walked, their pace slowed, and their bodies were more turned toward each other. “Nothing can compare to the ruggedness of the place. Everywhere you look, there is a new animal.”

“More deer like Harry?” She reminded him of their conversation about the deer on his estate.

“Many more,” he agreed. “Great stags. I saw a white stag once when I was there.”

“A white stag!? That’s... unbelievable. I always thought they were mythical?” Emma actually reached out and placed her hand on his arm, for she was so stunned.

“Far from it, they are real,” he assured her. He acted on instinct and took her hand, threading it through his arm. “Yet

incredibly rare. It had to be the most surreal moment of my life to see the white stag stepping through the trees as if it was a ghost walking by me.”

“Oh my, I wish I could have seen it.” She sighed in awe.

“Maybe you will someday. You just might have to go all the way to Cumbria to find it.”

“I’d love that,” she said with a giggle. “But getting my family all the way to Cumbria might be a challenge.”

“Why is that?”

“For we would all want to do different things there. My father would wish to meet local writers and poets, and my mother would busy herself in the garden of whatever lodgings we were staying at. Andrew would read up on the history, and Betty, well... currently, I think Betty would try to acquaint herself with the local society. Who would come walking with me to hunt for the white stag?” Emma asked. “I need a friend for that.”

“You have one here,” Jasper said and gestured to himself. The moment the words came out of his lips, his stomach knotted.

What am I doing? Am I actually offering to go traveling with Lady Emma to the lakes? Have I lost my mind?

Yet the offer had come all too easily from him.

“Ha! Maybe someday,” she said playfully, then returned her gaze forward. “In the meantime, I shall have to buy a dog like Frankie so that he may keep me company.” Frankie barked, clearly recognizing his name.

“I think he’s offering to come too,” Jasper said, prompting Emma to chuckle.

They walked on for a minute or two in companionable silence before Frankie pulled too much at the leash for peace to remain. Jasper reached down and released Frankie, watching as the dog shot off into the trees.

“Oh my, he is quick,” Emma said with a laugh. “What is he chasing? Rabbits? Squirrels?”

“Anything he can find. I caught him chasing a fly the other day, so I am not certain he is the smartest of dogs.”

When she laughed at his words, Jasper grew distracted, and he found himself staring at her. There was a thrill that came with making this lady laugh, a thrill he rather wanted to hold onto.

“Oh, there it is again.” Emma stepped forward, looking so sharply up at the sky that she had to hold onto her bonnet to avoid losing it.

“Are you teasing me by marveling at the sun again?” he asked, trailing behind her.

“Ha! Far from it. Look.” She pointed to a bird that soared overhead, then darted amongst the trees. “I do not recognize the bird, but it is russet red and has a forked tail.”

“I know it,” Jasper said, stopping at her side as they watched the bird appear again. “It is a red kite.”

“A kite?” Emma had jerked her head to look at him and no longer stared at the bird of prey.

“The kite is that way, My Lady,” he said playfully, gesturing toward it.

“It’s just...” She shifted between her feet, hesitating before she went on. “You know birds.”

“I do.” He nodded. “You do remember I told you I have an aviary?”

“Yes, you did, but you know the names,” she pointed out. “Many gentlemen might have an aviary merely to show off a rather grand collection.”

“Yes, I know such men.” He offered her his arm again as they walked on, and she took it swiftly. The way her hand slid up his arm made a warmth spread through him, a warmth he was trying not to think too much about. “I am not one of them. Every bird I own, I know exactly what it is. It interests me.”

“Hmm,” Emma murmured.

“I have surprised you.”

“Pleasantly so.” She glanced behind them, clearly looking at where her aunt walked at a distance. “You are quite challenging my aunt’s idea on how a gentleman busies himself, Your Grace. She once told me my liking for a conversation about birds would bore any gentleman.”

“Ha! Then I am glad to be the one to defy her. From what you and your brother have said, not many dare try.” His jest made her eyes widen as if the idea of defying Lady Frampton was impossible. “Frankie! No more chasing squirrels.” Frankie returned at the mention of his name and loped back to Jasper’s side, bumping his head against Jasper’s knee and insisting on being stroked before he walked peacefully.

“I have to thank you, Your Grace,” Emma said quietly, her arm sliding a little further across his arm in such a way that his attention was caught completely by it.

“Thank me? Whatever for?”

“Today could have been a very tiresome day indeed,” she said softly. “I could have talked to many pleasant people but felt compelled to act a part that is not truly who I am.” Her lips quivered into a smile. “Yet in your company, I can be myself.”

“I would not have it any other way, and I am glad you have enjoyed this walk as I have done.” His words had deepened, and he held her gaze for a beat before he looked ahead.

“If you have others to greet now, I would not be offended. After all, you must know many interesting people who have come to walk in this park. Yet you have come to walk with me!” She laughed at the idea, clearly putting herself down as she so often did.

“Your company pleases me, Lady Emma.” Jasper longed to be a little more open with her and felt more words tumble from his tongue. “You help chase away my woes.”

“Your woes?” Her tone was soft. “What woes are they?”

He glanced between her and their path ahead, being careful to take the lane that led back to the center of the park. Sooner or later, he knew he would have to return her to the others, or her aunt would grow impatient.

“Such woes are best not spoken of,” he whispered, even though they were far from anyone. “They are best kept out of the public eye.”

“Ah, I see.” Her hand had stiffened a little on his arm. “Then I am still quite a stranger to you.”

“A stranger?” he repeated.

“Friends talk of woes, Your Grace,” she explained.

“It is not that, Lady Emma,” he sought to persuade her, his voice turning even deeper, “it is merely that these woes are difficult to speak of. I like to think you are my friend.”

“I am,” she said, with her smile growing, “and if you should ever decide to speak to me of your woes, Your Grace, then rest assured, you will find a comforting friend here.”

“Thank you.”

The two of them came to a stop at the edge of an expanse of lawn where families picnicked and couples walked together. Jasper felt there was truth in her words that if he were to tell her the truth of what troubled him so, she would be supportive. She would not be judgmental or distance herself from him, as some might.

Maybe someday I could tell her.

“Ah, Emma, forgive the intrusion.” Judith was suddenly between them, with Betty on her arm. “Lord Thorne has just arrived in the park and is clearly eager for your attention.” She gestured across the parkland toward the entrance. Jasper followed that gesture with his eyes to see that she was right.

Lord Thorne had entered the park and was waving at Emma as he approached, trying his best to capture her eye.

Jasper felt Emma’s hand slip from his arm. It made his stomach knot to think she would now go and walk on Lord Thorne’s arm. It sizzled in his gut until he was restless, shifting his weight between his feet.

I have no right to be envious of Lord Thorne. Lady Emma and I are not courting.

Yet he found his eyes watching Emma carefully, trying to judge her reaction to Lord Thorne's approach. She didn't appear enthused, and Jasper was relieved for it.

"Yes, so he is." Emma waved in return then looked back to Jasper again. "Your Grace—"

"Forgive us, Your Grace," Lady Frampton said, speaking over her niece, "but we must greet our friend. I hope you enjoyed your walk?"

"That I did, thank you." His eyes lingered on Emma with the words. "I wish you a pleasant rest of your day." He bowed to her, watching as she curtsied. Before they parted, she bent down and stroked Frankie.

"Goodbye, Frankie. I hope you behave and stop chasing all those squirrels now." At her words, Frankie barked. "Do you think he was agreeing with me?" she playfully asked Jasper as she stood straight.

"Don't believe him if he was. He'll be chasing them again in seconds."

They smiled at one another before she was taken away by her aunt and crossed the park, heading to meet Lord Thorne. Jasper's hand tightened uncomfortably around Frankie's leash as he reattached it, aware that Emma glanced back at him more than once. He would have liked to have walked longer with her, but it was not to be.

“Well, I’ll be damned. You are promenading now, are you?”

At the familiar voice, Jasper stood straight and turned round to see Patrick approaching.

“Patrick? Good day to you.” The two of them shook hands. Jasper was aware of Patrick glancing at Emma, who was now with Lord Thorne, but he made no comment. Jasper was relieved about it. He did not think he could stand being teased about Lady Emma at that moment. “I came to walk Frankie,” Jasper explained, gesturing at the dog who sat dutifully at his side with his tongue hanging out of his snout. “And yourself? Have you come to promenade now? I do not remember you ever doing so before.”

“Perhaps people can change.” Patrick shrugged and urged Jasper to walk with him with a wave of his hand. “Unlike you, Jasper, maybe some of us wish to be married someday.”

“It is rare to hear you talk so candidly. You wish to be married then, my friend?” Jasper asked, eyeing Patrick carefully. His friend stared forward, though, as if finding something much more interesting to look at in the woods.

“Someday, perhaps,” Patrick said quietly.

“And what lady do you seek?” Jasper pulled Patrick to a stop and gestured to a sea of ladies. Some were doing their best to be noticed, fluttering fans in their faces so fast that it was as if they were being buffeted by a great wind. Others sat demurely, as still as statues, thinking that would earn them admiration. The sight of their stillness made Jasper glance back briefly at

Emma, thinking of the animation with which she had walked at his side and petted Frankie.

“I do not know,” Patrick said slowly.

“There is no particular lady you seek to promenade with?” Jasper asked, watching his friend for a reaction.

“Perhaps the lady I seek is not here.” Patrick sighed. “I should look elsewhere when she is absent, should I not?”

“Patrick, would you tell me who this lady is?”

Yet Patrick didn't answer his question.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“F or a week, this has been going on. A week?” Frances asked, tilting her head to the side and quite abandoning her gardening.

Emma tried to stand from the stone bench where her aunt had placed her, but she was quickly made to return to her seat with a hand on her shoulder.

“Yes, a week,” Judith confirmed. Emma wriggled out of her aunt’s grasp as she sat on the stone bench.

This is not quite how I pictured today.

Every day for a week, she and Betty had gone to Hyde Park to promenade just as their aunt had requested. Every day, the Duke of Waybridge had been there, walking Frankie. Emma had always spent time with them.

They had often walked together through the park, forcing Judith to either hurry on behind them as a chaperone or send a maid to follow them. Sometimes, Emma and the Duke would sit on a bench as they both threw a ball for Frankie to chase.

It had been a thrilling week for Emma. The Duke's company was always amusing, but there had been excitement there too. Near touches, and sometimes, she thought she caught him staring at her, though he would always jerk his head away as if it was not what he was doing at all.

That happy bubble was being popped this very minute, for Emma had been placed on this stone bench whilst the family gathered around to discuss the situation. Frances knelt near a rose bush, pruning, whilst Betty collected blooms by her shoulder, arranging them as Judith had taught her to do. Andrew was sat on a bench, seeming quite unperturbed by the conversation, and at his side was Bernard, who was forced to lower the poetry book he had in his hands to listen to Judith.

"A week?" Frances said, angling her head around to look at Judith and Emma. "You have walked with the Duke of Waybridge each day, Emma?"

"I have," Emma murmured, not understanding what was so wrong with what she had done.

"There. See! Do you see the danger of this?" Judith asked wildly.

"Aunt Judith, please, it is a walk," Emma reminded her aunt. "It is hardly anything greater."

"People are gossiping, Emma." Betty's quiet voice broke through to Emma much more than her aunt's panicked tone. "They have seen the two of you together. People presume you will be courting soon."

“And we all know the Duke has no intention to court at all, do we not?” Judith said with finality and waved her hand in the air.

At the movement, Emma flinched. She tried to be unaffected by the idea that the Duke refused to court, but the truth was it hurt. The two of them had such fun together, and when he offered her his arm just the day before, that touch had sent a tremor of excitement through her.

Perhaps it is all I shall ever be to him—a friend, but nothing more.

“I do not understand the problem in Emma being friends with a duke,” Bernard said calmly, waving his book so much that he dropped it. Andrew hurried to bend down and pick it up for him.

“Friends? Is that what they are?” Frances giggled at the idea. “Bernard, love, when you came to see me every day when we were young, we were more than just friends, were we not?”

“Nothing has been said in that regard,” Emma said hurriedly.

“You bought me such beautiful flowers,” Frances said rather dreamily, looking into the distance as if staring into the past. “You came every day for two weeks, and that raised my father’s eyebrows.”

“I did?” Bernard chuckled at the idea.

“The Duke does not buy me flowers,” Emma reiterated, trying to return to the matter at hand. “We are just friends. We are not courting.”

“Exactly,” Judith agreed and gestured to Emma as if she was the only one making sense. “Do you not see how this is dangerous, my dear?” she appealed to Emma, her tone a kind one. “Yes, the Duke of Waybridge is certainly making himself a good friend to you, but if he has no intention to wed, then seeing him so much only bodes ill. It makes others think you are engaged when you are not.”

“What do you expect her to do? Tell the Duke their walks must stop and she cannot be his friend anymore? Pah!” Andrew scoffed at the idea. “Something tells me Emma would never do that.”

“Thank you, Andrew,” Emma said, shooting a glance his way. Sometimes she felt as if Andrew was the one who knew her best in her family. He was quite right that even if her aunt pressured her into putting an end to the connection between her and the Duke, she would not do it.

I like him. I see nothing wrong in that.

“The Duke’s attentions make you look desirable, Emma. His friendship is advantageous to you in that,” Judith explained, circling the stone bench where Emma sat, unable to stand still.

“I thought friendship was its own advantageous state,” Emma murmured. The jest made Andrew smile, but no one else. They were all busy glancing at Judith rather nervously.

“Yet it is high time we were practical,” Judith said, changing her pace so that she walked the other way around the bench. “The longer you continue giving so much attention to each other, a connection that is not there will be presumed.”

“It is already presumed,” Betty declared from where she was collecting flowers.

“Then we must work to stop it. We will seek to correct people and explain that you are just friends, and you, Emma, must not see the Duke every day. It is a little too much,” Judith added hastily when Emma glared at her. Yet the words didn’t soften Emma’s anger.

It made her hands grip the stone bench beneath her, and her breathing turn a little more labored. She did not see what was so wrong in meeting with the Duke daily. There was still a chance, perhaps, that the more they knew each other, the more likely he would change his mind about marriage.

When the thought struck Emma, her deep frown began to soften, and she hung her head. The fact that she was putting so much hope on the Duke of Waybridge was dangerous, indeed. He’d never uttered any words of love or care, even affection, nothing beyond friendship. They may be flirtatious at times, but that was part of their natural dynamic. It didn’t promise anything.

My heart may be a fool for choosing him.

She was risking falling in love with him, and the fact remained that he had no idea it was the case.

“Do you know what I think?” Betty said, striding past Judith to come and sit beside Emma on the bench.

“What?” Emma asked, glad to have someone else’s opinion.

“I think another suitor has sent you more flowers today,” Betty reminded Emma of the bouquet that had turned up that morning. Lord Thorne’s flowers were an ostentatious display and had turned up not alone but with chocolates and biscuits. Strangely, though, the Baron had not delivered them himself. He had sent them by messenger.

“Yes, I know,” Emma said slowly. “But the Baron—”

“Emma, you like plain speaking, yes?” Betty spoke quietly.

“Yes.”

“Then I shall speak plainly now. The Baron intends to court you. It is as clear as the sun is in the sky today.” Betty gestured up toward the blue sky above them. Emma looked up, watching as the sun passed by overhead. It was a warm spring day, and with the sun so high in the sky, that warmth was beginning to increase. “He sends you gifts, and when he sees you, he is so complimentary that we all agree. It is even a little too much.”

“Yes, I imagine he studies our father’s poetry books,” Andrew declared with humor and took the poetry book out of Bernard’s hands.

“Andrew, I was reading that,” Bernard said with a laugh. They had a playful tug of war over the book before Andrew won and splayed open the pages, clearly looking for a certain poem in particular.

“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” he asked, at which point, the family all groaned at once.

“Even I do not like that one,” Bernard pointed out, trying to get the book back, but he failed. Andrew swiveled on the bench, holding the book out as he continued to read.

“Thou are more lovely and more temperate,” Andrew adopted a dramatic tone, like an actor taking to a stage. “Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, And summer’s lease hath all too short a date.”

“No more, Andrew, I beg of you,” Emma called as they all covered their ears. “Yes, I take your point, though. Lord Thorne’s compliments are a little in that ilk.”

“Exactly.” Betty bumped her shoulder, earning her attention once again. “He is the gentleman who is interested in courting you. It is apparent. Has the Duke of Waybridge ever given the slightest hint that he would do the same?”

Emma breathed in to answer, then held her breath, hesitating as she wracked her brains. For all the flirtation between them, all the excitement, there had been no great grand compliments, no gifts, nothing. It was merely his company that she had adored so much, not any amorous attentions.

“No. His attention is not an amorous one,” she confessed aloud.

“Then that confirms it, does it not?” Judith asked with finality, moving to stand at her sister’s side. “The Duke is a friend, nothing more. Frances, what do you think?”

“I think...” Frances paused and leaned into the bush she was working on, gazing at the early blooming roses. “That we need more roses in the garden.”

“Thank you for that helpful addition,” Judith said with a sigh.

Emma and Betty shared a small smile. Emma knew that Judith might not always understand Frances’ mind, but Emma did. When something was difficult, Frances would much prefer to let her mind wander than deal with the difficulty itself. It was her way of coping.

“Bernard? What do you think?” Judith appealed to him, and the rest fell quiet.

Bernard had his poetry book back in his hands and turned it over repeatedly, clearly deep in thought. When the birds tweeted in the distance, they made him sit taller, rousing him from his quietness.

“I’m reluctant to admit it, Emma, but there is truth in what your aunt says.” He slowly stood to his feet and moved to Emma’s side, laying a hand on her shoulder. “Maybe the Duke of Waybridge is a man not worthy of so much of your attention. Save it for another gentleman. I would hate to see

the Duke stringing you along when he has no intention to give you that same attention.”

“I see, Father, thank you,” Emma whispered. There was something in her father’s solemn tone that had her spine slumping. Ordinarily, he would never have interfered in such a way. For him to say something now showed his strength of feeling.

He is worried for me.

“Turn your attention elsewhere,” Bernard encouraged quietly. Emma nodded, though she said nothing. She was too acutely aware of a pain in her chest at the thought of not seeing the Duke every day, for it had become their habit.

“With that in mind, we will take a rest from the promenades for a couple of days,” Judith said for all to hear. “We can avoid the Duke of Waybridge that way.”

Emma chewed the inside of her cheek to stop herself from objecting when the butler appeared in the garden, hastening forward.

“What is it?” Bernard asked, his voice soft as he turned to look at the approaching butler.

“Lord Thorne is here again to see Lady Emma, My Lord,” the butler explained in a rush.

Emma froze on the bench, digging her fingers into the stonework until she could feel the grains scratching against her skin. She was aware of everyone's gazes shifting toward her, waiting for her to react.

"I told you," Betty whispered, "he is the one who wishes to court you."

That is what worries me.

Yet, Emma kept the thought to herself. Slowly, she stood to her feet and lifted her chin. If she had to turn her attention elsewhere, then Lord Thorne should be a wise choice. He was kind to her, a gentleman, and even if he was a little vain and dull at times, he was an eligible match.

"I shall come and chaperone you," Judith said, stepping forward, but Emma was too irked to allow it. Deep down, she knew Judith was doing her best to protect her, but Emma's heart didn't see it like that. Emma's heart was only hurt that Judith was separating her from the Duke of Waybridge.

"May my mother chaperone us instead today, please?" Emma asked and reached out a hand toward her mother by the rose bush.

Judith stopped so suddenly that she practically skidded on the paving slabs beneath her.

"I would be glad to do so, love," Frances said sweetly. She took Emma's hand, moved to her feet, and followed her inside.

“Thank you,” Emma whispered to her mother as they moved closer to the house. “I felt I just needed a little break from my aunt. I hope that is not an ill thing to say.”

“Have no fear, Emma. She is my sister. I know better than anyone how her strong opinion can make one feel like a wilting flower.” Frances squeezed her hand in comfort before they stepped into the building.

They quickly made their way to the sitting room where Lord Thorne awaited them. He stood by a table set up at the side of the room that displayed the flowers he had arranged to be delivered that morning quite wonderfully. Beside the crystal vase were the chocolates and the biscuits, waiting to be eaten.

“Ah, Lady Emma.” He hurried to greet her as she entered the room, bowing in a rather flamboyant way. “It is such a thrill to see you again. My heart can barely contain itself.”

“It is good to see you too, My Lord.” Her compliment was a little plainer as Frances entered the room. Frances curtsied and retreated to a corner, where she picked up her embroidery, clearly trying to give them a little privacy. “I wish to thank you for your kind gifts,” Emma said, walking back to the table and gesturing toward the flowers. “They are very beautiful.”

“You are most welcome. I had these specially picked from the hothouse for you.” Lord Thorne stood taller, clearly pleased with himself. “I rather wish I could show you such a place in person. With your love of nature, I imagine it is a place that would appeal to you greatly.”

“I am sure it would. Though I confess, My Lord, I prefer the wilderness of nature to hothouses and orangeries. Nothing can quite compare to rolling hills, can it?” Emma said, trying to lose herself in conversation with Lord Thorne.

“I suppose,” he murmured, “I have never really thought of it.”

“Forgive me, I ramble. It is just that one of the reasons I love nature so much is the animals and the natural wonders you can see. Just the other day, my father and I went walking on the estate to find two red squirrels digging in the ground. We presumed they were looking for all the nuts they had buried before hibernation...” Emma trailed off, seeing that the Baron was clearly quite bored by her words. His eyes had wandered back to the flowers. “But yes, these flowers are lovely.”

Her words seemed to comfort him, and he smiled again.

“Would you like some tea?” Emma gestured for him to sit and called to the maid to prepare tea. A short while later, they sat at the table, drinking tea, and Emma struggled to make more conversation.

My father is right. I must try harder to give my attention to someone other than the Duke of Waybridge.

“I hope you will be attending the sailing regatta on Saturday, Lady Emma, for I am to compete myself,” Lord Thorne suddenly declared, sitting tall in his seat.

“You are? That is wonderful.”

“Yes, indeed. Though the result is something of a foregone conclusion, for my boat is the finest, and I am the best sailor,” he boasted without a hint of irony, making Emma’s nose twitch a little. “There is still the thrill of the race to be had. Will you and your family be in attendance?”

“Yes, of course. We shall have to come to cheer you on,” she said, busying herself with topping up their teacups.

“Then I look forward to celebrating with you once I cross the finish line,” he murmured.

“Or commiserating if another pips you at the post,” Emma said with wit, trying to offer an alternative future, but the Baron laughed and shook his head.

“That will surely not happen.”

As Lord Thorne continued to boast, he talked of his great sailing prowess and how he was yet to be beaten in any race. Emma barely took part in the conversation beyond nodding and smiling at the right points.

She found she longed for another’s conversation. She wished to speak to the Duke of Waybridge, to lose herself in their rambling conversations that would have the two of them laughing in minutes.

I wonder where he is at this moment in time.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“A h, that was long.” Jasper practically stumbled out of the carriage in his eagerness to be free of it. The long journey had left him aching and in need of stretching his muscles. Standing on the driveway, he stretched his arms and arched his back as his eyes danced around the scenery before him.

No wonder Lettie likes it here so much.

The driveway was flanked by vast lime trees, tall and shimmering in the sunlight with their silvery green leaves. Beneath these trunks, the grass grew long with wildflowers, and the scents of newly sprung flowers filled the air. It was a far cry from London.

“Jasper?” Lettie’s voice urged him to turn on the drive, looking toward the house.

His cousin’s house had always been something of a refuge for them growing up. The Marquess of Buckingham’s home was a vast structure of red and white brick, surrounded by such a vast estate that one could become lost walking in it for hours. Now standing in the doorway, dwarfed by the house’s large size, Lettie peered her head out the door.

When her eyes found Jasper, she smiled that wide smile she always gave way to. Her dark eyes were much like their mother's, and her petite features were very much like their late father's.

"Lettie?" Jasper called to her, walking toward the house.

"You're here! You're here at last." Lettie ran out of the house, coming toward him so quickly that she seemed in danger of tripping on her hem.

"Of course, I'm here. I promised you I would come." Jasper held out his arms for when she barreled into them. "Oomph! Trying to knock me off my feet?" He laughed as she embraced him tightly, quite refusing to let go.

Jasper felt he needed this. This last week had been confusing with seeing Emma every day. He needed someone else to speak to about her who was not their mother, for he knew what their mother would say.

Marry her.

"You're here, you're here," Lettie said again as she jumped back. "You look tired too."

"Well, I did set off long before dawn to be here at a reasonable hour." Jasper attempted to stifle a yawn but failed.

“Then come with me. You will need waking up.” She took his arm and began to steer him around the house.

“Am I not going to greet our cousin just yet?”

“Nope!” Lettie said with eagerness. “I want you to myself for a short while before I have to share you.” He chuckled at her exuberant nature but went with her, allowing her to drag him away from the drive, through the lime trees, and across an expansive lawn. “How are you?” she asked.

“No, the real question is, how are you? That is why I have come all this way, after all, to see you.” He nodded his head at her as she looped their arms. “How are you enjoying your time here?”

“Have you not read my letters? I have told you I am enjoying myself.”

“Yes, but what do you do with your time?” Jasper pressed her some more, wanting to know that men like the Marquess of Hatfield were a thing of the past.

“Oh, it is very quiet here,” she explained with a shrug. “We have two assemblies a month at the local hall. They are very sweet affairs and not too grand. Our cousin is the grandest name there by far. We do country dances and hear readings from the local curate.”

“It sounds very quaint indeed,” Jasper approved with a nod. This was good for Lettie, a little peace and quiet. “What else do you do?”

“I’m enjoying my walks at the moment, and you’ll be pleased to know I am reading more. You always thought I read too little.” She rolled her eyes as if he was a pleading father, fearing for her education.

“I thought it might help a little to learn more about the world.” Jasper could see she giggled at his explanation, clearly thinking he was still overprotective of her. “I am pleased to hear you are reading more. I come bearing a message too.”

“A message? From whom?” Lettie asked, steering them across the back of the house, where the lawn turned to a formal knot garden paved on the side, and following a man-built stream.

“From my friend, Patrick. Lord Lancaster, to you,” he reminded her. “He wishes you well.” Jasper stayed quiet for a minute and watched his sister’s reaction. Something Jasper was becoming more and more certain of recently was that Patrick had to feel something for Lettie, or he would not ask so much about her, but as to Lettie’s feelings on that matter, he had no idea.

“He does?” Lettie jerked her head toward Jasper and abruptly stopped walking.

“Lettie, you would think I had just told you something truly shocking,” Jasper observed slowly, watching as she hung her head forward a little. He could have sworn a blush began to color her petite nose.

“It is just... well, he is the only other person who knows about...”

“Yes, let us not say the words.” Jasper had no wish to talk of the Marquess of Hatfield and that night.

“I rather thought after that your friend would have disparaged me. Our mother clearly thinks many will.” She hung her head, her embarrassment palpable.

“Well, you can rest your mind where Patrick is concerned.” Jasper patted her hand on his arm in comfort and urged her to walk on with him. “I am not sure that gentleman is capable of thinking ill of you.”

“What does that mean?” Lettie murmured.

“I am not entirely sure.” Jasper looked at her, aware now that she was avoiding his gaze altogether. As they continued to walk, Jasper made a resolution. He was determined to discover more in his visit to Lettie today about exactly what she thought of his friend.



“Lady Emma, it is so good to see you again.”

“And you, Lord Thorne.” Emma kept her true thoughts restrained as she held out her hand. Lord Thorne took it eagerly and kissed the back, but he did not linger with that kiss. The rather brief and hurried action made Emma curious, watching him closely.

There was no feeling in that kiss, no real emotion.

“We are glad you could join us again today, My Lord.” Judith stepped forward, taking command of the conversation as Emma withdrew her hand from the Baron’s grasp. “My niece was just talking of her longing for a walk in the garden.” she gestured toward the back door in the hall, out to the wider estate. “Perhaps you would be so kind as to accompany her before our tea?”

“I would be glad to.” Lord Thorne bowed deeply.

Emma was used to her aunt’s artfulness by now, but she also felt a little gratitude. At least Judith was trying to persuade Lord Thorne to accompany Emma in pastimes that she was fond of.

Once a chaperone had been prepared, the maid followed Emma and Lord Thorne into the garden. Emma’s eyes quickly darted through the trees, looking at the birds and recognizing their bird song. In her mind, she could perfectly picture the conversations she would share with the Duke of Waybridge at that moment, but he was not there to take part.

“I trust you are ready for your sailing regatta on Saturday, My Lord?” Emma said, trying her best to encourage a conversation she was certain Lord Thorne would enjoy.

“No one could be more prepared,” he said with a laugh. “I hope to make quite the impression, and I am thrilled you will be there to watch the event.”

“I am sure it will be an enjoyable day.” Emma turned her focus forward, looking out to the garden. In the distance, she could

see Frances attending to the flowers, peering around the blooms as she watched Emma and Lord Thorne together.

“I see your mother is watching us,” Lord Thorne whispered to her, coming near. When he came so close, she flinched in surprise and leaned a little away.

Oh dear, what will he think of me?

“She is curious as to the number of your visits,” she explained. “You have come a lot these last few days.”

“I am sure you cannot be in any doubt of my intentions.” His voice had deepened with sincerity. Emma felt her stomach tense with nerves and anxiousness. She avoided his gaze, angling her head away.

“You have been a friend these last few days, and of course, you are very generous with your gifts. So many flowers adorn the windowsills of our house at the moment. My father cannot walk into a room without sneezing,” she jested, trying to avoid the real matter at hand.

Lord Thorne appeared to angle their direction in the garden. Even as Emma longed to walk toward her mother’s location, Lord Thorne took a different path, wandering between high-banked yew bushes shaped as if they were cresting waves of the ocean. Emma sighed and turned to follow him, watching as their chaperone hurried on behind them at a little distance.

“Lady Emma, I cannot go any longer without sharing my thoughts with you,” he spoke with enthusiasm the moment

they were out of earshot. He was about to take her hand when Emma cleared her throat and nodded her head at the chaperone following them. He lowered his hand in understanding but went on. "I bring gifts, but not from friendship. You are too wise to surely think I do it for that reason alone."

"Nothing has been said of courtship, My Lord," Emma muttered in a hurry, but Lord Thorne did not seem to understand her hint.

"Then let us speak of it now." Lord Thorne stepped in front of her and turned to face her, bringing their walk to a sudden stop. Emma backed up, fearful of colliding with him. "It is my dearest hope that you and I may court someday, and maybe at some point in our future, we may call each other something infinitely dearer."

Emma held her breath. They were sweet words but said with such emotion that she felt rather bewildered. It was as if he was an actor performing on a stage rather than standing alone with a lady in the garden.

"May I speak of my heart to you?" He stepped toward her, intending to take her hand once again.

"Our chaperone, My Lord," she whispered in a hurry, hoping to use the maid as an excuse not to take his hand for as long as possible.

What is wrong with me? Is this not what Judith has wanted? I have the opportunity to court Lord Thorne!

Yet, she could summon no enthusiasm for the idea. Her stomach knotted in resistance to him, and her mind thought of another man entirely, one she was not permitted to promenade with at the moment.

The Duke...

“You are eager, My Lord, and very kind in your compliments,” Emma said, stepping around him and continuing their walk. “Yet, you and I hardly know each other. We have known one another for just a few short weeks. I respect you dearly, but I would not want us to rush anything.” She hoped it sounded reasonable.

“Yes, but when one sets their heart on something, as I do, one must pursue it until the very end.” He strode ahead, keeping pace with her. “I imagine myself to be like Romeo, in Shakespeare’s grand tale, fighting for his love till the end.”

“They had a miserable end, My Lord,” she said with a laugh. “I pray you and I will not meet the same grisly demise.” Her jest only made herself laugh, and once again, she felt the mismatch of the connection between her and Lord Thorne. He was dramatic and often missed her jests. She longed for good humor and conversation that was not so flowery. “You are eager to wed then, My Lord?” she murmured in surprise.

“I make no secret of my intentions.” He stopped by a flower bush and plucked a peony bloom, spinning round with animation to gift it to her. Emma smiled at his attempt to charm her.

“Indeed, you do not. You are persistent,” she said with laughter and sniffed the flower. It was a kind gift, and she liked such flowers, but there was still something that sat uneasily in her chest about this situation.

“I believe it is right for every young gentleman to marry at some point in his life. It is my mother’s opinion too.”

“Your mother’s?” Emma said in surprise, encouraging him as they turned down a second path between the yew bushes.

“She has high expectations, I will confess. She wishes me to marry well and to secure an heir for the barony. I take my responsibilities seriously, My Lady, and I intend to follow through with her wishes.” He laid a hand on his heart as he spoke as if he considered it the greatest honor in the world to marry as his mother wished him to.

“Then... that is why you wish to discuss courtship so quickly?” Emma murmured in surprise, her feet falling still beneath her on the chalk path. The Baron came to a stop a few strides ahead, turning back to look at her. “You wish to marry to please her?”

“To please her as well as myself,” he explained in a rush, “and I could not imagine a lady more perfect than you.” This time, he was too fast for Emma to avoid him. He leapt toward her and took her hand, lifting it swiftly to his lips. Emma wished she had worn gloves, anything to separate his lips from her skin. When he kissed her hand, she closed her eyes, imagining it was the Duke of Waybridge with her instead.

Stop thinking of him!

She tore the memory away as hurriedly as she released her hand.

“My Lord, be careful. Our chaperone will tell my father.” She retracted her hand and made a point of glancing at the maid.

“I do not care if all hear of my affection for you,” Lord Thorne said hurriedly. “Let the world hear it!”

“That is perhaps a touch dramatic.”

“But it is true.” He tried to close the distance between them once again, but she turned and walked down the path, encouraging him to follow.

“My Lord, we barely know one another,” Emma insisted. “If you someday wish for a courtship—”

“Yes?”

“Then I beg you.” She paused at the end of the path. “Let us learn about each other more first. I would not like us to rush into anything. Please.” Her pleading was obvious, and she did not miss the look of disappointment on his face. The light in his eyes faded a little, and he looked down at the path between them for a moment.

“I pray this is the true reason you ask for a delay to a courtship,” he said softly, “or am I competing with another for your attention?”

The question was too pertinent. It shot right to Emma's core. She turned and continued down the path again, this time with more eagerness in her steps.

"I have no expectations of another courtship, My Lord." She was forced to confess the truth. No matter what she hoped could pass between herself and the Duke of Waybridge, the fact remained that he had no intention to court any lady.

"Good, then I am glad." The Baron made a leap toward another bush and plucked a second flower, this one a bright white peony that he passed to her.

"Thank you," Emma said softly, taking the flower from him and adding it to the other one in her grasp.

"I would hate to think of a lady as good as you placing any hope on a man unworthy of you. When I think of such men, I think of the Duke of Waybridge, for instance." The baron's words made Emma stumble on the path. She righted herself quickly, glaring down at the flowers to avoid staring straight at him. "He would not be worthy of you, My Lady."

"Oh." Emma didn't know what to say. The Baron spoke nonchalantly as if he had picked the Duke's name from the air without any real intention, but she was not so great a fool as to fall for the nonchalant pretense. The Baron had evidently chosen the name very specifically, having seen the friendship between her and the Duke. "Do you not like the Duke, My Lord?" she asked slowly, nervous to hear the answer.

“I respect him,” the Baron spoke rather stiffly. “Yet I fear of his true intentions toward any lady he gives his time to. Let me, as a friend, issue a warning, My Lady. Keep your distance from the Duke of Waybridge.”

“I thank you for your warning.” Emma put on a false smile and walked ahead, but she kept her true thoughts to herself. The Baron had gone out of his way to disparage the Duke, but he had no real insult to level at the Duke’s name. “Let us talk of something else for a while. Tell me of your preparations for your sailing, My Lord.”

“I could talk of that subject for hours.”

She was pleased to see he did without much encouragement from her. It left her alone to her thoughts, thinking not only of the strange forwardness he had in wishing to ask for courtship but also the eagerness with which he had warned her from the Duke.

What can he possibly have against the Duke of Waybridge?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“**H**ad you heard about the Marquess of Hatfield recently?”

“Lettie, do you really want to ask me that?” Jasper’s hand tightened so much around his teacup he feared he was in danger of breaking it.

“I ask for a particular reason.” Lettie glanced to the other end of the parlor, clearly checking if their cousin was too absorbed in conversation with his own wife to take notice of their own. Jasper leaned toward her and rested his elbows on the table to better hear her.

“What reason can that be other than for torment?” Jasper put his teacup down rather sharply, making it clink loudly against the saucer. “You would be best not to think of that gentleman again after what happened. After what he did...”

“You seem to forget my own doing that night, Jasper.” Lettie laid a soft hand on his arm. The touch was gentle, an attempt to calm him, but it did not work. Something still simmered deep in his gut. It was always the same whenever he heard the Marquess of Hatfield’s name.

“I do not wish to discuss the night again,” Jasper pleaded. “I hear it enough from our mother.”

“I wish to move on from it too, but you have to accept that the Marquess was not the only one to blame for that night.” Her voice was a hissing whisper.

“You did not know what you were doing.” Jasper could still remember it plainly. He recalled how he had searched the ballroom, aware that he had not seen Lettie since her dance with Lord Hatfield. Growing desperate, he’d left the ballroom and wandered into the garden, only to see two people standing together by the wall of the orangery.

Seeing Lettie standing in the Marquess’ arms, locked in his embrace, had broken Jasper. To see her taken advantage of so disgusted him.

“He charmed you,” he muttered in anger, “made you believe he intended to court you, then he...”

“I went with him,” Lettie whispered. “I am as much to blame. I went to him and risked my reputation. Nothing takes that away.”

“We will always disagree on that point. He was not a true gentleman.” Jasper felt the truth deep in his gut. Had Lord Hatfield been a man of honor, he would have pursued Lettie properly, not led her outside alone and unchaperoned, just to steal a kiss.

Jasper often feared what might have happened had he not discovered the two of them when he had done. He'd barreled toward the two of them, tore Lettie from Lord Hatfield's arms, and then delivered a heavy punch to Lord Hatfield's nose.

"The one good thing that came from that night was Lord Hatfield's injury," Jasper said with something of a triumphant smile. "May his nose forever be crooked, so when he looks in the mirror, he remembers how ill he behaved that night."

"Oh, Jasper." Lettie laid a hand over his as it rested on the table, once again trying to calm him. "I fear our mother does not see it as you do, does she?"

"No, she does not," he muttered. "She fears the Marquess has told all his royal and blue-blooded friends that I am a violent thug and you are a... Well, I would never use his language."

"And do you think that is the case? Has he told his friends such lies?" she whispered in fear, looking down at her teacup and returning her hands to it, playing with it self-consciously.

"I wish I could deny it," he whispered. "Our mother is right, though. Invitations from people we would have once called friends no longer arrive on our step. The last time I saw the prince regent, he gave me a wide berth. We are perhaps separated from a part of the ton now. Unlike our mother, I see no ill thing in that. If they are to believe in lies, then they are fools. Let them keep on another company in their foolishness." He felt a small smile pulling at his lips, thinking there was someone who would have agreed with him.

Lady Emma would laugh at my jests, agreeing heartily.

“Then you have not heard yourself from the Marquess of Hatfield?”

“I believe he went traveling for a while. If he has returned, then he is clearly making an effort to avoid being at the events I attend.” Jasper sat taller in his seat. “I see no great problem in that.” Lettie nodded in plain agreement.

“I am sorry, you know that, don’t you?” she murmured softly, twizzling her teacup in her fingers.

“Please, Lettie, do not apologize,” he begged her. “It was not your doing.”

“Do they not say it takes two to dance? I danced that night, and I went with him to the orangery. I am more sorry than I can say for what it has done to us all.” Lettie sighed deeply and hung her head.

“You must not think that way.”

“But I do.”

As he reached for her hand, she took it. They sat there for many minutes, smiling rather sadly at one another, clasping hands.

“You are better here, are you not?” he asked gently. “Away from it all.”

“Very much so.” Her smile became a full one. “I am happy here, and there are not many things I miss. I perhaps do not get to dance as much, so I envy you for that. I miss friends as well.”

“Friends like my friends? Patrick?” Jasper nudged her a little on the topic. She released his hand and reached for a honey cake on the table.

“Would you like a slice of cake?” she asked, offering him a plate.

“How swiftly you moved the conversation on,” he observed, but he did not press her again.

“How is he?” she demanded, busying herself with cutting the cake.

“He’s well. He asks after you often.”

“He does?” She paused with the cake slice, clearly so intrigued by the idea that it took up all her movements.

“Lettie, am I right to believe you have a soft spot for my friend? Perhaps even an attachment to Patrick?”

“Well, it does not matter now, does it? Even if I once did.” She blushed as she served the cake on his plate and passed him a fork. “I have ruined any chance of earning his good opinion now, have I not?”

“I would not be so certain of that.” Yet, Jasper’s words didn’t appear to be heard by her. She hurried to pick up her fork, eating avidly.

“Let us talk of your heart rather than mine, Jasper.”

“My heart?” he spluttered, hurrying to speak around a mouthful of cake.

“Yes. You say our mother is urging you to attend many events of the ton,” she said hurriedly. “Has a young lady taken your eye whilst you have been at such events?”

“I... well...” Jasper hesitated, uncertain what to say. Apparently, the hesitation was enough, for Lettie looked up, her eyes suddenly wide.

“Oh, Jasper. There is someone, is there not?”

“That is not how I would phrase it.”

“Then let us make the matter plainer.” She sat tall, twisting her body to face him completely, taken up with excitement. “Have you met a young lady you are fond of?”

“I have met a young lady whom I respect.”

“Respect?” Lettie laughed at the idea. “Good Lord, Jasper. You might as well be speaking of a politician, not a young

lady. What is she like? Describe her to me. And pray, use language that is at least a little more interesting to hear.”

“Oh, am I that dull to listen to?” he asked with sarcasm, watching as she tapped him around the arm in reprimand. “I have met a young lady whom I admire. Quite greatly.” He sighed deeply, finding it a strange thing to utter aloud. “She is joyous company, witty, fun, and does not overly concern herself with excessive proprieties. Well, she did not. That was until her aunt decided to give her some instruction.”

Jasper rather feared how far these instructions would go. As elegant as Emma was becoming, he feared she would change too much.

“This sounds a rather strange affair,” Lettie observed, wrinkling her nose in thought. “Do you know the lady well?”

“Sometimes I feel I do.” Jasper thought of how often he and Emma had walked of late together, promenading. Never had he talked with someone so easily as he did Emma.

“What exactly is happening, Jasper? Is there a chance you will court this lady?”

“No,” Jasper muttered the word without thought, almost on reflex, for he was so used to his mother asking similar questions these days. “Our mother is harping on at me to marry enough as it is, Lettie. I do not need that here too.”

“You misunderstand. This is not me nagging you but talking with you openly.” To get his attention, she took hold of his

cake plate and drew it forward, forcing his eyes to meet hers. "I'm asking what you think of the lady. Not what our mother thinks."

"I think..." Jasper paused, trying to understand his own thoughts. He had an attachment to Emma that could not be denied after spending a week in her company, making an excuse every day to go and see her. "I think Lady Emma is searching for a husband. Why else would her aunt instruct her in how to act more as the ton would wish of her?"

"Jasper! You could not skirt this question more. Do you like the lady or not?"

"If I answer, will you give me my cake back?" he asked, attempting to take the plate back but failing.

"Perhaps," she teased him.

"Then yes, I do." He snatched the plate away. "Yet, that is all it is. Lady Emma and I are friends. It is a good friendship, but that is all."

"Hmm." The sound that escaped Lettie's lips caught Jasper's attention. He looked up at his sister, watching as she hummed to herself, tapping her plate with her fork in front of her.

"And what exactly does 'hmm' mean?" he urged her.

"I was just thinking," She paused, clearly ensuring she had his whole attention before she went on, "Would one wish to marry

a friend?"

"I beg your pardon?" Jasper hesitated, his fork raised in the air.

"It's something I have often thought about," Lettie mused, gesturing to where their cousin and his wife sat together, talking animatedly. "Our parents may not have had the most wonderful of marriages, Jasper, but take a look over there and tell me what you see."

He did as she asked, focusing on their cousin and his wife. The two were leaning together, so close that their intimacy was obvious. As they talked, they smiled and laughed, so eager to tell each other things that they often talked over one another.

"I see two people very much in love," Jasper observed quietly.

"As do I, and they are the greatest of friends, are they not?" Lettie explained. "When something happens in either of their days, they cannot wait to tell the other of it. Believe me, Jasper, the next time I choose to even entertain the idea of a gentleman, I will be ensuring that I am as devoted to his friendship as our cousin is with his wife."

Jasper had lost interest in his cake entirely now. He stared at his cousin and how he held onto his wife's hand so tightly.

How often have I thought of taking Lady Emma's hand? How much more has she walked on my arm as we have promenaded as of late, with never a hesitation between us?

He felt a longing to return to London just to see Emma again.

“Curious indeed, Jasper,” Lettie whispered as she cut herself a second slice of cake. “Something tells me this lady means more to you than you are willing to say.”



“I must confess myself surprised you were so eager to attend this ball, Jasper,” Marianne said as they walked into the ballroom together. “I would have thought you tired after your journey today.”

“I made you a promise, did I not? To attend all the events that you wished me to.” Jasper kept his true thoughts to himself. He was not sure what his mother would make of him if he confessed that he had come with one specific reason in mind.

I have missed Lady Emma's company these last couple of days.

Turning his head back and forth, he searched the ballroom, seeking any sign of her. The room had been draped in tulip flowers that hung from the pillars and candelabras, with candle flames quivering dangerously close to the petals. Beneath these flowers, ladies wandered to and fro, their clothes matching the soft pastel colors of the tulips.

Between these ladies, Jasper sought out the face he had traced so often he knew it as well as his own. When Emma appeared, she was not alone. She stood between her sister and her brother, talking attentively with her brother at her side, who seemed to be shaking his head in dismay at something.

“Who will you dance with tonight, Jasper?” Marianne asked, earning Jasper’s attention. He looked at her to see she was smiling a little, apparently having recognized where he was looking.

“I did not say I would dance, Mother.” His words made her smile drop. “If you would excuse me for a minute, I should greet some friends.”

“Yes, go. Go greet them,” she said with vigor, waving a hand in Emma’s direction.

Jasper sighed deeply before he walked across the room. He tried his best to ignore the rather eager persistence of his mother. If he wished to talk with Emma, that was his own matter, as Lettie had told him. It did not matter what anyone else thought.

As he crossed the room, Emma, Betty and Andrew made their way to a drinks table, collecting wide-brimmed champagne glasses. As Jasper approached, Andrew noticed him first.

“Ah, Your Grace.” As he bowed, his sudden words made Emma turn around so fast her glass nearly slipped from her hand. Jasper reached forward in time, grasping it before it could fall. “Something tells me you have a habit of rescuing my sister’s disasters.”

“Pure luck, I am sure,” Jasper said, passing the glass back to Emma. When their fingers brushed over the long stem, such warmth spread through that touch that he wished it was a touch that could last, but it was not. They stepped back from

one another, and Emma smiled at him, her cheeks blushing red.

“We have not seen you for a few days, Your Grace,” she said hurriedly. “We have not promenaded for some time.”

“I have not attended myself. I went to see my sister in the countryside,” he explained, aware that he and Emma talked to one another alone. Andrew and Betty stood off to one side, busying themselves with their drinks.

“Then poor Frankie has been missing your company when he needs his walks?” Emma asked playfully, stepping toward Jasper and away from her family.

“I think he has been missing a certain lady more.” He gestured toward her. “He grew rather accustomed to your company on our promenades.”

“Well, you can tell him I have missed him too.”

“I’ll be sure to, as soon as he can understand me,” he said playfully, watching as she smiled. It was shocking to him how easy it was at times to talk to Emma. Just by meeting by chance in this room, they talked with ease and without hesitation.

“How was your sister?” Emma asked. “I hope she is well?”

“Very well and enjoying the country, though there is something she does miss. She talked of balls such as these,

saying how much she missed the dancing.” He gestured behind him to where people were making space for the first dance of the night. “I am afraid I promised to make up for her lack of dancing by dancing lots myself. I am unsure how her logic worked on this occasion.” His jest brought a soft laugh to Emma’s lips. “If you would accompany me for the first dance?”

Jasper already had his eyes on her dance card. He tried not to think of his mother’s expectations across the room or even what asking Emma to dance truly meant. He thought only of what he wished to do.

I would enjoy such a dance.

“Oh, Your Grace, I—” Before Emma could answer, a shadow of another person approaching passed between them.

“Your Grace, forgive my intrusion.” Despite the apology, Lord Thorne stood between Jasper and Emma, offering no bashful or ashamed look. “I did not see you there. I have come to ask Lady Emma to dance the first set with me.”

“Ah, then the lady has a choice.” Jasper glanced toward Emma, doing his best to peer past Lord Thorne’s shoulder. “I have asked her for the same.”

“Then you are too slow on this occasion, Your Grace,” Lord Thorne continued speaking, extending his hand toward Emma. “The last I saw Lady Emma, I requested to reserve the first dance tonight. I visited her this week and brought flowers. Has she not told you of it?”

Jasper felt his stomach knotting tightly as he gazed at Emma, watching as she appeared quite wrongfooted. Her lips parted, and words couldn't escape her.

“Lady Emma, shall we dance?” Lord Thorne, turned back to face her with his hand still outstretched.

How I wish she would say no to him.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“I ...” Emma found words failing her as she looked between the Duke of Waybridge and Baron Thorne. There was no denying what her heart wanted. More than anything, she would have rather said yes to the Duke and danced with him, but nothing seemed so simple anymore.

Lord Thorne had intimated dancing with her the last time he had seen her. Emma was all too aware of the stare of her aunt across the room, who had been accompanied by Frances tonight to keep an eye on events. If Emma turned Lord Thorne down, she feared she would never hear the end of it from Judith.

“You have put our dear friend in an uncomfortable position, Your Grace,” Lord Thorne said suddenly. Despite the fact his tone was rather jovial, almost jesting, the accusation was clear. He was blaming the Duke for Emma’s current speechlessness.

“By asking her to dance?” the Duke asked with his lips curling into a smile. He shook his head softly, then his gaze found Emma’s. There was something in his expression she couldn’t quite decipher, something different about him compared to what he had worn during all their walks in the park. “Lady Emma, you are free to accept whom you like. Feel no pressure

or expectations on my side. I merely wish to enjoy your company tonight.”

How can I not dance with him now?

Emma could feel herself walking toward him, ready to accept, but Lord Thorne was still there, staring at her.

“Yet the lady has already promised a dance to me, Your Grace,” Lord Thorne reiterated, standing tall. The demanding way he spoke irked Emma so much that she turned a glare upon him, one he did not appear to notice.

“I said I would dance, I did not say when,” Emma explained, but her words were unheeded.

“I am sure you could have many partners tonight, Your Grace,” Lord Thorne went on, addressing the Duke alone and gesturing toward the crowd behind them.

“Yes, they are not the partner I seek.” The deepness of the Duke’s tone did something to Emma.

Oh, how I wish to say yes!

“Yet the lady is engaged for this number,” Lord Thorne’s voice grew sharper.

Emma could see the matter was quickly growing out of hand. The Duke and Lord Thorne would not stop glaring at one

another, evidently competing for her hand when she had not yet said to whom she intended to give it. In desperation, Emma turned to her family, hoping for support

Andrew was laughing into his glass of wine, trying to hide his expression and proving himself useless at this time. On the other hand, Betty quickly returned her glass to the table before she stepped forward to Emma's side.

"Help me," Emma whispered, reaching for Betty's hand. Her sister needed no more encouragement.

"My apologies, My Lord, Your Grace." Betty curtsied to them each in turn. "I must steal my sister from you for a minute. I am in need of some fresh air, and my sister must accompany me as a chaperone."

"Of course." The Duke bowed in acknowledgment, though his eyes lingered on Emma for a beat longer. She returned that look, wishing she could tell him that he was the one she longed to dance with, but no such opportunity presented itself.

"But we are promised a dance—" Lord Thorne protested, but Betty didn't listen.

"Then the dance will have to wait. If you will excuse us." She threaded her arm through Emma's and drew her away. Emma moved as quickly as she could, holding tightly to her sister and ignoring the one glimpse she had of Andrew trying to hide his laughter behind a second glass.

When they reached a door in the ballroom, Betty was the one to hurry outside first, pulling Emma sharply behind her. They practically fell onto a stone terrace in the garden, eager to escape the ballroom.

The night was thick and dark, the shadows only illuminated by the candelabras in the ballroom windows and the occasional lantern that had been placed in the nearby trees, swaying in the breeze. Emma hastened across the terrace and through these shadows, reaching for the stone balustrade lit by the orange light of one lantern.

“Oh, God’s wounds! This is becoming absurd,” Emma muttered, Betty close on her heels.

“That is certainly one word for it,” Betty breathed heavily, sighing with dramatic exaggeration. “Andrew believed it would not be long before Lord Thorne started trying to snatch your hand away.”

“Then it was not solely in my mind, was it?” Emma asked, turning to face her sister. “The two gentlemen were insistent!”

“Extremely so. Had you been crows courting, they would have begun pecking each other for want of your attention,” Betty jested, though neither of them laughed. They merely grimaced.

“Oh, this is infuriating!” Emma tipped back her head and peered at the dark clouds above.

“Yes, how infuriating to have two gentlemen wishing to dance with you,” Betty pointed out, earning Emma’s raised

eyebrows. “All I am saying is that it is a nice dilemma to have.”

“You think that now. You will not think so when it happens to you.” Emma took to pacing on the terrace, marching up and down and shaking her head. “What am I going to do, Betty?”

“Well, what do you want to do?” Betty leaned against the stone wall nearby, folding her arms. When Emma hesitated, Betty urged her on with a crook of her head. “I am not our aunt. I will not judge your choice. You may always be honest with me.”

“Thank you,” Emma whispered to her sister. “I longed to take the Duke’s hand.” She confessed the words aloud then hung her head, knowing what a fool she was. “Yet that is foolish, is it not? Aunt Judith has said he has no wish to marry, so what does he mean by coming and giving me such attention? Is it only friendship he offers?”

“Maybe,” Betty murmured, grimacing at the idea. “Maybe he offers something more.”

“But if he never intends to wed, then we all know that something more could be...” Emma trailed off and abruptly stopped pacing. She and Betty shared an uneasy look in the lantern light.

“Well, let us not talk about that.” Betty’s eyes widened. “Lord Thorne clearly offers marriage, though, does he not?”

“He does. He has made that abundantly clear. Rather too clear.” Emma thought back to their meeting in her garden where Lord Thorne had been so forward about his intentions that she had wished to retreat to the house and hide in her bedchamber just to avoid him. “We do not know each other, though.”

“Then get to know him.” Betty’s simple answer should have helped, but somehow, it did not. It only made Emma’s anger grow. She kicked out at a nearby weed growing through the terrace path and spun around once more, trying to control her temper. “There is more to this than I know, is there not?”

Emma didn’t answer her sister at first. She returned to her pacing, occasionally glancing toward the ballroom. So far, it seemed that Judith and Frances had not seen their escape, for they did not hover by the ballroom windows looking for them. The only thing Emma could see was the flooding of candlelight and the way the bodies swayed back and forth to the music.

I could be one of them, dancing...

As she pictured herself dancing, she imagined herself with one man only. She thought of the Duke of Waybridge taking her hand, their fingers curling together in such a way that was rather intimate. She thought of him bending toward her, whispering in her ear as they moved together. Such a moment would send a thrill down her spine and make her cheeks burn, just as they were doing now.

“Emma?” Betty called to her. “Whatever imagining you are living in at this moment, would you care to leave it and return to the real world?” Her question urged Emma to turn to face her.

“I’m sorry,” Emma whispered. “Aunt Judith says it is not the preoccupation of a lady to daydream.”

“Maybe we do not have to follow all her rules.”

“I beg your pardon?” Emma had to hold back her laugh, watching as Betty raised her eyebrows and folded her arms. “This from the only one of us who has been following her lessons with gusto!”

“I like what she has to teach us,” Betty said in a rush. “Do I miss the fact that we did not have the same training nor the same elegance as other ladies? Of course I do, but that does not mean I have to like everything Aunt Judith says. I do not see the harm in daydreaming, for one thing. I am certain I have seen Aunt Judith indulging in such moments herself.” She shrugged as if it were no great matter. “Would you tell me what you were daydreaming of? Or whom?”

Emma hesitated, turning on the spot and fussing with her gown. She did as Judith had taught her, straightening out the creases and fiddling with her dance card on her wrist so it laid just perfectly, then she huffed and threw her arms down at her side. To her mind, all these ministrations made little difference. She looked much the same.

“Emma?” Betty whispered, earning her attention. “Tell me the truth, sister. What is really going on here?”

“What is going on?” Emma repeated in frustration, moving her hands to her hips. “I’ll tell you. I find that though all this expectation weighs on my shoulders to marry well, I cannot

stand the thought of marrying because a gentleman is *eligible* alone. Good Lord, Betty. Even that very word is beginning to make my stomach curdle. How many times have you and I heard our aunt talk of how eligible Lord Thorne is?"

"More times than the clock strikes the hours in the day, that is for certain," Betty murmured in agreement. "Yet, he is more than just eligible, is he not? He's kind. Handsome too. Not to mention attentive toward you. Do these things not all add up to something good?"

"I fear I am about to sound incredibly ungrateful for his attentions, but you asked to know the truth, so very well, I shall tell you." Emma closed the distance between her and her sister, moving to lean on the stone wall beside her. "I do not find him handsome." She shook her head slowly with the words.

"Not at all?"

"No." Emma's voice had deepened in emphasis.

"Well, that is certainly a problem," Betty said with her eyes wide. "As I understand it, it is rather helpful when one is attracted to their husband. The duties of the marriage bed might be rather..."

"Odious otherwise?" Emma finished her sentence for her, prompting Betty to wriggle uncomfortably.

"I was going to use a softer word, but yes." She nodded. "Could you never come to appreciate the Baron though? Not

at all?”

“It is not merely attraction alone that concerns me.” She began to fiddle, adjusting her dance card so many times on her wrist that the string wore itself thin. “He and I have little in common. When we talk, it is invariably about himself, and when I talk of my interests, I can see they bore him. I am not sure that is the future I wish for the rest of my life.”

“I see,” Betty murmured softly.

“What is more, the gentleman is too eager,” Emma said in a rush. “He talks of marriage, wanting to court and wed, but he is ignoring the fact he and I barely know each other at all.”

“And you and the Duke? Do you two know each other?” Betty’s question made all of Emma’s fidgeting fall still. She held her breath, staring back at her sister. Unable to form the words, she ended up nodding. “Emma, you have not known him for that long either.”

“Perhaps not, but I know him better.” The words began to escape her in a rush. “Through all of our promenades, everything together, we have talked as true friends, without walls or obstacles between us. I feel I know something of his heart, and I thought he knew something of mine too.”

“Emma, what are you truly trying to say?” Betty moved to her side and nudged her arm. “I know Andrew and I have teased you often about the Duke’s attentions toward you, but do you mean to intimate that the connection between you is something even greater than that?”

“I do not know.” Emma was frantic as she shook her head and returned to fidgeting. “I cannot explain it. Aunt Judith has told me many times that he has no interest in marrying, yet my heart doesn’t seem able to listen to it. Somewhere inside of me, I hope that the gentleman will change his mind. That is what my heart wants. It’s a foolish heart indeed.”

Betty sighed and lifted her hands to her face, hiding there for a moment. Emma didn’t need to hear her sister’s words to know the truth. Betty did indeed think it foolish.

Stepping away from the wall, Emma peered down at the dance card on her wrist. It was just visible in the orange-tinged light from the lantern. The spaces were empty, but they should not have been. Both the Duke of Waybridge’s name and Lord Thorne’s should have graced that card.

What will I do when I return inside? Whom shall I dance with?

“Emma, may I give my advice?” Betty asked, shaking Emma out of her thoughts.

“Please, do.” Emma turned back to face her sister, preparing herself for words she didn’t really want to hear. Betty slowed walked toward her, then laid her hands over Emma’s fingers, stopping her fidgeting, and clasped their hands together.

“I cannot tell you it is wrong for your heart to attach itself to the Duke. I do not think you would ever wish to give it to a gentleman that was unworthy of you.”

“Betty, that is too kind for this moment—”

“I speak the truth,” Betty said with sincerity. “Yet, there is still a word of caution I must issue. If our aunt is right in that the Duke will never marry, you must find a way to retrieve your heart from him. Should he keep it, then you will lose it for good, will you not?”

Emma understood clearly what her sister was saying.

The heartbreak. It will not end.

“I know,” Emma whispered and hung her head. “I should return to the ballroom, shouldn’t I?”

“I think it is time. Tell me, whom will you dance with?”

Emma didn’t answer, for she knew the answer she would have to give, even though it displeased her. Looping her arm through her sister’s, she returned to the ballroom door and stepped inside.

The air in the ballroom was warmer, and the light from the candles was brighter. With the room now so packed with guests, she and Betty had to squeeze through different groups. Emma soon came to a stop near the dancefloor, peering across the room to the spot where they had been standing before. Andrew was still there in conversation with Judith and Frances, but neither gentleman was there now. Emma turned her head back and forth but caught no glimpse of the Duke of Waybridge. He seemed to have disappeared from the room.

“Here he comes,” Betty whispered in Emma’s ear. Emma looked around, finding her heart thudding harder in the hope it would be the Duke, but he was not the person walking toward her. It was Lord Thorne, walking with purpose in his step.

“Ah, Lady Emma, allow me to apologize to you,” he said in a rush and bowed rather flamboyantly. “The Duke and I put you under pressure to accept our dance offers just now. We should have been more considerate. I hope you will forgive my eagerness for what it was, true attachment.”

Emma could hear Betty sighing at her side as if entranced by the words, but Emma could feel no delight in his words. She wished to point out that it was only Lord Thorne who was pressuring her into dancing before. The Duke had offered to stand back, saying the decision was hers.

“Thank you, My Lord,” Emma said as Betty nudged her to speak.

“If you will allow me to make up for my earlier behavior, I would be thrilled to dance the next with you.” Lord Thorne offered his hand to her. “Maybe my dance skills can make amends where my words fail me.”

Emma held her breath, looking between that hand and his face. Everything inside her told her to reject him and search out the Duke’s company. She knew which of them she would enjoy dancing with the most and whose friendship she longed for. It was certainly not Lord Thorne’s, yet she didn’t reject him.

All of the advice she’d had was beginning to seep in. Judith’s words, her father’s and now Betty’s too, all persuaded her that

it was perhaps time to stop placing hope on a man who could not offer his heart. Standing before her was a man offering to give his heart and hand in marriage.

Slowly, Emma lifted her hand and placed it in Lord Thorne's. He smiled the moment her gloved hand touched his bare skin.

I pray I will not regret this decision.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The glass in Jasper's hand became more and more uncomfortable to hold. He barely realized it was because he was grasping onto it so tightly, his fingers gripping it in such a way that he was in danger of breaking the stem. Only when he heard a crack did he look down at what he was doing to the glass, seeing the crack begin to develop across the stem.

"You fool." Jasper turned and placed the glass on the nearest table, picking up a second glass that he hurriedly gulped from. "What is wrong with me?" He was unable to answer his own question though as he watched Emma being drawn toward the dancefloor by Lord Thorne.

The entire time he watched Emma's expression closely. She did not smile at Lord Thorne the way she had done with him the last time they had danced, but neither had she hesitated in accepting his offer on this occasion. As they took to the floor, neither one of them looking away from one another, Jasper had to face a harsh truth.

Maybe Lord Thorne is the gentleman for her.

It could not be denied that in their conflict earlier that evening, Lord Thorne was extremely determined to dance with Emma.

At one point, Jasper had feared the gentleman would not take no for an answer. Somehow, he might have snatched Emma's hand and drawn her toward the floor before she had even said yes.

He must be devoted to her.

Jasper felt something in his gut tighten even more as he watched Emma take Lord Thorne's hand. They circled one another with ease, neither one looking away from the other, not once.

I feel sick.

Jasper returned the second glass to the table behind him and began to top it up.

"Careful, Your Grace. Drink too much and you will not be able to dance with my sister after all." The familiar voice of Andrew urged Jasper to look up, meeting the gentleman's gaze as he approached Jasper's side. "Ah, an ill-timed jest, perhaps? I apologize. I prefer japes to being serious."

"I cannot blame you for that." Jasper picked up another glass, but this time, he did not raise it to his lips. "On the matter of dancing with your sister though, I think she has found her preferred dance partner."

"Truly? Do you think so?" Andrew asked with interest, leaning on a marble pillar beside them and angling his head to watch the dancers. "Earlier on, I could have sworn my sister did not know whom to choose between both of you."

“Is that what you saw?” Jasper asked, finding he had seen something entirely different. “I fear your sister was being polite in not refusing me outright.”

“Pah! Perhaps you don’t know my sister as well as you think, Your Grace.”

“I beg your pardon?” Jasper stepped closer to Andrew’s side, intrigued by the words. Andrew smiled a little more as if he held onto a great secret.

“What do you see, Your Grace? When you watch my sister dance with Lord Thorne?” he asked, gesturing to the dancers.

“I see...” Jasper paused, watching Emma intently. When she smiled at Lord Thorne, something in his stomach seemed to drop, a deadening feeling. “I see a young lady enjoying herself.”

“I see my sister putting on a smile,” Andrew whispered for Jasper’s ears only.

“Putting it on?” Jasper was not so convinced. “I heard Lord Thorne say earlier this evening he has been visiting your sister at your house.”

“That he has.”

“So clearly he is company she entertains well,” Jasper mused, trying to keep his true thoughts to himself, that he wished she

did not.

“My aunt’s lessons to my sister have been rather *thorough*,” Andrew said with emphasis. “Even going so far as to show her how to keep the company of someone we perhaps do not consider our greatest friend.” He eyed Jasper carefully. “I was under the apprehensions that you were a better friend to my sister.”

“I suspect you are like your sister, My Lord. You prefer open and candid conversations rather than small talk,” Jasper observed, watching as Andrew tipped back his head and laughed.

“I confess, I do. I would much rather talk about something real. In fact, I urge you to do the same.” He gestured toward Jasper with his glass. “I do not believe a duke would spend every day for a week promenading with my sister to be cowed by the appearance of Lord Thorne.”

Jasper couldn’t help eying Andrew closely, feeling as if a part of him that he had tried very hard to keep hidden being observed by the man.

“I keep no secrets,” Jasper said slowly.

“No?” Andrew smiled. “Then you asked my sister to dance because...?”

“Because I wished to dance with her, that is all, but she has found a better partner.” Jasper motioned toward the floor. “That is plain.”

“Then you and I see different things, Your Grace.” Andrew shook his head and began to walk away. “I’d urge you to visit a doctor, you might need some spectacles.” With these passing words, he bowed and left, leaving Jasper staring after him with parted lips.

When Jasper returned his gaze to the dancefloor, he saw Lord Thorne wrapping an arm around Emma’s waist. The sight of the close touch made him grip his glass harder once again, barely taking note of just how tight a grasp it was.

“Jasper? Jasper, dear?” Marianne’s voice was near again.

“Not now, Mother.”

“Whyever not? You are hardly busy, are you?” She pointed out, stopping at his side. He wished he could have said he was busy, but even he knew it would have been a little beyond reason to claim he was busy when he was merely staring at Emma and her dance partner across the ballroom. “Jasper, we must speak.”

“About what?” Jasper asked, forcing his eyes away from Emma.

“About why you have been standing in a corner staring at one particular lady for the last—”

“Mother.” Jasper’s warning tone made her fall silent. “Please, I beg you not to talk about this.”

Marianne kept her lips firmly together, though she turned to stand at his side and nudged his elbow. In the quiet that followed, his eyes drew back to the dancefloor another time, seeking out Emma.

“Ha! I knew it,” Marianne noticed it all too easily.

“Mother, please...” Yet his words seemed to be unheard.

“I could talk to you for hours about responsibility and the need for you to wed for the sake of our reputations,” she whispered in his ear.

“You already have done that,” he seethed.

“Let me talk of something else instead.” She prodded his arm, earning his attention. “Are you truly going to stand back and let a lady, whom you are clearly quite besotted with, be courted by another man?”

The question made Jasper fall still. Slowly, the urge took hold of him again to look, and his chin angled toward the dancers where his eyes sought out Emma. She was looking away from her dance partner, searching those around her as if seeking someone out.

“It seems she is looking for someone.”

“Perhaps her family,” Jasper answered his mother.

“Or another dance partner.” Marianne’s words made Jasper hold onto a small amount of hope. He had thought earlier that night that Emma wanted to dance with him, but now, he was too confused to make much sense of any of what had passed. “As you stare at her so much, will you dance with her now?”

“She has a better dance partner, as you see.” Jasper gestured toward the baron. “A better man, and a better suitor, I do not doubt.”

He would not be so confused by the idea of marriage nor have a mother harking on about how he must marry purely for the sake of the family and not his own heart.

“You think he’s a better man than you?” Marianne asked, her voice so quiet that Jasper looked at her. “How strange.” She said no more but turned on her heel and left him alone.

This time, when Jasper’s eyes returned to Emma, he was not prepared for the intimate touch her partner gave her. Lord Thorne placed a hand on her waist and let it linger there, contrary to the choreography of the dance. Jasper was so angered at the sight that when he gripped the glass in his hand tighter, this time, it fractured in his hold.

“God’s wounds,” he muttered as the white wine spilled over his fingers. Stepping back toward the table, he laid down the two pieces of broken glass, the stem that had snapped and the bowl, then lifted a *serviette* to dry himself off.

What is wrong with me these days?

He was soon distracted by the broken glass, though. The music was coming to a close.

Discarding the *serviette* on the table, Jasper hurried across the room, heading straight for the dancefloor. Emma and Lord Thorne were leaving, though Lord Thorne seemed to make an effort to hold her back. Jasper rather thought he was trying to persuade her into a second dance, though she seemed unmoved, striding off the floor. The way in which Lord Thorne gripped her hand meant that their arms became quite outstretched.

As Jasper grew near, he heard some of their conversation.

“No, I really couldn’t, My Lord,” Emma said hurriedly.

“Surely one more dance would not be so awful. I promise to delight as much as I can with my company!” The enthusiastic tone made Jasper groan under his breath. Lord Thorne was clearly not one for subtlety.

The way Lord Thorne tugged on Emma’s arm reminded Jasper awfully of a similar event when Emma had nearly fallen over at their little tug of war. The memory made Jasper’s pace quicken, trying to reach them as fast as possible.

“If you would excuse me, Lord Thorne.” Emma retracted her hand from his and stepped away, but Lord Thorne clearly wasn’t ready to let her go yet. He jumped toward her and took her arm. His movements were so harried that he clearly didn’t look where he was putting his feet.

Jasper saw it all too easily. Lord Thorne leapt forward, and his feet became muddled with Emma's, tripping her up. She began to fall, tipping forward, but Jasper was there.

Reaching out, he grabbed hold of her arms, not letting her fall.

"Your Grace?" she murmured in shock, rather limp in his arms as he drew her to stand.

"Lord Thorne, you seem to have a habit of tripping up the lady," Jasper said with a jesting tone, though he felt the accusation was real. Lord Thorne should learn to take more care. "Lady Emma, are you alright?"

"My ankle." She winced with pain, trying to put her weight on it. "I fear I have twisted it."

"Here, allow me." Jasper hadn't released her yet, reluctant to do so. He shifted their hold on each other so that she was resting on his arm.

"Thank you," she whispered, looking up at him in such a way that Jasper could have fooled himself into thinking she did feel the same tension that he felt between them.

Why else would she stare at me in such a way?

"I can help the lady, Your Grace." Lord Thorne hurried at her other side, though she didn't give her arm to him.

“I will find the lady a seat. If you wish to be of use, might I suggest you find her family?” Jasper hoped it would work well to get rid of the Baron. At first, he didn’t go anywhere. He just reached out to Emma as she began to limp, leaning more and more on Jasper’s arm.

“Yes, please, My Lord,” Emma said, glancing his way. “I would be thankful for my family at this moment.”

“Then I will complete the errand with as much enthusiasm as I can.” Lord Thorne bowed quickly and hurried off like a puppy attending to its master.

“He’s rather giddy at times, isn’t he?” Jasper said, thrilled when Emma looked up at him.

“And I thought I was the only one who had noticed.”

“No, indeed.” He walked her forward, noting the look of pain. “He tripped you.”

“Not on purpose, surely.”

“Perhaps not, but you are injured, are you not?” He steered her toward the side of the room where some chairs had been set out. “Here, rest a while.”

“Thank you.” Emma slowly lowered herself into the chair, keeping her weight off her injured foot. “I am sure it will be

fine.” As soon as she tried to put weight onto the foot though, she grimaced and lifted it once again.

“Yes, fine if you wish to hobble around as you walk,” Jasper said in jest, relieved when she smiled.

“Well, this is frustrating. How are we to dance now?” she asked in anger at herself.

“Ah, you were to accept my offer, were you?” He held her gaze and sat in the chair beside her. “I thought I had missed my chance.”

“My waltz was still available for the night.” She glanced down at her dance card. “I rather hoped you would ask again.”

“I feared you had found a better dance partner,” he explained slowly, watching her expression.

“You did?” Her nose curled at the idea. “Did you not notice how I ran outside with my sister after he had asked?”

Jasper laughed heartily, only just seeing the moment for what it was.

“And here I thought you were just trying to escape an awkward situation.”

“Perhaps there was that too,” she acknowledged and leaned forward, peering at her foot. “I hope I have not cause myself a

serious injury. How will we resume our promenades now?"

"Your friends will have to come to you instead." Jasper glanced around the ballroom. They were pushed so far into the corner of an alcove that barely anyone looked their way. It offered up an opportunity, one he knew he should not take advantage of, but he wished to be of service. "May I?" he asked and gestured toward her foot. "I have some experience with injuries. I can tell you if it is broken."

Emma nodded, though she seemed lost for words. Jasper glanced around one last time, checking no one was paying attention to them before he lowered himself to one knee and reached for her foot. With a delicate hand, he took her ankle, aware that he heard her gasp.

Did she feel that too?

Such a spark passed through him that he wished he would not have to move back from Emma. If only they could stay as close as they were now.

Slowly, he turned her ankle back and forth, checking for any injury.

"It is not broken, but it is perhaps sprained," he said and slowly released her. When his eyes found hers, he saw her cheeks blushing a deep shade of red. It was a pleasant sight, indeed.

"You said you had experience with injuries?" she spoke in a rush.

“I may have fallen off my horse a few times when I was young. Well, that and Frankie can become rather animated. He has a habit of toppling me over at times.” His words prompted her to laugh. “You will recover soon, My Lady.”

“Thank you.” She leaned a little toward him as he returned to the chair beside her. “You are very kind to me, Your Grace.”

“What else would I be?” he asked with a laugh. “We are friends, are we not?”

“Yes, friends.” Yet, there was something in her expression that seemed off now. She was no longer smiling. That expression had slipped away, and she looked down at her injured foot. “Friends, indeed.”

What does that mean?

“Lady Emma, about tonight...” Jasper longed to tell her that he wished they could have danced. The words were on the tip of his tongue, about to be uttered, when two shadows fell over them. One belonged to Judith and the other to Andrew.

“What have you been up to now, Sister?” Andrew asked and folded his arms. “Falling into a duke’s arms in need of help? And I always thought you were not one to be a damsel in distress.”

“I am not,” Emma insisted, glaring at her brother. “His Grace kindly assisted me when I injured my ankle.”

“Injured? How bad is it?” Judith asked in panic.

“I believe it to be a sprain, My Lady.” Jasper’s answer made Andrew and Judith jerk their heads in his direction.

“You have ascertained that for yourself, have you?” Judith asked, blushing an even deeper shade of red than her niece had done.

“How interesting,” Andrew said with a chuckle. “Well, come, Sister, we should get you home before you injure yourself even more.”

“Yes, that is a good idea.” Emma struggled to stand. Jasper hurried to help her, offering his hand forward. She took it at first, and their fingers brushed together as she leaned on him to stand. He rather wished she would keep holding onto him in such a way, but she soon shifted her grasp to her brother. “Goodnight, Your Grace. I thank you for your assistance.”

This time, Emma did not smile. On the contrary, she looked upset, her lips flattening together in a line. As she turned away with her family to leave, she did not glance back at Jasper, not once.

Wait... did I do something wrong?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Would you smile, dear? No gentleman will be enamored by a lady with such a sad face.”

At Judith’s words, Emma sighed, tired of all the instructions.

“Auntie, is it not enough that I am out at all?” Emma struggled to walk. She clutched Andrew’s arm as they strode through Hyde Park, making little progress. Emma’s ankle was still hurting, and it was hardly helped by this walk that her aunt had insisted on.

“It shows you are recovering well, dear,” Judith called back to her, striding ahead with Betty beside her.

“This is absurd,” Emma muttered for only Andrew to hear.

“I know it,” Andrew agreed. “Had you not been injured, then I might have been able to escape today’s promenade. Did you have to be injured, Emma?”

“I am sorry my misery is making you miserable too!” she pointed out, watching as Andrew nodded.

“It is,” he jested then shook his head. “Nope, no glimmer of a smile from you today. Is your sad demeanor really just from this injured ankle?”

“It is.” She looked forward, keeping her real thoughts to herself as she focused on her aunt’s and sister’s pelisses that bristled in the breeze. She had not explained to anyone the real cause of her sadness.

We are friends, that is what the Duke said, just friends. It really never can be anything more.

Emma was beginning to think herself quite the imbecile. Despite all her family’s warnings, even Betty’s urges that the Duke was not a wise person to whom to give her heart, Emma had done it anyway, and now she was forced to accept what a mistake it was.

The Duke had been kindness itself at the ball two days ago. The way he had assisted with her ankle had been something of a thrill with the stolen touches of his hand on her leg, but that was all it was—the efforts of a friend to help. It couldn’t have been anything more.

“I wish you’d smile a little,” Andrew said at her side. “You might make this event more bearable then.”

“We will have to grit our teeth and bear it together.” She winced as she placed more weight on her ankle, and Andrew shuddered as the wind picked up around them. Despite it being a sunny and bright day in spring, there was still a chilliness to the breeze that was hardly helping her foul mood.

“Come on you two,” Judith called back to them. “We must continue our walk.”

“We cannot go at any greater pace, Aunt Judith,” Andrew called ahead.

“Then go at the pace you can manage.”

“Is she sometimes blinded to reality?” Emma muttered in Andrew’s ear, quite baffled at this turn of events. After Emma twisted her ankle, Judith had been very worried, but ever since the physician had assured them that within a few weeks all would be well again, that worry had quite disappeared.

“Perhaps she simply likes to focus on other things and makes herself blind to things that displease her.” Andrew’s offered explanation only rattled her further. She huffed, trying to walk a little faster.

They had only walked a brief way through the park and alongside the river when Judith hesitated, turning around to watch them both.

“Look at the two of you,” she whispered in panic, walking back toward them. “This is hardly an alluring sight, is it?”

Emma and Andrew exchanged confused looks, none the wiser to her meaning.

“Andrew, stand straight. You should be seen as dependable, not crippled by your sister’s weight,” Judith said, tapping him on the arm so that he stood straight.

“I don’t remember professing her to be light in weight, Auntie.”

“Oi!” Emma tapped him on the other arm in reprimand.

“Emma, you must at least try not to look in so much pain.”

“Aunt Judith?” Emma stared at Judith with wide eyes. “I am in pain. Let us discuss it now before you ignore the matter any further. This morning I have done much at your request. I danced during one of your lessons, though it hurt me to do so. Over breakfast, I suffered you telling me how to eat so much that my food was quite cold by the time I could eat it. Now, I am walking far away from home and am in considerable pain, and all for what? To please you.”

Her words made Judith stand tall, her lips parting a little in shock.

“Allow me to guess, a lady should not be so outspoken in public?” Emma’s question made Judith turn a deep shade of red.

“I am trying to help you, Emma. Can you not see that?” Judith pleaded, stepping toward her. Behind them, Betty suddenly began coughing, though Emma could not understand what had brought on the sudden coughing fit.

“I see it, Aunt Judith, but right now, I do not need instructions on how to be a finer lady than I am. I need a seat.” Emma released her brother’s arm. Out of the corner of her eye, she became aware that Betty’s coughing was not real coughing at all but an attempt to clear her throat and gain their attention.

Emma used the opportunity to escape. She made her way toward a nearby park bench, hobbling as best as she could and wincing with nearly every step she took. Behind her, Andrew, Betty, and Judith were waylaid by a group of approaching ladies, whom Betty had clearly seen and forewarned of their approach. Emma was glad her family could not follow so quickly and sat down on the bench with a sigh of relief, lifting her foot off the ground.

This is useless. What a dreadful day!

More than anything, Emma wished she could be home, perhaps on a chair in her garden. She could admire the birds that flew by and be distracted from the other thoughts that had plagued her mind so much.

The Duke of Waybridge only wishes to be my friend. We can never be anything more to one another.

“Well, this is a surprise.” The deep voice was seconded by a bark so familiar to Emma that she spun around on the bench, peering behind her to see who had approached.

The Duke was there as if he had been summoned by her thoughts. He rested his arms on the back of the bench with Frankie the greyhound at his side, who ran around to greet Emma, wagging his tail.

“Your Grace,” she said in surprise then petted the dog. “Good day, Frankie. You seem rather happy to see me.” The dog barked as if agreeing with her.

“I do not doubt he is.” The Duke remained where he was, leaning on the back of the bench. She looked back at him, startled that he had managed to sneak up on her so well. “How is the ankle?”

“Sore and painful, but saying that aloud seems to accomplish very little,” she said with tiredness and nodded her head toward her aunt, who was trapped in conversation. “My aunt informs me that it is important that a young lady is seen out whatever the weather or the challenge.”

“I see.” The Duke walked around the bench and came to sit beside her. “And we are ignoring that walking on a sprained ankle can make the injury worse?”

“That is the question I have been asking my aunt,” she explained and rolled her eyes. “I doubt anyone else could gain much more of an answer than I could.” Her words prompted a light chuckle from the Duke.

For a minute, it was easy to forget her foul mood. Emma could pretend their conversation from the ball had not happened, that he hadn’t expressly called her ‘his friend’ and nothing more. When he was laughing, it was easy to think that another life was entirely possible.

“There was something on that matter I wished to discuss with you,” The Duke said in a low voice and turned to face her.

Frankie clearly wanted attention and put his head between them. Emma petted him as the Duke did, but neither one of them looked at the dog: they looked at each other. “When you tripped, I was thinking of exactly what I saw...” he paused as if thinking the matter through.

“Yes? What of it?” Emma encouraged him.

“Is there a chance that your fall was not so accidental?” he whispered, then he shook his head as if it were an awful thing to suggest.

“Wait, you think it possible that the Baron tripped me on purpose?” Emma had to laugh at the idea. “That is quite absurd! Why would he do such a thing?”

“That I do not know. I know it is mad. Maybe it is just my imagination at work,” the Duke explained in a rush, “but I was walking toward you when it happened. Lord Thorne was clearly most insistent that you would not walk away from him.”

“He wanted a second dance, that was all.” Emma shrugged, thinking it was no grave thing. “I am afraid clumsiness is in my blood. You should meet my father sometime, Your Grace, then you would understand.”

“He is a clumsy fellow?” the Duke asked.

“None is more so! Though I love him for it. Give him a smooth floor to walk on, and he will find a nook or ridge on

which to trip.” She laughed at the idea. “Perhaps I am more like him than I realized.”

“Perhaps.” Yet, the Duke did not look convinced. He had shifted his focus toward the greyhound between them, petting him softly. “Ah, maybe I am just seeing things that aren’t there. Forgive me. I was most concerned about you. That is all.”

“Concerned?” Emma said in surprise. “No need to be worried for me, Your Grace. If I fall, I can climb back up again.”

“I do not doubt it. I suppose I am rather protective of you.” At his words, Frankie shifted his attention. He moved to stand more in front of Emma and placed his chin on her lap, wanting her attention alone. “Rather like Frankie here.”

“He’s a sweet dog,” Emma said softly, stroking the greyhound. She wanted to wriggle with delight at the idea that the Duke could be protective of her, but this time, she did not allow herself to indulge in that feeling. She was determined to listen to her family’s advice and stop thinking of what she felt in her heart. “I am quite envious of you, Your Grace.”

“Of me? Why?” he asked, angling himself on the bench to face her fully.

“Because of this one.” She smiled and motioned at Frankie, who barked, clearly liking her words. “I would love to have such a pet.”

“Can you not have one?” the Duke asked.

“We have had cats before,” she explained, “and I do have a fondness for birds. I often sit in the garden and see what birds flutter past, but I have never been so fortunate as to have a dog.”

“Well, you are always welcome to play with Frankie.” He nodded his head toward the dog, who sat back on his haunches, clearly on his best behavior. “I warn you though, he’s not always so well-behaved as he is with you.”

“Mischievous? I like that.”

“A quality to admire, is it?” the Duke said, his smile growing. “Is that just in animals or people too?”

“Both!” Her words prompted him to laugh.

“Then I should give way to mischief more often. Speaking of which,” he paused and moved a little toward her on the bench. “If you are so fond of birds, then we must make arrangements for you to see my aviary sometime.”

Emma smiled at once at the idea. She could remember talking of the aviary at length with the Duke and longing to see it.

“Ah, now I see you are being mischievous,” she jested with him. “A lady visiting a duke’s house? Who would believe it was just to see an aviary?” At her words, he laughed heartily.

“I will have to invite your brother then, so no one will suspect me.” They laughed together, but the sound quickly faded.

Judith had returned, having extricated herself from the group of ladies, and on either side of her stood Andrew and Betty.

“Ah, Your Grace, so good to see you again.” Judith curtsied, prompting the Duke to jump to his feet and bow deeply.

“And you, Lady Frampton.” He bowed in turn to Andrew and Betty too.

“Ah, who is this?” Andrew immediately fussed over Frankie, but Judith cowered away a little.

“My dog, Frankie.”

“Yes, charming creature,” Judith said, not sounding so convincing. “Emma, we were just saying what a lovely day it would be for boating on the river. Do you not think?”

“Boating?” Emma tried to keep the smile on her face. She did not appreciate the idea of having to walk back toward the river after walking so far away from it.

“In a boat, you could rest your ankle,” the Duke said, urging her to sit straighter.

“Yes, you are right. Very well, boating sounds lovely.” She moved to her feet but wobbled a little. The Duke offered his

hand to steady her, and she took it quickly, using him to stand still. When Andrew's eyes widened at Emma, clearly watching that touch with interest, she snatched her hand away again. "Lead the way to the boats, Aunt Judith."

Judith was only too happy to oblige. She led the path to the boats with Betty on her arm. Behind them, Emma walked with the Duke and Andrew, leaning on Andrew so much that he began to complain.

"You could lighten your leaning on me a little, Emma," Andrew said, teasing her as Frankie ran around them, thinking their walk was a game.

"I am not so heavy. You are just causing trouble." she elbowed him, trying to get him to stop. She did not fancy being embarrassed in front of the Duke, with her brother complaining she weighed too much.

"She cannot be that heavy." Without hesitation, the Duke offered his arm on Emma's other side. "Come, Lord Follet, you have a break, and I will assist your sister." Emma took his arm, even as Andrew began to chuckle. She stepped on his foot with her good ankle, hoping to quieten him.

"Ah, what a coincidence," Judith called from up ahead. Emma was so busy thinking of how her arm rested against the Duke's own that it took her a minute to realize Judith was speaking. "Look who has also come to try the boats."

Emma looked forward, shocked to see Lord Thorne there.

“Yes, a coincidence,” she muttered, eying her aunt’s face. Judith seemed to be making a special effort to avoid looking at Emma as she approached Lord Thorne in greeting. He was standing by a small dock that led out into the river with boats attached.

“A coincidence?” the Duke whispered in Emma’s ear. “Something tells me you were not prepared for his presence.”

“Not in the slightest.” Emma did not want to let go of the Duke just yet, especially not if it meant accompanying the Baron on a boat. Being alone with the gentleman once again could have meant him renewing his conversation about marriage. “Would you join us, Your Grace?”

“You wish me to come boating with you?” the Duke said and gestured to Frankie. “I would say that I must take care of him, but...” Before he could even finish the sentence, Frankie had bolted so quickly past the Baron that the gentleman was forced into a spin. The dog leapt into the water and began to swim, his tongue lolling out of his mouth. “I think he can take care of himself.”

“Ha! I think he can too. So? You will join us?” Emma asked, hoping she did not sound too persistent.

“As you wish.” The Duke adjusted his hold on her, taking her hand and leading her onto the dock.

“Your Grace? You are joining us?” the Baron asked, his tone and his expression making his surprise clear.

“I am.”

“Well, I am sure we will be glad of your company,” Lord Thorne said with ease. “Here, Lady Emma, allow me to assist you onto a boat.”

Emma could have laughed at the strangeness of it all. Her hand was already in the Duke’s, and he was the one trying to help her onto a boat.

“Allow me,” the Duke said, plainly competing with Lord Thorne.

“Anyone else feel as if they have Déjà Vu?” Andrew said from behind them as he helped Betty onto a boat. Emma was glad to see Betty tell him to be quiet. “This will end badly. I’m warning you.”

“Andrew.” Betty’s warning tone was enough to silence him.

“I will wait for you all here,” Judith said with ease and waved at the boats again. “In you go, Emma.”

“Yes, Aunt Judith.” Emma struggled on her ankle, for the pain was getting worse after walking on it for so long.

“This way, Lady Emma.” The Duke still held her hand and steered her toward one particular boat. She was so focused on his movements that she did not notice how close Lord Thorne had come. He took her other hand.

“I surely do not need two gentlemen’s help.” Emma planted her feet firmly onto the wooden dock, so maddened that she refused to move. “I am injured but not incapable.”

“Then let me lead the way,” Lord Thorne said. “If you will allow me, Your Grace.” He circled Emma and was about to take her other hand from the Duke’s when he tripped. Emma had been watching carefully though, and she had not seen the exact moment the Baron had tripped, only that he had lunged toward the Duke. “Oh!” He yelped in surprise, then barreled into the Duke.

“Look out!” Emma called, but it was too late. The Duke toppled over the side of the dock and fell so hard into the water that the splash leapt into the air, almost as tall as her.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY

“**Y**our Grace? Your Grace!”

Jasper could hear Emma’s cries, even as he bobbed under the water. Swimming upward, his head broke through the surface, watching in time as Lord Thorne lost his balance and fell into the water too.

What on earth is happening?

Jasper swam out of the way and back toward the dock, his body so sodden that there was not a part of it that was not wet.

“Your Grace, here.” Lady Emma was kneeling on the dock, leaning toward him with her hand outstretched. Jasper trod the water for a second, looking back at the Baron who was panicking in the water, struggling to swim.

Jasper would have loved nothing more than to climb out of the water and leave the Baron behind. After all, the Baron’s trip caused him to fall in, but Lord Thorne was panicking, moving his arms like the struts of a windmill.

Swimming back toward the Baron, he pulled on the gentleman's tailcoat and dragged him toward the dock.

"Hold onto the dock," Jasper instructed. He received no thanks for his help, though Lord Thorne clung to the dock, beginning to shiver.

Turning back, Jasper found Emma still there, reaching out toward him. He took her hand and grasped onto the dock with his other hand, levering himself out of the water.

"What a state you two are in," Andrew declared, laughing as he walked past Jasper and Emma. "Worry not, I'll get the other one." He reached down to the baron, who was fussing so much he did not make it easy for Andrew to pull him out.

"Oh, my goodness, are you all right, Your Grace?" Emma asked, reaching toward Jasper.

"Sodden, and my pride is wounded, nothing more." He shook out his arms, shaking off some of the water, just as Frankie jumped up on the dock beside him and did the same. "This is not a game, Frankie." The dog merely barked, not understanding what had gone wrong.

"Your Grace, please, come this way." Emma took his hand and drew him down the dock, limping with her ankle. He didn't think of pulling his hand back from hers, even as Judith and Betty panicked, gossiping between them and pointing in Lord Thorne's direction, who was still not out of the water. "Are you hurt?"

“No, as I said,” he smiled at her worry for him, “I am perfectly well, just merely wet.” He was angry, though. One minute he had been perfectly safe and dry on the dock, the next minute he was falling headfirst toward the water. “I do not understand what happened. Did Lord Thorne trip?”

“He tripped you!” Emma said in a panicked whisper, looking behind him to check she wasn’t heard. “Were you not the one saying earlier you thought he might have tripped me on purpose?”

“Yes, but I thought we agreed that the idea was ridiculous.” His hand was still in hers, the drips on his skin trickling onto her own, but she didn’t seem to care. He loved the way she did not remove her hand from his.

“Yes, we did, but I could have sworn he did all that with intent.” She waved her other hand behind him. “It seemed to me he pushed you on purpose, then he fell in himself.”

“He did?” Jasper didn’t know what to think anymore. He looked toward Lord Thorne, who was half out of the water with Andrew helping him, though Andrew proclaimed more than once that Lord Thorne was making the situation much more difficult than it needed to be. “It could have been an accident.”

Yet Emma’s expression said it all. Her frown was so deeply set that it transformed her features.

“You do not believe that for a second, do you?” Jasper whispered to her.

“I do not,” she agreed with him. Frankie began to bark around them, running in circles, but Jasper didn’t even bother to quieten the dog. He was busy thinking of Emma’s hand in his. “The man is forward to a mad degree, Your Grace. His attentions toward me are...” She struggled for the right word.

“Enthusiastic?” Jasper offered.

“In a way, yes.” Emma shot a glare in Lord Thorne’s direction. “To my mind, he was trying to get you away from my side, Your Grace.”

“Then it will take more than pushing me into a river to make me move.” His words captured her attention so much that her eyes shot toward him. They shared a sweet smile before Jasper noticed Emma’s eyes wandering over him. She seemed to take in his whole appearance, the dark hair now plastered across his forehead and the way his tailcoat and trousers stuck to his body.

Oh... she does feel something.

Jasper was imbued with hope. Here Emma was, blushing at the sight of him so sodden. Such excitement filled his body that he could not let this moment pass without saying something.

“Continue to look at me in such a way, Lady Emma, and people will talk of us.”

“Ah! God’s wounds.” She snapped her eyes away from his body and looked at his face. “I was merely looking at the wet

clothes.”

“Of course you were,” he teased her.

“You seem to have returned to this idea of mischief with great alacrity.”

“I find I cannot resist,” he whispered to her. He would have happily stood there smiling at her in this ridiculous fashion, completely sodden, had they not been interrupted.

“What happened?” Andrew asked, appearing on one side as Lord Thorne appeared on the other.

“I’ll tell you what happened,” Lord Thorne spoke with sudden firmness, “the Duke tripped me into the river.”

“I beg your pardon!?” Emma’s shocked words beat Jasper to his own expression of surprise.

“Are we to ignore the fact that I was the one who ended up in the water first?” Jasper asked, watching as Lord Thorne’s face paled a little. When Emma had first suggested the fall might have been the work of Lord Thorne, Jasper had dismissed it, thinking they might just be suffering from overactive imaginations. Now, he was forced to reconsider.

Is it possible Lord Thorne would be so petty in his envy to do such a thing?

“Lord Thorne, the Duke did no such thing,” Emma said, arguing his case for him. “You were the one who knocked into him. I saw it myself.”

“Care to comment, Lord Thorne?” Andrew asked, folding his arms and standing tall. For one minute, Jasper could see how formidable Andrew could be. The man might be a jester and liked to keep to himself, but when it came to his sister, there was a protective streak that was clearly visible now.

“The idea is absurd. I felt something underfoot. I believed the Duke tripped me...” Lord Thorne petered off, clearly judging from all of their expressions that they would believe him. “Perhaps I was mistaken and I tripped on the dock itself.”

“There seems to be a lot of tripping as of late,” Jasper murmured, watching as Lord Thorne avoided his gaze altogether.

“Aunt Judith?” Emma turned to face her aunt. Jasper suddenly realized his hand was still in Emma’s, their touch now strained as she had turned around. He didn’t want to let go, but Lord Thorne was sending him a deep glare, and even Andrew was staring at him with a questioning expression.

“This is the time you let go, Your Grace,” Andrew whispered only for Jasper to hear. Jasper did so.

“Aunt Judith?” Emma called again as Lady Frampton stopped at her side. “I think you will agree that the ambition for boating now must be retired. For one thing, our escorts are quite sodden.” She gestured toward Jasper and Lord Thorne.

“Yes, quite so.” Judith appeared disappointed indeed. “Is your ankle sore, dear?”

“Very much.”

“Then we will return home.” Judith’s frown persisted as she looked between Jasper and Lord Thorne, clearly unsure what to think. “I am not certain what just happened here, Gentlemen, but I pray I will not be witness to it again.” She turned on her heel and collected Betty, leading the way off the dock.

Emma hovered for a second, her eyes on Jasper.

“Take care of yourself, Lady Emma,” Jasper said, offering a deep bow. “Rest your ankle.”

“Thank you.” When she looked at Lord Thorne, he stepped forward with fervor.

“Lady Emma, might I just offer my deepest and sincerest apologies? Any misunderstanding that might have arisen is purely from my wish to communicate to you the extent of my respect and affection—”

“My Lord, please,” Lady Emma cut him off quite cleanly, standing tall. Jasper couldn’t help admiring her at that moment. For a minute, she wasn’t performing, nor was she adopting the characteristics her aunt was trying to teach her. She was purely herself as she stared at Lord Thorne. “Your compliments, whilst kind, do not help matters at this moment.

I can only wonder why this happened and fear what I suspect is true, that you pushed the Duke in.”

“I swear on my life, I did not—”

“Andrew, let us part,” Emma said, turning to her brother.

“Gladly.” Andrew stepped between Lord Thorne and Emma, stopping the Baron from getting to her again.

Jasper stood back and took off his tailcoat, shaking it free of some water. Frankie thought it was a game and shook himself again.

“There now, Frankie. No more today.” He tried to soften the dog by petting his head. Glancing down the riverbank, Jasper watched as Emma looked back his way. They shared a long look, one that should not have been so long. Had they been standing in an assembly room or at a ball, such looks would have made people talk, but not out here in the park, where people were busy laughing and talking about what had taken place.

The only person who had noticed that look was Lord Thorne, who turned with such speed to face Jasper that he stood taller, standing his ground.

“I must speak to you, Your Grace.”

“Must you? I rather suspected you wished to do something worse than speak.” Jasper had had enough. His feelings for

Emma were confusing enough as they were without the added complication of Lord Thorne, who now could well be coming close to violence over their want of Emma's attention.

Bending down, he attached Frankie's leash to the dog collar then led the animal away off the boat dock and down the path.

"Your Grace, I am speaking to you." He hastened to run after Jasper, catching up with him.

"Then speak," Jasper urged, "but pray do not take long about it. You and I will both be cold after our dip in the water and in need of a change of clothes."

"I must speak to you about Lady Emma."

Jasper came to a sudden stop. They had retreated from the main part of the park and were on a path through a dense clump of trees. With Jasper's boots scuffing the dirt beneath him, he halted and turned to face Lord Thorne, who was fidgeting and so red in the face that as he breathed. He reminded Jasper of a bull preparing for a charge.

"Why do you wish to discuss Lady Emma with me?"

"I have had enough of this art. I intend to speak plainly to you." Lord Thorne walked forward, but Jasper did not back up. With how close the Baron came, Frankie began to growl. That single sound urged Lord Thorne to stop. "Can't you control that mutt?"

“He rarely growls. You must have really made an impression on him.” Jasper’s words did not help matters.

“I wish to talk of Lady Emma.” Lord Thorne stood tall, but he was not as tall as Jasper. The attempt to be the more intimidating one of the two made Jasper bite the inside of his mouth to stop himself from smiling.

“What of her?”

“Lady Emma and I are to wed.”

Jasper felt as if he had been punched in the gut. His shoulders slumped a little, and his hand clung tightly to the dog’s leash. Even Frankie whimpered at his side as if the greyhound somehow recognized Jasper was in some sort of pain.

A horrid imagining took over. Jasper imagined himself standing in a church, watching as Lord Thorne married Emma.

Emma...

He stopped thinking of her title and only thought of her name, as she gave her vows and moved toward Lord Thorne. As the ceremony came to a close, Lord Thorne bent toward Emma, ready to kiss her.

Jasper shook himself, releasing himself from the imagining.

“There is an understanding between you?” Jasper asked, finding the anticipation for an answer making his body shudder.

“Not yet.” Lord Thorne’s words made Jasper sigh with relief. “But there will be soon.”

“You are being rather presumptuous about the lady’s answer, are you not?” Jasper pointed out. “I have seen you with Lady Emma. The exchanges are cordial, certainly, and you danced together often, but I have not seen anything to suggest intimacy. Surely not on Lady Emma’s side.”

Jasper kept his true thoughts to himself. He had often feared there could be such intimacy, but he hadn’t seen any concrete proof of it. Emma did not smile at Lord Thorne as she did Jasper, and wasn’t his hand the one she had been clinging to minutes ago? She had left the Baron in the water, not so worried for him.

“Everything else is a matter of formality.” Lord Thorne stepped toward him again. When Frankie growled, Jasper jerked a little on the leash, enough to make the dog quiet. “Why can’t you control that dog?”

“Would you rather I let him off the leash?” In emphasis, Frankie growled again. The sound was longer and deeper this time, and Jasper didn’t bother to stop him. “He doesn’t like you. But have no fear, he would never attack you.” Lord Thorne did not look convinced.

“I am speaking to you honestly now, as a friend.”

“A friend?” Jasper scoffed at the idea. “Based on the encounter we just had in that dock, I am not inclined to think you wish to be my friend, Lord Thorne.”

“Then as an acquaintance,” Lord Thorne snapped. “Lady Emma and I are to wed. I can offer her a good life, a comfortable one, courtship and marriage. What is it that you can offer her?”

Jasper didn’t answer. He breathed deeply, his body still struggling with imagining Emma standing in that church alongside Lord Thorne.

“If you do not intend to ever offer your own hand in marriage, then do not give Lady Emma such attentions, *Your Grace*.” He emphasized the address with derision.

“I am Lady Emma’s friend. A good friend,” Jasper reiterated. “I am entitled to give any attention I wish to.”

“But you have no intention to wed, do you? The ton has spoken of it often. The gossip has spread that you do not intend to wed.”

It has?

This was news to Jasper. He’d told his mother and, of course, Patrick, but no one else. The only possibility was that either someone else had overheard him or one of them had spread the information.

“Do you care to correct me, Your Grace?” Lord Thorne asked, pressing the matter.

No words escaped Jasper. He didn't know if he was too shocked that people knew of his intentions to think of something to say or whether he knew he couldn't deny the accusation leveled at him. But either way, he stayed quiet.

I said I wouldn't marry, but that meant not marrying for the sake of reputation.

The first time he had spoken of such a resolution was long before he had even met Emma.

“Let us be civil, at least.” Lord Thorne straightened his wet clothing as if it could somehow make his appearance something genteel again. “I intend to wed Lady Emma and you do not. Therefore you confuse matters by giving your attention to her. I saw the way she grasped your hand just now. What is anyone to think of such a touch?”

“I am her friend,” Jasper spoke the words slowly and deeply, but they did not seem to affect the Baron.

“Then, if you are her friend, you will step back and give her the best opportunity she has for making a good and eligible match.” Lord Thorne gestured at himself. It seemed to be the final words they would share on the matter, for Lord Thorne turned on his heel to walk away.

Something in Jasper couldn't let it end there, though. He called after Lord Thorne, needing to ascertain one more thing

first.

“Have you spoken to her father?” Jasper called. “Have you asked for his blessing yet?”

“Not yet.” Lord Thorne paused enough to glance back. “But it will not be many days before I do.” With those final words, he walked off, leaving Jasper staring after him and Frankie whimpering at his side.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Emma, you must make a decision now.”

“What is that, Aunt Judith?” Emma sat carefully in front of her vanity mirror, rubbing the sore spot on her ankle as Judith strode into the room. “I am preparing for bed.”

“I know, but after what I have witnessed today, you and I must talk.” Judith collected a stool from the far side of the room and moved it beside Emma, sitting very still. The two candles that kept them company on the vanity table quivered for a few seconds, making the orange light dance across Judith’s face.

“What is it, Auntie?” Emma asked, nervous about what Judith had to say.

“I must confess myself perplexed.” Judith shook her head a little. “Yet, the incident at the river can leave us in little doubt that you have the attentions of both Baron Thorne and the Duke of Waybridge.”

Emma avoided her aunt’s gaze and looked down at her lap instead, playing with the curling ribbons she was placing in her hair to ready for bed. All day she had thought of that

strange moment and the way in which she and the Duke had held onto each other's hand. For a minute, it had been as if no one else was around them. They had been the only two people who mattered.

"Both were so insistent on helping you onto that boat, and then look what happened. Goodness!" Judith shook her head in bewilderment. "The two of them became entangled and fell in the river."

"I am not sure it was an accident, Aunt Judith," Emma said slowly. She had tried to explain earlier to Judith that she feared Lord Thorne might have tripped the Duke, but Judith thought it impossible.

"Not this again," she dismissed the idea. "Regardless of the cause of the incident, we must face this. Both were attentive to you, and it must lead us to question their motives." She laid her hands over Emma's, halting her fidgeting with the curling ribbons. "You mentioned before that Lord Thorne has spoken of marriage to you."

"He has, more than once."

"Then we cannot be in doubt of what his intentions are. The confusion comes with the Duke of Waybridge." Her voice was soft and caring. "I know what I told you, Emma, that he has no intention to wed. It is the gossip that was told to me by his mother, but that is not to say the gentleman could not say something different to you. So now, I must ask you, Emma. I know I am prying, but I do it out of care for you. Has the Duke ever spoken to you of marriage?"

“Marriage?” Emma whispered, thinking through all of her conversations with the Duke. They enjoyed one another’s company and they had fun, but no such serious topic had been discussed. “No, never.”

“What of courtship?”

“No.” Emma’s words prompted Judith to sit back and release her hands.

“Then he has not contradicted the gossip himself.” She sighed, seeming almost as disappointed as Emma was.

Slowly, Emma turned to face the vanity table and lifted her hands, placing the last curling ribbons in her hair. She had dismissed her maid some time ago, wanting to be alone and leaving the task to herself. She had wanted to be alone with her thoughts, but those thoughts weren’t helping her now.

“The Duke has never given any intimation that we are anything more than friends.”

“How strange. His behavior toward you today suggested a gentleman who was more than your friend. He held so tightly onto your hand!” Judith tipped her head back as if pleading with the heavens for an answer. “We must conclude that the gentleman has mischief in mind instead of marriage.”

“Mischief?” Emma repeated, halting her movements with the ribbons. It was the very word she and the Duke had used as they talked together on the bench.

Perhaps it is all he intends.

“Either way, a choice must be made.”

“Go on, Auntie,” Emma said, lowering her hands and turning to face Judith.

“We have concluded that the Baron has honorable intentions. The Duke’s intentions are not known, but you have a choice, Emma.” Judith leaned toward her. “The Baron will soon offer you marriage again. It is up to you whether you accept it or not. As for the matter of the Duke... if his intentions are not honorable, as we fear, then I suggest you choose to distance yourself from him as greatly as you can.”

“Oh, I see.” Emma paused, chewing her lip as she considered her aunt’s words. “Thank you for your advice.”

“I hope my words are of use to you, Emma. I truly do.” Judith stood to her feet and placed a hand on Emma’s shoulder. It was a comforting touch, but it did not last long. Soon enough, Judith had left the bedchamber, and Emma was alone again.

She attempted to finish her ribbons but ended up tying them into knots. Abandoning them altogether, she took a dressing gown off her bed and wrapped it around her shoulders before leaving her bedchamber, carrying a candle with her. Unsure of what to think at this moment, she decided to seek out another member of the family to get his opinion of what had passed that day.

She found Andrew in the billiards room, where he played alone, working on his skill. Candles placed around the table cast it in a yellow light, and a small fire at the side of the room offered warmth.

“Emma? What are you doing up?” he asked in surprise, raising himself from where he leaned on the table with his cue. “I thought you had retired for the night some time ago.”

“I find I cannot rest.” Emma leaned on the billiards table, unsure how to begin.

“Out of fear of knowing where this conversation will go, might I make a suggestion?” He headed to the side of the room and picked up a second cue, offering it to her. “Let us play if we are to talk of something serious.”

“As you wish.” She waited for him to return the balls to the center before she broke, watching the balls scatter. She was not particularly skilled at the game, but neither was she dreadful. She managed to pot a couple of balls before it was Andrew’s turn. “What did you make of today, Andrew?”

“Make of it? Pah! I have many words for it, Emma. Probably none of them you really wish to hear.” He potted one of the balls and then circled the table, eyeing up his next shot as he talked. “Lord Thorne is persistent in his attentions to you, I’ll give you that. Though I tell you now, if you do marry that man, I will not be visiting you every day.”

“Why not?” Emma asked.

“He is a little much to contend with at times, is he not? He’s dramatic and over the top.” Andrew shuddered before leaning down and taking his next shot. “The Duke is more of a puzzle.”

“Yes.” Emma chewed her lip in thought. “What do you make of him?”

“Well...” Andrew paused, potting a ball before standing straight again. “Today would hardly be the first occasion I suspected he cared more for you than he was letting on.”

“Truly?” Emma asked, trying not to sound too hopeful, though she clearly failed, for Andrew offered her a warning look.

“Then again, he never speaks of what he thinks of you, does he?” Andrew said slowly, circling the table. “Do you wish to know from me exactly, Sister?”

“The gossip suggests the Duke will never marry, and our aunt believes it to be the case. What do you think?” Emma asked.

“Whilst I’m flattered you think me a man of many talents, mind reading is not one of them.” He clipped one of the balls, and it went flying over the edge of the table.

“Apparently, billiards isn’t one either,” she teased him and collected the ball, returning it to the table. “I get your point, though. How much can we really know is in a man’s mind?”

“Exactly. Do you wish to know what the Duke of Waybridge thinks of marriage, Emma? Then there is only one person you can ask, and it most certainly isn’t me.” He encouraged her to take her shot, gesturing to her cue.

Emma took up her place and aimed at one of the balls, potting its friend perfectly before she stood straight. The sheer prospect of openly talking with the Duke about what she felt for him scared her, but what else was she supposed to do?

“I must speak to the Duke,” she concluded, watching as Andrew nodded.

“If our aunt is to make us promenade tomorrow, I will distract her and Betty. You can talk to the Duke.”



She’s here again.

Jasper couldn’t believe his luck. When he had taken Frankie out that morning, he thought it a wild chance that Emma could be promenading. The lady was still injured, and after what had happened the day before, he would not have been surprised had she stayed away. Yet here she was again, sitting on the very same bench where he had found her the day before, with a blooming magnolia tree hanging over her, its branches so near to her they practically tapped her on the shoulder.

Jasper approached with Frankie running ahead of him. The dog announced his arrival before Jasper could, and Emma turned to greet the greyhound.

In the distance, Jasper could see Andrew talking eagerly with his aunt and Betty. He seemed to be pointing toward the bandstand in the other direction, ensuring they were completely distracted by the musicians rather than looking in Emma's direction.

"I see they have allowed you to sit today," Jasper said, stopping at Emma's side. She smiled as she looked up at him, but if he wasn't mistaken, that smile didn't reach to her eyes. "Is all well, Lady Emma?"

"Yes, everything is fine." She nodded hurriedly. "Is all well with you? You took quite the tumble yesterday in the river."

"I'm fine. It's nothing more than Frankie does every day, is it?" He turned and petted Frankie on the head, who barked. Jasper took the seat beside Emma, about to talk to her freely when he noticed her body language. She angled herself toward him, fidgeting restlessly with her reticule on her lap. For a change, she seemed unable to meet his gaze. "Emma, something must be wrong."

He only realized what he had done once the words were out of his mouth. He had dropped her title. She jerked her chin up to look at him.

"My apologies," he whispered in a rush.

"Please don't apologize for that! You merely called me by my name."

“It is a good thing that your aunt was not around to hear it. I imagine my informality would not please her.” Jasper was too easily reminded of all the lessons Judith had clearly been giving her niece.

Perhaps I wouldn't quite meet Lady Frampton's expectations of a gentleman either.

“I do not care about that,” Emma spoke with fervor. Now that he had addressed her without her title, it became all too easy to think of her without it too.

“How is your ankle? Is it bothering you?” he asked with worry, thinking that maybe the injury was her source of discomfort today.

“It is a little better.” Emma shrugged as if it was hardly bothering her at all. “I have managed to walk here without complaining today, much to Andrew's relief, so it must be getting better.” Even as she said the words, she renewed her fidgeting, turning the reticule over so many times that it was never in the same place for more than two seconds.

“Then, would you tell me what is upsetting you?” Jasper whispered. He glanced around the park but saw no one was glancing their way, not even Judith, who seemed much more interested in what Andrew had to say about the bandstand. Jasper took the opportunity and slid a little closer to Emma, aware that Frankie lay down at their feet, yawning and being surprisingly peaceful for a change.

“It is hard to put into words.” She finally met his gaze, laying the reticule flat. “My aunt is very particular on her discussion

of marriage as of late.”

“Ah, I see.” Jasper sent a quick look her aunt’s way. “This is why she conducts all her lessons with you, is it not? She is forming you into what she thinks a gentleman desires.”

“You scoff,” she observed.

“Perhaps a little.” He turned back to face her. “You have become very elegant, Emma, that cannot be denied, but I do not want you to lose who you are. I told you as much before.”

“You did.” Her voice was soft and gentle, as if what he had said genuinely mattered to her. “She talks so much of marriage that I have to consider how I really feel about it.”

“How do you feel?” Jasper asked, watching as she sighed deeply.

“It is difficult. I’m constantly reminded that marriage should be considered based on *eligibility*. It does not sound very romantic, does it? Nor conducive to one’s happiness.”

“I agree with you heartily, more so than I can say.” Jasper was uncomfortably reminded of all his conversations with his mother on this topic. “I often think parents wish to hurry marriage for their own peace of mind, rather than their children’s.”

“Is that how you feel?” Emma asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“About marriage.” She was not sitting very still on the bench as she stared at him. “I supposed what I am asking is, what do you think of marriage?”

“It is a complicated affair.” He looked away from Emma, not needing the distraction of her if he was to answer honestly. “My mother has made it plain that she expects me to wed. She says it is the duty of every duke. *Duty.*” He repeated the word with some derision.

“That’s what she says?” Emma asked, her voice quiet.

“Yes.” Jasper had felt once before that Emma could be the one person he spoke to about the secrets that were hidden in his family. At this moment, despite the fact they were out amongst people, he felt secluded with her and safe under the magnolia tree. Leaning toward her, he offered a few words in a whisper. “My mother thinks only of marriage in terms of what it can do for reputations.”

“Reputations? You are a duke! Why would you need to improve your reputation?”

“Perhaps not all is as it sometimes seems.” He winced, watching as Emma slowly nodded.

“I am sorry.”

“Please, don’t be.” He shook his head. “It is no one’s fault, really, but what happened has led my mother to harp on daily about the need to marry to improve our reputations.”

“And what do you say to her?” Emma had become very still. It was clear she was hanging onto every word he said, her lips parted. Jasper felt so safe with her at that moment that the confession fell from him.

“I do not think anyone should marry for such reasons. Never.” He shook his head in emphasis. “I know my mother will be disappointed in me, but how could I do that to any lady?”

“What do you mean?”

“How could I marry an eligible lady purely to improve my family’s standing? It would be cruel to the lady, would it not? Dragging her into our story for the sake of our selfish ends. No, it’s too awful.” Frankie groaned in his sleep as if in agreement with him. “See? Frankie agrees with me. No. Marriage for such a purpose is quite mad.”

“Yes, it is. Quite mad.” Emma looked away from him, angling her head so far that he could only see the side of her face.

Jasper wished to say something more. Deep in his gut, something yearned to tell Emma that he could imagine marrying for different reasons.

Devotion and attachment... are good reasons.

Yet his tongue failed him. He kept thinking of Lord Thorne's determination to wed her and speak to her father.

Maybe I am not worthy of Emma, not as worthy as another.

"So, you never thought to wed?" she asked slowly, keeping her gaze averted from him.

"No, I did not." His lips parted again, ready to tell her that she was the one thing that had made him question this resolution, but his hesitation was too long. Emma moved to her feet, struggling on her ankle for just a moment.

"Thank you," she said, avoiding his gaze as she looked down at Frankie. "Your opinion on marriage has helped me more than I can say."

"It has? How?" He stood to his feet, reluctant to let her go just yet, but she was already backing away from him.

"It would take a long time to explain. I wish you a good day, Your Grace. I should return to my family." She curtsied to him, and for one minute, Jasper could have sworn that her eyes were wet.

Wait... were those tears?

Then she looked away, and Jasper thought it was all in his imagination.

“Goodbye... Emma.” He didn’t bother with her title anymore. As she walked away from him, Jasper had this horrid feeling that their conversation had placed a barrier between them. He’d confessed a secret to her, and she had walked away, possibly with tears in her eyes.

What have I done?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“This is unbearable,” Jasper muttered, staring across the ballroom.

“What was that?” Patrick asked at his side, passing Jasper another drink.

“Nothing.” All evening, Jasper had been staring in one direction only. Emma held much attention at this ball but from one gentleman in particular—Lord Thorne.

They had danced together twice, despite the palpable discomfort the second dance had caused Emma because of her ankle. Now, Lord Thorne was pressing a glass into her hand, one that Jasper rather thought she did not want. Emma kept trying to return the glass to the table behind her, but Lord Thorne would pick it up and pass it to her again.

“Jasper?” Patrick waved a hand in front of his face. With a little dizziness, Jasper turned to look at his friend. “God’s wounds, what is wrong with you tonight?”

“Nothing.” Jasper turned his back, trying not to look at Emma anymore. It had been two days since he’d talked with her

alone on that bench in Hyde Park, and every time he thought of it, he kept playing the conversation out differently in his head. What more could he have said? What did she think of him now?

“I have a feeling you’re not really here at all.” Patrick nudged his arm, trying to get his attention. “Your mind is elsewhere entirely.”

“It is, really.” Jasper pulled fussily at the cravat around his throat, loosening it, then tugged on his tailcoat, unbuttoning it. Tonight seemed like a ridiculous affair. Why had he come to prance around in a grand outfit such as this, walking between candelabras adorned with silken bows and crystal gems, just to stare enviously across the room?

“Care to tell me where your mind is then?” Patrick tried to take the glass from Jasper’s hand just to get his attention.

“I’m drinking this,” Jasper said, holding firmly onto the glass.

“That’s my worry. I think you’re in your cups.” Patrick’s words were low and solemn. “Am I wrong?”

Jasper wished he could argue with his friend, but he couldn’t. The moment he’d seen Emma arrive that night wearing a Pomona green gown so fine that his mouth had turned dry, he’d reached for the first drink.

“I’m not sure how many of these I’ve had,” Jasper confessed.

“Then perhaps this should be the last.” Patrick succeeded this time in taking the glass away from Jasper’s hand. “Right, are you going to tell me what is wrong, my friend? Or shall I hazard a guess at it?”

“It does no good to dwell on it.” Despite the words, Jasper turned, and in his drunkenness, his gaze sought out the source of his sadness that night. He watched as Emma stood beside Lord Thorne, patiently listening to all that the gentleman had to say.

I could have sworn there were tears in her eyes the other day... yet, was it my imagination?

“Let us dwell on it, for God’s sake,” Patrick said, elbowing Jasper to get his attention. Jasper turned to see the wide eyes of his friend and the pinkening cheeks betraying a little anger.

“You’re frustrated with me.”

“Very!” Patrick said with vigor. “I have no wish to pretend you are not staring at a very particular lady across this room. I can see it as plain as day. What I can’t see is why you continue to stand here and not go to her.”

“It’s complicated,” Jasper muttered.

“Is it!?” Patrick was growing increasingly frustrated, his voice seething so much that Jasper couldn’t take his eyes off his friend. “As far as I can see, you have an attachment to a lady who is also attached to you. What is there possibly complicated about that?”

“Her suitor, for one thing.” Jasper gestured across the room to Lord Thorne. “For another... I can’t hurt her, Patrick.” The words seemed to take the wind out of his friend.

“What do you mean?”

“My mother wishes me to marry for reputation. I’ve told you this a hundred times.”

“You have.”

“If the news of Lettie is ever to break,” Jasper said, wincing with the words, “then if I was so fortunate as to marry Emma, I would drag her down with our family. How could I do that to her?” Silence followed, and Patrick slowly nodded in understanding.

“Does the lady know this?”

“I told her something of it.”

“Does she know *all* of it?” Patrick pressed. “Does she know you’d choose her if you felt free to do so?”

“I never said quite as much.” Jasper shook his head. In his drunkenness, he thought of their meeting on the bench. In his mind’s eye, he could imagine taking her hand and kissing it, confessing his feelings for her, but none of that had really happened.

“Then I’d say the lady deserves to know, wouldn’t you?” Patrick asked. Jasper reached behind him, going for the glass of wine another time, but Patrick took it before he could. “No more of this, or you won’t be able to walk in a straight line toward her.” He took the glass and walked away, leaving Jasper staring after him, wide-eyed.

This is madness!

Jasper’s eyes turned on Emma across the room, but she appeared to be leaving, heading for a door that led out of the ballroom.

Where is she going?

An opportunity presented itself, one that his addled mind thought an excellent idea, indeed. He had the chance to find her, to lay all bare for her so that she could know the truth of how he felt about her.

I will tell her all, as Patrick said, then I will say goodbye. She can marry a better man than I, like Lord Thorne, who would never drag her good name down.

Jasper stepped away from the drinks table and crossed the room, hurrying to catch up with Emma. What was strange was that as he reached the ballroom door and stepped out into the hallway, he swore he could see two shadows at the end of the corridor. One was Emma, and the other may have been Lord Thorne.

Why is she leaving the ballroom alone with him?



“Lord Thorne, I do not think this a good idea.” Emma felt her hand tightly clasped in the Baron’s, dragging her toward a door that led to the gardens. “Our hosts will be wondering where we are. We should return to the ballroom.”

“Are you not the one who said you longed for some air?” Lord Thorne said with ease and offered her a smile as he opened the garden door. “We will not be long.”

“It’s just—oh!” Her words were cut off as he pulled on her hand and tugged her outside. Emma stumbled out onto a gravel path, peering through the shadows to try and make out something of the gardens.

The path they were on seemed to lead away from the house, which was flooded with candlelight filtering out of the house’s windows. On either side of the path were box hedges leading to a formal knot garden. Lord Thorne seemed intent on dragging her toward these formal flower borders, where the candlelight grew thin and there was only the moonlight above to shine on them.

We have no chaperone. This is not a good thing.

“My Lord, we should return.” She tore her hand out of his grasp and spun on her heel, about to leave, when he took her elbow. It was a gentle touch, really, but the way he had taken her arm still unnerved her. Emma backed away from him, aware that he did not let go of her.

“We will not be here for long, I promise you.” He offered her another one of those charming smiles that left her cold.

What is wrong with me? Should I not take delight in such smiles? Why should I constantly compare him to the Duke?

The thought of the Duke of Waybridge made her shoulders slump and her stomach knot together. She had scarcely stopped thinking of him for the last two days and his resolution not to marry. She could not blame him for his reasoning. Once he had explained himself, she understood him better—he was trying to protect any lady that could be attached to him. Yet it did not make the situation any easier.

The fact remained that her heart belonged to him, but he would never be in a position to return that gift.

“My Lord,” Emma began again, realizing the precariousness of her situation with the Baron, “we have no chaperone. We really must return.”

“I must take the opportunity whilst it stands, Emma,” he said hurriedly, taking her hand and lifting it to his lips. She pulled back her hand, stopping him from kissing it just in time. “To speak to you alone is too good an opportunity to miss. My offer to you... it still stands, I hope you know that.”

“If we are to speak of marriage, My Lord, then I—”

“Of course, I wish to speak of marriage,” Lord Thorne said with a chuckle. “I have made my attentions plain, have I not?”

“Abundantly.” The jest she made seemed to pass Lord Thorne by though, who was unaware that she found it all too much. “Please, tonight is not the moment for this.” She had no wish to explain that she could hardly consider marriage to one man when her heart was bleeding because of another. It would have been dishonest to agree to marry Lord Thorne now. “Let us talk of this another time, in the future.”

“Why, when this moment is the perfect opportunity?” He gestured toward the garden around them. Emma could have sworn she heard someone moving in the garden. She looked to the side, trying to see if someone was there, but all was still, and she assumed it was in her imagination. “The beautiful garden, the moonlight and our isolation here. Is it not the perfect romantic setting?”

The word *isolation* set Emma’s teeth on edge. She didn’t want to be here anymore.

“Let us discuss this another time. I must insist we return to the ballroom.” She turned, ready to depart, but the Baron took her hand and swung her back so fast that she fell into him. “My Lord!” She pushed against him, trying to get away from him, but his hands had come up to cup the backs of her arms, holding her. “Release me.”

“One kiss, Emma. Please. Is it not the romantic moment for it?”

“No!” She shoved against him again, but he appeared not to hear her. With his eyes half-lidded, she saw for the first time how in his cups he was. That evening, she had seen him down more than one glass of wine, and that liquor must have

confused his good sense and propriety. "I said, let me go." She stepped on his foot without hesitation.

"Ow! Emma." He was shocked enough to release her for one moment. She jumped back, trying to get away, but she wasn't quick enough. He was there again, reaching for her and being stronger than her. He dragged her toward him, gripping her wrists so that she was forced to buckle against him. She couldn't fight him.

"No! Release me!" she demanded, trying to angle her head away from him, but he came closer still, his lips about to find her own.

"One kiss, Emma. That is all I ask."

"You ask too much of her." The deep voice tore between them. Emma knew that voice at once, for she had heard it so much in her mind as of late.

The Duke...

Emma suddenly felt another hand, yet this one was soft. He touched her shoulder, pulling her back a little from the Baron.

"Release her, now," the Duke demanded. Emma looked up to see him standing behind her, his expression dark in the moonlight and his features contorted in anger.

"Leave us. This is not your business," the Baron said dismissively.

“It is now.” The Duke lunged forward. Emma was barely aware of what he was doing until it happened. With one hand balled into a fist, he lashed out and struck the Baron on the nose.

Lord Thorne released her at once, but not out of choice. The hit had been so firm that it knocked him out. His eyes turned glazed, then he fell to his knees before them. As he swayed on his knees, the Duke took hold of one of her hands and pulled her back out of harm’s way, just before Lord Thorne fell on his face on the gravel bed out cold.

Silence followed, in which all that could be heard was Emma’s heavy breathing.

“Did he hurt you?” the Duke asked, breaking the silence.

“No.” She shook her head, certain that there may have been little bruises on her wrists, but that hardly bothered her. “You didn’t need to do that.” She turned away from the Duke.

Emma had no idea why she wanted to level her anger at the Duke at that moment. After all, she should have been grateful to him. He had saved her from an event she had not wanted to happen, but she was angry. The ire at Lord Thorne came out of her along with the disappointment that the Duke had no intention to marry. It all blended into one mass of fury that she directed at the Duke.

“Oh, truly?” the Duke asked wildly, following her as they took a few steps away. “Tell me, did you want to kiss Lord Thorne?”

“Of course not!” She spun back to face him. “But I could have stopped it. He would have listened to reason.”

“No, he would not.” The Duke swayed on his own feet.

“You’re drunk.”

“A little.” He held himself still. “Though clearly, not as in my cups as Lord Thorne here. If I hadn’t found you when I did, then God knows how far he would have forced that kiss.”

“I could have stopped him. I didn’t need help.” She turned away and marched in the direction of the house, but he stayed with her, never once leaving her tail.

“Yes, of course you didn’t. Could you have knocked the man out with one punch, Emma?”

The way he used her Christian name hurt her. How could he abandon such formality between them yet feel nothing for her?

“Enough.” She turned to face him, coming to such an abrupt stop that he stumbled on the gravel path. “Call me Lady Emma, *Lady*. I beg of you.” Something in his expression changed, something that expressed disappointment.

“I cannot.”

“Why not?”

“Because the title suggests you are a stranger to me, and you are anything but.”

“Then what am I to you?” Emma asked, stepping toward him, coming so close that the Duke had to angle his head to look down at her. “God knows, I think more of you than you do of me, plainly.”

“What does that mean?”

“You heard me. I do not need to repeat it.” She was about to back away from him when he moved toward her. His head movement was sudden but nothing like what Lord Thorne’s had been. Lord Thorne had grabbed her arms, preventing her from escaping, but the Duke did no such thing.

As his lips moved toward hers, he gave her every chance to escape. The only thing was, she did not wish to.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Jasper knew he was a fool for kissing Emma. Was he now not as bad as his enemy, Lord Thorne? He'd kissed her out here in the darkness when they were alone! Yet something had overtaken him at hearing her words, knowing that she cared for him. It had made him yearn to show her what she meant to him.

He was about to pull back when he grew aware of Emma kissing him back. Her lips moved against his own with just as much fierceness and passion. His mind could no longer think of a reason to stop, and he reached out toward her. His arms came up to rest on her waist as her hands found the tops of his arms. The way her fingers clung to him spurred him on, and he took liberties, pushing the kiss further.

It was nearly his undoing when Emma moaned a little into the kiss, showing her pleasure. Jasper would have happily stayed with her in the garden's dark shadows for hours, indulging in this stolen kiss.

"Emma!" The sharp voice was sudden and of such a feminine tone that both of them jerked back. Their hands were still on one another, but they stared at each other wide-eyed. "Emma!" a voice called again from across the distance of the garden. Footsteps followed on the gravel path, getting closer to them.

“You kissed me,” Emma whispered, still not entirely releasing him.

“I’ve wanted to for a long time,” he confessed, his voice so quiet that only she heard him.

“Emma, what is the meaning of this?” Judith was so close now that he and Emma had no choice but to release one another, stumbling away and increasing the distance between them. Judith grabbed her niece’s arm and looked her over in the moonlight as if to check if she was harmed.

“It’s not how it seems, Aunt Judith,” Emma said in a hurry, though her eyes were on Jasper alone, not her aunt. Jasper returned that look.

That kiss...

It had been so intense he wanted nothing more than to take Emma in his arms again, but that was now an impossible thing.

“How dare you take advantage of my niece?” Judith stepped in front of Emma, blocking his path to her.

“I am sorry for my impertinence, My Lady.” Jasper hurried to speak and found some sort of propriety in what he knew was an inappropriate situation, “Your niece is right, though. Not all is as it seems.”

“You mean my eyes deceived me, and I did not just spy you kissing my niece alone in this garden?” Judith asked, her eyebrows arching high.

“You know I cannot deny that.” Jasper’s eyes flicked to Emma, who was trying to walk around her aunt, but Judith moved in the way again. “This private meeting ends now. Emma, return to the ballroom at once.”

“Aunt Judith, I can explain.”

“No explanation you can offer would be good enough.” Judith pointed in the direction of the house. “Go, now, before anyone else comes out here to see what you have done. Your name would be ruined, Emma, *ruined!*” The vigor with which she said the word shook Jasper to his core.

What have I done?

He’d kissed a lady in the darkness, just as the Marquess of Hatfield had kissed his sister. He was as evil and just as bad, taking advantage of an innocent lady.

No, it is different. He was with Lettie for no reason other than to find a quick thrill. That kiss with Emma... meant so much more.

Emma avoided looking at him now, though. Clearly, the words had shaken her as much as they did him. She hurried toward the building, grasping her skirt in one hand and sprinting as quickly as possible, showing her ankle had healed much. The

glance she shot toward the garden told Jasper she was looking warily out for Lord Thorne.

“Your Grace, I cannot believe what I have just seen—” Judith turned back toward Jasper.

“Let me explain a little of what happened first,” Jasper cut her off.

“I do not need any explanation for such impropriety.”

“Nevertheless, you shall have it, for it involves more than your niece and I.” Jasper could see his words had captured Judith on this occasion. She stood staring at him with her arms folded, waiting for him to continue. “Lord Thorne persuaded your niece to come out here. I followed them and found him trying to force Emma to...” He faded off, watching as Judith’s lips parted in horror. “He was not taking no for an answer.”

“You intervened?” Judith asked.

“I did. The gentleman is quite knocked out now.” Jasper gestured in the direction of the garden where he’d left Lord Thorne, but one look that way showed something strange. Lord Thorne’s shadow was no longer prostrate on the ground. Jasper presumed he’d skulked off somewhere to the recesses of the garden, probably hanging his head and bruised nose in shame.

“You defend her honor and then ruin it at the same time?” Judith pointed out, making Jasper’s shoulders slump.

“I have no good explanation to offer other than the fact that what you saw passing between Emma and me was no forced thing.” Jasper felt in his gut that it had been a long time coming. All the flirtatious comments between him and Emma, all the long looks, they were bound to build to some release of this tension. “I would never do that to her.”

“Yet you would ruin her reputation regardless.” Judith stepped toward him, her tone sharp, “Listen to me, Your Grace, one would have to be blind to have not seen there is a connection between you and my niece, but I understand from your mother and from Emma herself that you have no intention to marry. None!”

Hearing the words said on another’s lips with derision did something to Jasper. He stood tall once again, refusing to be cowed.

“If that is the case, you will leave my niece alone. You will not marry her to remedy her good name, so who will?” Judith asked with her arms out wide. “We must pray no one other than myself saw anything of what happened out here tonight, or you will have destroyed her.” With those words, Judith backed up, heading toward the house.

“Lady Frampton, please—”

“Leave my niece alone from now on,” she ordered, shouting the words back to him. “I will not see you hurt her any more than you already have.”

Once Judith had disappeared into the house, Jasper turned and swiped out at the nearest tree, making the branches dance.

What have I done?



“Well, I’ll be damned,” Andrew said, standing at the window of the sitting room.

“What is it?” Judith asked, pacing in the room.

Emma was sat very still on the settee, barely having made any movement that morning as her family talked around her. Half the time, they spoke as if she was no longer there. Frances sat on one side of her, drawing in a notebook her plans for the garden. On her other side was Betty, who kept trying to continue her embroidery and failing.

Bernard sat across the room, unsettled, with his knee bobbing up and down. Andrew had stayed by the window, watching for any visitors.

Their chief topic of conversation had been the night before, where what had passed between Emma, Lord Thorne and the Duke of Waybridge had been laid bare for all to know by her aunt. At first, Emma resented her aunt for the reveal until she saw the sympathy on her family’s faces. Not one of them disapproved of her actions, as Judith did, but they worried for her.

“Andrew?” Judith said, catching Andrew’s attention, who was still staring out the window.

“It seems the man we have been speaking much of does not intend to stay away. On the contrary, he’s just arrived in his carriage.” Andrew gestured toward the window. His words prompted a sudden reaction.

Bernard, Betty and Frances all jumped to their feet and ran to the window, pressing their faces to the glass.

Emma swallowed with difficulty, her nerves so sudden that her palms were sweaty. All morning, Judith had spoken of the imperativeness to see Emma married first in case anyone heard of what had happened in the garden the night before. She had hardly expected the gentleman to turn up this morning and had thought he’d keep a wide berth.

The Duke is here?

At the thought, she recalled the kiss they had shared. Never had she thought such a kiss or such a thrill was possible. The passion had been exhilarating. That stolen moment together was something she wouldn’t forget, but it was over.

“He’s here?” Emma asked.

“He is, and sporting a rather bruised nose,” Andrew said with a laugh. “I’m pleased to see the Duke defended your honor to the Baron.” The words made Emma sit back, feeling her heart drop.

The Duke is not the one who has come to see me. It is Lord Thorne.

“I’ll tell this man where to go,” Bernard declared, stepping away from the window.

“Rug!” Emma called out, but it was too late. Bernard tripped on the edge of the rug. Fortunately, Frances and Judith were there on either side of him to keep him standing.

“You cannot send the man away,” Judith said in a hurry.

“Whyever not?” Bernard declared, gesturing toward Emma, “After what he tried to do!? She is my daughter, and I will protect her.”

“Then protect her now,” Judith’s voice was calm. “I do not like it any more than you do, but Emma must marry. You know that, just as I do. Let us hear what he has to say.”

Emma’s jaw dropped in horror at what was being suggested.

“If he proposes... you wish me to accept, Aunt Judith?” she asked, feeling her body begin to shake.

“It is something we must consider. No one else will ask you, will they?” she pointed out.

Emma brushed the thought of the Duke away. No matter what that kiss had felt like, he’d made himself abundantly clear in Hyde Park—he would not marry.

“We cannot have so many people in this room,” Judith said, gesturing toward the door that led to the drawing room. “We must all retreat in there.”

“I am not leaving my daughter.” Bernard refused to go, standing his ground. Emma smiled at her father at that moment, truly touched by his wish to protect her.

“I cannot leave you here to greet him. At the moment, you would sooner punch him than give him your blessing,” Judith argued.

“I see no problem with that,” Emma muttered, but no one appeared to hear her.

Moments later, everything was decided. They were all to retreat to the drawing room apart from Emma and Judith, who would greet Lord Thorne. Emma didn’t doubt that her family would be pressing their ears to the adjoining door, trying to listen to everything that would be said.

As Lord Thorne entered the room with such a purple bruise spreading across his nose that Emma had to hold her tongue. She was tempted to tell him that he deserved his injury, but she had a feeling she’d never hear the end of it from her aunt if she did.

“Lord Thorne.” Judith curtsied to Lord Thorne, followed by Emma. However, Judith’s tone was not as warm as in the past. “I take it you have come to make an apology to my niece?” Her sharp words made the Baron hung his head a little.

“You are right, My Lady. I owe her a great apology, indeed.” He moved toward Emma. On instinct, she backed away. That movement made him still his action. “Lady Emma... you must allow me to apologize for last night. I was not myself.”

“That is your excuse?” she asked, baffled. It wasn’t just the fact he’d tried to kiss her that bothered her so much, but the force with which he’d taken her hand and her arms, dragging her toward him. Had he not coerced her outside, too, and pressured her at every turn? It was hardly an impulse, but one that seemed to have been planned.

“It is my explanation, though I know there is no excuse.” He shook his head and stepped forward. This time, Emma stayed where she was, for she could see Judith’s eyes widening behind the Baron, urging her to be still. “I drank too much. It is the weakness of man sometimes, and it was certainly my weakness last night. I was enjoying your company, and it led to too much liquor. That liquor... well, you saw the result of what it did.”

The intent was there, I’m sure. The liquor just made it easier for you to execute your plan.

Emma didn’t accept the excuse. It was not enough.

“I cannot apologize enough for what I did, but I hope to make amends to you.” He reached toward her and offered his hand, though this time, he did not force her to take it. He merely waited patiently. “I have not covered myself in glory, but I wish you to know the earnestness of my respect and admiration for you. If you will forgive a fool who was carried away with that admiration last night, I’d like to offer my hand to you. Will you marry me, Lady Emma?”

Emma stared at him, her body was as still as a statue. He'd talked of admiration but not love, and knowing where her heart resided now and exactly which man she did love, she realized she could never marry another.

I'd rather be alone and be cast a spinster than marry the wrong man, especially a man like Lord Thorne.

“I know at times like this, a lady is supposed to act out of obligation to her family and her name,” Emma addressed the words as much to her aunt as she did Lord Thorne. Judith could clearly sense what was coming, for she lifted a hand to her face and pinched her brow in frustration. “Yet, I am afraid I cannot. I refuse your proposal, Lord Thorne. I cannot marry you.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Emma muttered, pacing the garden with her hands on her hips.

“I can’t believe he’s still here,” Andrew said from nearby, sitting on a marble bench. Beside him was Betty. The two of them were mirroring each other in stance, both with their arms folded and their heads tilted toward Emma. “You would have thought that after being refused, the Baron would have fled with his tail between his legs, as they say, but no. He’s persistent, I’ll give him that.”

“I think you mean stubborn.” Emma paced the other way, walking past the flowerbeds and barely taking note of what changes her mother had made recently to the garden, for her mind was taken up with other things. She kept glancing toward the house, where the Baron was now talking with her parents and her aunt. He was insisting that Emma change her mind. “What do you think our parents will say?”

“I would have thought that the more pertinent question would be, what will our aunt say?” Betty pointed out. “She can encourage our parents to say what she likes, most days.”

“I don’t think it’s that bad,” Andrew protested, though one look from Betty made his spine slump, and he gave up the argument. “I must admit I’m a little surprised, Emma.”

“Surprised? By what?” she asked.

“Your refusal.” Andrew’s words made her freeze, turning to face him with wide eyes. “Don’t look at me like that. I would never want you to marry a man you could not abide by. Still, our aunt has a point in that if anyone hears of what passed last night... the safest place for you would be to marry before any gossip can harm you.”

“This is absurd.” Emma turned away and covered her face. “Can you truly not see why I refused him?”

“I can.” Betty’s words startled her so much that Emma cricked her neck, turning to face her. “Don’t look so shocked, Sister.”

“It is just that I always thought you were quite fond of Lord Thorne.”

“Fond, certainly. He’s a handsome man,” Betty said with a small smile that quickly faded. “Yet, could I ever blame you for turning him down? Not in the slightest. Especially when we all know that your heart lies elsewhere.”

They did not mention the Duke by name. Emma just returned to her pacing as Andrew shook his head, muttering about what a hopeless situation they found themselves in.

“This is unbearable,” Emma said to herself, pacing so fast that she frequently tripped on her hem, though she hardly cared. She supposed Judith would have scolded her for doing something so unladylike, but at this time, all her lessons seemed pointless. Where had they gotten her? Catching the eye of a man she did not care for! A man who would try to force a kiss rather than ask for one.

The mere thought of marrying Lord Thorne made Emma so sick that she rubbed a hand on her stomach, fearful of what would happen. Whenever she thought of another man, like the Duke of Waybridge, her heart would flutter and that sweatiness to her palms would return.

That is hopeless. It was one kiss, but he has never offered anything more, nor would he. He has said he will never marry.

“It looks like their meeting with him must have finished.” Betty’s words urged Emma to look at the house. From the door, Frances, Bernard and Judith hurried forth, all arguing amongst themselves. Bernard tripped and fell into one of the flowerbeds. However, he recovered quickly enough as Judith marched ahead, her formal manner shaken today due to the redness of her cheeks.

“Do you think they have come to have a peaceful discussion?” Andrew said in jest, to which Emma just shot him a dark glare. “Not able to smile at all today, Sister?”

“Remind me to ask you that when you have as bad a day as I’m having.”

“I pray I never will.”

They were forced to fall silent as their parents and their aunt met them. Frances was rubbing her hands together, unable to settle, whilst Judith stood tall, turning her focus on Emma.

“Emma, you must marry him.” Judith’s words were met with silence even as Bernard shook his head and turned in a frantic circle. Emma could suddenly see where she had inherited her tendency to pace.

“I beg your pardon?” Emma spluttered.

“You must marry him. I know it’s not ideal,” Judith said, holding her hands in defense, but Emma did not let her continue.

“Ideal? Ideal! Is that all you can say?” Emma stepped toward her aunt. “He tried to force me to kiss him last night. He took me outside when I did not want to go. What sort of man does that?”

“I can think of a few words to describe a man like that,” Andrew said under his breath. “Though I reckon my aunt will tell me off for my colorful language.”

“Utter them for all I care,” Bernard encouraged, “I’m sure I’ll agree with you.”

“Exactly.” Emma looked between her brother and father. “Would you really wish me to marry a man so underhanded in intent? What if I were to marry him and he tried to do such things again?”

“Or something worse,” Frances spoke for the first time. Her words made Bernard turn away, cursing under his breath. “No... I cannot bear thinking about it.”

“Thank you, Mother.” Emma’s tone turned soft, not wanting her mother to lament such a possibility and make herself miserable. “You cannot ask me to marry such a man, Aunt Judith.”

“Then this family is ruined,” Judith murmured, holding out her hands, losing hope.

“What did you say?” Emma froze, her spine jerking.

“Your *suitor*,” Bernard said the word with derision, “has just made his intent quite plain. He demands we give our blessing to the union, or he will tell the scandal sheets what he saw last night.” The words made Emma’s mouth turn dry.

“He saw you and the Duke,” Judith spoke slowly. “All of London will know of the scandal if you do not wed Lord Thorne.”

Emma began to walk backward, somehow hoping she could distance herself from the situation. When her legs collided with the bench, she found Andrew and Betty had made a space for her, a space she now fell into. Betty reached for her hand, and Andrew wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

It’s not enough to protect me now.

“What a man. What a foul devil!” Bernard seethed, cursing so loudly that they all flinched. “He even dares to demand your dowry be doubled.”

“What?” Emma murmured in horror.

“He called you damaged goods,” Judith explained, “because of what happened with the Duke. He agrees to wed you to save your reputation, but it’s to save it from himself, as he is the one who would spread the rumors and destroy your reputation.”

“Double the dowry?” Emma couldn’t move past the idea. If such a thing were to happen, then there could be little left for Betty’s dowry.

He wants the money, does he not?

“If you don’t marry him, Emma,” Judith went on, walking toward the bench, “this family’s name will be dragged through the mud.”

There was a tightening around Emma’s throat, and tears sprung to her eyes. Betty must have sensed it, for she squeezed Emma’s hand tightly.

“I will not see my daughter marry such a devil,” Bernard insisted.

“Then what else do you suggest we do?” Judith asked, rounding on him.

“Can you seriously condone this marriage, Judith?” Frances’ words were softer. It was that gentleness that seemed to break through the heat of the argument between Bernard and Judith. “Can you accept her marrying such a man as he?”

Judith didn’t answer at first. She stood silently, staring back at her sister.

“The best portion of a good man’s life is his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love.” Bernard’s words drew all of their attention. “William Wordsworth said that. A quote for a man to live his life by, don’t you think? I cannot imagine Lord Thorne abiding by such a rule, can you?”

“It is not the time for poetry, Bernard,” Judith dismissed him.

“Then speak plainly, Sister.” Frances showed her first sharpness. It shocked Emma so much that she stared at her mother wide-eyed. “Would you send my daughter to marry a devil?”

“If I could think of another way, then no, of course I wouldn’t,” Judith answered in a rush, turning to face Emma. “You turned him down, Emma, and ordinarily, I would respect that more than anything, but this is now about the family’s name, not just your situation.”

“What do you suggest we do?” Emma asked.

Judith held herself still, her eyes the only things that moved, darting from side to side, before an idea clearly appeared to her, and her chin tilted upward.

“We must buy ourselves some time. For now, we will tell Lord Thorne we will think his offer over. In the meantime, we must think of a plan to stop the marriage from happening.”



“God damn it.” Jasper pulled the trigger of the shotgun, but he missed once again. Not only did he miss the pheasant, but he missed it by a good distance. At his side, Frankie whimpered and ran off, finding someone else to stand behind.

“You’re scaring your dog.” Patrick reached down to pet the animal at his side. “You’re scaring me a little too.”

“I can’t hit anything today,” Jasper muttered and unlocked the shotgun, making the spent cartridges fly out onto the ground.

“Something tells me your mind is on other things besides shooting,” Patrick pointed out.

“Of course it is.” Jasper reloaded the shotgun and turned to face the tree line just as the beaters urged more pheasants into the sky. He fired again but missed just the same as before. “Ah!”

“I think it’s time we stopped shooting for a while.” Patrick stepped forward and took the gun out of Jasper’s hand.

“Why?”

“Because you have a visitor.” Patrick pointed across the estate grounds. Jasper turned, half expecting to see his mother walking his way, just as she had done the last time he had gone shooting with Patrick, but the carriage that stopped on his drive was unfamiliar to him, and the face that descended made his blood run cold.

“That man... he dares to come here?”

It was Lord Thorne.

That morning, Jasper had told Patrick everything that happened the night before, knowing he could trust his friend with his secrets. Patrick had tried to comfort him and asked him to come shooting for a distraction, but it hadn't worked.

“What will you do?” Patrick asked then looked down at the two guns in his hand. “Is it a good job I took this off you?”

“I'm not that bad,” Jasper objected as he walked in the direction of the drive.

“Tell that to the gentleman's bruised nose.”

Jasper had no more defense to offer. As far as he was concerned, Lord Thorne had deserved that injury.

“I’ll be back shortly,” Jasper called to his friend, not intending to waste much time with the Baron. He crossed to the drive, with Frankie on his heels, clearly unwilling to let Jasper go alone. Jasper briefly reached down and petted the greyhound’s head before stopping at the edge of his drive.

Lord Thorne turned to meet him. Although he didn’t bow in greeting, he merely bobbed his head.

“I received no note you wished to visit,” Jasper said coldly, not inclined to show any kindness to this man now, not after how he had treated Emma.

“It was an imperative meeting.” Lord Thorne stepped forward. Today, Frankie didn’t growl but moved to stand behind Jasper almost fearfully. “If I could prove what you did last night, I would go to a constable.”

“You mean for this?” Jasper gestured toward Lord Thorne’s nose. “Tell a constable, and I will report your attempted force of a lady. I could have done much worse, My Lord.” The threat hung in the air between them, making Lord Thorne shift his weight between his feet. “Why have you come here today? Just to make empty threats about going to a constable?”

“No, I came to make my intentions clear.” Lord Thorne stood tall and cleared his throat as if preparing himself for a rehearsed speech. “I have asked Lady Emma to marry me.”

“I doubt she’d say yes after what passed between you last night.”

“She has no choice.” The words made Jasper fall silent, and he stared at Lord Thorne. There was a victory in the man’s expression that was emphasized by the smile that curled his thin lips. “I have made plain the lady’s situation, especially after her transgression with you last night.” He tutted and shook his head. “If anyone were to hear of it...”

“You wouldn’t dare speak of it,” Jasper said, stepping forward.

“I would not need to say anything to the ton. The scandal sheets could do that.” Lord Thorne continued to smile. “Lady Emma is aware of her situation. I can offer her marriage and a good name. She will accept.”

Jasper felt his hands ball into fists, but he held himself back from hurting Lord Thorne again.

“She will accept.” That means she hasn’t yet!

“Why are you here?” Jasper asked, watching Lord Thorne closely. It seemed to him that the Baron had come just to crow about his victory, but clearly, he couldn’t if Emma hadn’t actually said ‘yes’ at this moment in time.

“To warn you to stay away from Lady Emma.” Lord Thorne stepped toward Jasper again. This time, Frankie growled from where he stood behind Jasper. “That dog... he’s not very friendly, is he?”

“He is just a good judge of character.” Jasper petted Frankie’s head regardless. He didn’t need his dog attacking Lord

Thorne, for it could make matters much worse. “Why would I stay away from her just because you ask it of me?”

“Because, as I said, I saw what happened between you last night.” The Baron’s smile grew wider, even wider than Jasper had thought possible. “Go near her house, and I’ll report what I saw and *another story* to the scandal sheets.” He stepped back, looking thoroughly triumphant. “I hear your sister spends much of her time in the countryside these days. Would that have anything to do with what happened between her and the Marquess of Hatfield?”

Jasper’s body turned cold as he stared at the Baron. Clearly, the man knew of it all.

“The Marquess is a friend of mine. He told me of her rather... persistent ways,” he said, leadingly. “What a shame it would be for the scandal sheets to hear of it.”

“You’re threatening me twice over.”

“So good of you to sum it up so succinctly. Stay away from Lady Emma, Your Grace. Is that understood?”

Jasper said nothing, though he nodded, unsure what else he could do. As the Baron retreated to the carriage and rode away, Jasper felt such anger coursing through his body that Frankie barked beside him, clearly sensing it.

Somehow, I have to see Emma.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“She’s here, Jasper.”

At his mother’s words, Jasper hurried toward the door, flinging it wide. He’d stayed true to his word to Lord Thorne, not going to Emma’s house, but he’d said nothing about Emma not coming to his own manor. The meeting had been arranged between his mother and Judith. They were coming for a secret tea in a carriage that was not their own.

As Judith and Emma descended the carriage, Jasper’s eyes shot to Emma. He longed to speak of what passed between them at the ball and that kiss, but such things were impossible now. She looked at him briefly, her cheeks turning pink, but her aunt took her arm and led her toward the house, and that look vanished.

“Lady Frampton.” Marianne appeared at Jasper’s side to welcome them. “Lady Emma. Please, both come this way. I have instructed the servants to leave us alone for our tea so that we may talk in private of what is occurring.”

“Thank you,” Judith said, never releasing her niece’s arm as she led her into their sitting room.

Jasper followed and hurried to take his seat beside Emma, noting that no matter how many times he looked at her, she refused to look at him.

“First, let us agree to speak without art or secret in this room,” Marianne said as she poured tea for the four of them. Jasper recognized the business-like tone as the same one she had adopted after Lettie was drawn into scandal. Clearly, she was trying to avoid another. “Is what my son said correct? Has Lord Thorne threatened to reveal what passed between you two if you do not marry him, Lady Emma?”

“It is true,” Emma answered swiftly and reached for her teacup. “My aunt says I have no choice but to accept.”

“I am trying to think of a way that she can say no,” Judith rushed to explain herself better. “I understand from your letter, Your Grace, that you have a plan?”

All eyes turned to Jasper.

“I have a thought, yes, something that may help us.” Jasper had barely slept all night thinking of the position Emma found herself in. He couldn’t leave her to this future, that was plain. The mere thought of seeing Emma marry Lord Thorne angered him more than he could say. In the end, he had abandoned sleep altogether and paced the corridors of his house before coming to a harsh realization of why he could not let Emma go.

I’m in love with her.

“What, though?” Emma encouraged him. Rather than looking him in the eye, she looked in his direction. It made the sadness bloom within.

“He threatens us with revealing scandals. We must level the odds,” he explained slowly. “The only thing that would make him abandon his goal would be to make a threat of our own.”

“I hope you are not talking about black noses or bruises, Your Grace,” Judith said, her tone a little proud.

“As tempting as it is, no, I am not.” Jasper sat forward. “Lord Thorne must have a scandal of his own. I scarcely know anyone in the ton who is not working to hide a secret.” These words clearly caught Emma’s interest, for she, at last, looked him in the eye.

“You think it possible?”

“I do.” Before Jasper could go on, his mother took up the thread of the conversation.

“If we are to protect ourselves, we must find out what skeletons Lord Thorne is hiding in his closet,” Marianne said, now serving up slices of cake that all remained untouched on their plates. “It will not be easy, and it may take a few days, but conversations and questions asked to the right parties could yield a lot.”

“Yes, I see what you mean.” Judith leaned forward, clearly taken up by the idea. “If we can find the right secret and

threaten to reveal that too, he would leave us alone and not give any story to the scandal sheets himself.”

“Precisely,” Marianne said with vigor. “I will talk to friends I know and staff, too, for the staff can hear secrets in houses that the ton never does hear.”

“I can do the same,” Judith said, at last digging into her cake. “Emma? Is this not good news? You may yet escape Lord Thorne.”

Emma did not look convinced. She stared at the cake, not reaching for her fork to touch it.

“We are placing hope on what could be an imaginary scandal. What if he has no scandal?” she whispered softly.

“Then we’ll think of something else.” Jasper had deepened his words. Her head angled toward him a little as if drawn to that voice, but she didn’t lift her eyes to meet his.

“What must I do in the meantime?”

“We must not alert his attention to our task,” Marianne explained. “The more comfortable you can make him feel, persuade him to believe his plan has worked, the better.”

“Yes, that is wise,” Judith agreed. “For now, Emma, we must tell Lord Thorne you accept his offer of marriage, but we will persuade him not to make it public for a few days. That should keep him happy and give us the time to unearth his secrets.”

“I pray he has one, or I will have agreed to marry this man and would have to go through with it.” She lifted her teacup to her lips and took a hefty gulp.

I will not let that happen.

Marianne and Judith began to make a plan of just whom to talk with in order to discover Lord Thorne’s secrets, but Jasper and Emma stayed quiet.

Before she leaves, I must talk to her alone.



“Oh my,” Emma breathed out as she approached the aviary. She had left the strange afternoon tea behind, claiming she needed a walk to clear her thoughts, when she found herself coming upon the aviary that the Duke had told her so much about. Set within the formal garden, it was far away from the house in its own separate courtyard.

At one end of the courtyard was a tall fountain made of stone birds on which water flooded off their wings and pooled below them in a chamber. At the end, where Emma stood, an aviary the size of a cottage stretched out in front of her.

The bird chirrups and tweets were constant, and the flashes of color that appeared before her eyes were dazzling. She saw such birds she had never seen before that she was in awe, her lips parted.

It was a welcome distraction when she was so downhearted.

“Do you like it?” The sudden question startled her. Emma turned to see the Duke approaching her, having appeared from a different end of the courtyard.

“How could anyone not like it?” she asked, turning away from him quickly to face the aviary. She found she could not look at him for long. Each time she did, she thought of that kiss then reminded herself that such a moment could never be relived. “It’s beautiful. What’s this bird here?” She pointed toward a small bird on a tree nestled within the aviary. It had a shock of yellow feathers on its belly and a dark blue cap on its head.

“It has a rather wonderful name,” the Duke explained, moving to her side. When he came so close that his arm brushed hers, she felt her breath hitch at the touch. “It’s a blue-crowned laughing thrush.”

“Really?” she asked, her eyes wide as a second thrush joined the first. The two sat beside one another, pecking at each other, cleaning one another of dirt. “What a name.”

“It’s the way they sing. Listen.” He held up a hand just as the bird began to titter. “It sounds like they are laughing.”

“It does.” Emma pressed her face to the grate of the aviary, trying to have a better look at the birds. “I can imagine this is a good place to escape your woes at times.”

“Then let me offer it for you to use.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a key before moving to the center of the

aviary. He placed the key in the lock and let himself inside, revealing a small chamber before the main aviary to stop birds from escaping. “Would you like to see, Emma?” She found impossible to resist his extended hand to her.

Placing her hand in his, a tremor passed up her arm, one of warmth and tenderness, as she followed him into the aviary. Once inside, the sounds of the birds filled the air around her. Stepping between the trees, she was careful not to stand on any birds that may have been on the ground.

All at once, Emma was surrounded by birds. There were laughing thrushes and other birds streaked with just as many colors, blue, red and gold. Some birds were small and darted between the branches. Others were bigger and walked about on the ground, passing Emma’s legs.

For the first time in two days, Emma felt a small smile appear on her lips.

“It’s quite magical,” she said softly, hardly aware of where the Duke was now. When he reached her side and brushed her arm again, she flinched and, this time, increased the space between them.

“You jump when I touch you,” he whispered, his voice deep.

“We have no chaperone.”

“No, I suppose we don’t.” The Duke sighed deeply. “Yet you know you’re always safe with me, Emma, don’t you?” He looked at her with wide eyes, clearly desperate for her answer.

“I know that,” she said hurriedly. The kiss they had shared had been startlingly different from the one Lord Thorne had tried to force on her. “It is more that I do not trust myself, Your Grace. It has nothing to do with you.” She walked around the nearest tree, following a small bird that darted up and down a tree the way a tree creeper would, with a bright red flash across its feathers.

“Emma, you were not the only one in that kiss.” He rounded the tree, coming to face her. “I kissed you just as much as you kissed me.”

The truth of it made her heart thud harder. She wanted nothing more than to agree with him, but her situation wouldn’t allow her to. Declaring feelings for the Duke would be dangerous when he would never marry.

“Please, stop talking like this,” she whispered, tearing her eyes away from the birds.

“Why?”

“Because you have said you will never wed.” Her words were firm, so strong that he hung his head a little. The birds grew quiet overhead as if they could somehow sense the seriousness of the conversation. “You clearly know not the power you have over my heart,” she confessed, unafraid to speak of her feelings now when there was only one thing she could do. She had to beg him to stop this.

“Power?” he repeated.

“More power than I wish to speak of,” she whispered. “But it must come to an end. If you do not intend to marry, I place hope on a man who can never look at me as I do him. If you feel anything for me, as your kiss suggested you did, you will stop confusing me so much.”

“Emma, please, listen to me.” He moved toward her, but once again, she escaped him. She rounded the tree and followed another bird. This one had such a bright white coloring that the sunlight glowed off its feathers. “Emma?” The Duke followed her, meeting her around another tree. “You think I do not care for you?” he asked, his brow furrowed deeper than she could ever remember it being before. “How can you be in doubt of what I feel after last night?”

“It was a kiss. Something fleeting.” She shook her head.

“Then allow me to make my intentions clear so there is no more confusion between us.” He stepped past the tree trunk, ignoring the white parrot that squawked at his side. “Marry me, Emma.”

She blinked, certain she’d heard him wrong.

“What did you say?”

“Marry Emma,” The parrot repeated the words.

“Did the bird say that?” she muttered in amazement.

“Parrots can learn words,” the Duke said hurriedly with an amused smile, just as the parrot said it again.

“Marry Emma.”

The Duke laughed and turned to face Emma, but she could not smile.

“You said you’d never marry.”

“I didn’t say that exactly.”

“No, you did.” Emma stood tall. “You said you would not marry for fear of what it would mean, marrying for convenience.” She closed her eyes, realizing a second later what he was doing. “Oh, good Lord! You are asking me to marry you to save my reputation?”

“That is not what I said.”

“But it is your intention at this moment, isn’t it?” She backed away from him, hurrying back to the aviary door.

“Emma, please, allow me to explain myself.” He followed her to the door, where she turned to face him.

“Please, do not go on anymore.” Emma waved her hands at him. “Your Grace, I cannot deny what I feel for you...” She stopped short of telling him she loved him, scared to utter those words aloud. “Yet, I would never accept an offer of

marriage just to save my reputation. Just as you said you could not hurt a lady for marrying for convenience, I would not hurt you either when you ask for that same reason.”

“You do not believe me.” He stepped back, a baffled look taking over his expression. Something in her manner must have made him give up, for he laughed a little and shook his head. “This is not the right moment for this conversation, is it?”

“Your Grace, please—”

“My name is Jasper,” he whispered and stepped toward her, reaching for her hand. It was the gentlest of touches, just him brushing the back of his hand against her own. Nevertheless, it sent a spark of excitement through her. “You can call me that, not ‘Your Grace.’”

“But...” Her voice was weak with how close he had come.

“If you do not believe me now, then I will wait,” he said with strength in his voice. “I will wait until you are free of scandal, free of Lord Thorne, then maybe when I ask you to marry me, you will see that I ask with my heart alone and for no other reason.”

Emma wanted to believe him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“We will be rid of him, we will,” Jasper muttered as he jumped down from the carriage. The rain was pouring heavily today, and it soaked his frock coat in seconds, running off his top hat as he ran toward the house. He strode up the steps to the front door and opened it wide, hurrying into the dry.

Jasper kept cursing under his breath every time he thought of Lord Thorne. For two days now, he had not seen Emma, and all he longed to do was go to her house and see her. The thought of what had passed between them in the aviary gave him hope and pain. She had not believed his intent when he'd asked her to marry him, and that was the hardest thing, but he could hardly blame her for that suspicion, not when he had as good as told her himself that he had no wish to marry.

How could I not ask Emma to marry me now? I love her!

It was the realization that she could be out of reach for good, married to a man like Lord Thorne who did not deserve her, that had shaken him into the realization of what he wanted. He longed to marry Emma, for the two of them to be together, without a need to part and say goodbye at the end of the day.

Now, he had to prove to Emma that he loved her.

“Well? Have you heard anything?” Marianne asked as Jasper strode into the house, shaking out his frock coat to shed some of the raindrops. His mother appeared in a doorway nearby, her expression quite bereft.

“No. I take it you have not either?” he asked, gesturing toward her expression.

“I have asked around, and my lady’s maid has certainly been privy to gossip from other households, but all I have learned, though it tells me more about the Baron, tells me little of scandal.”

“What have you learned?” Jasper asked with interest. He took off his coat and laid it on a nearby coat stand before following his mother into the sitting room.

“It seems a maid at the Baron’s house used to complain about the arguments she overheard between the Baron and his mother. I understand she has high expectations of her son,” Marianne explained, taking a seat and sitting forward restlessly. “She expects him to marry well, make a good name for himself, and so on.”

“Yes, it sounds familiar,” Jasper said as he moved to the fireplace and tossed a log into the fire. The heavy rain outside made it seem like spring was not there at all. The sudden warmth in the room helped a little, if not a lot. “It doesn’t help us though, does it?”

“No.” Marianne shook her head and sat back in her chair just as the clock chimed. Jasper shot a look to the timepiece, for he had one further plan he had enacted. Any minute now, someone was to turn up at his door to show if the plan had produced any results.

As if on cue, there was a knock at the door.

“Who is that?” Marianne asked, sitting forward.

Jasper hurried out of the room and practically ran to the door, with his mother beside him. Flinging open the door, he found two gentlemen there, both sodden and trying to shake some water off their clothes. Patrick was one of them, and the other Jasper did not recognize.

“Mr. Taylor?” Jasper asked, addressing this stranger.

“Aye, Your Grace, that is me.” He bowed deeply. “I understand from your friend here that you wished to hear the results of my investigation this evening.”

“If you have anything to share, that is, yes, please come in.” Jasper beckoned them inside. He grasped Patrick’s shoulder and squeezed it in thanks, to which Patrick smiled. “Thank you for this.”

“You were in need of help. You wouldn’t find me anywhere else at this moment.”

Jasper clapped him on the shoulder before leading the way back to the sitting room. Marianne fussed around them, confused but curtsying to their guests, nevertheless.

“Mother, this is Mr. Taylor. At my bequest, Patrick has been so good as to engage Mr. Taylor’s services for us these last couple of days. He is a private investigator.” At Jasper’s explanation, Marianne sat down hurriedly.

“Oh, I see.” Her smile began to grow. “May we hope it is good news then, Mr. Taylor?”

“I believe I have something for you, Your Grace.” He nodded and turned his focus on Jasper. “My investigation into Baron Thorne has led to many different directions these last couple of days, but what is quite certain to me now is the extent of the gentleman’s debts.”

“Debts? What sort of debts?” Jasper asked in surprise. “The man is a baron, he has an estate and a large fortune.”

“No, he doesn’t.” Mr. Taylor shook his head. “He has gambled away most of his fortune in the attempt to make more money but has lost it all. He’s barely holding onto his estate. He has debts in nearly every gambling hall in town. If all I’ve heard is correct, the gentleman is simply a couple of weeks away from being taken to debtors’ prison.”

“Oh... that is why he did it,” Jasper muttered, stepping back and thinking of the night Lord Thorne had tried to kiss Emma. It was just possible that Lord Thorne wished to be caught kissing Emma so they would be forced to marry by her family.

Using a special license, they could marry within a few days, and her dowry would be his.

“That is why he’s asking for her dowry to be doubled,” Marianne said, turning to Jasper. “Goodness, he only wishes for her money.”

“That he does. Emma must be told.”



“Are you sure that now is the time, Jasper?” Patrick asked, hurrying at his side as they strode into the assembly rooms.

“Lord Thorne has forbidden me from going to Emma’s house. If he has someone watching the house, then I cannot take the risk. Here, at a public event, I can take a chance.” Jasper gestured toward the assembly rooms as they strode in through the door. Both he and Patrick shed their frock coats before making their way through the candlelit rooms, searching the faces of the ladies and gentlemen that wandered the corridors.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” Patrick whispered in Jasper’s ear as he searched for Emma, “will Lettie be coming back to London at any point?” The question made Jasper pause and look at his friend with something of an amused grin. “What?” Patrick asked with innocence.

“Perhaps I should take you to see her. It might please you both.”

“What does that mean?” Patrick persisted with his appearance of innocence.

“Enough of this, Patrick. You ask so much about my sister that you either have a strong affection for my family or for Lettie herself.” Jasper watched as Patrick stepped back a little, struggling for words.

“I... well...”

“Another time, Patrick. If you fear my disapproval, please notice I just offered to take you to see her.” Patrick was baffled as Jasper stepped away. Another time, he would bring Patrick to see Lettie, and perhaps, at last, they would have a chance to talk after Lettie’s scandal, but for now, Jasper had another lady to help.

When he eventually spied Emma across the room, he stumbled, shocked by how she had hidden in the corner. She did not want to be seen and stood behind her sister and brother. Dressed in a pale blue gown, she fiddled with it constantly, reminding him of the Emma he’d first met. The latter was not so concerned about appearing with perfect propriety.

“Jasper, again,” Patrick said as he caught up to him, “is this the right moment? What if Lord Thorne sees you?”

“I cannot see him here yet, can you?” Jasper asked. “Emma must know of what we learned. Please, Patrick, keep a look out for Lord Thorne, and try to warn me if you see him.”

“Very well.” Patrick nodded, and Jasper hurried off to Emma’s side.

At once, Betty stepped aside, allowing Jasper through, though Andrew was not so quick to stand aside, a little protective of his sister.

“I hope you’ve come with good reason,” he muttered for Jasper’s ears only.

“With the best of reasons,” Jasper assured him. “I wish to help Emma.” The way he didn’t use her title clearly caught Andrew’s interest, but he let Jasper pass still.

“Why are you here?” Emma whispered in panic, stepping toward him. “If you are seen beside me...”

“Lord Thorne is not here yet, and there is something you must know.” Jasper revealed all to her, how he had hired the private investigator and what they had discovered about Lord Thorne’s financial woes. “He needs money, Emma.”

“Oh, my goodness.” Emma laughed a little as if she thought herself a fool. “No wonder he was always so forward in his charm and compliments, for he meant none of them. He was only ever after the dowry, wasn’t he?”

“It’s a possibility,” Jasper said, to which Emma shook her head.

“Oh, I was blind,” she said in anger at herself. “You would think I would have seen his falseness at once, but I did not.”

“He is a convincing actor, it must be said,” Jasper explained. “As for a gentleman showing affection for you, that I could easily believe, could I not?” his question was a leading one, but she narrowed her eyes at him a little.

“Don’t tease me, Your Grace.”

“I do not tease you.” His words had deepened. This time, she didn’t object.

“What good does this news do us though?”

“I am not sure.” Jasper sighed. “Even if I offer to pay his debts, he could still release the stories to the scandal sheets afterward.”

“You should not pay his debts. That would be unfair!”

“Then what else can I do?” Jasper asked, staring at her.

“Look lively, people, you’ve been caught.” Andrew’s words were so sudden that Jasper and Emma stood back from one another, angling their heads away.

Lord Thorne had appeared on the other side of the assembly room. Though Patrick clearly tried to distract him, drawing his attention away, he failed. Lord Thorne’s eyes were on Jasper and Emma. He strode past Patrick and marched across the room.

When he got near Jasper, Andrew moved in the way.

“Step out of my way,” Lord Thorne growled.

“Out of fear of violence, for you look ready to lash out at the Duke, I will not,” Andrew argued.

Jasper had never seen the Baron so angry. He seethed, his cheeks and chin blushing a deep red and his breathing so heavy that his nostrils practically flared.

“Fine, then we’ll see violence another day.” Lord Thorne did not step back as his eyes turned to Jasper. “I have had enough of your attentions to my betrothed,” he spat the words in Jasper’s direction.

Jasper felt his breath catch in his throat. He knew Emma had agreed to marry Lord Thorne for the pretense, but it still hurt to hear Lord Thorne call her his ‘betrothed.’

“I challenge you to a duel,” Lord Thorne uttered the words clearly. At once, Andrew begged him to rescind the demand. They were attracting attention now, with Patrick and others looking their way, all clearly trying to listen in.

“When?” Jasper asked.

“Your Grace, no,” Emma pleaded at his side. “You cannot do this.”

“He’s threatened my honor now. To refuse would be a disgrace.” There was more to it for Jasper, though. He couldn’t let this man who only wanted Emma’s money get away with marrying her. “I accept the challenge.”

“Dawn, two days’ time. At the ridge at the back of Hyde Park.” Lord Thorne gritted out.

“I’ll be there.”

“Step away, Lord Thorne, now.” Andrew’s order was this time heeded. Lord Thorne was marched away by Emma’s brother, and he didn’t once let up. The whole assembly room was suddenly alive with whispers. Those that had overheard the challenge passed it on, whilst others across the room who had not been privy to the words simply pointed at Andrew’s and Lord Thorne’s exit with wonder.

“What have you done?” Emma suddenly pulled on Jasper’s arm, turning his attention toward her. “You cannot fight him. Please, you cannot.”

“I must.” Jasper felt strangely calm. “Once a challenge has been issued, it is cowardice to refuse.”

“Then be a coward for all I care. I’d rather you live!” Emma looked so desperate and pulled at his arm so much that he felt her care for him at that moment. Subtly, he took her hand from his arm and entwined their fingers together, then he hid their hands behind their bodies so that no one in the room could see them.

“I won’t die at his hands, Emma,” Jasper spoke gently, hoping to reassure her, but she was frantic and could not stand still. “I’m a good shot.”

“You do not have to do this.”

“What happens then?” Jasper asked with a shrug. “He could release my own scandal to the scandal sheets tomorrow, ruin my family’s name, and marry you anyway, claiming your money. I cannot let any of that happen.”

“This scandal...” Emma whispered, “you spoke of it before. What exactly happened?”

“I will tell you all about it soon. Suffice it to say, it’s not quite my own. It belongs to my sister and the Marquess of Hatfield.” Jasper grimaced, watching as Emma’s eyes widened as she began to understand his hint. “I’d rather fight Lord Thorne than let that news reach the scandal sheets.”

“But...” Her fingers tightened through his. “Jasper.” The softness of how she said his name nearly made him capitulate. He was tempted to give her anything when she said his name in such a way. “I could not bear it if you are hurt because of me.”

“It will not be because of you, but neither will I be hurt.” He smiled softly, trying to reassure her. “Lord Thorne will live to regret the day he challenged me to a duel, trust me.”

“I pray you are right.”

They stood there, staring at one another, but it was not to last. Minutes later, Andrew returned to say that Lord Thorne had refused to rescind the challenge. Andrew took his sisters home, and Patrick led Jasper away.



“You’ll have to go to bed at some point, Emma.” Betty’s words didn’t help. They were the last two awake in the house, but Emma knew sleep would not come. It was the early hours of the morning now.

“Would you be able to sleep in my position?” Emma asked, turning on the settee to face her sister. Slowly, Betty shook her head. They were both curled up on the sofa, fully relaxed now, and Judith was not awake to tell them that they were sitting in an unladylike manner. “When the sun comes up... oh!” Emma flung her head back on the arm of the settee. “They will duel. How can I bear this?”

She thought only of the Duke, Jasper, as he had asked her to call him. She thought of how he’d asked for her hand in marriage in the aviary, and she had dismissed it as him trying to save their reputations. Now, she wished she could turn back the hands of the mantelpiece clock and change her answer.

I’d say yes.

“What if he’s hurt?” Emma whispered.

“We must pray he won’t be,” Betty said solemnly. No more words could be passed between them as there was a knock at the door. “That is late for a caller. Or obscenely early.” Betty

was on her feet before Emma could rouse and hurried to the hallway.

Evidently, the butler had reached the door first and opened it wide from what Emma could hear. He attempted to send their visitor on their way, but Betty invited the person in.

“Emma?” Betty called from the doorway. “This lady says she must speak to you.”

Emma sat up to see a lady she did not recognize in the doorway. She was young, perhaps even younger than Betty, and wore servants’ clothes. Slowly, she pulled her pelisse hood off her face.

“Pray forgive my impertinent arrival. I know it is not right to call at such an hour, especially when I am but a maid, but I know of you, Lady Emma, and all that I know means I had to come and see you.”

Emma was too intrigued to refuse. She beckoned the lady forward.

“Here, take a seat. Tell me your name.” At her words, the servant hurried to sit beside her.

“My name is May, My Lady, and I work in Lord Thorne’s household.”

Emma exchanged an uncertain look with Betty, who stayed standing, clearly apprehensive at the maid’s arrival.

“I have overheard such a plan tonight that I had to come and see you.” The servant gestured toward Emma. “I know more than most what kind of a man Lord Thorne is, and it is one that is certainly not to be trusted. Never have I been so convinced of it tonight. I overheard him speaking to another man, the Marquess of Hatfield. The two are plotting against the Duke of Waybridge together. Tomorrow, when dawn rises and the Duke goes to meet Lord Thorne, the first shot will come from the Marquess, who will be hiding nearby. He’ll catch the Duke unaware.”

“Oh, God’s wounds.” Emma stood to her feet. “They could kill him.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“I’m not asking you to be my second, Patrick.” Jasper checked the gun. He had enough bullets for the duel, but that was not what worried him. He was a good shot. The fear was how good a shot Lord Thorne would be.

“You didn’t have to ask.” Patrick stood up from Jasper’s settee, where he had spent part of the night sleeping. “I’m offering regardless, and you’re mad if you think I’m going to let you go alone to this.” He stifled a yawn and reached for where his tailcoat was laid across a nearby dumbwaiter table. He lifted the tailcoat, revealing a pistol beneath lying on the table.

“You came prepared.”

“Of course I did.” Patrick smiled and added the pistol to his belt. “I’m usually not as good a shot as you, but I daresay I’ll do in a duel. Before we go...” He paused, shifting his weight between his feet. “What exactly is your plan with this duel?”

“To be the first to draw blood,” Jasper said simply. He’d thought it through all night, quite sleepless with the impending duel ahead of him. “That is all Lord Thorne wants. He wishes for a chance to humiliate me. So, I will not let it happen. I will

shoot first and wound the man, that is all I intend to do. Perhaps that will be enough to make him leave Emma alone.”

Jasper pulled on his frock coat, turning to check his appearance in the mirror over the fireplace in his lounge. He could barely see his reflection, for the sun was only just beginning to rise in the early hours of the morning. The grey light filtered through the windows, revealing his dark hair that was mussed and the bags under his eyes.

“I pray you’re right,” Patrick said, though he sounded a little doubtful.

“Let us go.” Jasper reached toward the door. “I don’t want to be accused of being late.”

Outside of the house, they each took up a horse and rode away. One glance back at the house when he reached the end of the driveway revealed that his mother had not slept either. Candles were lit in her room, and her silhouette was cast against the bedchamber window, showing that she watched him from a distance. Jasper nodded his head at that silhouette before he parted, leading the way to Hyde Park.

They were silent on the way there until they reached the edge of Hyde Park. As they slowed their pace and took the horses down a bridle path, conversation began in whispers.

“If something is to go wrong,” Jasper began slowly, thinking of his family, “you’ll find the address where Lettie is staying in my study. Go to her.”

“Nothing’s going to go wrong. You’ll live just fine,” Patrick said with vigor.

“Patrick...” Jasper’s sharpness called an end to the buoyancy. “*If* it goes wrong, go to Lettie. Offer her a better life than she’s living now, at least.”

“Jasper, how did you know I...?” Patrick didn’t quite finish the sentence. He swallowed and looked away, clearly nervous to speak of it.

“Well, it grew increasingly obvious,” Jasper explained. “You are always asking about her. If she says yes, you have my blessing.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Patrick’s voice had become hushed.

“Don’t say anything. You have to wait to see if she says yes first.” The two of them shared a small smile.

“And if all goes well? What will you do then?” Patrick asked, gesturing toward Jasper. “You are going to a lot of trouble for Lady Emma. You’re even prepared to risk your life.”

“I know exactly what I’ll do.” There wasn’t a doubt in Jasper’s mind anymore. “I intend to ask her to marry me.”

Patrick said nothing, but he smiled broadly.

When they reached the fence that led out onto the ridgeway behind Hyde Park, they both stalled a little. The sun was beginning to rise over the horizon, showing that dawn was here. The golden ball peaked through distant trees and rooftops. The time to duel was nearly upon them.

“Do you hear something?” Patrick asked, but Jasper wasn’t paying attention. He was too busy searching the ridgeway. In the distance, by the trunk of a tree, he could have sworn he saw one shadowy figure. It had to be Lord Thorne, but something was strange.

“He has no second,” Jasper said.

“What?” Patrick turned his attention forward.

“Look at the ridgeway.” Jasper gestured toward the figure. “There is no second man with him. Why would Lord Thorne not bring a second?”

“Perhaps he is that confident about his win,” Patrick said. The words only made Jasper uneasy. “No, I definitely hear something. Can’t you hear it?”

“Hear what?” Jasper jumped down from his horse and opened the gate, preparing to walk through it, when he heard it too. It sounded like a horse’s hoofs galloping hard into the earth, creating a fast and irregular rhythm. “Perhaps it’s his second arriving.” Jasper stepped through the gate and encouraged Patrick to follow, who also climbed down from his horse.

They stepped out onto the ridgeway, spying Lord Thorne in the distance. He was so far away his face could not be deciphered, but he turned in Jasper's direction, showing he'd noticed his arrival.

"Are you sure about this?" Patrick asked.

"Stop asking me that." Jasper couldn't back out now. He strode out across the ridgeway when the striking of the hooves in the ground got so close that he could have sworn the earth vibrated beneath his boots.

"Stop!" It was a voice so familiar to Jasper. He knew it as well as his own. Spinning round so sharply that the horse snorted in surprise from where Jasper held onto the reins, he turned to see who had approached.

Emma was on the other side of the fence, atop a horse she had hastily pulled to a stop.

"You cannot go through with this," She cried.



Emma was desperate as she clambered off her horse, aware that Jasper and Patrick faced her, their expressions completely in shock.

"Emma? What are you doing here?" Jasper passed the reins of his horse to his friend and went to meet her at the fence, reaching for her hand. She didn't hesitate to take hold of his hand, determined to have his attention.

“I’ve come to stop this.”

“I’ve already agreed to go ahead—”

“No, Jasper, you do not understand. It is a plot against you.” She could see, at last, that she had his attention, for his blue eyes didn’t blink, not once. “A maid came to my house in the early hours of this morning. She works for Lord Thorne. She overheard him talking with the Marquess of Hatfield. You spoke of him, did you not? The other day at the assembly.”

Jasper exchanged a worried glance with Patrick behind him, who had stepped harshly forward.

“I did,” Jasper said.

“Then you know him. He is your enemy, I take it?”

“Of a kind.”

“He must be, for he is here now.” She gestured toward the ridgeway behind him. In the distance, she could see a shadowy figure, one she supposed belonged to Lord Thorne, who seemed to be staring straight at the three of them. “He is hiding, waiting to shoot you when the opportunity presents itself.”

“That damned devil!” Patrick said suddenly, turning on the spot. “They have murder on their minds!?”

“I do not know, that or serious injury.” She pulled harder on Jasper’s hand, tugging him toward her so he bent over the fence in her direction. “But let us not find out. Come away, Jasper, before either man can hurt you. Please?”

“I would not be so great a fool as to walk into a trap. Patrick? Let us go, now.” Jasper released her and went to get his horse. Seconds later, they were pulling the animals back through the open gate.

Breathing heavily, barely having caught her breath after her mad ride, Emma looked out across the ridgeway. Lord Thorne seemed to be in a panic, running toward them.

“He’s running,” she muttered.

“Emma, on the horse. We must go now before he shoots.” Even as Jasper said the words, a shot rang out.

The three of them bent down, taking cover behind the fence and nearby trees. When the shot landed in a nearby tree trunk, Emma peered over the fence to see it was Lord Thorne who had fired. He was hurrying to reload his pistol and shouting to the trees nearby, clearly calling for his accomplice.

“We need to leave!” Patrick shouted.

Jasper took Emma’s hand and drew her toward her horse. He helped her up before he clambered onto his own saddle. They all rode away, directing the horses to travel so fast that her mare whinnied beneath her, objecting to having ridden for so

long at such a great speed. Still, Emma did not let the horse give up. She pushed on, pulling harshly on the reins.

Soon enough, Lord Thorne's shouts faded behind them, and when the three of them appeared in the main streets, they slowed their pace, allowing Emma's horse to recover a little.

"This is madness!" Patrick roared. "He may have actually intended to kill you, Jasper."

"Some men lose their minds over money," Jasper reasoned, turning his focus on Emma. She realized what he was saying. Jasper was the competition for her hand, and if Lord Thorne was so desperate to get his hands on her dowry, then it was just possible he was prepared to kill to get hold of it.

"What of the Marquess? What cause does he have to hate you?" Emma asked.

"This way, we must keep riding." Patrick pointed toward a small lane. They rode away, but slower this time, trying not to draw attention to themselves in the early-morning traffic of carriages and walkers.

Jasper moved his horse alongside Emma's and spoke in a rush.

"The Marquess of Hatfield charmed my sister," he said with clear resentment in his tone. "He enticed her into a conservatory one night and risked her reputation. Unlike any action you and I might have shared, the Marquess did not have love on his mind."

“Love?” Emma repeated, shaken by the word.

Wait... did Jasper just hint that he loves me?

“He thought only of brief satisfaction, that was all. I punched him, just as I did Lord Thorne, and left the man with a nasty bruise to remember me by,” Jasper went on as they rode down the road. “We do not doubt he has told his friends of the incident. Maybe the scandal sheets have not spoken of it, but his royal connections and his high friends must know of it. Our invitations to events slowed these last few months, much to my mother’s fear.”

“Oh,” Emma sighed in realization. “The Marquess blamed your sister for the encounter?”

“I believe he did. Devil of a man not to take any responsibility. I must have hurt his pride considerably for him to consider taking revenge on me in allegiance to Lord Thorne.” Jasper glanced over his shoulder, clearly wary of them being followed.

“Your friend is right. This is all madness,” Emma murmured, feeling her hands begin to shake. Now that she had achieved her aim and warned Jasper of the plan against him, fear was setting in.

“We need to get off the main roads, in case they follow,” Patrick called from up ahead. “This way.” He led them through a route into Covent Garden, where an early-morning market was being set up. They discarded the horses where others had been tied to posts and began to walk through the

market as if they were visitors. Constantly, they all glanced at the entrance of the market, wary of being followed.

After a minute or so of walking, Emma felt Jasper reach for her arm and thread it through his own with a gentle touch.

“You rode out here alone?” he whispered, moving closer to her.

“My aunt would no doubt despair of me,” she said with a small smile. “I knew what I had to do, there wasn’t a moment that I hesitated. Betty nearly rode out with me before I persuaded her to stay behind. I went to your house first, but finding you weren’t there, I had no choice but to go to Hyde Park.”

Jasper lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the back. At the sudden movement, Emma froze, staring at him. It wasn’t just the kiss that affected her, but the way he held her gaze as he did so, showing no intention of letting go of her.

“You would risk yourself to come after me?”

“You did the same, did you not?” she asked quietly. “You agreed to a duel because of me.” She shuddered, thinking of what danger could have passed that morning. “I would never have forgiven myself if something happened to you.” He kissed her hand again.

As Patrick cleared his throat, the two walked on, trailing behind him.

“What will we do now?” Patrick called back to them.

“They must be reported to a constable,” Jasper said at once.

“If you do that, you could be arrested too. It is illegal to duel,” Emma pointed out, watching as Jasper offered a small smile. An idea was clearly occurring to him. “Then let us try things another way. Patrick and I shall say we were going for an early morning ride when Lord Thorne and the Marquess shot at us. It is hardly far from the truth, is it? For Lord Thorne did fire his weapon.”

“Would they believe you?” Emma asked, just as Patrick looked back with an amused smile.

“Something tells me the word of a Duke holds up well in court.” He gestured toward a nearby road. “The constable’s office is this way. Let us go now.”

“First, Emma, you must go home.” Jasper stopped walking, holding onto Emma’s arm to still her. “Hurry home while we report to the constable and keep your name out of it. No good can come from revealing you were here this morning.”

“Yes, very well.” She nodded, knowing he was right. If it was known she had been riding with two unattached gentlemen, her reputation would be ruined for good. “What of Lord Thorne and the Marquess? Will they be arrested?”

“Let us see what the constable can do. In the meantime, I’d say we can make it known how ill the Baron and the Marquess act and betray the rules of a duel, don’t you agree?”

“Let the gossip spread,” Emma said with enthusiasm, hoping she would never have to see Lord Thorne again after this morning.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“E mma, Emma!” Betty’s voice echoed through the house. She shouted so loudly that Judith covered her ears where she sat opposite Emma.

“Good Lord, child,” Judith said as Betty burst into the room. “What did I say about the volume of a lady’s voice?”

“Oh, Aunt Judith, another time, please,” Betty begged, waving a sheet of paper in her hand. “Emma, you have to see this now!” She walked past Judith and Frances, thrusting the newssheet straight into Emma’s hand.

“What is this?” Emma murmured, turning her gaze down to see the title of a scandal sheet.

“It’s news,” Betty said excitedly.

“From a scandal sheet?” Judith said, curling her nose. “I doubt the news is trustworthy.”

“Goodness,” Emma gasped when she read the names in the title article on the first page. “It speaks of Lord Thorne.”

“Read it aloud.” Judith seemed to have taken back her complaint and waved a hand at Emma, urging her on.

“Yes, please do,” Frances pleaded.

“It speaks of an arrest.” Emma scanned the article, reading it as swiftly as she could. *“This writer learned last night of a great scandal that is to shock the ton, most of all, for it pertains to one of the Season’s most eligible bachelors, Baron Thorne.*

“It seems the Baron has been keeping secrets from us all. Last night, he was arrested on multiple charges. He is to be taken to debtors’ prison, for it’s said the man has debts to nearly every gambling house in London and more. Yet, a greater charge now hangs over the Baron’s head.

“Lord Thorne is accused of conspiring to assault another gentleman of the ton, the Duke of Waybridge. The Duke, accompanied by a friend yesterday when riding through Hyde Park early in the morning, was shot at by Lord Thorne and an accomplice. The gentlemen made their escape before reporting the crime to the local constable.”

Emma paused long enough to turn the page, her heart racing. She had not seen the Duke since the event, though what she had done had been whispered around her family. After she had left, Judith had risen and demanded to know from Betty where Emma was. Betty had not held out long under Judith’s demands.

“Does it mention you at all?” Frances asked, evident worry making her voice shake.

“It does not,” Emma assured them with a smile before going on. “*Lord Thorne is to appear before a magistrate’s court on Monday for the beginning of his trial. His accomplice at this time remains unknown.*”

Emma paused, for she knew exactly who the accomplice was. It did not make sense to her how the Marquess of Hatfield could escape punishment for his crimes when they all had known he was there.

“Is this not wonderful?” Betty said before anyone else could. “Emma, you’re free!” She took hold of Emma’s shoulders and shook her.

“Dear, there is no need to shake her like a peg doll,” Judith corrected her, but Emma didn’t care. So overcome with relief, she embraced her sister tightly, feeling tears of relief threatening to fall.

I will not have to marry him. Never!

As Emma rested her head on her sister’s shoulder, she could see Judith and Frances sitting together and holding hands on the settee. Despite Judith’s remonstrations, she was smiling with equal relief.

“Thank God,” Frances said with a dramatic tone. “It is over then?” she asked. “Lord Thorne cannot come after you again.”

“Ah...” Judith paused, angling her head toward her sister. “Lord Thorne can certainly not make Emma marry him now, but prisoners are allowed to have visitors. We cannot rule out the chance that our own stories will not appear in the scandal sheets any time soon.”

“Surely not!” Frances gasped.

“It is still possible that our names could be marred. The only way to protect Emma would be to see her married.”

Emma released Betty, feeling the worry return. She may have escaped marriage to Lord Thorne, but a dagger still hung over her name and her family’s reputation.

“He wouldn’t, would he?” Emma asked, her spine beginning to crumple.

“Are you asking me if he is not a man of vengeance?” Judith pointed out with raised eyebrows.

Emma swallowed uncomfortably, knowing exactly that was the kind of man Lord Thorne was.

“Emma! Emma!” Andrew’s voice boomed through the house.

“Goodness, what is wrong with everyone this morning?” Judith asked, opening her fan and cooling her face with it. “All of you have forgotten the soft tones of ladies and gentlemen.”

“Let ladies and gentlemen laugh and scream for all I care,” Frances said with a light laugh. “Sister, my children cannot be still like porcelain dolls.”

Emma and Betty exchanged wide-eyed glances, amazed that Frances had spoken up in such a way, even if it was with laughter. Judith appeared equally surprised, though she nodded as if in agreement.

“We must allow for moments of high emotion, I suppose,” she said in agreement.

“Emma!” Andrew called as he burst through the door.

“Though they could at least not slam the doors,” Judith muttered quietly.

“He’s here.”

“Who’s here?” Emma asked her brother.

“Who do you think?” Andrew laughed, gesturing back toward the door he had just burst through. “The Duke of Waybridge, he’s with our father now.”

“He’s here?” Judith asked, moving to her feet at the same time as Emma did.

“When did he arrive?” Emma stumbled forward.

“I just saw him go into our father’s study,” Andrew said in a rush.

“Well, this is good news,” Judith said with some satisfaction and a great smile. “There are not many reasons a suitor could wish for an audience alone with a lady’s father, are there?”

Emma didn’t need to ask what her aunt meant. She hurried out of the room.

“Emma! A lady should wait for the gentleman to come to her,” Judith called.

“Oh, I’m not the perfect lady, Auntie. I’ll leave that for another to be.” She stepped away into the hall, pleased to see that Andrew moved to stand in the doorway, blocking their aunt’s exit so she could not follow Emma.

With quickness to her step, Emma hastened through the house. She came close to running more than once, though she barely managed to hold herself off. When she reached the door to her father’s study, she found it was open and her father was stepping out with the Duke, shaking his hand.

“Ah, Emma, what a surprise,” Bernard said with some humor in his tone. “You have come to see me have you?” He was teasing her.

“I...” She looked between them, wondering what words to say. She could hardly ask outright why the Duke had come to see her father, could she?

“Perhaps we should go for a walk in the garden. What do you say, Emma?” Bernard began a conversation when she could not and took her arm.

“I—”

“Yes, it’s a wonderful idea.” He led her toward the nearest door leading to the garden. “Your Grace, will you join us?”

“Of course.” Jasper walked on Bernard’s other side as they moved out into the garden.

Emma was in a state, barely able to walk with any amount of peace in her countenance. She kept looking between her father and Jasper, wondering what they had spoken of.

“I hear you have an aviary, Your Grace,” Bernard said, making conversation. “My daughter has talked much of it.”

“I do,” Jasper confirmed with an easy smile. “I’m fond of birds and wildlife, My Lord.”

“Then you should come here more often. We have many birds in our garden.” Bernard gestured toward the garden ahead of them just as they turned down a path, heading toward the yew trees. “Oh dear, I have a stone in my boot. Walk on, and I will join you momentarily.”

“Pa—”

“Walk on, now, Emma.” He urged her. “I’ll catch up with you.”

That was not subtle!

Emma felt her cheeks heat with embarrassment as she walked ahead with purpose in her step. Jasper kept pace with her, though the two of them kept glancing back at Bernard, who was making an appearance of taking off his boot and shaking it out.

Once they turned through another avenue of yew bushes and were out of sight, Emma shifted her focus to Jasper.

“We read in the scandal sheet what happened,” she said in a rush. “The constable believed you then. Everything you had to say?”

“He did.” Jasper nodded. “Lord Thorne was arrested last night, and his debts have been called in. He’ll be charged with attempted assault too. Worry not, Emma. He cannot come near you now.”

“But what of the Marquess?” She halted on the path and turned to face him, aware that the wind was picking up so much that it lifted the loose hairs from her cheeks. She didn’t bother to push them back, as Judith often urged her to do these days, but let them be wild. “It did not mention him in the article.”

“No, it did not.” Jasper walked on, urging her to do the same. “Part of me wishes to curse that man’s name for many things,

yet another can't help being relieved. Just as my word, as a duke has power in court, a marquess with royal connections has power behind the scenes. Patrick and I mentioned him to the constable, but it went no further."

"You must be in jest," Emma said in horror.

"If only I were. His royal friends must have persuaded the right people, for he was not charged with anything. Yet, I heard news today that he has left the country," Jasper declared with a great smile. "Perhaps these same royal friends were ashamed to hear what he had done. Either way, he has been persuaded to leave. He left England this morning on the first ship from Southampton."

"Then, he is gone?" Emma asked with excitement. "The threats he holds over your family, do they go with him?"

"I like to think so." Jasper glanced behind them, clearly looking for Bernard's approach. "Your father is taking a while catching up with us."

"Why did you come to see him?" she asked, not afraid to hold back now that they were alone. The two of them came to a stop, turning to face one another, at which point Jasper laughed softly.

"Emma, can you really be in doubt of what I came to ask of him?" he whispered. "I came with one thing only in mind."

"Please, do not leave it to me to guess." Emma felt her hands clench at her sides. "I will guess the very thing I hope for and

might give myself hope when there is none.”

“You speak in riddles.” He laughed again. “So let us avoid the riddles for the moment.” He stepped toward her and brushed his hand against hers, just as he had done in the aviary. This time, she responded, turning her hand over to meet his so that their fingers played together. “I came to ask for his blessing, Emma, for your hand in marriage.”

Emma’s heart thudded deep in her chest. These last few days, she had hoped often for this moment, thinking she would never have the chance to accept him again.

“A blessing he was somewhat nervous of giving at first.”

“What!?” she spluttered, snapping her gaze away from their joined hands to Jasper’s face.

“He informed me that you had declared to the family I had no intention of marrying.”

“You said you didn’t!”

“No, Emma, that is not quite what I said.” The way his smile began to grow made her breathing become stuttered like the buffeting wings of a butterfly. “I said I would not marry on the order of my mother for the sake of my family’s reputation, but that threat is gone now, as is the threat over your name.” He joined their hands together. “What I have to ask you, I do not ask for any convenience or need to rescue a name. I ask you this for one reason only.”

“Go on,” she pleaded, not wanting him to stop when he took a deep breath.

“I love you, Emma,” he whispered the words.

Lifting her hand from his, she pinched herself on the arm.

“What are you doing?” he asked with humor.

“I’m making sure I’m not dreaming.” Her words prompted him to laugh deeply.

“You are not dreaming, I assure you,” he whispered, moving toward her. “Would you like me to prove you are not dreaming?”

“Please, prove it,” she murmured back. When he moved his lips to hers, the kiss was tender and soft, unlike their first kiss, which had been full of instant passion. Yet, this one was just as powerful. As they parted from one another, she couldn’t help the smile that overtook her face. “Yes, I think I’m awake after all.”

“Ha! You most definitely are.” His smile matched her own. “So, Emma, I ask you something that I asked you before, though on this occasion, I hope you’ll believe that I do it because I love you, not for any other reason.” He breathed deeply as if summoning courage from somewhere. “Would you do me the honor of accepting my hand in marriage?”

“I cannot believe it,” she murmured.

“Would you like me to kiss you again to prove that this is real?” he teased her, and she laughed.

“Maybe I should ask for more proof just to get another kiss!”

“Emma,” he said, trying to control his own laughter, “you’re keeping me in suspense here.”

“Yes, yes, I will marry you,” Emma said in a hurry. “I love you too, and I have spent every day since you last asked regretting the answer that I gave you. I should have said yes, the first time.”

“You’ve said yes now, that’s all that matters to me.”

When Jasper moved toward her, ready for another kiss, she held her breath, but the kiss never quite came.

“No kissing until you are wed! You must still be a lady, Emma!” Judith’s words called across the garden.

Emma and Jasper leaned away from one another, though they held tightly onto each other’s hands as they turned to look where the voice was coming from. Judith stood in a gap between the yew trees, with Bernard very much holding her back, despite her protests.

“Shall we go tell her we are betrothed?” Jasper asked, looping Emma’s arm through his own.

“I do not know. I see a chance for mischief,” Emma said with a giggle. “Maybe we should hold off until this evening?” Jasper laughed deeply as they crossed toward the arguing pair by the yew trees. As it was, there was no chance for such mischief, for Bernard revealed their secret.

“Calm yourself, Judith,” Bernard said with a buoyant tone. “His Grace has asked for my blessing for the union, and I have said yes.”

“Oh, wonderful!” Judith gasped. “We shall have our first wedding in the family.”

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE

One Month Later

“Was it the wedding you hoped for?” Jasper asked, sitting beside Emma as she sipped from her champagne glass at the head of the table.

“It was better,” she said eagerly, turning to face him and pushing the glass toward him. He couldn’t resist topping it up for her, finding something very alluring about seeing Emma so happy.

That morning, he had been full of nerves and excitement, standing at the altar, barely able to stand still, even with Patrick at his side telling him to do so. All of that fidgeting had stopped the moment the door opened and Emma walked in.

Wearing a bold ivory white gown that hugged her figure, he couldn’t take his eyes off her. The delicate lacing to the hem and neckline drew attention to her auburn hair and honey-colored eyes.

At that moment, Jasper felt peace, and that feeling had not faded ever since.

“You look as happy as I am,” Emma observed as he nudged her shoulder.

“That would be because I am.” His smile matched her own. “And I’m not the only one. There seem to be many smiles here.”

“Many indeed!” Emma agreed, looking around the wedding breakfast with him. “Did you see my aunt during the ceremony?”

“My eyes were a bit preoccupied elsewhere,” he said playfully, watching as Emma giggled.

“Aunt Judith had a tear or two in her eyes. Tears she was desperately trying to hide. Tears of happiness I think.”

The mere thought made Jasper smile in satisfaction.

On one side of the table, Marianne and Judith were sat together, talking and laughing rather loudly. There were no signs of those tears now on Judith’s face, only happiness. She and Marianne had consumed so much champagne that they were beginning to declare his and Emma’s union a plan of their own all along, and weren’t they such fine matchmakers? Jasper offered a narrow glare at overhearing those words, and Emma nudged him, making that glare vanish.

On the other side of the table, Lord and Lady Hawkins, Emma’s parents, sat together, hand in hand, talking about their hope for grandchildren someday.

“They’re jumping ahead a bit, aren’t they?” Jasper asked with a laugh for Emma’s ears only.

“Do you not want children?” She slid her hand against his own, and he found himself longing to talk about how children were made and how he looked forward to their first night as husband and wife.

“Of course I want children,” he said softly, “though promise me one thing on that score.”

“What is it?” she asked, pulling a second glass forward and urging him to pour one for himself.

“I want our children to feel free. Free not only from the expectations of the ton,” he replied, casting a quick glance his mother’s way at this thought, “but also free from too much propriety.”

“Ah, shall we not raise children to be like porcelain dolls, then?” Emma said in mischief. “They might be beautiful.”

“I’d rather they were happy,” Jasper said to which Emma nodded eagerly.

“I’d agree any day of the week.” She sat back in her chair. “After all, if I was excessively ladylike, you might never have come to play skittles with me that day. Then, where would we be?”

You might be married to Lord Thorne.

The thought made darkness settle in Jasper's stomach, then it dissipated with the relief that Lord Thorne could never come near them again. Since he'd entered debtors' prison, no one had heard from him.

"Thank God I did and was enamored by your lack of propriety," he said, leaning toward her and whispering the latter in her ear. "I suppose your aunt will shift her attention to your siblings now?"

"Yes, poor Andrew and Betty." She gestured toward them, where they sat near the far end of the table, talking together. Betty even took a fork out of Andrew's hand when he picked up the wrong one for his slice of wedding cake. "Something tells me Betty may accept her teachings better than Andrew. I have this idea that Andrew will hide at all of the antiquarian digs he can find just to hide from her."

"Ha! I could not blame him for it." Jasper laughed and took a sip of his champagne. "Your siblings would be better to be themselves rather than people they are not."

"I know that." Her eyes landed on Betty, and something ticked in her cheek, a lonely muscle.

"Is all well, love?" Jasper asked, to which she turned to face him, smiling sweetly.

"You called me 'love.'"

“I rather like it. I might call you that more.”

“Please do!”

“Only if, love, you tell me what worried you when you looked at your sister.” He gestured across the table to where Betty sat tall, consciously rearranging the *serviette* on her lap.

“I hope she will be herself when she begins to court. I fear she will try to become someone else just to please a suitor.” Emma sighed. “I want her to be happy.”

“She will be, have no fear about that.” He gestured toward her mother and father. “I have a feeling your parents’ example of a happy marriage has led you all to hope for love.”

“How perceptive of you.” She turned to face him. “Speaking of siblings, how is your sister?” She gestured toward the foot of the table. “She seems quite quiet to my mind.”

“Yes, I fear that she is.” Jasper sighed as he looked at Lettie.

At last, Lettie was back from the countryside, though she had been out of sorts since she arrived. The first day Jasper introduced her to Emma had been a joyous one. The two had gotten along well and were firm friends by the end of the day. Ever since they exchanged notes, even when they weren’t planning to see each other, they’d have messages sent to one another’s houses. It gave Jasper hope for a truly happy family until he saw this sadness creep into Lettie’s countenance.

Every now and then, she would hold herself as she was doing now, with slightly hunched shoulders and an averted gaze from everyone else's. She made a point of prodding at the slice of cake on her plate, a little too much, then her eyes lifted, and she looked at someone across the room.

Jasper froze, realizing exactly whom she was looking at.

Patrick was standing near the table, talking to another friend of theirs. The two were locked so much in conversation that he was completely unaware of her look.

"I have an idea," Jasper whispered to Emma. "If you excuse me for a minute, I might be able to do something to see my sister smile."

"What are you going to do?" Emma asked.

"Point out to my friend that if he wants to be happy in love, too, then he has to do something about it." Jasper's words were met with a warm smile from Emma before she released his hand and allowed him to stand.

Jasper crossed the room toward Patrick and tapped him on the shoulder, interrupting his conversation.

"If you would excuse us," he said to Patrick's friend, "I need to speak to Patrick for a moment."

"Of course, Your Grace, I will help myself to some cake, and once again, many congratulations!"

“Thank you.” Jasper offered a smile as the gentleman returned to the table before he took Patrick’s arm and steered him a little distance away, ensuring they could speak without the risk of being overheard.

“Why do I feel like I’m about to be reprimanded for doing something wrong?” Patrick asked under his breath.

“Because you are.” Jasper folded his arms, staring down at his friend. “My sister has been back in London for a week, and you have not come to the house since then.”

“Ah, no, I haven’t.” Patrick began to fidget, shifting between his feet and pulling at the cuffs of his tailcoat.

“Good God, man, you are as restless as I was this morning before the wedding.” Jasper laughed at the idea. “What has you in such a mess?”

“Jasper, you know how I feel about your sister,” Patrick said quietly and in a rush. “You have guessed it without me having to say the exact words, but I am under no apprehension that your sister has ever seen me as anything more than... well, your friend.”

“I see.” Jasper nodded, looking between Patrick and Lettie. He could understand his friend’s nerves. “You wish to wait until you have some hint of the opposite?”

“Perhaps it would be best,” Patrick said quietly. Jasper began to smile with mischief. “What does that look mean?” his friend

asked with plain worry in his tone.

“I was just thinking, if one is always standing around waiting for something to happen, then it will never happen.” Jasper clasped his hands together with a plan in mind. “We must make something happen.” He walked away, heading toward Lettie.

“Wait, no! Jasper.” Patrick panicked, following him. “Just because you’re happy in love doesn’t mean the rest of us will find it so easy.”

“Let’s find out.” Jasper reached Lettie’s side. “Sister, you remember my friend, don’t you? Patrick.” He took her hand and drew her to her feet so that she turned and faced them both. At once, Lettie blushed a deep red.

Good Lord, it is a little obvious, isn’t it?

“It is good to see you, Lord Lancaster,” she said, hurrying to curtsy.

“And you.” He bowed to her. The rather stiff greeting was frustrating, causing Jasper to look pleadingly across the room at Emma. She was covering her mouth as she watched him, clearly holding back a little laugh before she lifted her other hand, waving him on.

“Very well, let us get to the point.” Jasper looked between them. “Lettie, whilst you have been gone, Patrick here has talked my ear off by asking about you.”

“He has?” she asked softly, her eyes shooting to Patrick.

“Jasper!” Patrick seethed. “Are you in your cups?”

“Perhaps a little, but I’m happy about it, and it is my wedding day, after all. Now, Patrick.” He turned to face his friend. “I believe my sister worries about what you think of her after the incident earlier this year.”

“Oh, may the ground swallow me whole right now.” Lettie tapped him round the arm in reprimand. “Is there a reason for this, Jasper?”

“Yes, is there?” Patrick seconded.

“Apart from a little fun, yes, there is.” Jasper looked between them. “I’ve stood at the side long enough to see you two swooning over one another without saying anything. If I’ve learned anything this Season, it’s that when you feel something, you should act upon it, or someone else may get in the way and you’ll lose your chance. Patrick, we are to have some dancing this evening to celebrate the wedding. May I advise you to reserve the first dance with my sister now? Before another man asks.”

Patrick nodded wordlessly.

“Excellent! Now, sit together and enjoy the cake.” He took hold of Patrick’s shoulders and pushed him into the seat beside Lettie as she hurried to sit too.

Once he was done, Jasper returned to his seat at the head of the table to find Emma unable to hold back her laughter anymore.

“Whatever you said to the two of them has shocked them both,” she said, reaching for his hand as he sat beside her. “They’re both blushing bright red!”

“I simply gave them some encouragement.” Jasper was pleased to see that the two of them began a conversation, and the more they talked, the more they leaned toward one another. Soon, blushes disappeared, and smiles took over.

“What did you say to them?” Emma asked, earning his attention once more.

“I may have pointed out that sometimes one can only realize they’re in love when it’s too late. We should not miss out on the opportunities for fear others can get in the way.” He reminded her of Lord Thorne’s interference, and she smiled softly.

“Nothing can interfere with us now, Jasper.” As she connected their hands, they both looked down at the wedding ring on her finger. They were bound together now, happy, indeed.

The End?

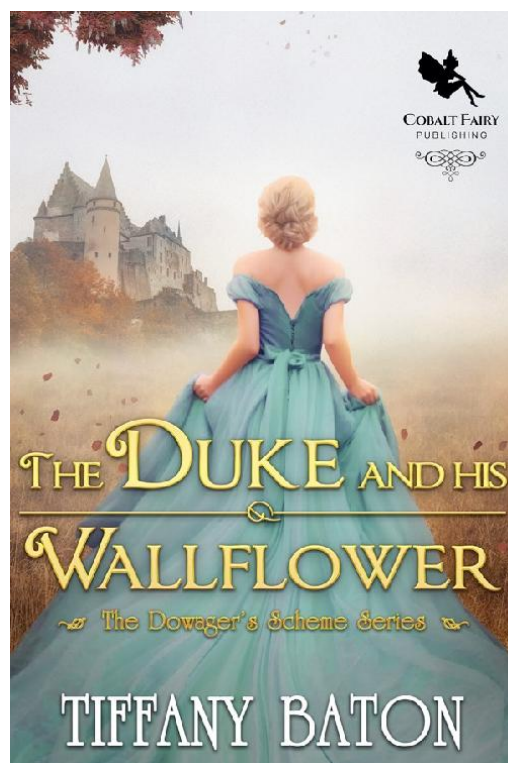
OceanofPDF.com

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

Would you like to know how **Emma and Jasper's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this free complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple!

Simply **TAP HERE to read it now for FREE!** or use this link: **<http://go.tiffanybaton.com/oR74jwTg>** directly in your browser.

I guarantee you, that you won't be disappointed ♥



OceanofPDF.com

PREVIEW: PROTECTED BY
THE DUKE

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

Rosalie Elkins could not remember the last time she'd been to London. It may have been when she was a child, when she had no other worries other than what she would do to entertain herself for the day. Those memories were hazy, laced with morbid nostalgia. She could not remember when last she'd been that happy, when last she'd allowed herself to fully relax.

Right now, as her rickety carriage brought her further into the sprawling city of London, Rosalie's shoulders were tense, her body rigid with nervousness. She resisted the urge to nibble on her bottom lip, knowing that it would not do arrive at her destination with her lips red and raw. That certainly would not make a good impression.

"My Lady," Rosalie looked up at the woman sitting across from her. Justine's naturally pink cheeks were redder than ever, her freckles slowly darkening under the sunlight pouring in from the window of the carriage. She gave Rosalie a gentle smile, reaching out to touch her arm. "Everything will go well, Lady Rosalie. I know it."

Rosalie managed half a smile. "You've always been so optimistic, Justine, even in the darkest of times. I wish I could be a little more like you."

"You are perfect the way you are."

This time, Rosalie laughed a little. "And such a flatterer too. Thank you, Justine. I wish it was that easy for me to believe as well."

Justine straightened, looking out the window. Even though she was nearing her thirtieth year, she still looked quite young, as if she was barely of marriageable age. In truth, she had been working for Rosalie's family ever since she was ten years old. Justine's mother had been a kitchen maid and so Justine had grown up in the servant's quarter of the Grove House. And she had begun working there as soon as she became old enough to start assisting with small tasks.

Once Rosalie came of age, Justine became her lady's maid. She had been by Rosalie's side ever since Rosalie was just four-and-ten years, fresh out of seminary school. They'd grown so close in that time that Rosalie considered Justine something like an older sister.

Rosalie tried to keep the same positive mindset as Justine, but it was simply too difficult. Not while she was dressed from head to toe in a black mourning gown. Not when her heart was still unsettled from the sudden death of her brother and she had little chance to think about what she would do next. And certainly not now that her life was in the hands of complete strangers.

Complete strangers whom she was to meet in just a few minutes.

Her carriage continued down the uneven path until it finally arrived at Mayfair. Tall brocade fences barred the entrances to lavish townhouses and apartments, the wealthy flaunting their riches in every way possible. As Rosalie stared out the window, drinking in the sight, she couldn't help but long for the home she had left behind. That was where she had grown into a young adult, where her family had lived its life. She'd even made friends who were commoners in the countryside and it pained her to know that she might not ever see them again. Above all, Rosalie lamented the fact that she would not be able to visit her brother's tomb easily. He had been buried in the family crypt, an entire day's ride away from London.

Lord Frank Elkins, the Viscount of Grove, was no more. Her dear brother, a man who was far more than his title, was no longer in her life. Though she knew he must be watching over her from above, Rosalie still could not believe that he had left

her like this, that a sudden and terrible illness had ripped him away from her. She would never be the same without him. He was her brother, her guardian, her friend. Now, Rosalie had nothing.

Her eyes pricked with tears at the memory of him. Grove House would be left empty and lifeless now that she was not there. But her heart felt even emptier without her dear brother by her side.

“I wonder what they will be like,” Rosalie spoke up, hoping to distract herself from the pain.

“Who?” asked Justine, her blond brows raised in thought. “The Duke and Dowager Duchess of Galway?”

Rosalie nodded, still staring out the window. “I’d never heard of them before that letter. It feels odd for me to reside with someone I did not know existed until a few days ago.”

“It appears that His Grace was quite close with your brother.”

“Yes, that is what the letter said. But if that were the case, wouldn’t my brother have spoken about him once or twice? He’s never mentioned him at all.” And now that her curiosity was deepening, Rosalie said, “I wonder what he looks like.”

That made Justine chuckle. “I did not think that would matter to you.”

Hearing the double meaning in her words, Rosalie flushed, quickly shaking her head. “Not in that way, certainly not. I’m just curious, that’s all. Do you think he is the same age as my brother?”

“Perhaps. I cannot say for sure.”

Rosalie sighed. “I hope I am not intruding too much.”

“They were willing to have you stay with them, My Lady, so I’m certain that isn’t the case.”

Rosalie fell quiet. Everything was moving too fast for her. It had not been a month yet since her brother died and here she was, leaving her family home behind to stay with people she had never heard of before.

And what happens after that? Was she expected to stay there forever? What could she do now? Melancholy descended on her like a wave and she felt the urge to cry once more.

“I understand that you may be feeling overwhelmed, My Lady,” Justine said gently. “But it will only be for a short while, until you are able to find a husband.”

Rosalie sighed softly as she blinked the tears away. “Finding a husband is the last thing on my mind.”

“Yes, I am sure it is.” Justine seemed almost as sad as Rosalie, as if she shared her pain just as deeply. Rosalie sniffled, wiping at the tears that had escaped, and tried to strengthen her resolve. Now was not the time for crying. She could do that later.

“It seems we have arrived,” Justine commented after a few seconds and Rosalie focused on what Justine was looking at. The carriage was coming to a slow stop as tall, iron-wrought gates were swung open to admit them in. Soon, they were passing through a broad paved path, lined by tall hedges. It opened up into a driveway where a beautiful, sparkling fountain sat within. The carriage pulled around the fountain, stopping right in front of the steps leading up to the entrance.

Rosalie’s heart began to race. She stared up at the cold, stone house before her and felt unease bleed throughout her body. This house held no warmth. One look at it and she could tell that she would not be comfortable here.

But I may feel comfort from the people within, she tried to tell herself, even as she remained stiffly in her seat when the coachman opened the door for her. *It may not be as bad as I think.*

But she couldn’t find the strength to move. She could not accept the coachman’s hand. Somehow, it felt as if she would be leaving behind the only part of her life she had left.

“My Lady,” Justine urged gently and it spurred her into action. Rosalie gingerly accepted the coachman’s hand and stepped out of the carriage. She studied the house closely. It was artfully built, the white brick and stucco screaming wealth. But

no one came out to greet them. If they had visitors at Grove House, her brother would have been the first one out the door, with Rosalie at his heels.

Another carriage pulled up behind, the one bearing their luggage. Rosalie tried to distract herself by watching them unload everything but she knew she could not delay her arrival any longer. Justine was standing silently by her side, waiting for her to move.

Licking her suddenly dry lips, Rosalie clutched the sides of her dress and began to make her way up the steps.

Halfway there, the door opened and a tall gentleman strolled out.

He was far too handsome to be seen with normal eyes. As soon as that thought crossed her mind, Rosalie blushed at how embarrassing it was. But the closer he came, the truer it felt. This man had a face that was far too perfect, a build that was designed to bring others to their knees. And judging by the way he was dressed, she knew that she was looking at the Duke of Galway.

Rosalie held her breath, unable to take her eyes off him. His hair was dark, fashioned an unruly Brutus style that seemed to take on entire new form. He was taller than she first thought, tall enough that she could not look into his eyes unless she bent her neck all the way back. A light dusting of hair coated the lower half of his face, giving him a rugged look. His eyes were brown, his lips thin and firm.

He was simply breathtaking.

“Lady Rosalie,” he greeted, his voice deep enough to send shivers throughout her body. Rosalie blinked, coming out of her reverie as he swept into a proper bow. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Forgive me for the delay but I had not known you would be arriving so soon.”

“We did not have many hindrances on the way here,” Rosalie managed to say, her voice soft. She still hadn’t fully found her breathing yet.

“That’s good to hear. Thankfully, I’ve already had your bedchamber prepared. Please, if you would follow me.” He turned his back to her, heading back to the front door. Halfway there, he paused and looked back at her. “Ah, I have not introduced myself, have I? My name is Andrew Simpson, the Duke of Galway and your host during your stay here at Galway Manor.”

Rosalie suddenly remembered her manners and dipped into a curtsy. “Lady Rosalie Elkins, Your Grace.”

“Please, Lady Rosalie, follow me.” And he continued on his way.

Uncertain and a little too nervous now, Rosalie looked back at Justine. Her lady’s maid gave her an encouraging smile which spurred Rosalie on. She quickly hurried so as not to fall behind, since it was clear that the Duke did not intend to wait on her.

Once they were in the foyer, the Duke turned to her once more. “While your luggage is being taken in, why don’t I show you around?”

“I would like that,” Rosalie managed to respond. It was hard looking at him without flushing. “This is a beautiful manor, Your Grace. I’m afraid I may get lost if I’m left to find my way around on my own.”

“I wouldn’t let that happen,” he responded, his tone light enough to almost feel comforting. “Follow me this way.”

Again, he turned and walked off. Rosalie was forced to follow. She kept in his shadow, listening as he pointed out one room after another, taking her down hallway after hallway. She forgot to listen after a while and instead passed the time by studying him from behind. He was certainly not what she expected.

The more they went along, the emptier the manor seemed. Rosalie distinctly recalled the letter saying that it was both the Duke and the Dowager Duchess residing here. Why was the Duke here to greet her alone?

Rosalie glanced at up him. For a moment, the question was lost on her tongue as she grew distracted by his side profile, the sharp cut of his jaw enough to send her heart racing. Suddenly, he stopped and looked at her, lifting a brow slightly.

“Is there something you would like to ask me?” he asked bluntly.

Rosalie faltered. His gaze was so direct that she didn’t know what to do with herself. “Y...yes,” she stammered, resisting the urge to smooth her suddenly sweaty palms down the front of her dress. “I was wondering where Her Grace was. I would like to make my acquaintance with her.”

“Ah.” The Duke scratched the back of his head, glancing away. “Mother has been...otherwise occupied. She regrets that she was not able to meet with you upon your arrival.”

“I see.”

“But rest assured, you shall meet the entire family by dinnertime.”

Rosalie frowned a little. “The entire family?” she echoed.

The Duke nodded. “Yes, both my mother and my sister. I’m sure they will be quite welcoming when they finally meet you.”

The Duke had a sister? That would make her feel a little more relaxed here, especially if she was near Rosalie’s age. It would be nice to find a friend who could help her navigate this unknown territory.

“Lady Rosalie,” came the Duke’s voice once more and Rosalie looked up at him. The moment she did, she felt her heart still, her insides trembling with anticipation at the somber look in his gaze. “Allow me to express my sincerest condolences for your loss. Frank...he was a dear friend of mine. Though I’m sure it does not come close to what you’re feeling, I miss him dearly.”

“Were you two close?”

He nodded. Rosalie could see the shadow of pain lingering behind his eyes, though he kept his expression polite. “We

were.”

“How did you two meet?” she probed.

The Duke thinned his lips. For a moment, she thought he might actually respond. She didn’t realize until then just how much she wanted to learn about the connection between the Duke and her brother. But he only shook his head.

“Enough of this. I’m sure Frank would not want us standing around feeling sad like this. You should begin getting settled.”

Once more, he set off, this time with more purpose in his stride. Rosalie waited a beat before she began to follow. Silence hung over them. He led her upstairs, not bothering to point out the various rooms they went by this time. Rosalie felt uncomfortable with the quiet and tried desperately to think of a way to break it. Before she could though, he came to a stop before an ornate mahogany door at the end of the hallway.

“Here is your bedchamber,” he announced. “It has already been prepared for your arrival so I hope you will settle in nicely. If you need any assistance, you can find me in my study.”

The Duke didn’t give her a chance to respond to him. He gave her a swift nod and walked away, leaving her staring in his wake. Rosalie felt a rush of disappointment as she watched him leave.

Slowly, she entered the chamber. Thankfully, in the time she had spent on her tour of the manor, her trunks had been unloaded and her belongings put away. But the chamber remained as cold and uncomfortable as the rest of the manor. Not to mention the fact that the man who would be hosting her as his guest did not seem to care about her beyond simple pleasantries. He had expressed his condolences, yes, and had seemed genuinely sorry, but past that Rosalie did not feel welcomed.

She sighed, sitting on the bed. Finally, she let the tears go free. She would cry for now, she told herself. And when that was done, she would face her new life here with far more vigor.

CHAPTER TWO

“My Lady? Lady Rosalie.” Rosalie stirred at the sound of Justine’s voice, feeling her lady’s maid’s hands shaking her. “It’s time to wake up.”

Rosalie opened her eyes, still groggy from the deepness of her nap. She’d fallen asleep without realizing it and the first thing she noticed was how heavy her eyes felt. “Why?” she moaned. “What is it?”

“It is nearing dinnertime,” Justine explained. She headed toward the balcony doors to pull the curtains close. “It’s time to get ready. His Grace will be expecting you, I’m certain.”

“Ah—” Rosalie still wasn’t completely awake. She sat up, staring blankly at the floor as Justine began to move around the chamber to gather all the things Rosalie would need. Slowly, everything began coming back to her. Arriving at the manor, being greeted by the handsome yet distant Duke of Galway, and then crying herself to sleep in her chamber. Rosalie touched her cheeks, alarmed.

“You needn’t worry,” Justine said with her back still turned to her. “Your eyes aren’t swollen and your cheeks haven’t grown splotchy. No one will know that you were crying.”

Rosalie studied the maid, watching as she rummaged through the armoire. “It’s quite unnerving how you always seem to know what I’m thinking.”

“It isn’t that marvelous of a feat,” Justine said simply. “You wear your heart on your sleeve, My Lady. Every thought that goes through your mind crosses your face as well.”

“Your back was turned,” Rosalie pointed out.

Justine only shrugged. “Then you can say it is my intuition.”

Rosalie knew it could not be anything but that, so she didn’t bother to say anything else. Her body was still tired, wanting to go back to sleep. She pulled herself to a stand, going to the center of the chamber just as Justine turned to her bearing a black dress. It was one of many she had procured after her brother’s death, knowing that she would have to spend a few months in a socially acceptable time of mourning. To her, she would be mourning Frank’s death forever. To others, it should not last more than six months.

“What do you think about him?” Justine asked as she began to help Rosalie out of the dress she was still in. “His Grace, I mean. Is he anything like what you thought?”

“I didn’t know what to expect,” Rosalie admitted. “But, no. I certainly did not expect him to be like that.”

“Devilishly handsome?”

“Yes—no!” Rosalie blushed as she caught Justine’s raised brow. “He is handsome, yes, but that isn’t what I mean.”

“But it’s the truth. There’s no issue with pointing out the truth.”

“There is more to others than just their physical appearance, Justine,” Rosalie chided lightly, rolling her eyes. Justine hid her smile as she placed Rosalie’s dress aside and helped her into a new pair of stays. Rosalie continued, her mind lingering on her interaction with the Duke. “I’m not sure how best to describe him. He was polite enough, yes. But he did not seem very welcoming. It almost felt as if he was only going through the motions, doing what was expected of him.”

“And Her Grace?”

“I did not meet her. I shall this evening during dinner.” Rosalie paused, remembering something the Duke had said. “His Grace has a sister. I did not know there would be others residing here.”

“That’s nice. Perhaps you two could become friends.”

“Perhaps.” But Rosalie was not going to put her hopes on that. She didn’t expect much from being here, other than having a roof over her head and her worries that came with being an unmarried woman with no guardian.

Soon enough, she was dressed. The dress was very much within current fashions but the black color did nothing for her pale skin. As she sat down before the vanity table, she noticed how different she looked since the last time she’d paid much attention to her appearance. She was slimmer than before, her dark brown hair having lost just a little of its luster. Her blue eyes were rimmed slightly red, the only indication that she had been crying at all. Despite the fact that it was springtime, her freckles had faded since she spent most of her time indoors ever since Frank’s death. In the years before, she would spend nearly every spring and summer outdoors, either tending to her plants or reading in the garden.

For now, she wouldn’t let her lackluster appearance bother her. Justine moved quickly, brushing her hair gently before she pinned it up in a puff, curling the ends so that it fell perfectly in place.

Before she knew it, she was ready for dinner. Rosalie thanked Justine and left the chamber, leaving the maid to tidy up behind her. Now that she was alone, her anxiousness returned. She knew her way to the dining room, having paid enough attention during her tour this morning, but she moved slowly, not wanting to arrive too soon. She was nervous to meet the Dowager and the Duke’s sister. What if they did not take kindly to her? What if they treated her with the same cool politeness the way the Duke had?

Rosalie’s nervousness mounted the closer she came to the dining room and she lingered outside for a moment. Steeling her nerves, she entered.

“Ah, she has arrived,” came a deep voice. “My sister has been thrumming with anxiousness at the thought of meeting you.”

“Brother, you know I never get anxious,” replied a shrill, yet amused voice.

The first person Rosalie took note of was the Duke sitting at the head of the table. He was nodding, lifting a glass of amber liquid to his lips. The moment she walked in, his eyes landed on her and, for a moment, Rosalie felt as if he saw no one but her. His focus seemed to be entirely on her presence now and her nerves grew frayed as she lowered her eyes and made her way to the table.

So she focused on the other two people seated by him. The eldest was clearly the Dowager. She was as thin as a rake, her body adorned with layers of jewelry. She wore a vibrant auburn gown that complemented her black hair perfectly, which was styled over one shoulder. The similarities between her and the Duke were great, even though she appeared feeble and weak in her old age with blue eyes that pierced right through Rosalie.

And then there was the other lady in the room, sitting across from the Dowager, to the Duke's left. Rosalie realized suddenly that someone had been talking when she'd entered but now there was nothing but silence, all eyes on her. The other lady seemed no older than six-and-ten years, looking like the spitting image of her brother save for the fact that her eyes were round and filled with intrigue.

"You must be Lady Rosalie!" she exclaimed excitedly, a wide smile stretching across her face. "Oh, thank goodness you're awake. I was afraid you would sleep forever."

Rosalie blinked, taken aback by the girl's exuberance.

"Maddie," the Duke spoke up. "Try not to frighten her. She's a guest here, so she isn't accustomed to your overbearing ways."

"Overbearing?" The girl—Maddie—looked sharply at her brother, her bottom lip poking out in an adorable pout. "How mean of you to say. Brother, please don't embarrass me in front of our guest."

"I don't have to do a thing," the Duke drawled in a rather lackadaisical way. Rosalie wondered if he was teasing his younger sister or if he was actually being serious. She couldn't tell.

Quickly, she chose the seat next to Maddie. The other girl seemed genuinely excited to have her here, which was unnerving and exciting. *At least someone cares that I'm here.*

"I'm Maddie Simpson," the Duke's sister introduced herself, shifting in her chair so that she could face Rosalie better. "And you're Lady Rosalie, aren't you? I've heard so much about you."

"You have?" Uncertain, Rosalie glanced at the Duke and the quiet Dowager.

"Well, not *so* much. But enough to make me excited for your arrival. When you came, I was spending time with my friends at a teahouse on Bond Street, so that's why I couldn't greet you. And by the time I returned home, I was told that you were in your chamber. You wouldn't answer the door when I came knocking so I assumed you were taking a nap."

"Oh. I was."

"You must have been tired," Maddie went on. "Your home is in Bath, isn't it? It is quite a long and tiresome ride to get to London so I don't blame you."

Rosalie didn't know what to say. Maddie was the complete opposite of everything she'd experienced so far.

"Maddie," came the Duke's warning tone. Maddie shot her brother a baleful glance but she settled down. Then the Duke fixed his gaze on Rosalie and her heartbeat sped up. "Lady Rosalie, please meet my mother, Her Grace, Theodora Simpson."

Rosalie finally met the direct gaze of the Dowager, who had not taken her eyes off her from the moment she entered the dining room. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Your Grace."

"I suppose it would be," the Dowager responded tartly.

Rosalie blinked, taken aback by the remark. But before she could dissect it fully, the Duke spoke once more.

"You'll have to forgive us, Lady Rosalie," he said, even as he gestured with his hand. The footmen waiting behind came forward to serve the first course. "Usually, we entertain more

guests during dinner. I cannot tell when last I've heard such a quiet dinner table, though Maddie is trying her best to make up for it."

"What can I say?" Maddie responded with a shrug. "I have much to talk about."

"I have little interest in the gossip among your peers, Maddie."

"That's too bad, Brother. I'm telling you anyway."

Rosalie watched the exchange with a pang of jealousy. The exchange was light, a clear indication that they were close. That was how it had been between her and Frank.

Blinking back tears, Rosalie focused fully on her bowl of artichoke soup. She didn't get to focus for long.

"Lady Rosalie," came the Dowager's gravelly voice. "Have you ever been invited to a dinner party?"

The question threw her off guard. She had visited the homes of her commoner friends for dinner on numerous occasions, but a part of her felt as if that bit of detail would not be welcomed as a response. So she shook her head. "I have not had the opportunity to be entertained at many events, unfortunately."

"I can tell." The Dowager looked up her and down, then sipped some of her soup. "You clearly don't know what to do with yourself."

"Ah." Flushing, Rosalie looked away. "Forgive me. It may just be because I am not that comfortable yet."

"What an odd excuse. Would you have said the same had you been invited to dine with the Queen, perhaps?"

"The Queen? Well, no—"

"You have not been taught proper lessons, haven't you?"

"Mother, please," Maddie cut in. Her tone was light yet firm, starkly different from the upbeat voice she'd had before. "You're making her uncomfortable."

"Am I?" Theodora didn't seem to care. "I'm simply asking a question, am I not? I've been told that she is twenty years old. Another year and she will be a spinster. Who will marry a

woman who is not only nearing spinster age but cannot make sense of the utensils before her?”

It suddenly felt as if her head was spinning. Rosalie looked down at her utensils, quite confused. Yes, there were more than she was used to, but she had been tutored on how to be a lady as much as any other lady in London. She did not use them because she didn't want to.

Before she could say so, or even attempt to defend herself, Theodora's voice cut back in. “Have you attended a seminary?”

“Yes, I did,” Rosalie responded, her tone soft.

“Oh? Which one?” Just as Rosalie opened her mouth to respond, Theodora waved a bony hand. “Never mind. It does not matter, since I doubt you have retained much information since that time. It is quite unfortunate that we have had to cancel our intended guests this evening to accommodate you.”

The apology was right on the tip of Rosalie's tongue but she did not get a chance to voice it when Theodora spoke again.

“Have you attended a Season before?” she asked.

Rosalie hesitated. She doubted that the Dowager would take kindly to the fact that Rosalie had not gotten the chance to debut at all.

The older woman sighed. “How burdensome. What do you expect to do here? Haven't you thought of your future? Or what you will do if you don't find a—”

“Mother, enough!”

The Duke's bark echoed throughout the room, making Rosalie jump. She gripped her spoon tightly, forcing her tears back, not daring to lift her head.

“Why?” came Theodora's unapologetic voice. “I am only asking the questions that no one else has the nerve to ask.”

“That is because no one would dare be so bold and rude.” The Duke sounded genuinely upset but Rosalie still didn't look up. She moved without thinking, still sipping her soup. She listened as he sucked in a breath and let it slowly out. “Please

forgive my mother, Lady Rosalie. She has a tendency to get carried away sometimes, since she grew up in a home that paid little attention to the feelings of others. I promise you, she means no harm.”

Rosalie sincerely doubted that.

Still, she said nothing, not even able to manage a smile. Her own silence was met with more from the others and, for a while, nothing could be heard save for the gentle clink of utensils against plates and bowls. It grew quite uncomfortable and Rosalie wished she could be anywhere but here.

“This is quite a bother, Lady Rosalie,” Theodora spoke again and Rosalie felt every bit of her body sag.

“Mother—” came Maddie’s soft but warning voice, yet Rosalie knew that nothing would stop her. The matriarch would speak her mind no matter what anyone said.

“I think she has a right to know,” the Dowager justified. “She has come into our manor and will be staying for a while. It makes no sense for us to pretend as if this isn’t an inconvenience. Especially with the Season beginning.”

“Forgive me.” Rosalie rose, not caring that her chair made a noisy scrape backward. She kept her head down. “I wish to be excused.”

“Lady Rosalie—” called the Duke, but she wouldn’t let him hinder her. She couldn’t stay. She couldn’t endure those harsh comments any longer.

So she turned and fled, escaping out just in time for fresh tears to streak her cheeks. How odd. She could have sworn she had been rid of them all.

Sobs broke free as she fled to her chamber. Rosalie found Justine within, still tidying up as she hummed a tune. Her humming came to a sharp halt as Rosalie threw herself onto the bed and cried into her pillow.

Justine tried to console her for a while. But the tears would not stop and for the second time that day, Rosalie cried herself to sleep.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THREE

The night had been long and the morning would be longer. Andrew was not looking forward to it. Already, sleep bore down on him, exhaustion settling in the back of his eyes and clouding his mind. With a regretful groan, he reached for his cup of black coffee and took a gingerly sip, hating the taste but enjoying the way in which it energized him. For today, he would need it.

As a matter of fact, he needed it every day. With every day that went by, sleepless nights plagued him. Memories that he'd spent years of whiskey and brandy trying to bury were now resurfacing, tearing through the shreds of mental stability he had left. He could wear a mask before others, appear the right and proper Duke to all who saw him.

But underneath, Andrew was slowly and surely falling apart and Frank's death had only made it worse.

He sighed, eyes skimming the contents of *The Times* though he was hardly paying attention to any of it. The past month had been a struggle to get through. His dear friend, the man who had suffered and survived as much as he had, was no longer on this Earth. Andrew knew more than anyone that death was a certain part of life. He was used to it. When his father died, he had taken it in stride, though he supposed most of it was due to the fact that he had no warm feelings for his father in the first place.

But to have someone like Frank, young and still so full of life, ripped away from this Earth due to a harsh and sudden illness...Andrew didn't know how to handle it.

And because of that, all the dark things he had pushed to the back of his mind were slowly creeping back to the front.

He let out another sigh. He had been up since dawn, after tossing and turning all night. It wouldn't do to attempt taking care of his business today without coffee to take him through.

At this point, I should just hand my affairs over to a steward and save myself the mental ache. I don't know if I can handle this much longer.

Andrew raised the paper again. At that moment, he heard the door of the drawing room open. It took him by surprise, since it was still very early. Only the servants were up at this hour. He glanced at the door, expecting to see a maid coming in to clean, who clearly didn't know that he was there.

Instead, he caught sight of the wavy brown hair of his new guest, Lady Rosalie, her head turned away from him as she scanned the room.

Andrew's heart skipped a beat at the sight of her. The reaction took him by surprise, as did everything else regarding Frank's sister. He looked away, not liking how aware he was of her now.

She slipped into the room, obviously trying to remain quiet. Andrew's lips twitched when he heard her tiny sigh of relief. And then he tried his best not to smile when, in the corner of his eye, he saw her freeze the moment she spotted him.

It wasn't entirely her fault, he supposed. He was sitting in the corner of the room, most of his body shielded by the high back armchair he occupied. He still didn't look at her, turning a page of the *Times* slowly.

The urge to laugh overcame him when he saw her slowly trying to back out of the room.

"Join me, Lady Rosalie," he called.

She jumped. If he was looking directly at her, he was certain she would be blushing. Andrew turned another page, very much aware of how little he was focusing on the newspaper.

"Your Grace," she breathed. "I don't want to intrude."

“It is no intrusion, I assure you.” Finally he set *The Times* down, looking at her. “I welcome your company. It was getting a little lonely here.”

“Is that not what you wanted?” She inched closer. “It’s fine, Your Grace. I can break my fast in my chamber.”

He raised his brows at her. “Am I so abhorrent?”

“W...what?” Her face went crimson. “I never said that.”

“But you were thinking it?”

“I wasn’t—” Her adorable pink lips thinned as she frowned in consternation. “You’re teasing me.”

“I am,” he confirmed with a nod. “You are incredibly easy to tease.”

She said nothing to that, eyes darting to the door as if she was planning another escape. Andrew couldn’t allow that to happen.

He got to his feet, gesturing to the armchair across from him. “Please, have a seat. I’ll ring for breakfast.”

Lady Rosalie seemed tentative. No longer blushing, she studied the chair he pointed to carefully and then slowly made her way over. Andrew couldn’t take his eyes off her. She was far more interesting than he’d expected—and far more beautiful.

She looked nothing like Frank. That was the first thing Andrew noticed when he first saw her standing uncertainly near the entrance. Where Frank’s hair was nearly as white as snow, she was a dark-haired beauty, with wavy tresses that were currently tucked into a chignon. Her eyes were a deep blue, her face heart shaped with a tiny cute mouth. She was neither short nor tall but Andrew knew that if he came closer to her, she would crane her neck to look up at him.

Her black dress was both fashionable and fitting, complementing her perfectly. Even so, Andrew wondered what it would be like to see her in something more colorful.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked, hoping to break the silence.

Lady Rosalie nodded. “Yes, I did.”

“Good, I’m happy that you’re comfortable. That is all that truly matters right now.”

She looked away, staring out the window to her right. Again, the silence drifted in between them and Andrew could not think of a single thing to say. She seemed somber, now that he was no longer teasing her.

“Lady Rosalie—”

“Your Grace—” she said at the same time.

Andrew managed a small smile. “Go ahead,” he urged.

She shifted in her seat. “I want to thank you for your kindness and generosity. When I received your letter, I—” She trailed off, eyes darting to her lap. “I was at a loss of what to do. Frank’s illness had taken far too many things from me and I was all but certain that I would fall to ruin.”

“I would never let that happen,” Andrew said quietly, alarmed by how fiercely he believed those words. In truth, he had sent that letter out of obligation, knowing that he had made a promise and would see it through to the end. But now that she was sitting here with him, Andrew couldn’t think of any other possibility. Having her here, protecting her from the pains and problems that a young lady faced without her guardian, felt right.

She managed a smile that didn’t touch her eyes. “Again, I thank you. I did not know that Frank had such a close and dear friend in London. He did not speak about you.”

“I’ll have to give him a stern talking to the next time I see him then.”

Lady Rosalie looked back up at him at those words, her brows furrowing slightly. Andrew realized that his droll tone was not being accepted well. Rather than ask if he was jesting, however, as she clearly wanted to, she said, “I don’t know how best to express my gratitude. But I ensure you that I won’t be a burden.”

Andrew frowned. “Are you saying this because of what my mother said last night?”

Lady Rosalie refused to meet his eyes. “Not completely—”

“My apologies, My Lady,” he told her, hoping to keep the annoyance out of his voice. “My mother has a tendency to say the first thing that comes to her mind. I promise, she meant no harm. And seeing that she did not get much of a chance to prepare for your arrival, I suppose she was feeling a little out of sorts.”

Honestly, he had been meaning to speak to his mother about her crass words over dinner last night, but hadn’t gotten the chance. Watching Lady Rosalie flee from the dining room had stirred up such strong anger and protectiveness that he could only sit there and watch in silence, taken by the force of his emotions. She was a stranger to him, the sister of his closest friend yes, but a lady he had only met yesterday. Yet, when he’d caught sight of the tears shimmering in her eyes a second before she’d turned and left, Andrew felt as if he had somehow failed her.

Right now, it seemed as if those same tears threatened to fall once more. She blinked and her eyes were dry again. “I understand, Your Grace,” she murmured and then left it at that.

Andrew propped his leg on the knee of the other, running his finger over the brush of hair on his upper lip. He didn’t take his eyes off her and, as if she was very much aware of it, she kept her gaze solely out the window. For a few seconds, he fell into a trance, admiring the gentle slope of her jaw and the pink tinge on her small ears. He spotted freckles lining her cheeks and running down to her neck and he wondered just how dark they could get.

“Would you like to go for a stroll in the gardens, Lady Rosalie?” he asked suddenly.

She looked at him with surprise. “Truly?”

The tinge of excitement in her voice intrigued him. “Why not?”

“Well, aren’t you busy? I’m sure you have many other things you could be doing than going for a stroll with me.”

Andrew nodded. “Certainly there are a few things I should be getting done but none of them sounds as nice as that walk with you. Unless that is your way of saying you’d rather not?”

“Oh, no, I would love to!” Lady Rosalie rose quickly. She neither smiled nor frowned, but her eyes shone brightly. Then she stopped herself as if she suddenly remembered something. “What about breakfast?”

“Ah, yes, I forgot about that. And seeing that you did not have dinner last night, I wouldn’t want to delay you any longer.” Andrew stood as well. She was positively shaking with eagerness at this point. She could not keep her hands still. “Do you like walks that much?”

Lady Rosalie gave him a nod. “I enjoy spending time outdoors, but I haven’t indulged much since—” She trailed off, not able to say the words. “I love to garden as well. And when I’m not gardening, simply basking in the scents and sights of various plants and flowers gives me such joy. What time should we go for that walk? Perhaps in the late afternoon when it is not too hot?”

“That sounds good.”

“Wonderful. I look forward to it.”

So did he. As a matter of fact, had it not been for the fact that she needed to eat, he would have suggested they go right now. Lady Rosalie stared expectantly at him and Andrew had to bite his tongue to propose that they do just that.

“I should return to my study,” he said after a moment. “As I’ve said, there is much I need to do.”

“Ah, yes.” She slipped into a slight curtsy. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

“For what?”

“For...all that you’re doing for me.”

His heart tore. Slowly, bits and pieces had been stripping off over the years and Frank’s death had done the most damage.

But looking at her now, seeing the pain and fear hidden behind her beautiful deep blue eyes, Andrew made a promise to himself that he would do whatever it took to make her smile again.

“You’re welcome, Lady Rosalie.”

Unnerved by the force of his emotions, he backed away, lingering long enough to give her a nod in farewell. Then he left the room, his heart thudding painfully in his chest. For a moment, he just stood on the other side of the door, thinking back on their interaction.

Then he headed toward his study, putting it to the back of his mind. For now, he had to put back on the mask of the Duke. Later, he could think about her.

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BJVP5XJZ/>

Thank you very much!

OceanofPDF.com

ALSO BY TIFFANY BATON

Thank you for reading *The Duke and His Wallflower!*

I truly hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it!! ♥ If you did, may I ask you to **please write a review HERE?** It would mean the world to me.

Your comments and feedback help me get better!

Some other bestsellers of mine:

Protected by the Duke

Falling for the Duke Next Door

My Gallant Duke

A Fake Bride for the Broken Duke

The Duke and the Bluestocking

Saved by the Duke

**Your support is what allows me to keep doing what I love most, and I'm
forever grateful!**

Tiffany Baton

OceanofPDF.com

LOVED THE BOOK?

If you loved this novel, click [here](#) to find more books like this by this author!



Just click on the image above! ↑

If this wasn't your cup of tea, you can select another trope more to your liking [here](#)!

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Like all true romantics, Tiffany had always been fascinated by the great love stories of the past. The only child of two historians, she had always felt a pull towards British History and the epics that it spawned. But, instead of following in her parent's footsteps, Tiffany chose to express her love of history in her own way: by writing about her favorite era.

After obtaining a degree in English Literature, Tiffany decided to write her first book and never looked back. When she isn't writing, she enjoys spending time with her own Prince Charming, and their two beautiful children, enjoying Massachusetts' natural wonders.

Hop on for a unique journey in Regency England, filled with intensity and heartwarming romance. Let Tiffany's words bring the enchanting heroes of an era long gone back to life and charm their way into your heart!



OceanofPDF.com