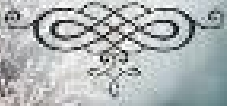




COBALT FAIRY
PUBLISHING



The Duke of
Vengeance

SALLY VIXEN

THE DUKE OF VENGEANCE

A STEAMY HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE
NOVEL



SALLY VIXEN



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ABOUT THE BOOK

“You deserve the world. But I am too broken to be able to give you that.”

Lady Lydia always loved mysteries. So, when she accidentally overheard two men arguing in the dark, she knew she needed to get to the bottom of it. No matter how great the danger...

When Duke Edwin’s sister disappeared two years ago, he swore he would not give up until he found her. So, he is more than furious when a nosy spinster almost ruins his carefully laid out plans. Until she discovers some hidden letters between her sister and an anonymous admirer, leading right up to her disappearance.

To justify the time the two spend together, they decide the only solution is to fake a courtship between them. But pretending to be in love makes it all that harder to resist the undeniable passion that starts to develop between them, and they cannot afford any distractions. For another lady has just disappeared. And the letters that Lydia’s sister has started receiving look dangerously close to those they found hidden in his sister’s closet..

CHAPTER 1



“*I* did not think that any of them would turn out like this,” Lydia Lambert, the eldest daughter of the Earl of Russton, heard someone say nearby. She recognized the voice. It belonged to an old friend of her late mother’s, and most certainly, the woman was talking about Lydia herself and her sisters.

“Like what?” another voice asked. Lydia wondered that herself as she eavesdropped on a conversation that was about her yet not meant for her.

“Well, so... appropriately,” the woman replied with incredulity in her voice.

Lydia looked proudly around the ballroom, congratulating herself on a job well done. Her rosy, freckled cheeks were glowing with delight as she watched her younger sister, Selina, dance with the Viscount of Lipton and their youngest sister Anna converse joyfully with the other ladies. Things were finally all in their place as they should be. There would be weddings afoot, and she was the one responsible for the joyful union.

“... late mother... absent father... older sister took good care of them...” That was all Lydia heard as she distanced herself from the ladies and this conversation. She had heard enough.

She exhaled with relief, thinking that she deserved a break. All this stress of being a constant help to her sisters had started to take a toll on her. Truth be told, it was simply how life had turned out for them. The untimely and tragic death of their mother left the Lambert family in a state of utter disarray.

The Earl, although a kind and loving man who would do anything for his daughters, was completely oblivious to the needs of three young girls. He always expected his wife to be there, to lead them onto the right path and eventually into the arms of a loving husband. Without the matronly presence, the Earl felt lost, like a ship in the open seas having entered a tempest without any sight of salvation in the form of land.

Quickly, it became obvious to Lydia that she would need to be the motherly presence in her sisters’ lives. As for her... well, her own happiness would not be a priority. First, she needed to lead her sisters onto the right path and only then, focus on herself.

Suddenly, she felt someone’s reassuring hand on her shoulder. She turned around and was met with her father’s loving gaze. She smiled back.

“Are you enjoying yourself, my dear?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, mostly so he would not worry. She would rather have a moment of peace with her own thoughts.

“Why aren’t you with your sisters or with your friends?” he wondered. “I hate to see you all alone.”

She almost told him that she’d had so few precious moments alone lately that she relished every single one of them. But he would not understand, just like he did not understand many things that were happening lately.

“I shall join them in a moment, rest assured,” she said, propping herself up on her toes to give him a peck on the cheek. “I think I need a breath of fresh air first.”

“Would you like me to accompany you?” he suggested.

“No,” she shook her head, and at that moment, someone by her father’s side, an old friend, pulled him back into the conversation which obviously needed his presence to continue.

Throwing one last glance to assure herself that everything was truly in order with her sisters, she headed out into the garden for some fresh air. The garden was illuminated enough for her to venture a little further away from the house, seeking a moment of peace and solitude. Surrounded by tall blossoming flower beds, tall trees, and thick shrubbery, she closed her eyes, enjoying the peace and quiet.

Then, suddenly, she heard angry voices coming from the other side of the thick, bushy fence. She tried to peer through it, but the thick leaves and the darkness did not allow her to see clearly or to see at all, for that matter. If she wished to see the two men, she would need to walk around the fence towards the opening.

Everything inside of her told her she should head back. This was none of her business whatever it was these two men were discussing. But Lydia Lambert was a lover of a good mystery, and what was more mysterious than two men arguing while concealed in the garden?

Led by curiosity, Lydia walked closer. Ever since she was a little child, she loved solving puzzles and mysteries. She would have one of the servants hide an object then leave clues as to its whereabouts. Lydia had come a long way in her search for good mysteries since those days, but this one promised to be the biggest one yet. There was no chance that Lydia would allow this chance to slip past her. She had to see what all this was about, even if that knowledge came at a price. After all, didn't the solution to all good mysteries come at a certain price? The only question was whether someone was willing to pay it or not.

With those thoughts in mind, Lydia tiptoed closer. The voices were becoming clearer. She could hear what they were saying, instead of only snippets. Revealing only a part of her face, she caught a glance of the two men. One seemed familiar. The other, who had his back turned to her, did not. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness easily although there was enough light coming from the torches around.

“Tell me, damn you!” the one facing her demanded of the other, his voice laden with fury. “When was the last time you saw her?”

“I do not owe you any explanations!” the other one spat back even more angrily.

Light from a nearby torch illuminated the first man's face. He was tall, much taller than what was considered to be average

male height. His shoulders were equally broad to match his height, and his arms were long, ending in fingers that were now curled up into fists. His brown hair was tousled, wild, and curly, but his eyes were what captured her attention. They were a striking blue, the color of pure rainfall. She could see that even from this distance as his eyes shone bright in the darkness, fueled with despair and rage.

The other man still had his back turned to her. He was shorter. His voice was deeper, and it resembled a growl more than human speech. His entire body was positioned forward as if he were about to attack the other man. He was merely biding his time, waiting for the right moment.

“Answer me!” the other man demanded, sounding enraged. He obviously needed this information as much as he needed the air to breathe. Lydia wondered who the woman in question was. Perhaps a paramour? A sister? Someone obviously very important if that man was willing to make such a scene during a ball.

“If you keep pestering gentlemen such as myself on these issues, I shall make sure that you are cast away from the *ton* in no time,” the man with his back to Lydia threatened.

She wondered if such a threat had any weight. If the other man valued his position in society, he would not be here, verbally attacking this man and demanding answers so publicly. He probably did not care one bit what the *ton* would think of his total lack of manners. He was obviously trying to find out something important, and he refused to allow anyone to stand in his way.

“I shall keep pestering whoever I damn well please,” the man with the questions growled his insistence, “until I have the

answers I am searching for!”

Once again, there was the issue of the mysterious lady. Lydia could not help but wonder about her identity and what she meant to the man. He must have loved her dearly. The thought panged her. She doubted that such deep, passionate love was destined for her. For her younger sisters, certainly. She had made sure to teach them all about what they needed to look for in a man who would prove to be a good husband. As for herself and her own husband, she had no time to ponder on that topic. It was not a priority.

Even now, she believed that she had been deemed by all eligible men in town as someone who was focused on her sisters and not her own life. No man wanted a wife who valued the happiness of her siblings more than her own happiness. Yet, that was something that came naturally to Lydia. No one forced her to become a second mother to Anna and Selina. It was a role she stepped into, almost like second nature. Then that second nature became first, and she slowly realized that she was living for her sisters with her own life blending into the backdrop.

“I won’t ask you again,” the man snarled.

At this point, Lydia believed that the two men would fight each other. That was the only way she could see this ending.

“You were the one who accosted me in the garden of this ball!” the other man replied. “I should call the constables to have you removed!”

“Call them. I shall gladly share with them what I know regarding your involvement in all this!”

“My involvement!” the man screeched. “How dare you accuse me of anything! Why someone might overhear you and –”

At that moment, a dry branch snapped underneath Lydia’s foot. She didn’t immediately realize that she had made that sound. Only after the two men turned in her direction, staring at her in shock and disbelief, did she realize that she had made her presence known.

The first man, the one with the questions, had his eyes blue and wide like the oceans. It took her only a single moment to realize that she knew that man. She knew who he was which made this situation even more awkward. She wanted to run away without saying a word, but something forced her to remain there, to stay put and endure their shocked gazes of incredulity.

Her eyes traversed the distance from the first man to the second, the one who refused to reveal what he knew regarding the mysterious lady. She had no idea who he was. Besides, she only managed to take a single look at him, not long enough for any of his features to awaken the memory of someone she knew. Realizing that someone was eavesdropping on their conversation, the other man instantly ran away, disappearing in the garden. His footsteps reverberated for a few seconds then everything was enshrouded in silence once more.

The only thing Lydia could hear was the frantic beating of her own heart, palpitating in her throat, making it increasingly more difficult to breathe. She still had to endure the scornful gaze of the man who refused to take his eyes off of her. When he spoke, it was cold and without any affection.

“I had him right where I wanted him,” he told her, his nostrils flaring with anger that things obviously did not end the way he had hoped they would. “Are you pleased now?”

CHAPTER 2



“*I* ... I... I’m sorry, I...” the lady who ruined the one chance he had of finding his sister kept stuttering her apology which, at this point, served very little purpose if any.

Edwin Carter, the Duke of Combston, did not know this woman. In fact, he believed that he had never seen her in his life prior to this moment. She was a stunning vision of strawberry blonde hair and green eyes, standing in her curve-hugging gown. Her rosy cheeks were flushed into a poppy red, most probably the result of having been caught eavesdropping on a conversation that had nothing to do with her.

He tried not to allow her beauty to distract him from his purpose which was more important to his own existence. He could not believe that he was so close to finding out what he needed to know. He had that man right where he wanted him. It was a chance that would only occur once in a lifetime, and this was it. He would be getting no second chances. He sighed heavily at the thought, blinking hard as if his own eyelids threatened to close on him.

“I...” she said again, her lower lip quivering, then she turned to go without being able to finish her thought.

“You know, the least you can do right now is introduce yourself,” he shouted after her.

His words stopped her mid-step. Her gown fluttered around her feet in the night breeze. Despite all his conscious effort not to pay attention to that, he still could not stop seeing her as a stunning vision in lilac, a light emanating from somewhere deep inside of her. The light of curiosity? It seemed he would need to remind her that curiosity killed the cat.

She hesitated for a moment. He thought she would not dare turn to face him. She would run back inside, hoping he would not follow her. To be quite honest, he had no intention of following her. He had other people he needed to follow, other people he needed to speak urgently to. This lady, beautiful though she may be, was a distraction.

Then, she turned around. Her eyes were fierce, unyielding, although everything about her body assured him that she was one step away from running back inside. That was her first instinct. Yet, he seemed to intrigue her as much as she intrigued him, no matter how reluctant he was to admit this.

“I am Lady Lydia Lambert,” she announced, her voice trembling, but she managed to push on. “I am the daughter of the Earl of Russton.”

Edwin knew the Earl only superficially. He had been introduced to him on one occasion and exchanged a few pleasantries with him, but other than that, the man was a stranger. His daughter was even more so.

“I am—”

“I know who you are,” she interrupted him. For some inexplicable reason, it pleased him that she knew him. “You are Edwin Carter, the Duke of Combston.”

He expected her to curtsy in front of him, but she did no such thing. That amused him even more. He reached into his pocket, well aware of the fact that she was not taking her eyes off of him for even a second. He took out a cigar then proceeded to light it.

“Well, if that is all—” she started, but this time, he decided to interrupt her back.

“No,” he cut her off, inhaling deeply, enjoying the smoke filling his being. He knew it was a horrible habit. He was supposed to have quit it a long time ago. In fact, he managed to quit then this whole madness happened, and it was now the only thing that provided some solace in this tempest of troubles. “The least you can do now is keep me company for a little while,” he added nonchalantly.

He had spent so much time chasing ghosts for the past two years that he had already forgotten what it was like to be in the company of a lovely young lady. Perhaps he could be a normal gentleman just for a few precious minutes and just enjoy her company.

He thought she would refuse his request. After all, they were outside in the garden, alone. Unchaperoned. Her reputation might be at risk if someone came outside and saw them. Then he remembered what she had already done. She had already risked her reputation by coming out alone then eavesdropping on a conversation that was none of her business. She was

obviously unlike any other young lady he had met before. That too intrigued him immensely.

“I apologize for my lack of manners,” she said, regaining some of her composure, although that blush on her cheeks was still as prominent now as it was several minutes ago. It suited her perfectly. He didn’t like that pale, porcelain complexion ladies preferred these days. He enjoyed some blush on a young lady’s face.

Her voice soothed him in a way he found surprising. While he was still angry regarding how this situation ended, he realized that he was eager for some company. *Her* company.

“I was simply worried because I heard two people arguing,” she added.

He grinned. “You thought you could talk some sense into us?”

“I...” she started, but once again, could not bring herself to finish. Her confusion was so endearing.

“You were curious,” he pointed out, taking another puff of his cigar.

She pressed her plump lips together so tightly that they turned into one single slit on her moonlit face. He was right. She simply did not wish to tell him that he was.

“I can’t blame you for being curious,” he finally said, wishing to take some strain off of her. Besides, it was true. If he heard

someone arguing, he would probably have done the same thing. Claiming otherwise would be unfair. “Although, curiosity can be a dangerous thing, especially for a young lady.”

As soon as he said those words, he could not help but think of his sister. It had been two years since her disappearance. Two long years, with each passing day more difficult than the one that preceded it. Rachel had always been a wallflower. There was childlike curiosity in her, and that was how she perceived the world. She was gullible and trusting. She believed all men and women were good, decent people. She never even dreamed that someone might have any desire to harm her in any way.

Rachel was his younger sister, his only sister. As her older brother, he was supposed to be her protector. They were supposed to be each other’s harbor. They were supposed to keep each other safe from harm. He failed her. That was why he could not rest until she was found and brought back home.

“I think curiosity is what makes life truly worth living.” She surprised him with her reply, bringing him from his troubled thoughts back to the present moment. “If you aren’t inquisitive, if you don’t ask questions, if you don’t notice the mysterious things around you, why are you living then?”

For a moment, he was stunned into silence. He had to admit that he wasn’t expecting such a profound response, especially not in the situation they had found themselves in.

“You like mysteries?” he wondered, already sensing what her answer would be.

“Ever since I was a child,” she confirmed. “I think life is one big mystery. We all have this capability of trying to solve it, but not everyone wants to do it. Some are content living mediocre lives without questioning any of the whys or the hows.”

Suddenly, he realized that her curiosity might be a problem. She might start asking questions, and that was the last thing he needed right now.

“Did you recognize the man I was speaking to?” he asked her, sounding grave. She noticed the change in tone. He could see it in her expression.

“No,” she shook her head. “Who was he?”

“That doesn’t matter,” he replied with silent relief. This didn’t mean that she would not be asking any questions on her own, but at least she did not know who the man was. “Believe me, it’s better for you that you do not know him.”

“Why were you arguing with him?” she asked boldly, and once again, he was stunned by her determination to find out more about what just happened.

He smiled. “I’m afraid that would be a tale too long to tell in the few minutes I plan on spending here with you. Furthermore, it is a tale that still has no end, so I would not know exactly what to tell you. Bottom line, it is best that you do not tell anyone of what you’ve witnessed here.”

“I might do that,” she told him, “but my curiosity needs to be satiated.”

She said it with such sweet determination that he could not help but chuckle out loud. He took one last puff of his cigar then threw it on the ground carelessly, stepping on it with his shoe. Yet another thing that was not exactly according to the rules of the *ton*, but he stopped caring about those a long time ago — somewhere around the time when his sister disappeared, and he realized that he had no one to rely on for help, no one but himself.

“You are a tough negotiator,” he had to give her that. She seemed to like that unusual compliment. “All I can tell you is that I spoke to this man demanding information regarding the disappearance of my sister.”

Upon hearing that, her facial expression changed immediately. There was no more defiance, no more confidence, just pure human sympathy. He had not seen such an expression of true compassion in a long time. It surprised him to see it from a complete stranger.

“I am truly sorry to hear that,” she said softly.

Against his better judgment, he continued talking about Rachel. “Everyone thinks she is dead,” he admitted, and the potential truth of those words weighed heavily upon his heart, like the stab of a thousand daggers all piercing through him at the same time in one swift puncture. “Or that she ran away of her own accord,” he added the other, softer version of events, the one which he still wholeheartedly believed in. “I am certain that she is still out there, waiting for me to find her, and that is what I intend to do, no matter what.”

She smiled. It was a smile unlike any other he had ever seen. In it, he could see the glow of innocent cherubs, and he could hear the music of an angelic chorus, all voices singing in unison as one.

“I would have done the same for my sisters,” she admitted. In that admission, he felt he just gained an ally.

There were so many other questions inside his mind. He suddenly wanted to know all there was to know about her. He wanted to hear her thoughts, her wishes, her dreams. But the silence was overpowering. A comfortable silence. The sort of silence that enshrouded one in a cozy embrace, promising only good things to come.

He had no idea how long they were standing like that, occasionally catching each other’s gaze only to look away again. He could not have imagined that this woman would understand him more than those who knew him for ages. She took one look at him and understood why he refused to give up searching for his sister. It was simply how older siblings were. At some point, they become parents, protectors, guides. It was a role one would never outgrow. It lasted forever.

Then, the spell seemed to be broken. It made Edwin sad, but he knew that this moment could not last forever. It came suddenly, and it caught him by surprise. He welcomed its appearance nonetheless, despite the knowledge that it was all too fleeting.

“Well, I’d best head back inside,” she said, still with that flicker of a smile on her face.

“Of course,” he nodded. He regretted putting her in this risky situation of being unchaperoned with a gentleman, but at the same time, he relished the precious time they had together. He was certain that she was a lady unlike any other he had met. A part of him wished to see her again, but he was caught up in the momentum of things occupying his life right now. He had no time for courting. It would be unfair to her.

“Good night,” she told him, her lips widening into a proper smile this time. Her eyes sparkled even more now as if filled with some inner light she had revealed only to him right now.

“Good night,” he smiled back.

She turned to go then stopped. When their eyes locked, she made him a promise. “Your secret is safe with me, Edwin.”

With those words, she tiptoed back into the house, disappearing from sight. The sound of his name on her lips inflamed him. It awakened passions he thought were long buried and forgotten under the burden of finding his sister. But they were there. They had awakened. And he feared it would be a difficult task to put them back to sleep again.

CHAPTER 3



“Susannah?” Lydia called out to her lady’s maid that evening as Susannah was combing her hair, preparing her mistress for bed. She gave her one of *those* looks. Lydia knew that Susannah would recognize exactly what was expected of her. No words of explanation were necessary. The plan for that evening was more than obvious.

“You can braid my hair in the back,” Lydia instructed. “I want to be as simple as possible. Nothing convoluted. Also, if you would be so kind as to bring me your blue dress from last time, the one with the roses. I really liked that one. It is so comfortable for dancing!”

Susannah smiled. Lydia smiled in return, taking her friend’s hand into her own. “You have no idea how much I appreciate your willingness to cooperate with me in my shenanigans,” she chuckled. That was what Susannah and she always called their adventures.

“You know, in all the years of me working as a servant girl, which I’m counting now more than ten, I never had such a strange request,” Susannah expressed her surprise as many times before. “Not that I mind, My Lady. It is, in fact, nice to see someone wanting to be an ordinary woman instead of it being the other way around.”

“This is all sometimes suffocating,” Lydia admitted, looking around at nothing in particular, “but I am grateful for it all, nonetheless. I simply like to live outside the confines of this house.”

The rest of the house was sound asleep. Lydia had started sleeping in her own chamber years ago, leaving Anna and Selina in another to keep each other company while she herself got some respite from everyday obligations. That privacy was also rather beneficial when it came to Lydia’s nightly wanderings as she liked to refer to them.

“You know,” Lydia remembered, “I will never forget the first time I explained what was required of you.” They both chuckled. “You could not understand why I wanted to dress as a commoner, make my hair in that same manner, and go out to a tavern where I would be treated as any other commoner.”

“I honestly could not, My Lady.,” Susannah admitted, amused by this reminiscence.

“You see, for someone like me, it made perfect sense. Every single hour of every single day requires of me to be prim and proper. My own behavior always needed to be a guide for the behavior of my sisters. That means if I were to make any mistakes in behavior and decorum, my sisters would follow suit, and I could not have that.” She paused to sigh heavily then she continued, “It is very difficult to appear constantly proper, to perpetually speak and act in the right manner.”

“And when you are a commoner, you do not need to be any of these things,” Susannah added.

“I could be someone else,” Lydia agreed. “During these outings, Lady Lydia Lambert does not exist any longer. She is asleep in her chamber. The Lydia that is out there is someone else entirely, someone who does not need to think about manners and decorum, someone who could watch people live completely differently from her, simply and without the restraints of polite society that I feel are strangling me like a noose.”

“You know I will always be there for you, whatever it is you wish to do, My Lady,” Susannah smiled, and Lydia felt overwhelmed to have someone by her side in her adventures. After all, going through them alone would not be even half the fun, and it might even be dangerous as well.

That night, like all those nights before, Lydia and Susannah snuck out of the house, making sure that no one noticed their departure. They could never use their own carriage for these purposes. Lydia could not trust one of their footmen with this secret. She was already forced to place her trust in Susannah. That was one person, but more than one would mean that a secret was not as safe. Lydia would worry that one of them might mention something unintentionally to her father, who would probably have a heart attack to learn what his eldest daughter had been up to behind his back! Lydia generously wanted to save him from the burden of that knowledge.

At first, Susannah felt uneasy about all this, but slowly, she learned to enjoy it as well. Lydia felt unrestrained. She could converse with people. She could laugh with them. She could dance to her heart’s content, and no one would be any the wiser.

Upon entering the tavern, Lydia was washed over with the rowdy sounds of song and merry laughter. Everywhere she looked, she could not recognize a single face. It made her even more comfortable. She ordered two drinks for them and immediately started to dance. A few men were giving her interested glances, but she was never afraid when she was in a tavern. Lydia had learned not to return those gazes, and it quickly proved to the men that she was not interested in them but rather in dancing and having fun.

However, sometimes it happened that there was someone who did not understand such subtle hints, and Lydia had to be more vocal about it. When a man approached her while she was dancing, she smiled back politely but tried not to engage in either dancing or conversing with him. However, he was resolute to exchange a few words with her. He leaned closer to her, and she could smell beer on him.

“Oy, luv,” she heard him say, drawling out the words. “Fancy a dance wif me?”

“Thank you,” she smiled, trying not to get too close to him as he had already tried to put his arms around her. “I’m here with my friend, and I wouldn’t want to lose sight of her.” That was the first thing that popped to mind. She could not very well refuse him outright. It would be rude. It might also be dangerous. She did not know what sort of a man he was. It was best to always deny people’s wishes in the gentlest manner possible.

“I can ‘andle two of yah,” he told her with a lewd look in his eyes, after which he laughed loudly.

Just when she was about to tell him that she was not interested, another woman came up and pulled the man by the arm.

“Come nah, Tim, leave the girls alone, will ya?” The lady gave Lydia an understanding look, and Lydia smiled.

“I was just...” the man started, but the woman, who was obviously his sister or perhaps a good friend but not his wife, kept pulling him away good-humoredly, telling him it was not nice to accost young ladies in such a manner.

Lydia sighed with relief, already thinking that such a situation could have escalated into something she would be unable to control. Such a possibility was always present, and she was well aware of that. After all, she and Susannah were two young ladies out on their own without any gentlemen to keep them safe.

At the same time, this was what she wanted, to be away from anyone who might be enshrouding her with protection. She could handle herself, and she could protect herself well enough. Truth be told, she still hadn't found herself in such a situation, but something told her that she would be able to handle herself just fine.

She continued dancing, minding her drink and just having fun with Susannah. She was a nobody here. She was just another nameless face in a crowd, acting exactly how she wanted to act. There was no right or wrong. There were no demands that chained her to act in a certain way. She could be who she truly was. She could express her curiosity about the world around her and about the people in it and everything that ever interested her.

No one in her family understood this need of hers. She knew if they ever found out, they would be shocked. Even worse, they

would be disappointed in her. Flabbergasted, even, that she would want to experience something like that. Lydia knew that no matter how hard she tried to explain it, she would never be able to make them see things the way she saw them. So, it was best to keep this side of herself a secret. As for Susannah, Lydia was certain that the sweet girl would not tell a soul about their occasional nightly wanderings. In addition to that, she was well compensated for them which was another incentive to keep quiet about them.

Lydia had no idea how long they were there as one hour blended into the next. Suddenly, Susannah pulled her by the hand and leaned to whisper something in her ear.

“Isn’t that Philip?” Susannah pointed at a man in the corner of the tavern who was too busy chatting with his friends to notice them.

Lydia looked in that direction. It took her eyes a little while to focus her gaze then she truly did recognize one of the footmen employed in her home. He had distinctively wide lips which revealed almost all of his teeth not only when he smiled but also when he spoke, so recognizing him was no difficult feat.

Lydia knew that it was imperative they were not seen. Although she was dressed differently, and her hair was done unlike she usually did it, she was not disguised in the sense that her face was any different. He would surely recognize her if he came up to her closely. She could not allow that to happen. She needed this secret. She needed this one thing that was solely hers, that brought her so much relief and comfort.

“We need to leave, now,” she told Susannah as fear gripped her. The longer they stayed there, the more likely it was that Philip would look in their direction and see them. If not her, he

would recognize Susannah and surely approach her to greet her.

The two women held hands, searching for another way out which they found after asking for it. They stumbled out into the dark night, and for a moment, Lydia could not tell whether they were supposed to go left or right to get back to the main road. She pulled Susannah left and, mistakenly, ended up in an even darker alley. The moment they stepped into it, Lydia saw a group of four men, huddling in a corner, talking in a hushed manner.

She swallowed heavily, gripping Susannah's hand. A lady alone in an alley at night was not safe, especially if there was a group of men involved. Their best option was to slowly back up the way they came from, but instantly, one of the men turned to face them. The moment he saw them, his face lit up. Then, the eyes of others fell upon them, and the two girls froze in place. Lydia could not remember the last time she was this frightened. Susannah squeezed her hand tightly.

If they ran back, they might make it. Those were the first thoughts that rushed through Lydia's mind. It would take them only a few seconds. The men would not catch up with them that quickly.

But something forced her to remain where she was. That man. She had seen him somewhere before. But... where?

"Wait..." that same man spoke to her, pointing his index finger at her. "I know you!"

Lydia's heart sank all the way down to her heels. It seemed that the feeling was more than mutual.

CHAPTER 4



The words echoed all around her like daggers aiming straight for her and Susannah as they watched the men in horror, anticipating what they might do next.

“You were the one eavesdropping on my conversation with the Duke at the ball,” the man continued. Now that he spoke longer, she recognized his voice. It had the same tone of anger, the same tendency to growl.

He squinted as he took a closer look at her, as if to make sure that she truly was who he thought she was. When he was finally convinced of it, he continued talking.

“You are no commoner!” he revealed to the others. He turned to the men, his words and eyes leering. “We got us a real lady here, gentlemen. She has obviously come for some fun that the *ton* doesn’t provide.” Hearing those words made the men laugh heartily.

Lydia shuddered at the sound of that laughter. It was rowdy, out of control. This man was their leader. Whatever he wanted, they would do. All he had to do was say it. She was certain of that, and it made her even more frightened. Susannah was still

holding her hand. This helped a little. At least they weren't alone. It was some solace.

“Well, my dear,” the man said, moistening his lips in a way that made Lydia nauseous, “if fun is what you are in search of, you have come to the right place. We shall show you what real fun is, and we'll make sure your pretty, little mouth doesn't say a word of what you've heard here.”

Lydia had no idea what the man was referring to. Did he think that she overheard something in the garden or perhaps now? He seemed convinced of it.

“We don't want any trouble,” Lydia tried to speak to them calmly, but she had a feeling that nothing she said would be of any help. She could see it in their eyes. There was wickedness and malice in them, the likes of which she had never seen before.

“Neither do we, do we, chaps?” The man spread out his arms wide like an eagle about to take flight. He looked enormous, and his shadow was even bigger while the girls resembled two frightened mice. That was also how she felt as her heart was beating right in her throat, about to jump out of her own body.

Leaving the comfort and safety of her home this evening was a mistake. Lydia could see that now. However, even in this darkest hour, she did not regret doing what she wanted. She regretted that she got Susannah involved, and now, the poor girl would also bear the brunt of her mistress' curiosity and desire to have fun. That was the only thing Lydia felt sorry about.

She looked at Susannah. Fear was etched on her face, making her appear at least ten years older as lines scoured her forehead. Lydia was certain that she looked the same. She tried to fight that fear, to force her brain to come up with a solution to this predicament.

The only way out she could see was to run away. The men would surely run after them. She doubted that she and Susannah would be able to run back inside the tavern in time. The men were too close, and with each passing second, the distance between them and the girls was being diminished.

The clock was ticking. Lydia had to act fast. She could either remain here and face them or try to run away. Either way, the odds were stacked against her and Susannah. That much was obvious. Still, Lydia refused to give up. Whatever fate had in store for her, she would welcome it with her head held high and willingness to fight until her last breath. She only hoped that Susannah knew how sorry she was that she put them both in this situation.

“What do you say we start with the servant girl, lads?” the man asked, eyeing Susannah from top to bottom as if she were a piece of meat, and they were at a market. Susannah shuddered.

Lydia instinctively stepped in front of her friend. This was all her fault. She would be damned if she would allow them to lay a finger on Susannah. The man seemed amused by this show of valor. The other men chuckled as well. Everything Lydia did was mere amusement to them while she felt as if her own spirit was leaving her body, little by little with each passing second.

“If you are going to do something, do it to me,” she ordered much more forcefully than she thought she was capable of. “But you leave her alone.”

All the men stopped laughing. Something told her that her outburst of courage not only amused them, but it also shocked them now. They were stunned that a woman would not yield to fear and promise to do whatever they wanted just so they wouldn't hurt her. Lydia was not certain whether the men would hurt them or not, but she knew one thing, and that was the simple fact that she would not beg, no matter what monstrosities the men had in store for them. She would not give the men that pleasure. They could take away everything else from her but not her dignity. That was the one thing she vowed to keep to herself, no matter what.

“You would sacrifice yourself for a mere servant?” the man spoke, approaching Lydia.

He had come so close to her that she could smell liquor on his breath. She considered pushing him, attacking him, but that would only aggravate the others more. She couldn't risk that.

“She is not a mere servant,” Lydia snarled, squeezing Susannah's hand even more firmly. “She is my friend.”

“Oh, how lovely,” the man mocked her show of camaraderie. “If she is your friend then by all means, we shall –”

The man wasn't allowed to continue his sentiment as someone's daring voice tore through the veil of cowardice that these men had woven.

“So, you attack young ladies in dark alleys now?” the voice cried, piercing through the darkness and bringing forth hope.



The sight that awaited him in the alley was the last thing he expected. Edwin had asked about Baron Bolton inside the tavern, and after some coaxing in the form of cold, hard coins, he was told where to find the man. What he couldn't even dream of was that he would find much more than he bargained for.

He didn't even recognize Lydia at first. He thought the girls were just two unfortunate servant girls who had snuck out of the house they were employed in for some good times, and now, the good times had turned dark. Only upon a second glance did he recognize her. His heart danced at seeing her, but he instantly realized the trouble she was in. This enraged him. The thought of what could have happened to her if he hadn't stumbled upon them was too terrifying to even consider.

“What are you doing here, Combston?” Bolton growled. Edwin had a powerful *déjà vu* feeling. It was the garden conversation all over again.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Edwin replied, walking over to the girls and stepping between them and Bolton, shielding them with his body. The message was clear.

“We are just conversing with the ladies here,” Bolton shrugged innocently. “Weren't we, ladies?”

Edwin turned to Lydia. He could immediately see the fear in her eyes. The shock. The disbelief that this was happening.

Bolton was a scoundrel. Edwin could at once anticipate what he was planning on doing. The thought made him want to grab Bolton by the neck and wring it once so strongly that it would... But no. He couldn't risk his investigation by doing such a stupid thing. He had to let Bolton go, regardless how much he wanted to hurt the man.

"I think the conversation has come to a sudden halt," Edwin pointed out. "I shall be taking the ladies home as it has gotten quite late. What do you say, ladies?" All they could do was nod in response. He turned to Bolton once again. "Our own conversation is yet to take place."

Bolton didn't say anything to that. Instead, he pulled away, murmured something to the rest of the men, and instantly, they disappeared through the other end of the alley. Now, Edwin was alone with Lydia and her friend. He focused his attention solely on her, incredulous at what just happened.

"Do you mind telling me now, what on earth is going on here?" he demanded in a tone that would allow for nothing less than the entire truth.

Seeing her accosted by those brutes instantly made him think of his sister. He wondered if she was also accosted in such a manner, if she needed his help, and he was not there to provide it to her. The thought tortured him.

"I... I just wanted to have some fun," Lydia explained, still sounding like a frightened little church mouse. "To experience life without being a lady but rather being someone ordinary, someone common."

Edwin's eyes glanced at Susannah then they were back on Lydia again. He understood exactly what she was telling him. However, it seemed that she didn't quite grasp the gravity of what she wanted to have.

"You should know how dangerous it is to go to places such as this one alone without any men around whom you know and could ask for help if need be," he told her, suspecting that she had learned that lesson the hard way. The last thing he wanted to do was drill this message into her frightened mind more, but it was crucial that she never forgot this.

"That was the man you spoke to in the garden," she said, changing the subject.

He sighed, realizing that he could not keep that man's identity concealed any longer. She would eventually find out who he was, so he might as well tell her himself and save her the trouble.

"Baron Bolton," he announced the man's name, which in polite circles still evoked nothing but awe and respect. How wrong they were, they would never know. "A known rake, but that isn't the worst of his traits." He paused to look around, to assure that they were alone then he continued, his voice down to a whisper. "The man is involved in various illegal activities. He even owns an illegal gaming establishment, and..." he paused again, wondering if he should even mention this, but then he decided to say it, "there have been rumors regarding his... bad behavior towards women."

The ladies did not seem to be particularly surprised by this revelation, having witnessed it firsthand.

“He said that I need to be silenced,” Lydia suddenly seemed to remember something.

“He must think that you overheard him talk about those illegal activities,” Edwin revealed. “I myself had to dig deep in order to learn all about them. He has done a perfect job of hiding all trace of it.”

“But I don’t know anything,” Lydia shrugged.

“He thinks you do, and that is enough to consider yourself in danger,” he told her. “He is a perilous man, Lydia. You must stay away from him at all costs.” She seemed to consider his advice then nodded. “All right then. I shall take you both home now before you get yourself in more trouble. My carriage is that way.”

He pointed at the other end of the alley, opposite the one where the Baron and his men disappeared off to. He allowed the girls to go first then, keeping the distance between them as small as possible, he followed them. He was still feeling that strange concoction of emotions. Joy at seeing Lydia. Fear at what could have happened. Anger that she consciously placed herself in such a dangerous situation. She was naïve if she thought that she had that situation under control. She wasn’t thinking. All it took was one second of not thinking for someone’s life to change drastically, for something terrible to happen.

He knew that well. He was certain that was what happened to his sister. One moment of carelessness. One moment of trusting the wrong person. One moment of deciding to go to

the wrong place and being there at the wrong time. That was all it took for someone's life to become tragic.

CHAPTER 5



Lydia could not believe that she was in the Duke's carriage, being taken home. All the events of this evening seemed like something out of a novel, something that could never happen in real life. Yet, they did. She was almost hurt in unimaginable ways by those brutes. It would surely have happened if this man hadn't come when he did and rescued both her and Susannah.

That same man was now sitting across from her. Susannah's head slumped on Lydia's shoulder. It was far too much excitement for the poor girl, and after just a few streets, she allowed sleep to overpower her. The Duke was looking out of the window as the carriage gently rocked while taking them back to her home. Despite the fear which was still gripping her, Lydia realized that she did not wish this night to end. Perhaps it did not have to end just yet.

"Do you have any new leads in your investigation?" she asked.

He looked away from the window and at her as if he were seeing her for the first time, and he was now wondering what on earth she was doing in his carriage. It took him a few moments to gather his thoughts and provide a response to a question he was obviously not expecting.

“Some, yes,” he nodded, surprised that she would be asking such a question. He was obviously unwilling to discuss it in more detail which she could understand. However, her curiosity was insatiable.

“What are they?” she inquired, realizing very well how rude that question sounded. However, her curiosity recognized no lack of manners. It simply desired to be satisfied.

He tilted his head a little as he spoke. “Why do you want to know? So, you can ruin more of my leads?”

For a moment, she thought he was serious, but a flicker of a smile on his face revealed that he asked that question in good humor. There was a wall between them, some sort of a barrier which he had kept up, but she was determined to take it down, especially now that she could see a soft spot.

“So, I can help you,” she corrected him.

“Help me?” He laughed aloud at her comment.

“Yes,” she nodded, remaining serious.

“My dear lady, you are not even able to help yourself, let alone someone else,” he explained, still laughing.

She endured it then continued by remaining on the same subject, only endeavoring to approach it differently this time. “How long did you say your sister has been missing? Two years?”

“Yes,” he confirmed more gravely this time.

“And the constables have stopped looking for her?” She was merely repeating what he had already stated, or what she could infer from the snippets he had told her that evening in the garden. Hopefully, by restating these questions and getting him to open up more, she would be able to piece together the entire story and prove to him that she could be a valuable ally.

This seemed to be the perfect mystery, the kind Lydia had always been looking for: helping a duke find his lost sister. The mere thought titillated her far more than she was willing to admit, even to herself. No longer would she be dressing up as a commoner. That was mere child’s play. Compared to this newfound mystery, her old ways of satiating her curiosity were now pale in comparison.

“Everyone has stopped looking for her,” he said with a heavy, melancholic sigh.

She could immediately tell the amount of love he had for his sister. He wasn’t in search for her out of some familial obligation. It was far deeper than that. He loved her. It was noticeable in the way he responded to questions about her and the way his eyes took on a veil of sadness and grief when asked about her. Lydia herself could feel his pain.

“I feel like they have all given up on her,” he continued without being asked to. She listened to him intently, carefully not taking her eyes off of him.

As he spoke about what he knew regarding his sister's disappearance, which was very little, she realized how strikingly handsome he was. She thought that upon seeing him for the first time in the garden. His eyes struck her the most. Now, they seemed even more remarkable. He himself seemed even more handsome, his physical appearance of a Greek god paired up with his heartfelt story of a lost sister and his utter unwillingness to give up.

For a moment, she didn't know whether this desire to take part in this mystery was entirely innocent. Was she so eager to take part in it because of her curiosity and love for mysteries or was it because of something else, rather someone else? She banished the thought from her mind, assuring herself that it had nothing to do with the devilishly handsome duke. It was all her infatuation with mysteries. She had always been interested in them. This time was no different. Just because there was a strikingly handsome duke involved in the story, that didn't change anything. Absolutely not. This was all about the mystery, not the handsome duke.

Well, perhaps a little. It was *his* sister after all, was it not? It had to be about him as well, at least a little.

When he finished the entire story, she realized that he knew devastatingly little. There was barely anything to go on. Rachel, his sister, simply vanished one night, never to be seen again. No one could understand why or even how. She was not being courted by anyone. All of her friends were contacted immediately, but as it turned out, no one had seen her, no one had heard from her. It was as if she vanished into thin air which was of course a physical impossibility. She had to be somewhere.

Worst of all, she had to be with someone. That was another thing her brother was certain of. While the constables kept

pushing onto him their theory that she simply decided to disappear of her own accord, maybe even with a paramour, he was certain that was not the case.

“Our parents were always traveling a lot,” he explained, “for Father’s business. That was during the time that he was alive. After his death, Mother remained mostly at home. But it was during those years that we were growing up that we were left mostly to ourselves and to the care of servants. That didn’t mean our parents didn’t love us. On the contrary, everything they did, they did for us. However, we still lacked their presence and found solace in each other. We were inseparable as children. Then, when we grew up, our interests separated us somewhat, but I feel as if we still remained close. That is why I believe that if she had any sort of a problem, any fear, any predicament, she would come to me.”

Lydia frowned. “I can understand sisters coming to sisters,” she agreed, “but perhaps she felt like there was something she could not discuss with you.”

“I highly doubt that.” he said, his brows knitting. She feared that she might have offended him somehow by suggesting that his sister did not have enough trust in him, bBut the truth was that there were certain things a lady would not share with a male confidant, no matter how much she trusted him. Still, Lydia decided to let it go.

“You have been doing this for two years on your own without any help?” she asked, leading him right where she wanted him.

“Pretty much, yes,” he nodded.

“You can’t deny that you need help,” she pointed out.

His eyes squinted at her suspiciously. They were back to the part of this conversation which he thought was finished with. Lydia would prove to him that he was far from done.

“How would you know what I need?” he surprised her with his own question.

“Well, you need a fresh, new perspective for one,” she revealed. “For instance, you as a man have had a male perspective on what happened. Don’t you think you could benefit from a female point of view?”

She obviously titillated him with her suggestion. He seemed to ponder it for a few moments then he stared her down.

“That may be so, but what makes you think you could be that help? You already ruined one of my leads, and this evening, you placed yourself in danger,” he reminded her.

“Point taken,” she nodded with as much grace as she could muster. He was right, after all. “I won’t deny that. But you’ve spoken to me enough to know that when I want to do something, I will do it. Nothing will stop me. So, basically, you have two options. Do you know what they are, or would you like me to tell you?”

At this point, he seemed amused. “Do tell,” he grinned.

“We could either work together, which is what I would advise, or I could start following you around, which could result in something even more dangerous than tonight.” She dared him to reply with her eyes.

“You would do that?” he asked, incredulous.

“You know I would,” she assured him although there was no need for that. She was certain that he already knew it. She could see it in the way he sighed. He had almost given up. “Like I said, your perspective is too close to see things clearly. Your judgment is tainted by the love you feel for your sister. You need someone who will see things objectively.”

The carriage suddenly stopped. Lydia knew that they had arrived at her home. Susannah did not even stir. She was still sleeping soundly. Lydia looked at the Duke. He looked back at her. She waited for him to reply.

“We are here,” he told her, instead of answering her comment.

“I know,” she replied stubbornly.

“You won’t let this go, will you?” he asked with a heavy sigh that assured her he was slowly coming to her side. All she needed to do was shake her head in confirmation of this. “Fine. But you must prove yourself first.”

“How?” she frowned.

He thought about it for a moment then continued. “Find out where I was last Saturday, and I will allow you to help me in my investigation.”

“How much time do I have?” she shot her question out without even thinking.

“One day,” he told her.

“One day?” she exclaimed, her brows knitting in displeasure. “That’s not nearly enough.”

“That is all you get. Take it or leave it.”

He said it in such a way that made her adamant to find out if for nothing else than to prove to him that she could do it. He obviously doubted it.

“I take it,” she told him with as much confidence as she could muster.

Then, she turned to Susannah and gently nudged her to wake her up. Susannah opened her eyes, and for a moment, she was shocked to find herself asleep in a carriage. Then, her brain flooded with information, and she realized where she was and with whom.

“Did I sleep through the whole trip back?” she asked.

“Yes,” Lydia smiled. “Let’s go to bed now, hopefully, without anyone seeing us.”

She noticed that the Duke was cautious enough to stop his carriage in front of the main gate not the house. If careful, the girls would be able to sneak back into the house unnoticed. Lydia wondered if she should tell him something else, offer some kind of assurance that she would solve the mystery of his whereabouts easily, but she opted against that.

She would prove herself by doing exactly what was required of her. She didn’t need to waste any more words.

“Good night, ladies,” the Duke addressed them, and just before he closed the door, he added mischievously. “Try not to go to any more taverns.”

Lydia blushed fervently, but before she could say anything to that, the Duke closed the door, and the carriage drove off into the darkness. She watched it until it disappeared from sight then she turned to Susannah.

“Well, this was one night we shall never forget.”

She had no idea how true that was because the adventure she had always been hoping for was just beginning.

CHAPTER 6



It was around noon that Lydia found herself seated in the drawing room with her two sisters. Their father had excused himself with work although he had been hospitable enough to greet their guest and exchange a few pleasantries with him. It was obvious that her sister, Selina, had been absolutely smitten by the man who had been courting her, Daniel Pearson.

Lydia had to admit that she could understand where this infatuation was coming from. Daniel was a strikingly handsome man with his tall stature, broad shoulders, and square jaw. His blonde hair stood in perfect contrast with his eyes that were the color of the bluest skies. Lydia had witnessed her sister stop in the middle of the sentence upon being accosted by those same eyes, unable to continue where she had left off.

In fact, there was a sort of a mystery surrounding this man as well. Lydia had heard from a dear friend of hers that he had changed quite a lot since his childhood. He had never been considered even fairly good-looking, and for that, the other boys always ridiculed him which resulted in him shying away from company and withdrawing to himself. Then, a tragedy struck. He lost both of his parents and was sent abroad to live with an aunt. When he returned, people could not believe it

was him. He was truly a changed man. More eloquent, more social, even more handsome.

Some people grew out of their ugly childhood, Lydia remembered her friend saying, while others wallow in it for the rest of their lives. It just depends on how fortunate one was.

This morning, a very fortunate man was in the company of three lovely young ladies, one of whom he had been courting for several months now. Everyone in Lydia's family welcomed it. Daniel seemed to be the epitome of good manners and seemed to have eyes only for Selina. Lydia could see the joy in her sister's eyes every time she saw him, and this morning was no exception.

He had amused them with one of his numerous stories of living abroad and how the language barrier had proven to be a predicament on more than one occasion.

"... and then I said, well, I don't know whose cat this is, but it certainly isn't mine!" Daniel finished his story, and all three ladies burst into an amused chuckle.

Lydia had been listening intently, just like her sisters had, although she had a secret agenda of her own. Daniel would be her first step in endeavoring to find out where Edwin had spent the previous Saturday evening. It seemed an easy enough task. Most gentlemen spent their nights in one of the gentlemen's clubs. The question would be simply figuring out which one. There were several of them scattered about London, but eventually she would cross all of them off her list but one, and she would be victorious in this easy task that she had been given.

“That was such an amusing story,” Selina said, as always not taking her eyes off of Daniel.

“Indeed,” Lydia nodded. “I bet that even the gentlemen you were with on Saturday night might have found it entertaining.”

Daniel turned to her a little surprised that she would be referring to his evening as no one mentioned it. Lydia had to admit that she did not handle that topic transition as well as she had hoped she would. She hoped to ease into it and not barge through the door like a raging bull. However, she would need to steer the conversation from here.

“Speaking of company on Saturday night,” Lydia continued as if she weren’t really interested in the conversation, but was rather forced to have it, “were you, perchance in the company of the Duke of Combston?”

“No,” Daniel shook his head, still bemused with the questions regarding his whereabouts. “I have been acquainted with the Duke, but we do not share the same company.”

“Did you see him on Saturday night?” Lydia asked again.

“No,” Daniel’s eyebrows furrowed at the question. “Why do you ask?”

“Yes, Lydia,” Anna suddenly became interested in the conversation as well. “Why would you be asking about the Duke’s whereabouts on Saturday night?”

Lydia had to admit that she hadn't thought about it this far. In her mind, the conversation flowed much more smoothly. There were no questions, other than the ones asked by her. She had truly done this rather clumsily, and now, she was paying the price.

"I uhm..." Lydia said, clearing her throat a little in an effort to provide some time. "I am merely helping a friend."

Come on, Lydia, think.

"Which friend?" Anna continued urging.

"Penelope," Lydia could only think of the name of her dear friend who had recently returned to London from a trip abroad.

"Does she know the Duke?" Anna would not stop with the incessant questions, and Lydia knew that she would need to weave an elaborate web of lies, hoping not to get entangled in it.

"She does not," Lydia admitted. "But her father does. As far as I understood, the Duke was supposed to come to their home for dinner on Saturday evening, and he uhm... simply did not appear."

"Without sending any word?" Anna sounded shocked.

Lydia didn't like that she was tarnishing the Duke's reputation, but she was certain that it was not all that bright to begin with.

Besides, she had to find out where he was, at all costs. She could apologize later and explain if need be.

“Yes,” Lydia nodded, trying on her most shocked facial expression. “No word whatsoever.”

“Well, that is rather rude,” Daniel pointed out. “Like I said, I did not see him at White’s. Perhaps he was somewhere else?”

Lydia shrugged. “I suppose it doesn’t matter. Penelope merely mentioned that her father was rather disappointed, and she wondered what could have been more important than a promise a gentleman had made prior.”

“The word of some gentlemen is as empty as their minds,” Daniel suddenly said, turning his attention to Selina and seizing the chance to take her by the hand and plant a soft kiss on it. Selina blushed immediately, her freckled cheeks taking on a poppy red hue with her eyes shining brighter than the stars at night.

Lydia wondered if that was how one looked when one was in love. She had never felt that. *Love*. It was a silly emotion, much like many other emotions. It provided happiness. However, it also could cause pain and misery. She would rather forego the last two and merely keep the happiness. That was why she was mostly focused on her mysteries. They brought her pleasure and joy which was exactly what she needed. Nothing else.

“I think Penelope’s father should cease handing out dinner invitations to gentlemen who do not appreciate what is being offered,” Daniel concluded, and a moment later, another one

of his stories commenced. The story of the rude Duke was easily forgotten by all but Lydia.



It was late in the afternoon when Lydia was waiting for Susannah to get dressed, so the two ladies could visit the Duke. It was all in vain, everything she had done, all the people she had asked, for she did not know the Duke's whereabouts Saturday night.

In the last several hours, Lydia had been scouring all of London in search of any information she could get her hands on. She went to the theatre and asked if the Duke had attended a play last Saturday. The nice lady working there assured her that she would know if he had because she was working that night. He had not.

Then, Lydia made a meticulous plan to go to every gentlemen's club and inquire about the Duke. Surprisingly, no one asked her why she needed this information. They merely shook their heads at her. She wondered if there was some sort of gentlemen's code which she was not privy to, but then, she did not say why she needed to know. She was merely asking. All she could hope for was that they would give her an honest answer.

Susannah had taken on the second part of the task. She entered every inn, every tavern they could think of, while Lydia was waiting outside. However, every time Susannah came out, Lydia knew the answer even before her friend spoke it. No one had seen the Duke of Combston. His whereabouts last Saturday were an equal mystery as they had been this morning when she set out to find out.

Lydia had even made a point of visiting one of her old friends, Lady Dougherty, who had been unofficially considered the biggest gossip of the *ton*. If one wished to find out something, Lady Dougherty was the person to go to. Although they did spend a pleasant hour chatting about unimportant things, Lydia was disappointed to realize that even Lady Dougherty did not know where the Duke of Combston was last Saturday.

“I am ready,” Susannah appeared, dressed in one of Lydia’s old dresses which had been gifted to her.

With her hair done up somewhat and in a nice dress, she could absolutely pass for a young lady. Not that Lydia ever doubted she would. Clothes did not make a person. One’s character did. And Susannah’s character was something Lydia had always admired which was partly why she loved spending time with Susannah outside the confines of their servant master relationship. Lydia had always considered her so much more than just her lady’s maid. Susannah was her friend.

“I wish I could say the same thing,” Lydia sighed.

“You still don’t know where he was?” Susannah wondered although the answer was plainly obvious.

She had visited so many places that she lost count of them. She had asked so many faces that they all somehow blurred into one, and all they could do was shake their head, telling her that they had not seen the Duke of Combston. That was the last thing she wanted to hear.

“No,” Lydia shook her head. “And I am out of ideas.”

She started off with such confidence this morning, but as hours seemed to pass by, Lydia realized that she was getting dangerously close to admitting that the Duke was right. Perhaps she could not find out what he asked of her in such a short period of time. She hated to admit that to herself but even more to him.

“What if it was a trick question?” Susannah suddenly asked.

“A trick question?” Lydia repeated. Her mind started to churn faster and faster.

“Yes,” Susannah nodded. “I doubt he gave you a question you can’t answer. He doesn’t seem to be that sort of a gentleman to set the rules of a game and then set them so only he could win.”

“That’s true,” Lydia had to admit. He certainly did seem to be the type who enjoyed winning, but only if it was a true victory, not a false one where the odds were simply stacked in his favor. He enjoyed the thrill of the rush, just like she did. The anticipation. The game itself where one did not know what the end would be. She knew that feeling well. She had become addicted to it over the years. She recognized that same glimmer in his eyes. That was why she could not believe that he would give her a mystery that had no solution.

“You just haven’t posed that question to the right person,” Susannah said.

Immediately, upon hearing those words, Lydia had an idea. She knew exactly what she needed to do. She jumped in front of Susannah and embraced her tightly. Susannah had already

gotten used to such sudden and unexpected outbursts of love on part of her friend, so she simply smiled.

“You have an idea, don’t you, My Lady?”

“I most certainly do, dear Susannah,” Lydia confirmed, once she released her friend from her grip. She was impatient now, and the visit could not come soon enough. “And I shall need your help with it.”

CHAPTER 7



“So, do you know my whereabouts last Saturday, Miss Lydia?” Edwin asked, relishing the look on her face.

She seemed calm, complacent even. This could be due to one of two options. She had either come to terms with the fact that she did not know where he was which was the option he was certain of, or she knew although he could not for the life of him figure out how she could know when he had simply visited an old friend, and they drank whisky until 5 am, reminiscing about the good old days. He doubted that Lydia knew Thomas, or that Thomas would tell her. It was preposterous to even consider it as an option.

The servant girl had placed the tea tray right in front of them both on a small table. It was his mother’s usual guest tea service and used their finest China although several of the teacups had already broken due to clumsy hands. Her opinion was that there was no point in having nice things if one did not put them to good use.

His sister was also just like that. She wrote with her favorite quill pen in her favorite notebook. She drank tea from her most favorite, most beautiful cup and kept her favorite book always on a little table by her bedside. The thought of Rachel once again gripped at his heart like a monster talon that simply

would not let him be. It was stronger than him — that pain, that heartache, stronger than any other emotion.

He tried to focus on the present moment and the lady sitting across from him. He was stunned to realize that she had been the only thing lately to manage to keep his attention for longer than ten seconds. In fact, he caught himself thinking about her far more often than he ought to have, about her eyes, her lips, the way she swayed ever so softly when she walked. He even caught himself thinking about how delicate her fingers were, willowy and thin, wondering if they would be cold to the touch.

“You said I have one whole day,” she told him, sounding as amused as he was, bringing him back to the present moment.

“Indeed, I did,” he nodded, agreeing with what he initially said. “That means you have several more hours.”

“That is correct,” she confirmed, waiting for the servant girl to pour the tea, watching the entire process as if it were something holy, something to be in awe of. She did not seem to be in any rush whatsoever as if she knew something he did not, and that gave her power over this entire situation.

Several moments later, he was left alone with her. She had been accompanied by her lady’s maid, who had for some reason left the drawing room upon being told something by her mistress. Being alone with her was something he had not anticipated. It both thrilled him and left him somewhat uneasy. He could not understand what could cause the amalgamation of those two states of mind.

“But you are here,” he reminded her, figuring that by focusing on the issue at hand, he would detach himself from the turmoil inside his soul. “In my own home. Aren’t you supposed to be searching for that information outside the confines of my own home?”

“I have been doing that all day,” she admitted, “to no avail.”

He chuckled at this admonition. “Perhaps then you are not as good as you claim to be.”

“I disagree,” she smiled, and it was a smile to die for. A smile burning with confidence and optimism. How he wished he had some of that for himself. “It simply means that I have been approaching this problem from the wrong angle. I simply need to change it, and the solution shall reveal itself to me.”

“Will it, now?” he smiled, leaning back against the chaise lounge, getting comfortable, and with each passing moment spent in this lady’s company, he was more entertained by her.

Entertained and enthralled. But that was something he wasn’t willing to admit. She was a good distraction. He was supposed to be out looking for Rachel, not sitting at home entertaining ladies. Something, however, assured him he was exactly where he needed to be, and that thought provided much needed comfort.

“I am absolutely certain it will,” Lydia was adamant.

Not only that, but she was also radiant as well. He tried to banish that thought from his mind and focus solely on her

brain. Only, that was much easier said than done when her brain was located in such a ravishing body. All the while, he had done his best to keep his eyes focused on hers and not on the soft line between her breasts. When she leaned forward to take the teacup into her hands, he could not resist lowering his gaze and gracing it with the sight of her pale pink flesh peeking out of that tight gown. As soon as she brought the teacup to her lips, his eyes were once again focused on hers... as they ought to be.

“You might as well just tell me where you were,” she suddenly told him, gazing at him from beneath those long, dark eyelashes.

He wasn't expecting this. He chuckled out loud so boisterously that he caught even himself off guard. He could not remember the last time he laughed so freely. When the onslaught subsided, he was able to muster a response.

“So, that is how you plan on finding out my whereabouts? By making me tell you?” he grinned at her. “I think we both know that is not going to happen.”

“I am merely suggesting cutting this waiting short,” she shrugged, seeming unusually pleased with herself, “so we could start focusing on your sister.”

The mention of Rachel once again withdrew from his being all the pleasure he had felt up until this point. The pain returned. The agony of her disappearance, the torment of not knowing where she was or with whom, and if she needed his help... It was too difficult to think about those things, and yet, that was all he could think about.

For a moment, he considered telling her. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps he *did* need help. Lord knew that he had tried all his ideas, and none of them were fruitful. He was nowhere nearer finding Rachel now than he was two years ago. It was slowly killing him on the inside.

Then, he decided against it. He did not need the help of someone for whom this would be nothing but something to pass the time with. Rachel was his sister. She meant more to him than he could explain in words. If he were to be helped by someone, it had to be by someone who proved their worth to him.

At that moment, Lydia's lady's maid knocked on the door, and after being called, she walked over to Lydia. She bent down to her ear and whispered something. All the while, Lydia did not take her eyes off Edwin. Suddenly, her eyes opened up more fully. Her lips widened into a smile. Her lady's maid pulled away and sat down by Lydia's side.

"Thank you, Susannah," Lydia smiled then she addressed Edwin. "Well, it would appear that you were at your old friend Thomas' home drinking whisky until 5 in the morning."

He had never heard someone say something with so much unspoken joy in their voice, with such defiance and sheer amusement. It was obvious. She won. She found out where he was, even the amount of time he spent there. He was flabbergasted. It took him several moments to realize what she had done.

"The staff always gossips, Your Grace," she explained without even being asked to, just so she could show off a little. He had to give her that. She deserved it. "Especially to other servants."

He tilted his head to the side, nodding ever so slightly.

“That was quite impressive, Lady Lydia, I must admit,” he confessed. “I thought you had come here endeavoring to extract that information out of me while I see now that it was merely a rouse while you were waiting for your more than capable lady’s maid to obtain that information for you.”

“Did I prove my worth to you?” she wondered, still with that smug smirk on her face which suited her perfectly.

“I have to say you did,” he nodded.

“Will you allow me to help you now?”

He saw no other way out. In addition to this, he had to admit that he needed the help. He had been doing this for so long on his own. He was out of ideas, out of clues. After all, what did he have to lose by accepting her help?

“All right,” he said finally, realizing that this agreement brought much needed comfort. Something inside of him welcomed the thought of her by his side, helping him. “I don’t know why, but I trust you. I hope you shall prove yourself worthy of that trust.”

“I always believed that everyone deserved your trust initially,” she explained. “Eventually, it can always go one of two ways. I would rather always start with trust rather than with the opposite.”

He had to admit that she was right. What kind of a world would it be if no one trusted anyone? Then again, in this world where people *did* trust each other, he lost his sister.

“I shall tell you all there is to know although I do believe I have told you most of the story. I shall fill in the gaps if I left any,” he said.

“You may do that while we search your sister’s room,” Lydia replied, standing up, leaving her teacup half empty.

“I have searched it several times, top to bottom,” he said, mirroring her action although he had finished his tea already. “I haven’t found anything worthy of mention, at least nothing that would point me in the direction of her disappearance.”

“With all due respect,” she suggested, “you have searched her room with your set of eyes. Mine are different. Mine see different things. Mine notice different things, mostly because I am a lady, and you are a gentleman.”

“What do you mean, you notice different things?” he wondered.

“I mean, I know how a lady thinks,” she said, mysteriously. “I know the way her brain works, what she might wish to show and what she might wish to hide.”

“I don’t understand,” Edwin was confused.

“Allow me to show you,” she smiled reassuringly. “Just take me to her room, and we may start there.”

All Edwin could do at this point was agree. After all, what did he have to lose?

CHAPTER 8



Lydia was stricken by how much hers and Rachel's room were alike. It was the room of any other young lady who loved books, lots of sunlight, bright colors, and beautiful gowns. Suddenly, a frightful realization hit her. Anyone could disappear like that. Just about anyone — her own sister, even she, herself.

Lydia fought hard to banish that thought. She was certain that if someone wished to take her away by force, she would do anything in her power to fight them. Then again, she was certain that Rachel did the same. If she were taken by force, of course. If she left of her own accord, then that was a whole different story.

“Where do we start?” she heard the Duke ask.

“Allow me a moment, please,” Lydia said, standing in the middle of the room and turning around in one place, just to get a feel of the surroundings. “I am trying to find out where I myself would hide things here?”

“You think Rachel hid something from us?” he sounded incredulous that such a thing was possible. She almost did not wish to burst his bubble, but she had to.

“It is actually in your best interest that she did,” she revealed. “Because if she hid something here, we shall find it. If we find that something, we might learn more about what happened. And of course, if we find out more about what happened...” she allowed her voice to trail off, so he could finish.

“... we may find her,” he concluded though with much less hope and optimism than she thought he would have.

Lydia walked over to Rachel’s bookshelf, just looking at the books.

“I took out every single one of those books myself,” he pointed out. “Opened them. Looked inside and outside. I didn’t find anything.”

Lydia didn’t say anything to that. If any of the books was a secret box of some sort, he would have realized it if he opened every single one of them. She decided not to check there first. She walked over to the bed and lifted everything, the pillow, the cover, then checked under the mattress.

“I checked there as well,” he told her.

She turned to him and exhaled loudly. “You checked with your eyes,” she reminded him again. “May I see with my own?”

“Of course,” he nodded, taking a defensive step back, crossing his arms in the level of his chest.

She was with her back to him, but she knew that he wasn't taking his eyes off of her. Susannah was also there, but she was also standing to the side, not wishing to interrupt Lydia. She inspected the bed, although she doubted she would find anything. It had been two years. The bed had certainly been made a million times already, and if there were something in the sheets, it would have been found, just like in the books.

Lydia looked around. Her gaze fell on the closet.

"May I?" She pointed at it.

The Duke nodded, walking over there himself and opening the door, so Lydia could take a closer look.

"We already –" he started then cut himself off. "Sorry," he smiled.

"It's all right," she smiled back, feeling that wave of tenderness towards this man. He wasn't trying to be obnoxious. He was simply worried beyond comprehension about his sister. She could not blame him for being impatient and for being anything other than calm and composed.

She looked inside the closet. Her initial feeling was one of sadness. The gowns hung from the hangers solemnly as if anticipating that they would never be worn again. Lydia tried to banish that sensation. They would find her.

Strangely, she was already invested in this mystery more than she thought she would be. She believed it would simply be something she could occupy herself with, something to satiate

this thirst for mystery solving she always had. But this was so much more than that. She wanted to help this man. He seemed so kind and sweet. She could not imagine his sister being anything other than that. She wanted to see them together again, under this roof. She promised herself that she would do anything in her power to help him.

She started to move the gowns. The smell of lavender permeated her nostrils. It was too strong as it lingered for far too long in a closet that wasn't opened that frequently. She looked up on the shelf. There were two boxes. She took them down and opened them. They only had hats inside. Nothing else.

She pressed the sides of the closet and the bottom, knocking, listening to the sound. It was the same everywhere which meant only one thing. There were no hollows inside. No hidden compartments.

She turned to him. "Did your sister have a favorite jewelry box or a music box?"

"Yes," he nodded, walking over to a small vanity table and taking a pale pink box then handing it to Lydia.

She took it into her hands gently, cautiously. At first, she inspected it from the outside. It was big enough to hide something. She opened it. It revealed a small ballerina, who raised herself upon the lid being opened, and a gentle music started with her twirling around her own axis.

"It is lovely," Lydia gasped at the intricate little ballerina and the soft insides of the box.

“It was a gift from our late grandmother,” the Duke explained. “Rachel loves it very much.”

“I can see why,” Lydia smiled at him then, quickly, returned her attention to the box in her hand.

She could see two rings and two pairs of earrings lying at the bottom of the ballerina’s feet, almost like an offering. Gently, Lydia started to feel the box. Everything seemed to be in perfect order. Then, she looked underneath the box. The paper was peeling from the upper left corner, almost as if someone peeled it off then tried to put it back as it was.

She took out the jewelry then turned the box around. The Duke jumped to be by her side as she did so.

“Did you find something?” he asked, eagerly, drinking in the sight of her fingers touching the corner of the box.

“I don’t know,” Lydia said, not wishing to raise his hopes. “Did you see this?” She showed him the raised paper.

He shrugged. “It’s an old box. Maybe it started to peel off on its own.”

“Possibly,” Lydia murmured to herself. She looked up at him. “May I peel it off completely?”

He hesitated before answering. She could tell that he didn’t want her to. For a moment, she considered just returning the

box and continuing her search elsewhere, but something told her not to. Something would not allow her to let that box out of her hands.

“Please?” she asked, sensing that he needed it.

He looked at her, his eyes filled with grief. She had never felt such a dire need to embrace someone. It took all her conscious effort to fight this feeling, waiting for his to say yes. Finally, he gave her his permission.

Slowly, with a trembling hand, she peeled off the bottom part. That was when they both saw a little indentation, the size of a finger. Lydia cautiously placed her finger there, pressing gently. A barely audible click was heard, and an invisible drawer popped out from the side of the box.

The duke’s eyes widened with shock and disbelief. No matter how much she wanted to be the one to take out the contents, Lydia offered the box to him. At first, he seemed to be paralyzed, unable to move a single part of his body. Then, his hand moved, accepting the box. His fingers fluttered like the wings of a petrified butterfly who wished to fly away, but something kept it still in place. Painfully slowly, he took out a folded piece of paper, and underneath it, he found a dainty golden necklace with a heart pendant attached to it. It sparkled in his hand, taunting them both.

He looked up at her, and for a moment, she thought she could see the flicker of a tear in his eye. Then, he did something which left her stunned. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close to him, so close that their hearts were pressed against each other, feeling each other’s ticking away.

It did not occur to her, even for a single moment, to push him away. It did not occur to her to leave her arms hanging in the air around him. The only thing that she could do, the only thing that felt natural, was to return the hug. She wrapped her arms around him as well, resting her head in the soft indentation of his neck, inhaling his scent.

She had no idea how long they were like that, embracing and silent, when suddenly, he pulled away, clearing his throat.

“Sorry, I...” he started but didn’t know how to finish.

To be quite honest, neither did she. However, that didn’t matter right now. They found a clue.

“That’s perfectly all right,” she smiled, reassuring him.

They exchanged a meaningful gaze, and she knew that there was something. Something she could not explain. Something far more than just this mystery binding them together. She tried to remind herself that she did not know this man. She was here only to help him, nothing else. But she could not prevent herself from enjoying his company, could she? She blushed at the thought and quickly banished it from her mind.

“What does the note say?” she asked in a desperate effort to change the subject.

He unfolded it. She could see him swallow as his Adam’s apple bobbed up and then down.

“It’s a letter,” he said.

“What does it say?” she asked then bit her lip. Perhaps it was too intimate. Perhaps it was not to be shared with a stranger.

Her heart rebelled at this word. She did not wish to be a stranger to him. However, that was exactly what she was.

“If it’s too personal...” she started apologetically.

Instead of a reply, he simply started to read the letter. “My dear, you are the moon that lights up the path of my weary existence. I am so fortunate to have found you, and I hope you shall continue to light up my path for many years to come. Be patient, my love.”

Lydia frowned. “That is a love letter.”

“I have not written many in my life, but yes, I do believe it is,” he said. She appreciated his effort at making a joke at a moment such as this one. That was obviously his coping mechanism to make a situation feel less stressful than it was.

“Is it signed?” she inquired.

“No,” he said, flipping the letter over. “Just what I read.”

“Then, we cannot even be sure it was for Rachel,” Lydia pointed out.

“Why else would she keep it hidden if it wasn’t meant for her?” he wondered. “That doesn’t make sense.”

She had to admit he was right. “Yes. That is the only logical conclusion. It must be for her. But I do not like that be patient part.”

“Neither do I,” he nodded. “It means she was waiting for something, for someone.”

She sighed, seeing the concern in his eyes, hearing it in his voice. She wanted to tell him it would be all right, that they would find her, but she could not make that promise.

“Thank you,” he suddenly said, with a trembling voice. “I never would have found it without you.”

“I’m sure you would,” she said, but they both knew it was not so. He would probably never dare to partially destroy his missing sister’s favorite possession. Lydia had no such concerns.

“We should take this to Mother,” he said, lifting the chain in his hand and allowing it to drop and dangle in midair. They both stared at the heart.

“Is it a locket?” she inquired. It seemed to be too thin.

“No,” he shook his head after he tried to open it.

“It would have been too easy to find someone’s photograph inside,” Lydia sighed. To be quite honest, she did not wish this mystery to be over that quickly. That would mean she would not spend any more time with the Duke which was also something she was looking forward to, no matter how much she refused to admit it to herself.

“Do you think your mother will recognize it?” she asked.

“Exactly the opposite,” he corrected her. “I think she won’t, and that is what frightens me.”

She understood what that meant. Someone else must have given it to his sister. The same person who wrote that letter. The same person who bade her to be patient. When someone was told to be patient, that meant that someone was waiting for something. Lydia shuddered.

What was Rachel waiting for?

CHAPTER 9



“*T*ake a good look, Mother,” Edwin urged her.

At first, his mother didn’t understand what she was looking at. Her eyes squinted in confusion at the object in her hand. Her thin lips were pressed against each other, turning into a long slit on her sad face. It had gotten even sadder in the past two years.

She held the necklace and pendant in her hand, inspecting it cautiously. There was no smile on her face. There was no frown. She did not know what it was. Edwin did not want to tell her immediately so as not to possibly taint her memory with any implications.

“Do you recognize this necklace?” he asked softly.

She lifted her gaze then she looked at the two ladies in the corner of the drawing room. She did know either of them. She had not been introduced to them, nor had they been introduced to her. Edwin had skipped that part, impatient to hear what his mother had to say regarding the necklace.

He could feel his heart beating inside his throat, like an obstruction to his airways, making it increasingly more difficult to breathe. He finally found a clue, something to go on from this moot point he had been stuck on for far too long.

He refused to admit it, but he was angry with himself. How could he oversee the jewelry box? Wasn't it only to be expected that a young lady would keep something truly precious in there? Then, he realized that he would not have had the heart to tear it. He would not have had the heart to change a single thing on it because as it was, it was Rachel's. It belonged to her. It needed to wait for her to return. Lydia did it because she sensed there was something inside. He could see it in the way her fingers trembled. She knew. She simply knew. And for that, he was grateful, more than he could ever express in mere words.

"I do not recognize this," his mother finally said, extending her hand to give it back to him. "Did someone lose it?"

"It was Rachel's..." he said in a voice that was already on the verge of breaking.

Immediately upon hearing those words, his mother snatched the necklace back and pressed it to her chest. Her eyes widened, traversing the distance from her son to the unknown ladies then back to her son again.

"Where did you find this?" she demanded, gripping at the necklace as if she were gripping for her own, dear life. In a way, she was. He was, too. He knew that feeling well.

"I didn't find it," he explained. "Lydia did."

Lydia smiled a little awkwardly as the Dowager Duchess stood up from her chair and walked over to her. She stared at Lydia as if she believed that this young lady held the key to her daughter's safe return home. In a way, Edwin believed that as well. If he doubted that allowing Lydia to help him was ever a good idea, now all those doubts had been erased.

"You found it?" the Dowager Duchess asked, her voice down to a whisper.

"Yes, Your Grace," Lydia nodded respectfully. "In the jewelry box in her room. There was a secret compartment."

She turned to Edwin. "But we checked everything."

Edwin shrugged. "Not close enough, it seems." He took out the letter and handed it to her as well. "We found this, too."

She grabbed it eagerly then read it in an instant. "A love letter?" she asked although the answer was obvious. She simply needed to say something, and in the lack of anything logical, restating the obvious was her only choice. "Who sent it?"

"That's what we plan to find out," Edwin assured her.

"I..." His mother shook her head incredulously at the proof she was holding in her hands that someone was secretly courting her daughter. "I cannot believe that Rachel would keep this a secret from us."

“I am certain she wanted to tell us,” Edwin tried to reassure her, although he himself could not understand this. “There was probably a good reason that she kept it from us.”

“What reason could be good enough for her to keep it from her mother and brother?” she wondered, sounding disappointed.

All of a sudden, she pressed her hand to her chest and closed her eyes. Both Edwin and Lydia jumped to her side at the same time.

“Are you all right, Mother?” he asked, taking her by the hand. He could see that Lydia was keeping a respectful distance, but she was still there at an arm’s reach. He did not even know how much he appreciated her company until this very moment.

“Yes,” she nodded, blinking heavily. “I feel a little lightheaded; that is all. I shall retire to my chamber and lie down for a moment. That should do me some good.”

She gave him back the letter and the necklace then she stood up and walked slowly to the door. There, she stopped and turned around. She looked at Lydia, her eyes the color of green treetops.

“I do not know who you are or how you came here, young lady, but... I am very glad you are here.”

Without waiting for Lydia or Edwin to respond to that, she walked out of the room and closed the door behind her. The

three were left alone. As always, Susannah kept herself at a distance, there only as a chaperone, or if she were asked to help. This time, however, it seemed that her presence was not needed. Edwin and Lydia had eyes only for each other.

He sighed heavily, walking over to the chaise lounge, and slumping down onto it. He raked his fingers through his hair, feeling overwhelmed by what happened. So much time had passed without a single clue, without a single glimmer of hope that Rachel would ever be found. Now, that hope was renewed, and he had Lydia to thank for that.

“I think we should search your sister’s room again, Your Grace,” Lydia suggested.

“First of all,” he said, adjusting himself in the seat, “I think we are beyond the proprieties of Your Grace. Please, call me Edwin.”

“Edwin,” she repeated. Despite being focused on completely different matters, he could not help but love the way she pronounced his name. It sounded like a melody that he wanted to listen to over and over again as it floated down from her lips and into the air around him.

“Secondly, I believe that is a good idea,” he nodded. “I do have another one to add.”

“What is it?” Lydia wondered.

“We should take this necklace to every jeweler in town and ask if they have seen it before, and if they know whom it

belonged to. Any sort of information might be invaluable in our search.”

“Yes,” Lydia agreed. “That is a very good idea. If we are fortunate, we might find out something about the person who gifted it to Rachel, or at least, if she purchased it herself.”

“I doubt she purchased it herself,” Edwin shook his head. “She did not like to purchase things on her own. She would usually send me or one of the servants for anything she needed. I cannot imagine her going out on her own and getting something like this.”

“You couldn’t imagine her keeping a secret from you either,” she reminded him, much to his chagrin, but he had to admit that she was right. His sister had a secret, one she refused to share with him. It hurt. However, he was grateful that he knew about it now because he could move forward with his search.

“There isn’t a moment to lose,” Lydia advised. “The three of us must go visit all the jewelers in town first thing tomorrow morning. In the meantime, your sister’s room must be searched again. There could be more clues, more things we have overseen which we must find.”

He liked how she said *we have overseen*. He relished the fact that she seemed to be eager to find his sister almost as much as he himself was. It made him hopeful that this time, he would actually find her or at least, find out what happened to her. He simply wanted the truth, nothing else. Even if that truth was painful, even if it would break his heart. He had to know. That was all. Living in a state of not knowing was worse than anything else he had ever experienced, and he knew that his mother was going through the same thing.

“It is late now,” Edwin said, glancing at the window.

He had not even realized that night had fallen. Lydia had been here for several hours already, and he wondered how come she was not desperate to return home already. Would she not be missed? Would she not be asked regarding her whereabouts?

He wanted to invite them both to stay for a late supper, but he didn't think that would be appropriate. They all needed a good night's rest, for tomorrow would be a long day that would require much of their attention and effort.

“We should meet in Coronation Street,” he suggested, “and commence with the jewelers there. Hopefully, we'll have some luck.”

“Hopefully,” Lydia nodded, turning to Susannah, and smiling at her. “We should head home. It is really getting late.”

“I shall walk you out,” he offered to which both ladies merely nodded.

They walked in silence outside, to their carriage. First, he helped Susannah up, then, when he offered Lydia his hand, he held hers in his for a moment, feeling the need to thank her.

“I know I have been a little... unpleasant from the first moment we met,” he admitted, “but I am truly grateful to have you by my side as an ally, Lydia.”

She smiled back. “You had every right to be unpleasant. I know I am not the easiest person to get along with. I am somewhat stubborn, you see.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” he said, to which they both chuckled.

Strangely, it felt good to laugh with this lady whom he knew only for a few short days, yet he felt as if their souls had known each other for much longer than that. When they laughed, it was that familiar sort of laughter, the one which allowed strange noises and a full opening of the mouth, instead of keeping one’s laughter constrained. Everything about her felt familiar. That was what assured him that allowing her to help him was a good decision. It was the right decision. It was the decision that would lead him to his sister. He was certain of that now.

“Well...” he started, feeling a little tongue-tied, something he also hadn’t felt in a long time. “Good night then.”

“Good night,” she returned, allowing him to help her in the carriage.

She threw one last glance at him then closed the door. A moment later, the carriage was leaving his property. He waited until he lost sight of it then returned to the house.

He could not sleep that night although he knew that he needed to rest. Tomorrow would be a long day. It would be a good day. It would be a day that would change everything.

CHAPTER 10



“It is a fine piece, yes,” the jeweler by the name of Reginald Willoughby told them as he inspected the necklace with a gloved hand.

His eyeglasses were thick rimmed. They needed to be, so they could accommodate the even thicker glass that helped him see the object in question more clearly. Lydia had heard very good things about him from her friends who had already gotten married. Three of them had purchased their wedding jewelry there and were most satisfied with both the service as well as the jewelry. That was why Lydia wasn't surprised that Edwin wanted to start with him first.

“However, there is nothing unique about it,” Mr. Willoughby finally concluded after a short assessment. It was obvious that it held nothing of interest for him.

“You mean, you cannot tell us anything regarding its origin?” Edwin inquired as the man put the necklace back into a small pouch then handed it to Edwin.

“I'm afraid I cannot.” Mr. Willoughby shook his head apologetically. “There is no engraving inside or on the pendant. The chain itself is very common. You can purchase it

in almost any jewelry store that sells... well, less expensive items.”

The way he said it made it obvious that he was a bit offended that they would bring him such an uninteresting piece of jewelry for assessment when he himself was dealing only with the finest pieces. Lydia looked around and had to stifle her gasp of awe several times at perceiving some of the items he had on display. They were truly masterpieces of gold and of precious stones and diamonds, and any lady would be very fortunate to wear any of these pieces.

However, Lydia was a rational woman. She always considered herself to be one. She had no particular taste for gold. Naturally, she had jewelry of her own, just like her sisters did, most of which had been inherited from their mother, grandmother, and so on. Family heirlooms. Those were what Lydia loved. Jewelry that actually meant something. Jewelry that had been passed down from generation to generation. Jewelry that had the scent, the touch of skin of every woman in their family who had ever worn it. That was what truly made a piece of jewelry worth possessing.

“You could try Nathaniel Emerson,” Mr. Willoughby suddenly seemed to remember. “Down on Wickham Street. I think he sells similar pieces. He might know more about this one as well.”

“Thank you for that information, Mr. Willoughby.” Edwin bowed his head quickly then led Lydia and Susannah out of the store.

Once out in the street, the three continued walking. It was a busy morning, even unusually so. Susannah made sure to give them some privacy as she walked behind them with Edwin and

Lydia walking side by side. They didn't even notice Susannah did this. It simply felt natural to walk in such a manner, almost like a couple that had been courting.

"We should try this Mr. Emerson," Lydia suggested as they passed by different stores, none of which held any interest for them.

"There are three more jewelers here," Edwin reminded her, "all of them selling items of the finest quality. Taking into account what Mr. Willoughby just told us, I doubt we'll have much luck here, but we cannot omit anyone."

"I suppose you are right," Lydia agreed.

She turned to look at her reflection in the shop mirror, and he did the same. She could see him smiling at her.

"Perhaps, while we are there, we ought to get you a necklace as well," he suggested, glancing at her bare neck. "We can't have a lady walking around without being smothered in pricey jewelry," he chuckled.

"Who says I don't have pricey jewelry?" she asked, giving him a mischievous look. "I simply prefer not to wear it."

"Why?" he asked, sounding surprised. "I thought all women loved jewelry."

"I do not feel a strong preference for it," she shrugged, "unless it is something dear, something close to the heart."

“So... if I purchased something for you now, you would not wear it because it would not be close to the heart?” he asked as they continued walking.

“Why would you purchase something for me in the first place?” she responded, cleverly avoiding answering his question.

“It is merely a hypothetical question,” he explained.

“So, you would *not* purchase something for me then?” she turned the question around, playing with him. They both seemed to have a lot of fun, though. That much was obvious.

“Hypothetically?” he asked, unable to resist chuckling.

“Hypothetically,” she nodded.

“I would,” he said, surprising her with his response. Then, before she could ask anything that might clarify this sudden desire to gift her something, he explained himself. “That is solely because you have proven to be of immense help, and I wish to express my gratitude somehow. I have always been taught that a gentleman expresses his gratitude best when purchasing a nice gift for the lady. Seeing we are here in the jeweler’s quarters...” He allowed his sentence to trail off.

“I am in no need of jewelry, I assure you,” she said, taking over control of the situation once more. “As for your gratitude, a spoken word is more than enough. Besides, this is what I always wanted to experience.”

“This?” he wondered, his face suddenly taking on a more serious expression.

“A mystery,” she clarified. “A real mystery.” Then, she realized that he might understand her wrong. “I didn’t mean that I’m glad your sister disappeared, or that I am having fun doing this. I... I simply... oh, goodness. I’m afraid that I have gotten entangled in my own words.”

She said it so endearingly that it immediately made him smile. He could not be upset with her. At least, she hoped he would not be.

“I think I know what you are referring to,” he assured her gently. “There was a time when I believed that I needed more excitement in my life, more of something that would make me feel like I was living on the edge of my seat all the time. Unfortunately, that is exactly what I have received. That is why one should always be careful with what one wishes for — because that wish may actually come true.”

She bit her lower lip, feeling awkward that she worded it so wrongly. That was not what she meant at all. She simply wished to tell him that she felt honored he allowed her to help, even after the mistakes she had made that almost ruined his investigation. Yet, she could not bring herself to tell him this.

At that moment, Edwin stopped in front of the next jewelry store. They entered, and this time, he allowed her to do most of the talking. She was surprised it was so because with Mr. Willoughby, he was the one who explained what they needed and who showed the man the necklace in question. This time,

however, she was explaining everything. He merely showed the necklace.

Unfortunately, this yielded the same result. There was nothing extraordinary about that necklace or the pendant. There was nothing that could link it to any buyer or any jeweler. It was the opposite of one in a million.

The trio exited the store with a heavy sigh. Lydia tried to remind herself that they were still at the beginning of their search. They shouldn't feel discouraged that only two jewelers couldn't identify the necklace. Perhaps Mr. Emerson would know more. She was eager to go to him immediately, to see what he had to say, but perhaps Edwin was right. After all, he had been doing this for far longer than she had. They had to do things in an orderly fashion and not rush it.

The third jeweler gave them the same sort of information. Useless and repetitive. They left his store feeling even more disappointed, despite their desire to remain optimistic and keep their chins up.

“There is another jeweler on a street opposite to this,” Edwin said, pointing in the direction where they were supposed to go. “We can visit him to see what he has to say then we can head to our Mr. Emerson.”

Lydia welcomed the idea wholeheartedly. At that moment, they could see a servant girl running towards them. Lydia immediately noticed that she was staring at Edwin, who was still with his back turned to her. The girl rushed to their side then stopped, breathing heavily.

“Your... Grace...” she said, her voice cutting out from the heavy breathing that was still gripping at her.

He seemed surprised to see her. “Julia?” he called out her name, making it instantly obvious that she was in his employment. “What is the matter?”

“I was sent to get you immediately,” Julia explained, her cheeks red from the strain and her chest heaving. “We found something... in Lady Rachel’s room.”

Edwin’s eyes widened in shock. Lydia’s heart skipped a beat. She could not believe what she was hearing. To some extent, she was somewhat envious that she and Edwin weren’t the ones who found the next clue. She wondered where it was and even more, what it was.

“What did you find?” Edwin urged her, standing in front of the girl, shadowing over her with his mighty stature.

“We turned the mattress around,” Julia explained. “There were several stiches on the bottom which we noticed before, but we assumed it was simply from a torn mattress, and it was stitched at a prior point in time. We were given permission by Her Grace to tear it open, and... we found something.”

“What did you find, Julia?” Edwin asked again, accentuating every single word. Lydia could hear impatience in his voice, but he was still calm and composed. She admired him for that.

“Letters, Your Grace.”

“More letters?” Lydia gasped, turning to Edwin.

“Have you read them?” Edwin demanded.

“No!” Julia shrieked. “We wouldn’t dare, Your Grace. We left them all on Lady Rachel’s bed, and I was sent to come and fetch you immediately.”

Edwin nodded. “You did well, Julia. You may return to the house. I assume Philip brought you?”

Julia nodded. “He is over there,” she pointed at the Duke’s second carriage which awaited her at the end of the street.

“All right,” Edwin nodded. “We shall meet you at home. I want you and whoever was with you to repeat this story to me again when we get home and anything else you may have omitted, is that clear?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Julia nodded.

With one swift move of his hand, Edwin dismissed her, and the trio turned around to go find their own carriage which was parked on the other end of the same street. Lydia wondered if she should ask him something, anything, but one look at him assured her that he was in no mood to talk right now. He needed to process things, and he needed to do it alone. She understood that.

The ride back to the Duke’s home was silent. Susannah had dozed off, as always. Lydia was envious of her skill to always

be able to fall asleep, no matter what was happening around her. When the carriage arrived, Susannah seemed to have taken a restful nap and seemed fresh as a daisy. Edwin and Lydia, on the other hand, seemed dreadfully in need of sleep. That was a trait they obviously shared.

He helped them out of the carriage, and together, they rushed back inside, eager to read the letters and see where the next clue would take them.

CHAPTER 11



Edwin barged into his sister's chamber without knocking. Two of the servants who had obviously taken part in the search were already lined up against the wall. Judging by the looks on their faces, one would think that they were being accused of a terrible crime, almost as if they felt guilty that they were the ones who found the letters.

Edwin's eyes traveled from the servants to the letters on the bed. He took them into his trembling hands. They were just folded pieces of paper with writing on them, and yet, they held the secret to his sister's disappearance. They would be the key to this mystery. He knew they would. He simply had to read them the right way.

"Tell me again how you found them," Edwin demanded.

This time, another servant retold the story, using different words, but basically, it was the same story all over again. There was nothing new.

"You didn't find anything anywhere else?" he asked although he was certain what the answer to this question would be.

“No, Your Grace,” the servant girl replied.

“Very well,” he nodded. “You are excused.”

The servant girls curtsied quickly then scurried out of the room. Lydia and Susannah remained behind. He turned to them.

“I would like for just you to stay,” he told Lydia. “I don’t want to do this alone.”

Lydia understood. She gave Susannah a meaningful glance, and her friend also immediately curtsied and left the room. Edwin and Lydia were left alone. Silently, almost solemnly, he approached the bed. The letters were neatly folded into a small pile, and there was a red ribbon wrapped around them, keeping them elegantly in place.

“This is exactly like my sister,” he said, looking at the letters. “Whenever she truly cared about something, she made sure that it was kept nicely wrapped in a nice box or at least with a nice ribbon. She is careful like that.”

Lydia smiled. It always warmed her heart to hear with what affection he spoke about his sister. It was apparent that he truly cared about her.

He sat on the bed, taking the pile into his hands. He pulled one end of the ribbon, and it loosened up. He unfolded the first letter. He could see that Lydia wondered if she should sit by his side, but she decided against it. wanting to allow him a private moment with the letters. After all, it was *his* sister, not

hers. He appreciated her thoughtfulness although something inside of him wanted her by his side. He wanted her presence around him, calming him down in his most dire moment of need.

He swallowed heavily, before starting to read aloud. "My dear Lady Rachel, I hope you shall forgive me for this intrusion upon your time, but ever since I laid my eyes on you, I have fallen madly in love with you. Your beauty is truly beyond compare. Your smile is as radiant as the sun itself, and your eyes... they sparkle brighter than the stars at night." He paused, frowning.

It was one cliché after another. Smile as bright as the sun. Eyes that sparkle like the stars or in another version, like diamonds. Those were phrases used by those who could not come up with anything better, anything more original.

He lifted his gaze to meet hers. "Rachel had no admirers," he said, explaining. "She was... insecure. Lovely, but very shy."

"A wallflower," Lydia reminded him of the word he was looking for.

"Yes," he smiled. It was a melancholy smile. It broke her heart.

That explained why Rachel would grab onto these cliché statements of tenderness and appreciation. She wasn't used to receiving such attention from gentlemen. When the first one came along and offered her his compliments, she gladly accepted them. Edwin could understand that.

Edwin looked back down at the letter and continued to read. “I fear I am much too timid to reveal my identity to you as of now. All I can offer is my undying devotion, for a lady as exquisite as yourself comes along only once in a lifetime. I know I shall be asking far too much of you if I even dream of a response, but I wish you to know that it would make me the happiest man alive. If you wish to reply, please take your letter to Crownsfield Park and leave it under the bench, the one by the little fountain. I shall find it easily. I would love it dearly if you would approve of this love pursuit. For that is what this is — a love pursuit. With this, I end my silly profession of love and hope that my words have not been thrown against the wind in vain. Yours forever, your secret admirer.”

This was where Edwin stopped reading.

“No name?” Lydia asked.

“No,” Edwin shook his head. “Just a secret admirer.”

“Are the rest of the letters from the same man?” she asked although it was obvious to both of them that this was merely the first letter in a row of other, similar ones.

He took the second letter and continued to read. It basically retold the same things only in different words. There was yet another profession of love, his gratitude that she had somehow been brought into his life, and his desire for this love to never disappear. However, there was something else in there. He was thanking her for writing back.

Then, Edwin read the next letter and the next, until there were only two left. Even though they could not see Rachel’s replies,

it was evident that she was intrigued by the man, that she was more than flattered to be considered so beautiful and so special by someone. She was interested in the stranger, whoever he was.

Edwin took the penultimate one and with a heavy sigh, continued to read. "My dearest, sweetest Rachel," it started. "Seeing you was like climbing on top of the highest mountain and truly breathing in the freshest air for the first time in my entire life. I have never been so utterly enthralled by someone, so completely smitten by someone's beauty and personality. You truly are precious, Rachel. I am so fortunate to have found you, to have you love me back as much as I love you."

Edwin looked up at Lydia. He wondered if she could read the look on his face. He was filled with rage, with displeasure, with guilt that all of this was happening right underneath his nose, and he never noticed it. Not even for a moment did he suspect that his sister, his wallflower sister, was courted by a stranger in the night.

"They met," he said, almost not believing that he was saying these words out loud. "She went and met this man... I... I cannot believe my sister did this..."

"Don't blame her." Lydia rushed to sit by his side. The moment she did that, something inside of him lit up. He turned to her. "You said it yourself. She was insecure of herself, of the way she looked. None of this is her fault."

"You're right," he sighed, feeling guilty that he even thought of that.

“Read the rest of it,” she urged.

He had had enough. He could barely go on, but he knew he needed to. They needed to go through all the letters. Perhaps there was more to be found out about this man, about his identity.

Edwin cleared his throat then went on. “There is nothing I would love more than to take a stroll with you through Hyde Park, hand in hand, and show everyone that you belong to me, that you belong with me. Alas, that is not possible yet. That is why I must implore you to keep our correspondence a secret for a little while longer. Then, when the time is right, I promise you that we shall tell everyone and allow them to celebrate our love with us.”

“See?” Lydia pointed at the letter. “He was forcing her to keep this a secret.”

“That scoundrel!” Edwin growled. He felt like crumpling the letters and throwing them into the fire in rage, but he knew that would be the worst thing he could do. They needed the letters. They were their only trace of that man. Without them, they would never be able to find him.

“He obviously didn’t want anyone to find out about them,” Lydia said, pondering on what he just read.

“There is only one reason why you would want to keep such a thing a secret,” Edwin pointed out. “You were planning on doing something wicked.”

The thought of someone writing to his sister with the intention of harming her in any way made Edwin furious. He felt helpless just sitting here, unable to do anything else but read the letters this scoundrel had been writing to his sister, right under Edwin's very own nose. He could not take it. He felt like punching a hole in the wall to get this rage out of his system somehow, but he managed to control himself. He didn't want to frighten Lydia. He didn't want her to think that he wasn't able to control his actions.

"Don't think in such a manner." Lydia tried to calm him down. "Rachel is out there, waiting for us to find her."

"Us?" He lifted his gaze to meet hers. Once again, there was that word. *Us*.

"Well... yes, us," she sounded a bit confused but quickly regained her composure. "I am your sidekick, am I not?" she smiled.

"You are," he smiled back. "You are also –" he started, but the door suddenly burst open, and his mother appeared.

Her eyes floated from him to Lydia then back at him. He could see the disgruntlement in them. She was displeased with something.

"Mother, we found letters," he told her, pointing at the heap in his lap. "Rachel had a secret admirer. We fear he might be the reason she disappeared."

Her eyes widened at this knowledge, but she didn't say anything at first. She waited for a moment or two then finally spoke.

"We shall discuss that now, Edwin," she spoke calmly with a note of disapproval, "but Lady Lydia's presence here at this hour is highly inappropriate. Needless to say, that you are also here alone, unchaperoned."

"But we are simply going through Rachel's –"

"I know," she cut him off. "I understand what you are doing, and no one is more grateful to Lady Lydia than I am. However, she is a young lady herself, much like Rachel. A young lady needs to pay close attention to her reputation, lest it becomes... tainted by rumor."

Edwin understood what his mother was aiming at. The two of them were alone in a chamber with the doors closed. Not even her lady's maid was here to upkeep propriety. His mother was absolutely right. He wanted Lydia's help. He needed it. But the last thing he wanted was to ruin her reputation in any manner.

"You are right," he said, standing up, and Lydia immediately followed suit. "I shall see her out."

"Make sure you do so," his mother nodded with something that resembled a smile but did not quite blossom into one.

"Your Grace," Lydia curtsied before the Dowager Duchess, who nodded in return then left the room, making sure to leave the door open.

“I’m sorry,” Lydia said, looking about herself anxiously.

“It is I who should apologize to you,” he corrected her. “I forgot myself. It won’t happen again.”

“It is fine,” she smiled. “I’ll go find Susannah and go home.”

“Lydia?” he started as if wanting to interrupt this silly apologizing, which was utterly unnecessary. He didn’t feel like either of them had anything to apologize for. They didn’t do anything wrong. In fact, they did everything right. They found out Rachel’s secret, and now, hopefully, they were one step closer to finding out where she was. His heart leaped with joy at this realization.

He hated the fact that society made him feel like he had done something wrong. He wanted to be in Lydia’s company. He relished it. She was a wonderful young lady with an even more wonderful head on her shoulders, the same head that would help him find Rachel. However, he knew that society would not see it as nothing. He had to let her go, at least for now.

“Thank you for everything,” he managed to muster.

She smiled so brightly that it illuminated the entire room. “It was my pleasure,” she replied.

What a true pleasure it was, only he dared not say that. Instead, he helped her find Susannah, and then, he walked them both to their carriage. He saw them off, wondering how

on earth he would ever let her out of his life again once this mystery was brought to an end.

CHAPTER 12



Lydia was still combing her hair when the door to her chamber suddenly burst open, and her two sisters entered, giggling something to each other.

“What on earth is the matter with you two?” Lydia frowned at their reflection in the mirror.

They pretended not to hear her question. “There is a visitor here for you,” Selina announced importantly to which she turned her gaze to Anna’s, and they both burst into a chuckle again.

“A visitor?” Lydia inquired. “Who is it?”

“A young man,” Selina said mysteriously.

“A handsome young man,” Anna added, once again with that silly chuckle. “He seems to speak of you in very intimate terms. We had no idea that you were so close to such a gentleman.”

“Ah,” Lydia said with a sigh. “I am not close to anyone, especially not any gentlemen. We are simply friends.” Then, Lydia realized that this would not be even nearly enough of an explanation to satiate her sisters’ curiosity regarding the Duke. She had to come up with something else, something much more plausible.

“He is helping me with a pamphlet I am writing for the Women’s Suffrage Society,” Lydia quickly resorted to the first thing that popped to mind.

She had indeed been very active for the past two years, but in the last several months, her activity has diminished, due to the fact that she was focusing more on her sisters and their prospects of upcoming marriage.

“Helping, you say?” Selina teased.

“Yes, helping,” Lydia frowned, but there was no ill will behind it. It was simply how girls were, how her sisters were. “Now, if you will excuse me, I need to make my hair look decent if I am to see any visitors.”

“He is waiting for you in the drawing room,” Selina added as the two headed to the door. Selina then lingered for one more comment. “Make yourself look very nice, Lydia. He is fetchingly handsome!”

Another bout of giggling, and Lydia was once again alone with her thoughts and her own reflection in the mirror. She quickly pulled her hair up into a simple chignon then made sure that every hair was in its place. Her dress was not the simplest of

the ones she had in her wardrobe, but now, she regretted not wearing something... well, nicer.

Why on earth does it matter what you are wearing? A little voice asked because it knew exactly why. She also knew. She simply refused to admit it.

Stubbornly, she refused to change into a more fashionable gown and descended the stairs, heading straight for the drawing room. She opened the door, and immediately upon seeing her, Edwin jumped up from his seat.

“Lydia,” he smiled, walking over to her then taking her hand and planting a soft kiss upon it. It almost made her blush. *Almost.* It took all of her conscious effort to remind herself that his kisses mean nothing. It is was merely something done out of propriety. Nothing else.

“Your Grace,” she smiled back. Then he frowned. She knew why, so she corrected herself. “Edwin.” He smiled again at hearing his name. “To what do I owe the pleasure of seeing you so early in the morning?”

“Here,” he said instead of a reply to her question. He offered her the newspapers which he was holding up until that moment in his hand. She looked at it then took it. “The front page,” he instructed.

She did as she was told then she gasped at what she read.

“Another lady disappeared?” she asked, almost unable to say the words aloud.

“Mhm,” he nodded. “We need to go and speak to her family.”

“Do you think that they will want to talk to us about this?” Lydia pondered. She could not imagine them being in any mood to share such intimate details with a stranger.

“I doubt it,” Edwin replied honestly. “Perhaps they will if we tell them the truth, that my sister is missing, and we can ask them if their daughter was courted by a secret admirer.”

Lydia sighed. “That doesn’t sound like something one would share with just anyone.”

“Their daughter and sister disappeared,” Edwin pointed out. “Just like Rachel. At first, I didn’t want to talk about her disappearance with anyone other than the constables. Then, I realized that the constables were incapable of helping me. I had to help myself. I had to help Rachel. But I can’t do it alone. I’ve learned that after two years of making the same mistakes. Perhaps if I tell them all of this, they might understand and not make the same mistakes as me.”

Lydia listened to his words which possessed so much wisdom. That kind of wisdom could only come from great heartache. There was no other source for it.

“Do you want me to accompany you?” she inquired, hoping with all of her heart that he would say yes.

He smiled. “If I didn’t want that, I would not be here.”

She didn't know what to say to that. Her mind was swarming with potential responses, then the door barged open, and her two sisters appeared. They were more serious this time, lacking that silly giggling. Lydia was grateful for that. She introduced them to the Duke and explained that they needed to head to the Women's Suffrage Movement headquarters downtown because of that pamphlet. Edwin understood immediately and merely nodded, not adding anything. Even Selina and Anna seemed satisfied with that explanation.

Lydia sighed with relief as she closed the door to the carriage which took them to a family who might have some answers for them.



“Thank you for tea,” Edwin heard Lydia say in an effort to soften the fact that their presence in this home was utterly unwanted.

He could see that the family was unwilling to divulge much regarding the disappearance of one Miss Geraldine Livingstone. However, propriety demanded of them never to banish anyone from their home, at least not until the designated half an hour had passed. Edwin figured that was more or less how much time he and Lydia had to find out as much as they could.

The father of the family was the one who did most of the talking. There was an older sister, who was seated by the ever-silent mother, who had a handkerchief pressed to the corner of her eye at all times. The younger brother was seated by the father, occasionally adding something, but once his father gave him a look, he withdrew as well.

“The last thing we wish is to disturb you in your time of trouble,” Edwin tried to be as gentle as possible, thinking of himself and how he would have wished to be approached on such a delicate matter. “But I was hoping to find out more about Miss. Geraldine’s disappearance because the same thing happened to my sister as well.”

The father frowned. “What makes you think that the two disappearances are even connected? My daughter did not know your sister.”

“That is true,” Edwin nodded, taking note of the father’s negative manner of speech. “But I was wondering if perhaps, your daughter was courted by someone?”

“No.” His response was short, stern.

“What about any letters she might have received from a gentleman?” Edwin asked, and the moment that question passed through his lips, he knew that their time here had finished.

“My daughter did not receive any unwanted letters from any gentlemen, if that is what you are assuming,” the father growled. “My daughter is a fine young lady. If there was a gentleman in her life, we would have known about it. Is that not right, Elizabeth?” he asked his wife, who merely nodded, not saying a single word.

“I am certain that Miss Geraldine is a splendid young lady,” Edwin assured the man. “I am merely asking if you noticed

anything... different about her behavior lately before the time of her disappearance.”

“Different how?” the father asked, and only this time he did show openness to cooperate. Edwin immediately jumped at the opportunity.

“Well, different,” Edwin shrugged, feeling guilty himself that he was asking the same question that others should have asked him. The answer would have been a painful no. “Had she become suddenly more cheerful or more melancholic perhaps?”

“Not that I know of,” he said.

However, he said it in such a way that assured Edwin’s father would rarely notice such things in young ladies. Mother perhaps would. However, this mother could not say a single word. Edwin did not even try to address her directly because he was certain that the father would interfere and offer a reply himself. There would be no use.

“My sister received letters from a secret admirer,” Edwin admitted. It hurt him to be so open about it, but he knew that he was sharing it for the greater good. “We fear that he was leading her on by sending her love letters and then convincing her to run away with him.”

“Well,” the father stood up, sounding insulted, “that may be *your* sister, but that is not what my daughter is like, Your Grace.”

Edwin bit his tongue not to say anything to that. He could understand grief. He could understand rage. He could understand that devastating feeling of helplessness. He tried not to hold it against the man. He did not mean to insult Rachel. He was merely acting in the only way he knew how at a time when he was hurt and bewildered.

“Now, if that is all...” the father continued, and Edwin knew that there was nothing else he would find out here.

“We thank you for your time,” Edwin stood up, and Lydia followed suit.

After quick and awkward goodbyes, they found themselves in their carriage, heading back to Lydia’s home.

“We didn’t find out anything,” she pointed out more to express her displeasure than to remind him of what happened.

“I know,” he sighed. “The father was too defensive to talk about anything regarding his daughter. And her mother refused to talk at all.”

“She was obviously afraid to say anything because of her husband,” Lydia told him.

He thought about it for a moment then concluded it was so. Still, he believed that if there was anything worth being told, the father would tell him. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps the disappearances of the two ladies had nothing in common, other than the fact that they were both shy young ladies

without many friends. That much the father was willing to divulge from the onset then he suddenly closed up.

“We should continue going through jewelers,” he suggested. “We didn’t find out anything from Mr. Emerson, but there are still places in town we haven’t visited.”

“We can do that tomorrow,” Lydia nodded.

“I can come for you in the morning?” he suggested again, wondering if perhaps he was, once again, overstepping that boundary that his mother reminded him of that evening.

“Come,” she smiled. “We need to cover all the jewelers left in town. We need to be more expedient and more efficient.”

He loved how she was eager to get everything done in a single day although such a thing was an impossible feat. Still, her enthusiasm was contagious. He needed some of that in his life. He needed it in his search for Rachel.

The carriage stopped, and he helped her out. Her hand lingered in his for one moment longer than usual.

“Until tomorrow,” he said, gazing at her, unable to take his eyes off of her.

“Until tomorrow,” she echoed his own words back at him.

He kissed her hand softly then released her from his grip. He watched her leave then disappear through the door of her home. He realized that she had walked through another door. The door to his heart. And that realization frightened him almost as much as never finding Rachel.

CHAPTER 13



Edwin was just getting ready to head out, feeling that this day was bound to bring something new, something that would take him one more step closer to finding Rachel. He couldn't help but feel more hopeful than he felt in ages. He knew that he had Lydia to thank for this newfound sense of purpose and mission.

He had to admit that he had fallen into a rut and slowly started to succumb to the frightful notion that Rachel might be lost forever. The thought gnawed at him little by little, demanding his attention, torturing him with its prospects. He endeavored to fight it for as long as he could, but after two years of finding nothing that would shed any light on the mystery of his sister's disappearance, he was starting to lose all hope.

Now, that hope was back. It was shining like a beacon of light in the darkest of all the tunnels he ever had to walk. Yet, he could see the path ahead. He could see where he was going with Lydia by his side.

Suddenly, a knock on the door interrupted his hurried preparations.

"Yes?" he called out with one hand in the sleeve of his coat.

The door opened. His butler, a man who was Edwin's senior by at least forty years and who had also been with the family for as long, peered through the half open door.

"I apologize for the intrusion, Your Grace, but you have a visitor," he announced.

Edwin frowned. "I am unable to see anyone right now, Collinsworth. Tell whoever it is to come tomorrow. I am on my way out as you can see."

"I told the lady that," Collinsworth said apologetically, turning his good, left ear to Edwin. It peeked out of a bush of greying hair. "She urged me to tell you it is of the utmost urgency. It concerns a certain letter."

The mention of a letter immediately made his curiosity peak.

"A letter?" Edwin repeated, ceasing to put on his jacket.

"Yes," Collinsworth nodded again. "She said you would understand."

"Send her in," Edwin instructed, taking off his coat and letting it rest on a small sofa in the corner of his study.

"Right away, Your Grace," Collinsworth agreed, bowing courteously, then left the room.

Edwin felt as if the entire floor was covered in hot, molten lava, and he couldn't stand in one place without feeling the burn of it. He had to keep moving, like a caged tiger waiting for the cage to open.

He heard the noise of the door and lifted his gaze in that direction. Collinsworth ushered in an evidently distraught woman, who was clutching something in her hand. Edwin immediately recognized her as the mother of Miss. Geraldine Livingstone.

"Mrs. Livingstone," he greeted her cordially, approaching her, then continued only after he heard Collinsworth close the door to his study. "How may I help you?"

He knew that he had promised Lydia he would come for her first thing in the morning. This, however, was something unplanned. He knew she would understand.

"I..." Mrs. Livingstone seemed a bit distraught as if she only now saw where she was and had no idea how she ended up here. "I know my husband wasn't very helpful yesterday when you came to inquire about Geraldine..."

He understood this as an apology. "It is quite all right, Mrs. Livingstone," he assured her. "I completely understand the distress your family is in. I know because I was going through the same thing. I still am."

"You said, your sister has been missing for two years?" she asked.

“Yes,” he nodded, glad to see that she was listening to him even if her husband was not.

“Does... does it get easier?” she asked with a whisper. She sounded desperate for reassurance, but he could not give her that. He could not lie to her like that.

“No,” he shook his head. “It doesn’t.”

She sighed heavily, looking down at her feet then at whatever it was she was clutching. She raised her gaze once again.

“I found this in Geraldine’s room,” she started with a trembling voice. “I didn’t tell my husband. He... he wouldn’t understand.”

Edwin was more than certain that he would not. He was of that make, believing that a man needed to have the last word over a woman, and he lacked understanding regarding any womanly predicament. It was, after all, a patriarchal society they lived in, but Edwin never considered himself such a man. He had not been brought up as one while Mrs. Livingstone’s husband obviously caused his wife and daughters to be afraid of him. Edwin could not imagine feeling that way about a member of his own family.

He looked at the woman in front of him. He wondered how much courage and defiance she must have had to keep this letter hidden from her husband, and not only that, but to also come here without him knowing, come to a complete stranger and share this with him. That took a lot of courage. Much more than her own husband had, Edwin was certain of that.

He took the letter and read it quickly. Immediately, he recognized the handwriting. It was the same as from his sister's letters. That meant only one thing. It was the same man. The same man was courting Rachel then Geraldine and who knew how many women in between them...

"You cannot let anyone know about this," she said, fearful for so much — for herself, for her daughter. "This letter... it proves that Geraldine went to see this man. She saw him, alone and unchaperoned. If he finds out, her father will immediately think she is a ruined young woman. Not only him but all of London will think that. They will say she... she gave herself to this wretch of a man, and she went with him of her own accord. I... I could not bear to see that happen."

She pressed her hand to her eye this time and wiped a stray tear. The pain of a mother for her lost daughter was palpable. Edwin had witnessed more than enough of it in his own mother.

"You can rest assured, Mrs. Livingstone, that this letter will not leave my hands," he assured her, "unless you wish to take it back with you."

"Goodness no!" she cried out, shaking her head fervently, looking at the letter as if it were something unholy, something to be afraid of. "I do not want it. I have been keeping it on my person this entire time, fearing that my husband will find it. I cannot live under that strain any longer. I cannot keep it in my own home. Please, you hold onto it."

"Why didn't you destroy it?" he inquired although he knew the answer to that question.

“I tried to,” she admitted. “I almost did. I almost tore it up. I almost burned it. But every time, something prevented me from doing so, almost as if Geraldine was beckoning me not to do it.”

“It is good that you didn’t,” he told her. “Because now I know that the man who wrote to my sister, calling himself her secret admirer, was the same man who wrote to Geraldine.”

Her lips parted. Her eyes became watery with tears, with the horrible images only the heart of a mother could imagine. He knew that his own mother must have been a victim of those same torturous thoughts.

“Do you think he did something to them?” she asked, drowning under the weight of her own words.

“No,” he replied quickly. This was more wishful thinking than knowledge based on fact, but she needed to hear it. He also needed to hear it. They both were desperate for reassurance that their loved ones were all right, that they were simply waiting to be found, waiting to come home.

“Will we ever find them?”

That final question almost broke him. It tugged at his heartstrings. He wanted to hug this woman, as if she were his own mother, and hold her in his embrace until she cried herself out. He wanted to thank her for the letter, for her bravery, for her defiance. He could not muster a single word of it.

“We will,” he said instead. “Never lose hope. Geraldine is waiting for you to find her. It will simply take a little longer than we’re all hoping.”

She smiled gratefully. She straightened her posture a little. Up until this moment, she was bent forward as if she were too heavy for herself. Now, she seemed to find new strength, new hope.

“You coming here was not a mistake,” he reminded her. “It was the best thing you could have done, and do not let anyone tell you otherwise. I shall keep Geraldine’s secret, Mrs. Livingstone. I promise.”

She raised her hand suddenly and caressed his cheek. Her hand was cold and clammy.

“I know you will,” she whispered. “I could see that same pain mirrored in your eyes. You feel it every day, just like me.”

“I do,” he nodded.

She pulled her hand away and turned to the door. “No need to see me out. I have already taken too much of your time.”

Before he could say anything to that, she disappeared through the door, leaving him alone with the letter that proved he and Lydia were on the right track.

He read the letter again and realized that not only was the handwriting the same but also most of the words and the

sentence structure. The villain did not even have the decency to write a different letter to every young lady, but he simply wrote the same things over and over again. For some reason, this made Edwin even more enraged. He knew that if he ever crossed paths with this poor excuse of a human being, he would knock the man's teeth in and then continue to punch him until the man had no more teeth left.

He had to share this with Lydia, immediately. After all, that was where he was headed before Mrs. Livingstone's visit interrupted him.

He grabbed his coat and put it on hastily then he rushed out and jumped into his carriage. He listened to the sound of the horses trotting, realizing how grateful he felt that he had someone to share this newfound knowledge with. After all, it was Lydia who found the first clue and started all of this. Without her, he would still be searching in one place, lost and confused, unable to move.

He was grateful, yes. But he was so much more than just that. The more time they spent together, the more he knew that he was starting to develop feelings for her. The smell of her hair evoked something inside of him, something he never even knew existed. The way she laughed when he teased her had become his favorite sound in the whole world. To be quite honest, he could not imagine sharing this experience with anyone else.

Something assured him that together, they would stop at nothing to find Rachel.

CHAPTER 14



Fortunately, her sisters were gone for the morning, and Lydia could speak with Edwin uninterrupted in the drawing room. As soon as she saw him, she could tell that he had important news to share. The moment she closed the door to the drawing room, he rushed over to her, showing her a letter.

“You would not believe what happened to me this morning,” he told her excitedly.

“Really?” she asked, sharing in his enthusiasm.

“Mrs. Livingstone came to see me,” he clarified.

Her eyes widened in shock. “Wait... Geraldine’s mother?”

“The same,” he nodded. “She gave me this.”

Solemnly, she took the letter into her hands and read it once. Then, she read it once again. There was no mistake about it.

“This is the same person,” she said, her voice filled with excitement.

“One and the same,” he agreed. “You know what this means, right?”

Neither of them could hide their delight. For a few moments, neither could speak. It was enough to remain silent, just enjoying the moment. Lydia knew that this meant a lot to Edwin. Little by little, they were revealing this mystery, putting each subsequent piece of the puzzle into its place. The picture was far from visible as of yet, but they were slowly getting there.

“Someone is kidnapping young ladies,” he finally said. She nodded to that, allowing him to have this moment. “From what we can gather, Miss. Geraldine had the same character traits as Rachel. She was a wallflower, unused to the attention of gentlemen.”

“Yes,” Lydia agreed. She wanted to continue and tell him that this man was preying on young, vulnerable girls with no prospects, but she suddenly worried that he might be offended at this, so she bit her tongue before she could say anything.

“You know, my mother always feared that, as such, Rachel would not have any marital prospects,” he suddenly continued. Lydia was surprised to hear him open up even more than usual.

He paused to take a seat on the sofa, and she could not stay away from him. Something was pulling her to him, an invisible force which she could neither deny nor fight. She sat

down beside him. It was highly inappropriate. Everything about this was. Their time alone. The closed doors. Their closeness. Yet, she could not pull away from him. He was feeding the one thing inside of her that no one else could, and now that she had gotten a taste of it, she constantly wanted more and more.

“She never said it directly to Rachel, of course,” he quickly added. “I would never allow her that. Rachel was far too tender to hear such a truth. But perhaps Rachel overheard her talking. I fear that might have happened. This made her even more vulnerable, and perhaps this is what drove her into the arms of that villain. I blame myself...”

He raked his fingers through his hair then rested his elbows on his knees and buried his face into his hands. She reached out to touch him and place her hand softly on his back, but she pulled away in the last moment. She felt like that would certainly be crossing a boundary which, if crossed, would not allow her to go back. She had to be careful. They both needed to be careful.

“This is not your fault,” she managed to muster, trying to regain composure. Hearing her say this, he lifted his head and looked at her. “Neither is it your mother’s or Rachel’s fault. The only person who is to take the blame here is that vile man. No one else.”

“But I am her big brother,” he shook his head. “It is my job to protect Rachel. I failed her.”

“I know how that feels,” she spoke softly, looking in front of him, not daring to turn her gaze and lock it with his. “When we lost our mother, I knew that Selina and Anna needed a motherly influence. They needed a strong shoulder, someone to be that guiding force in their lives. I knew I could not be

that as a big sister alone. I had to take up another role, that of a mother, and as it happens, when one becomes a mother, you lose a part of yourself because you give that part to others. You satisfy the wishes of others because it makes you happy to see your loved ones happy. I suppose what I wanted to tell you with this was that you can only protect your loved ones up to a certain point. You cannot make the right decisions for them. They have to make them on their own.”

He thought about her words for a few moments. He was also staring at an invisible spot somewhere in front of him. The silence felt good. It was not the awkward silence that drove them apart but rather that pleasant kind of silence that seemed to bring them even closer together.

“That is kind of you to say that.” he said. “But that feeling of guilt will continue to gnaw at me until I find her.” Then, he added the one concern that frightened him the most, “If I find her.”

“We shall find her,” Lydia was quick to correct him. “We shall do everything in our power to find her and bring her back. We shall do the same for Miss. Geraldine and any other lady who has fallen prey to this wicked man.”

“Do you promise?” he asked, unexpectedly. That was the last thing she thought he would ever ask, especially taking into account how all this started.

“I promise,” she smiled.

She turned to him, her eyes wide, her cheeks flaming. She had no idea why he had this effect on her. Actually... she did. She

knew it well. She simply refused to think about it, to accept it as reality.

He turned to her as well. She had never truly seen how handsome he was. Her chest constricted at the very sight of him. Her imagination took a trip, a wild trip, and she realized that she had been dreaming of this intimate moment for such a long time, ever since she interrupted his concealed conversation in the garden. Her desire to spend time with him grew exponentially from that simple desire to solve mysteries all the way to an overconsuming need to be by his side in any manner possible.

Her lips parted in an effort to say something else. They moved soundlessly, but there was no voice. Only her hot breath spilled from her lips. Her heart was beating inside of her chest, wanting to break through the cage of her body and fall right into Edwin's hands, for that was where her heart already was. Only, he didn't realize it yet.

At that moment, he covered her lips with his. It was a sudden movement that seemed to take them both by surprise. There was little finesse to it. She could taste his tongue as he slid it inside her mouth. At first, she didn't know what to do. She simply stood there, allowing him to kiss her.

Then, something happened. It was her first kiss ever. It was not how she expected it to be, but it was with the man she secretly wanted. The raw desire inside of her took over suddenly without any warning. She instantly lost herself in this kiss, provoked to the point of madness for him.

She cupped his face with her hands. His own hands raked right through her hair from her neck upward. He was in control, and she loved it. She allowed him to adjust her head to the right

angle, so he could slide his tongue deeper inside of her mouth as he slanted his lips over her. She could taste his saliva, sweet and with a hint of lemon.

It was a kiss she could never explain in words. It was tender and sweet, yet underneath, raging with all the power it could yield, was savagery and raw desire. When he sucked her lower lip, she felt an unexpected explosion between her thighs, a warmth that up until then only came from her own mind. Now, it came from him.

Her own tongue joined the dance, starting to swirl with his. She was finally kissing him back, the way one ought to kiss back. She dug her fingers into his hair, pulling him closer to her. She dared to suck his tongue a little as well, instantly blushing even more. Her eyes were closed, so she did not care one bit if she looked a mess while doing so. She was completely taken over by the moment, reveling in what she was not permitted to do.

She found hunger inside of her the likes she had never even known she possessed. It was a hunger that demanded to be answered, to be satiated. But this was not the right moment. Perhaps, the right moment would never come, but for now, she had to regain control. Yet, all conscious thoughts vanished from her mind. There was nothing logical to hold onto, just this kiss. Just Edwin's lips. Just this sheer and inexplicable need to kiss him forever.

Then, reality knocked on the barred doors of her mind, and she heard its distant call. Still trembling with desire, she pulled away. Her lips were still pulsating from the pressure of his own lips and from the way he sucked on them. Her eyes were wide and her cheeks felt hotter than lava. Only now did she realize what she had done, and it was the same for him.

“Lydia, I...” he started, his entire body pulling away, creating distance between them as if that would make them forget all about what just happened. “I am so sorry... I didn’t mean to...”

“No, I...” She was as confused as he was. Blaming him for something she herself wanted would be wrong. She didn’t want to do that. “We are both to blame for this.”

“I kissed you,” he corrected her. “I shouldn’t have done that. I was simply...” He endeavored to find a plausible excuse as to what happened as he scratched the back of his neck nervously. “I was so happy that we finally have something to go on; I... I crossed the line.”

“We both crossed the line, Edwin.” She did not want him to feel guilty about this when she was as much to blame as he was. It wouldn’t be fair.

“This won’t happen again, Lydia,” he assured her solemnly as if he were giving the most serious and sacred promise of his life. She believed him although she wasn’t certain that she wanted it never to happen again. But he was right. It was a mistake. Their relationship was and should remain strictly professional.

“I cannot agree more,” she nodded, trying to obtain a modicum of dignity after she grabbed him like a ferocious animal, demanding from him to kiss her more. “We shall forget it ever happened.”

“And we shall never speak of it again,” he added.

They nodded a few more times, just for good measure, then there was silence. Only this time, it did not feel like that pleasant silence. There was something in it that was pushing them apart. She didn't want to allow that to happen.

“So, we are going to visit more jewelers today?” she asked although she knew their plan well. She simply wished to fill that uncomfortable silence with something.

“Yes,” he smiled, grabbing at her suggestion like a drowning man grabbed at someone's hand, promising to pull him out of the water. “I think we should head out immediately.” With those words, he stood up.

She followed suit. “I am ready when you are,” she smiled.

They started to walk towards the door when he mentioned a few of the jewelers that he thought might know something about the necklace. It was all empty talk; she knew that much. They had discussed this once before, but he was endeavoring to make everything all right between them. She appreciated his effort immensely and replied with her own comments.

In the carriage, their conversation continued, and little by little, she felt as if things would truly be all right. Then, she remembered that she said they should forget it ever happened. He agreed.

A dreadful realization seized her, and it gripped at her with its cold talon.

She lied.

CHAPTER 15



They spent the whole morning and half of the afternoon visiting jewelers, talking to them, and asking all sorts of questions. The result was always the same. It was a generic necklace with no particular markings that might divulge where it was made or who purchased it. It was all turning out to be a wild goose chase — at least, that was how Edwin was starting to feel.

The kiss from this morning was still in the back of his mind. Lydia urged him to forget about it. *Forget about it?* He doubted that such a thing was possible. Seeing her like that, so beautiful, so enthralling, he knew that he could not pass up the opportunity to kiss her. It was stronger than him. He completely lost control over his own body, and he relished every moment of it.

However, it was a mistake. They had not discussed any such possibility of their... relationship developing into anything other than aiding him in the case of his missing sister. He basically attacked her. That was how it felt despite the fact that she reciprocated his kiss.

And how... The way she kissed was something out of this world. This sweet but stubborn young lady had a fire inside of her which he had suspected was there, but he could not even

dream that it was so powerful to threaten to burn them both at the same time. She kissed the hell out of him. He almost chuckled aloud at that thought but managed to only smirk and remain silent as the carriage rocked them towards Hyde Park.

His suggestion was that they needed to take a short break, enjoy some fresh air, and allow their minds to rest from their hunt then they would continue with a few leftover jewelers in the vicinity of the area they were in. She surprised him by agreeing immediately. The footman was given clear directions to take them there, and when the carriage stopped, Edwin jumped out, helping Lydia and Susannah climb down.

It was a lovely day for a walk. However, that also meant that there would be a lot of other people there with the same intention. Eyes would see. Tongues would wag. He personally did not care. Not about himself, at least, but he did care about Lydia and her own reputation.

Still, the desire to be by her side was too overpowering. He could have suggested that he take her back home. He could have ended their search for the day right here. After all, it's not like they had much success. They were getting tired of getting the same answer over and over again. Perhaps that was a sign that they were doing something wrong. They needed to change their approach or at least, change something. But he had no idea what he could change. It seemed that neither did she.

Yes, he could have taken her home. He ought to have taken her home, but he didn't. He couldn't. He wanted to gaze at her for a little while longer, and the safest way to do it would be in front of everyone else, proving that they were not doing anything wrong.

They strolled through Hyde Park slowly, walking past other couples and small groups of people. Some of them he knew. Some of them he did not. Yet, they all seemed to notice them. In many ways, London was nothing but a small village with people even more willing to gossip and come up with stories than in a real small village.

Lydia did not seem to care. She was walking languidly as if she did not have a single care in the world. He wanted to offer her his hand, but after what happened this morning, he decided against it. Touching her again might be too much for him. It was safer to keep a distance between them.

“I’m sorry we didn’t learn anything new,” she suddenly said with a disappointed sigh.

“Sorry?” He had to chuckle. “Why on earth would you be sorry?”

“I feel like we failed your sister now,” she said, sounding melancholy. “It is one more day that is lost.”

“You never know what tomorrow will bring,” he reminded her. “Perhaps we shall find her tomorrow.”

The thought sounded comforting although he himself doubted its truth. However, it seemed to be something she needed to hear. He wanted to make her feel better, even if it were only with mere words.

“I tend to be so impatient sometimes,” she said, walking and keeping her eyes fixated ahead of her. “I cannot possibly

imagine how impatient you must be.”

“I am,” he nodded. “But I’ve learned to keep my emotions under control. The past two years taught me a lot about myself.”

“It is so sad, isn’t it?” she asked. It almost sounded as if she was talking to herself, and he was merely privy to her private conversation.

“What is?” he sounded curious this time. He had never heard her be so pensive.

“The fact that we learn most about ourselves when something dreadful happens,” she explained.

He had to admit that was true. “It *is* sad,” he agreed. “We don’t even realize what sheltered lives we’ve led until something happens, something that changes our lives from the very core, demanding us to change as well.”

“You changed when Rachel disappeared,” she pointed out.

“I did,” he agreed, his voice trailing off. Then, he picked it up again. “I was a carefree soul. I always loved my sister, but it was a carefree love. Never, in my entire life, did I ever think that she would be taken away from me, that I would not be able to find her in her chamber or in the library, nestled in the armchair with her favorite book. Those things were difficult for me to accept. Both my mother and I are like that. We keep our emotions to ourselves. We only manage to express them once it might be too late.”

She turned to him and granted him a lovely smile. A sad smile. He wanted to caress her cheek, to keep that smile frozen in his memory forever. But he kept his hands to himself.

“I learned that same thing when my mother died,” she revealed as they turned into a small pathway, away from the bigger crowd, without even realizing it.

The sound of her voice was all he wanted to listen to. Her face was all he wanted to see. He tried to fight this feeling, but it was difficult. He was already too focused on controlling his emotions when it came to Rachel’s disappearance. It was difficult to control himself with Lydia as well, but that was what he needed to do.

“I still feel like I didn’t tell her I loved her enough times,” she admitted with a soft voice that was on the verge of breaking.

He realized that they had much more in common than he initially thought. They both suffered a great loss. He lost his father. She lost her mother. In addition to this, he lost his sister as well, feeling like a big failure for not seeing the signs that were right in front of his nose. She seemed to understand him better than he even understood himself. Her voice soothed him in a way no one else could. And now, she understood his regret. He wondered if there was anyone else in the entire world who comprehended his heart the way she could. He doubted there was.

“I’m certain she knew,” he assured her.

“I know,” she nodded. “But... it is one thing to know. It is a completely different thing to tell it to someone, so that they can be absolutely certain.”

“You’re right,” he agreed. “I also feel that I could have been gentler with Rachel sometimes. I could have been there more although I feel like we did spend a lot of time together. But this... this makes me question what sort of a big brother I truly was. Not a very good one, it seems.”

“I would love to have a big brother like you,” she told him, instantly blushing. She dared not look in his direction although he wanted her to. They merely continued walking as he seared her cheek with his gaze.

He didn’t say that being a big brother to her was the last thing he ever wanted. A friend. A confidant. A partner. A lover. He wanted to be her all. But not her brother. Not the one who would be by her side while she chose another man to love. He doubted he could bear that. Yet, he could not admit to her how he felt.

He could not admit to her because he was fighting it himself. He could not focus on another woman while Rachel was still out there, waiting to be found. She was waiting for him. Focusing on another woman would take away that focus from his efforts at finding Rachel. That could diminish his chances of finding her, of bringing her safely back home. He could not do that. Not after all that he had done so far.

Lydia was here to help him find her. She had already proven to be an immense aid. If they somehow became involved, if they started courting, he believed that this would detract from their efforts at solving this mystery. He hoped that she could understand that, that she agreed with that. He needed to remain

concentrated on the single goal that he had in life. Only after that could he entertain the thought of courting someone, getting married to someone. Not before.

“And I would love to have a sister like you,” he said, each word hurting like a dagger into his very heart. It was all a lie. A big, despicable lie, but that was the only thing he could say in response. Then, to soften it some more, he added. “Rachel would also love a sister like you; I am more than certain of that.”

This time, Lydia turned to him. Her lips widened into a smile. “When we find her, the two of us shall have tea together and gossip about you behind your back.”

He chuckled at her words. He loved how she always managed to make him smile, how she found something to amuse him with even in what seemed to be a dark moment. She would truly be a wonderful big sister. She was already behaving like one towards Rachel. The thought warmed his heart. He wasn't alone in his pursuit any longer, and it made everything easier. It made the burden a little lighter.

“I think I could live with that,” he said, still chuckling. “Rachel could tell you some pretty horrible things when I was a boy, just so you know.”

“Oh, I cannot possibly imagine you being a dreadful little boy!” she laughed.

“You'd better believe it,” he assured her. The conversation was light and humorous, and they were both enjoying themselves

immensely. “The governesses would leave their employment because of me.”

“No!” Lydia pretended to gasp, pressing her hand to her chest, then burst into a boisterous chuckle.

“I would come inside bringing frogs,” he admitted.

“Frogs!?” she gasped earnestly this time. “Those horrid little creatures?”

“They are not horrid,” he laughed. “They are merely... not pretty to look at.”

“They most certainly are not!” Lydia joined in. “I would have thrown you out of the house if you brought me a frog!”

“Rachel actually did,” he confessed.

He proceeded to share a few more humorous stories regarding his childhood, and every time Lydia laughed, it sounded more and more melodious. Then, they realized that it was getting late. They had spent much more time at the park than they intended to, and there was no more time for visiting more jewelers. At least, not today.

He took her back home and welcomed the fact that he would spend some time in his study, reading. He could not remember the last time he felt this relaxed and able to focus. He had Lydia to thank for this peace of mind.

He had her to thank for so many things, even this turmoil in his heart.

CHAPTER 16



Only one single day had passed since the last time Edwin saw Lydia, yet it felt like an entire lifetime. Minutes felt like entire hours, and his mind refused to cooperate with him on any endeavor he had undertaken today. So, he decided that he would sit at his writing table and hopefully, manage to get some correspondence done.

However, as soon as he picked up his quill pen and started a letter to a dear friend who had not received a response in over a fortnight, a knock on the door interrupted him.

“Yes?” he called out.

The door opened, and his mother allowed herself in. She didn’t say anything at first. She merely walked over to his writing table, placing the tips of her fingers onto it, almost as if she were trying to feel the soft, polished surface of the mahogany table. He could tell that something lingered on her mind, something that bade her come here and hesitate to start speaking.

That was unlike his mother. She always spoke her mind freely. That was why Edwin was so intrigued to hear what she had to say.

“Is everything all right, Mother?” he inquired gently, lifting his gaze to her. She did not return it. Hers was lowered to her fingers as they glided against the surface of the table. After a few moments, she sighed then she looked at him.

“It has come to my attention that you and Miss. Lydia have been spending an inappropriate amount of time together,” she finally revealed the cause of her concern.

Edwin thought about it for a moment then had to admit that she was right. In fact, that had started to be his concern as well. He was not worried about his own reputation. His would have been untainted either way. But Lydia’s would not be.

“We are just... friends, Mother,” he said without much confidence in his own words.

“Whatever it is that you are,” she commented, “you must see that you two spending so much time together is highly inappropriate.”

“We are not doing anything inappropriate,” he continued. “She is just helping me find Rachel. That is all.”

She sighed once more. It was evident that she did not completely believe what he was telling her, but she chose not to argue. Sometimes, he forgot how insightful his mother truly was.

“If that is what you wish to believe, that is fine by me,” she told him. “But you cannot take her everywhere with you,

especially without a third person. You know better than that.” She paused for a moment then added, “If you were to announce that you are courting, then it would make more sense to be spending so much time together. But... you said you are simply friends and nothing else...” she shrugged which was also something she rarely did. It was evident that she doubted this was true.

Edwin pondered on her words. Perhaps that would solve his problem. Well, their problem. He wanted to take Lydia everywhere with him. He was certain that she wanted to join him as well — probably not because she craved his presence, but rather because she was as eager to solve the mystery of his sister’s disappearance as he was. He needed her help. He felt now that he could not do it without her. So, if he needed to announce that the two of them were courting so he would be able to spend more time with her and not make it inappropriate, so be it.

“I shall sort it out,” he told his mother.

For some reason, she smiled. She could not know what he was thinking... or could she?

He didn’t know. All he knew was that his mother had better intuition than anyone else he knew. She was aware of things before others could even sense them. Was it possible that she noticed something between him and Lydia?

After all, what was there to notice? Occasionally, he thought that Lydia was looking at him somehow... inexplicably. He could not say she had that look of a lover, but it was a look of awe. Then, he quickly banished the thought from his mind, thinking he was probably merely seeing something that he

wanted to see. His mind created these thoughts because he desired them so much.

Even that kiss was something he initiated. *But... she reciprocated*, his memory reminded him. She reciprocated with such passion that he could barely recognize her in it. Not that he didn't like it. Quite the contrary, he relished every moment of that kiss, and something assured him that he would not experience such a kiss ever again. But she agreed that it was a mistake. It wasn't supposed to happen, and they would never mention it again.

They could never mention it again, but that didn't mean that he would forget it. Ever.

"If you do go to see Miss. Lydia today, do send her my regards," his mother said, interrupting the flow of his tumultuous thoughts. Before he could say anything to that, she walked over the door and let herself out, leaving him with his own wavering mind.

Yes. That was exactly what he would do. He would go to see her and tell her that the only way they would be able to continue searching for his sister together was to pretend to be courting.



"Courting?" she echoed Edwin suggestion. He had only been in her drawing room for a short two minutes when he told her exactly the opposite of what she was expecting to hear. She believed he had some news to share regarding his sister, but in fact, he came to tell her that they had to pretend to be courting.

“Yes, courting,” he confirmed, nodding. “I have given it some thought. We have been spending a lot of time together, wandering about London and –”

“But you know why we do that,” she interrupted him.

“I do,” he agreed, “but others don’t.”

“Who cares about what others think?” she frowned.

“Well... you should,” he said. “And to be honest, I care about not harming your reputation in any way. My mother has pointed out to me that we were seen in Hyde Park.”

“We were not really hiding, were we?” She was still frowning.

“We were not indeed,” he chuckled. “But if we announce that we are courting, this will allow us to... well, spend more time together, so we could find Rachel, of course.”

She had to admit that it made a lot of sense. Her sisters were already asking too many questions regarding her socializing with the Duke. No matter how much she tried to explain to them that they were nothing more than friends, it seemed that they simply refused to believe her. They would giggle and make fun of her, all in good humor, but this still showed that they believed there was more to this story. Perhaps if they pretended to be courting, it would calm down the situation.

“That might be a good idea,” she finally agreed. “But... what do we do? I mean, how does one pretend to be courting?”

He smiled. “I don’t know. I’ve never pretended to be courting anyone before.”

“Me neither,” she smiled back.

“First and foremost, we announce it to our families,” he suggested. “Then, we go together to balls to be seen. We dance together. We... hold hands.”

She immediately remembered kissing him. But they would not be kissing again. They agreed that it was a mistake, one that wouldn’t happen again.

“Then, when we find Rachel, we call it off?” she asked.

“Well... yes,” he nodded, sounding unsure of what he was saying.

“Because we won’t need to spend so much time together any longer, right?” she continued.

“I suppose so, yes,” he replied, equally awkwardly as the first time.

She shook her head, remembering her sisters. “You know, Selina and Anna will be ecstatic.”

“Your sisters?” he wondered. “Why?”

“They already think that something is happening between us,” she admitted, “just because we are spending so much time together.”

“My mother assumed the same thing,” he agreed. “That is why she asked me about our relationship.”

“But we are not in any relationship.”

“We most certainly are,” he corrected her, amusedly. “We are friends, are we not?”

“Oh,” she smiled, blushing a little. “Of course, we are.”

“And we are partners in solving a mystery, are we not?” he asked once more.

“That, too,” she nodded.

“We shall add courting to the equation simply to make things easier on others, not on us. Because we know where we stand,” he explained. This time, he sounded more confident regarding what he was saying.

“Yes, of course,” she confirmed although with much less confidence than he showed.

The truth was that she was not certain where they stood. This all started as her desire to take part in an adventure, to solve a

difficult mystery, and to have some excitement in her life. Then, her purpose deepened. She got to know this man who was now sitting opposite from her. She could see him for who he truly was. She could see past the walls he had built around himself in an effort to hide his true self from the rest of the world that didn't seem to understand him.

She did. She understood him. She could see him as he truly needed to be seen. But that didn't mean anything. He did not need a lady by his side to court. His heart was somewhere else. That much was obvious. And the last thing he wanted to do was take away from his time that needed to be focused on finding his sister.

Perhaps when they found Rachel... her mind relished in this possibility that one day, he might see her as more than just a partner, more than just a friend. However, she dared not give in to this hope. She feared it might break her. It might destroy her. It was safer to simply shield her heart from any potential pain that might be caused.

They were friends. That should be enough.

“There is a ball next week,” he suddenly seemed to remember. “That might be a good opportunity to announce to everyone that we are courting.”

“Lord and Lady Ackerley's ball?” she said.

“Yes,” he nodded. “But we shall, of course, tell our families before that.”

Lydia had to admit that she didn't feel good about lying to either her sisters or her father. She always tried to be honest with them. However, she could not be honest about this. She dared not be.

"Your family first," he suggested.

"I think they shall be ecstatic," she said, rolling her eyes as if she were utterly annoyed that they would be thrilled about her being courted.

He chuckled. "If it's any consolation, my mother shall be thrilled as well."

She laughed. "It actually is."

"Well, all right then." He suddenly got up as if he felt his time here had run out. "I shan't take up more of your time."

"Are we going to see more jewelers today?" she asked.

"No," he shook his head. "We saw all the ones that could have provided us with some insight. We are back where we started from, I fear."

"No," she corrected him. "We are much closer to Rachel. I am certain of it."

"You are kind to say so," he smiled. "We shall see what we can do tomorrow. I shall send word if I come up with

anything.”

“I shall do the same,” she nodded.

He walked over to her and took her hand in his, kissing it softly. She shivered at the touch. She didn't want him to let her go, but he did. He bid her goodbye and left, leaving her utterly confused as to what she had just agreed to.

CHAPTER 17



Everyone was seated at the dinner table, eagerly anticipating the reason for their get together to be announced. Edwin didn't want to admit it to himself, but he was anxious. He was nervous. This was not even close to what he had imagined when he thought about what his courting of a young lady would be like. He didn't think it would be false at all to begin with. He also didn't think that he would be this madly in love with her.

Lydia was seated by his side while opposite them, he could see her two younger sisters. Their father was sitting at the head of the table. The food was being served while they filled the time with irrelevant chit chat. Obviously, no one wanted to rush him into revealing why he was there, or why he and Lydia had arranged this dinner.

Lydia's father just finished his monologue on how his newest business endeavor was doing, and Edwin figured this would be his perfect moment to make their announcement. He turned to Lydia. She simply nodded, understanding immediately what he wanted to do.

Edwin stood up and cleared his throat. He was holding a glass of sherry in his hand, recognizing that after his speech, they would all need to toast. He had practiced this speech in his

mind a thousand times although none of it was true. However, everyone else had to believe it was true. He needed to make it as convincing as possible.

“If I may have everyone’s attention, please,” he said although everyone was already listening. He merely started his announcement in such a manner because he had practiced it thusly. All eyes were on him, waiting.

“First of all, thank you for having me. You have welcomed me into your home with open arms, and I feel ever so grateful for that. Also, you have kept your minds open regarding the friendship your sister and daughter Lydia and I share which has, over the course of this short time, developed into something more.”

This time, he paused to look at her. She was smiling. In fact, she was beaming. He had never seen her look more radiant than she did now. For a moment, he regretted all this not being true, all this not being a real courtship.

“Lydia and I would like to take this opportunity to tell you all that... we have fallen in love with each other, and with your blessing, we would like to officially commence with our courtship.”

It was somewhat clumsy to state it in such a manner. He could see it now that he said those words out loud. However, they were said, and he could not take them back. Besides, he wanted to make their announcement official, not too emotional, and straight to the point.

“I knew it!” Selina exclaimed, clapping her hand, leaning closer to her sister, and repeating those words. “I told you. Didn’t I tell you?” Her sister merely nodded, equally amused by what she had just heard.

It was, however, Lydia’s father who had to give the ultimate blessing. Her sisters and their opinions were important, of course, but not as important as the opinion of the man of the house. The man in question didn’t say anything at first. He merely stood up and walked over to Edwin, who waited apprehensively to see what would happen next. Then, the Earl of Russton offered him his hand, and Edwin accepted it gratefully.

“If there was any man I could imagine courting my daughter, I couldn’t have imagined him being better than you,” the Earl said.

Edwin swallowed heavily at this sudden and quite unexpected show of affection. He had been introduced to the Earl, but the man usually kept to himself. Lydia had already explained that this was simply how he was. It was her mother who was the social butterfly, who was always chatting away with everyone. Her husband was the opposite of her — pleasant, but he preferred to keep to himself. From the little that Edwin knew of him, that much was obvious.

“You are most kind to say that.” Edwin smiled.

“I am merely saying the truth,” the Earl said, giving Edwin a firm handshake after which he released him from his grip.

The rest of the dinner passed in pleasant chit chat, and it seemed that the reason for this dinner was almost forgotten. It made Edwin believe that everyone, just like his own mother, expected this would happen sooner or later. As it turned out, it happened sooner. After dinner, the girls retired to the drawing room while Edwin remained behind at the dining table with the man of the house as custom dictated.

Edwin felt a little awkward. He felt as if he were lying to this man, who had been nothing but kind and welcoming towards him. He reminded himself why he and Lydia were doing this. They needed to be allowed to spend time together, and this was the only way they could do that without someone jumping to the wrong conclusion. This way, her reputation would be safe from the possible harm that would arise out of dalliance with a bachelor.

The Earl got up and proceeded to pour them both another glass of sherry.

“You know, when the girls told me that Lydia was socializing with a young gentleman, I did not pay much attention to that,” he admitted, bringing a glass over to Edwin. “Lydia is a smart young lady. She always knew what she was doing. But I realized that, in this case, perhaps she was spending too much time with the young gentleman in question.”

“I assure you that I never meant any disrespect towards your daughter,” Edwin assured the man. “It has always been my sworn duty to keep her reputation intact.”

He actually meant every word of this. This wasn't a lie. He had been thinking about this even before his mother pointed out that people were talking about them spending too much

time together without being anything other than friends. It simply didn't make any sense.

Edwin had never been the one to care much about what the *ton* had to say. Their opinion was not a relevant item in his life. However, he knew that a lie might destroy a young lady's reputation very easily. Once destroyed, that reputation would never again be untarnished. Her chances of marriage would be ruined.

Her chances of marriage to someone else, a little voice inside of him reminded him of something he didn't like. He didn't want to think about the possibility of Lydia marrying anyone other than him. It was unthinkable. It was preposterous. No one understood her needs, her wants, her desires like he did. He was providing her with exactly what she needed. Yet, there was still a barrier between them that kept them apart. The very same thing that brought them together was now keeping them apart.

"I am glad to hear that," the Earl nodded, taking a seat opposite Edwin. "I am even more glad to hear that you two have finally come to your senses and admitted that there was more to your relationship than mere friendship. It was plain as daylight that you to care deeply about each other."

Edwin wanted to ask him if that was really true, if that was really how it seemed, but he managed to bite his tongue in time. He didn't want to appear too curious. He needed to be certain of the feelings of his future wife.

Inside his mind, there was such a tangled mess of emotions right now that he could not make heads or tails of it. He wanted to be close to Lydia. He wanted to spend more time with her. He relished the idea that he would need to act like he

was in love with her. He would be able to hold her hand, bring it to his lips, and kiss it any time he wished. The thought brought him much joy.

But there was a different thought, a heavier thought, and that was the fact that eventually, this would be brought to an end. They would not be able to pretend to be courting forever. Eventually, that moment would come, and they would tell everyone that it was either all a sham or that their paths had simply diverged. He believed the latter would be the better option than coming clean. He didn't want to hurt either this man or his own mother with the truth of the knowledge that they lied to them willingly.

“It has been very difficult on all of us ever since my wife left us much too soon,” the Earl spoke a little melancholically. “But Lydia stepped in and took her mother's role without even being asked to. I... I admit, I should have been there for her more, but I didn't know how to be. I was left alone, a man with three daughters. They needed a mother, womanly guidance. They did not need a man to tell them about the female perspective on the world. Lydia gladly took over. I shall be forever grateful to her for that. She deserves a good man, one who will treat her right, and I do believe you are that man.”

Edwin was overwhelmed by the kind words of Lydia's father and ended up feeling even worse than in the beginning.

“Now, tell me,” the Earl suddenly said as if he had had enough of these sappy exchanges, and wanted to continue in a more manly way. Edwin welcomed the change of topic. “Do you plan on attending Lord and Lady Ackerley's ball?”

“Yes,” Edwin nodded. “Lydia and I were discussing it just yesterday that we should all go together. That way, we can reveal our courtship to the world and of course, the *ton*.”

“Splendid,” the Earl confirmed. “But to Hell with the *ton*,” he added, much to Edwin amusement.

“You are not a fan, I see,” Edwin chuckled.

“It is filled with big noses who have nothing better to do than lead other people’s lives for them while leaving their own unlived,” the Earl explained.

“I could not agree more,” Edwin confirmed.

“However, we live in their world by their rules,” the Earl said with a sigh. “What they say, goes. I cannot say I particularly like it, but I know what the rules are, and I believe we all need to abide by them.”

“That is certainly a logical way of looking at it,” Edwin agreed.

“Logical or not, it is simply how things are,” the man shrugged.

Edwin could not help but notice so much underlying grief about life in general. He was certain that he would feel the same way if he had been left alone, without the person he loved, to take care of three daughters.

“Well...” the Earl raised his glass. “Cheers... and welcome to the family.”

Edwin hesitated for a moment. Guilt would simply not let him be. But then, he lifted his glass and clinked it against the Earl's.

“Cheers,” he replied with a smile. “And thank you.”

CHAPTER 18



Anyone who was anyone wished to be present at Lord and Lady Ackerley's ball, situated at the newly refurbished townhome. It was filled with splendor brought all the way from the Far East, and the hostess took great pleasure in telling anyone who wished to hear what exactly they purchased and how much it cost.

Lydia had no desire to listen to such reports. Fortunately, she was not alone, so she did not need to. Her arm rested against Edwin's, who was her future betrothed if only for this short time being. They arrived fashionably late with Lydia deciding on a pink silk gown this evening that perfectly accentuated her curves. She wished to look dazzling. She wanted to make Edwin proud to be standing by her side as proud as she was to be standing by his.

She could see all the inquisitive eyes and glances that were sent in their direction as they passed through the ballroom. They situated themselves in the corner where they would observe the gathering of lords and ladies who were just like them, fashionably late.

She had to admit that she felt slightly uneasy, but the warm touch of Edwin's arm felt reassuring. She was not alone. Her sisters were scattered about, amusing themselves and chatting

with their friends while her father was at his usual place, gathered around a table with several glasses of whiskey with his friends. He was not fond of drinking alone at home, only with friends and only in good measure.

It was at that moment that she noticed him. The man who was arguing with Edwin when she interrupted them on that fateful evening. The same man who wanted to attack her and Susannah in an alley and would have probably done so if Edwin had not arrived in the nick of time. The Baron.

It seemed that her entire body stiffened at the sight of him because Edwin noticed it instantly.

“What is the matter?” he asked, leaning closer to her, so he could whisper the question into her ear.

She swallowed heavily before replying. She tried not to look in that direction, but it was difficult because the Baron was staring right at her.

“That man is there,” she whispered, turning to Edwin, but feeling that vile man’s stare at the back of her neck.

“What man?” Edwin asked.

“The Baron,” she whispered.

He moved to the side to take an inconspicuous look, then he noticed him as well. Lydia could see it in his eyes and in the way his body tensed as well.

“Is he still staring at us?” Lydia asked as she had her back turned to him. Edwin, on the other hand, was looking at her, but he could catch the Baron with the corner of his eye.

“Mhm,” Edwin confirmed. “Don’t worry,” he assured her softly. “He can’t do anything to us right now. We are safe. All he can do is glare, but that isn’t much. Besides, he’ll grow tired of it at some point.”

She appreciated him trying to calm down her nerves, but she still didn’t feel as calm as she wanted to be.

“I feel too vulnerable here,” she admitted.

“That is because you are thinking about it,” he told her. “Come.”

He suddenly slid her arm down from his and took her by the hand instead. Then, he pulled her towards the center of the ballroom where dancing couples were swirling to the last sounds of the music which was about to end. A new number would commence any moment.

“What on earth are you doing?” she asked, blushing gently.

“Claiming my first dance,” he explained matter-of-factly as they settled to take their place.

A few moments later, the orchestra started the next song. Lydia loved the waltz. It was one of her favorites.

They assumed their positions opposite each other. She trembled ever so slightly as she felt his hand on the lower of her back. Her other hand rested in his. They were dangerously close, she could sense that, although they were keeping an appropriate distance. It was strange how the *ton* considered a simple stroll so inappropriate while a dance such as the waltz was considered all right. It simply didn't make any sense, so Lydia stopped trying to make sense of it.

The music commenced slowly then they were moving. They were swirling, following the rhythm. He was a wonderful dancer. She did not even know that, and caught her off guard. Then again, they never discussed each other's talents and hobbies. They had other things to talk about.

He was taller than she was, much taller, but her relatively short stature fit perfectly with his. Their bodies moved in perfect unison. She allowed him to lead, and in turn, he listened to the motions of her body. He possessed that natural grace of a good dancer. It was something one was either born with or one didn't have. It was not something one could learn, like the steps to a dance. It was far more than that.

He never took his eyes off of her, not even for a single moment. This made her blush. In fact, it kept her in a constant blushing state. They went down the line with their gazes locked. Then, they turned away, and her heart felt disappointed that she was forced to stop looking at him, even for a few moments. When they faced each other once more, her heart leaped with joy. It was as if not only her body was dancing, but so was her heart.

The waltz slowly ended. It felt as if it lasted only for a few short moments. She wondered if he expected her to talk, or if

he enjoyed their silent dance as much as she did. He twirled her about. She felt so safe, so cherished in his arms. She never wanted this dance to end.

When the final notes died down, he bowed to her. She, in turned, curtsied back. Then, he took her to the refreshments table where he offered her a drink.

“Was it a good distraction?” he asked.

“It was,” she nodded, realizing that she had forgotten all about the Baron. He did not even cross her mind... until now. She quickly looked around, but he was nowhere to be seen. She thanked her lucky stars for that. He was the last person she wanted to see.

At that moment, she noticed her sisters approaching. He leaned closer to her and whispered right into her ear.

“It’s show time,” he murmured to which she almost chuckled aloud.

He took her by the hand and stood close to her. She had to admit that they looked good together. The perfect couple. That was, after all, what both Selina and Anna told her, and although she did not say it, she felt the same way.

“So, there is the happy couple,” Selina giggled. “We saw you dancing together. You looked absolutely stunning, both of you.”

“Why, thank you,” Edwin gushed, giving her one of his best smiles. “Has the Viscount of Lipton arrived yet?”

“I have not seen him,” Anna shook her head, sounding a little disappointed. “Hopefully he will arrive any moment.”

“I am certain that he will rush to you the moment he does,” Edwin assured her. She smiled. She obviously needed that.

Lydia listened to Edwin talk to her sisters. He did it so easily, finding the right words to express himself even when they themselves were not certain what to say. He soothed them just like he soothed her. It was simply something he had in himself. The power to make someone feel safe, to make someone believe every single word he said.

She looked around once more, fearing that the Baron might still be here. In fact, she was certain that he was, but she tried to remember what Edwin told her. They were safe. He could not do anything to them in front of everyone else. All they needed to do was remain inside and not risk going out to the terrace or out in the garden. She was certain that the Baron might try to accost them or try to do something even worse if they did.

“Lydia, are you all right?” Anna asked.

Lydia smiled. “I am. I am just a little overwhelmed with everything that has been happening these last few days.”

Anna was the one who still had not found her prince charming. For Selina, that was the Viscount of Lipton. For Lydia, that

was Edwin. Even if it was just a sham, she could believe that even for a little while as long as the lie was ongoing. Anna was still alone. Although she seemed happy and content with things as they were, Lydia was certain that she was surreptitiously yearning for someone to start courting her. Lydia hoped that this man would arrive soon and not take his time. Anna was waiting for him.

“We were so happy to hear that you two announced your courtship,” Anna added. “We did know that you were courting, just in case you were wondering. You couldn’t hide it very well.”

“What couldn’t we hide?” Lydia wondered, feeling amused by this assumption.

“The fact that you are madly in love with each other, of course,” Selina took over the conversation. “It is obvious.”

Lydia chuckled at this although her heart clenched at the possibility that her own emotions towards Edwin might be visible to everyone but him. Or perhaps, they were visible to him, but he was turning a blind eye to them. Yes, he did kiss her, but it was a spur of the moment sort of thing. It meant nothing. He was overjoyed that they found a very important clue, and he was filled with this cheer that he had to get it out of his system somehow. That was all it was. Nothing else.

“I think I see the Viscount,” Lydia pointed in the direction of the entrance, and sure enough, the man in question appeared. He was a tall, lean man with a thin moustache that did not suit him all that well, but it did give him a sort of an endearing look. He seemed to be looking for someone.

Selina lifted her hand in his direction. He noticed her and instantly, his face lit up at seeing her. Lydia could feel a pang of envy. She wanted Edwin to feel this about her, to be so happy when he saw her. But she doubted such a thing would ever happen.

CHAPTER 19



The following morning, Lydia and Anna found themselves in the library. Selina had come down with a slight cold, so she decided to spend the morning in bed. Lydia was in search of a good book to keep her company when her sister suddenly made an announcement.

“You know, I’m glad it is just the two of us here this morning,” Anna said, almost hesitatingly as if she wasn’t certain if she should reveal what she had or not. Quickly, she opted for the affirmative reply.

“I also love spending time with just you.” Lydia turned around to her sister, thinking that it had something to do with the two of them spending time together without Anna.

The truth was that she loved both of her sisters equally, and usually, the three spent their time together. However, often, Selina and Anna would go for walks or shopping. And occasionally, Lydia would spend time with each of them separately. This, of course, didn’t mean that she preferred the company of one over the other. It simply meant that sometimes, a one-on-one conversation was more pleasurable than speaking with two people at the same time.

“I...” Anna started, looking down at her feet.

This wasn't her usual behavior. She was unafraid to speak her mind which was partly why Lydia wondered if she would ever find a man who would be able to handle such a young lady. She always assured Anna that this man was somewhere out there. He merely needed to find his way to her.

“What is it, Anna?” Lydia asked, realizing that she needed to put the book in her hands back on the shelf and focus on her sister.

“I have something to tell you,” Anna whispered, glancing at the door, half-expecting someone to be there, listening in on their conversation. “I met someone.”

Lydia's eyes widened in shock and disbelief then this shock and disbelief was substituted by sheer joy. “You met someone! Tell me all about it!”

“Well, I can't say I actually met him,” Anna clarified. “I haven't really seen him yet.”

Lydia frowned. Her sister wasn't making much sense. “So, you didn't meet someone?”

“I did, and I didn't,” Anna said, chuckling. It was that tell-tale sign of a heart in love. “He is my secret admirer.”

The moment her sister told her this, something inside of Lydia froze. It made her paralyzed, unable to think or say anything

for several seconds, during which her sister kept talking about the mysterious man in question, how wonderful he was, how eloquent, how outspoken, how understanding, sympathetic, and kind.

Lydia turned pale. When she finally got her speech back, she could ask only one question. “Has he been sending you letters?”

“How did you know!?” Anna sounded surprised that her sister managed to guess that part. Lydia, on the other hand, wasn’t as surprised as Anna. She was shocked. Frightened. Petrified.

“I... guessed,” Lydia managed to muster, not wanting to alarm her sister. That would only make things worse. “But do tell me more about him.”

“I have the letters in my chamber. Would you like to see them?” Anna offered.

Lydia could not believe what she was hearing. It all resembled a horrible nightmare. She expected to wake up from it at any moment, but dawn would not grace her with its presence. She seemed to be stuck inside this nightmare, with no way out.

“Yes.” That was all she could say. She had utterly lost the power of speech in her shock.

Anna rushed out of the door, and Lydia followed her. The two girls entered Anna’s chamber where Anna proceeded to go to her bookshelf and pull out a book with a red hardcover. She opened it, revealing it not to be a book at all but rather a box where the letters were hidden.

“Here,” Anna said, giving her the letters. “You may read them. He has told me that I shouldn’t tell anyone, but I can’t keep quiet about this. I am so happy!”

Lydia listened to her sister gush about her mysterious secret admirer with her fear growing with each passing moment. She opened the first letter with a trembling hand and started to read silently. She could recognize the same words, the same tone, the same manner of address, but most frighteningly, she could recognize the handwriting. It was the same handwriting from Geraldine’s letter which could only mean one thing. This was the same man who wrote to Geraldine. This was the same man who wrote to Rachel. This same man was now writing to Selina. The thought was frightful.

It took Lydia all of her conscious effort not to tell Anna everything right then and there. But she couldn’t. She needed to keep this a secret, first so she would not frighten her sister, and secondly, so she could tell Edwin and together, they could come up with a plan to catch this man in the act.

“... so romantic and wonderful.” The sound of Anna’s voice brought Lydia back to the present moment. She was still gushing about her secret admirer while Lydia kept reading the each letter until the very last one.

There was no doubt about it. This was the same man.

“You told me that he is out there, waiting for me,” Anna beamed. “That was exactly what he wrote in one of the letters. He had been waiting for me patiently, and now that he’s found me, he won’t let me go.”

That was exactly what Lydia had been afraid of, but she did not have the heart to tell this to Anna.

“Here,” she returned the letters. The words were on the tip of her tongue. The truth. Although she knew that would break Anna’s heart. She managed to swallow the words and keep silent, at least for the time being. “Keep these letters safe,” she advised.

“I will,” Anna promised, pressing them against her chest and closing her eyes as she did so. Lydia could tell that her sister was already smitten with this man which was probably what he had already anticipated would happen. Anna was without suitors. She was a wallflower although she did know how to express herself well when the occasion required it. Still, she was slightly awkward and that made her almost an undesirable candidate for marriage. Lydia did not see it like that, but Anna had almost been convinced that she would probably remain a spinster her entire life. Now, this secret admirer was proving otherwise, and Anna was holding onto this with her dear life.

Lydia knew what she had to do. Edwin had to know about this.



Edwin didn’t mind that Lydia had come to see him unchaperoned, not after she told him the news that she had. It was so unexpected that he barely believed it to be true.

“That man... is writing to your sister Anna?” he asked, just to clarify that he understood it correctly. It was unbelievable. He could not wrap his head around it. “We should tell her all

about this man, and then, we should go to the constables and _”

“No,” she cut him off. “The constables won’t do anything. We both know this.”

“What do you suggest then?” he asked, sounding skeptical.

“Anna keeps replying to him,” Lydia explained. “We play the part. We lull him into a false sense of security, so he thinks that no one knows the game he is playing. Then, we make a plan to find out who he is.”

“Absolutely not!” Edwin stood up and started pacing his study like a caged tiger. “I will not put you in danger, Lydia.”

“Can’t you see, Edwin?” Lydia stood up as well and walked over to him. He felt as if he were ready to jump out of his own skin, nervous. His entire body was itching. Then, she continued, “This might be our only chance to catch this man.”

“He is dangerous,” he reminded her.

“I won’t be alone,” she told him, smiling softly. “You will be by my side every single step of the way.”

He hesitated. He wasn’t certain whether they should do this or not. He wanted to find Rachel. He was desperate to find her, and he knew that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. But he didn’t want to risk Lydia getting hurt. If something happened to her, he would never be able to forgive himself.

“We shall have Anna write a response,” Lydia explained. “Then, we shall take it to that bench where he wants the letter delivered.”

“Then what?” Edwin asked, anticipating the answer.

“We wait,” Lydia continued, “as long as it is necessary, so we can see who this man is.”

“That seems very dangerous, Lydia.” Once again, he hesitated. The desire to find his sister was burning inside of him brighter than ever. However, he was unwilling to put anyone’s life in danger because of it, especially Lydia’s.

“I know,” she admitted. “But just imagine... this man has been doing this to countless girls including your sister. Now, he is doing it to my sister. If we don’t stop him, he will continue to do this. How many more sisters need to be lost before he is stopped?”

He knew she was right. He hated that she was always right. She always somehow managed to find the right thing to say to convince him of whatever she wanted. It was a special power she held over him.

“All right,” he finally acquiesced, “but we shall be extremely cautious when approaching this.”

“Of course, we will,” she agreed.

“We shall have Anna write her reply, but I will be with you every step of the way,” he repeated what she had already said, but he needed to clarify that. “I will not let you out of my sight.”

“Well, we are courting,” she reminded him mischievously. “You are not supposed to let me out of your sight.”

He liked it when she turned it around like that. She could be serious and calm, but at the same time, he loved her playful side. He loved when it surfaced when he least expected it, just like now.

“I will have eyes only for you,” he replied in an equally mischievous tone. In fact, he meant it. He meant every word of it.

Ever since she had come into his life, he stopped noticing other young ladies. They were pale images of what he was already seeing in front of him. He would rather be looking at Lydia than any other lady in all of London. Especially now, with danger breathing down their necks, he had no plans of leaving her, even for a single second. That was a promise.

“I can’t believe we are so close to this man,” Lydia suddenly said, sounding eager and excited. He had to say that he shared her enthusiasm.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this close to solving the mystery of my sister’s disappearance,” he pointed out.

“If we are fortunate enough, by finding out who this man is, we shall also find out where Rachel is,” she assured him. “We simply need to play this well. We only have this one chance.”

“I know,” he said, still frightened that something might go wrong, terribly wrong even, and that he would lose Lydia as well. He knew that he would not bear to lose her, not now that he had her in his life.

“It will be all right,” Lydia tried to calm him down. She was his safe harbor in a torrent out in the open sea. She was his lighthouse bringing him home. It was simply the effect she had on him without even knowing.

He wondered if he would ever be given the chance to tell her how he truly felt about her. Perhaps he would. Perhaps not. Only fate knew what it had in store for them. They still needed to wait, to be patient. But Edwin could be anything, just not patient. He had been patient for two years already. Wasn't that enough?

“Did you tell your sister?” he asked as if remembering something.

“No,” Lydia admitted. “I didn't have the heart to tell her.”

“You know you will eventually need to do that, right?” he asked.

“I know,” she confessed. “And I shall tell her. Just not now. Let her rejoice for a little while longer. I think she was already

succumbing to the notion that she will never get married because she sees herself as odd.”

“Odd?” he echoed. “But... we are all a bit odd, one way or another.”

“I know, but she can’t accept that,” Lydia sighed. “She wants to be like her friends — popular and with lots of suitors — but it simply not who she is.”

“She has not accepted herself yet,” Edwin noticed. “My sister was the same way.”

Once again, he realized why this man was targeting only such girls. They were easily convinced of anything, of even the silliest of lies, and they believed it. They believed it because they wanted to believe it. It was as simple as that. The thought once again made him furious.

Lydia seemed to sense his anxiety. She placed her hand softly on his shoulder and squeezed it. “It will be all right. We shall find Rachel. We are so close now. Just a little more patience.”

He nodded. That was all he could do.

CHAPTER 20



“It was so hard convincing Anna to allow me to leave this letter at the designated place,” Lydia said as the two of them headed to Crownsfield Park.

Fortunately, it was a chilly evening, so the scarf that she wrapped around her neck and lifted all the way to her lips made sense. She hoped no one would think it was a concealment trick but rather something a lady did to keep herself from getting chilly on such an evening out. Because it was evening. It was also an important evening during which she and Edwin hoped to get at least one step closer to solving the mystery of what happened to his sister.

“Did you tell her that I was accompanying you?” he asked.

“No,” Lydia assured him as they rushed towards the bench which was to hide the letter until the man arrived. “I told her I would drop it off because I was worried about his intentions. Technically, I didn’t lie to her. I merely... was silent regarding the whole truth.”

“Do you feel bad about lying to your sister?” he asked, turning to her without slowing down his pace. They were both in a rush. There was not a single moment to lose.

His question caught her off guard. It was direct. It was succinct. He knew exactly what she was worried about, and he wasn't afraid to ask exactly that question. People usually tended to steer clear of such questions that might get others to open up too much. They considered them too inappropriate. With Edwin, no question seemed to be inappropriate. They flowed out of curiosity, out of concern, out of... love?

The thought surprised her. She quickly tried to banish it from her mind.

"I do," she admitted. "Although I know we are doing the right thing, I just wish I could have told her about this man."

"It is best that she doesn't know yet," he reminded her. "That might change the way she writes to him. A man like this might notice any change in her behavior towards him, and it might frighten him away before we can find out who he is."

"You are right," she nodded.

He smiled reassuringly then he stopped. He looked knowingly at a bench. There was the fountain as well. This was it.

Lydia looked around worriedly. She half expected to see someone watching them, just like they were planning on doing to whoever would come for the letter.

"Where shall we hide?" she asked, her voice down to a whisper.

He mirrored her action, his eyes surveying the grounds around them. There were lots of trees around and lots of shrubbery they could crouch behind. However, Lydia knew that they were taking a tremendous risk just by being here together, after dark. Fortunately for them, there was no one around. Crownsfield Park was much smaller, especially in comparison to Hyde Park, and people steered clear of it after dark, mostly because of its poor illuminations and lots of dark corners where Lydia did not even want to think what might happen. Despite that fear, she knew that this was where she needed to be. Here, by Edwin's side.

“Over there,” he finally pointed at a statue that seemed to arise out of the bushes. It was Venus pleading with passersby. To Lydia, the goddess looked sadder than anything she had ever seen before. It reminded her of the sadness of the girls who had disappeared and their hopes of being found again. She could not imagine how that must feel.

He walked over to the bench and hid the letter in the grass underneath it. It was completely concealed from the naked eye. One could only find it if one knew it was there. So, whoever, came and lowered himself to it would be their man.

“Now?” Lydia asked, feeling her heart beating in her very throat. She had never been this much involved in a mystery. It had become of the utmost importance to her that Rachel was found. There was no other acceptable outcome.

“Now we wait,” he told her with a shrug.

He sounded calm, composed. He wondered how he managed to do that. She envied his character, the way he always kept

himself under control no matter what. Suddenly, he pulled her by the hand, and led her behind the statue. They had a perfect view of the bench from there, but they were hidden from plain sight by the thick shrubbery and the statue itself. It was the perfect hiding spot.

The way he grabbed her by the hand seemed to stir her from this silent moodiness. It alerted her to the fact that they were together, to the fact that his touch felt so warm against her skin. But there was one downside to this. The touch was too short. He let go of her immediately upon hiding, and now, he was focused on the bench.

“How long do you think we’ll have to stay here?” she pondered.

He shrugged. “It might be five minutes, but it might be five hours as well.”

She didn’t like the sound of that. What they were doing was risky. They could be seen by someone. Truth be told, the odds of someone walking through Crownsfield Park at this time of the evening were rather slim. In addition to that, whoever might be walking around would be equally reluctant not to make his or her presence known. So, Lydia believed they were safe. Well... as safe as they could be under the circumstances.

“Have you thought about what you will do when we catch him?” she asked.

Upon hearing her question, his body tensed. Despite what she thought, the question obviously caught him off guard. If he was thinking about this, which she was certain he was, he

didn't seem too eager to share his thoughts regarding the matter.

"I'm afraid," he admitted with a low tone of voice. He didn't dare look at her.

She tried hard to fight this desire, but eventually, she yielded to it. She placed her hand softly on his shoulder. She expected him to twitch, to show some sort of displeasure at her touching him, but he showed no such thing. It was actually the opposite, his body seemed to relax.

"What are you afraid of?" she whispered her question. She was afraid that their conversation might stir the darkness and silence around them.

"I am afraid that my rage will take over me," he finally confessed what his greatest fear would be. "I am afraid that it will be too late for Rachel..."

"It won't," she assured him. "I don't want you to think like that, not even for a single moment."

He lifted his gaze to her. She could see all the pain in his eyes, all the misery of the previous two years. At the same time, she could see all the love he had for his sister, all the hope that was and could never be extinguished because he wouldn't allow it to be.

"I am so fortunate to have you by my side, Lydia," he told her, his words trailing off as if he didn't have the strength or the courage to express them until the very end.

“There is nowhere else I would rather be,” she replied, unable to take her eyes off of him.

She could see him nearing her. Her heart was now booming inside her ears. She could hear nothing but the beating of her own frantic heart as Edwin was leaning to kiss her again, but before he could do that, they both heard a noise then a loud girly giggle.

They both looked in the direction of the bench, noticing a young couple. The girl was laughing, teasing the man, who followed her like a lovelorn puppy.

“Come nah, Adelaide,” the man beckoned. “Do not run away from me...”

“If you want me, you need to catch me, Peter,” she teased, running in the opposite direction, away from the bench. The man kept on following her. A moment later, they were gone. Obviously, neither of them was the person Edwin and Lydia had been waiting for.

Minutes felt like hours. After what seemed to be an entire eternity spent in silence and watchful gazing, Edwin sighed.

“It is getting too late,” he pointed out. “I cannot risk having you here, with me.”

“I am not returning without you,” she said stubbornly. “I hope you are not endeavoring to get rid of me and solve this mystery on your own.”

“I would not dream of it,” he assured her, obviously amused by her utter unwillingness to be sent off home. “I am merely thinking of your reputation, which you must admit, is not the safest here, right now.”

She had to admit that he was right. They had already risked far too much by waiting.

“I shall send for my footman to come here, and we shall return with the carriage,” he suggested.

“Is he to be trusted?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” he assured her. “He shall remain here in our place to watch the letter and inform us if anyone will show up. As for you and me, we shall return in the morning.”

“All right,” she said, finally appeased with his suggestion.

To be quite honest, she did not want to leave, not after all the effort they had taken and all the time they had already spent here. However, he was right. Not even the fact that they were supposedly courting would be a good enough reason to be caught dallying in the middle of the night. Her reputation would be ruined. Even with all her desire to solve mysteries, she did not wish to tarnish her family name with such a scandal.

That was why she allowed Edwin to lead her out of the park and towards his carriage. Within half an hour, she snuck into her home with Susannah’s help, of course, and momentarily,

she jumped into bed. She doubted she would be able to sleep, but at least, here she was safe. Safe from having her reputation ruined and safe from having her heart be broken.

CHAPTER 21



Edwin actually considered going back on his word and returning to the park, but he gave Lydia a promise. That promise helped him stay calm throughout the night, even though his heart raced, and his mind didn't allow him a moment without thinking about what might be happening at the park, without him present.

As soon as it was daybreak, he rushed downstairs, asking one of the servant girls if George, his footman, had returned. She nodded, saying that he had just arrived.

“Do send him to my study at once!” Edwin demanded, flying back upstairs, crossing two stairs as he did so.

He lunged through the door like a madman, leaving it open. He was calm all night. He didn't know how, but now, he could not control himself any longer. He had to know what happened, and why George had returned since he was given strict orders to remain there until someone showed up.

... until someone showed up!

That was when it hit him. The reason George had returned was obvious. Someone did show up!

Even though he was in the middle of his room, he rushed back to the open door, and in the process, almost stumbled onto George, who was on the way in. George immediately mumbled his apology, wringing his hat in his hands.

“That is quite all right, George,” Edwin assured him, allowing him in. “Tell me what happened last night. Did someone come for the letter?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” George nodded.

Edwin’s eyes widened in shock and disbelief. He couldn’t believe that he would finally find out who kidnapped Rachel. He would be able to ask him where she was, and if he was fortunate enough, he would be able to find her and bring her home where she belonged.

“Some urchin came for the letter,” George continued, standing in the middle of the room as if he were being interrogated for something he had done. But Edwin was beyond politeness at this point. “He couldn’t ‘ave been a boy of more than ten, I reckon.”

“A boy?” Edwin repeated, frowning. He had to admit that he wasn’t expecting a boy but rather a man. George quickly nodded in confirmation. “Well, it is obvious that someone hired this urchin to fetch the letter. Dammit!”

Edwin felt his fingers curl into fists. He tried to keep himself calm and composed, but that was easier said than done.

“What happened then?” he demanded of his footman.

“Well, I followed the boy,” George assured him. “I ran after him for a long time, but I reckon he must ‘ave seen me runnin’ after ‘im, so he took me round ‘n around in circles until I... until I lost ‘im.”

“You lost him!?” Edwin growled, closing his eyes, turning around from the man and raking his fingers through his hair nervously.

“The urchin was too quick, Your Grace,” George said apologetically, still wringing that hat of his in his hands.

“Or you were too slow!” Edwin snarled angrily.

George’s head bowed down so low that his chin was almost touching his chest. He didn’t say anything else. There was nothing else to say. He had failed his master.

Still, Edwin knew that he could not blame the poor man. It was obvious that this was a very cleverly arranged plan by whoever was behind it. The urchin in question must have done this many times before to be able to lose someone as easily as that. It truly wasn’t George’s fault. Edwin knew that, but it did not make this taste of defeat any less bitter.

He sighed heavily, waving his hand at the man. “You are dismissed, George.”

“I apologize, Your Grace,” George said one last time before bowing in front of the Duke and leaving through the door, closing it behind him.

Edwin sat down in his chair, feeling crushed. He was so close, so very close. He almost had him. Now, he felt he was even further away from Rachel than before.



“This is all your fault!” Anna screamed at Lydia, throwing the letter she was holding in her hands at her sister.

“Please, Anna, calm down,” Lydia tried to appease her sister, but such a feat was impossible.

“You told me to trust you!” Anna kept on shouting which she did mostly because she knew that Selina and their father were both away from the house on their separate errands. Anna and Lydia were the only ones at home, apart from the servants, so Anna felt free to express her dissatisfaction in the most vocal manner possible.

“And you *can* trust me, you know you can,” Lydia was speaking as calmly as she could, but that was becoming increasingly difficult when she didn’t know what it was she was defending herself against. She still didn’t know the accusation.

“Read it!” Anna snarled at her sister angrily with tears swelling in her eyes.

Lydia picked up the letter from the floor then proceeded to read it. It was from Anna’s secret admirer. He was telling her how disappointed he was that she told others of their secret, and that now, he needed to see whether he could ever forgive her for this betrayal. This would be his last letter for the time being until he figured things out.

“Anna, I –” Lydia started, but her sister interrupted her.

“You told me to trust you, that you would take the letter yourself when I should have done it all along.” Anna kept shaking her head at herself.

“Anna, you have to listen to me now,” Lydia could tell that things had crossed the line into a very dangerous zone, and she needed to tell Anna everything. Well... at least what she needed to know regarding this man. “This man...” Lydia shook the letter in front of her sister, “this man is dangerous. He is not the man you think he is.”

Anna instantly pulled away, frowning in displeasure, distraught and incredulous that her sister could tell her such a thing.

“Lies!” Anna shouted. “All lies!”

“Please, listen to me,” Lydia repeated as calmly as she could. “I will tell you something very important, something I

probably should have told you earlier, but I wanted to keep you safe.”

Lydia waited to see if there would be any exclamation of protest on the part of her sister, but Anna was silent this time. So, Lydia proceeded to tell her everything about Rachel and Geraldine, and the fact that there were probably even more ladies involved that they did not even know about. Anna listened with her face changing and distorting in shock at what she was hearing. Once Lydia was done, Anna’s face was still shaking in refusal to accept the truth.

“You are wrong,” Anna said simply, her lower lip quivering, almost as if she barely had any strength left in her to argue what she so ardently felt was true. “I don’t believe a word you’ve said. I don’t believe that he is the man that communicated with those ladies that disappeared. That can’t be true.”

Lydia listened to the words that were coming from her sister. The sheer desire to live in the dark was almost palpable. Anna had never met anyone even half as romantic as this man was claiming to be, and it was only natural that her first instinct was to defend him. Lydia was well aware of this fact. The last thing she wanted was to hurt her sister, but if she needed to do that so that Anna would avoid falling into the clutches of this villain, then Lydia was willing to do it.

“We checked, Anna,” Lydia tried to reason with her. “The handwriting is the same.”

“It might be... similar,” Anna admitted. “But even you and I could be said to write in a similar fashion, could we not?”

Lydia frowned. “This is more than just a coincidental similarity.”

Anna pretended that she didn’t hear her sister, and simply continued along the path of her own reasoning. “This man you accuse of being a monster is kind and sweet and pure and romantic,” Anna pointed out.

“Then, why is he insisting on keeping this a secret?” Lydia asked her sister. “If his intentions are truly honorable, why doesn’t he profess his love for you publicly, so you can start courting officially?”

“He is shy, like me,” Anna had a response ready for that as well. “He is simply not ready to meet yet. With my family being like this, accusing him of being a villain, can you really blame him?”

Lydia bit her tongue not to say something that might hurt her sister, but at the same time, it was obvious that Anna was absolutely smitten by this man. He had her wrapped around his little finger, and Lydia could not stand it. She was not only furious at what he had managed to achieve, but she was also terrified for her sister’s safety. She knew that this man would not give up so easily, especially now that he had invested so much time and effort into Anna.

“Anna, I... I don’t want to argue with you,” Lydia decided to take another route. Convincing her that this man was anything other than the image she had of him in her mind was futile. Lydia could tell that much. She had to tread carefully and make sure not to make Anna see her as the enemy.

Anna was still frowning, but at least, she was listening. She was also not arguing. That made Lydia hopeful that despite everything, things might turn out all right in the end.

“I just want you to be safe, that is all,” Lydia admitted. She could tell that Anna understood that. So, she continued along that path of sisterly understanding. She approached Anna and took her by the hand. “No one in this world means more to me than you and Selina. I don’t know what I would do if anything happened to either of you.”

“Nothing will happen to us,” Anna smiled, “as long as we are all together.” She squeezed Lydia’s hand back.

“I love you, Anna.” Lydia could not resist wrapping her arms around her sister, and Anna did the same.

“I love you, too,” Anna whispered into Lydia’s ear.

For a few precious moments, things were truly all right. Lydia could sense it. As for what they would do... she would need to speak to Edwin about it. He would help.

CHAPTER 22



“**S**he is blaming you?” Edwin echoed Lydia’s conviction, right after she came to see him and told him what just happened with Anna.

“Rightfully so,” Lydia confessed with a heavy sigh.

She was pacing about Edwin’s study as if she had been there a million times before, and she felt at ease with everything around her. She walked over to the window and gazed outside, at the garden. It was Edwin’s favorite sight. In the summer, the garden would be filled with blossoming flowers, and upon opening the window, the summer breeze would enter, bringing with it the soft fragrance of blooms.

However, now was not the moment when either of them would notice blossoming flowers. They were too focused on the problem at hand, and that was how to keep a young lady safe when she did not believe she was in any danger to begin with.

“You cannot possibly blame yourself for this,” Edwin pointed out. He hated seeing Lydia look so down, so defeated.

“Anna thinks I mean her harm, that I mean to keep her unmarried. She can’t fathom the possibility that this man is anything other than what he claims to be,” she said with a heavy conviction.

“I know,” he sighed. “But we mustn’t give up.”

Lydia turned around from the window, facing Edwin once more. “I have no such intention. I am simply... at a loss because I do not know what else to do.” She sounded apprehensive and nervous as she continued pacing about the room resembling a caged tiger who was yearning for freedom. “I fear that she might do something behind my back and put herself in danger.”

“If he writes to her again, although he claims he will not write any more, do you think she would hide it from you?” Edwin asked, anticipating the answer.

“I fear that she would,” Lydia admitted. “That is what I am so afraid of — that he will lure her away from us, away from the safety of her home, and that she will suffer the same fate as Rachel.”

He could see that she regretted what she said. At least, she regretted the way in which she said it because it sounded as if Rachel had no chance of returning home. He knew that she didn’t mean it like that. Stress was getting to them both. She was too tired to choose her words carefully, and sometimes, they all said things they did not mean.

“I’m sorry,” she said, biting her lower lip and walking over to him. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know,” he smiled reassuringly. “I know you are afraid for Anna. That is understandable.”

She sighed again, blinking heavily. “I honestly do not know what to do.”

He thought about it for a moment then presented her with his offer. “I might have a solution.”

“You might?” she echoed, her eyes widening in surprise. “What is it?”

“My mother and I have been planning on going to our countryside home, two hours outside of London,” he explained. “We do this every year. We invite a small circle of our friends — they are all trustworthy families, I assure you — and we have dinner parties which extends into a stay of several days. The previous two years, we failed to arrange them because... well, because we were hoping to find Rachel, and time simply went by. My mother has insisted that we organize it this year. I suppose it is mostly to take our minds off of Rachel’s disappearance because that is the only thing we have been occupying ourselves with ever since she went missing.”

“I cannot imagine myself being occupied with anything else if such a thing happened to me,” Lydia admitted.

“Thank you for your words,” he said with a smile, feeling a strange tenderness towards her. He wanted to take her by the hand, to feel the touch of her warm skin against his, but he resisted the temptation. They should be merely pretending to

be courting. Allowing himself to cross that line would be dangerous.

“You are very kind to offer that, but I do not wish to be a bother,” Lydia said defensively, pulling away.

“You could never be a bother,” he corrected her. “You have already helped me so much...”

She smiled. This time, he could not resist the temptation. He took her by the hand and squeezed it gently. Her fingers were trembling in his hand. He wanted to bring them to his lips and kiss each and every one of them to pacify her. But he did exactly the opposite. He released her from his grip as if her touch scorched him. In a way, it did. She was so close to him now.

Too close.

He cleared his throat and quickly resumed speaking. “Besides, that would mean that Anna would be out of London. That wretch will not know where she is. Even if he does somehow find out, I assure you that neither he nor any word of him will reach Anna while she is at my countryside home. She will be safe there. You can rest assured of that.”

Lydia seemed to hesitate for a moment. “Are you certain that we won’t be a bother? Because you will need to invite all three of us.”

“The more, the merrier,” he smiled mischievously.

The moment she looked back at him, those strange, unwanted sensations rose from his very depths. As much as he loved spending time with her, he dreaded it now because she awoke things inside of him which he didn't even know he could feel.

"Besides," he walked over to her, diminishing the distance between them, "we need to establish the idea that we are courting... seriously."

"Do we now?" she chuckled.

"I'm afraid that there are still people who do not believe us," he said, gazing at her as heat flared in her cheeks. "If you and your sisters join me there, no one will doubt us."

Standing so close to her, he inhaled deeply. Her scent was mesmerizingly feminine. He could smell lemongrass and lily of the valley mixed with the scent of her skin. It was overpowering. Being alone with her felt as if he had too much brand, and just kept on having someone refill his glass. His head was filled with wondrous thoughts of her which thrilled him and petrified him at the same time. But he knew that he was not able to control himself right now.

"Perhaps all of this wasn't a good idea to begin with..." she told him, her voice a mere whisper.

At that moment, his fingers grabbed hold of hers. The touch of her skin felt like a bolt of lightning searing through his entire being. He could not deny how much he wanted her, especially after that kiss they shared.

Now, she was near him, so near that their noses were almost touching. The hems of her gown brushed gently against his trouser legs. He could feel her breasts pressed against his chest, raising then lowering quickly. He knew that she had many layers to her clothes, too many to count. Yet, that did not prevent him from imagining the soft pinks of her nipples, hardening underneath his fingers, his lips, his tongue. The very thought made his manhood jolt in his pants.

“I don’t know much,” he told her, amazed that he could still muster a coherent thought and aim it in her direction. “But I know that we are exactly where we need to be. Without you, I would still be lost, I wouldn’t be an inch closer to finding Rachel. You brought me here, Lydia. You...”

She lifted her free hand and rested it upon his chest. He feared that she did it so she could push him away, but no such thing happened. He could feel her fingers trembling against his chest. He used his own hand to wrap her willowy waist and pull her even closer. Her lips were right in front of him.

All reasonable thought urged him to sever their connection before it was too late. He should simply stop touching her. However, that was easier said than done. His mind was in a haze. Reason would not penetrate it. Common sense would not either.

“You helped me,” he reminded her. “Now, let me help you by keeping you and your sisters safe.”

“You do not owe me anything,” she said, not taking her eyes off of him.

“On the contrary, I owe you everything,” he corrected her. “When we find Rachel, it will be because of you...”

The more he spoke, the faster his heart was beating, the more adamant his lips were to kiss her again. But he wanted to make this moment last. He knew that someone might knock on the door to his study at any moment. The magic would be broken instantly. However, for the time being, he had her all to himself, and he had no plans of letting go.

“We were working together,” she tried to remain objective, but her cheeks, her eyes, and her quivering lips were assuring him otherwise.

“We should most certainly continue to do so,” he told her as his hand traveled from her lower back, upwards. Her body instantly felt pliable to his touch, and he thought she would melt into a puddle. The thought made him smile. He never had such power over such a woman. It felt better than anything else he could ever imagine.

Without thinking, his mouth was on hers. This conversation made no sense in any case. They could continue talking and talking all day long, but he would rather be doing something like this. Instantly, they both forgot all about their discussion. They could not think about anything else.

She kissed him back with much more ardor this time. Their kiss seemed even more forbidden and more delicious. He kissed her desperately, fearing that he would never again get the chance to do so. He had to make this kiss count.

There was nothing inside his mind, nothing but her image. He could not resist the magnetism of her eyes, of her lips, of her entire being, drawing him constantly near to her. To be honest, he didn't want to resist. He wanted to let go, to lose himself completely in her embrace.

He felt her tongue slide into his mouth. He smiled. She knew what she was doing this time. She even went so far as to take his lower lip between her teeth and nip it gently. Then, she tugged at it. He groaned against her lips, grabbing her by the buttocks and pulling her so close to himself that she could feel his manhood pressing against her belly. It was all too intense, too forbidden. They should not be doing this.

Yet, all he could do was kiss her even harder as that thought passed through his mind. Her buttocks fell perfectly into the palms of his hands. She had so many layers to her gown, but he could still feel how soft and plump it was. He could tell that she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

She moaned as he kissed her even harder, offering all of herself in this kiss. Her body quivered, it melted in his arms, and he knew that if he were to lift her up and take her to his bed chamber, she would gladly allow him. But he could not do that. That need would remain unsatiated.

“Edwin...” he heard her moan.

“Tell me, Lydia...” he replied. He kept sucking on her lower lip then he released it, only to trail an invisible line of kisses down her neck and below the sensitive hollow of her ear.

“I... I...” There was obviously something she wanted him to know. His heart was beating faster, louder, booming inside his ear. He waited to hear what she had to tell him.

Then, a knock on the door seemed to explode all around them. She pulled away, her lips slightly swollen from his kisses. Her cheeks were blushing red. She looked absolutely ravishing. He wanted to shout at whoever it was to go to Hell, but he swallowed those words instead.

He looked at her, waiting for her confirmation that it was all right to answer the door. She silently nodded, adjusting her gown.

“Yes?” he called out.

“I apologize, Your Grace, but Mr. Turlington is here to see you,” his butler explained from the other end of the door. Edwin had completely forgotten that he had a scheduled meeting with his attorney.

“Send him to the drawing room,” Edwin instructed. “I shall be right there.”

He couldn't take his eyes off Lydia. She had never looked more beautiful than she did now. She was smiling. He could not stop smiling, too. It was a ridiculous feeling, yet nothing could have felt more natural.

“You and your sisters prepare for our trip,” he instructed, deciding not to apologize about the kiss this time. He did it because he wanted to. He felt guilty, but at the same time,

nothing could have brought him more pleasure than kissing her breathless. “I shall send you word when we are going.”

“All right,” she nodded.

They exchanged a hasty goodbye, and she disappeared behind closed doors, leaving Edwin with a tangled mess of thorns that had become his emotions.

CHAPTER 23



Several days before their designated trip, Lydia could still not cease to think about their kiss. She wondered how long it would have lasted if Edwin's butler had not interrupted them. She would rather die than admit it to anyone, but she would not be the one to stop it. She was enjoying herself far too much for that.

Still, keeping an eye on Anna and what she had been up to was something that made her focus her mind on something other than Edwin and the fact that they would all be spending several days and nights under the same roof. The thought titillated her. It thrilled her, but she knew that they needed to be cautious. Yes, she wanted to solve mysteries and have a good time but not at the expense of her reputation.

That morning, when she was passing by Selina's chamber, she thought she heard someone crying. She immediately stopped and approached the door. Hesitant, she leaned her ear against the hard surface and listened carefully. A moment later, she was assured that someone was crying inside. That someone could only be Selina.

Lydia knocked softly, waiting to be called in. She counted exactly fifteen seconds, much longer than she would have expected to wait, then Selina came over and opened the door

herself. She managed to calm herself down, obviously. She was smiling even. But the swollen redness of her eyes was a telltale sign.

“Selina, is everything all right?” Lydia asked tenderly, almost whispering to her sister.

Selina faltered then she stepped aside, allowing her sister into her chamber. She quickly closed the door but remained standing.

“Nothing is all right,” Selina finally spoke in a voice that assured Lydia more crying was bound to happen soon.

“Come now,” Lydia said, taking her sister by the hand then leading her to the bed where both of them took a seat, one next to the other. “Whatever is troubling you, we can sort it out. You know we can. Now, why don’t you tell me all about it? After all, two heads are better than one.”

Selina smiled. Lydia was instantly hopeful that whatever reason had Selina so sad wasn’t as troublesome as it initially appeared.

“I... I think I do not want to marry the Viscount,” Selina said, carefully selecting each of her words.

Lydia frowned. This came completely out of nowhere. “Wait... you do not wish to marry him? But... why?”

Selina shrugged. “I think I’m not in love with him.”

“You think or you know?” Lydia asked.

“I don’t feel it,” Selina said, unable to find the right words.

Lydia smiled. “You do not have to marry anyone you do not wish. And if you do not love this man, then he is obviously not the one for you. Is that why you are crying? Because you don’t want to hurt him?”

“Well, that... and also, I was planning on telling him tomorrow. I’ve been planning this for almost the entire month. Then, you informed us that we are all to spend several days in the countryside at the Duke’s house.”

Then, Lydia realized what her sister was trying to explain. The Viscount was also one of the people invited.

“Oh, I see,” Lydia nodded compassionately. “If you tell him before we go there, then he won’t be able to hide the animosity.”

“And I won’t be able to hide my embarrassment,” Selina admitted, looking down at her feet. “He is a good man and everything, but... I feel he is not the one for me.” She sounded apologetic as if she were endeavoring to convince both Lydia and herself that she had a good enough reason for doing this.

Lydia could see that her sister needed reassurance. She needed someone to tell her that it was all right to change one’s mind about things like this.

“You do not need to apologize ever for the way you feel, Selina,” Lydia continued talking with tenderness and compassion. “If there is no love between you, it is better to recognize that now than to remain true to a promise that will only lead you down the path of misery later in life.”

“So... it is all right if I tell him that I no longer wish to marry him?” Selina asked, her voice trembling, sounding as if she were about to burst into tears once more.

“It most certainly is all right,” Lydia nodded. She wanted her sister to be fearless about herself, her emotions, but at the same time, she wanted her to be reasonable and to know what to expect. “However, know that he probably won’t like it. He may reply with words which will shock you. But that is all right. People say a lot of things when they are hurt and when they are angry. That has nothing to do with you. You should not stifle your own happiness to make someone else happy. It simply doesn’t work that way.”

“What do you suggest I do then?” Selina sighed although Lydia could immediately tell that her sister was feeling less stressed about all this. “Should I just tell him everything tomorrow as I planned? I’ve practiced my speech so often that I know it all by heart.”

“You do know that these things are best to be told from the heart,” Lydia commented.

“I just wish to tell him everything in a way that might hurt him the least,” Selina admitted. “If I allow my heart to do the talking, I might get tongue tied. I might get confused. I might say the wrong things and make an already bad situation even

worse. I don't want to marry him, but I also don't want to hurt him more than I already have to."

Lydia had never felt more proud of her sister. "You have no idea how much it means to me to hear you say those words, to hear how much you care about others and their emotions."

"That is what you taught us," Selina smiled, her eyes sparkling with love.

Lydia almost started crying herself. She swallowed heavily then cleared her throat. "My suggestion is to try and survive these few days in the countryside," she finally advised. "I know it won't be the most pleasurable of situations knowing what you must do after we return, but I think this way, it will cause the least pain for everyone. You and the Viscount won't be out there for the world to see you in your most vulnerable moment. It is something to be kept private. That is why I think you should remain patient for a few more days, and then reveal how you feel once we are back. Can you do that?"

Selina quickly nodded several times as if once wasn't enough.

"I think so," she agreed.

"I shall keep you by my side," Lydia promised.

In a way, that was a selfish promise. She, too, wished to keep herself occupied, so she would not be tempted to knock on the Duke's door with whatever question would pop to her curious mind. She needed to remain at a distance from him, especially after what had happened... again. This time, he did not even

apologize for the kiss. Not that she wanted him to. She wanted him to be aware of her own desire. She wondered if he was. He had to be... no?

“I shall keep both you and Anna by my side,” Lydia pointed out, remembering the real reason why all three of them would be the Duke’s guests. Selina didn’t know anything about Anna’s secret admirer, and Lydia meant to keep it that way. As it turned out, Selina had her own troubles to sort out. Lydia would be there for both of them.

As for herself... she would need to sort out her own feelings. The Duke had already shown her in many ways that he could not open himself up to a woman — at least, not until his sister was found. He could not allow such a distraction from the only goal he had set up for himself. Lydia could understand that. After all, she was helping him as much as she could. She wanted Rachel found as much as he did. Perhaps, once Rachel was home, safe and sound, the Duke would see her as someone more than just a partner in solving a mystery.

“Lydia?” Selina’s voice brought her back to the present moment, piercing through the fog of her heart’s desires and confusion.

“Sorry,” Lydia smiled. “I got lost in my own thoughts for a moment.”

“I can see that,” Selina smiled. “Are you thinking about the Duke?”

“Yes,” Lydia admitted with a chuckle. Why lie?

“You two are such a sweet couple,” Selina observed, gushing over it. “I knew it from the beginning. You were doing your best to hide the way you feel about each other, but love will always find a way to surface.”

“I know it will,” Lydia said. Actually, that was what she was afraid of. The fact that she would not be able to hide how she truly felt about Edwin, and because of this, he might want to push her away, refusing her further help. She could not allow that to happen. She simply had to show him, somehow, that she didn’t feel anything about him. She had to find a way not to be affected by the way he talked, the way he smiled, the way he smelled... Everything he did affected her.

Lydia sighed then got up. “How about we go and see what Anna is up to?” she suggested. “We might have a nice cup of tea in the garden while the sun is still out.”

“That is a splendid idea,” Selina nodded, jumping up from the bed. “I could use a distraction.”

Me, too, Lydia thought to herself, managing to bite her tongue in time not to say it out loud. Together, the two sisters walked out of the chamber, hand in hand. Lydia felt that as long as she had her sisters by her side, she was a happy woman. She would never let anything happen to them.

Never.

CHAPTER 24



If there was ever a perfect moment, to Edwin, this was it.

He was seated in the garden, a light summer breeze messing up his hair. Lydia was to his right. By her side rested Anna and then, Selina. Across from him at the table were the members of the other four family he had invited over to his country house.

Everyone seemed to be having a splendid time. There was not a trace of a gloomy cloud on the horizon. Even his mother was much more cheerful than usual as if sensing that they were so close to having Rachel back. That was, at least, how Edwin himself felt about it. He was certain that the man, whoever he was, could not resist writing to Anna again. All they needed to do was remain patient and vigilant. They would get only one more chance. They couldn't squander it.

Suddenly, one of the young ladies present pulled Selina up from her seat, and Selina in turn pulled Anna. Then, all three ladies started to run towards the middle of the garden, giggling joyfully, lost in their own world.

“I love how unburdened Anna has been these last two days.” Lydia turned to him and expressed her joy with this realization.

If he could, he would have patted himself on the back. Not only did he have Lydia by his side, but he also had a great excuse for it in addition to keeping her sister safe. His plan was perfect.

“I told you so,” he smirked at her.

She smiled in return. “You were most certainly right,” she admitted.

“Is she still angry with you?” he asked, lowering his voice, but that was unnecessary. Seeing that everyone here already knew one another, they easily found common topics to discuss, so everyone seemed engaged in a conversation with the person sitting closest to him or her. It was no coincidence that Edwin was seated next to Lydia.

“I think she is,” Lydia nodded, gazing in the direction where her sisters were huddled around in a small circle with Josephina, the young lady who invited them to play. “But she sounds much more forgiving somehow.”

“Give her time,” he said. “She still fears that he won’t write to her.”

“I fear that he will,” she said, biting her lower lip in a concerned manner.

The sight instantly made him remember their kiss. He wanted to be the one who would bite that delectable lip of hers. But he could not very well do that now even if there was nothing else he would rather do. So, he tried to remain in the present moment and focus on the conversation.

“I also hope that he will,” he admitted. “That is the only way we can find Rachel.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I am just... frightened of something happening to Anna, and that it will all be my fault because I didn’t keep her safe.”

Hearing those words, he wanted to wrap his arms around her and tell her that everything would be all right. However, he knew that just like the kiss, he could not do that right now. He could not act on his innermost emotions and desires, no matter how powerful they were.

At the same time, he felt terribly guilty. He kissed her again after he promised himself, he would not do it. He kissed her, and he made her a silent promise of some sort, giving her hope when he knew that there was no hope. At least, there was very little hope. He could not give himself to a woman now. He wondered if such a thing would ever be possible. He needed to find Rachel first. When he did then he needed to make sure that she was all right, that she did not have any trauma. He needed to take care of his sister whom he had failed. He could not give his heart to someone else. That would make him the worst brother in the world.

“I know you feel guilty,” he whispered, leaning closer to her but still keeping a respectful distance. “I know that feeling because we share it. But trust me, you are being the best sister one could hope to have.”

She lifted her gaze to meet his. “Do you really mean that?” she asked.

“Of course,” he smiled. “But now, I really think you should have fun. Go with your sisters and be merry without that ominous cloud that has been following us everywhere. Leave it behind, even if it is for a few precious moments.”

She hesitated then got up. She looked at him in a way that made him suspect she might bend down and give him a peck on the cheek. Everyone here knew they were courting, but even that would have been considered inappropriate. They were to show their devotion merely with looks and occasional handholding. Nothing else. God forbid that there was something else.

He almost chuckled at the thought. What he wished to do with her went far beyond the confines of looks and handholding. The animal inside of him raged on, demanding to be satiated, but he knew that it wouldn't be fair to Lydia. They would both enjoy a night of passion, but then what? Would he be able to promise her anything? He would not. He could not. And a lady like Lydia deserved the world, nothing less.

Finally, she placed her hand softly over his. The touch felt electric. Every time she touched him, it made him desirous for more, so much more. He feared that if he kissed her just one more time, he would never be able to tear himself away from her. Her magnetism was too powerful. Her heart was drawing him to her, and he was finding it increasingly more difficult to fight this off.

When she pulled away, he felt as if there was a gaping hole where her hand caressed him. She rushed over to her sisters, joining in their fun. He could not take his eyes off of her. The lack of her presence was a sensation he was still learning how to handle. He wondered what would happen when Rachel was found and brought safely home, and when there would be no more need for him and Lydia to spend any more time together. What then?

Unexpectedly, he felt the light touch of someone's hand on his shoulder. He recognized it immediately — the touch as well as the perfume. After all, his mother had not changed her perfume in over twenty years. It was the same one his father always used to gift her for her birthday, every year.

“I am so glad we decided to do this,” he heard his mother whisper, then she took a seat by his side.

He smiled as he watched her adjust herself on the chair, taking a small, dainty cup of tea in her hand and bringing it to her lips. She took a small sip then placed the cup back on the table in front of her. Edwin could not remember a time when his mother was not behaving in a ladylike fashion. It was simply who she was.

“Me, too, Mother,” he replied, gazing at her.

Even at her age, she was still considered a beautiful woman by many gentlemen. Rachel looked so much like her.

“You know, I am very glad that you two decided to put all this friendship nonsense behind you and finally admit to each other how you feel,” she continued.

“Lydia and I?” he wondered, but the moment he said it, he realized how silly his question sounded. Of course, she was referring to Lydia.

“Why, who else, darling?” his mother chuckled. To be honest, he could not remember the last time he saw her laugh so freely.

“Well... I took your advice,” he said a little awkwardly, feeling bad that he was lying to her. In fact, they were lying to everyone, but it was all for a good cause. They had to continue to solve this mystery together. He knew that without Lydia, he would not get anywhere. He needed her by his side.

“I am very happy you did,” she beamed. Then, she looked in the direction of Lydia and the other girls. “The love you feel for each other is simply... inexplicable.” She looked at him once more. “I simply could not understand why you would deny this obvious connection that exists between you two?”

“I don’t know,” he said even more awkwardly this time, feeling as if he was dragged into this conversation that would end up with him entangling himself deeper and deeper.

“Ah, you men,” she waved her hand dismissively, bringing the teacup to her lips once more and partaking in another sip. “You would lose your head if it wasn’t attached to your neck.”

He chuckled at his mother endeavoring to oversimplify things, but he knew what she meant. Men were not good at expressing emotions. At least, he knew that his father was a man who kept to himself, who rarely, if ever, had outbursts of emotions.

However, that did not mean that he didn't love his family. As for his wife, he adored her. That much was obvious from the way he spoke about her ever so highly regardless of whether or not she was present. It was also obvious in the way he looked at her.

Suddenly, Edwin wondered if he was looking at Lydia in the same manner. Did that give him away? Was that how his mother instantly recognized that he had feelings for Lydia? However, he was not willing to dive more deeply into these thoughts.

"I think both you and I needed this," he said, hoping to change the subject. She could tell his intention immediately, but she allowed it. "We needed to be surrounded by loving people again whom we trusted."

They both looked around at the same time. Laughter filled the air around them. It was obvious that everyone was enjoying themselves immensely. Joy was etched on every single face. Cheer blossomed in every voice. There was no doubt about it.

"I just wish Rachel could be here..." his mother said, her voice down to a whisper.

He took her by the hand and brought it to his lips. "I will bring her back," he said, meaning every word for it. "I promise."

She smiled at him, caressing his cheek. "I know you will. I never stopped believing that, not even for a single moment."

He didn't know what to say to that. Her words gave him strength. They gave him courage at a moment when he felt that he needed it. Only now did he realize how fortunate he had been to have all these women in his life. His mother was the first and primary guiding force. His sister was a loving companion to show him the error of his ways. Finally, Lydia... he still could not say what her exact role in his life would be. He knew what he wanted her to be, but he dared not say this out loud. He feared he could not be what she needed him to be.

At that moment, he noticed the girls returning. They were all blushing from running. Lydia slumped into the chair next to him. He was once again, overpowered by the need to pull her close to him, to inhale the fragrant scent of her hair, to taste her lips. He would have every reason for it. They were courting, were they not? Now, whether it was appropriate or not, that was a different story.

"Lemonade shall be served now," he leaned over to say, but he couldn't care what he would tell her. He simply wanted to be even closer to her, to be in her personal space embraced by the aura that was solely hers.

"Oh, I would love some," she gushed at him, her lips widening into a smile.

She was mesmerizing. Every single day, she seemed to grow even more beautiful. He could not stand it.

He swallowed heavily then, reluctantly, straightened himself in the chair and tried to start a conversation with one of his best friends, who was seated across from him. It was difficult to focus on business related topics, but he did his best. As long as Lydia was by his side, he knew that everything would be all right.

As for what would happen when she was no longer there...
well, he would cross that bridge when he got to it.

CHAPTER 25



That night, Lydia could not sleep. Not even when she kept her eyes closed for what seemed to be a small eternity did sleep come to her. Finally, she had to admit defeat. Checking in the darkness to hear the steady breathing of her sisters, she was assured that she was the only one with this predicament. Slowly, assuring that she would not make a single sound, she wrapped her robe around her willowy frame and tiptoed out of the chamber.

Carrying a small candle in her trembling hand, there was only one place where she could go. Edwin had shown her where the library was. On a night like this, only a book would be an adequate companion. She found her way to the library easily, her mind having memorized the map of the house upon first arriving here. She expected the entire house to be dark and silent. What she didn't expect was to see light flickering underneath the library door.

For a moment, she hesitated to come in. Obviously, there was someone there, someone who, just like her, could not sleep. Was it Edwin? Her heart immediately leaped at the possibility. Before her mind could tell her feet to turn around and walk back to her chamber, her hand was already on the doorknob, gently pushing the door open.

As she hoped, her eyes befell on Edwin. He seemed surprised to see her as he stood by the bookshelf with his arm stretched out.

“Sorry, I...” she started, standing in the doorway.

“Come in,” he said with a smile. “Trouble sleeping?” He pinpointed her problem immediately. All she could do was nod as she walked in and closed the door behind her. That was her second mistake of the night. “I’ve got just the thing,” he said, spreading his arms around himself and showing her all the books that were there. Lydia was flabbergasted. The shelves were brimming with books from top to bottom, all the way to the ceiling. There wasn’t a single corner of the room that was not filled.

“This is amazing,” she said in awe, looking around.

“I doubt you won’t be able to find something to keep you company on a sleepless night,” he assured her.

She smiled. “I would have the opposite problem.”

“Which one?” he asked.

“How to choose only one,” she chuckled. He instantly joined in. She loved the way their laughter merged together. They fit so well. But she banished the thought quickly.

“Come,” he suddenly called her over. Stiffly, she obeyed, standing by his side. He then proceeded to tell her about his

favorite books, and she listened intently. “I love fairy tales,” he suddenly told her.

“You do?” she asked, her eyes wide with disbelief.

“Mhm,” he nodded, then shrugged. “I know it’s not what a man ought to read, but they remind me of simpler times when life was so much easier.”

“I know what you mean,” she said, washed over by melancholy. “My mother always used to read fairytales to us before bedtime,” she admitted. “For a very long time, I didn’t dare pick up that book which she read to us. It was frightful to know that her fingers would never touch it again, that her voice would never fill our ears. It... hurt.”

She was overpowered by sadness, and before she even knew it, she was locked in his embrace. She was terrified of this sudden emotion that bloomed inside of her, of this need to be worshipped by him, of this need to constantly be by his side. After all, was that not exactly the reason she was here?

She closed her eyes, allowing the moment to completely overcome her. Gently, his lips caressed her ear. It was a soft touch. She barely felt it at first. She thought she imagined it. But his tongue followed quickly enough. Her skin became inflamed instantly. They were the same flames she had come to recognize during the two previous times they kissed.

Unexpectedly, he pulled away then he walked over to the door, locking them both in the library. Lydia swallowed heavily. Her heart was not hers any longer. Neither was her body. It all belonged to him. However, that was a secret she did not plan

on divulging right now. Perhaps not ever. As for the time being, she would live in the moment.

He wrapped his hands around her waist pulling her closer to him. She had fallen under his spell during that first kiss. She knew that now. His kiss was more passionate than ever before as it moved from her lips to her earlobe, down to her throat, nipping at it. He flicked his tongue over neck, leaving a wet spot that seemed to burn with heat that exploded in her chest, only to travel down her belly, landing right between her thighs. She knew this ache from before, but it had never been so powerful, so throbbing, so yearning.

His skillful fingers liberated her from her robe, revealing just a thin, silken nightrobe that barely hid the curves of her body from his sight. The look that he gave her was a look of desire, of complete surrender. She had to look away quickly because if she kept looking at him, she feared that he would set them both aflame, this entire library included.

But he would not let her look away. He took her hands and brought them to his lips. He sucked on her fingers tenderly then released them in order to remove all their garments, one at a time. She could not keep her hands off of him. Something else was in charge of her mind. Her fingers found his shoulders easily, caressing them up and down. He felt like a marble statue, only burning on the inside.

“I love it when you touch me, Lydia...” she heard him say, and his voice seemed to do something to her. She felt the same way. She loved it when he touched her. With a trembling hand, she did as she was told. His hand covered hers, leading her up to his shoulders then down his chest again, down his chiseled abdomen. There was nothing appropriate about this, yet there was also nothing wrong with this. Nothing had ever felt more right.

Suddenly, he lowered his forehead to hers. His stare was burning with intention. She knew what that intention would be. She wanted it as much as he although every modicum of honor bade her push him away and run. It was his tenderness that made her remain put. The tips of his fingers gently slid down her arms. His lips were on hers once again, and that was all she could focus on.

She chuckled loudly when he lifted her up and took her to the chaise lounge, laying her down onto it gently. He propped himself up, hovering over her. He didn't want to look away even for a single second. Yet, she wasn't ashamed. She was completely naked, her body glistening in the soft light of the candles, but she was unafraid. Unapologetic. His touch on her skin felt natural, the only thing she wanted right now.

Drinking in the sight of her, he lowered himself and planted his lips upon hers once more. She did not dare to open her eyes, to look down at what was poking her between the legs. She knew what it was, of course, and the very thought made her blush fervently.

For a moment, she wondered what he must think of her. She came to him in the middle of the night. She allowed him to disrobe her. She was kissing him back as passionately as he was kissing her and –

His fingers found her hardened nipples. Then, his tongue. Goodness, the things this man knew to do with his tongue. He kissed her breasts reverently as he kept himself propped up on his elbows, never too far away from her. The moment he took one of her nipples into his mouth, she gasped loudly. The lash of his tongue was unbearably pleasurable. Her fingers immediately raked through his fingers, keeping him close.

Everything that he did made her feel as if she were riding a tidal wave of pleasure which she never wanted to end.

The more she felt his tongue on her body, the more her throbbing center yearned to feel him inside of her. As if listening to her most inner desires, she felt his hand trail an invisible line down her body, only to part her flower gently.

“Do you like this?” he murmured right into her ear.

All she could do was moan in response. Her entire body writhed in response to what he was doing. The sensation was unlike anything else she had ever felt before. It was so overpowering. She quivered uncontrollably as his finger slowly dipped into her most secret cavern. It was strangely pleasurable, and she could feel herself all wet and needy for him. He kept circling his finger on her tender bud, building up friction.

“Oh, my...” she managed to muster before she felt a sudden explosion inside of her, exactly where he had been touching her. His caresses became more tender, softer, but he did not stop. He kissed her gently as she felt herself float down from the cloud she just climbed up on. The pleasure he brought her was complete, it was indescribable.

When he broke their kiss again, she could see something in his eyes, something she always wanted to see. Was that love? Affection? Tenderness? A moment of heated passion? Or was it an amalgamation of all the above? She didn't know much at a moment like this, but she knew one thing. Edwin was the one she loved, the one she lived for. Whether she would ever be able to admit her emotions to him... that was a different story.

“Tell me if you wish me to stop,” he said against her lips. She couldn’t imagine a situation where she would tell him to stop. She nodded, swallowing her breath. He could read the desperation in her eyes; she was certain of it.

He lowered his forehead to hers as her legs parted even more, granting him access to her most sacred place. His lips were on hers, kissing her passionately. Then, in a blink of an eye, the world ceased to turn. Everything changed. He slid inside of her slowly, tenderly. It was a sensation she would never be able to describe in mere words. It was painful and pleasurable at the same time. It was hot and cold. It was wonderful and terrifying. Nothing existed but this one moment in time.

She grabbed onto him as if she were clinging to her dear life. Her body reacted to his perfectly. She had never done this before, but her body knew what to do. He moved his hips towards her, thrusting. Every time he entered her more deeply, her desire took a stronger hold of her.

His pace slowly hastened. She clutched at him more hungrily. She bit at his lower lip. Her nails dug into his skin. Their rhythm was wonderful. It brought forth unspeakable delights. Suddenly, her body exploded once again, wrapped up in a more potent euphoria than the one before. She shivered. She trembled. She moaned against his lips. Several moments later, his own body stiffened. He pulled out, and she felt a hot sprinkle of something on her inner thigh.

Still breathing heavily, he lay down next to her, unwilling to release her from his embrace. She had no idea how long they were lying like that. The doors were locked, so she wasn’t afraid that someone might barge in and find them like this.

Instead of being petrified at what this would mean, she almost chuckled at the idea.

She closed her eyes, relishing this moment because she didn't know what would happen after it. She didn't know, and she didn't want to know. Not yet at least. She would hold onto it for a few precious seconds longer then she would accept reality whatever it might be.

CHAPTER 26



*I*t was the most wonderful night of his life. He knew that.

That knowledge was what made his next words all the more difficult. Lydia was the first one to get up and start putting her clothes back on. He tried to look away, but the sight of her naked body was too glorious. He never wanted to take his eyes off of her. When she was finally done, tying the belt around her waist, he mourned the fact that he would probably never get to see her like that again. Not after what he had to tell her.

He got up and slid into his own robe then he walked over to her and took her by the hands. She was absolutely glowing. He hated himself for doing this, for having done this, but this desire to have her was stronger than him,. He knew that she would not forgive him. He wouldn't forgive himself.

“Lydia...” he started, feeling something inside his throat making it increasingly more difficult to speak. “I know this will make me out to be a horrible man, but...”

The moment he said this, her facial expression changed. Her eyes were now the eyes of a doe, running away from the

hunters, fearing for her life. He hated that he was the one who made her feel that way.

“I care about you more than I could ever express in mere words,” he said, trying to soften the blow, but it was all futile. What he had to say, after what he had done, could not be softened in any manner. “But... after what happened to Rachel, I have become a wreck, a mere shell of a man. You awakened something inside of me, something I didn’t know I still had, and I shall forever be grateful to you. I see what you need. I know what it is. I know who it is. But I... I cannot be that man for you...”

Immediately upon hearing those words, she pulled her hands away from his. He could see her lower lip quivering. Her eyes were wide and sparkling. She was fighting back the tears. He had seen that look many a time in his sister. He knew it well to be able to recognize it instantly.

“You deserve so much,” he continued. “You deserve the world. But I am too jaded to be able to give you that.”

“You decided all this without even asking me if I needed the world?” she suddenly asked him, tilting her head.

She had regained control of her emotions, of the situation. He admired her for that. She was a strong young woman, just the type he liked. In a different life, or at least under different circumstances, they could have become husband and wife. But not in this one. Here, everything was against them.

“You are the most wonderful woman I have ever met,” he admitted, and he knew it to be true. “I knew this from the

moment I laid my eyes on you. I know that you need a man who can fully devote himself to you. You could not handle anything else. You wouldn't be happy."

"Do you truly know what would make me happy?" she asked again, defiant.

"I think I do," he replied, confidently. "That is why I know that I cannot be what you need me to be."

He expected her to say something, to ask something else. He expected anything but what she actually replied.

"Very well," she said, her chin slightly pointing upward. "We shall forget all this ever happened. Just like everything else."

He wanted to tell her that such a thing was impossible, that he would never be able to forget what happened here. He wanted to tell her that he still needed her help in finding Rachel, but now was not the time to ask for more favors. He was certain that she would let him know if there was any news with Anna and her mysterious secret admirer. Now, he needed to let her go.

"What about our courting?" she suddenly asked, stopping right before the door. She still had her back turned to him. Her silhouette burned in the darkness against the faint light of the candle she was holding.

He paused. He had no idea. "We can talk about it tomorrow, before we return to London."

“Very well,” she echoed the same words from before. They didn’t mean anything. He couldn’t hear any emotion behind them as if she purposefully closed herself off from him, unwilling to give him even a glimpse into the current state of her mind.

He fought hard not to rush after her, grab her by the shoulders, turn her around to face him and kiss her breathless. That was what he wanted to do, to tell her what a fool he was for even considering letting her go. But that would have been the selfish thing to do.

He loved her. He loved her more than life itself. He wanted her all to himself. But with him, she would be like a bird in a cage. His love would not be what she needed to blossom. And he wanted her to blossom, even if that meant by another man’s side. Because he loved her so much, he was willing to let her go.

“Good night,” she finally said, unlocking the door and letting herself out.

He stood there in silence for a long time. It seemed like an entire eternity. He couldn’t move. He could barely breathe properly. Everything inside of him was numb. His mind was a blank. There was nothing. Just a big, endless nothingness.

When he was finally able to move, he returned to his chamber. Nothing was the same. The colors around him seemed to have faded. The sounds were dead. He felt as if he wasn’t even alive but was merely moving and breathing, driven by some inner mechanics not even he was able to understand. But he didn’t feel alive. He didn’t feel quite dead either. He was somewhere in between. Without her, he was lost. He could see that now.

But he could not get her back. She didn't deserve such a life. She deserved so much better than him.



Lydia avoided Edwin as much as she could. Fortunately, it was their last day there, so everyone was busy preparing themselves for their return to London. Anna and Selina were also excited to get back, and Lydia allowed their enthusiasm to infect her as well.

Still, Edwin's words never left her mind. She merely managed to forget them for several blissful moments then they would return with a vengeance. But she managed to remain smiling, polite, and cheerful. It demanded all of her conscious effort from her, but she managed it.

That night, when she was once again in her own bed, she cried herself to sleep. The pain of the Duke's words finally set in, and she could allow all the hurt to come to the surface. She wished there was someone she could talk to, someone to whom she could unburden her heart and soul, but her sisters were lost in their own problems, and she didn't wish to trouble them. As always, she decided to handle this on her own.

She pulled the covers all the way to her chin in an effort to hide herself from the rest of the world as she allowed the tears to simply stream down her cheeks. Suddenly, the door to her chamber burst open, and Selina appeared, looking furious.

Lydia's eyes widened in shock. She quickly wiped the tears with her sleeves, hoping that they weren't visible in the darkness and that Selina would not be asking her questions she

wasn't willing to reply to. As it turned out, Selina seemed lost in her own troubles, focusing on them, unable to notice anything that was happening around her.

"Selina?" Lydia asked as she sat up in the bed. She quickly lit a candle which rested on a small table by her bedside then watched as Selina walked over to her. "What on earth is the matter?"

"I cannot believe she would do this!" Selina hissed angrily through clenched teeth.

"Who?" Lydia wondered, still somewhere between sleep and wakeful state.

"Why, Anna, of course!" Selina frowned, placing her hands on her hips.

"What did Anna do?" Lydia asked, unable to come up with a single reasonable explanation as to why Selina would barge into her bed chamber in the middle of the night and accuse her sister of doing something that sounded outrageous.

"She and the Viscount!" Selina snapped, her words like her thoughts, chopped up and making sense only to her.

Lydia frowned this time. Selina lifted her hands to the level of her chest, incredulous and shocked.

"Wait, Selina... you are not making any sense," Lydia tried to clarify. "What about Anna and the Viscount?"

Selina's brows furrowed as if she were angry at her sister that she simply could not make the necessary assumption on her own. "They are involved... romantically!"

Lydia gasped. "That cannot be," she quickly shook her head. "You are not making any sense."

"I'm not, am I?" Selina glared. "Then, pray tell me, where is Anna?"

"What do you mean, where is Anna?" Lydia was having enough of this conversation. "Why, in her bed of course! Where else would she be?"

Lydia pulled the covers off of herself and got up, ready to head to Anna's room immediately, and sort all this nonsense out.

"I was just in her chamber, and she isn't there," Selina said, victoriously. As if that was any sort of a victory.

Lydia still couldn't understand what exactly Selina was accusing Anna of. None of it made any sense.

"The Viscount said he was going away and would not be home, and now, Anna is missing as well," Selina continued. "And this was all happening right underneath my nose!"

"Selina, you are being paranoid," Lydia could not listen to a word more of this.

“Paranoid?” Selina echoed incredulously. “I overheard one of your conversations with Anna about her secret admirer. Then, I got curious. I wanted to see what those letters were all about. I... I read them.”

“You read your sister’s letters?” Lydia asked, shocked at this breach of privacy.

“I had to,” Selina tried to explain herself. “And it is good that I did, because...” She swallowed heavily before continuing. “Because I recognized the Viscount’s handwriting. The letters... they were all from him.”

“Wait...” Lydia shook her head. This was all too much. “What did you say?”

“The Viscount is Anna’s secret admirer,” Selina finally said it clearly, aloud.

Lydia couldn’t say anything at first. It was too much. It was unbelievable.

“Are you certain of what you are saying, Selina?” Lydia asked, accentuating every single word.

“I wouldn’t come to you if I wasn’t,” Selina admitted. This time, she sounded much less angry and more hurt. Lydia could tell that she was heartbroken even though she had decided already that she would not be marrying this man.

“And Anna isn’t in her room?” Lydia asked although the answer to this was already obvious. Still, she had to ask again... for her own sake.

“No,” Selina confirmed.

“We need to alert the entire house,” Lydia’s mind suddenly switched on, and she could think properly. She was once again the protector, the one who kept her sisters safe. Her own problems instantly became unimportant. “We have to find Anna, immediately!”

She rushed over to her writing table in the corner of the room and scribbled a quick note on a piece of paper which she then folded and handed to Selina.

“Give this to the footman and tell him to take it to the Duke of Combston,” she instructed. “We shall start looking for her in the meantime.”

Selina seemed confused for a moment then rushed out of the room in search of the footman. Lydia quickly got dressed and ran outside. She wasn’t even thinking. She was led by some inner instinct that told her that her sister needed to be found at all costs. She would do whatever she needed to do to bring her home safe and sound.

Suddenly, Lydia realized why Edwin pushed her away. With Anna missing, she could not think of anything or anyone else. No one else existed. The world stopped spinning. Life was put on hold. She finally understood.

A tear slid down her cheek. She quickly wiped it then headed outside. Every second counted.

CHAPTER 27



When the message reached him, Edwin knew he needed to act fast. He quickly got dressed and immediately returned with Lydia's carriage to her home. Her note was brief. It told him little other than the fact that he needed to come urgently. Still, he trusted her judgment. He knew that she would not come to him for aid unless the situation was dire.

As soon as the carriage came to a halt, Edwin jumped out of it, flying towards the main house. Just as he was about to knock on the door, it opened, and Lydia appeared.

"Lydia!" he exclaimed upon seeing her. "I came as quickly as I could."

"Come, there is not a moment to be wasted!" She pulled him by the hand, her touch both tender and urgent at the same time as they rushed towards the garden behind the house. "She is nowhere in the house," she continued as they ran with the cool nightly breeze raking its invisible fingers through her strawberry blonde locks. Her freckled cheeks were even rosier now under the strain. "We have to search in the garden," she announced as they took a left turn behind the house. "The servants were already sent out into the streets to see if she's already left us..."

He could hear the concern in her voice. He understood her completely. The memory of that fateful night when he woke up and realized that Rachel was not sound asleep in her bedchamber. He remembered that heavy feeling in his gut, that dull, throbbing ache that frightened him into believing the worst. It took him a lot of effort to escape the talons of those convictions. But he was here. He was hopeful. He was so close to finding Rachel.

This was the same memory all over again. He and his mother also employed the help of every single servant. They searched the entire house first then the garden and the rest of the premises. The search was widened into the surrounding streets then the entire city of London. But Rachel was nowhere to be seen or heard from. He could only hope that Lydia wasn't too late for her sister, the way he was late for his own.

They tried to see in the darkness, but the garden was dim. It was illuminated solely by a few torches, but the woods behind the garden were pitch black.

“We need to go there,” he pointed towards the darkest part.

She stopped, gazing into the distance in the direction where he was pointing. He could tell she was afraid. Petrified even. He knew that feeling well. She wanted to rush over there and to find Anna. But at the same time, she was afraid of not finding her there. Then, she would be one step further away from finding her.

Without saying a word, she started first. He followed her silently, looking around. Every shadow could have been Anna. Every tree seemed to have a human shape. He wanted to hear

noises, but there were none, apart from the sound of their own footsteps.

Then suddenly, Lydia stopped. Her hand flew to his side, bidding him silently to do the same. His heart was beating wildly. He didn't know where to look, but she obviously did. Her eyes were focused on something in the distance, something he could still not see. She tiptoed towards a tree, trying to make as little sound as possible. He did the same.

He looked hard in the same direction that she was, squinting, until his eyes had finally adjusted to the darkness. Then, finally, he could see it. There were two silhouettes, one facing the other. One was taller with broader shoulders. The other one was smaller, standing close, but her body language seemed uneasy, frightened even.

He was just about to tell Lydia to wait until they could come up with a plan when Lydia stepped out of the shadows that were hiding them and shouted.

“Anna!” Lydia’s voice echoed throughout the area, awakening anyone and anything that might have been sleeping soundly up until that moment.

Both silhouettes turned to face her. He could see them clearly now as the soft light of the moon shined down upon them. It was Anna and the Viscount.

“Lydia?” Anna called out to her sister.

Even Edwin, who didn't know Anna that well, could tell from the sound of her voice that something wasn't right. The Viscount wasn't holding onto her, but she was still by his side.

"I know this looks suspicious," the Viscount suddenly started to explain without being asked anything, "but I merely needed Anna's help with... Selina."

"Why didn't you come to me then?" Lydia flared up as she took one step closer to the couple.

"I could not," the Viscount assured her. "Selina is closer to Anna, and I needed to find out why she called off our engagement."

Lydia ignored his comment. She turned her attention to her sister. "Is that true, Anna?" she demanded although Edwin was certain that they all knew the answer to that question.

Seconds felt as long as an entire hour. Edwin wanted to interfere, to show the Viscount that the ladies were not here alone and unchaperoned. He was there to keep them safe. But Lydia had taken charge of the situation. She was bold enough to prove it to that man, and Edwin didn't want to take that power away from her. That was why he stood behind her, close enough for her to know that he was there if she needed him, but far enough away so that she could do this on her own terms. He knew that she needed that.

"I..." Anna started to speak, but she was unable to finish her sentence.

It had become clear to everyone that she wasn't here of her own accord.

"Anna," Lydia demanded in a voice that allowed for no back talk. "I need you to walk over to me now, slowly, all right?"

Anna nodded, but the moment she started to take her first step, the Viscount grabbed her and used her as a human shield, hiding behind her with his hands firmly planted on her shoulders, digging into her soft flesh.

"Lydia?" Anna called out, her voice trembling with fear.

"It will be all right, Anna," Lydia assured her with her hands at the level of her chest, trying to keep everyone calm. "Just do as the Viscount says."

"Yes!" the Viscount shouted. "You shall all do as I say! Stay where you are! Do not come a step closer, or you shall force me to hurt Anna!"

Edwin swallowed heavily. This man was dangerous. Edwin knew that much. They'd better not make him angrier than he already was. Edwin also knew that this was his one chance to find out where Rachel was. If they lost sight of the Viscount now, he doubted that the Viscount would ever fall into their hands again. That would be devastating because Rachel might be lost forever.

However, Edwin couldn't ask him about Rachel now. They had to save Anna first. He couldn't be so selfish as to value his own sister's life more than Anna's.

“Get back!” the Viscount hissed, adjusting his entire arm underneath Anna’s neck. Edwin could tell that the Viscount could do Anna grievous bodily harm just by choosing to squeeze more tightly, so he did exactly what the man demanded of them. He took a step back then another one. Lydia did the same although she was doing it reluctantly.

He wanted to tell her that they had to obey the man’s orders now. There was no other way of doing this, of saving Anna. But he was certain that Lydia already knew this. They took a few more steps back until the Viscount was at a safe distance.

At that moment, the man pushed Anna down onto the ground then started to run away. Lydia and Edwin ran to her aid, and Lydia bent down to help Anna.

“Are you all right?” Edwin asked her.

“We’re fine,” Lydia nodded. “Go after him!”

Edwin didn’t need to be told twice. He started running in the same direction that the Viscount was headed. At first, he couldn’t see anything in the darkness, but he kept on running, hoping that some inner, invisible guide would allow him to find his way.

Somehow, through some fluke of providence, he did. Right in front of him, a silhouette of a running man appeared. Edwin hastened his pace, using up all of his remaining energy. It was hard. Harder than anything he had ever done before, but he pushed himself.

When he was close enough to man, Edwin jumped onto him, and they both started to roll down on the ground. Edwin grabbed hold of the man's collar and refused to let go as they were swirling in the darkness. They both groaned loudly, feeling the unforgiving roots underneath their backs digging into their flesh, but both of them refused to let go.

Then, Edwin felt the man punch him in the jaw. The pain was so sudden, so unexpected, that he immediately released him from his grip. He was still on the ground when he heard the familiar click of a pistol.

“Stay on the ground,” the Viscount said, “for your own good.”

Edwin was still breathing heavily when he propped himself up on his elbows, feeling the coppery tang of blood in his mouth. He believed that he had just breathed his last breath. He knew that he wouldn't be able to even get up from the ground, and the pistol would fire. He couldn't risk that. If he got killed, who would save Rachel? He needed to stay alive, if for nothing else, then for her.

He closed his eyes thinking about Rachel and about Lydia. He remembered their childhood games, how he would always let Rachel win and how happy she was. He remembered Lydia and her laughter and the way she tasted. He wanted to taste her again and hear that laughter echo all around him.

When he opened his eyes a moment later, he was alone. That guilt was there, eating him up alive. He had his chance, and he squandered it. That pistol was there, but that was only an excuse. He should have been a man; he should have done something.

That treacherous voice again tried to convince him that he wasn't man enough, just as it tried to convince him that it was all his fault that Rachel was gone. He couldn't allow that voice to win again. Not again. Not ever again.

He found his way back to Lydia and found the two girls embracing. Anna was sobbing in Lydia's arms. He approached them cautiously.

"Why don't we head back to the house?" he suggested.

"The Viscount?" Lydia asked.

"He had a pistol..." Edwin said apologetically. "He threw me to the ground. I will go after him."

"Father will help," Lydia nodded. "You need to go after him right away."

He knew she was right. All he could do was nod then he helped the girls back to the house. The ordeal was not over yet. In fact, it was far from over.

CHAPTER 28



Everyone was gathered in the drawing room. Selina was sitting by Anna's side with her arm around her sister, protectively. Lydia's father and Edwin were standing, obviously unable to sit in one place after everything that had just happened. Lydia knew that feeling. That was why she herself was standing as well. This was the moment for the entire truth to finally come out.

"I was so frightened," Anna said, sobbing, turning to Selina. "I want you to know, Selina, that I never knew it was the Viscount when he was sending me those letters."

"I believe you," Selina assured her tenderly, patting her sister's back.

"I spoke to him during balls and dinner parties, and never, not in my wildest dreams, would I ever think that it was him," Anna reiterated one more time, still sounding as incredulous as the first time she spoke.

"None of us could have ever imagined it," Lydia added. "The truth truly is stranger than fiction, especially in our case."

“What do you mean?” her father asked. Lydia then realized that he had been the one kept mostly in the dark about everything. In fact, only she and Edwin knew the entire truth. This was exactly the right moment to rectify that mistake.

“Well, this is the entire story...” Lydia started patiently. She spoke slowly, making sure not to omit a single piece of information so that they would all understand exactly what had been going on and why she and Edwin were spending so much time together.

Lydia felt that she had been talking for hours, although that was hardly the case, when she finally brought her story to an end. Everyone was stunned into silence. No one dared speak or say anything. She expected there to be questions, but all she could see were eyes wide with shock and disbelief.

“I’m truly sorry that Edwin and I kept this from you all, but we didn’t want to frighten you,” Lydia admitted.

“I understand,” Anna was the first to speak. “I am sorry that I didn’t believe you.”

“It is quite all right,” Lydia smiled at her sister. “This man was such a skilled manipulator; it was impossible for you not to believe him.”

“He managed to do that to many other girls including my sister,” Edwin interjected. “We are still hoping to find them all...”

“We must gather our men and go after him,” the Earl spoke up, taking a step towards the center of the room.

“But we have no idea where to go,” Edwin said. Lydia could tell that he felt defeated because he backed down when the Viscount pulled a gun on him.

“You could try the Viscount’s home,” Lydia suggested. “Isn’t it on the outskirts of the city?”

“Yes,” the Earl nodded. “That is the first place where we should look. I doubt he can leave the city just like that. He needs provisions and he needs resources of all kinds. If we are fortunate, we might catch him there.”

“In that case, we need to head out there immediately,” Edwin agreed.

The Earl headed towards the door, and Edwin followed, but Lydia caught him by the arm. He turned to her with a puzzled glance.

“You did everything right.” She smiled at him. That was all she said. That was all she needed to say, all he needed to hear. “Now, go, and bring Rachel back.”

She felt overwhelmed by the look that he gave her. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and kiss him from now until eternity. She didn’t care that he tried to push her away. She understood why he had done that. She could understand all of it now, and she could blame him for nothing.

She loved the man that he was. She loved him for all of it, and she knew that as long as she was alive, there would never be another man for her. Just him.

Silently, she gazed at him, hoping that he was able to read all of this in her eyes because she was unable to say it in words. Sometimes, silence spoke much louder than words ever could, and she was certain that this was one of those moments.

He smiled back, taking her hand into his and bringing it to his lips. He held it like that for a long time until he finally let go.

“Wait for me,” he whispered back to her fluttering heart.

“That is all I will ever do,” she replied, watching him follow her father through the door.

Once again, the three girls were left alone. There was still so much left to be said, but instead of speaking, Lydia walked over to her sisters, sat on the sofa next to them, and the three embraced firmly, just like they used to do when they were little. It was an embrace that proved to them that they were stronger than the world, stronger than anyone who wished to keep them apart. Their love could beat all the odds, and this time, this was proven.

Lydia felt a stray tear roll down her cheek. She let it. Her heart was full. All they needed now was for another lost sister to be brought home, safe and sound.

Edwin can do it, she kept repeating to herself over and over again.



“You go through the back entrance,” the Earl instructed once they found themselves in front of the Viscount’s home. There was a small group of trustworthy men with them. Edwin was certain that if the Viscount was still here, they would catch him. He would pay for what he had done.

“All right,” Edwin nodded, signaling a few of his men to follow him.

The two groups separated with both the Earl and the Duke at the helm on both ends. Edwin felt strangely empowered. He was certain that this was the last stop of this insane ride. He would finally find the answers he had been looking for.

Just as he was about to barge through the back door into the house, he heard a noise from somewhere behind him. Someone was running through the maze in the garden.

“Over there!” Edwin shouted. The men followed him immediately.

He ran like a madman, having no idea where he was running. He was simply following the sound. It didn’t even occur to him that it might be a squirrel or some other irrelevant animal taking his focus away from the house. Something assured him he was on the right track. Some inner feeling told him not to go back, not to wait for anyone, but to keep going. So, he did.

He fought his way through the maze, turning left, then right, listening to the sound which was becoming louder and louder,

until finally, he saw someone's back.

“Stop!” he shouted, gripping the pistol in his own hand. This time, he would not be frightened into backing down.

The figure instantly stopped. It raised its arms into the air above its head. It was also holding a pistol.

“Turn around!” Edwin ordered. The figure did as it was instructed.

It was the Viscount. Edwin had no idea why he was running through the maze. Perhaps there was an exit on the other side, and he needed to run away before they entered his house and found him there. This time, fortune had truly favored them.

“Drop your pistol!” Edwin ordered.

“Or what?” the Viscount hissed back, unwilling to obey.

“Or I will not be as kind as you were when you left me last time,” Edwin warned.

At that moment, his men came running. It was obvious that the Viscount was outnumbered. He could take out one, perhaps even two or three men, but not all of them.

“The game is over,” Edwin pointed out. The gun in his hand was unnecessary at this point, but he still held onto it, just in case.

“The game is over when I say it is over,” the Viscount corrected him.

“You have no more control over anything,” Edwin told him. “You’d best admit to everything, and the constables might be lenient with you. But if you make me angry, I will not be held responsible for my actions.” Edwin meant every word of it, and obviously, the Viscount knew it. He dropped the gun to the ground, not taking his eyes off of Edwin.

“I am not really Daniel Pearson,” the Viscount revealed, much to Edwin’s shock. “My real name is Nathan Anderson.”

“Who the heck is Nathan Anderson?” someone from the group inquired, and Edwin had to admit that he was asking himself the same question.

The man’s cold blue eyes seared through Edwin, but he endured the look. Then, the man continued. “Daniel Pearson is my cousin. You see, Daniel also comes from a commoner family, but his mother married a Viscount. Thus, they climbed the social ladder, leaving the rest of us far behind in the gutter, pretending to be so much better than us.” There was obvious derision in his voice. “They never even tried to help us get out of poverty. We almost didn’t exist to them any longer. That was when I realized that the people of the *ton* didn’t deserve the happy, rich lives they got to live. What had they done to truly be deserving of it? Nothing!”

“That is not up to you to decide,” Edwin reminded him.

“Why not?” the man glared at him viciously. He was obviously not sorry for a single thing he had done. “Someone needed to teach them a lesson. Why couldn’t that someone be me?”

Edwin didn’t know what to say to that. The man saw it as an excuse to continue his story.

“So, I decided one day to abduct my cousin while he was traveling abroad. It was so easy. Too easy, almost. My next decision was to take revenge on the *ton* by targeting what they cherished the most: their insecure, youngest daughters. They were an even more rewarding prey. They ate every single word I gave them, ate it up like the good obedient daughters that they were without questioning a single thing I told them just because I showered them with what they needed the most. Attention.”

“The girls?” Edwin demanded, his voice akin to a growl. “Are they alive?”

“Who do you take me for?” The man frowned in disgust. “Of course, they are alive. But for how long, I cannot claim to know.”

“Tell me where they are,” Edwin ordered, feeling his fingers squeeze around the handle of the pistol.

“I shall do no such thing,” the man almost laughed in his face at his pain.

Edwin could not take it any longer. He threw the gun to the ground then grabbed the man by the collar, pushed him down, knelt on his chest, and started to choke him.

“You have three seconds to tell me where they are, or I swear to God, I will strangle you with my bare hands, and no one will consider me guilty of what I had done because you are nothing, and you will never be anything more than nothing... One...” he started counting. “Two...”

“The... base... ment...” the man started to gargle the words, mixing them with the air he was trying to draw into himself but wasn’t allowed to.

When Edwin finally released the man from his grip, he could feel his own fingers stiffening under the strain. His entire body was trembling. His mind still hadn’t had enough time to process what he just heard.

“The basement,” someone behind him echoed the answer he had been waiting for over two years to hear.

He turned around as if in a haze. “Take him to the constables,” he ordered the men. Then, he wanted to make the man know something else, something crucial. He walked over the man now known as Nathan Anderson with the same cold blue eyes that stared at him with hatred. “I will make sure you rot in prison for the rest of your life,” Edwin promised Nathan.

Then, he ran all the way back to the house, barely able to control himself.

CHAPTER 29



Edwin could almost hear his sister's silent pleas for help. He did not know where the basement was located in this grand old mansion, but he had a good idea. He found the stairs then went down to the basement. What he found there seemed to be nothing unusual. There was no indication of anyone being kept there against their will.

"I don't understand..." Edwin placed his hands on his hips then looked around.

A few of his men joined him while the others remained outside with Nathan, waiting for the constables to arrive. Edwin kept searching for something out of the ordinary, something that might indicate the fact that there were people here, people who could not find their way out. But nothing pointed in that direction.

Suddenly, Edwin noticed that part of a wall seemed to be painted differently from the other parts of the wall. Hope flared up inside of him. He walked over there, pressing his open palms to the surface. He could still see or feel nothing out of the ordinary. Then, he noticed a barely visible line that went all the way from the bottom to the middle of the wall. It turned right then plunged downwards again, almost as if there was a door behind it.

He tried to peel the wall off, to scrape what he could, but there was still nothing. Then, he tried pushing it in. He used all of his strength and aimed his shoulder at it. He lunged at the wall, not even thinking that he might get seriously hurt if it was truly a wall and nothing else. But he wasn't thinking. That was the truth. He was blinded by the fact that Rachel was down here, and he was wasting precious moments by being indecisive. He needed to act fast.

He closed his eyes and used his entire body strength to push the wall which exploded underneath his efforts. The bricks dropped down to the ground around him. Thick haze rose all around him, making him cough, and he cursed. It took his eyes a few moments to adjust.

He lowered his head and walked through the hole, entering a small room. At the end of it, he could see the door. It locked with a chain.

He used the sole of his boot to kick it open angrily, and after a few tries, it gave in. With a trembling hand, he reached for the doorknob and opened the door. It was pitch black inside. He couldn't hear anything.

Edwin's heart dropped all the way down to the soles of his feet. He feared that he was too late. All he would find here would be –

“Edwin?”

He heard his name being called out. It was the voice of someone he hadn't heard from in two years, the voice of

someone he feared he would never hear from again.

“Rachel?” he called out her name in return.

He waited for a few moments, unable to go into the pitch-black room. He was afraid of what he might find there. Then, he realized that it was his sister that called out to him. She needed him.

With that realization, he ran into the room, and the moment he felt someone’s body close to his, he wrapped his arms around it, picking it up and taking it back outside with him. But upon getting out, he realized that he didn’t have Rachel in his arms. It was someone else.

“Are you... Geraldine?” he asked, with a trembling voice.

The girl nodded. She didn’t look like a young lady at all, the one he remembered from the photograph that her mother had shown him. This seemed to be a different girl altogether. Her cheeks were hollow and dark. Her eyes were all red and swollen from crying. Her once beautiful gown was soiled and torn at the hems. But she was smiling. Her eyes were wide with shock and gratitude.

“Rachel?” He looked over Geraldine’s shoulder, listening to the sound of oncoming footsteps.

The second person that emerged from the hidden room was a man. Edwin didn’t understand anything.

“I’m... Daniel,” the man spoke, patting himself on the chest. He seemed even more worn out than Geraldine and had a sickly hue. From the story that his cousin had shared, it would seem that Daniel had been kept here for over three years. Edwin almost gasped at the thought of being locked up for such an insane amount of time without even knowing whether one would see the light of day ever again.

“You are all safe,” Edwin felt the need to tell them. “We caught your cousin. He is being handed over to the constables, and I shall see to it that he never sees the light of day as a free man again.”

Daniel and Geraldine didn’t know what to say to this. They exchanged a meaningful glance then looked back at the door. Edwin called out again.

“Rachel?” His voice was pleading. He found everyone. She had to be here. She had to be all right.

He rushed back inside, back where he could not see anything, calling out her name again and again. He stretched out his arms, waving through the darkness, waiting to feel her. But there was nothing but emptiness.

“Edwin?” There was a whisper of hope coming from the corner of the room.

He rushed over there, bending down. He finally felt her. She was sitting. Patting blindly in the darkness, he somehow managed to lift her up into his arms and bring her back out into the light. She felt like a feather, weighing almost nothing. He put her down gently then cupped her face with his hands.

“Let me look at you,” he whispered, unable to believe that she was finally here, standing in front of him.

“Edwin...” she smiled, looking as worn out as the other two. But none of that mattered. She was with him once again.

“Are you all right?” he asked. “Did he hurt you?”

“No,” she shook her head. “He didn’t do anything to us. He just kept us here.”

“I am so sorry that it took me this long to find you,” he said, bringing his forehead to hers. He closed his eyes for a moment then opened them. He couldn’t stop drinking in the sight of her.

“I never stopped believing that you would eventually find me,” Rachel whispered. He could tell how weak she was.

Anger took hold of him. “I feel like strangling that vile wretch of a man,” he said, clenching his teeth together.

“Let others make him pay for his crimes,” Rachel pleaded. “I never want to see that man in my life. I don’t want us to have anything to do with him.”

“I am so sorry that he did this to all of you,” Daniel apologized. “He had always been a mischievous boy, but I never thought that he would grow up into this villain. I should have seen it coming.”

“You couldn’t have predicted any of this,” Rachel assured him. “Besides, it was you who kept both me and Geraldine sane all this time. I don’t know how we would have done it without you.”

With those words, she released her brother’s hand, and walked over to this man. Edwin watched her embrace him softly, tenderly. He couldn’t imagine what his sister must have gone through, what they all must have gone through. He still considered himself guilty for allowing this to happen. But he knew that he could not have foreseen it, just like Daniel could not have foreseen that his cousin would grow up into this horrible man.

“Let’s go home,” Edwin suggested, taking his sister by the hand.

Everyone liked that idea.



“Mother!” Rachel fell into her mother’s arms as Edwin, Lydia and her sisters looked on. Lydia wondered if this was a private moment that should have been reserved for the family alone, but Edwin assured her that he wanted her and her sisters present. She could do nothing else but agree.

Rachel and the Dowager Duchess remained like that, embracing for a long time. No one wished to disrupt the magic of their reunion. Everyone looked on tenderly, waiting for them to separate, so they could ask all the questions that were on their minds.

When Rachel finally sat down, she brought a teacup to her lips with trembling hands. Lydia could tell that a part of her still couldn't believe that she was at home and not in that dungeon that madman had created for them. Lydia wondered if one was truly able to get over such a trauma.

Rachel shared with them everything that had happened although they all pretty much knew the story. Anna had recognized herself in it immediately, and she quickly squeezed her sister's hand. Lydia smiled at her reassuringly.

"Everything he said was so beautiful," Rachel admitted. "I never thought such malice could hide behind such beautiful words."

"All that matters now is that you are back with us where you belong," the Dowager Duchess announced, taking her daughter's hand into her own. "That is a reason to celebrate."

"Actually," Edwin suddenly interrupted, walking over to the center of the room and addressing everyone. "I have another reason to celebrate."

"You do?" his mother inquired.

"Well... that is, if Lydia agrees," he said, now turning his attention solely to Lydia.

"If I agree to what?" Lydia asked, her cheeks flaring up. Her hopes were flying so high above the ground that she could barely see them up there in the clouds.

Before he said anything, he walked over to her and knelt down before her. Her sisters gasped. Lydia herself could barely move.

“To marry me,” he said tenderly, offering her an open palm. “I do not have a ring, but – ”

“I do.” the Dowager Duchess suddenly stood up and walked over to him. She took off one of her rings, the one with the sapphire, and handed it to her son. “You have a ring now, as well, darling. You may proceed as is proper.” With those words, she returned to her position by her daughter’s side. All eyes were on Edwin again.

He smiled then continued. “I *do* have a ring now,” he corrected himself. “All I need now is you by my side, Lydia, and I will be the happiest man alive. Will you take me as your husband?”

Lydia gasped, pressing her hands to her lips then she exclaimed. “Yes!”

She jumped with joy, and everyone clapped even before Edwin managed to put the ring, which was a perfect fit, on Lydia’s finger. He wrapped his arms around her and swung her about the room. She could see everything in his eyes, the whole world. Because that was what he was. *Her* world. Just like he said, she didn’t need anything else apart from him to be completely and utterly happy.

“Well, now we truly have two reasons to celebrate,” the Dowager Duchess exclaimed, much to everyone’s joy. “We need to plan so many things. Ugh... I honestly have no idea

where to start. Girls?" she addressed Rachel and Lydia's sisters. "You shall help me plan all of this, won't you?"

Selina and Anna rushed over to the Dowager Duchess and Rachel, and they immediately started making excited plans about dinner parties, balls, and weddings breakfasts.

Lydia and Edwin looked on from the sides and embraced. She rested her head on his chest, listening to the sound of his heartbeat. She closed her eyes. Everything was finally as it was supposed to be, even without a mystery to solve.

In fact, Lydia felt that she had enough mysteries to solve... at least for a while.

EPILOGUE



The wedding breakfast was finished. The guests had all gone home. Lydia was finally alone with her husband. As soon as he had closed the door, saying goodbye to her father and sisters, he turned to her. She could see desire in his eyes. He grabbed her by the hand, and together, they started to run up the stairs.

“Where on earth are you rushing?” she asked, chuckling, as she tried to keep up.

“You’ll see,” he said, without turning around.

“But... you need to introduce me to all the servants first,” she reminded him. “They are already there in the dining room, lined up.”

“Later,” he managed to say as soon as they were on top of the landing. He turned left with equal haste, unwilling to let go of her hand for even a single second. She couldn’t stop chuckling.

He finally stopped in front of his chamber, opening the door. As soon as they were inside, he closed the door and wrapped

his arms around her.

“I have been waiting for weeks to do this,” he said, refusing to allow her to say anything in return. She chuckled against his lips then felt his hands lifting her gown then working his way around all the underpinnings beneath. He easily removed all of them.

He lifted her into his arms and took her to the bed where he dropped her in such a manner that it made them both laugh. When the laughter ceased, she noticed he was staring at her.

“Do I have something on my nose?” she wondered.

“No,” he grinned.

“On my lips?” she asked again.

“No,” he shook his head.

“Then, why are you staring at me?” she wanted to know.

“Because you are my wife,” he told her. “And only I get to stare at you like this. You are mine, and I am yours. And I plan on doing all sorts of mischievous things to you, My Lady, just so you know.”

He said it in such a cute manner that she had to chuckle again. To be honest, she didn't expect her first wedding night not to be a night at all. She also didn't expect it to be full of giggles.

Then again, this felt like perfection. She wouldn't change a single thing about it.

Then, she felt his hands on her thighs, spreading her legs.

“Wait... Edwin...” she called out to him, frowning. “You don't mean to –”

“Shhh,” he ordered, and she immediately obeyed the moment she felt his mouth on her most secret passageway. In fact, she completely forgot what she wanted to tell him.

She closed her eyes, spreading her legs even more for him. His tongue on her felt wonderful. It was wicked and wonderful at the same time. She gasped. She moaned. She grabbed at his hair, pulling him closer as if she were afraid that he might suddenly change his mind and leave her unsatisfied. But he had no such intention. Still, she thrust her hips up to him, offering herself, needing more of his skillful tongue inside of her.

“You taste more delectable than that chocolate cake,” he murmured against her tender bud, blowing hot air at her.

Just as she was about to ask if he truly meant it, he sucked her into his mouth. The sensation was absolutely wonderful. It was true perfection, the way sensation blossomed inside of her, threatening to take over her completely. That was what they both wanted. This man knew how to play her like the finest instrument. He knew exactly what to do to make her moan and purr and make all sorts of wonderful noises.

That pent-up desire started to build up slowly, and she knew she would not be able to resist letting go. His tongue was now moving over her bud in quick licks then he parted her folds, sliding inside. Heat exploded between her thighs.

It was at this moment that he added his finger which slowly dived into her, just like his manhood did that fateful night when she knew that she would never belong to another man again. Just him. Just this one. The pressure became steady. He knew exactly what he was doing to bring her to the brink. Then, she lost control. She was unable to hold it any longer.

She clenched suddenly, unexpectedly. Heat unfurled. Her mind became a blank. Something electric exploded inside of her, making her tremble like never before. She looked down at his head between her thighs. The sight made the sensations inside of her even more potent. She felt like a goddess, and he was a priest in a temple that worshipped only her.

This time, he slid into her effortlessly as she quivered underneath him, still in the throes of ecstasy. But they were not done. Not yet. His manhood was deep inside of her now, slowly filling her up to the brim, going in and out of her. Those wet sounds echoed all around them. They only seemed to heighten her pleasure. She had no idea that one could need another person this desperately. It was a frantic desire she never knew before.

His manhood was stretching her more and more as it went in deeper. Her body adjusted itself wonderfully to this foreign body that seemed to become one with her now. His deliberate thrusts were delicious, just like he said. She closed her eyes, cupping his face and bringing it closer to hers.

“Open your eyes, Lydia,” he told her. “I want to look at you...”

The moment he said that, she forced herself to open her eyes. It was truly a sight to behold. She could see a reflection of herself in his eyes, the same love, the same yearning, the same need that she herself felt for him. He loved her as much as she loved him. They belonged to each other, now and forever more.

She thrust against him, wanting him even deeper. He seemed to be reading her mind, giving in to whatever she wanted of him. He was here to make her every wish come true. He pressed his lower abdomen against her clitoris, rubbing in just the right spot, making her explode once again, making his manhood inside of her wet with her juices as they poured out of her.

He lowered himself to suck her nipple and lick it softly with his tongue. He left her wet and aching and wanting more. So, he gave her more.

She wrapped her legs around him, and his rhythm became faster, more demanding.

“You feel so good,” she dared to say, instantly biting her lip when those words escaped her lips.

He grinned. “Naughty girl.”

His thrusts became faster and faster. She could tell that he was losing all control, and it was all because of her. She was

awakening this animalistic side to him, and she loved every moment of it. Together, they got lost in this frenzy of motions, of love and tenderness. She moaned loudly, unable to resist any longer. She could hear his ragged breathing close to her ear. She clung to him, helpless and completely his, as he thrust into her again and again, harder and harder.

Then, he stiffened, groaning loudly. His entire body stopped moving for one moment. She felt his manhood inside of her throbbing, pulsating. Both of them mindless and feeling completely numb, they remained motionless for a few moments. Neither of them wanted to move.

She didn't know how long they remained like that when he slumped down onto the bed next to her, breathing heavily. They were both looking at the ceiling.

“Well... now I can introduce you to the servants, if you wish,” he told her, chuckling.

“I would rather get dressed first,” she teased.

“Oh, really?” he said playfully then he propped his head on his hand, bending it at the elbow, so he could look at her while he talked. “You are so ravishing now; if I could, I wouldn't allow you to put on any clothes. Oh... wait...” he pretended to think, “then I would have to fight every man in London. In England. No.... in all of Britain!”

She laughed aloud, shaking her head at him. “You are absolutely mad.”

“Mad about you,” he corrected her, leaning closer to her and kissing her forehead. It was a kiss unlike any he had given her before.

He had given her kisses of passion, kisses of love, kisses of sweetness, and of playfulness. This was something completely different. This was a kiss of promise, a kiss of forever more. This was the kind of kiss she always wanted but never dared to even dream that such kisses would be bestowed upon her.

She inhaled deeply, smiling.

“Are you all right?” he wondered.

“Better than all right,” she admitted. “I have never been so happy, and I have you to thank for that.”

“No,” he corrected her. “You were the one who changed my life, who showed me what happiness was when I had forgotten all about it. If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have found Rachel... you see,” he told her, caressing her cheek. “You were my savior, and I was almost fool enough to push you away when I needed you the most.”

“You wouldn’t be able to push me away from yourself even if you wanted to,” she smiled back. “Because I loved you from the moment I laid my eyes on you in that garden when I thought that I ruined your life.”

“If that is what ruining your life means, then you may ruin it every day,” he chuckled.

Once again, he wrapped his arms around her, and Lydia fell asleep listening to the soft sound of Edwin's heartbeat. This was her life from now on. She never even thought that she would deserve everything she had been preparing her sisters for. Still, it seemed that fate had others plans.

Lydia adjusted herself in the enormous bed a little, pulled herself closer to Edwin, and inhaled deeply. His scent soothed her. The touch of his hands assured her that she was safe, safer than anywhere else in the whole world. This was the man who would have done everything to save his sister and to save her own sister. Now, he would do everything to keep her safe and cherished as well. That was all she could ever ask for.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE



Would you like to know how **Lydia and Edwin's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this free complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple!

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PREVIEW: THE DUKE AND
HIS VIRGIN



CHAPTER 1



Everyone was still staring blankly at the letter in question which now occupied the centerpiece of the breakfast table almost taunting them with its enigmatic content.

Jane Pratt, the daughter of the Earl of Reeves, was seated to the right of that letter. Her aquamarine blue eyes kept darting from it back to her father then to the letter again. It made absolutely no sense. What on earth kind of a morning was this?

“I think we should simply ignore it,” she finally spoke, her voice laden with mistrust and the memory of everything that had happened several years prior.

“Ignore it?” Anna Pratt, the Countess of Reeves, frowned disapprovingly. “One cannot just ignore such invitations, my dear. Do not be silly.”

To be quite honest, Jane believed she was anything but silly. She believed herself quite reasonable, especially when it came to the question of gentlemen who believed that they could treat all those around them as if they were beneath them.

“What do you think, darling?” This time, the Countess was addressing her husband, Isaac Pratt, the Earl of Reeves.

Only one quick glance at this man revealed most of his character. His cheeks were high and full, most of the time with a reddish tint to them as if the excess of blood in his body always managed to find its way back to his face, and his lips were perpetually pulled together in a sour expression as if he

sucked on a lemon every morning. Jane overheard one of their servants tell this to another ages ago, and she found it quite adequate as a description of her father's general facial expression. Still, she knew better than to actually share it with him.

"I do not see a reason for it," the Earl said calmly with a note of displeasure in his voice which he tried to keep subdued.

"See?" Jane seized the chance. "Even Father doesn't think it's a good idea."

The Countess frowned. Her usual delicate features were now marred by disgruntlement. Out of the three of them, she was usually the one who always managed to find common ground between two opposing sides. Being in the middle was never an easy task, but someone had to do it, and Jane considered herself fortunate that it wasn't her.

"Need I remind you both of our financial predicaments?" the Countess spoke up gently then left the question to linger in the air around them along with that mysterious letter which still rested in the middle of the table because no one wished to touch it after the initial reading by the man of the house.

The Countess proceeded to pick up her fork and eat the two leftover bites of her toast that remained on her plate. Jane did not have much appetite this morning to begin with but after she heard the contents of the letter, she was utterly devoid of any desire for nourishment. The question remained, festering inside her mind, torturing her with her own inability to grasp the hidden meaning behind it.

"You know what that man did to us," the Earl growled softly, like a wolf threatening an enemy, still not ready to attack.

That man.

Jane knew whom he was referring to. It was not the actual author of the letter in question. It was the author's father who had recently passed. It was strange how death should be the end of all things, but it is, apart from grudges. Not even death had the power to end those.

“Of course, I know,” the Countess snorted indignantly. “I was there.”

“Then, you understand my utter unwillingness to oblige his son,” the Earl believed he had concluded this conversation but his wife would not have it.

“Isaac...” His name reverberated in the room. The moment she used his Christian name was the moment they all knew that she would play the emotional card. The Earl disliked it. He loathed it. But he loved his wife. He sighed heavily as he listened to his wife continue. “You know that the brewery isn’t doing well. In fact, saying that it isn’t doing well is an understatement. We are in terrible debt, Isaac. Your bad decisions have led us to the brink of ruin.”

“Well, what do you wish me to do about it now!?” he snarled more loudly this time. Usually, people would pull back from him when he was in such a mood but his wife knew how to handle him. Decades of marriage had taught her well.

“I wish you to consider the offer of the Duke of Dunton,” she replied calmly, unwilling to let him aggravate her. It was simply who he was. As soon as he felt threatened in any manner, he defended himself with anger. Diffusing him was easy enough if one knew how.

The moment her mother had said her father’s name, Jane’s heart felt a powerful tug. It was simply her mind reacting in the only way it could. After all, how else could one react to the mentioned name of one’s sworn enemy?

Once, it seemed now ages ago, she believed he would be so much more than that. In fact, she hoped he would be the opposite of that. But quickly, the truth came crashing down upon her, and she realized that all she ever was to him was a game, a mean way to get back at her father. Fortunately, they only had one brief encounter on that fateful night of the ball hosted by Lord and Lady Weatherby, but it was enough to make her heart all aflutter for him.

Upon finding out that he was the man their daughter was so smitten by, her parents had told her the truth. He was the son of the man with whom her father had once been the best of

friends. With such great love comes a great hatred as well as the two are never too far apart. A feud happened to take place, one that originated in the very core of man's existence: greed. The Earl believed that he deserved a greater part of the profit, because he was the one with the most prolific ideas. His friend did not seem to agree. Their agreement had always been to divide the profit in two equal shares. Little by little, the Earl started to believe that he had been taken advantage of, that he would be better off on his own. Then, the final event that assured they would be friends and associates no longer was the missing money. The Earl was certain that his now former friend had stolen it, but refused to admit it. Regardless, the money was gone and so was their friendship.

This feud led to them parting ways not only in a business venture they shared but also in life. The result was antagonizing several years that followed with the man in question passing away, leaving the feud and the question of the missing money forever unresolved.

To be quite honest, Jane believed it was for the best. Yes, their brewery was in debt. That much was true. And yes, the Duke of Dunton's own brewery was doing far better than theirs. So, what was the point of this letter? To rub it in their faces? The thought enraged Jane, and she could not possibly understand how her mother could even consider his proposal.

"I implore you both to think about this and not make a hasty decision," the Countess continued, the voice of reason as always. "The least we can do is hear what he has to say. The final decision will, of course, be ours. He cannot force us to do anything we do not want to."

Jane thought about it for a moment. The Duke of Dunton was the last man on earth she wished to see, now or ever, but perhaps, her mother had a point. After all, that old adage made much sense: to keep one's friends close but one's enemies even closer.

They might attend it, and Jane would see to it that she was dressed in her finest gown. His opinion of her was, of course,

irrelevant, but it would not hurt for her to look her best. Just because.

“You won’t let this go until we agree, will you?” the Earl asked, inhaling deeply, realizing that his peaceful morning with the newspaper was all but ruined. In response, his wife just gave him a meaningful gaze which meant that she was in utter agreement with what he just said.

“It is just a dinner invitation, after all,” she shrugged seemingly indifferently although the effects of this seemingly irrelevant dinner would be known only after it had taken place.

“Fine,” the Earl finally acquiesced. “We’ll have dinner with the duke. But if he says one wrong word, and you see me stand up from that dinner table, we are leaving.”

“Of course, we are,” his wife nodded obediently.

Jane, however, refused to. She did not agree with any of this. She believed that there was no good reason on earth that they should be having dinner with that man who, among other things, thought it was a good idea to play with her emotions and pretend that he was interested in her while all the time, the only thing he was interested in was to cause more misery to her family. That was something she could not forgive nor had any intention to.

“Then, we are all in agreement,” the Countess said in a satisfied manner. “You shall send a reply immediately, darling,” she urged her husband.

“Immediately...” he grumbled, glancing one more time at his newspapers. Then, he got up demonstratively as he always did, assuring that his was the last word being spoken. “One wrong word,” he repeated with his index finger lifted importantly in the air, “and we are leaving that place immediately.”

“Immediately,” his wife echoed with another nod.

With those words, the Earl stormed out of the dining room, not even bothering to close the door behind him. Jane gave her mother a look underneath her knitted eyebrows.

“Do not look at me like that, my dear,” her mother pointed out, taking a napkin and pressing it softly against the corners of her

lips, more in an effort to busy her hands with something than to actually clean herself. “We have to think of our financial future, and by that, I mean your dowry.”

“My dowry?” Jane gasped. She had to admit that she hadn’t considered that although the truth was staring at her right in the face.

“Yes,” her mother nodded, taking a cup of tea in her hand and bringing it to her lips for a sip. “We have no money. You are to get married soon, and we cannot afford a dowry which would assure that you are well cared for.”

Jane wanted to remind her mother that perhaps she might meet a good man, a kind man who would see past her family’s poor financial state and wish to marry her, nonetheless, but she bit her lip before saying it. This was a conversation she did not wish to get involved in right now when she had other concerns on her mind.

“It is just a dinner,” her mother reminded her as if she somehow had the magical abilities to read her daughter’s mind. Then again, perhaps all mothers were blessed with this. “What harm could come of it?”

CHAPTER 2



Leonard Ridlington, the Duke of Dunton wished to look particularly good that evening although he could not for the life of him explain why. It was a business dinner, essentially. Although, the present parties would be far more than mere business acquaintances.

He looked at himself in the mirror, wondering if the dark gray trousers and jacket he had chosen for this evening would convey the image that he needed to convey. As he adjusted his cravat for the fifth time, he tried to go over the monologue he had in his mind. To be quite honest, it changed every time he tried to repeat it. Sometimes, it seemed too harsh as if he were forcing them into this. At other times, it seemed too mild as if he were pleading with them to agree and that they would be doing *him* a favor instead of it being the other way around.

He sighed heavily, leaving the cravat. It would have to do as it was. His steel blue eyes inspected his own reflection in the mirror. He wasn't as pleased as he expected to be. He tried to convince himself that it was not the result of any nerves. Why would he be nervous? This was all his doing. He was the organizer. He would be the one with the business proposition. He was the one doing a favor for them if only they were smart enough to see it.

He never considered himself a particularly handsome man although his tall, lean build and his chiseled muscles said otherwise. His chin was strong, according to some even arrogant. He had inherited that trait from his father, but he tried not to let it surface too often. Still, he knew that he

needed to show his teeth when it came to the business world because it was too cutthroat. They would eat him up alive if he showed them that he had a soft side to him as well. That was why his arrogance and self-confidence always took the lead, and this evening would be no different.

Fortunately, a knock on the door interrupted his train of thought, bringing him back to present moment.

“Yes?” he called out. He doubted that the guests had already arrived. There was at least an hour and a half left before the time they had agreed upon.

The door opened, and his mother let herself in. Her gown trailed behind her like a thin, velvety tail of a mermaid. As a child, he always thought his mother was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. Effervescent and sparkling, she was the lift of every conversation she took part in. That was what everyone loved about her. She always knew what to talk about and always made sure that no one felt left out.

As years went by, her beauty did not fade. On the contrary, it took on a more mature look, like fine wine ripening in the cellar, just waiting for the right moment to be opened. Her face was devoid of any make up. There was just a slight dab of red on her still full lips.

Once, a long time ago, he caught her dipping blueberries on her lips, as she sat at her vanity table. He approached her, mesmerized by what she was doing. When she caught his reflection in the mirror, she immediately turned to him, and explained that she liked the color that blueberries left on her lips, and it was much better than any rouge she might purchase. She then proceeded to finish the process, and he had to admit that he had never seen her lips look more beautiful.

“Are you certain that this is a good idea?”

She came straight to the point which was a trait he loved about his mother. If she had something important to discuss or some relevant question to ask, she would not circle around it. She would immediately ask or say what was on her mind, not wishing to waste anyone’s valuable time.

“To tell you the truth, not really,” he said with a sigh, staring at her in the mirror. “I don’t know if this is what Father would want.”

“Your Father’s wishes, God rest his soul, do not matter any longer,” she said matter-of-factly, not as a result of any lack of love for her deceased husband but simply because life was for the living, not for the dead. “The brewery is yours. Whatever business decisions you make are solely your own, no one else’s.”

“I know,” he nodded, finally turning around. “But I also know that Father hated the Earl of Reeves. That is why they went their own separate ways.”

“He didn’t hate him,” his mother corrected him as she took a seat on the nearest chair, her back straight and her bejeweled fingers resting in her lap. “They started off as the best of friends. To tell you honestly, I thought it was one of those friendships that would last a lifetime.”

“You were wrong,” he pointed out although politely.

She smiled somewhat sadly. “I was, Leo.” There was melancholy in her voice, a longing for the olden days which would never return.

“But... what exactly happened between them?” he asked, aware that neither she nor his father had ever disclosed the real story behind what happened between them.

His mother waved her hand dismissively then got up. “Oh, it happened such a long time ago, it doesn’t matter any longer. In addition to that, your dear father is not with us anymore. Why dig up old wounds that have healed?”

Only, he wasn’t certain that all those old wounds were fully healed. His father hated the Earl of Reeves, that much was obvious, but at the same time, he still kept the man’s letters. Leo had seen them with his own eyes. Why would someone keep such mementoes of someone whom he no longer considered important or valuable to his life? It simply did not make any sense.

“Father was a proud man,” Leo said. “Too proud sometimes.”

He hoped that his mother might continue the story, that she might be tempted to somehow clear his father's name in this story, but she did not grab the bait. She was far too wise for that. Leo should have known.

"We are all guilty of that transgression sometimes," she smiled benevolently, walking over to him and placing her hand on his cheek lovingly. "You will see for yourself..." she paused as if she wondered whether or not she should continue then she did. "Sometimes, we say words that are intentionally meant to hurt someone. We say them in the heat of the moment, but we don't mean them. But once they are said, they are out there. They have done their damage. We might regret them, but we can never take them back. This is where we draw the line how proud we are. Are we willing to say those most difficult words or not?"

"I'm sorry?" he asked.

"Yes, exactly those," she confirmed. "It is hard. Much harder when it comes to someone we love."

She pulled her hand away from his cheek and he felt its sudden disappearance. She stood in front of him, adjusting his cravat perfectly this time.

"To be quite honest, I think you should not busy yourself with this brewery all that much," she confided. "You are a handsome young man who will make one lady very fortunate by marrying her. Why not focus on that instead of this brewery?"

Leo didn't really know how to tell her that his marital status would also be the subject of discussion during tonight's dinner. But he didn't wish to reveal that part just yet. She would be there, and she would see it all for herself.

In fact, he was looking forward to seeing the Earl's daughter. He would rather be struck by lightning repeatedly than admit it to anyone, but Jane Pratt was and continued to be the only woman he could not cease to think about. Her beauty was beyond compare. He had admitted this to himself thousands of times, but it was not her beauty or her beaming smile that

taunting him so. It was the mere knowledge that she had been the only one he could not have.

Leo never considered himself a rake. It was a derogatory term for men who did not respect women. He had much respect for ladies of all social status. His mother had taught him better than to disrespect a woman in any situation. As an eligible bachelor, he had no one who obliged him to remain faithful, and Leo found solace from the world's troubles in many a lady's arms. Such situations benefitted both him and the lady in question since he always remained discreet about it. Hence, his reputation had never reached the true definition of a rake, yet he believed himself to be well versed in the language of love making, the same language which he yearned to speak to Jane Pratt although a chance had never presented itself.

Now, it seemed that he was able to create that chance for himself by offering her father this business proposition and fortifying it with something else, something none of them would ever expect. The very thought of the look on Jane's face already made him smile. He had no idea why it brought him such pleasure. The hunter and the prey. That must have been it. That sheer desire to have what one always thought one could not.

"There shall be plenty of time for marriage, Mother," he smiled, realizing that he had taken a few moments too long to ponder, and his mother was looking at him expecting an answer. He took her hand and planted a soft kiss on it, reverently. "As for this evening, I need you to be there by my side because you of all people know what Father would wish."

"I told you that he left the brewery to you," she was adamant. "I know he left it in good hands. If you think you can make it into a blossoming business then do it. If you think it is not worth the hassle, it is better to leave it."

"You know I like a challenge," he grinned, once again remembering Jane. What a challenge she had proven herself to be.

"I know," she smiled back. "You are just like your father."

“And proud of that,” he answered, letting go of her hand and taking one last look in the mirror. Somehow, he was completely satisfied with the way he looked. He oozed charisma, confidence, and assurance. There was a little bit of arrogance peppered in there as well, just for good measure.

“I shall go and see if everything has been set up,” his mother said, smiling softly then walking out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Leo inhaled deeply, closing his eyes. He still wasn't completely certain whether this was a good idea, but like he said, he had always liked a good challenge. Convincing the Earl to merge their breweries would prove to be a tricky endeavor but worthwhile in the end. He was absolutely convinced of that.

He looked up at the clock on the wall. It was ticking slowly. The time for the dinner was approaching. He straightened an invisible crinkle on his pants then turned around and followed his mother. He should also assure that everything was in its place this evening.

Nothing could be amiss. Nothing.

CHAPTER 3



Jane had never felt more uneasy than at that moment, under the scrutinizing eyes of the Duke. Once, she would have relished being the object of his gaze. Once, but that was such a long time ago that it felt as if it belonged to a completely different life. Now, all she felt for him was disdain. Well... disdain and something else. But those emotions would emerge solely in the privacy of her own bedroom, during those sleepless nights when all she could do was stare at the ceiling and think of him and what could have been.

“Please, follow me to the dining room,” the Duke exclaimed cordially, spreading his arms wide in the direction where they were all supposed to go.

Jane sought her mother’s gaze for support. The countess returned her gaze lovingly and reassuringly. *We are in control here*, Jane tried to remind herself. *We came because we chose to come not because he forced us to*. Thinking in such a manner made her feel as if she managed to regain at least some semblance of control over the situation although it was her father who should be in charge of it all.

Yet, he wasn’t. That much was clear. From the moment he squeezed her father’s hand and kissed both hers and her mother’s, the Duke had asserted himself as the alpha animal in this make-shift pack. He did everything according to the rules of *the ton*. He complimented the ladies, inquired about the gentleman’s health, and welcomed them cordially into his home. Jane could not fault him regarding his hospitality.

What she *could* fault him for was the fact that he kept his eyes mostly on her, and she distractingly noticed that he was as handsome as that first time she laid eyes on him. He walked first alongside his mother, a lady whose beauty was only matched by her mistrustful stare, leading them towards the dining room where everyone was seated at a table, already lavishly set up. The lady of the house followed the old adage that a fine table should be covered but not crowded, and that was exactly how it was.

All the dishes for all the courses were already laid out with the first of them being artichoke soup—not one of Jane’s favorites, but the sight of Mackerel with fennel and mint made her heart leap with joy. The second course was roasted meat alongside sweet and savory pies and tarts. There were several different kinds of vegetables, dipped richly in butter sauce. Jane could not remember the last time they had butter. She frowned at the thought that the Duke brought all this out solely for the purpose of showing off his wealth. Finally, she noticed the dessert, beautifully exhibited in a stylish pyramid shape, made entirely of fruits and marzipan. By the side of each plate, there was an already full glass, containing a drink lathered with spiced, sweet ginger which Jane absolutely adored.

Once everyone else was seated, the Duke was the only one who remained standing with his glass in his hand. He was smiling. Jane tried not to focus on how even his teeth were or how those small dimples made his face even more handsome. It was hard to focus on how much she loathed him with all this splendor about and him looking so breathtaking.

“First of all, I would like to thank you all for coming,” he started.

Jane did her best to resist frowning at this self-important speech which surely served no other purpose than to accentuate the financial difference between the two families. She already regretted coming here, but now that she did, she had to endure the entirety of the evening... unless her father decided otherwise.

Hope rekindled in her mind. Perhaps the Duke would say something wrong, and knowing her father’s hot temper, he

would surely raise the whole house to its feet before storming out. She would gladly follow in that case.

“Secondly...” he started then paused for a moment, taking his time to look at every single one of his guests straight in the eyes. Only then did he continue. “I know that the relations between our family and yours have been somewhat... strained.”

Strained? That’s an understatement of the century.

Jane rolled her eyes, but the moment she did so, she felt her mother’s elbow on her lower arm urging her to behave. Jane cleared her throat, straightened her back and continued listening to something she was not the least bit interested in hearing.

“My father passed away last year, and I feel that it is a time for a new start. A fresh start,” he announced, much to everyone’s confusion. “My Lord,” he continued addressing Jane’s father, “you have the only brewery whose success at one point matched the success of my father’s own brewery.”

At this point, Jane was certain that her father would say something, but there was not a sound from him. All he did was listen cautiously as if anticipating that the point of this entire evening would soon be revealed. And... it was.

“I consider myself quite good at business dealings,” the Duke said, to which Jane almost rolled her eyes again, but she managed to resist the urge to do so, fearing another elbowing at the side of her mother. Quite deserved, she had to admit. “All of this brings me to my next point which is this—I would be willing to pay off your brewery’s entire debt, provided we merge our businesses and become partners.”

Partners? The notion was ludicrous. An absolute dissolution of reason.

At this point, Jane was certain that her father’s would laugh in the Duke’s face at least. Or simply storm out angrily, insulted that the Duke had the nerve to make such an offer. Then, much to her surprise, she noticed that her father was silent. His

cheeks were no redder than usual which meant that he was not particularly outraged at this proposal.

Jane swallowed heavily. Suddenly, a frightening thought hatched inside her mind. He could not be considering the offer, could he? She quickly shook her head to herself. No. Absolutely not. Her father would never accept charity from the son of the worst enemy he had ever known and also, from his own daughter's enemy. But the more seconds passed, the more she was certain that he indeed *was* considering it. Then, he spoke, dashing her hopes against the treacherous shores of reality.

“How am I to know that this is not some sort of a trick to gain access to my brewery and make it all your own?” the Earl demanded.

Jane turned pale at the question. She knew that they had absolutely no means of paying off their debt. They were so deep in it that it would take years and selling everything they owned just so they could pay off two thirds of it. The final third would have been left outstanding, remaining to be paid for... somehow, someway, someday.

“Ah, yes,” the Duke suddenly smiled, and that smile made Jane's blood turn cold. “I had a feeling you would ask that, and I have the solution to this predicament.” He turned his gaze to Jane with that slick smile and devilishly handsome dimples which she was still endeavoring to banish both from her mind and her memory. “To prove that I am utterly serious about this and completely transparent, I shall marry your daughter.”

At first, Jane believed she did not hear him right. *Marry her?* That couldn't be. Her father would never allow such travesty to happen. His daughter could not marry the son of his worst enemy, and whether the man was dead or alive was irrelevant. Yet, she could see that he was not refusing it straightforward. He was thinking. He was considering it!

Then, as if to fortify this offer, the Duke added nonchalantly as if it did not matter one bit, “Without a dowry. That way, I will prove to you that my intention is to unite our two families

again and forget all about the feud that separated you and my father.”

Jane was horrified. She felt the entire room spinning about, and if she were not seated, she was certain that she would fall down unconscious right onto the floor. She gasped silently as if gasping for air, but that talon of fear and horror kept gripping at her throat, making it increasingly more difficult to breathe.

“Marry you?” the Earl finally responded, much to Jane’s relief. “I would never give my daughter to the son of my worst enemy,” he growled angrily, having regained his senses which Jane thanked him silently for.

“You make it sound as if I am some sort of a barbarian who would treat your daughter like an animal,” the Duke replied, and Jane wanted to express her displeasure with this right then and there, but she held her composure, sending glaring stares in his direction. Only, he did not see them. He was focused on her father this time. “I assure you that is not the case. Your daughter shall be well provided for. You have my promise.”

“The promise of people like your father, and therefore, you, means nothing to me,” the Earl returned unwaveringly. He stood up, and immediately, his family followed suit. “The answer is no.”

Jane felt relief wash over like rain in the desert, but unfortunately, that relief would last a very short time.

“My Lord, if you will permit me to be blunt with you,” the Duke continued, his voice calm and composed while the Earl’s became more uneven and stronger. “I do believe your financial situation leaves much to be desired. I wonder if you will be able to find a suitor who will take your daughter without a dowry. She is a beauty, that much is undeniably true, but these days are more uncertain than ever. Dowries are a necessity.”

Jane felt like she could strangle him with her bare hands. He knew exactly what he was doing, that vile, despicable man. He knew that he could convince her father that his hands were tied, and that the only way to escape the clutches of debt was

to give away his daughter. She could already see the ultimatum: it was either agree with this or go into poverty.

She noticed tiny beads of sweat on her father's forehead. She knew that he had already pictured that same ultimatum inside his mind, and he was considering it. If there was anything to consider... Poverty was something none of them was prepared for. It was merely a distant fear, distant enough for them to be remotely aware of it but not fearful of it.

The Duke's words made it seem much closer than they initially believed. One thing was painstakingly obvious. They had to find a way out of this debt, and as it would appear, this was their only option. The thought felt like a stone deep inside of Jane's gut, pulling so deep down that she felt she would never come up for air again.

"If we agree to this," her father started, taking a slow, defeated seat. Jane refused to follow suit although her mother did immediately, signaling that she would always side with her husband, no matter what. "Jane will own half of the merged brewery. I want her to have her own income."

The Duke grimaced with a nod. Jane couldn't tell if he liked the idea or not. Probably the latter. "That seems fair. Anything else?" he told them.

Jane felt her ears were hotter than lava, and her cheeks were blazing red. She wouldn't dare look at herself in the mirror at this point. However, all she could do was listen to these two men decide her fate for her.

"She will have her own London house," the Earl continued listing his conditions, "in case she decides that this wedding will be in paper only."

This was where Jane could not hold her peace any longer. They were discussing her future without taking her will into account. She would not stand for it a moment longer.

"Don't I get any say in this!?" she demanded. Her fiery temper was something she inherited from her father, and although she did not like it all that much, she had to admit that sometimes, it came in mighty handy. "I won't do it!"

“Darling,” her mother’s soft voice brought the sound of reason. “It is our only option as the Duke has already explained.” Her mother placed her hand softly on her daughter’s, but Jane pulled it away as if her mother’s touch scorched her.

“You cannot make me!” Jane exclaimed louder than last time. What was worse, it seemed that her outburst of emotion only amused the Duke even more. He was not smiling, fortunately, but she could not help but feel that he was enjoying this.

“No one will make you do anything,” the Duke answered mild-manneredly, fully aware that the entire situation was under his control. That enraged her even more. “I am merely offering a proposition that benefits us all. If you find it unfair to you, feel free to refuse me.”

Jane’s lower lip quivered with indignation. Her eyes sought her father, but the moment their eyes locked, she knew that he had already made up his mind. It was the same with her mother. Like she realized, this was their only option.

Seconds felt like hours. All eyes were on her, waiting, anticipating. Finally, she sat down, feeling more defeated than ever. She felt like her entire life was out of her hands, now, and she was being punished for someone else’s transgressions.

She would acquiesce... for now.

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

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Thank you very much!

ALSO BY SALLY VIXEN

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Thank you for being my reason to smile today,

Sally Vixen

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Pennsylvania by a mother of British ancestry, it is no wonder Sally developed a love for British culture. An avid reader since she was a child, it wasn't long until she stumbled onto the Regency classics, and the rest is history.

A couple of years and a Creative Writing degree later, Sally has truly found her calling. She is rarely found without a book in her hand, but when she isn't reading or writing, she likes taking walks in nature, traveling and spending quality time with her very own happily-ever-after, her wonderful family of four.

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