

A Court of
Thorns for Lady
Ambergrave

EMMA LINFIELD

A COURT OF THORNS FOR
LADY AMBERGRAVE

A HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL



EMMA LINFIELD

Edited by

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With love and appreciation,

Emma Linfield

ABOUT THE BOOK

A blessing and a curse to love thy you mustn't...

Lady Luciana Alden lives a perfect life.

Raised by doting parents and with a handsome suitor about to ask for her hand, she has everything she ever wanted. Until the day her father announces that she is to marry a stranger.

Gideon Merriweather, the Marquess of Ambergrave, has searched far and wide for a reprieve from his pain. Heartbroken after his parents' unfair death, there is but a single cure: vengeance. Vengeance that starts with marrying Lady Luciana.

While striving to accept their fate, they cannot escape their luxuriating emotions.

An uninvited visitor and an old envelope with an unbroken seal open Luciana's eyes to a lifelong lie, forcing her to make a difficult decision. She must leave Gideon to save them both from a fate worse than death.

CHAPTER 1



“Luci! You’re here at last, and how elegant you look!” Lady Elizabeth cried, holding out her arms to her dearest friend for an embrace. Lady Luciana, daughter of the Earl of Thornshire, hurried to her friend with a smile.

“Thank you, Bette. But I pale in comparison standing so close to you!” Luci said, sighing contentedly. “Your gown is simply beautiful!”

“It was from Aunt Adele. But don’t leave for home tonight before you find me, I brought you back some gossamer and chiffon in the most wonderful shade of yellow. I thought of your dark tresses when I saw it, and knew it would pair perfectly with your brown eyes as well.”

“That is too kind of you to think of me,” Luci cried. “You must let me give you some of the silk Mother ordered as payment. But tell me everything about your journey! And wherever did you manage to find such lovely ribbons?”

Luci only half-listened, having set her friend off on a winding tale of her three months of London adventures, but that was by design. She smiled and nodded and made appropriate

responses as Bette told of the excitement of visiting her aunt and purchasing necessary items for the Season. All the while, she scanned the Viscount Ridley's large, ornate ballroom, her eyes drifting over the sea of well-dressed members of the ton, all turned out in honor of Bette's return home.

And then she saw him.

At the far end of the room, talking in a cluster of young gentlemen, Bradley Landon, Earl of Stillscar, chanced a look in her direction and smiled in that crooked way that made Luci's heart falter for a moment. His dark eyes met hers for only a moment, but it was enough. Before anyone could have noticed, he returned to the conversation, brushing his blond hair back slightly and appearing interested in their talk.

"I saw that," Bette whispered happily in her ear, and a rush of heat flooded Luci's face. "That's why I was very adamant with Mother that the Earl simply must be invited to our little party!"

"You are too good to me," Luci cried, clutching Bette's hands. "But it will be some trouble to find time to speak with him. After my unfortunate accident last week, Mother and Father insisted the only way I could attend tonight was if they escorted me instead of Christina."

"Ah, so that's why I don't see your old governess lurking at your elbow!" Bette teased, but at the look of reproach on Luci's face, she blushed.

"You know she is much more than a governess. Besides being so learned as to now be my tutor, she's more of a confidant than a governess!" Luci argued kindly.

“I’m sorry, Luci, I didn’t mean that to sound unkind. Miss Ross is lovely, and I know she matters a great deal to you.”

“All is forgiven, of course!” Luci said, smiling at her friend once more. “But I cannot fault them. They were so concerned when I fell while riding, both of them stayed by my bedside for two days while the physician pondered whether or not I’d suffered any harm. It mattered not how many times I told them I was fine, they refused to let me up until they felt certain!”

“Even now, I think they are unconvinced. Look,” Bette said, gesturing towards the Countess. “Your mother comes this way.”

“Luci! There you are!” Lady Thornshire said, smiling adoringly at both girls. “Be sure to come sit for a while before you feel faint. Lady Elizabeth, I heard you are newly returned home from seeing your aunt in London. Tell me, how is the Marchioness faring in the city? Were you introduced to anyone?”

As Bette once more launched into her tales of diversion, Luci stopped her and said, “I have already taken enough of Lady Elizabeth’s time. I think I shall go sit for a while. Bette, be sure and tell Mother all about the shops you visited so that she and I might know the best places to go next summer.”

Luci raised her eyebrows slightly, signaling to Bette to make the story rather lengthy. Bette returned her smile and turned Lady Thornshire towards a row of cushioned chairs so that they might speak of London at length.

Luci looked over to the where she had last seen Lord Stillscar but felt a pang of disappointment when he was no longer there. Without being too obvious, she looked about the grand room until her eyes fell on him, standing alone by one of the open doors that led to the gardens. He cocked his head to the side slightly and smiled.

Looking around to ensure that no one might have noticed, Luci nodded briefly. She wound her way through the crowd of people, intent on not going directly to the door, and feeling grateful that they had not yet begun dancing. It still took several minutes to reach the outdoors for every person she passed was obligated to extend some sort of greeting, and she was obligated to reply.

Outside, the glow of dozens of low flames flickered inside their glass lamps, creating a somewhat serene effect over the garden. Luci stopped at the top of the marble steps that led down to where several other pairs of guests walked about, speaking in low voices.

But the Earl was nowhere to be found.

Casting a thin smile and curtsying slightly to two matronly dowagers who'd settled themselves into chairs—no doubt keeping their hawkish eyes on the guests who meandered outside for propriety's sake—Luci thought to return inside when a hand darted out from behind a shrub and clutched her wrist.

“Oh!” she chirped suddenly, looking to the two women to make sure they hadn't heard her cry of surprise. Luci turned slightly so that it would not be so obvious to anyone standing nearby that her arm was now concealed behind the greenery.

“Shh, no one must know we’re here!” Bradley said, amused. “It would be far worse should anyone discover that I did this, too.”

Luci stifled a giggle as the Earl pressed a kiss against the back of her gloved hand. Still looking about and pretending as though wedging her arm behind the shrub was a commonplace thing to do, she attempted to keep a plain expression upon her face. Too soon, her merriment got the better of her and the Earl had to emerge from behind an urn in order to avoid being noticed.

“That was rather some silliness, don’t you agree?” she asked, smiling up at him. Bradley only shot her a mischievous look then gestured for her to walk with him.

“I actually thought it was quite devious on my part,” he finally answered. “Like a game of cat and mouse.”

“But which one was I? The cunning cat or the scurrying mouse?” Luci asked innocently. “After all, everywhere I’ve looked this evening, you’re there one moment and gone the next, like a the cleverest of alley cats.”

“You wound me, dear Luci! I am most definitely the mouse! A harmless, timid creature—and dare I say, rather adorable looking—who wishes only to peek out from its home once in a rare while and enjoy a mere morsel of cheese!” Bradley said, twitching his nose and feigning to have delicate paws.

“Then the mouse you shall be,” Luci conceded playfully. “But tell me, why must a mouse such as yourself keep hidden in

corners and behind the shrubbery? None of the guests seems to mind your presence the way they would some vermin.”

“Ah, you see, there are a great number of cats at this event, those who would take an instant liking to anything this humble little mouse desires. Should everyone here know how much I admire you and how taken I am with you, they would all pounce and steal you away for themselves!”

Luci ducked her head, smiling shyly despite the dim glow of the lamps that prevented her elation from being too obvious. She was content to walk about the garden for some time, until finally Bradley led the way to a low bench and bade her sit with him.

“Bradley, I am perplexed,” Luci said as they sat down. “Why must our every conversation be shrouded in such mystery? Under the cover of evening or away from the crowds?”

“I only worry for your reputation, Luci,” he explained. “My family has not always been in the best stead among some in the ton, and I would never want to besmirch your own standing. Should you ever agree to be my wife, then I will joyfully shout it from the rooftops without a care as to who might see us speaking at a ball or when you’re out for a ride.”

“But I have already said as much!” Luci protested in earnest. “I have said time and time again that I return your affections ardently! Is that not cause enough?”

The Earl frowned, mulling over her reply. Finally, he said softly, “It is, it is more than enough for me. But I must convince your father of our match. When the time is right, I

shall speak to him. But I must first see to some of my affairs so that I do not enter into a marriage contract with any business concerns unresolved. Can you understand that, and be patient for but a while longer?”

Luci looked away, shame at her selfishness burning within her while at the same time, frustration and longing filled her heart. Of course she understood, and absolutely she could be patient. But she longed for the day when the Earl could speak to her father and their arrangement could be affirmed. Then, they would have an entire season of attending events such as these as a betrothed couple, gratefully accepting the well-wishes and congratulations of all who knew them.

Instead, Luci sat in the growing darkness with a man she loved but could not publicly acknowledge, ever aware of how close they sat or how quietly they whispered lest someone take issue and speak ill of them. She was forced to entertain invitations to dance from men who simply did not know that her heart—if not her actual future—was already pledged to another.

“Trust me, my dear, it is a physical torment for me to love you so much and be unable to speak it, to let it be known,” Bradley said. “I am doing my utmost to complete these dealings so that I may be unencumbered, entering into our marriage with free title to my vast holdings. It shall not be much longer, I promise!”

Luci smiled bravely for his sake. “Then I shall hold you to your promise and believe upon it. What is a small matter of time when we shall be happy for the rest of our lives?”

“That’s my brave girl,” he answered, taking her hand and caressing it firmly. “Only think, one day soon we will be the happiest, most wonderful couple in the ton!”

* * *

“There you are, my dear!” Bette whispered, catching Luci in the doorway as she reentered the ballroom alone. “I’ve kept your mother occupied for as long as I might, but she moved on to find you. I told her I’d given you leave to lie down in my chambers, away from the party, and that I would fetch you at once.”

“You’re a saint! I don’t deserve you as my friend!” Luci replied gratefully.

“Of course you do, you goose. Now tell me everything about Lord Stillscar before you go find your mother!” Bette waited expectantly, her eyes wide as Luci informed her of their devotion to one another.

“Oh, it is so romantic!” Bette cried. “I shall never hope to find love such as yours, not so long as my father is plotting a ‘prosperous’ match for me! I shall be fortunate if my future husband is not already senile and walks with a cane!”

Luci hid her titters behind her fan as Bette imitated the carriage of an elderly man, only to straighten upright when she spied an ancient marquess looking at her. Both girls were flooded with shame lest he think their ridicule was intended for him. He harrumphed loudly and turned away, leaving them to fall into gales of laughter once he left.

“But tell me sincerely, Luci,” Bette said, serious once more. “Do you truly love Lord Stillscar?”

Luci pondered the question for only a moment, reminded by the fluttering of her heart of her answer. “I do, dear Bette! I’ve

never met another who is so interesting, so enchanting to listen to, so genuine in his nature!”

“And I suppose it hurts nothing that he is so devilishly handsome?” Bette teased. “However do you manage to keep your hands from reaching for a lock of his hair when you two speak?”

“Bette!” Luci answered, shocked at the question. “I would never!”

“Well, I don’t know that I wouldn’t in your position!” her friend said, laughing once again. “Come, there’s to be dancing now. You must be seen lest people talk.”

“I don’t know that I feel up to it, not when the one person I long to dance with all evening is within my very grasp but still so far beyond my reach!” For a moment, Luci looked as though she might cry.

“Come now, none of that. I’ll see to it that the Earl just happens to ask you to dance before the evening is over, I promise!” Bette said, taking Luci’s hand and pulling her towards the great room.

True to her word, not long after only her third dance, the Earl of Stillscar bowed slightly and extended his hand, his intensely blue eyes belying all traces of familiarity. He spoke formally when requesting to dance with Lady Luci, and she fairly blushed at the way some of the other girls stared after them.

Luci fought to contain her frayed nerves as the music swelled. Standing so near to Bradley in full view of everyone, she was certain her true feelings were on full display. For his part, he made great pretense of looking only politely interested in his partner, avoiding any untoward display that would have set the ton talking.

“This is madness,” Luci thought miserably. “This is worse than not seeing him at all, to see him and dance with him and stand so close yet be unable to acknowledge how much of my heart he commands!”

When the music mercifully ended, the other pairs broke out in polite applause. Luci, however, stood transfixed by the deep, longing stare with which the Earl pinned her back. Taking her gloved hand in his and merely bowing over it, he looked up long enough to whisper, “That shall be the last time I publicly pretend that you don’t mean the world to me.”

CHAPTER 2



Gideon Cross, Marquess of Ambergrave, looked out the upstairs window at the sprawling glens surrounding his estate. He expected to be filled with a torrent of memories, some pleasant but others straight from his nightmares. Some of the thoughts that wound their way through his mind were of his adoring parents, doting on him as they took outings or rode horses or played at boules, his mother always finding a way to let him win.

Those recollections were fleeting, though, cruelly supplanted by the recall of the night he learned his parents had died. The flames that engulfed the main house had moved quickly that night, but the fire had not been the cause of their demise.

Gideon had been the one to cause their deaths.

“My Lord, will you be overseeing the remainder of the builder’s plans today?” his butler, Derwall, asked politely. Gideon was slightly startled, having forgotten that he had not been alone in the room.

“Oh, yes. I’d forgotten he was coming this way today. Please send word that I’ll meet with him by ten o’clock,” he replied somewhat absently.

“Very good, My Lord,” Derwall answered.

A housemaid entered the small study to stoke the fire, and Gideon stiffened. Derwall, ever indispensable, waved her back and shook his head sharply.

“It’s all right, Derwall,” Gideon said quietly. “It will have to happen sometime, it might as well be today. We can’t go all winter chilling ourselves to the bone and catching our death of grippe.”

“Very good, My Lord,” Derwall said once again, gesturing for the maid to come forward to start the fire. “Though there will be plenty of time each day once you are otherwise engaged, if that suits you. I have just had the chimney sweeps ‘round to ensure all are cleared and ready, just to be certain.”

“Thank you, I’d forgotten to do that,” Gideon admitted sheepishly.

“It is no trouble, My Lord. Though you will have to be the one to keep your appointment with the physician. As much as I would gladly take your place, I fear it will not keep you in good stead,” Derwall said lightly.

Gideon laughed. “No, I should say not. I have cancelled the engagement twice now, haven’t I?”

“I fear it may be closer to four times,” Derwall corrected. “Shall I send word once again?”

“Yes, thank you. And this time, do not permit me to abandon the meeting. No matter what excuse I may give, please see to it that I am home and meet with him,” Gideon explained, finally turning to look at the butler so that he might see how serious he was. “Even to the point of forgetting your station, do or say whatever you must to see to it.”

“I say, My Lord, hopefully it will not come to that. I value my place in your household and would never wish to compromise it,” the butler said, looking somewhat aghast.

“Then let’s both pray it does not come to that, shall we?” Gideon asked, attempting to be humorous but only furthering his dark mood.

“If I may, what is the cause of your aversion? I have been with you a great many years, and at times have even had to serve as your valet. Unless I am terribly mistaken, your injuries are not so grave that you should have cause to fear the physician’s assessment.”

Gideon didn’t answer, long enough that he worried the butler might mistake his silence for reprimand. He forced himself to smile good-naturedly and nodded.

“You’re right, Derwall. You almost always are, and it’s only one of the reasons I value your service here. I shall see the physician as soon as he is available,” Gideon replied.

He turned away once more and continued looking outside, intentionally avoiding thinking about his medical care by turning his thoughts to the house. The necessary repairs had

taken place immediately after the fire, but only to rebuild what structure had been destroyed. Now, these many years later, it was up to Gideon to restore the long-empty house to its once-grand appearance, starting with the builder who'd been contracted to come that very day.

It's what his parents would have wanted, and he was filled with a sense of shame that he'd let it remain neglected all this time. If he hoped to make peace with their deaths and reclaim the place they'd held for him in the peerage, reopening the stately but beautiful Ashworth Hall at Ambergrave was his first task.

Beyond that, rebuilding the stables and stocking them with fine breeds was a must, especially if Gideon intended on calling or being seen about the ton. While envisioning that task actually served to lift his spirits somewhat, it would also mean hiring stable hands and a stablemaster, though. He was aware that he needed to bring on more household staff, as an estate of this size was far too much for his meager employees to handle. While Derwall had been with him for some time, he could not burden the man with everything that had to be done.

Remembering the staff of more than a hundred who coddled him and doted on him as a boy, Gideon calculated that he needed no less than a valet, a driver and footmen, several more housemaids, and at least one other cook to assist Mrs.—what was her name again?

“Derwall, who is the woman you hired for the kitchen—” Gideon started to say, but then he saw that he was alone in the room. “Very well, I'll have to learn her name later on.”

He supposed at some point he would have to host some sort of affair, hopefully a small and unassuming one, in order to let

the word spread that Ashworth Hall was once again inhabited. He despised attending any sort of well-appointed ball, though his years in business had often required it of him; the thought of actually playing the jovial host made his nerves alight.

“That’s it then, there’s no getting around it,” Gideon muttered absently, a sinking feeling coming over him and making his sour mood even more hopeless. “That’s what I need more than cooks and maids and stable hands.”

There was only one other thing he would need to do in order to reenter the regional society and bring Ashworth Hall back to its former glory: find a suitable wife.

* * *
“Arise, my young charge!” Christina called out in a chipper voice, flinging open the curtains with gusto and flooding Luci’s chambers with sunlight. Luci groaned, reaching for a downy pillow to pull over her eyes. “Oh no, you don’t. Young ladies who stay out at balls until late into the night must awaken early the next morn so that they do not become accustomed to laziness and sloth.”

“It is not slothful to require adequate sleep!” Luci protested, but her words were muffled to the point of being mistaken for agreement.

“In any event, your mother requests you to take your breakfast with her, then your parents are both going out and would like you to ride with them. We’ll have to see to your drawing lessons later this afternoon,” the governess replied with a pleasant warning. “After all, *nous ne devons pas arrêter d’apprendre parce que notre gaieté nous gêne.*”

“I haven’t neglected my learning! Besides,” Luci answered back, sitting upright and letting her hair fall in her face, “*Ich habe wichtigere Dinge gefunden, um meine Zeit zu beschäftigen.*”

“My dear girl, you must not answer in German if you were addressed in French. It’s very bad form,” Christina teased. “Now hurry. I want to hear all about the ball, and that reminds me, your mother has retained a dance master after seeing the influx of new reels that were enjoyed last night. He will be here today at six o’clock, so we must be finished with lessons by then.”

“All right,” Luci said, sighing. “Though I haven’t had to endure dancing lessons since before I was out in society. He will likely throw a vase and storm out after seeing what little I still remember.”

“You deny yourself credit, Luci. You know you are quite a lovely dancer. Now hurry, your lady mother is waiting.” Christina laid out items for Luci to wear, then added, “I’ll return in a moment to help you dress.”

“Ah, Luci, there you are!” Lady Thornshire called out from her seat by the fire when Luci finally made her way down the hall. “Come join me.”

“Certainly, Mother,” Luci said, entering the small morning room and taking a chair nearby. A servant came forward to bring a small table already piled with delectable dishes, setting it within Luci’s reach. “Is something wrong?”

“Oh, not at all, dear. I just wanted to ask you how you enjoyed Lord Ridley’s ball yesterday evening?” Her mother shook her head slightly at the servant and reached to pour her daughter some tea herself. “You appeared to be having a wonderful time.”

“Oh, I did! It was wonderful to see Bette again after such a long time. I hadn’t realized how much her absence pained me until I finally saw her again,” Luci replied, accepting the delicate teacup with thanks.

“Was Lady Elizabeth the only person you saw who brought you such happiness?” her mother asked, smiling and watching her over the rim of her own teacup.

Luci frowned, thinking back through her evening and worrying that she had made some grievous misstep. “What makes you ask that? Did I... did I do something wrong? Was I too forward, or spoke with too many gentlemen?”

“Oh, not at all, my darling!” her mother cried, reaching for Luci’s hand and squeezing it reassuringly. “Quite the contrary, in fact. I was merely wondering if any of the young men in attendance held your fancy.”

“I am so relieved,” Luci answered, falling back against her chair for a moment. “I worried that I had caused any number of tongues to wag, embarrassing both you and Father.”

“Rest assured, daughter, I would never allow that to happen. I would speak to you discreetly to prevent any harm to your reputation,” Lady Thornshire said sweetly. “But as to my

question, did you take a liking to any of the young men you danced with?”

Luci wondered how much she should divulge. Was it proper to speak of her feelings for Bradley with her mother, knowing that he had not yet spoken to her father? Would it anger her mother to learn that she and Bradley had first met nearly two months ago at a luncheon, and that they had since seen each other quite regularly while Luci rode about the ton or attended events?

“No, Mother, I don’t know that any one of them stood out in my mind. Of course, they were all pleasant and well-spoken and respectable,” she said, ignoring her governess’ knowing face in the doorway. She returned Christina’s pointed stare for a moment and then replied, “Is there some purpose that causes you to inquire?”

“None really,” Lady Thornshire answered with a brief wave, “only that you are of marriageable age and your father has a significant role in choosing a husband. I, for one, am only concerned for your happiness and your secure future. I care not a whit for who has this title or that fortune. I only care that your husband is the right match for you, and thus wondered if you might already have your eye on someone.”

“My Lady, please forgive my intrusion,” Christina announced suddenly, coming into the cheerful morning room. “But if you are to ride today and Lady Luci is still to have her drawing and dancing lessons, then I must bid her come with me to dress for her ride.”

“Is it so late already?” Lady Thornshire asked, looking to small clock that sat on the mantel. “It hardly feels like the proper hour.”

“Of course, My Lady. But I must also ensure that her gown for this afternoon is pressed and not in need of alterations. It has been some time since she required a dance master, and it would not do to keep him waiting because her gown was not suitable.”

“Oh. I suppose not. All right then, off you go, my dear. Your father and I shall be waiting for you outside within the hour,” Luci’s mother said.

Luci kissed her mother’s cheek and followed Christina only so far as the hallway before turning and demanding, “What was the purpose of that?”

“Of what? Preventing you from informing your mother that you are quite taken with a man who—for some odd reason—has yet to speak to your father about marriage?” Christina whispered. “You will thank me should you ever learn what your mother’s reaction might have been, trust me on this!”

“Is it truly so wrong for a man and a woman to speak to one another within plain sight of plenty who might serve as witnesses and chaperones?” Luci asked, both puzzled and disturbed.

“Sadly, my dear, yes.” Christina sighed and looked sympathetic. “I know of the affection you have for Lord Stillscar. After all, I’m your chaperone for most of your outings and have seen how he happens to be in the vicinity whenever you go out. But the very fact that he has been speaking to you illicitly could be reason enough for your father to reject him outright.”

“What? Why would Father do such a thing if the Earl holds me in such high esteem that he goes to these lengths to see me?”

“Simply for not having followed all the proper protocols, I’m afraid.” Christina linked her arm through Luci’s and led her towards her chambers. “Where matters of men and marriage are concerned, all must be done by the book—at least on the outside of things—in order to prevent scandal.”

CHAPTER 3



“Good day, Lord Thornshire,” the undersecretary said, brushing off several clerks who had appeared to take the Earl’s coat and hat in favor of tending to the man himself. “I trust you had a pleasant journey to the harbor today.”

“Yes, yes. Not a trouble in sight,” Lord Thornshire replied, scrutinizing the man’s face. He certainly seemed familiar, but the Earl was unable to place him.

The official cleared his throat and leaned closer to say, “Reginald Davids, My Lord. We were introduced at Lord Ridley’s ball celebrating his daughter last week.”

“Ah yes, Davids,” Lord Thornshire replied, relieved to remember him now. “My apologies, my mind is clumsier than my feet these days, especially when I have important business matters to see to.”

“Of course, My Lord. Shall we sit and begin addressing the matters? Or do you require some refreshment first?” The official indicated a small tea cart that was laden with a few items, but the Earl shook his head.

“No, no. It will only delay things and I have a lengthy ride home this evening. Let’s get to it, then! You sent word that you needed to meet in order to discuss my exports. How are my affairs holding up?” Lord Thornshire sat down and stretched his legs out before him, settling in to discuss the good news of his investments.

“Well, I’m terribly distressed that I must be the bearer of unfortunate news,” Davids said, making a pretense of searching his desk for sheaves of papers. “But there is a matter of your business partner.”

“Yes, a silent partner. I make the investments, he fronts the funds, and the both of us are rather wealthy!” the Earl said, smiling. “It’s the ideal working partnership.”

“I’m afraid that your partnership has hit a most unfortunate snag, My Lord. It seems your partner has not been privy to the latest investments and therefore has withdrawn his support. He sold his stocks in your company some time ago, and—”

“What?! When?” the older man roared, half-rising from his chair. “Why wasn’t I notified of this?”

“I’m sorry, My Lord, this was nearly a year ago. We assumed you consulted with your partner on matters such as these on a routine basis,” the official said, blinking his sharp blue eyes in astonishment.

“Of course I don’t consult with the man, he’s a silent partner, contracted through mutual business acquaintances, for good reason. I don’t even know his name, let alone have frequent chats over mutton and ale!” the Earl explained indignantly.

“I see, that is most unusual.” Davids looked as upset as the Earl by this news. “But we are not in the habit of informing anyone when investors make a business decision, especially one of that astounding sum.”

Davids rifled around his desktop once more in order to avoid looking the Earl in the eye. Lord Thornshire fell back against his chair and exhaled sharply.

“Well, get on with it! What is the damage?” he demanded, but Davids seemed reluctant to answer. Finally, he could stall no longer.

“The latest venture, shipping to and from the Caribbean Seas, is completely undone,” he answered quietly. “The shares of that company are now worthless. Then there is the original shipping line to the former colonies, begun over a decade ago. Business is still quite prosperous there, but unfortunately, you borrowed against that company to purchase your controlling stake in the Caribbean company.”

“So what are you saying?”

“Your latest venture is completely shuttered, and your former company is now bankrupt to cover the debts incurred when you lost your business,” Davids answered, finally looking the Earl in the eye. He leaned forward and clasped his hands in front of him. “So you see why this is now a matter for the Crown, and I had to summon you here today?”

“No, I still cannot fathom it!” Lord Thornshire answered in disbelief. “What has happened?”

“His Majesty has seized the assets of your Delaware Bay Company to cover the losses. There is still a rather large debt that remains unpaid, but you’ll have six months to reassess your businesses and properties in order to fulfill that obligation.” Davids smiled as though this should come as some sort of relief, but Lord Thornshire only stared blankly as though he hadn’t heard him properly.

“What is the total loss?” he whispered, his eyes roving the small, dark office until they settled on a brass and mahogany spyglass, aimed out the window at the harbor.

“The Caribbean Company losses totaled more than eighty thousand pounds. When your partner sold his shares, it filled the market and lowered the value. Then without his funds involved and without you making payments in the interim, your profits from the Delaware business began covering the debt.”

“So you’re saying...” Lord Thornshire whispered, his shoulders sagging and his hands falling to the arms of the chair uselessly, “...that I’m ruined.”

Davids did not speak for a few moments, allowing the Earl to recover from the news. Finally, he spoke up enough to say, “No, not entirely. Not if you can cover the amount that is owed to the Crown.”

“And how much is that?” the older man asked, sounding hopeful for the first time since receiving the news.

“Once the Crown profits from the sale of your ships and other equipment, takes possession and auctions your buildings in both of the American ports and your home-side properties at port here, and then receives payment for the final shipments that are already underway, that leaves you only owing...” Davids paused to scribble on a piece of foolscap with the nub of a well-worn lead. “...fifty thousand pounds.”

Lord Thornshire clutched at his chest so suddenly that Davids called to a clerk to bring a pitcher of water. The Earl stammered to himself like a madman for a few moments, then asked miserably, “Fift... fifty thousand pounds? Where am I to get fifty thousand pounds when my partner has abandoned me and the King now owns every nail of my ships? Everything I’ve worked for is gone!”

“Forgive me, My Lord, but do you not possess any properties, estates, other holdings you might sell?” Davids asked, but he shrank back from the vicious look of rage the Earl cast towards him.

“Sell my home? Turn my wife and daughter out on the streets? See my beautiful child, the only one of three to survive to adulthood, cast out and working as a governess for only the price of her room and board? Then what, she may die alone and starving as an old woman having had no wages and pension to speak of? Is that what you’re suggesting I do?” Lord Thornshire demanded, rising up from his chair with renewed vigor, spurred on by his anger at the situation.

“I beg your pardon, My Lord, that was not my intention at all,” Davids answered humbly. “I am terribly sorry for this entire situation, but I have my orders. I’ve presented you with the bills for your debts, and I wish you every measure of good luck in someday recovering your fortune.”

Davids rose and bowed slightly, sufficiently dismissing the Earl. He nodded to a clerk who appeared with the older man's hat and coat, signifying that he was to leave at once.

Edgar Alden, Earl of Thornshire, looked down at the coat and hat and seemed almost to not recognize them. They were the fine cloth and stylish cut of a man who had great wealth, but now, he was almost loath to touch them. He almost feared he would be called an imposter for putting them on and walking the streets back to his carriage—his fine, hand-carved carriage—that would carry him home.

Home. The Earl scoffed at the thought of his estate, and for a moment both Davids and the clerk watched him warily in case he prove mad. His laughter turned to a single, silent, choking sob, though, when he thought of his daughter at that home. She no doubt waited for him to return, having begged him only that morning not to be gone too long. What would she think of him now when she learned that he had been a fool in business?

She must never know! The Earl grimly took his effects and left the small office. *I will do whatever I must to see that my failure does not bring scandal and ruin on her prospects!*

* * *

“Lady Luciana! We must hurry if we wish to be home before nightfall,” Christina said, chiding Luci gently. “We’ve made countless rounds of the Carriage Drive and already stopped to speak to three households. How much longer shall we stall?”

“We’re not stalling,” Luci replied absently, still watching the road ahead of them. “I just have no wish to sit in that stifling house and sew at my needlepoint, not when we can be out in

the fresh air and seeing who else has come out for the afternoon.”

“It’s the ‘who else’ I’m fearful of,” the governess answered, looking sideways at her charge.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Luci asked, turning to look at Christina, but her governess did not answer. Instead, another voice called out, diverting their attention.

“Lady Luciana!” Bradley called out from the adjacent Rotten Row. “What a wonderful happenstance, I feared I would not know anyone out riding today!” Bradley said, pulling his stallion up alongside their phaeton. He tipped his hat politely. “Lady Luciana. Miss Ross, as always.”

“Good to see you as well, Lord Stillscar,” Christina answered for them, “though I cannot help but believe it is more than fate that contrived to bring us all out together today.” She looked at Luci, and added, “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“No, I don’t agree,” Luci replied with a smile. “I rather think it’s astounding how even the Fates wish for us to have a pleasant afternoon with wonderful company.”

Bradley grinned at Luci’s obvious disagreement with her chaperone, but Christina only rolled her eyes.

“Lord Stillscar,” Luci said, turning her attention to him, “I find that I’ve ridden all afternoon, though. I’m very nearly sluggish from the passage. I think I should benefit from a walk to the Serpentine if you would care to join us.”

“Of course. I’ll be along after I engage a boy to tend my horse.” Bradley turned and rode a short distance away and dismounted, handing off the reins to one of the many street children who gladly accepted a coin to watch a gentleman’s horse.

“What are you up to?” Christina asked, her threatening voice nearly a hiss.

“Nothing. It’s only as I said, I should like to go for a walk, that’s all.” She smirked at her governess and directed the driver to stop a short distance ahead.

Luci disembarked from the phaeton and strolled slowly toward the path that followed the Serpentine. Other members of the ton were milling about in twos and threes, and Bradley soon joined Luci on the path that led to the ornate lake. Boats drifted on the water, many rowed by young gentlemen eager to show their prowess to their peers.

Christina scowled but she walked behind, close enough to serve as chaperone but distant enough to afford the pair some privacy. She seemed oblivious to their talk but every so often would snap her head up to decipher some word or phrase that caused her alarm.

For her part, Luci was thrilled that Bradley had gotten her message, sent with a stable boy in exchange for a small sum. Now, with them walking the footpath in full view, her plan was unfolding nicely.

“Bradley, I wondered if you’d forgotten your promise to send word to me this week past. I’ve been taken with such loneliness in the many days since Bette’s affair,” she said, feigning a slight pout.

“I’m so very sorry, my dear,” he answered quietly, nodding at someone who caught his eye across the path. “I’ve been away, finishing some urgent business. But I have wonderful news for you.”

“Oh, you mustn’t tease me,” Luci answered coyly. “There is no news so wonderful as hearing that you would be in the park today and able to join me for my ride.”

“Is that so? Then I shall not tell you my news and spoil your happiness,” Bradley teased, risking an adoring look in her direction. “Anything I have to share of my business must be minor in comparison.”

“No! I was wrong,” Luci cried. “Tell me what wonderful news of your business!”

Bradley laughed out loud, earning a reproofing clearing of Christina’s throat. He looked over his shoulder and nodded to the governess, then said softly, “I have completed one of the deals I’ve been working on, and it has put my fortune in rather good stead.”

“Truly?” Luci asked softly, tears of happiness pooling in the corners of her dark brown eyes. “So you’re that much closer to speaking to Father?”

“That I am, my dear,” he assured her. “I cannot envision asking a man of such great esteem as your father to willingly bless and approve a match that is so far beneath his fortune... and your great worth. It shall not be long now, but every day I grow closer to having the sort of standing that I could proudly stand before him and ask for your hand.”

“I’ve no wish to argue with your great announcement, Bradley, but you know that I care not about these things,” she said kindly. “Father has a fortune sufficient for both of us. It is honorable that you wish to ensure that you can support a wife and a family, but I am not in love with a ledger book! I wish to marry the sort of man that you are, in great measure.”

Bradley turned to look at Luci full on, smiling broadly as if to show that he cared not a whit who should see them. For her part, Luci was equal parts overjoyed that his business dealings were nearly finished but also that a great number of people had seen them walking in the park, accompanied by a chaperone no less. It would take only one or two of the right people to begin talking about them, and then Bradley would not have to wait to speak to her father; Father would see to it that Bradley made an offer within the day after escorting her in public.

Too soon, there was no longer an excuse to be away from home. Christina strongly hinted that the hour was growing late, and Bradley said his goodbyes. As soon as the phaeton pulled away from the Carriage Drive, the governess pounced.

“What do you think you were playing at, arranging such a ‘chance’ encounter in full view of the ton?” Christina hissed, trying to keep their driver from overhearing. “Without your parents’ approval, that was a foolhardy thing to do! What shall you do if word gets back to them?”

“That was my very intention,” Luci replied, an aloof look on her face as she placidly looked out at the countryside. “When they hear that I was set upon by an Earl and seen by quite a few of the better families, they’ll take pains to ensure that they seem approving. Father may even insist that Lord Stillscar come to dine.”

“Oh, really? And what is your devious plan should they reject the notion?” Christina pressed. “What if they insist that the bearer of this tidy bit of gossip was mistaken, and that no daughter of theirs would ever venture such a public outing without their knowledge and express approval?”

Luci blanched. That had not occurred to her, not given the way her parents approved of her every whim. What if she had accidentally brought a dark cloud of suspicion on her family? That had not been her intention at all!

“Well, we’ll just have to hope that Lord Stillscar hurries in his business endeavors and asks for my hand before any of the tongues can wag,” Luci said, too elated with her outing to allow any concern to dampen her spirits.

“You’re impossible,” Christina muttered. “The lengths you would go to in order to marry a simple country earl?”

Luci squared her shoulders but glowered slightly at Christina. “You have no idea how far I’m willing to go for the man I love.”

CHAPTER 4



“*T*his will only pinch slightly, My Lord,” the physician, Sir Rawlings, said as he held the metal instrument over Gideon’s leg.

Gideon remained silent, fearful that if he dared to utter a response he would embarrass himself greatly. His injuries in the fire had taken well over a year to heal, and now the resulting scars pained him horribly. When Sir Rawlings had said there were treatments which could alleviate much of the pain, Gideon had willingly agreed.

Yet now he found himself wishing he’d never given Derwall leave to force him to endure this appointment. It had been one agonizing prod after another, just as Gideon had feared.

The needle slid beneath the skin and Gideon gritted his teeth, shoving his fingernails into his palms. It went on for a horrendously long time, and just when he thought he could endure it no more, Sir Rawlings slid the needle back out and dabbed at the speck of blood with a cloth.

“There, that should take effect in only a few minutes. Once it becomes numb to the touch, you’ll have a much easier time enduring the therapy,” the physician promised.

Gideon breathed deeply, trying to quell the nausea that rose up in his stomach. He nodded, though, grateful to the physician for understanding the intensity of the pain that the burned nerves still suffered.

“It is a very real syndrome, despite what any know-nothings with a medical bag and some opium might tell you,” Sir Rawlings had said when he was first consulted. “Medical science now understands that the damage to the nerves, such as with a severe burn or even an amputation, can very nearly ‘trick’ the brain into believing the limb is still aflame or still attached.”

Gideon had thought it sounded like quackery at first, but when other learned acquaintances confirmed the very same research, he decided that anything would be better than continuing in this way.

“Now, I am ready to work on your leg,” Sir Rawlings said, prodding the immense scars gently with his fingertips and noting how the patient registered no sensation. “The intention is to stretch the skin to release the nerves that have been trapped by the healing tissue.”

“Will it hurt the way your needle did?” Gideon asked hesitantly, dreading the confirmation of his concern.

“Absolutely not, My Lord,” the physician replied happily. “The needle not only numbs the leg, but it will actually remain painless later into the evening. Do not be alarmed if the sensation does not return for several hours, in fact.”

Sir Rawlings set to work, and Gideon found himself bemused that he had ever been fearful of this sort of treatment. He'd tended to his wounds with such delicate care, making effort to never risk further injury. He was actually pleased when the hour was up and the physician declared himself finished for the day.

"It will take a day more to see what amount of pain you feel once the treatment has worn off," he explained, "but then another week longer before you should know if there is any improvement to the motion and the enduring pain. Once that week has passed, we'll arrange to do this again and assess what improvement there is."

Gideon thanked the physician profusely and bade him return in a week's time. Derwall couldn't stop smiling as he showed Sir Rawlings out, thanking him surreptitiously at the front door for all that he'd done.

"That went rather well, did it not, My Lord?" Derwall asked when he returned to Gideon's chambers.

"It did, yes," he answered. "I'm pleased with how it went, I need only wait to see if I'm eating those words later this evening."

"Have no fear, My Lord. The physician left instructions for warm compresses and laudanum if there is any discomfort." Assured that there was nothing else he needed to do, Derwall bowed and left the room.

Gideon fell back against the bed, relishing the sensation of feeling nothing in his injured leg for once. It was

disconcerting, the ability to see and touch his leg but gain no sense from it, but it was a vast improvement over the brutal scorch he typically felt all day and night.

The relief was not the only surprise. Gideon was also in a much better mood, a better state of mind even, now that he wasn't endlessly plagued by his leg. He was now looking forward to seeing the builder for a third time, eager to see the renovations completed. He was even looking forward to the interviews for a housekeeper that were to take place that afternoon.

Gideon thought back to the other appointments he'd arranged that day, thankfully very few as he hadn't known how he would feel following his visit from the physician. He still needed to inquire about a stablemaster and meet with the breeder he'd contacted. He felt certain he could accomplish those tasks without causing himself any harm.

"My Lord, the breeder has arrived ahead of schedule as he caught an earlier carriage from the port," Derwall said, hesitating. "If you are not yet recovered, I can bid him wait or offer him some refreshment. Perhaps I could take him to see the current state of the stables and inquire about his thoughts on improving them?"

"Thank you, Derwall, but I don't think that will be necessary," Gideon answered, sitting up and smiling. "I think... I think I'm able to get up."

"That is marvelous news, My Lord," the butler agreed. "I will have him wait in the drawing room, and tell him you'll be along shortly."

“Very good,” Gideon said, already limping across the room to the chair and retrieving his coat. “I think I shall pace for a bit though, just to be certain it doesn’t pain me on the way down.”

Derwall nodded and Gideon was alone again, still grinning at this new progression. Inwardly, he chastised himself for putting off such a helpful procedure out of nothing more than fear. It made him question what else he had needlessly put off, and become determined to see those important details through.

* * *

“Hurry, My Lady,” Christina said formally, entering Luci’s chambers and bidding her freshen up. “Your parents have summoned you to speak with them, they said it is an urgent matter!”

“Urgent?” Luci asked, looking up from her book. “But I was only out with Bradley but a day ago! Surely they have not had the chance to speak to him already?”

“I know not, but you must hurry,” the governess said, already tackling Luci’s dark brown waves with a hairbrush and refreshing the wispy curls that framed her face.

“Oh Christina! Do you suppose Bradley has come to speak to Father at last?” Luci cried, jumping up from her chair and causing Christina to recoil, pulling the hairbrush close to her heart in surprise.

“There is but one way to find out, and that is to allow me to finish dressing you so that you might do as you were bade.” Christina sounded as reproachful as ever, but there was something about her tone that belied her words. She sounded

almost as excited and happy as Luci, knowing that this was the fulfillment of her young mistress' desires.

“All right, hurry then. I don't want to waste any more time than I must being plain old Lady Luciana, not when I might soon become Lady Stillscar, the wife of my beloved Bradley!”

When Christina pronounced her finished, Luci bolted from the room and raced down the stairs. Her governess trailed behind her, calling out fervent instructions to remember her manners and stop running at once.

At the door to the drawing room, Luci turned to beam at Christina, and for her part the governess pulled her into a swift embrace. “I wish you every happiness, you know that,” her governess whispered in her ear before letting her go.

“Father, Mother,” Luci said, entering the drawing room and curtsying slightly. “I was informed you wished to speak to me?”

No sooner had she greeted her parents than Luci sensed something was terribly wrong. The air seemed thinner somehow, and catching her breath proved difficult. Her father's face was ashen, and her mother's eyes were red from intense crying. Luci's mind raced as she thought what possible scenario could cause them such grief.

“Father, what is it?” she demanded fearfully, racing to his side and falling to her knees beside his chair.

Lord Thornshire looked up from where his hands rested in his lap and met his daughter's eye. He reached out a hand and stroked her hair gently, the look of sadness on his face only growing as he did.

“My daughter, my sweet child,” he began, but it was a long moment before he could finish his sentiment. “I have received an offer of marriage on your behalf from a gentleman of both title and means.”

Luci fought to suppress a smile that Bradley had at last spoken to her father, but for a moment her heart faltered. She would not have been so eager to become his wife if she had but known how much her parents would be grieved by losing her.

“But Father! This is a happy occasion, is it not? Why do you both look so unhappy?” Luci asked, placing a kiss on her father's hand before rising and going to her mother. Lady Thornshire wept anew and pulled her daughter to her.

“Daughter, we are old but not yet blind,” her father said quietly, looking down in shame once again. “We are well aware that you have certain affections for one Bradley Landon, Earl of Stillscar.”

“You do? But how did you know? I was careful always to preserve my reputation!” Luci said, perplexed at how they might have known but still not understanding their sadness.

Her parents did not answer, and Luci began to suspect that her beloved governess might have had a hand in the revealing. But it mattered not. Bradley had made an offer, after all, and how anyone knew was of little consequence.

“Daughter, we have the most troubling news,” her father continued, and her mother’s weeping turned to quiet sobs. “It was not Lord Stillscar who spoke to me.”

Luci turned to look at Lord Thornshire, her confusion slowly replaced by torment. Of course, that would be the cause of their deep grief. They knew of her love for Bradley, yet it was another man who’d spoken for her.

“But I don’t understand, I know of no one else!” she whispered, her fear causing her breath to stall in her lungs.

“His name is Gideon Cross, the Marquess of Ambergrave,” her father said slowly, her mother still unable to speak as she clung to Luci. “He is only recently returned to Ambergrave, having spent a number of years abroad.”

“And what did you answer him, Father?” Luci demanded, her emotions swirling until they formed the darkest mood. “Tell me! What was your reply?”

Her father stood up and paced the length of the room, turning only once he reached the fireplace. Luci saw that he clung to the mantel as though for support when his physical strength seemed to falter.

She had her answer. His silence told her everything she needed to know.

“But why? Why him? When you knew of my feelings for Lord Stillscar and therefore must know that he returns my same

affections?” she asked, tears spilling forth in earnest now.

The Earl was overcome, unable to give his daughter any word of comfort. Instead, her mother took her hands and looked down at her where she cried. Forcing the words to come, she explained.

“My darling child, we are penniless. Your father’s partner left us, and there were debts that are too great for us to overcome. Even with a sum such as Lord Stillscar must have inherited, any bride price would be insufficient. And how would your father ask his son-in-law for such an amount?”

“That’s it? You’ve sold me to a stranger because he had the winning bid?” Luci asked bitterly. “All this time, you’ve led me to believe that love and happiness were what mattered, that security was pleasant but that we had the means to seek love instead of wealth!”

“That was before we knew we were ruined, my child,” her father finally said, his back still to Luci and unable to look at her. “It is my own fault, and if my very death could repair the harm, I would gladly take my life to see you avoid a fate such as this.”

His stark words were the awakening Luci needed. She flew to his side and clutched at his arm, weeping more forcefully now.

“You mustn’t say such a thing, Father! Nay, do not even think it! I would marry the foulest cretin to walk the glens before I would wish you harm,” she cried, and her father held her tightly.

“But are you certain there is no other way?” she asked, her voice muffled in the collar of her father’s coat. “I will do anything you require, but have you thought of every possibility that might let me avoid it?”

“I’m so sorry, Luci,” he whispered, kissing the top of her hair. “If there were any other way, I would never ask it of you. Remember, this is not in any way to secure your mother and myself against ruin. I only seek to preserve your reputation and your standing with this match, nothing more.”

“Father, I care not for my standing or reputation, I only care for our family’s happiness!” Luci answered, wiping away her tears to look at her father. “Please, we’ll all go. We’ll leave here, and live... we’ll live on one of your ships. We’ll sail the world, only so long as we’re together!”

“My girl, there are no ships,” he whispered, his own tears falling silently and spotting the front of his coat, mixing with his daughter’s tears. “It’s all gone. Everything I’ve built, everything I’ve worked for. Everything had to be sold to pay the debts my company incurred. All we have left is this house and our belongings, though your mother has generously parted with much of her jewels and some of our things in order to provide us even the funds to pay our staff and put food on our table.”

“Is it truly so dire, Mother? Your beautiful things, gone?” Luci asked, returning to her mother’s side.

“It matters not,” her mother answered, though her fresh tears told Luci that was not true. “All that matters is that we pay off what we rightfully owe and that we do not turn our servants out without their wages.”

Luci looked around the beautiful room and suddenly took notice of the empty spaces. A painting that hung over the pianoforte was gone, as was the pianoforte itself. The ornate silver tea service that typically sat on the tea cart was no longer there, replaced with one of the tin sets that was brought up when they took their breakfast a-bed or were feeling poorly. Here and there a candelabra or a vase were gone, either replaced by a lesser object or simply missing entirely.

If this is what the drawing room where her parents received guests looked like, Luci could not begin to imagine what sort of pillaging and pilfering other rooms of the house might have succumbed to. All but her room, of course. It was if they had spared her every slight or inconvenience in their quest to remain in good standing.

All but for selling her to the highest bidder.

“Stop it, Luci,” she chided herself silently. “They have sacrificed so much already, the very least you can do is put on a brave face. Many other girls marry without ever knowing who their husband might be.”

But those girls did not already have their hearts set on marrying their true love, of course. Luci couldn't not envision how she might break the awful news to Bradley.

“Mother, tell me. If I must marry Lord Ambergrave, what shall I do about Br—I mean, Lord Stillscar? I know that he intends to speak to Father when he has finished some of his business matters. How will I inform him of this grievous news?”

Lady Thornshire smiled lovingly at her daughter and brushed some of the girl's hair back from her face. "Do not trouble yourself. When Lord Stillscar requests to speak with your father, he will simply inform him that he declines the offer and has already promised you to someone." Her mother's voice cracked with emotion as she spoke those last words, but she put on a brave face.

"Should he not hear it from me?" Luci asked tearfully. "Is it not the least I can do to inform him myself so that he does not think I was playing him for a fool?"

"No, dear. He will not think so," her mother replied. "These matters are settled in this way rather commonly, and as such, he will know that it is how it is done. Besides, if you are the one to tell him, he may attempt to persuade you otherwise. You may even have to be truthful about our humiliating circumstances. That would bring scandal on us all."

"Will you, Father?" Luci asked, standing before her father and asking softly, "Will you let him know in the kindest possible way? And tell him that though my heart was set on marrying him, I must reluctantly obey my parents' wishes?"

"I will, darling Luci," he replied. "I will be sure he knows that you chose him, but that I forbade the marriage. It is the least I can do to shoulder the blame for your misery."

Luci smiled gratefully the took a deep breath to steel herself. She stood up straighter and squared her shoulders, holding her head high.

"When shall I meet this unwelcomed husband?"

CHAPTER 5



In the two weeks leading up to the wedding, Luci prayed daily for a reprieve. She would never break her parents' hearts with a demonstrable display of unwillingness, but that did not prevent her from wishing on every third flower petal and praying at every chime of the clock that some way could be found to spare her this fate.

Perhaps the matter with Father's business was all a terrible mistake, and his wealth could be restored, she wondered. Or perchance that Bradley would be done with his dealings and ride to her parents' house straightaway to ask for her hand, announcing that his fortune was now so vast as to eclipse that of Lord Ambergrave?

"Luci, you must not do this to yourself," Bette said one afternoon when she'd paid a call, only to find Luci bedridden from crying. Christina, who'd summoned Bette to cheer her mistress' spirits, nodded silently. "You must accept what is to be your future, and do so with a willing, happy heart. There is no point in upsetting yourself and hoping for things that will not come to pass."

"But you don't know that!" Luci protested. "Perhaps Bradley has only been called away and does not know of my terrible predicament."

“My dear, the banns have been posted and read this week,” Christina reminded her. “Even should Lord Stillscar not have been at church this Sunday past, word would have surely gotten to him.”

“But if he is abroad on business, he would not know. I may still be saved,” Luci argued, smiling through her tears. “I must find a way to get word to him, he is my only hope!”

Bette and Christina exchanged a nervous glance, slight though it was, but it was enough that Luci noticed. She frowned deeply and asked, “What is it?”

“My dear Luci,” Bette said sadly, “Lord Stillscar is not abroad. I... I saw him only yesterday.”

“Well, did you speak to him?” Luci demanded, growing on the verge of anger. “Did you inform him that he must come to my rescue?”

“How could I?” Bette cried. “And risk your reputation when you have already accepted the marriage proposal of Lord Ambergrave? As I told you, the banns have been read. To cancel the marriage now would require some great cause, and simply changing your mind is not sufficient.”

Luci fell back against the pillows and sobbed, the last particles of hope drifting just out of her reach. Christina sat on the other side of her and brushed her shoulders gently.

“Luci, think of it. Please. Even if Lord Stillscar could prevent this great weight, it would still not alleviate the struggles your parents face,” she said gently for what felt like the tenth time. “But you are going about this all wrong.”

“I am?” her muffled voice asked. “How?”

“You are not affording Lord Ambergrave the chance to prove his worth to you,” the governess continued, trying to sound brighter. “Perhaps his wealth is not the only thing that outshines that of Lord Stillscar. Perhaps he... he... maybe he likes to ride horses just as much as you do.”

“I should cast off the love of my life to marry a man who enjoys riding horses?” Luci demanded angrily.

Christina sighed, imploring Bette to help her with a glance. Bette added, “What if Lord Ambergrave loves you even more than that old useless Lord Stillscar? Have you thought of that? There must have been a reason he decided to speak to your father, after all. Gentlemen simply do not go about knocking on doors and inquiring if there are any unmarried daughters within.”

“That’s true!” Christina echoed eagerly. “And no one seems to have heard of Lord Ambergrave, at least not in any personal way other than knowing he has reopened Ashworth Hall. So what would have prompted him to make an offer if not because he had heard of your beauty, and your charm, and your love of the outdoors, and... and... many other admirable characteristics you possess?”

Though Luci had remained unconvinced over the next few days of Lord Ambergrave's fine qualities and apparent deep devotion for her—both of which miraculously grew every time Bette or Christina or even Lady Thornshire spoke of him to Luci—she was at least relieved that her wedding day would be here soon and this dreadful worrying would be behind her. If she could not have Bradley, dear object of her affection that he would forever be, at least she would not have to wait long to suffer her unavoidable fate.

The wedding was a small, solemn affair.

Lord and Lady Thornshire were present, of course, and Lady Elizabeth served as Luci's attendant. Christina accompanied the ladies to the small chapel where the vicar would preside over the brief ceremony, and then all would be done.

Peering into the small sanctuary from the narthex, Luci pressed a gloved hand to her mouth. "Oh dear Heaven, is that him? He's hideous."

"What are you talking about?" Bette demanded, straining to see inside the darkened chapel without giving themselves away.

"That man there, beside the vicar." Luci began to breathe faster, the air closing in on her. "It's as you feared, I'm marrying a doddering old man with a cane!"

"Oh, you goose. Would you control yourself?" Bette answered, swatting at Luci's arm playfully. "That's not your husband, that's the bishop. He's here from the House of Lords

and staying with my father, so he came at the request of Lord Thornshire.”

Bette stood on tiptoe to see over Luci’s shoulder, then pointed discretely towards the baptismal font. “There, Lord Ambergrave is standing over by the doorway. See? And I think he’s rather handsome, don’t you agree?”

Luci trained her eyes on the man at the far end of the chapel. It was true, he was rather pleasing to the eye. Tall and ruggedly built, he was an imposing figure due in large part to the severe expression he wore. At first he appeared to have dark hair like Luci’s, but when he walked nearer to the window she saw that it was actually tinged with a reddish hue that shone in the light.

His most striking feature, though, were his eyes, lighter green than any emerald Luci had seen. From where she stood, they still shone across the chapel as though made of purest jade.

I have never seen such a color before... For a moment she thought their beauty wasted on a man who would take no particular pride in their enchanting shade.

“Yes, I suppose there are some who might say that he is handsome,” Luci begrudgingly agreed. “But he shall not prove his worth with those eyes and those looks alone.”

At a sign from the vicar, Luci started forward, followed by Bette. She averted her gaze, unsure of how she felt about Lord Ambergrave staring at her as she entered. She attempted to put herself in his position. He, too, was marrying a stranger, a woman he may only know by reputation and not by personal

acquaintance. Though the fault was purely his that they had not met before now, his affairs keeping him far too busy to come call.

In a blur, the ceremony took place. Luci clearly remembered the vicar speaking some sort of blessing over the couple, there were questions that she answered dutifully if numbly, and then congratulations were passed round. Her parents embraced her and Bette kissed her cheek, and even Christina beamed at her.

And then it was over, and all hope of a rescue by her Bradley was lost.

* * *

For as long as he was fortunate enough to live, Gideon would never forget the first words he spoke to his new wife: “If you’ll be so kind as to take the carriage, I’ll see you in a few days.”

The words themselves weren’t so memorable as the reaction they caused in the new Lady Ambergrave. His wife was clearly confused by his statement, and appeared to be somewhat taken aback. She stared at him in silent condemnation, speechless with what he assumed had to be deep loathing. He couldn’t really blame her, though.

It’s your own fault for not paying a call once the marriage contract was signed! Gideon thought it over ruefully. He knew it showed a clear lack of manners, but he had his reasons, not the least of which was his reason marrying this particular young lady. *You might have had ample opportunity to cancel this ridiculous wedding and avoid any harm. But now it is far too late for that.*

His plans had seemed perfect when they first began to take hold in his mind. He merely needed a wife—any wife, at that—because his parents would have expected it. The more he had thought about it at first, the more he was certain it would provide a great deal of satisfaction. But when he saw the innocently wide-eyed, timid yet beautiful creature who entered the chapel only moments ago, his plans nearly dissipated in a vaporous cloud of longing.

She is too lovely to marry someone who does not adore her. He continued sneaking glances at her throughout the brief ceremony.

When the vicar had asked if he, Gideon, did willingly take Luciana to be his wife, he nearly called out, “No, I’ve changed my mind.”

All that prevented him from doing so was the knowledge that word would spread of the unfortunate near-marriage, and his plans might be discovered. Instead, he had to see them through, even if it meant destroying a stunning, smart lady. His only recourse, as he saw it, was to spend as much time away from her as possible.

Most couples, upon marrying, might have enjoyed some form of couple’s holiday. But Gideon had serious matters to attend to other than introducing himself to his new bride. His treatments with Sir Rawlings had proven wondrous, so much that he had renewed vigor to see to his house.

Shouldn’t a wife appreciate a fully staffed home and completed repairs? It seemed reasonable. Moreover, it seemed likely to dull the pain his new bride would endure in a loveless marriage.

“Derwall, the butler, will show you to your chambers,” he’d added almost as an afterthought. “I apologize, the house is still not well appointed for some staff, but the servants who are there will see to everything you need.”

Lady Ambergrave had still only stared at him silently, and her expression told him all he needed to know. She’d had no desire to marry him, that much he well knew, but she at least assumed they would introduce themselves to one another.

“I should return in about three days’ time,” he added, looking behind his wife to where the vicar and bishop were still speaking to her parents. Another woman, one who was only a bit older in appearance than Lady Ambergrave, stood nearby. “I’ve been told you enjoy riding, so I hope you are pleased that the business calling me away is the purchase of eight new horses for the stables. Of course, if you have a particular favorite and if your father does not object, it would be ideal if your own horse moved to Ashworth. But only if you wish.”

“I do wish it, actually,” she said, speaking at last. She gestured behind her and added formally, “And I shall bring my lady’s maid, Miss Ross, as well.”

“That’s to be expected,” he said, nodding, “and she is most welcome. Then I shall see you in perhaps three days’ time. Goodbye.”

* * *
“What is that about? Where is he going?” Christina whispered from behind Luci. Lady Thornshire approached next.

“He’s leaving? After speaking to you so briefly? Whatever for?” her mother asked.

Luci merely stared after him. His eyes had very nearly bewitched her the entire time he spoke, and more than once she had wanted to look away from his intense gaze. Instead, perhaps in a show of defiance or independence, she had refused to be intimidated, even if that had not been his purpose.

“He’s going to buy some horses,” Luci explained slowly, still watching him gallop away on his steed. “He shall not return for some time.”

“Whoever heard of such a thing?” Lady Thornshire asked quietly, looking around to see who else had noticed the Marquess’ odd departure. She caught her husband’s eye and nodded for him to come over. “Have you any idea of what the Marquess is about? He’s just... left.”

“Left? On his wedding day?” Lord Thornshire asked, standing up on his toes so that he might see Lord Ambergrave for himself.

“Yes, he needed to buy some horses,” Luci repeated, feeling rather stupid. Just as suddenly, a new feeling overcame her, and she started to laugh. Soon, she clenched her arms around her middle, as if she could physically hold back the peals of laughter. Her parents, her friend, all of them simply stared in wonder.

“Edgar, you should ride after him,” Luci’s mother said indignantly. “Force him to come back here at once!” But Lord

Thornshire would not.

“It is quite all right, Mother,” Luci assured her, finally regaining her breath but still smiling strangely. “I suppose this is to be my life now, married to one such as Lord Ambergrave, so I might as well get used to his odd quirks sooner rather than later.”

Luci bade Bette goodbye, begging her to remember to write to her often, then she clung to both of her parents for a few moments. She would have thought her tears over these past few weeks would have dried up her supply, but she cried once again when it was time to tell them goodbye.

“You’ll visit, my dear, don’t worry,” her mother insisted. Her father cleared his throat several times and blinked rapidly.

“Of course I will, as often as I can,” Luci promised. “If my husband is to travel frequently and for great lengths of time, you may find that you see more of me now than before I was wed.”

When it was finally time, Luci and Christina climbed aboard the enclosed carriage and settled back for the long journey to Ambergrave. Neither spoke until the chapel and Luci’s family were out of sight.

CHAPTER 6



“*H*urry now! Place all bets, gentlemen!” the rough-looking attendant called out, walking up and down the queue of men. “Last call for race number twelve, ‘tis the last race of the evening. If you plan to be rich by sundown, this is yer last chance.”

Lord Stillscar, his face and hair obscured by a cap pulled down low over his ears, stepped up to the wooden table and laid down a sum of money. The man at the table counted it, scooped it into a drawer, then marked the amount in a ledger before looking up at him expectantly.

“Well?” the man said in a weary voice. “What horse then?”

“Which one’s the longshot again?” he asked, narrowing his eyes as he looked at the crude board that had been covered with blacking. Someone had scrawled a series of numbers and the horses’ names on it with a chalk.

“Pretty Penny,” the man answered, sounding more and more bored the longer the bookings went on.

“I’ll put it all on Pretty Penny,” Bradley said. A short man standing beside him turned to look at him in surprise.

Walking away with his ticket in hand, Bradley stiffened when the man caught him by the elbow. He turned to see what was the matter, only to find the man staring in confused awe.

“What do ya think yer doin’? Ya put it all on the longshot, but ya did not even know who it was?” he asked. “Are ya mad? Ya can’t go throwin’ yer money away like that, ya have to know which horse is what before you go and place a bet.”

“Thank you kindly for the advice,” Bradley replied with a grin. “But I know what I’m doing.”

And know he did. Bradley had made a keen study of the track the day before, so the question had been part of the ruse in case he was found out after the race was over. The bookie could vouch for him and say that Bradley had not even known which horse to place the bet on. But Bradley had some help that the others did not have—he knew that the race had been fixed to assure that Pretty Penny would win.

It’ll be a certain moneymaker. He wound through the burly crowd to find a spot along the track fence. If my sums are correct, this will pay out enough to pay off the bank and reclaim my shares in my uncle’s company. Then my plans can proceed.

The pushing and shoving grew more rambunctious once the horses meandered to the starting line, led by stable hands who held tightly to their bridles. Bradley had to place a foot on the

bottom rail and lean back to keep the throng from pushing him over the fence entirely.

At the bell, the horses took off and the crowd pressed forward to watch. Bradley strained to see the pack of animals sprinting away from the gate. After a brief silence of awe, the shouts and cheering began, as though each man could spur on his favorite with merely a word.

Bradley laughed out loud at the sight of Pretty Penny closing ranks and moving up through the file quickly. The rider crouched low over the creature's neck as together they flew past one horse after another. Hope rose in him and flooded his limbs with a pleasant feeling of relief mixed with joy. But as the finish line waited only a stone's throw away, the unthinkable happened.

Pretty Penny stumbled, throwing his rider to the ground as the horses on either side surged across the finish line. A collective shout of panic went up from the onlookers as they waited to see if the hapless man would be trampled by the horses that came up behind. After the poor rider stood and waved to the spectators that he'd survived, only then did the crowd begin to cheer or grouse about their wins or losses.

Bradley, though, stood mute. His ticket fluttered at the ends of his fingertips, held loosely in his grasp.

I'm ruined. An empty feeling crept up inside his chest. It was quickly replaced by panic as he realized what had happened. *That was all I had. The horse was supposed to win. Why didn't he win?*

Across the track, Bradley spied Mr. Black, the man who'd told him it was all arranged. The sight of him laughing and shaking hands with several spectators enraged Bradley, who knew then he'd been played for a fool. Before he could formulate a plan, he worked his way through the heavy crowd and stormed around the track.

Coming up behind Mr. Black, Bradley shoved him from behind so forcefully that the man stumbled, recovering himself long enough to whirl around in anger.

“What’s the meaning of that, ya scoundrel?” Black shouted, his thick hands already balling up into sizeable fists.

“You know what you did,” Bradley hissed. “You told me it was all set.”

“Aye, it was supposed to be. I had a little money on it meself, and so did me brother. But ya cannot count on a horse taking a fall like that,” Black explained, his ire growing.

“Then what was all the handshaking and pats on the back I just watched? Admit it, you lied to me! You lured me in with a false tale so I would bet heavy on one horse, while your friends there made off with the winnings,” Bradley shouted, pointing at the group that was already on its way to collect.

“Keep yer voice down, ya idjit! Do ya want everyone to know that yer bettin’ on a false race? ‘Cause I can tell ya plain, it won’t be me that these fellers turn on,” Black said, gesturing to the spectators.

Bradley swallowed loudly and looked at the crowd. They were certainly not his sort of people, and he had no wish to draw their attention to him. Certainly not if Mr. Black was correct, and they would come after him.

“That’s right, Lord Fancy Man,” Black said with a sneer. “I know who ya are. I don’t let just anyone know what secrets are happening at the track. I checked ya out, I had ya followed. So unless ya want word to get out that there’s a dandy boy causin’ problems and tryin’ to steal the bets, ya best be on yer way.”

“I need my money back,” Bradley said quietly, a threatening look in his eye. “You must not understand, it is very important.”

Mr. Black threw back his head and laughed. “And ya don’t reckon that all these people’s money is important, too? Only yers, is it? Well, la-di-da, Sir Fancy! I shall hurry straight away and inform the bookie that yer bet is to be erased because yer money is *important*.”

“You don’t understand!” Bradley argued, a growing desperation in his tone. He stepped closer and insisted, “There is so much at stake. You were the cause of me losing all that I had, and you must return it to me.”

“I’ll do nothin’ of the sort,” Black said darkly, coming closer and standing directly in front of Bradley. “But if ya don’t be on yer way, I’ll be takin’ far more than just some money from ya. If ya like all those pretty teeth where they are, ya best be goin’ now.”

Bradley went pale at the man's threat, but in the end, there was nothing to be done about it. What recourse did he have? To go to the constable and lodge a complaint that he'd tried to profit from a rigged horserace, only to be cheated himself? That would certainly not have the outcome he desired, and might even put him in bad standing with a dangerous man.

No, all Bradley could do was turn and walk away from the track, the cold emptiness returning to his limbs. It suddenly occurred to him that he could not so much as pay for a carriage home, let alone pay any debts. Instead of succumbing to his misery, though, he realized that he had a very long walk home to come up with a new plan.

* * *

"Luci, wake up, dear," Christina said, shaking her charge from where she slept soundly, her head on her governess' shoulder. "I believe we've arrived."

Luci sat up slowly and looked out the carriage window. At first, all she could see was the glare of the dozens of windows that overlooked the front of the enormous house. Their reflection blinded her for a moment, so much that she had to put her hand to her eyes to keep looking at it. The pale stone façade rose up to numerous spires atop the dormers, all supported by flying buttresses that led to additional wings of the main house.

"Oh dear," Luci said, sighing. "This is a lot of home."

"My understanding, from what I could uncover, is that Lord Ambergrave is a lot of Marquess," Christina said rather scornfully. "He's been gone for a number of years and allowed the house to fall into ruin, and is only now restoring it... at great expense, from what I hear."

“Where do you hear such things?” Luci asked, turning to her with an accusing look.

“We governesses are a very unique lot, my dear. We have no money to speak of, our wages are often barely more than bed and board, and we are neither family nor downstairs servants. As such, we must stick together.” Christina stopped speaking when the driver pulled the carriage up to the house and stepped down, then a footman approached to open the door. She added quickly, “Never permit a governess to carry your secrets for you, she will share them with her ilk in every household across the countryside.”

“Even you, you mean?” Luci asked, still glaring. Christina laughed as she linked her arm through Luci’s.

“Shall I answer truthfully, or in such a way as I keep my already precarious position?”

Luci joined in her laughter and was still giggling softly when she saw the servants had come out to greet their new Marchioness. She immediately went silent, looking from face to face and waiting for someone to tell her what to do.

“Wait for the butler to approach,” Christina whispered in her ear. “In the Marquess’ absence, he will introduce you to the household.”

Luci waited, and eventually a smiling man nearly her father’s age came forward and bowed deeply. When he stood straight, he wore a very pleasant expression.

“My Lady, welcome to Ashworth Hall,” he said formally. “I am Derwall, the butler. May I introduce the rest of the staff?”

“Please do,” Luci replied, noting their small number. After meeting each one in turn, Derwall explained the reason for such a meager staff.

“Lord Ambergrave has not been returned long, only a matter of months. He intends to bring on more staff once all the renovations to the house are complete. In the meantime, he has requested that you interview and hire several of the positions.”

“Me?” Luci asked, looking to Christina suddenly for confirmation. Her governess only looked back at her placidly, as if reminding her of some unspoken rule. “That is, I would be happy to. If you’ll let me know when anyone comes seeking the position, I will get on it straight away.”

“Very good, My Lady,” Derwall said, obviously relieved at this new Marchioness’ easygoing nature and pleasant demeanor. “I will show you to your chambers, if you wish, and take note of what you would like to dine on this evening. Will you take your meals in the dining room in Lord Ambergrave’s absence? Or in your private sitting room?”

They discussed other important details of the household as Derwall led her to her chambers, Christina following closely behind. When the butler finally took his leave, Luci’s head was filled to overflowing with both vital and useless information.

“Christina, how am I to manage? I don’t know what I’m doing,” she cried, falling onto the bed. “I’m a pretender, nothing more. A pretender wife with no love lost for her husband, and now a pretender noble who has no notion of what to do.”

“Oh, never fear,” Christina replied gently, coming to stand beside her. “You did not ask for this, so you cannot rightfully be expected to take to your position like a swan to the pond. You will have time to learn what needs be done.”

“Apparently I have but three days!” Luci cried, still not persuaded that all would be well. “In that time, I must learn how to be the wife of this mysterious man, the mistress of a house bigger than some villages, and bring on servants as though I owned the estate.”

“Lady Luciana—nay, make that Lady Ambergrave now—” Christina said with a rueful smirk, “—you do own the estate. Now behave as such and let’s unpack your things. There will be time enough to figure out how to be a lady.”

CHAPTER 7



Three days quickly became a week, and then two. There was still no sign of Lord Ambergrave's return, and though Luci fretted whenever she thought of her husband appearing suddenly, she was also relieved. He did send word once or twice—addressed to Derwall, for some reason, and not her—otherwise Luci might have wondered if she was already made a widow.

Then just as suddenly, Lord Ambergrave sent a letter that he would soon be home.

The household flew into a near panic, all but Luci. She saw no cause for the flustered efforts at cleaning and dusting, of changing the linens and stocking the larder. It was all so much effort and trouble for a man who hardly seemed to reside there.

“Lady Ambergrave, I am here to inform you that Lord Ambergrave has arrived,” Derwall announced formally one morning. Luci, who had just prepared to go riding, tugged on her second glove, thanked Derwall for the news, and then walked past the perplexed butler and continued on towards the stable.

“What are you doing?” Christina asked, her own riding habit already buttoned to accompany Luci.

“I’m going for a ride, as I’m sure you can tell by my attire. Jacques only arrived from my father’s stables two days ago and I’m still getting him accustomed to his new home, after all,” Luci said, gathering her hat and heading to the door.

“Luci, you must stay. Your husband has come home and you should be here to greet him,” Christina said, her typical admonishing tone put to use again.

“If my husband had cared at all about seeing me, he wouldn’t have sent me on my way on the very day we were married. At the very least, perhaps he would have returned home when he said he would,” she retorted. “I see no reason to interrupt my ride for one with such lack of simple manners.”

“You know I adore you and would do anything you ask,” Christina began, still trying to persuade Luci, “but this is truly bad form.”

“And so is staying gone long after he was supposed to return. For all I know, he was off on holiday with his mistress. Should my horse be denied his necessary exercise so my husband, having finally grown weary of another woman’s bed, has lowered himself to return home?”

“I was not with my mistress,” a deep, stern voice said from behind her.

Christina went pale as Luci turned to face Lord Ambergrave. He was every bit as intriguingly handsome as she remembered—from the brief half hour or so that she had seen him—but unlike her governess, she was not intimidated by him in the least.

“Lord Ambergrave,” she said, sounding rather surprised. “I did not know you had entered the room and were listening in on my conversation.”

“It’s rather hard to avoid hearing when your voice echoes off the walls of my house, accusing me of frolicking elsewhere,” he said seriously. “But you are wrong. I was not with my mistress.”

“I suppose that is good to hear for I—” she began. But the Marquess cut her off.

“I only visit my mistress on Thursdays,” he added before marching past her and leaving the room, his long strides punctuating each step against the marble floor like a retort of pistol fire.

After he’d left the room, Luci fought back tears of anger. Christina pretended not to notice. Instead, she placed an arm around Luci’s shoulders and waited for her to speak.

“Remind me to change the new housekeeper’s schedule, if you please,” Luci finally said.

“Oh? For what?” Christina asked.

“So that all the washing may be done on Thursdays from now on.” Luci turned and stormed out of the room, heading to the stables where Jacques waited patiently in his stall.

“There you are, my handsome boy,” Luci crooned to her horse when she entered the darkened stable, her mood lifting considerably upon seeing him. “Did you miss me? I certainly missed you.”

Luci took Jacques’ saddle down from its post and put it over a saddle blanket emblazoned with a golden letter A. After tightening the girth, she went to the tack room to retrieve his tack. Luci stopped when she heard two men talking outside the window.

My husband isn't the only one who can play the spy. She felt bitter, crouching down slightly and leaning closer to the open window. To be certain, Lord Ambergrave was talking with another man who seemed to be the stablemaster.

“The horses I’ve procured will arrive in less than a week’s time,” Lord Ambergrave said. “Will the additional stalls be ready by then?”

“Tis most likely, My Lord. If not, there would only be one or two short. We could surely find a place for two horses in the meantime, perhaps in the carriage house until the stalls are complete,” the man answered. “Are they all of the same breeds?”

“Yes, and very expensive. They’ll need to be tended to immediately and their comfort seen to.” It was quiet while Lord Ambergrave was lost in thought, but then he said, “We

can move that old farm horse out of the way to make room for the Arabians, should it come to that.”

Luci stifled a gasp. How dare he speak of Jacques that way? And talk of leaving him out in the cold and damp overnight?

“Where should I put him, My Lord?” the stablemaster asked, but the Marquess laughed derisively.

“I should think the butcher shop would do just fine,” he replied. Luci clapped a hand over her mouth to keep her cry of protest from escaping. Fortunately, Lord Ambergrave said, “Oh, don’t look so aghast. I was only speaking in jest. Lady Ambergrave may not be all that I’d imagined, but she is feisty, that is for certain. She would pack me off to Paris for the guillotine if I touched a hair on that animal’s tail.”

To his credit, the stablemaster did not reply. He didn’t speak up for Jacques’ fine qualities, but he also did not join in the cruel jest of having her horse killed. But Lord Ambergrave’s last words stung hatefully: *She may not be all that I’d imagined.*

Luci was of half a mind to speak up, to inform the great lord that he was not what she’d envisioned in a husband, either. And more to the point, how were either of them to know who the other was unless Lord Ambergrave deigned to actually spend more than five minutes in her presence?

She stood up to defend her horse and her own honor when she was yanked backwards painfully, landing on the floor of the tack room with a loud thud. Reaching up, Luci felt the nail that

protruded from the wall beneath the window, the very same nail that now held captive a thick lock of her hair.

Oh dash it. She angrily reached both hands up, feeling blindly in an effort to free herself. *It would be humiliating if it didn't hurt so much.*

The more she struggled to unleash her hair, the more tangled it seemed to become. Luci twisted it and turned it, yanking it this way and that, but without eyes above her to see the problem, she could not free herself.

Only the sound of approaching footsteps made her give up. The heavy boots strode purposefully down the length of the wooden hallway, coming closer. Luci was ready to rip the offending lock from her scalp in order to free herself before anyone could see her predicament, but she was too late.

“What are you doing down there?” Lord Ambergrave asked, eyeing Luci suspiciously.

“Nothing,” she answered, attempting to look serene.

“It does not appear to be nothing. It appears as though you are trapped somehow,” he said, narrowing those beautiful eyes as he sought to understand her plight.

“I am merely caught on a nail, but I will have myself free in no time,” she answered with a dismissive snuffle.

Lord Ambergrave looked at her appraisingly, taking several moments to assess Luci's situation, then he merely shrugged and said, "All right then," before leaving the room.

"Wait a moment!" Luci cried out. "Are you actually going to leave me like this?"

Lord Ambergrave stepped back into view, looked at Luci, and nodded. "Yes. You said you had no need of my assistance, so carry on."

And then he was gone again. Now furious, Luci kicked her feet against the wooden floor in anger. Instead of working her way loose, the movement only seemed to lodge the offending nail even further into her hair.

"My Lord?" someone called outside the window. "Lady Ambergrave's horse is out of his stall and wearing a saddle, but I do not see the rider. Do you know if Lady Ambergrave intends to ride today, or should I put her horse away?"

"I don't know," Lord Ambergrave said loudly enough for Luci to hear through the open window. "I haven't seen her."

So that's how we're to play it then... Anger caused her blood to boil in her veins. The game is cruelty? I may not be a seasoned player, but I am a quick study!

* * *

That evening, after finally freeing herself and putting Jacques through a relatively brief ride about the estate, Luci sat reading in her chambers when the housekeeper knocked at the door.

After bidding her enter, Luci looked at the woman, Mrs. Cushings, and smiled at her.

“My Lady, now that Lord Ambergrave is once again returned home, I came to inquire whether you will be taking your meal in the dining room?” she asked. “Dinner is promptly served at eight.”

“Well,” Luci said, pretending to think it over, “I think not. I’ve grown rather accustomed to eating up here, if you’ll please inform the cook and Derwall?”

Mrs. Cushings looked uncomfortable, but at a slight nod from Christina, she answered, “Very good, My Lady. I’ll let them know.”

She curtsied and left, but no sooner had the door closed behind her than Christina was up in arms once again. She stood up, flung her needlepoint into its basket, and began to pace the floor.

“Luci, what are you plotting?” she finally asked, a worried look on her face.

“What do you mean?” she asked without looking up from her book.

“You know what I’m referring to! How long do you think Lord Ambergrave will tolerate insolence and downright rudeness?” Christina asked, fretting and twisting her hands. “You risk putting your parents in a very compromising position.”

“How so?” Luci asked, sitting up in alarm. “What of my parents?”

“There was an agreement,” Christina said urgently, coming to kneel down beside Luci’s chair and speak tenderly. “You agreed as well. Whether you are happy with your circumstances or not, your father signed the contract. You signed the contract. Now you must abide by your promise to be the Marquess’ wife.”

“So if I continue to displease Lord Ambergrave, he might send me home?” Luci asked, brightening significantly.

“Oh, he might, but it would not have the results you’re hoping for in that calculating mind of yours. He would be within his rights to demand his funds back from your father, leaving your family in ruin, and you would be a discarded woman whom no man would ever consider marrying,” Christina explained. “I cannot caution you enough to stop your games and accept your lot. The Marquess may be giving you some leeway for now, but his patience will surely soon wear thin.”

“And what of my patience?” Luci asked. “How can you suggest I debase myself to someone who hasn’t seen fit to speak more than five minutes in my presence at a time? Now, the darling Marquess knew what he was getting into when he first proposed marriage. He bought me outright and has the receipt, I’m sure of it. My obligation to be grateful and kind was not part of the bill.”

The sound of a man clearing his throat made both Luci and Christina jump. Once again, the Marquess had come upon

Luci without it being known, and she was even angrier than before.

“Do you make it a habit to eavesdrop on others’ private discussions?” Luci demanded. “Or merely when it affords you the chance to enter a lady’s chambers unannounced?”

“I’m not accustomed to waiting for a servant to announce my presence in my own house,” he explained bitterly. “I’ve come to see why you’ve refused to dine with me this evening.”

“I wasn’t aware I’d been invited to dine with you... tonight or any other night, for that matter,” Luci answered haughtily. “Speaking of being accustomed, I’m not accustomed to dining in this house with anyone other than my lady’s maid to keep me company, and I cannot help but acknowledge that is entirely your fault.”

Lord Ambergrave was quiet, mulling over Luci’s accusation. Finally, after a silent, weighty pause, he nodded thoughtfully.

“I see the issue. Luci Cross, Marchioness of Ambergrave, would you dine with me this evening?” he asked.

Luci looked to Christina, shocked by the formal nature of the request. Her governess looked down, and Luci knew what she seemed to be thinking. After all, Christina should not even be present for a disagreement such as this, and certainly should not be weighing in with her opinion.

“Yes, I will,” Luci finally answered. Her face flamed with a mixture of reluctance and shame at being so easily persuaded,

taken in by the handsome gentleman's first show of kindness, mocking though it seemed to be.

"Very good. I shall see you then." Lord Ambergrave left the room, leaving Luci and Christina to stare at the emptiness where he'd stood only a moment before.

By eight o'clock, Luci was bathed, dressed, and her hair fashionably styled, effort that she herself had not seen the need for though Christina had insisted. The governess saw her down the wide staircase and to the door of the dining room, and Luci couldn't help but wonder if Christina was only concerned she might flee instead of dining with Lord Ambergrave.

"Good evening, My Lady," Derwall said, greeting her in the empty room. "The Marquess has been detained, but asks that you sit and begin your meal."

"Of course he has," Luci answered sourly. "Where am I to sit? Shall I take a different chair during each course and thus pretend there are other guests here to amuse and entertain?"

Derwall looked away briefly, and Luci immediately felt regret for making him feel awkward. She smiled at him and added, "I'm only having fun, Derwall. I shall sit anywhere."

"Very good, My Lady," he answered, but his earlier cheerfulness was dampened a bit.

"Christina is right," Luci thought as Derwall held her chair for her and signaled for a footman to fill her glass. "I'm not only

miserable myself, but now I'm infecting others with the poison that is my broken heart.”

Luci determined at that moment to at least attempt a pleasant demeanor. After all, she had agreed, just as Christina had said. And there were far worse marriages than her own, at least according to the gossip that she'd learned over the years. Some young brides were wed to men vastly above their station and as such were never accepted in the family. Others were the second or even third wife of a widower, and his children—and therefore, rightful heirs, no matter how many children she may have—would stand to inherit everything and leave hers to beg for the scraps.

Worse, though, were the whispered conversations, hidden well behind the participants' fans, that told of a certain cruelty that made Luci feel faint only from hearing of it. Some husbands spoke harshly, denied their wives all contact with their families, forbade old friends from visiting the house, and much, much worse.

“No,” Luci decided. “I may not know him well, but I can tell that Lord Ambergrave is not that sort. He may be odd and even callous, but I cannot envision him being cruel.”

When Derwall returned with a small platter of breads and delicate rolls, Luci smiled gratefully and thanked him. Then, as if to repair any initial harm, she stopped him.

“Derwall, please tell Cook that I will not need my supper as of yet after all,” she said most humbly. “Please tell her I will wait for Lord Ambergrave. Should he be prevented for too long, though, a simple plate in my chambers will suffice.”

The butler returned Luci's smile heartily and nodded. "Very good, My Lady."

CHAPTER 8



Lady Thornshire sat alone in her morning room despite the late hour, barely nibbling at the piece of dry toast she'd requested. Her teacup sat full but cold, as she had no desire to even lift the cup let alone drink from it. Since Luci had gone, she found that her house was empty of the girl's vibrant spirit.

She knew it was uncommon for such a bond to exist between mother and daughter, especially of their station, and as such she had truly treasured it. Luci had been more than just her child—her only living child, that is, after suffering the loss of two others before Luci—she had also been her constant companion. Whether riding or visiting or going to London to buy for the Season, her daughter had always been by her side.

And now, she was no longer there. Lady Thornshire had none but the servants to keep her company when her husband was away, and she knew she could never press upon them to go for a ride in the phaeton or play a hand of whist.

“My dear, you're up rather late, are you not?” Lord Thornshire said, coming into the room and straightening his waistcoat. He noticed the untouched food and drink, but said nothing.

“I suppose I might be,” she answered, trying to look cheerful for her husband’s sake, “but I couldn’t fall asleep and there was no sense in trying any longer.”

“Did you take a draught for it?” he asked, frowning at the dark circles that were not usually so visible.

“I don’t care for anything to help me sleep, I wake to find that I don’t much remember anything,” Lady Thornshire said. “I suffer a fitful night’s rest, filled with odd dreams and such.”

Lord Thornshire sat down in the chair opposite his wife and rested his elbows upon his knees. He looked up at her gravely and said, “It’s her letter, isn’t it? That’s what has you in such a state?”

A tear escaped the corner of Lady Thornshire’s eye, and she nodded. “I had no idea she would be so unhappy. I knew her heart would long for Lord Stillscar for some time, but I truly thought once she and Lord Ambergrave became accustomed to one another, that a sort of respect and friendship might form.”

“As did I, Angeline,” her husband agreed. “Why, you and I knew each other not before we wed, and look at the fondness that has grown between us. It has weathered even the worst of tragedies. The loss of the boys within minutes of their birth, the loss of my business and our fortune... why, a couple who had not placed so high a value on the bonds of marriage would have fallen to their separate ways by now.”

“But we had Luci to bind us together,” Lady Thornshire reminded him. “Our love for her forged a family, not merely a

couple. What is to befall us now that she is moved on and we're left here like an unwanted Michaelmas candle?"

"My dear, don't be troubled. In time, she will adjust," he insisted.

"Do you truly believe so, or does that only assuage your guilt for sending her away to cover your own debts?" his wife said, accusing him. He looked aghast, but she added, "Do not play the part of the innocent, wronged man. You know that is why she's in this precarious position."

"I had to do it," Lord Thornshire said softly, wounded deeply by his wife's words. "I was thinking not of our plight, but hers. She would have fallen into ruin had I not. At least this way she is unhappy but well cared for, instead of unhappy and wretchedly poor."

Lady Thornshire sniffled for a moment, but then closed her eyes and nodded. She reached for her husband's hand and held it to her cheek adoringly.

"I know," she admitted sadly. "You are right, of course, and I'm sorry for having spoken so harshly. I am merely suffering from a broken heart at losing her."

"All will be well, Angeline," Edgar whispered. "We have to trust that she will find happiness in her new life, and not think selfishly of wanting to keep her for ourselves. Trust me, in time, we will all wonder why we were ever distressed."

* * *

Bradley had spent the past three days trying to come up with a plan, some way to secure the funds he desperately needed. He could not think of another lender who would extend him credit, nor another associate who would front him a loan. Everywhere he turned, there was no one who could help him.

In his desperation, a sudden thought occurred to him. All this time, he had been attempting to earn an adequate fortune to present himself to Lord Thornshire. But why must the man know the truth? He did not have to submit his bankbook, after all. And no respectable man would refuse to take him at his word.

Thus, Bradley borrowed a carriage and driver from another man who lived in town, dressed himself in his finest, and set out for Alden House. Along the way, he formulated precisely what he would say.

But when he reached the gates, his resolve began to wane. This would either solve all of his problems, or cause him such great humiliation that he could not show his face again in the ton.

He wished he had a small draught of whisky to steel his nerves. *Either way, I will know my fate soon enough.*

The driver pulled into the circular path before the front of the house and climbed down, then opened the door for Bradley. The earl bade the driver wait but half an hour at most, then climbed the wide marble steps that led to the door. As he lifted his hand to ring the bell, the door opened narrowly and a footman appeared.

“Yes?” he said simply.

“I am Bradley, Earl of Stillscar, come to see Lord Thornshire,” Bradley explained in a formal way.

“This way, My Lord.” The footman opened the door wider and led Bradley into the front foyer where the butler, Pierson, quickly appeared. Bradley placed his card on the butler’s tray and was escorted into a small but inviting drawing room.

While he waited, Bradley looked about at the room, taking note of its many books standing sentry on high shelves. The paintings adorning the walls were very old, displaying oversized renditions of former occupants of the family estate for all to see.

The effect was almost nauseatingly typical.

Bradley had only come into his title when his mother had married again after his father’s death. As the breathtakingly rich widow of a successful merchant, she provided what every good noble family needed: money tied to the mere promise of a title. His stepfather, the Duke of Renfeld, had arranged for an earldom for Bradley as a show of gratitude for the coffers his mother brought to the marriage, but upon her death last year, Bradley discovered that almost none of her vast funds had come to him.

“Society would benefit from a greater number of self-made men,” the Duke had told him when he set him up with a paltry three thousand pounds per year salary. “You have an estate and a fine education, thanks to me... now it’s up to you to make something of it.”

Now, Bradley intended to do just that. He was standing in Lord Thornshire's—what was this room? a smoking room? a drawing room? He knew not, only that he did not have such a grand space in his already extravagant residence. In any event, he would speak to the man about marrying his daughter and then he would have all that he desired.

Bradley heard footsteps approaching and turned to look at the doorway, an eager and hopefully inviting smile on his face. Instead of Lord Thornshire, though, the butler had returned.

“My apologies, Your Lordship, but Lord Thornshire is unable to meet with you at this time,” Pierson announced stoically. “He is not certain that he will have any time in the near future, either.”

“But it is an urgent matter, please inform him,” Bradley said, already feeling the familiar twinge of desperation. “I should like to speak with him about his daughter.”

“I’m sorry, but the Lady Ambergrave no longer resides here.” The butler waited cautiously, as if knowing that this announcement would be a most unwelcome surprise.

“What did you say? Lady Ambergrave?” Bradley asked, not certain that he’d heard the man correctly.

“Yes, Your Lordship. Lord and Lady Thornshire’s daughter has married and now resides with her husband at Ashworth Hall. If you’ll come this way, I will show you to your carriage now,” Pierson added in a more clipped tone, firmly ending their conversation and Bradley’s visit.

And thereby ending Bradley's hopes as well.

Outside, Bradley stumbled down the wide steps that only moments ago had led to his last chance at a happy, secure future. He climbed into the carriage as a cold numbness spread through his limbs, chilling his heart. He sat back against the seat and waited for the inevitably long road to carry him to his residence in town.

As they pressed on, it seemed as if every passerby was in the greatest of spirits. Try as he might, Bradley could not find a single individual who looked as wretched as he felt. Even laborers going about their work or vendors pushing their carts of wares towards the center of town were in a better mood than he.

And they're in better stead, as well. They at least know where their next piece of bread may come from. I, on the other hand, have nothing to offer and nothing to show.

The driver left him at his rooms and Bradley ducked inside before anyone could see him. He'd had visits from creditors as of late and was in no mood to make promises about payment that he could not meet. Behind the safety of the closed, locked door, he took off his coat and hung his hat on the stand, then fell down on the sofa.

“What has she done?” Bradley muttered, secure in unleashing his emotions in the sanctuary of his privacy. “She had sworn her affection to me. And how soon she has forgotten me and moved on!”

Torn between confusion over this turn of events and worry about the future, Bradley's mind churned with choices. How would he even begin to seek employment? Were there no elderly matrons in need of escorts to public events? Could he relinquish this flat to a tenant and live in the estate house? Would the rent on these lodgings afford him enough income to live reasonably? What would he do on his estate, some hours ride from town?

The thinking and the planning were tiring, of course, and Bradley was in no mood to expend the effort. He barely had the strength of mind to turn to his side and retrieve the gold trinket he'd stolen from Lord Thornshire's home, partly to sell for quick funds but also out of petty anger over the marriage of the daughter Bradley had hoped to marry.

Tossing the trinket on the table nearby, Bradley finally pushed himself up from the sofa and began to pace. A new plan had formed in his mind, one that reeked of such desperation that he wasn't sure he lacked the self-awareness to go through with it. Though truth be told, there was not much else Bradley could do.

It's hardly palatable and I'd want to challenge me to a duel for it, let alone anyone else who may be so offended.

But it was the only course he could envision. In his mind, Bradley could see the events as they played out. The more he thought on it, the more delightful it began to seem.

The only way to undo this suffering was to go to Ashworth Hall and convince Lady Ambergrave to run away with him. He would set out as soon as the details were firm.

CHAPTER 9



“Lady Ambergrave? What are you doing in here?”

Luci sat up suddenly, unaware she had fallen asleep. Her face smarted from where it had rested on the edge of the table, and touching it, she knew it would be creased and red. But that was of no consequence now. She looked at Lord Ambergrave where he stood, and her rage almost got the better of her.

No. You've done enough tongue-lashing and grousing!

“I was waiting for you. You invited me to dine, or have you forgotten?” she said, silently adding the words, “since only an hour ago.”

“No, I hadn't forgotten, but I assumed you would actually rather not come down here,” he answered, though he was not unkind in his response. “I had something urgent to attend to, I apologize for that, and I simply assumed you would remain in your chambers when I didn't come for you.”

“I see. Well, I forgive you,” Luci said with a false brightness in her tone.

“I did not ask your forgiveness,” Lord Ambergrave said, a slight upturn to the corners of his mouth that looked dangerously close to a hint of smile, but Luci shook her head in an attempt at playfulness.

“You should have. So I simply expedited the conversation and forgave you before you had to trouble yourself with the words.”

Her sweet smile burned in her blood, belying her true feelings of petty anger. But Christina had been right. This was her lot now, and she would not be one to grow bitter and age before her time from resentment.

“Since you are here and your urgent appointment surely prevented you from dining, won’t you sit?” Luci asked, nodding to the seat across from her.

The Marquess was silent and unmoving, and for a moment Luci feared he might reject her invitation in the most humiliating way. He surprised her by nodding and marching around the table to his seat, then nodding curtly to a servant who carried forward their plates.

“Shall we have a conversation about the weather, then?” Luci teased. “Or perhaps the latest piece of gaudy music that everyone is performing in salons this season? Oh, I know! Shall we discuss the dreadful fashion of carrying a useless reticule in place of sturdy, serviceable pockets tied ‘round the waist?”

Lord Ambergrave surprised Luci by pretending to fall into a deep slumber and emitting a soft snore. She laughed in spite of herself, laughing even more merrily when he opened one eye and looked at her.

“Well, I suppose we could discuss the latest goings on in Parliament, the predictions for the price of imports from America, or the quality of horses coming down from Scotland, claiming to be of excellent pedigree?” she continued. When Lord Ambergrave’s head snapped up in surprise, she shot him a knowing smile. “Ah, you must not have known that I can converse rather intelligently on a number of important subjects. You’ll soon find that your wife is neither frivolous nor a simpleton.”

“I never mistook you for either of those things, I only...” he began, but did not finish the sentiment.

“You only...” Luci pressed before finishing for him, “did not know me well enough to venture a guess on my intelligence. Tell me, My Lord, what did cause you to seek my hand if both my appearance and my intellect have come as a revelation to you?”

The Marquess was prevented from answering by the arrival of their next course. Luci stared at him with determination as their glasses were filled once again and their plates replaced, but he did not respond.

Instead, Lord Ambergrave asked quietly, “Do you truly feel as though I bought you from your father?”

Luci looked away, burning with shame. “You were not intended to hear that.”

“But I did hear it, and it is impossible to erase it from my memory,” he continued, though his tone was not accusing. “Tell me.”

Luci took a deep breath, forcing herself to meet her husband’s green eyes. She willed herself to be strong as she said, “Yes, it does feel that way.”

“How so?” Lord Ambergrave asked, as though equal parts perplexed and genuinely interested.

“Did you once stop to inquire—from anyone, let alone me—whether or not I was already in love with someone?” Luci asked, fighting to keep her tone light. “Because I was, in case you never did discover the answer. I was in love with someone who had already made his intentions of marriage clear to me. But like a set of ribbons or a new hat that is put for sale in the shop, you beat him to it. You did not consider that anyone else might have an interest to marry me? Or that I might already wish to marry someone else?”

“I admit, that had not occurred to me,” the Marquess conceded. “Though if that were the case, why would your father not have said as much to me?”

“My father did not yet know of it,” she replied, a faint twinge of embarrassment running through her at admitting their relationship was not yet formal. “This young gentleman would not hear of entering into a marriage agreement while he still

had certain business dealings unresolved, lest he appear to be dishonorable and simply out for my father's money."

"That is... honorable, I must admit." Lord Ambergrave was quiet for a moment, long enough that the silence grew uncomfortable between them, but then he said, "I do apologize if you were made to feel insignificant or merely the product of a business transaction."

Luci did not know what to think, nor how to respond to both the confession and the subsequent apology. She merely looked at her untouched food and pondered how these past many weeks could have been very different if the Marquess had simply inconvenienced himself to speak to her.

"But that is now behind us," she finally stammered, trying to regain her composure. "Tell me of yourself, of this house. It must have a long history."

Luci did not miss the way a cloud of pain passed over Lord Ambergrave's face, and his lack of response made her regret even asking. He eventually shrugged his shoulders lightly, frowning as he thought.

"There is not much to tell, I'm afraid," Lord Ambergrave replied. "It is my family's home, and it fell into disrepair in my absence on business."

"Yes, I meant to ask that next. What sort of business?"

"Why all these questions?" the Marquess demanded sharply. Luci was taken aback for only a moment.

“Should a wife not be privy to at least the manner of business her husband conducts? I may not be aware of the innermost workings and finer details, but I should at least be capable of answering questions such as ‘what does your husband do?’ and ‘why is your husband gone from home for such lengthy periods of time?’ Do you not agree?” Luci pressed insistently.

“You may tell these imaginary people that your husband’s business is none of their concern,” he growled. The effect, rather than causing Luci to shrink, only emboldened her.

“What if one of these people—whom I can assure you are not, in fact, imaginary—should desire to become customers of your business?” she argued hotly. “What if you’re, perhaps, a coffin maker, and they’ve recently suffered a terrible loss and are in great need of a quality coffin at a reasonable price? I would have no words of comfort to offer while assuring them I could handle the purchase discreetly and at a goodly savings.”

“Madam, am I correct in understanding that if you’re presented with a grieving widow, your ‘words of comfort’ would include, ‘Never fear, I know a man who sells coffins at a significant discount?’” the Marquess asked, a look of disbelief on his face.

Instead of taking offense, Luci smiled. “My father is in business, I’ll have you know, and he has taught me that there is never a time when one should miss the opportunity to earn a customer’s coin. They might not be receptive to the notion when you first mention it, but they will be grateful when they have their wits about them.”

Lord Ambergrave looked aghast, and finally Luci could no longer contain her laughter. “I am speaking in jest, of course! No, I would never attempt to sell a coffin to a person enduring such agony as the loss of a dear relative or companion. I merely meant to exaggerate the importance of knowing what it is my own husband does for income that puts a roof over my head and food on my plate. It is considered a rather mundane detail that a wife should know.”

“This ‘mundane detail’ of which you blithely speak is rather personal,” he said, nodding, “though I can see your point of view. You need only know—and share with others—that my business interests are varied and vast. I invest in others’ companies, and make a steady profit from my careful ventures.”

“Fine. Then what of your family?” Luci asked, moving on to another subject of great importance to her. “You’ve met my parents, of course, but when shall I have the pleasure of meeting yours?”

Lord Ambergrave stiffened, and Luci immediately took note of the way his hands tightened into tense fists. One hand remained curled around the stem of his goblet and she feared for the safety of the glass.

“Oh dear,” she said very quietly, “I am sorry to have spoken to carelessly about them. I’m very sorry for your loss.”

The Marquess nodded, though Luci noted the way his jaw clenched painfully. Finally, he eased slightly, enough to say, “It is all right. You could not have known.”

“Do you wish to tell me what happened? Or just leave off?”

“I would prefer not to speak of them,” he answered, “though I ask that you do not take my reaction for insult or injury. They were very dear to me, and I have spent the years since their passing blaming myself for their deaths. As you can see, it is a subject I cannot converse about without great emotion and upset.”

“I understand completely,” Luci answered. “Again, you have my utmost sympathy and apologies for speaking of a painful matter.”

“It is quite all right,” Lord Ambergrave answered in a way that told her it was far from all right. Luci thought desperately for a subject to broach that would not be so upsetting as business and families.

“I’ve got it,” she said tenderly. “Your admiration of horses was rather evident when I heard you speaking in the stables. Tell me about them?”

The Marquess relaxed measurably and even ventured a smile. He began to speak at length—hesitantly at first, but more freely once he’d noted Luci’s eager reaction—about the horses he’d only just acquired, so much that Luci began to wonder if they were not part of this secret business of his. Soon, their talk turned to that of beloved horses they’d had over the years, their favorite places to ride, and more.

Before she realized how much time had passed, Luci yawned. The Marquess looked to the clock, alarmed.

“My apologies, My Lady, but I have kept you up far too late,” he said sincerely. “Let me see you upstairs and I’ll leave you to your rest now.”

Luci wanted to protest, but another yawn gave her away. Instead, she thanked the Marquess for the invitation to dine and rose to leave. As they exited the dining room, she asked Lord Ambergrave when they might have a chance to speak together again, surprising herself to find that she felt something similar to hope.

The pleasant sentiment of the dinner faded quickly.

“I shall be leaving tomorrow,” Lord Ambergrave informed her at the door to her chambers, his formal, distant manner returning now that the subject had once again returned to their own lives.

“Already? You only just returned!” Luci cried, indignant at her husband’s secretive behavior and eagerness to be gone from her.

“I must, I’m afraid. It involves urgent business, as well as a required stop in London,” the Marquess explained. His tone was no longer as stiff and uninviting as before, though his words were every bit as unwelcome. “I should not be gone more than a week, though.”

“I see,” Luci said quietly. She had every wish to lash out at him, but lacked the fervor at the late hour and after a pleasant evening. “I imagine this is to be my lot, then. Goodnight.”

“Lady Ambergrave,” he said, putting out a hand to stop her when she turned away, “I shall make it up to you upon my return.”

Luci paused, weighing her words carefully. “There’s no need for concern. If you must leave, then I understand. Goodnight.”

* * *

Watching Lady Ambergrave return to her rooms and close the door firmly behind her had an unexpected effect on Gideon. He stood silently as the echo of the door latching closed and a key turning in the lock resounded through the empty, cavernous hallway. Without warning, a surge of discomfort broke through him, causing him to question his very motives.

After all, Gideon had been so certain in his course of action. He was to return home, begin the repairs to Ashworth Hall, marry the woman of his choosing, and reenter noble society. What was so difficult about that?

He’d simply not accounted for the beauty, tenacity, and razor-like wit of his chosen bride.

Had I known she was both beautiful and brilliant, I would have gone to greater lengths to know of her person better before proposing marriage.

Luci was nothing like he’d imagined when he’d inquired about eligible young ladies in the ton through an acquaintance. He’d only learned that she was well-connected and well-respected, a serviceable bride who would carry no scandal with her name. But to discover that she was also a puzzle that he dared not solve was discomfiting, to say the least. Her beauty had been

the first but not the last remarkable thing he'd noticed about her, and her intellect had followed quickly behind.

His plan was about to fall apart around him, and there was nothing Gideon could do to stop it.

Unless... if Gideon could somehow salvage this marriage and win over his bride, there might never be a need for anyone to know his true intentions. It was a desperate shift of thinking, to be sure, but from what he had seen of Luci, he felt certain his affection for her could be genuine after all.

There was only one facet he had not counted on, one that could stand to be quite the obstacle: who was this other man she'd claimed had a place in her heart? She had certainly been frosty towards him, and now the reason was painfully clear. But despite a friendly meal and pleasant conversation, Gideon had no reason to think her affection for this other man had subsided.

That fact could prove to be his undoing.

CHAPTER 10



Luci awoke with a start the following morning, her dream from the night before already fading in her memory. In it, she had felt the heat of a fire that was not of her control, one that burned without permission from man or woman. The smell of smoke had stung her nose and its acrid fumes had pricked at her eyes, but she had run blindly through it, looking for something that was always out of reach.

“My Lady,” Christina said softly as she entered the room, already dressed and holding a gown for Luci, “His Lordship has sent word that he is delaying his departure until after breakfast in order to see you this morning.”

“What does it matter?” Luci asked in a tired voice. “Before breakfast or after, he’ll be off on another journey, leaving me here to the emptiness of this house. I might as well take my breakfast in my room rather than primp for a man who plans to be gone before the tea is cool.”

“All the same, he is here now. So I suggest that you get dressed and appear at breakfast with a cheerful disposition.” Christina flung back the covers just as she’d done countless times when Luci was a child, petulant over rising and beginning her lessons.

“You know, I don’t actually require a governess. Your position in this household could be terminated at any time,” Luci threatened playfully, pretending to pout so that Christina knew it was in good fun. “I don’t require any help, as a matter of fact.”

“No, but you do require a lady’s maid and a friend who has managed to get in good stead with the servants. As such, I have managed to find out a lot of information about Lord Ambergrave,” Christina answered, whispering now.

“Information?” Luci asked, intrigued before slumping her shoulders in irritation. “Gossip, you mean. The most uncouth kind.”

“No, no. Idle gossip is meant to bring harm or sow the seeds of discontent,” Christina explained, looking around just to be sure no one had come in. “This information was shared with me in order to help us understand the Marquess all the better.”

“Tell me then,” Luci said, sitting up and paying heed. “What is this news we must know?”

“The repairs to the house, for instance. They are not the necessary result of ‘disrepair,’ as we might have believed.” Christina leaned closer. “There was a fire, many years ago. No one knows how it was set—though some have speculated it was no accident—but Lord Ambergrave was badly burned. He spent months at a retreat in Bavaria in order to heal from his wounds.”

“No! The poor man!” Luci uttered, horrified by the news. “If it were so long ago, surely he must have been only a lad himself.

Where were his parents?”

“I dared not ask, knowing as I did that they are already deceased. It would be too gruesome for someone to tell me,” Christina explained, shaking her head sadly as though flinging the image from her mind of the elder Lord and Lady Ambergrave perishing in a fire. “No one ventured an explanation, so I did not inquire.”

“What else, then? Surely that must be the worst of the news.”

“No, I fear. You see, according to some, Lord Ambergrave carries a great weight on his shoulders... he blames himself for his parents’ death.” The governess looked visibly paler for a moment, and had Luci not known Christina’s strong countenance, she would have thought the woman might feel faint. “It is why he acts so strangely, having been gone for all these years, refusing to come back to this house until only now. Something changed in him, and he is now driven to bring back the respectability that this great estate and its occupants once commanded.”

“I don’t understand,” Luci said, furrowing her brow and thinking through Christina’s words.

“You, my dear,” Christina cried softly. “You are the path to Lord Ambergrave repairing the damage he believes he has inflicted.”

“Me? How would I have any part in it?” Luci asked, shocked. “I barely know the man, and I certainly did not know his family.”

“No, but you are the very key to opening the doors to polite society. He believes himself to be some sort of murderous villain, having destroyed everything good that this estate once held. With you as his beautiful, charming wife, he believes he shall follow meekly as you lead the way towards acceptance and reparation.”

“But... but that is such a twisted view. How can any man believe he must grovel before the ton to be accepted once again, when he did naught but suffer a terrible loss to his physical form and his heart?” Tears formed as Luci felt the sting of Lord Ambergrave’s broken past.

“Grief does terrible things to us all,” Christina answered forlornly. “It is a vile monster that follows us everywhere, breathing down our very necks with the hot stench of pain and loss. I know not what has brought Lord Ambergrave to this low point, and his servants did not offer much else than the basic facts that I shared with you. But it’s now up to you to surmise how you might help him heal from it.”

Luci flung back the covers and stood beside the bed, looking very determined. “You’re right, Christina, as always. Who other than I, someone who was raised in the very cradle of love and familial devotion, would be better suited to show the Marquess what it means to find happiness again? I shall strive to help him put the past behind him and regain a measure of the happiness he must have once enjoyed here.”

Together, she and Christina got her dressed and ready, and Luci headed downstairs to seek out the Marquess. He emerged from the foyer as Luci entered.

“Good morning, My Lord,” Luci said politely. “I have learned you were able to postpone your travels for but an hour so that

we might see each other this morning. And so, I am here.”

Lord Ambergrave smiled, nodding his head in greeting. “I actually sought to delay my departure for an entire day, should that please you. I thought we might embark on a brief ride around the estate so that you might meet some of the new horses and see the countryside for yourself.”

Luci looked to Christina for guidance, then smiled eagerly. “Of course. I will put on something more suitable for riding once we have had our breakfast. But I would not wish for your business interests to be delayed on my account. I was in a sour state of mind last evening when I learned you were to depart again, but now I understand it is important to you.”

“Nonsense,” he answered, brushing off her concern with a slight wave of his hand. “I would far rather show you your new home than be gone a day sooner.”

Lord Ambergrave offered her his arm, and Luci hesitated for a moment before placing her hand in the crook of his elbow. A nervous flutter filled her middle as she walked with him into the morning room and sat down in a gilt-edged chair beside the window.

They dined and chatted pleasantly about unimportant things, long enough to prevent a droning silence from stretching on for too long. Soon, Luci took her leave to put on her riding attire, leaving her husband to wait for her.

When Luci returned to the mews to seek out Lord Ambergrave, she was disappointed to find the phaeton readied and the Marquess speaking to one of the newly hired stable

hands. She approached with a slight frown, looking at the offending vehicle with scrutiny.

“I thought you had said we might go riding,” Luci said, looking at the open carriage and team of horses. “I had hoped to ride Jacques, and finally take him out on a vigorous ride.”

Lord Ambergrave looked away briefly and Luci once again saw a flash of discomfort in his expression. “I... do not ride, My Lady.”

“You do not ride? How is that possible?” she asked. “What means of conveyance do you depend upon when you must travel alone, or only a short distance? Surely you do not hitch a team for every excursion.”

“Yes, I do, in fact,” he answered, not looking at her.

“Did you somehow never learn to ride? Because I will be happy to show you, it’s not difficult at all—” Luci offered helpfully, but the Marques stopped her.

“I am not unaware of the mechanism of riding a horse, My Lady,” Lord Ambergrave said crossly. “I stated that I do not ride, not that I am incapable.”

Luci was quiet, pondering both his meaning and her next words carefully. She looked up at him and said, “Then why have you bought so many horses?”

“I like to own horses, not ride them,” he said, though he looked embarrassed at his own very weak explanation.

“But I don’t understand. Do you intend to turn them out on the property and merely look at them all day?” Luci pressed. “The whole purpose in owning such fine beasts is to ride them, to show them in competition, to breed them with other magnificent specimens so that others may purchase and ride the offspring.”

Lord Ambergrave opened his mouth to retort sharply, but stopped himself. He paused, appearing to take deep breaths, then spoke again.

“Would you care to embark upon our ride now, My Lady?” he asked through clenched teeth, appearing to make a show of keeping a pleasant tone in his voice.

“Of course, My Lord,” Luci replied just as falsely. “As soon as I saddle Jacques, we can be on our way.”

“You don’t mean to—” Lord Ambergrave called out, but Luci was already halfway to the stable. He finished his sentence in a weary voice as he said, “—ride alongside the phaeton.”

* * *

“My dear Angeline, why didn’t you come to me sooner?” Mary Colquitt, Duchess of Hardigree, asked while clutching her younger sister’s hands and soothing her tears. “You know I would have done anything in my power to help you and dear Edgar.”

“I know, and I’m most grateful to you for it,” Lady Thornshire said, sniffing as she fought to quiet her sobs. “But it was such a dire situation, one that struck so suddenly. We did not know what to do.”

“But marrying Luci off to someone we have never met? To what end?” Lady Hardigree closed her eyes as though her head pained her. “Angeline, you know I would have gladly issued a loan to Edgar in any amount, especially if it would have prevented this tragic turn of events.”

“Oh Mary, he never would have accepted,” Lady Thornshire cried. “He was horror-stricken to learn that his business had failed, especially after he had been so steadfast, so careful. When an offer of marriage from a titled, wealthy man of somewhat appropriate age came along, we snapped him up for poor Luci without a second’s hesitation. And now my only child is in misery for it.”

“Now, now. None of that talk,” the Duchess said gently. “All brides are miserable when they leave home and turn away from the bosom of their families to start a new life. Why, look at me! Sent halfway across the continent when I first wed, married to a man twice my age whom I’d never seen and who barely spoke my language. But it turned out for the best in the end. The same will be true for our dear Luci, too. You’ll see.”

Lady Thornshire stood up and paced the length of the small solarium. The afternoon sunlight streaming through the windows cheered her spirits less than the Duchess’ promise of help.

“I have not disclosed all,” she said quietly. “Luci has written to me of her situation. Her husband did not even see her home on their wedding day. He left her at the chapel, promising to

return in a matter of days, and was gone all of three weeks. Luci was left to enter a strange home without so much as a word of introduction, and worse, she was charged with hiring servants in her husband's absence. There was not even a full complement of staff about."

"Why Angeline, that is certainly unusual, but I think you are needlessly worried," her sister explained. "I should be far more concerned had he escorted her home to an empty estate, or left her there with only a paltry few individuals lurking about. He gave her leave to hire servants, which shows that he trusts her judgment and acknowledges her place as lady of the house. It sounds as though this will turn out for the best after all."

"But what if it does not? What if we've sent her off to her doom with a strange man in our haste to ensure she was cared for?" A fresh round of tears and sobs sent her reaching for another linen handkerchief.

"If this turns out to be as bad as you fear... then there are things that can be done," Lady Hardigree said quietly, keeping her voice low and pinning her younger sister back with a stare.

"You don't mean... kill him?" Lady Thornshire gasped, astonished.

"What? No! Of course not!" The Duchess managed a nervous laugh, then said, "There are ways to undo the marriage with very little scandal, though. It would require that Edgar be in a position to return any funds that have changed hands, of course."

Lady Hardigree paused and watched her sister's face for any signs of reluctance. After all, matters of fortunes—both gained and lost—were not polite topics of conversation, even between close sisters, unless the topic was in discussing the fortune of a potential suitor. In that event, the conversation was of the utmost importance, even though it was held in secret and in hushed tones.

“He is desperately trying to recover his fortune, even as we speak,” Lady Thornshire said in earnest. “That is why he suggested I might write to you and come for a visit. He will be away and did not wish to think of me alone in our house, longing for Luci. He has sent word that he is already seeking several partners who may show interest in investing in a new proposal. It is of a very low risk, though, so I fear it shall not return much in the way of significant profit for some time.”

“That is just as well,” the Duchess assured her. “Although, I have to caution you. Have you told anyone of Edgar's failed business?”

“Why, no. How could I?” Lady Thornshire answered, shocked at the question. “Who would I possibly tell that we are penniless as beggars in the alleyway?”

“Oh, good. That is a great relief. After all, if anyone knew for certain, they could insinuate that you had foisted your daughter off on an unsuspecting noble without being forthcoming about the state of things.”

“No, Edgar would never,” she answered, embarrassed at the talk of her misfortune. “He said that Lord Ambergrave knew of our circumstances and made the offer himself.”

“Then all the more reason we must learn the truth,” Lady Hardigree said firmly. “Do you not think it odd that he should appear at precisely the right time to ask for a marriage contract? We need to find out more about this Lord Ambergrave and determine if there is anything in his past that might give us the excuse to question his motives. If he failed to disclose something, say, that he is a bastard child or that he had been expelled from school, then we may very well annul the marriage quietly without the return of his funds.”

“But what happens to my poor daughter, in that event? She would return home as though she’d never been married? And all the ton would simply accept her again?” Lady Thornshire shook her head in disbelief.

“There will undoubtedly be talk, but as with all senseless gossip, it will fade away shortly. All the better if it can be replaced by someone else’s tragic undoing to set the ton talking.” Lady Hardigree laughed. “Now, let me send word to some people I know to find out what they can about this Lord Ambergrave. I shall inquire about the other poor man, the Earl of Stillscar, was it? There’s little point in rescuing our dear Luci from one bad marriage and then thrusting her into one that could prove worse.”

“Oh Mary, I wish I had confided in you sooner,” Lady Thornshire said, resting her head against her older sister’s shoulder. “You were always the smarter one of us. Where I’ve always been flighty and romantic, you’ve always known how to keep a clear head and go after that which you need.”

“Never mind that, dear. We have our own personalities and our own pursuits,” the Duchess answered, patting her sister’s hand lovingly. “Right now, my interests lie in salvaging Luci’s reputation and removing a possible cad from her life.”

CHAPTER 11



For the second time in as many weeks, Bradley stood waiting in a wealthy man's drawing room, hoping the gentleman could be of assistance. He'd begun to despair of anyone being capable of helping him, or being willing to, that is. Everywhere he turned, Bradley was met with scorn and indifference.

He was certain that this time would be no different, though he had to at least try.

"Stillscar! Is that you?" a man asked as he entered the drawing room. "You look to be in a wretched state. What has happened?"

"Renfeld," Bradley replied, addressing the slightly older man. "I shouldn't think my appearance is so awful as that greeting warranted, though."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't think so," the young Duke said, gesturing for Bradley to sit before taking a chair himself. "What is it that brings you around after all this time?"

Bradley had rehearsed his speech during the journey to his brother's estate, the current Duke of Renfeld. But now that he was sitting, facing Bernard's pinched expression of disdain, his words failed him. He stared at the polished marble floor and expensive Persian rug for a moment to gather his thoughts, but the Duke beat him to it.

"Let me venture a guess... you need money, don't you?" Bernard said with a sneer. He sounded almost triumphant.

"As a matter of course, don't we all?" Bradley said lightly.

"Well, no. Not me, in any case, not thanks to the money your mother was kind enough to sign over to my father." Bernard laughed at the state of things, ignoring the hurt that settled in Bradley's countenance.

"That is, in fact, why I've come," Bradley admitted. His voice, though quiet, was resolved. "As the owner of the estate, I would like you to increase my annual amount."

"Why would I do such a thing?" Bernard said, equal parts irritated and genuinely intrigued. "My father was more than fair to you in providing you with a salary, a title, and property."

"Property which I have to pay to keep up!" Bradley argued adamantly. "The taxes alone on the house and the flat are nearly the price of the allowance I am given."

"You were supposed to use your connections and the title my father secured for you to increase your own standing," the

Duke explained as though speaking to a child. “The fact that you have not chosen to make something of yourself is proof enough that the last thing you need is another handout.”

“Handout?” Bradley shouted in disbelief. “Every shilling my father ever earned is now sitting in your coffers! You are one to speak of receiving handouts, considering your own father was as penniless as I am when he married my mother. If my father had lived, you’d be the one secretly arranging for someone to buy this monstrous castle you’ve got and I’d be the one to sweep in and snap it up at a bargain.”

“Yes, well,” Bernard said, appearing aloof, “your father is dead, as is your sad mother. So his money is now mine and you have no claim to it.”

Bradley jumped up from his chair and for a moment, visions of soundly pummeling Bernard danced through his mind. Whenever they’d fought as children, Bernard had always run off to their nanny or governess or even to his father, and Bradley had been lashed for it... no matter who had been at fault. But there was no nanny or father here to save him now, no one to come running at his simpering little whines.

“If you are thinking of raising a hand to me,” Bernard said, barely looking up at Bradley, “I can assure you that is the last thing you want to do. Your mother is not here to save you from the punishments you so richly deserved all those years, and I would not hesitate to have you thrown in prison for your crime.”

Bradley was silent, weighing the Duke’s words carefully. This had all gone so wrong, after he had thought carefully about what to say to endear him to this brother. Instead, they had argued just as vociferously as when they had been children,

thrown together by a marriage of convenience and increase. They'd hated each other then, and he'd been a fool to think their sentiments had changed any since then.

"You haven't told me what it is that has left you in such dire straits," Bernard finally said, sounding only marginally interested. "It must be drastic if you would actually come to me for money."

"It is rather urgent, now that you mention it," he answered sarcastically. "Did you really think I might enjoy coming to you with my hat in my hand? The amount I am afforded is not enough to even pay my bills, but I would have thought someone in your position would have understood that."

Bernard was quiet and Bradley was left in an awkward position. He paced the room, uncertain as to what he should do or say next.

"Have you considered marrying?" the Duke asked. "Surely there are other well-monied young ladies in much the same position as your mother was. Holder or heir of a nauseatingly large fortune, yet unable to possess it themselves? They might be eager to wed an earl with nothing to his name."

Bradley scoffed sadly, surprised that Bernard was offering something that halfway sounded like supportive advice. "I had actually considered marrying, but it... it did not work out."

"Ah, yes. That's a shame," Bernard said, not sounding very sincere. "You could join the service."

“At my age, and with no experience? They’d laugh me off,” he answered, momentarily envisioning himself in the armed services.

“Well, I am not an ungrateful person, as you should know,” Bernard said, standing up and walking over to a small secretary. He took out a ledger book and held it in his hands. “If it had not been for your mother and your father’s fortune, my own life might have been very different. Therefore, I will front you a loan against your next year’s salary. It shall be deducted to the penny, so do not make a fuss when the time comes ‘round and your funds are significantly smaller than expected.”

Bradley sighed gratefully, coming over and taking Bernard’s hand to shake it. “Thank you, Bernard. It will help a great deal.”

“For some reason, I doubt it,” the Duke said. “I strongly recommend you take these 500 pounds and invest them wisely. If you do so, and if you strive to live within your meager means until you see a return on your hard work, then you might grow this amount to a much more fruitful yield.”

He handed over a letter of payment, which Bradley accepted gratefully. As the earl turned to go, Bernard called out after him.

“Stillscar, be warned. Do not return here seeking money ever again. This is your one chance, and I will not repeat such acts of charity. You are entirely on your own now.”

* * *

Though the day had gotten off to a difficult start—as had the marriage, if truth be told—Luci was taken aback by the enormity and beauty of Ashworth Hall and its grounds. She and Lord Ambergrave had ridden for the better part of the morning, speaking idly on pleasant topics as they continued about.

Lord Ambergrave had begun their excursion by driving towards the rear of the estate where the stables opened out into rolling fields of green. The horses he had acquired recently were milling about in the open, save for Jacques and the pair that pulled the phaeton. Luci could have watched the magnificent creatures all day and still been content.

“They’re Arabians,” the Marquess explained. “I had them sent from Egypt especially for building up my stock.”

“Egypt?” Luci asked, aghast. “Will the climate here not prove too wet? Too cold for them? I’d be rather worried about their joints in a clime such as this.”

“It will take some getting used to,” Lord Ambergrave admitted. “And you’re very clever to question their joints. I don’t plan for these newcomers to be ridden, at least not more than is sufficient to keep them used to the saddle, but will sell their offspring for a good price. Over time, further generations will be heartier and better suited to living here. Perhaps that might be a task that you enjoy? To take each one out in turn and put them through a brief ride from time to time?”

Luci brightened considerably at the thought of having a purpose. She nodded thoughtfully, watching the animals with the high sloping foreheads and glossy coats. They nearly shimmered in the morning sunlight, an effect that looked inviting and yet exotic.

The more time they spent out of doors and away from the confines of the house, the more Luci noted that the Marquess seemed to relax. There was clearly something about the house that still bothered him, keeping him in its tight grasp somehow. Outside, he was a changed man, one who talked freely and even laughed at statements or stories that amused him.

She dared to broach the subject of the servants' gossip by asking, "My Lord, what has happened to the rear of the house?" Luci pointed to the upstairs windows whose stone borders were still smeared with black soot. A wide black streak rose up onto the roof, which was patched in places with wooden boards until work could begin there.

"Oh?" Lord Ambergrave asked, turning to look. "There was, well, a fire some years ago. It was a long time ago."

"Was anyone harmed?" Luci asked incredulously, anticipating the answer.

"What? Oh, no. No one was injured," he answered.

Before Luci could question him any further, he clucked purposefully to the horses and rode on, not looking back to see if she was following. And there it was again, she realized; within the vicinity of the house or when speaking of it, the Marquess was a changed and distant man. Only when away from here was he more open to her.

"I remember crossing over a quaint stone bridge upon my arrival here," Luci said cheerfully as she and Jacques caught

up to him. “Why don’t we ride down to the river?”

“All right,” Lord Ambergrave replied, smiling genuinely.

Interesting, she thought. Even the very thought of being away from here brightens him considerably. It’s no wonder he stays gone for so long, and for so often.

They rode on towards the stream that ran through the property and Luci marveled at how it became a gentle brook in some places, a steadily moving river in others. Lord Ambergrave pointed out a number of notable features as they explored, including a falcon nest and a burrow that led to a rabbit’s nest he’d discovered some time ago.

They stopped at the stream and unhitched the horses from the phaeton to let them drink. Luci led Jacques to a gentle section of the moving water and tied off his reins to a tree, then took off her own riding boots and stockings.

“What are you doing?” Lord Ambergrave asked, staring at Luci.

“I mean to wade in the brook,” she explained, as though her intentions were clear. “Did you never do this in all the time that you’ve lived here?”

“No, I was never permitted,” the Marquess answered, averting his gaze while Luci lowered herself down the overgrown bank and into the refreshing water.

“Why would anyone have prevented you?” Luci pondered aloud while testing the temperature of the water with the edge of her foot. It was frigidly cold, to say the least, but still felt refreshing after the discomfort of her riding boots on a warm day.

“I don’t know, I never thought to question,” he replied, sounding rather perplexed. “Perhaps because my parents had no other heirs, I suppose?”

“Yes, quite like mine, too. Only you had the good sense to be born a boy and spare them the worry of having to locate a suitable match for their useless daughter.” Luci laughed at her own silliness, and was pleased to see that Lord Ambergrave joined in. “In any event, there is no one to forbid you now. Why don’t you join me? The water is rather pleasant after you get used to the cold.”

“No, thank you.”

“Wait, please do not tell me that in addition to shunning horse riding, you also do not swim?” Luci looked incredulous.

“That is a brook, My Lady. It is hardly deep enough for swimming,” he pointed out.

“Then all the more reason not to fear it. Join me, I insist,” she teased, gesturing to the wide stream.

“And I shall insist that I do not,” Lord Ambergrave replied sternly.

Not to be dissuaded from enjoying the afternoon, Luci walked out a ways towards the middle of the brook where the weak current felt pleasant rushing past. Lord Ambergrave called out to her, but it was too late. The flat rock she'd perched on rolled beneath her foot, pitching her to her side in the shallow water.

"Luci," the Marquess cried out before rushing into the stream, ignoring his attire. He hurried to her side and plucked her from the water effortlessly, as though she were a child's poppet. Setting her on the bank, the Marquess knelt at her feet to inspect them for harm.

"Are you injured?" he asked, an obvious note of concern in his voice.

Luci couldn't help but smile. "It does pain me where I turned it, but it's nothing. My pride is far more wounded than my foot, I can assure you. I must look like a drowned cat."

"No, you're as lovely as ever," Lord Ambergrave assured her without looking up. Luci smiled at the odd compliment. He pressed his warm fingers to her ankle and asked, "Does it hurt here? Or here?"

Luci winced and gasped sharply at the place where his hands pressed last. "Oh, that hurt a good bit. But I know from falling off my horse more times than I care to admit that it is not serious."

"Still, we should get you back to the house and let Mrs. Cushings tend to you. You should take the phaeton, and with Jacques' permission, I shall ride him back," the Marquess said, still frowning with worry.

“But I thought you did not ride, My Lord,” Luci reminded him. The Marquess only shook his head.

“Desperate situations must make brave men of us all. Come, let me help you.”

His face was still grim as he lifted Luci to her feet, ignoring the soaked fabric of her clothes and politely averting his eyes from where the thin material clung to her form. He kept an arm around her waist as he led her to the vehicle, only letting go once she was seated and he set about hitching the horses once again.

Admittedly, it was a feeling that Luci liked very much.

Luci held the reins of the phaeton while Lord Ambergrave shed his wet leather shoes and stockings, placing them in the rear of the vehicle to be seen to at the house. When he led Jacques around and spoke softly to the creature, Luci’s heart thudded softly. Any man who spoke so tenderly to an animal had a very sensitive disposition.

“My Lord! Your—” she called out in surprise as Lord Ambergrave put his foot in the stirrup and pulled himself up. But she stopped herself, remembering too late that he did not want anyone to know.

“What?” he asked, looking down at the ground from his perch in the saddle.

“No, it was nothing,” Luci said, smiling innocently. “I thought I saw something, but I was mistaken. I’ve suddenly taken quite a chill from these wet clothes, I think we should hurry.”

Lord Ambergrave looked at her for a long moment, and Luci feared he did not believe her. Finally, he nodded and gestured for her to lead the way.

As she flicked the reins and called out softly to the team, Luci’s mind churned. It was exactly as Christina had said, the Marquess was badly burned. The evidence of his terrible injury was there on his leg when he climbed into the saddle. She was disturbed not by any sort of disfiguration, but that he was so clearly ashamed of it.

Looking to her right to where Lord Ambergrave and Jacques kept pace with her, she saw a grimace of discomfort on the Marquess’ face but otherwise no sign that he was not a confident, capable rider. Was it only this old injury, this burn from a terrible ordeal, that kept him from enjoying outdoor pursuits? Luci was determined to know more.

CHAPTER 12



*A*fter leaving Mrs. Cushings and Christina to tend to Lady Ambergrave, Gideon headed to the stables to see to his latest arrivals. Only one had not thrived since the move, so he stopped in there first to pay the beautiful mare some attention. The magnificent creature looked rather forlorn, standing all alone in her stall in the newly finished stables.

“This isn’t where you want to be, is it, girl?” Gideon asked softly, stroking her flank. “But don’t fret, this will feel like home in no time.”

Gideon was suddenly struck by how this exact thing was happening to his new bride. Taken from her home fairly against her will and brought to this new place where she knew almost no one, only to be left on her own while he saw to his business affairs. Unlike this animal, though, he could not argue that Lady Ambergrave had not made an effort to be amenable.

“I shall make it up to her,” he told himself as he continued to brush the sad mare. “Once I return from this excursion, I will not be gone again for some time. At the very least, I can arrange for her to go on a holiday or visit friends while I’m away.”

If only his business affairs didn't require so much of his attention, he realized angrily. It had been one thing when he had thrown himself into his work in an effort to forget Ashworth Hall and all that had happened here. He had practically lived in his offices abroad, sometimes even staying there for days while handling some deal or another. His father had left their family's dealings in very good shape, and Gideon had been determined to keep it from falling into ruin.

Over these past few years, his fortunes had eclipsed even what his father had left behind. It was this singular focus that made it possible.

But now with his return and his fervent desire to resume his place in the peerage, Gideon struggled to manage his business from Ashworth. He saw no other way to manage than to make frequent, lengthy journeys abroad.

"My Lord," the stablemaster said suddenly, unaware that the Marquess had come in, "my apologies, I did not know you were still here. Did you wish to see a particular horse?"

"No, no. It's quite all right. I was supposed to have left this morning but was delayed," Gideon explained. "I just thought I would see how this one is getting on in her new home."

"I'm afraid the news is rather grim, My Lord. She does not take her full meals yet, though we are encouraged that she still drinks plenty of water," the man explained, recounting other pertinent facts about the mare.

Gideon only half-listened, still reeling from the juxtaposition of this unhappy horse and his reluctant bride. What had she

said about being in love with another man, one who had intended to seek her hand? Gideon could kick himself for his callousness.

He had to find a way to make it up to her, though he barely knew her well enough to think of how.

* * *

“Feeling better, is it?” Christina asked when she entered Luci’s room and saw her walking tenderly.

“Much better, thanks. The bandaging hurts a bit more than the injury itself, I think,” Luci answered. “But Christina, come sit with me. I want to know more about what you learned from the servants.”

Christina put down the gown she’d carried up and sat in the chair opposite the one Luci took. She waited, an expectant expression on her face, while Luci thought of how to pose a question to her.

“I do not wish to tell Lord Ambergrave’s personal matters, but there are some odd things that I wanted to understand better,” she began. “For instance, he told me he does not ride horses.”

“Well, not all men are as avid about outdoors pursuits, you know,” Christina said, smiling despite the worried frown on Luci’s face. “Why, your father would never step foot out of the house if not for your mother’s own keen interest in sporting and nature.”

“I know,” Luci said, waving off the comment lightly. “I only found it odd that he would put so much effort and a lot of

funds into rebuilding a stable, hiring a stablemaster and hands, and bringing horses from Egypt only to never ride them.”

“That is odd, I must admit,” the governess agreed, “though perhaps he intends to make his fortune in breeding. It’s quite a respectable hobby interest in members of his class.”

“True,” Luci replied, but she was soon lost in thought again. “But today, when we went riding, I had to remind him of the stream that runs a course through the fields.”

“Oh? Is that important somehow?”

“I wouldn’t think so myself, except that there’s a lovely bridge over it,” Luci explained, her face vacant again. Slowly, she added, “I had to tell him of the bridge. It was as though he had no idea what I was talking about.”

“That is rather strange to not know that you possess a waterway of such size,” Christina agreed lightly. “Though I’m sure it is only because he has spent so much time away and is only now returned. The stream may have been smaller in his youth, or its course may not have been so pronounced as it is now.”

“That’s true, I suppose,” Luci said. She was silent for a minute or two, long enough that Christina might have wondered if her fears were allayed were it not for the concerned look she still wore.

“What else is it?” Christina pressed, more worried now. “I know that look, you’re thinking on something that weighs on

you heavily.”

“I am, but I want to be careful of Lord Ambergrave’s privacy.” Luci looked down again, feeling suddenly somewhat ashamed at sharing such an intimate detail. “When Lord Ambergrave helped me up the bank today, I chanced to see that his leg is badly scarred.”

“Scarred, you say? As in, there may be a chance he was injured in battle?” Christina asked. “I don’t remember anyone mentioning whether he served in war time.”

“No, I think it was... I think he was burned, as you said once before,” Luci corrected, “but I cannot understand why he seemed so embarrassed of it.”

“Well, despite our reputations as the creatures who give great importance to fancy ribbons and fashions, it is the men who can be rather vain about their appearance,” the governess answered. “He is probably very aware of its appearance and doesn’t wish to be stared at. He may simply want to avoid others’ pity.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” Luci agreed, though her voice was far from acquiescing. “It was just so odd that he went to such lengths to hide it. He even climbed into Jacques saddle from the wrong side, which I now think was his attempt at keeping me from seeing his old injury.”

“You know, I am thinking of something that is rather endearing to Lord Ambergrave, now that you’ve brought this up.” Christina leaned closer and said, “If he is as sensitive about the appearance of this scar as you say, it might explain

why he was interested in marrying a young lady who did not know of his injury.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if he is so vain about it, maybe he thought no lady would have him if she knew about the scars. You did say they were rather pronounced, didn’t you?” When Luci nodded, Christina continued. “It might give you some measure of sympathy for the man if you understand that he is terribly ashamed of his appearance.”

“Why, yes. That is true,” Luci said, brightening somewhat. “While it still grieves me to marry a stranger when I had already set my heart upon another, I think I can accept that Lord Ambergrave may have sought some wife who wouldn’t have known about his leg and rejected him. The poor man!”

“What do you mean?” Christina asked.

“Only this—the scar is... why, it’s nothing!” Luci said. “I admit I only caught a glimpse, but it is certainly not so disfiguring as he must believe it to be. Imagine spending years thinking that you were terrible to look at, when in truth, it’s nothing like that at all.”

“Ah yes, but remember, men’s vanity is only superseded by their need to look strong and vigorous,” the governess instructed. “So long as they think themselves an invalid—or think that others believe it of them—then it will be a constant worry.”

“Christina, I must go speak with him,” Luci said, standing up slowly and testing the weight on her foot. She dabbed at the moisture in her eyes with her handkerchief, but smiled. “He was so very kind today, and our ride was actually... pleasant. If he is to be off once again tomorrow, I want him to know that I enjoyed our time today and am grateful for it. Perhaps I’ll ask if he’ll have tea with me today.”

“That’s a good girl,” her governess said approvingly. “Take your time freshening up, I’ll see if I can discover where he is.”

Luci got ready and took her time heading down the stairs and outside. The vast courtyard behind the house was something of a challenge due to the uneven cobblestones that swirled in wide arching circles, but she took her time and tread carefully. She did not know where to look for Lord Ambergrave, but headed in the direction of voices near the hothouse.

“You are too funny, sir,” a high voice called out. This was followed by a man’s laughter and a higher shriek of surprise.

Luci frowned. Someone was here, obviously someone engaged in some sort of game or jest.

“I shall show you what’s funny,” the Marquess called out playfully, and Luci instantly froze. She felt as though she were intruding, eavesdropping on a moment that was not meant for her.

Who’s there with him? Luci wondered, a strange feeling creeping up the back of her neck.

Instantly, her heart was torn. The mysterious, aloof noble who was so reserved with her quite obviously was capable of playful frolicking, if the continued peals of laughter were any indication. Yet he was unable to produce anything more joyful than a pleasant smile whenever she was around. Though they were still little more than strangers, it stung to know that it was only she who caused him to be so withdrawn.

A sudden flash of movement made Luci jump back, secure in her hiding place. The Marquess and this other person were even closer now, close enough that she sought to listen and discover who this person was who brought out such a lively nature in her husband. Could it be this mistress that Lord Ambergrave had callously taunted her with before?

And what would you even think to say to her? Would you dare bring shame upon yourself by acknowledging her? But would you bear this great pain in silence and pretend that all is well?

As she leaned around the corner to look more closely, Luci was struck by what she saw. This other person turned out to be nothing but a young lad, perhaps ten or eleven years old. He took turns throwing a ball to the Marquess, who caught it deftly every time and threw it back.

But in order to enjoy their game, the Marquess had taken off his coat and hung it from a nail. The result was that he looked every bit the country rogue, his linen shirt having come untied at the neck and his reddish hair unkempt from chasing and diving for the ball. The result was breathtaking, and Luci was rather surprised to know how his appearance stirred her heart.

It was not only his physical appearance that was so pleasing, of course, but rather the beauty that coincided with his demeanor. The stiff and proper Lord Ambergrave had

transformed himself into a gentle, endearing man who was enjoying a game of sport with some local boy.

So he can be quite pleasant, and is that beautiful expression on his face...dare I say, a smile? She grinned in spite of herself. But who was this boy?

As Luci watched, the two continued to play while calling out to one another, laughing and making a game of trying to force the other one to run for the ball. Her heart sank as it became painfully clear.

This is Lord Ambergrave's son! Her misery was compounding. I'm sure of it, and it only makes my position as an intruder in both this household and the marriage all the more obvious.

She was not threatened by his station, though. From the cut of his work clothes and the patches of mud here and there, this was clearly the child of some local woman whom the Marquess could never have married.

Luci's cheeks flamed with anger and humiliation. It tore at her heart to know she had given up her real chance at love and happiness to be the wife of a man who didn't want her... and never would. It brought clarity to the question that had eaten at her like a pest all this time, the question of why he should have chosen her without ever laying eyes on her.

It was obvious. What did it matter what she looked like, or whether she was funny or clever, if she would never be the woman he'd wanted but couldn't have?

“Collin!” a woman shouted, causing Luci to jump.

“Ah, that will be your mother,” Lord Ambergrave said, laughing. “Best you run along and see what she needs.”

Oh, God, the boy's mother is here? And on the very same grounds as my home? This is an insult that I shall never live down. Tears stung at Luci's eyes as she turned to flee. In her haste to be away from there, she forgot about her sore foot and stumbled, crashing loudly into some items that had been stored beside the hothouse.

“Who's there?” Lord Ambergrave called out from somewhere behind her, but Luci did not answer. “Stop, who's there?”

Instead, she turned and limped as best she could, fighting the blinding anger and tears that obscured her view. Moving as only her injured foot would allow, Luci caught the toe of her slipper against a cobblestone and pitched forward, no longer caring if she fell.

CHAPTER 13



“Lady Ambergrave?” the Marquess asked, catching her before she could strike the ground painfully. “What are you doing out here?”

Pushing his hands away and righting herself, Luci thrust her chin up and answered, “I could ask the same of you, only I saw with my own eyes. Visiting your *son* before you left on another of your mysterious trips, were you?”

Lord Ambergrave stared at Luci, an unreadable expression on his face. For a moment, she took his silence as agreement, but she cringed instead when he said in a low voice, “You think that boy was my son?”

“Well, I did... until you said that, at least,” Luci admitted haughtily. “But it did appear so.”

Lord Ambergrave reached for his coat from behind him and thrust his arms furiously into the sleeves, tugging it firmly into place in front of him. He took a step closer and Luci instinctively moved back a pace. He narrowed his eyes angrily as he stared at her, and she could see the clenching of his jaw that told her he was mulling over his words.

“You think me the kind of man to father a bastard child and hide him away on my property,” he finally said through gritted teeth, “hiring him as a laborer instead of claiming him as my rightful heir and raising him as my son? And worse, that I would cast off his mother for... what, her lowly birth?”

“Honestly? I don’t know what to think,” Luci shot back, regaining her courage. “And I truly don’t know what sort of person you are. You could be a scoundrel of the worst degree, a highwayman who robs carriages in the night, a... a murderer, for all I know. For the little that I knew of you before you brought me here, you should be glad that the worst I think of you is to have a son you don’t acknowledge.”

Luci steeled herself for Lord Ambergrave’s wrath, knowing that she might deserve whatever reply he threw at her. But she was not sorry. No matter how insulting it may seem, it had to be said.

Instead of anger, though, Lord Ambergrave’s hard expression softened. He looked away in shame, ducking his head slightly.

“You’re right.”

“I am?” she asked meekly, her heart filling with trepidation. “That’s... that was your son?”

“What?” Lord Ambergrave’s head snapped up to look at her. “Oh no! No! I only meant... that I have not been fully honest with you. It is terribly unfair to you, but I intend to be forthright, as soon as I am able.”

“What does that even mean?” Luci demanded, her anger returning. “You speak in such puzzles, My Lord.”

“I know, I’m making a mess of things.” He stepped closer, but this time Luci did not shirk away. He looked down at her with an earnest look in his eye and said, “I have not told you everything, but I will. But please understand that I am only beginning to understand all of it myself. I need time to sort it out and to make some amends, and then I will make you informed. Can you be patient but a while?”

Luci wanted to look away, to avoid the penetrating gaze that pinned her back, but he held her captive with his heartbreaking look. She nodded silently, but then murmured, “Yes, I can.”

The sheer relief on Lord Ambergrave’s face was nearly her undoing. She suddenly felt lightheaded, and a new well of unexpected emotions rose up in her chest, making it difficult to catch her breath.

Slowly, the Marquess looked down and reached for her hand, taking it in his gently as though she were made of delicate porcelain. He stared at her thin fingers as he turned them over in his hand, then raised her palm to his lips and pressed a soft kiss there. The sensation made Luci gasp as the shock of it traveled up her arm, filling her with a peculiar sort of feeling.

When Lord Ambergrave met her eye, there was a look there that Luci had never seen before, not in him or in any other man. It was equally inviting and wanting, and it thrilled her in some inexplicable way.

Swallowing back her nerves, Luci whispered, “Then who was that boy?”

Lord Ambergrave blinked as if some strange spell had been broken. He looked around as though remembering where he was, and said, “Oh, Collin? He’s the gardener’s child. His father worked here for many years until...”

“Until... the fire, you mean?” Luci finished for him when his words were lost to him. “The fire in which you were burned?”

For a moment, Luci thought the Marquess was going to turn and run from her. He looked greatly pained at her utterance, and briefly shook his head as though to deny it.

“I saw your leg this morning, My Lord,” Luci reminded him before he could say anything, clinging to his hand that still held her fingers lest he walk away. “It is nothing to be upset about.”

“You don’t know...” he began, but the Marquess stopped. He cleared his throat and continued, saying, “You don’t know all of it.”

“But I shall. You said so. Though I can wait until you’ve—what was the word—sorted it through?” Luci said kindly. “That is your tale to tell when you see fit. I only mean to say that if you do not ride horses or wade in a lovely brook on a warm day because you do not wish for anyone to glimpse the scars, then I am here to tell you there is nothing to be upset about.”

“Is it not hideous?” he asked, avoiding her eyes. “The sort of thing young ladies would shy away from or whisper about to one another? ‘Oh, don’t look now, the burned man is coming this way and he might wish to dance?’”

“Not any ladies I know and associate with,” Luci assured him firmly. “And any ladies in my presence who spoke so hatefully would be very sorry they’d said a word when I was through with them.”

Lord Ambergrave smiled thinly, a newfound admiration in his expression.

“But I heard you say his mother was calling for him. Where is the boy’s father now?” she asked. A shadow crossed over his face.

“He died in the fire,” the Marquess said.

Luci pressed her other hand to her mouth, concealing a cry. “But I thought you said no one was harmed.”

“No, I was careful to say that no one was *injured*. It was wrong of me to speak falsely, even in such a small way,” he explained. “But I did not wish to ruin your outing with talk of tragedy here.”

“I see. It was polite of you to be so concerned for my happiness, but I think you know by now that I am much stronger than many of my peers.”

“Yes, I am starting to understand that,” Lord Ambergrave said with a nervous chuckle. “But as you asked, the gardener perished in his effort to save me from the fire. The boy was but an infant at the time, and never got to know his father.”

“And so he remains here?” Luci asked, impressed.

“Of course. I could not think of turning them out after their great loss and the tremendous debt of gratitude I owe,” he said, looking over to see that Collin was still far from earshot. “He and his mother live in that cottage over there, and they have taken on various roles over the years I’ve been away.”

“So, you put them to work, you mean?” she asked, cringing. It was not the kindest way to repay someone for your life.

“At their insistence,” he continued, understanding her meaning. “They wouldn’t have it any other way. And Collin is quite skilled with the gardens, as you can see, as was his father. His mother, Mrs. Drummond, has simply been a presence on the estate to alert me to issues in my absence, for which I pay her a salary. It is the very least I can do for those whose husband and father literally died to save my life.”

Together, Luci and Lord Ambergrave fell into a contemplative silence, one that was only broken when Luci suddenly placed her hands on the Marquess’ lapels and stood up on her toes, then kissed him.

What she had meant to be a brief but heartfelt gesture became so much more when she felt the Marquess’ hands go to her arms, holding her closely to him. His lips moved softly against

hers, and she felt a longing in that kiss that bespoke years of hurt, years of feeling unworthy and unloved.

Surprised at her own boldness, Luci soon stepped back, but could not help the smile that turned up the corners of her mouth. She chanced an embarrassed glance at the Marquess, but he looked pleased as well.

“What was that for?” he asked softly, still holding Luci by the arms.

“For being the man who would see to someone’s care, who would not turn out the widow or orphaned child,” she said tearfully. “It is the first honorable thing I’ve learned of you, but if it is any indication of your character, I am certain it will not be the last nor the most important.”

A fleeting look of pain flashed over the Marquess’ face, and he simply responded, “I fear I am going to prove myself entirely unworthy of your compliment... and your affection.”

“I refuse to believe that,” she answered proudly, taking his hand again. “And I shall not dare you to prove me wrong.”

“Angeline! Look what I’ve found!” the Duchess of Hardigree called out, crossing over the veranda with a paper in her hand. Lady Thornshire looked up from her stitching and waited expectantly.

Lady Hardigree settled comfortably on a seat and unfolded the paper, then read it over once again silently to make sure she

had it right. Her sister watched her face to see if she could decipher what sort of meaning the letter held.

“Here it is, a response to my inquiry about this Lord Ambergrave,” Lady Hardigree said gravely. “I am both elated and disturbed by the contents.”

“But what does it say? What sort of man is he?” Lady Thornshire demanded, growing anxious.

“Well, according to my husband’s cousin, Lord Ambergrave is undeniably wealthy,” she began, holding the letter at arm’s length to read it over again. “His money is in trade, much of it in luxury goods like spices and horses, but even in more serviceable resources like cotton and timber.”

“That’s rather respectable,” Lady Thornshire agreed, her fear abating slightly. “But what of the scandalous part? Move ahead to that.”

“I’m getting to it. And it’s not so much a scandal as it is a situation that gives me pause.” Lady Hardigree was quiet while she skimmed down further in the letter, her lips moving as she read it to herself again. “Ah, yes. His family.”

“What of them? Edgar never mentioned them, so I assumed everything was in order.”

“No, my dear. They passed away some time ago. But there was no word on how they died. What’s worse,” Lady Hardigree continued, lowering her voice and looking around,

“there were rumors that they died in a fire, one that Lord Ambergrave may have started.”

Lady Thornshire pressed her hand to her mouth and looked as though she might faint. What sort of man was responsible for the death of his own parents? And what did that forebode for her daughter?

“You know, Angeline, this isn’t even what bothers me about the Marquess of Ambergrave,” the Duchess said, looking thoughtful. “It’s that no one nearby seems to have heard of him. His family home stood empty for years, and then he suddenly appears and begins to work his way into society.”

“And that strikes you as odd?” Lady Thornshire asked, waiting eagerly for an explanation.

“Quite odd. I’ve heard tales of imposters taking others’ names and fortunes, you know. Remember that one tale from when we were girls? That base, lowly girl passed herself off as the niece of some dowager countess, appearing at all the parties and balls and worming her way into everyone’s good graces. Oh, what was her name?” Lady Hardigree waved her hand as though it was no of no consequence. “Fortunately, she was discovered before her wedding to that wide-eyed fellow she’d snared could take place.”

Lady Thornshire was quiet, pondering the memory of that poor girl being forcibly removed from her aunt’s home. While she did not wish to argue with her sister, she had always wondered if there wasn’t some work of jealousy at play when that shameful incident had occurred.

After all, the Viscount of Trevon had been one of the most sought-after young gentlemen the season that she and her sister were out. Quite a few young ladies had intended to put their claws in him, and more than a few friendships had been dissolved over their affections for him.

“In any event, I do not see anything that should give us reason to fear,” the Duchess said, turning the pages of the letter over and looking to see if there was anything writ on the reverse.

“Nothing to fear? Did you not hear the same words I did?” Lady Thornshire cried. “My daughter may be in grave danger. Her life may be in peril from this man.”

“Now Angeline, you have no reason to think so. Rumors of an incident quite a few years ago are hardly a cause to be so distressed,” Lady Hardigree said calmly.

“They’re hardly a cause to host a nuptial ball, either. He may have killed his parents, and you don’t think Luci is in peril?”

Lady Thornshire fell back against her chair and fanned herself, covering her eyes with her hand. The weeks of torment had finally caught up to her, and she was overcome at what she had put her daughter through.

For her part, the Duchess of Hardigree was having none of it.

“Sit up, Angeline!” she barked, exasperated. “You’re so melodramatic, you always have been, but now you’re acting like a bit player in a third-rate opera. If you are so concerned for her safety, you should pay her a visit.”

“Yes! A visit!” Lady Thornshire said, sitting up once again and somehow casting off her agony with a broad smile. “I shall write to her at once.”

“But not until the end of the month,” her sister warned ominously with an attempt at a delicate sniffle. “I don’t wish to be alone while Alistair is away, and mortal danger or not, you simply can’t leave me alone until after my ball.”

CHAPTER 14



The following morning dawned gray and chilly, despite the beauty of the day before. Luci couldn't help but liken the sudden arrival of rain to the way her sentiments mourned.

Lord Ambergrave was gone. He'd left a note for her that was sent up with her correspondence, and endearing though it was, it left her feeling rather hollow.

"And what does His Lordship have to say for himself?" Christina had teased when she saw Luci reading the paper.

"Only that he had no choice but to go, and would return as soon as he could," Luci answered, sighing in a somewhat defeated way. "I don't understand. It's as if his marriage were simply another appointment on his calendar, and not something that mattered all that much."

"You mustn't feel that way," Christina cautioned, coming over to sit beside Luci and cheer her up. "We cannot know the nature of all of his business, and perhaps it is something that was already planned, something that he cannot postpone."

“I know,” Luci said, still looking forlorn. “And you’re right. I had just hoped... I don’t know, I suppose that he would be very happy with his decision, so happy that he might wait a few weeks to leave again.”

“Why don’t you think of some way to be of help to him while he’s gone?” the governess suggested. “After all, you cannot go out with this weather that’s come in. Jacques would despise you if you attempted to ride.”

Luci laughed at the thought of her horse frowning back at her while plodding forward through the rain.

“But how do you mean I could be a help? I wouldn’t know the first thing about his business affairs.”

“No, but what about the house?” Christina suggested, gesturing at the space around her. “Can you not send word to the builders about continuing on with their work?”

“I suppose I could,” Luci answered, lighting up a little at the thought.

As she set about her day, taking note of things that needed tending and parts of the home that needed repair, Luci began to look at the portraits that lined the walls, the books that still stood on the library shelves, the pianoforte that sat untouched in the drawing room. There were so many small things she could begin this very day to improve the house, and she set about her tasks happily.

As Luci moved through the many empty rooms and hallways, she chanced upon a portrait of a man and woman, easily spying Lord Ambergrave's features in their faces. He had his mother's beautiful auburn hair and his father's sharp but understanding features. The green eyes were clearly hers, though, and they stared intently at the viewer from within the confines of the frame.

But she was lovely. It's no wonder Lord Ambergrave is so distraught after all these years. Luci muttered to herself, taking note of the portrait should she decide to move it to a place of greater honor later on. And his father. He was both handsome and commanding in his presence, yet he looked to be more like a kindly uncle than a commanding Marquess.

The day got away from her as Luci moved through the rooms, inspecting each one, making note of any repairs or improvements. Her pencil worked furiously as she labeled and numbered each one by floor, ignoring the crashes of thunder and the rain that poured against the lead glass windows.

By the evening, Luci was nearly overcome with both excitement and fatigue. It felt good to be of use to the Marquess, even in this small way, and she could not wait for his to return to show him what she had done with her time.

"My Lady," Derwall said after knocking at her sitting room door, "there is a visitor to see you."

The butler brought forward a small tray and extended it to Luci so that she might take the card. Luci took it and frowned, then cast a look at Christina.

Bradley Landen, Earl of Stillscar

“What is it?” Christina asked, getting up from her writing and coming to sit next to Luci. She took the card Luci held out and scowled at it. “Good heavens, what could he possibly want?”

“I don’t know. Do you suppose I should refuse to see him?” Luci asked, curious as to what proper behavior required of her.

“I want to say yes, but then again, you are now the Marchioness of Ambergrave,” Christina said, deeply troubled. She turned to Derwall and said, “I know this is a lot to ask of you, sir, but what do you suggest she do?”

“My Lady,” he answered stoically, turning to Luci, “in Lord Ambergrave’s absence, you are now the one to make these decisions. I would never deign to instruct you on these matters, nor on your personal sentiments. However, I will abide by whatever decision you come to.”

“Thank you, Derwall, I am grateful for that,” Luci answered. “I suppose my worry is for the Marquess’ reputation, not my own discomfort. I could never embarrass Lord Ambergrave by refusing to receive a guest in his home. Please inform Lord Stillscar that I shall be down soon.”

“What will you do, Luci?” Christina asked when the butler left to comply, her concern evident in her voice. “I don’t know that this is wise.”

“I’m not certain either,” Luci responded. “Surely it is only that he has heard of my marriage and has come to offer his

congratulations, perhaps as he's traveling on his way north."

"Well, I shall accompany you just as I did all those evenings when you had your own reputation to preserve."

"I don't think that's wise," Luci said, surprising them both. "If he has not come to offer his well wishes, then I fear he may make a spectacle of himself in his anger at me. Having someone else to bear witness to that would be too great a shame to carry."

Christina looked worried but held back her response. Finally, she said, "I shall be nearby then. If I hear so much as a harsh word or a raised voice, know that I will barge in and handle this matter myself."

"Rather than accusing you of barging in, I would be grateful to you for preventing anything that could cause gossip," Luci said, laughing and taking the governess' hand in hers. "Come, the sooner I greet the guest, the sooner I can send him on his way."

"Wait a moment," Christina said, shaking her head. "No, let's not be in a hurry. He should not think you've raced down the stairs to meet him."

"Oh, you're right," Luci replied, realization dawning finally. "That would be a very bad look for a married woman, no doubt. You're right. We'll sit here for a while and let him wonder."

* * *

Bradley paced nervously along the length of the room, very aware of the butler's eyes following him. The older man watched his every move as though he suspected him of some underhanded business, and it bothered him greatly.

Although Bradley could admit that his reasons for coming might not be acceptable to some, he bristled at the notion that their butler felt he warranted keen observation.

“So, how old is the house?” Bradley asked cheerfully, attempting to engage the man in conversation.

“Quite,” he said in a clipped tone.

“Well, most houses such as these usually are,” Bradley countered. “Two hundred, perhaps? Three hundred years?”

“I should have to consult the archives to know for certain, My Lord,” Derwall answered in a bored voice, clearly not volunteering anything further.

“I see.” Bradley paused, then tried again. “And the grounds? They're lovely, from what I've seen. Are they extensive?”

“The land office would know that figure better than I could answer,” the man said, continuing to use a nasal, droning tone that bespoke his indifference to Bradley's questions.

“True, true. Well then...” Bradley was at a loss as to how to respond, so continued his pacing. He brightened somewhat

when he turned to say, “I did see the stables, they look very sturdy. Very serviceable.”

“Is the Earl attempting to appraise the value of the property for some reason?” Derwall asked, raising his eyebrows in an accusing glare.

“I beg your pardon,” Bradley shot back. “How dare you speak in such a way and accuse me of anything untoward.”

Unruffled by the outburst, the butler returned to looking bored, perhaps having made his intention rather clear. Bradley fumed at the man’s insolence, though, and his pacing became angrier, more purposeful.

In any event, he did not say anything else until his hostess appeared.

“Lord Stillscar, welcome,” ^{* * *} Luci said as she entered the room, smiling slightly.

“Lady Ambergrave,” he replied, bowing formally. He cast an irritated glance at the butler, who still stood by the door.

Noticing his look, Luci turned and said, “Thank you, Derwall. That will be all. Will you send someone up with refreshments?”

“Of course, My Lady. I shall bring them myself,” the butler replied before bowing and leaving for the kitchens.

Turning to face Bradley, Luci smiled politely and said, “So tell me of yourself, Lord Stillscar. What have you been doing as of late? Have you traveled, or perhaps visited with anyone I know?”

“Lord Stillscar, is it?” Bradley asked, frowning. “And am I to address you as My Lady now? Must we stand on ceremony at all times, or only when the staff are present?” Bradley asked, a merry look on his face. “After all, there was a time when I was known to you as ‘my darling Bradley,’ with no need for titles and formality.”

“Yes, well that changed, quite obviously,” Luci said somewhat coldly, feeling rather bothered by his too familiar comment. “You took your time in proposing marriage, so my father saw fit to beat you to it.”

“You know that was not my fault, Luci,” he began, but Luci turned on her heel and walked to the far side of the room as he spoke.

“Fault or no, the fact remains,” she said, sitting stiffly, her posture formal and erect. “I am married now, and my husband is not at home. I don’t think it is at all proper—or acceptable—for you to be here when he is not, especially since he has not been introduced to you.”

Her comment was meant to call him out, to make him see how inappropriate his visit was, especially at this day and hour. But Bradley appeared undaunted by her indifference as he came to sit very close to her.

“That is why I’m here, Luci. I wish to right a terrible wrong!” he insisted.

“What wrong is that? The one where you assumed I would be available for marriage whenever you got around to it?” Luci accused.

“Of course not. You know why I was delayed,” Bradley said. “I don’t understand, I thought you would be glad to see me.”

“How could I be?” she cried, forgetting all efforts at remaining formal and aloof. “You abandoned me. Even after my father made this contract, the banns were posted and read and yet you did nothing. You could have spoken to my father, could have spoken for me. Instead, you blithely allowed this to go forward knowing how I adored you.”

“I was not in a position to put a stop to it, but I am here now. Does that not count for anything in your heart? You would wound me so gravely with indifference to how much I love you?”

“How can you possibly think you can change anything?” she asked sadly. “I am wed to him, the contracts cannot be undone.”

“I care nothing for papers scribbled by earthly hands, Luci. I care only for you.” Bradley smiled adoringly, as though the sentiments they had once shared had the power to undo any injustice.

Luci did her best to decipher his meaning and could only conclude that he was affected by some sort of fever. “How can you believe that this is some simple, inconsequential matter that you can wave away as if swatting at a fly? I am married! Under the law. A bride price was paid to my father. Surely you understand what that means.”

“It doesn’t matter to me, though. Leave with me, Luci. Come away with me right now. We can go to my estates in Scotland and you will never have to think of Lord Ambergrave again.”

“Have you gone mad? Is that what you think of me, some ill-bred girl who would throw away her reputation and her family’s good name to run off with you in the night like a reckless, short-heeled wench?” Luci would have delighted in slapping the Earl across the mouth.

“It is the only way we can finally be together,” Bradley argued, “to be free of rules and decorum. I have no need of propriety if I cannot have you.”

“Goodness me, it is even worse than I believed,” Luci said quietly, a feeling of disgust flooding through her. “You’re not suggesting I divorce my husband and marry you... you only mean for me to run off with you. And then what? What shall I do when you tire of me and cast me out, shall I roam the hills and bogs with nowhere to go now that I’ve disgraced myself? I would have no husband to return to, no parents who were willing to take me in. You are the most selfish man I have ever had the extreme displeasure of meeting!”

“You’re not thinking clearly, Luci dear,” Bradley argued, still smiling that rather deranged smile. “Your husband would never divorce you, the shame would be too great. He would continue to support you, to support us.”

“You have... you’ve gone mad. Bradley, hear what I am telling you. There is nothing between us. There once was, and I held such deep longing and affection for you. But I cannot undo this, nor would I even agree to.” Luci stated her words firmly and plainly, naively believing that to be sufficient.

“I know all that, but you do not give me enough credit. I can repair it now,” he insisted, taking her hands in his and holding them tightly. Luci flinched from his touch and instinctively leaned away.

“What are you doing, let go of me,” she said in a low voice. Her eyes instantly darted to the door to see if Derwall had returned or Christina might have chanced to come in. Seeing no one, she called out loudly enough for someone to hear, “Get your hands off me and leave this house at once!”

“I will not, not until you confess that you love me,” Bradley answered. He leaned towards her, ignoring her protests as he sought to kiss her. Luci shrank back and turned away to avoid his advance.

“Derwall!” Luci called out, but Bradley smiled.

“You sent him off, remember? It was so we could be alone, I knew that was what you wanted,” he said happily.

“I did not. Now let go of me or I shall scream,” Luci threatened.

“No, you won’t. You love me. If you did not want me to save you from this terrible mistake of a marriage, you would never have received me. I know we will finally have our chance to be happy once we’re away from here.”

Luci felt the crushing weight of this unwelcomed advance pressing down on her as Bradley continued to pin her hands. She fought to free her hands from the strength of his grasp, but he continued to hold fast.

Suddenly, the air around her shifted as Bradley was no longer pinning her back. Luci looked up to see Lord Ambergrave holding Bradley by the back of the collar, his free hand cocked backward to strike him.

“No, don’t!” Luci shouted as the Marquess let loose a punch that caught the Earl firmly in the face. Bradley shouted in pain and pressed his hands to his nose, but it was not enough to stop the blood that seeped through his clenched fingers.

“Derwall, send for the constable and fetch several footmen to drag this intruder to a stall in the stable. Lock him in and stand guard until the constable arrives,” Lord Ambergrave said, still holding fast to Bradley’s coat and keeping his arm poised to strike again.

“Happily, My Lord,” Derwall said.

Lord Ambergrave’s face was a mask of loathing and rage as he turned to Luci and asked, “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head meekly, wiping at the tears that now fell. She looked between the two men with a mixture of humiliation, fear, and relief at being saved as she fought to soothe her nerves.

The servants Lord Ambergrave had called for arrived and half-dragged the bleeding Earl from the room. Luci sat up straighter and tried to stand, but her legs gave way.

“I’m so grateful that you’re home,” she began, “but how did you—”

“How did I know that your lover would pay you a visit in my absence?” Lord Ambergrave spit out, turning and giving her a disgusted sneer.

“What did you say?” Luci whispered, astonished. The heat rose in her cheeks as she was flood with embarrassment. “My what?”

“What else should he be but your convenient visitor? I left before dawn and hurried through my engagements, canceling all but the most important ones so that I might ride all evening to come back to you, remembering how you were distressed by my leaving again. And this is what I find upon my return?” he demanded, pointing towards the door where Bradley had just been removed. “The man you had once pledged your heart to, the one you’ve been so angry with me for preventing your marriage to?”

“It is not what it appears,” Luci argued hotly before feeling weak just as suddenly. “I did not know—”

“Spare me your excuses, I have no wish to hear of them,” the Marquess barked at her. “You entered into marriage with me under false pretenses, knowing that you had no intention of severing any relationship you once had with that man. Worse, the very day my back is turned you invite him into my home and make me look the fool.”

The Marquess stormed out of the room before Luci could respond. She sat stunned, too numb from both Bradley’s most unwelcomed visit and her husband’s brutal accusations to think clearly. More tears began to flow as the pain of it crashed down upon her.

“Are you all right?” Christina inquired softly as she entered the room.

“Leave me alone,” Luci whispered in, gasping for breath as her sobs threatened to choke her.

I have to get out of here, she thought miserably as she fought to breathe. Luci stood and hurried from the room, down the hallway, and to the door at the front of the house. It took great effort to open the massive wooden door but she did, then raced down the stone steps and out into the night.

The rain still fell as Luci ran, the pain in her foot from the day before sending sparks of torment up her leg. She did not care, nor heed its agonizing warning. All she knew was she had to get free, to get air in her lungs before the dizziness in her head took over. Before long, her hair was plastered to her face and neck, her gown clinging to her as the wet garment hung heavily against her skin.

She did not care.

How long must I endure men thinking and saying and doing as they see fit when I have done nothing to bring this shame and hurt on myself? She cried bitterly as she stumbled through the storm.

First my father buys his redemption with me as the price, then another man carries me off as his wife. Now a third man appears on the doorstep and demands my acceptance of an inconceivable offer of shame.

Luci was surprised to find that Lord Ambergrave's betrayal hurt the worst. Had she grown fond of him in this short time? Or had she merely accepted her position as one that many other young ladies face? She had consciously chosen acceptance in order to have happiness, rejecting the bitterness she'd felt in order to prove herself a worthy, kind wife.

And it had been for nothing.

CHAPTER 15



A flash of lightning illuminated the walls as Gideon stared into the fire, the only source of light in the nearly darkened room. The effect was to cast shadows from the portraits that still hung there, giving their faces a disapproving, haughty appearance. He cared not for their judgment this evening as they knew not what he had suffered.

The thunder roared around him only a moment later, its echo filling the room for more than a second or two. It signaled that the storm that had threatened all day long was finally upon Ashworth, but he did not care. Let it rage, if only to parallel the anger that he was succumbing to as well.

Gideon jerked himself up from the sofa and strode across the room, pouring himself a drink at the low table. Just as he raised the strong spirits to his lips, he stopped, overcome by the memory of the last time he'd drowned his sorrows in drink.

Turning, he suddenly hurled the glass—amber whisky and all—at the farthest wall, spurred on by the sound of the crashing glass as it tinkled in a thousand pieces against the floor.

How dare she! He shouted aloud in the empty room as the rain and another cannon fire of thunder drowned out his words.

There was a knock at the door and Lord Ambergrave whirled around as if facing down a specter of his own imagining. “Who is it?” he roared.

The door opened a sliver, then Derwall stepped in. “I chanced to be nearby and heard a loud crash,” he said placidly. “Is everything all right, My Lord?”

The butler’s eyes went immediately to the shattered glass and the light brown puddle on the floor before looking up to see where it still ran in a wet stain down the wall. He slowly looked to Lord Ambergrave as though this were a commonplace matter, but clearly expecting some explanation.

“Everything is fine,” the Marquess hissed through gritted teeth. Derwall did not answer, but did not take his leave, either. “Is there something else, Derwall?”

“Yes, My Lord. As a point of fact, there is something else. Have a sit, if you will.”

Lord Ambergrave blinked at his usually loyal butler’s sudden insolence. Instead of moving towards the sofa, though, he merely stared at him.

“I have been in service to this household since before you were born, Lord Ambergrave. I was a footman in your father’s household before assuming the position of butler some years later.”

“As I am well aware,” the Marquess said before adding pointedly, “Someone provides your salary, after all.”

Undeterred, Derwall continued, “And I saw you through your terrible ordeal and recovery, never wavering in my service even when you were bedridden and unconscious.” Lord Ambergrave looked instantly ashamed, and the butler said, “It was my duty and my pleasure to see to the affairs of your household when you were incapable, even at such a time that your household was temporarily in a hospital suite in Bavaria.”

“Yes, Derwall. And I am grateful to you for that loyalty and service, as I have already stated on several occasions. What is your point?”

“My point, My Lord, is that these might be the last words I utter in your presence or in your employment, but I *will* say them,” Derwall replied, staring the Marquess down. “You have acted like a cad of the lowest degree.”

“What did you say to me?” Lord Ambergrave roared, indignant.

“I am quite certain you heard me clearly, My Lord,” the butler said calmly, unmoved by the Marquess’ anger. “You have treated Lady Ambergrave with terrible disregard since the day she arrived at Ashworth. Worse, you misjudged her this evening and have treated her in the most boorish, brutal way. I am the one who presented the Earl of Stillscar’s card to her this evening, and I am the one she consulted with as to whether or not she should even receive him.”

Lord Ambergrave was silent, waiting for Derwall to continue while the butler's words swam about in his mind.

“She instantly refused in that it would be unseemly for her to receive a guest she had once cared for, especially in your absence. Without knowing how to proceed, she then changed her mind and agreed to do so only out of concern for how *your* reputation might suffer if she refused to receive a guest in your home,” Derwall explained, a hard edge to his words as he fought to keep a respectful tone to his voice. “As you have worked diligently to improve your standing in the ton upon your return to Ashworth Hall, she made a sound decision, one that she has now paid for very dearly thanks to that scoundrel Stillskar... and you.”

Lord Ambergrave turned away and walked to the window, resting his arm against the frame as he looked out, lost in thought. It was true, he had entered the room and seen his wife in a very compromising position with a man she knew well, yet it was also true that he had not given her a chance to explain before pouncing on the rat himself. His temper took hold before his intelligence had a chance.

“There is more, My Lord,” Derwall said, an accusing tone in his voice. “Lady Ambergrave fled from the house moments after your boorish behavior. She has not been seen since.”

“What? What do you mean?” the Marquess demanded in shock, turning from the window to look at Derwall.

“In the absence of your good judgment and better manners,” he said, his own anger becoming even more evident, “I dispatched servants to look for her but so far, they have not

returned. It has now been nearly an hour since Lady Ambergrave ventured out and I cannot help but worry for her safety. I also know who should firmly shoulder the blame if any harm comes to her.”

Derwall stood up straighter and adjusted the front of his coat, then added, “I shall happily tender my resignation now and go pack my personal effects. But I do not regret a single word I’ve said to you, and I care not if you put that in any letter you write, admonishing my performance in your household.”

The butler turned and strode to the door, his shoulders proud and his head held high. Lord Ambergrave didn’t respond, still lost in the news concerning Lady Ambergrave. Only at the last moment did he call out.

“Derwall, wait! That will not be necessary. You have done me a great service as always, both with this alarming news and with the reminder that I am not behaving as I should. I thank you for that. But please... help me find her.”

* * *

“Luci!” Gideon cried out, his voice hoarse as he fought to be heard over the pounding rain. “Luci! Where are you?”

He had been searching for nearly twenty minutes, stopping on his way out of the house only long enough to learn where the other servants had gone to look. They had thought of the stables and her horse, of the field that led stretched out beyond the house, but Gideon had a different plan.

Where would she have run if someone had accused her of the most horrible act a wife could do? How little he of knew her, Gideon still knew that his accusation would have sent her

stumbling without thought, without plan. He started at the front of the house and simply ran, knowing his own panicked emotions would not even compare to how she must have felt to be so hatefully accused.

It is not possible to make up for that sort of cruelty. Gideon ran on, calling out her name and begging the wind to die down so he might be heard. *I shall never repair the hurt I've caused.*

When lightning flashed again, Gideon thought he saw something ahead of him that both gave him hope and destroyed him. He ran on, unsure of what he'd seen until another flash lit up the night. Yes, it was. There on the ground by the bridge, something white lay prone and still.

Gideon sprinted down the lane, still some great distance away, long enough that his mind conjured up every possible outcome. When he finally came close enough to see that it was indeed Luci, there was no feeling of relief.

She was dead. He was certain of it.

“Luci!” he cried out, his voice lost in the thunder that reverberated around them. Dropping to his knees beside her, he turned her carefully, terrified at the feel of her ice cold skin beneath his hands. Her lips were blue and a cut on her forehead that had once bled profusely was now a clotted mass of dark blood that matted her hair.

“Luci! Can you hear me?” he asked, feeling a faint pulse. She did not answer, not even a moan of recognition. He looked around and realized she must have caught her foot where the

dirt path met the stone of the bridge, but why had she come this way at all?

Gideon pulled off the oilcloth he'd held over himself and took off his coat, wrapping both around her in layers. He pulled the cloth over her head to protect her as well as he could, then lifted her in his arms and carried her away.

By the time he reached the house, Gideon's arms burned from the effort of holding Luci close as he ran. But he did not care. He flew through the door and immediately called out for anyone who could help.

"Hurry," Mrs. Cushings said, followed closely by Christina. "Bring her upstairs at once."

Gideon happily obeyed, grateful to have anyone who could know what must be done to help her. He followed the housekeeper and Luci's maid as they took the stairs two at a time, painfully aware of how cold Luci was in his arms now that he was inside the dry, warm house.

"Stoke that fire up," Mrs. Cushings called out after he'd laid Luci in her bed, and it took him a moment to realize she meant him. "Miss Ross, please tell Cook to heat plenty of bed stones in the oven and brew a very hot tea. Have her also put on a bone to make hot broth."

"I'll do that," Gideon volunteered as Christina moved to relay those orders. "You stay here and—" He gestured helplessly with his hands towards the bed, "—help with... her clothes and such."

Gideon fled the room so they might remove Luci's wet gown that much faster. He raced downstairs, taking care to avoid the water that still pooled in round puddles across the floor, trying to remember what Mrs. Cushings had said. Something about hot tea? Stones?

A servant hurried past with an armload of blankets and he stopped her. "Wonderful. Take those immediately to Lady Ambergrave's room. And then fetch some more."

In the kitchen, he attempted to explain to Cook what Mrs. Cushings had called for, but fortunately, the old woman was of the same mind. Smiling, she assured Gideon that she would send everything up as soon as it was prepared.

Her returned to Luci's room to find the oddest of sights—the governess in the bed on one side of her, the servant he'd sent up looking very awkward and out of place on the other side of her. Mrs. Cushings stood over the bed, directing them to rub the warmth back into her hands as they laid next to her, warming her. The housekeeper did the same at her feet.

But all he could see was Luci's face. She was whiter than the very linens she rested upon, her perfect bow mouth still a deathly blue. Miss Ross shot him a look of pure hatred as she turned to her side and pressed her warm hand to Luci's face, trying to share a measure of her heat with the poor girl.

"My Lord, we will need some bandages for the injury to her head. Once she is warm again, the blood will move more freely. Have you sent for the physician?" Mrs. Cushings asked, gently reminding him.

“What? Oh God, I forgot!” He hurried away and returned as soon as he’d found someone to take on that task, unable as he was to tear himself away from Luci’s side.

“You might send for the vicar and the coffin maker as well, just to save time,” the governess said angrily, still trying to warm Luci with her own body. Mrs. Cushings looked away, embarrassed by the woman’s obvious accusation but not refuting it in any way.

And why should they refute it? Gideon was looking down at Luci’s beautiful, deathly pale face and feeling a stab of self-loathing at what he had done. If she should perish, there will be no one to blame but myself. Just as with my parents...

CHAPTER 16



The physician arrived in the early hours before dawn, and immediately locked himself in Luci's chambers with Mrs. Cushings and Miss Ross to attend him. Gideon found himself on the other side of the door, pacing in a nervous rage, unable to sit still for fear of succumbing to some sort of madness over what he'd done.

From time to time, the door would open and a servant might enter or go out, or Mrs. Cushings would step out with some request. Each time, Gideon raced to the doorway to peer inside, hoping to see something that resembled good news. Each time, the doctor's face was grim or Christina's expression looked murderously towards him. Through it all, Luci stayed as pale and still as ever.

"My Lord?" Derwall said sometime before sunrise, approaching Gideon softly. "I have come to apologize for my words earlier."

"There is no need," Gideon said quietly, barely remembering the words the butler spoke of.

"At the risk of arguing so rudely for a second time, there is a need. A great need," the butler said. "I should not have spoken

my mind so freely, it was not the proper thing to do.”

“Derwall, only remember this and then do not trouble yourself with thinking of it again,” Gideon answered on the verge of tears. “If you had not spoken to me so and prompted me to search for her, Lady Ambergrave would have been dead when we found her. Your outburst may have saved her life, God willing that she is still spared.”

“Thank you, My Lord. I had not thought of it that way. It was still unseemly, and I deeply regret my harshness. But as you said, if it will spare her life, I will gladly discomfort myself to rant at you on a weekly basis.”

“If it will spare her life, Derwall, we will make it a standing appointment for every day at noon,” Gideon said, attempting to reassure his trusted servant. Instead, his attempt at a forgiving sentiment only made his eyes well up once again with fresh tears, ones that he hastily wiped away. Derwall was kind enough to look away at that moment, then bowed and returned downstairs.

Too soon, Gideon fell into a chair near the door and slept, his head propped painfully on his hand and his back slumped down low in the chair. He was jerked from his fitful sleep by the sound of the door latch turning, and he awoke to see the physician emerge from Luci’s room.

“Sir Rawlings, what news?” he asked weakly as he attempted to rise from his uncomfortable position.

“It is not good news, I am afraid,” the old man answered, looking at the door to see that he wasn’t overheard before he

continued. “From what I can gather, Lady Ambergrave must have tumbled into the river before climbing out and falling near the bridge. She lost a good deal of blood from the cut to her forehead, but that’s not the worst of it. Her lungs are filled with fluid and when a treatment of sulfurous air I administered caused her to cough, the water that came forth was rather muddy. If we can prevent pneumonia from setting in, it will be a miracle. Her fever is already climbing, but we have it somewhat under control for now.”

“Only tell us what to do, we will do it. Anything, no matter what it is,” Gideon stated firmly.

“The first step shall be fervent prayer to God Almighty that he does not see fit to take her. If we are so fortunate, from there I have left medicines and instructions with your housekeeper that must be followed to the letter,” Sir Rawlings said. He looked over to a servant who’d come up the stairs and nodded. “I am leaving her in their care while I take a few hours’ rest, but they are to come and wake me immediately if there is any cause for alarm.”

He nodded to Lord Ambergrave then followed the servant to a room that had been prepared for him, refusing to leave the premises with the Marchioness in this precarious state. Gideon sank back into the chair and closed his eyes, grief threatening to overwhelm him.

Instead of letting his misery take hold, Gideon stood up and opened the door. Softly, he crept inside, his guilt grabbing hold of his heart once again when he saw Luci.

Her governess looked fire at him, but thankfully did not say anything. She did not need to, for no matter what she could say to him, it was not possible that it would hurt worse than

what he was already telling himself. For her part, Mrs. Cushings appeared only some small measure more sympathetic.

“Miss Ross, if you should like to go to your rest, I will sit here in your place,” Gideon said kindly. Instead of arguing, she only rose up from her chair at Luci’s bedside and turned her back on him, leaving to go to her own quarters.

“Mrs. Cushings, if you can manage it, it would be a great comfort if you could stay. I know not what to do, I’m afraid.”

“Of course, My Lord,” she answered softly, but she too looked away in order to hide the accusation she felt.

Gideon sat in Miss Ross’ seat and took Luci’s hand. It was barely warmer than he’d remembered from the night before, and there was only the faintest hint of color to her skin now. The doctor’s stitches stood out on Luci forehead, angry jagged lines of black thread that punctuated the gash beneath. Someone, Mrs. Cushings or Miss Ross, had attempted to dry Luci’s hair and brush it back from her face, but the unkempt nature of it made her look vulnerable, every bit a woman who’d suffered a terrible ordeal.

In all, Luci looked like a sad sort of doll, a smaller version of herself. Gideon would give anything for her to open her eyes and rant at him, to call him every horrible name she could think of. He would gladly teach her a few insults she’s assuredly never learned in her privileged upbringing, insults that would make a sea captain blush and throw his hands over his ears.

He deserved every word, and more.

* * *

Within the next few hours, Luci's fever climbed higher. She endured the strangest sort of dream state, one in which she wanted desperately to wake up but for some reason, could not. She was aware of other people in the room, even if she could not determine who they might be. Worse, she could actually hear the silence around her, punctuated only briefly by the occasional cough or the sound of a chair scraping the floor as its occupant shifted in their seat.

Her head burned ferociously with a strange sort of pain and she wanted to reach up to feel it, to see what was hurting her so, but she could not lift her arms. One of her hands was pinned in a tight grasp, and for a moment she had a fleeting fear that Bradley had returned and was holding her down. She knew that couldn't be right, but it didn't stop the image of his face from taking hold in her mind.

Drifting in and out of sleep and near-wakefulness, Luci also dreamed of Lord Ambergrave. Had she truly only thought a short time before that, strange though he may be, he would never actually cause her harm? Now she knew that was not true.

I had to run. She fought back the dangerous people in the dreams that still seized her unconscious mind. *He would surely have hurt me, I had to.*

As Luci fought to decipher truth from falsehood, fiction from reality, she knew that wasn't correct. He had been angry and had said the most horrible things, but he had not made a move to hurt her. In fact, he had pulled Bradley away from her and beaten him. She remembered that clearly, though she wished she could not.

That only proves he is capable of such anger. What will he do the next time he is so enraged?

In some of her dreams, it was her parents' faces that Luci saw. They had been unparalleled in their love and devotion to her all her life, her mother coddling her even when Christina would try to scold her, her father dotting on her and spoiling her when he would have to leave for any length of time. They only wanted her happiness, but yet, their dream faces now twisted into macabre masks, awful creatures that mocked her and laughed with a hideous sound that she could not block out in her unconscious state.

At one point, Luci dreamed she was drowning in the river, but it was caused by a racking cough that shook her whole body. Cold hands turned her on her side suddenly and she wanted to open her eyes, to tell them that she was there. Instead, the need for air made her cough for so long that she fell back against the pillows as soon as she was able, exhausted from the effort of trying to breathe. She was asleep again before she knew it.

I wonder if I shall die? Luci thought this once, aware of her conscience and surprised at how calm the thought was. It was like wondering if she might have roast at dinner or if she might paint a picture rather than read a book, rather than wondering if her life might end.

Then, as a new labored gasp of air filled her lungs, Luci felt her first clear thought. She would not die. No, she would live through this and then she would be the one to decide what happened to her. Not her father or Bradley or the Marquess, but she alone would decide her fate.

And she would leave this place for good.

But one morning as she struggled to open her eyes, Luci managed to look out the window at the green fields glimmering below. She saw a strange movement and called out to Christina.

“What do you see out there?” she asked as her maid pushed back the curtains with her hand. “Someone is there, I know it.”

“It’s Lord Ambergrave and...” Christina pressed her hand to her mouth and turned to look at Luci in fright. “...and Jacques.”

“What? My Jacques?” she asked, her voice thin and raspy as she tried to breathe. “Why?”

“I know not. Surely he would not bring any harm to the animal?” Christina said, sounding uncertain. “Shall I go down and make sure that Jacques is all right?”

“Please...” Luci whispered, barely lifting her hand to send her. But as Christina turned to hurry downstairs, she chanced to look outside once more.

“Oh Luci, you won’t believe it,” she said softly, pressing her hand to her mouth. “Lord Ambergrave... he’s going to ride Jacques.”

“Why?” Luci gasped, but Christina only shook her head.

“I can see them, he’s riding very slowly, simply taking turns around the lawn. It appears that he is only exercising the poor creature in your absence.” Christina said, coming to sit on Luci’s bedside and taking her hand. “You know, he has been very concerned about you.”

Luci only turned her face away, letting her head fall to the side in both weakness and indifference. Without the strength to argue, she stayed silent. But a simple act of tending to a neglected horse did not begin to make up for what Lord Ambergrave had done to her.

* * *

The days ran on until a week had passed, then another. By the third week, Sir Rawlings was only beginning to sound encouraged when he reported on Luci’s condition. Pneumonia had set in, and coupled with the weeks of lying abed and not eating proper meals, he was grim-faced when he spoke of Luci’s recovery.

“My Lord, it’s as though she sees no purpose in getting well,” Sir Rawlings explained as gently as he could. Gideon looked at him sharply, so much so that the physician thought to phrase his words in a different way. “I fear she has suffered some form of grief that is preventing her from improving.”

Gideon thought to protest, but he knew he could not. He sank into a chair and let his head fall to his hands. Without looking up, he told Sir Rawlings of his abhorrent behavior towards her.

“And in truth, I spoke so harshly only out of petty anger,” he said, his explanation complete. “I had been so eager to come home, to make her happy, that when I found another man here, I lashed out. I said awful things to her, things that can never be taken back.”

“Ah, then there is cause for her suffering,” Sir Rawlings said, nodding thoughtfully. “It is her heart that is broken, above all other malady and injury. There is no desire for her body to heal so long as her spirit sees no point in the endeavor.”

“But what do I do? Surely there is some way to help her,” Gideon said, rising from his chair again and striding towards the physician. “You must help her, there must be a way.”

“I only know of ailments and their treatments, the sorts of things that a learned man can attempt to cure. This is no ailment, My Lord. I fear that this is your handiwork.” Sir Rawlings steeled himself for an outburst of indignation, but there was none. Gideon only looked at him sadly, his expression riddled with guilt.

“How can I mend what I am not permitted to fix?” he said, feeling all hope of saving Luci vanishing. “I cannot come near her for fear of causing her to turn from me.”

“Has she though, My Lord?” Sir Rawlings chided. “I was not aware that you had come to see her, at least not when she might be awake. Now, do not look at me with reproach, you have been most attentive... but only keeping watch in the chair outside her door. You must see her, make your apologies, do whatever you must to win her good favor once again, or else all hope is lost.”

Sir Rawlings bowed slightly and left, giving Gideon the space he required to sort through the older man’s warning.

After the physician returned to his quarters, Gideon stared upwards as though he could see through the ceiling above to where Luci lay, lingering somewhere between life and eternal sleep. She may not have the force of will to choose to live, as Sir Rawlings said, but Gideon would not sit idly by and allow her to slip away if he had any sway over her countenance.

After hurrying upstairs, his mind racing with unspoken notions of how to make amends, Gideon rapped softly at the door to Luci's chambers. Upon hearing no sound from within, he turned the latch anyway and peered inside. Luci still lay in bed, and her very faithful governess sat at her head, thumbing through the pages of a book and looking very weary.

Gideon coughed lightly as he approached, but the governess was not one to be startled. Without even looking up from her book, she merely droned quietly, "If you are ill, be gone from here lest you further infect my mistress."

"Has everyone in this household forgotten that I am a marquess?" Gideon asked, neither expecting an answer nor wanting it. "This is my house, if everyone does remember."

"And when you act worthy of the title, I'm certain the servants will show you the proper respect," Christina replied, still turning the pages slowly as she read. "Until such time, do not cough in here."

"Miss Ross, you have been given much leeway because of your close relationship with Lady Ambergrave," he said stiffly. "You obviously matter to her a great deal so I have no wish to end your employment. I do, however, insist upon the most basic attempt at manners."

“I shall certainly strive to meet your approval, My Lord,” she replied in a bored voice before looking up sharply. “That is, assuming I still have employment and my mistress does not die.”

Gideon stopped short, suddenly mindful of the situation. Miss Ross might be insolent and perhaps a corrupting influence on his wife, but he could not argue that the woman did not care for Luci. She cared too much, perhaps, and he wondered again why a woman of two and twenty would still have need of such a companion, lady’s maid or no.

“I see. Then for some unfathomable reason, I shall strive to meet your approval.” Gideon bowed. “And to show my ardent desire to be a man worthy of my title, I shall relieve you now and sit by Lady Ambergrave’s side so that you might go to your rest.”

Christina glared at him again, only this time her suspicion was clear in her expression. Gideon knew she trusted him not, but he also knew that she could not refuse a kind gesture such as this. He smiled as kindly as he could when she stood up abruptly and closed her book.

“I shall be in my room—and able to hear every word—when you are ready to take your leave.” Christina strode out haughtily, leaving Gideon to simmer with a sense of having been chastised.

Pushing that sentiment aside, he took the seat that the governess had just vacated, lowering himself silently so as not to disturb Luci. Rather than the deathly pale white skin he’d seen that night, she’d taken on a more ashen hue, the certain mark of a gravely ill person.

But there was no mistaking her beauty, even in the throes of illness. Gideon stared at her, surprised to see her image swimming before his eyes as unexpected tears of longing and worry pooled in his eyes. He wiped at them quickly before hesitantly taking her hand, relieved to feel some measure of warmth there.

“Luci? Are you awake?” Gideon whispered, watching her face for any sign that she’d heard him. It took a few moments, but her eyelids eventually fluttered open to narrow slits, the effort of which seemed tremendous. “I am... I am so deeply sorry for what I’ve done. I will make it up to you, no matter what it takes.”

CHAPTER 17



Beside her, Luci could make out the words a man whispered, along with another sound, a softer and gentler noise that spoke of deep hurt. Who was this man, and why was he singing? No, that couldn't be right. It was low and mournful and filled her heart with such grief. As she woke more and became more aware, Luci realized the sound was crying, but who could it be? And why?

She opened her eyes and strained to see, but her vision was blurred. She thought there was someone there, a man perhaps, and for a moment she feared that Lord Stillscar had returned.

He mustn't be here! Luci was frightened. But the more she tried to see him clearly, the more convinced she became that it must be her father sitting with her.

But where was her mother? She had a terrible vision that her mother, having learned of her illness and this nightmarish marriage, had succumbed to some grave injury of her own. The thought panicked Luci into trying to sit up, trying to speak or call out to someone.

“Luci. Shhh, you must rest,” a man's voice said softly.

Luci did not recognize it for a moment, but then it came back to her. Lord Ambergrave? What could that villainous, hateful man possibly be doing sitting at her bedside? Luci tried to shake her head, but the effort exhausted her and the movement made her sickeningly dizzy.

“Who... why are you here?” she managed to ask, the effort of filling her lungs to speak causing her to cough weakly.

“Luci, don’t exert yourself, please,” Lord Ambergrave begged, his plea almost tearful. “You’re still quite ill and you mustn’t strain yourself.”

“But I don’t understand,” she answered, still trying to focus on his face. “You... I was running... from you.”

The Marquess was silent, but Luci noted how he turned away and wiped at a tear. As she watched him, she was able to make out more of his appearance. His visage was haggard, desperately in want of a shave, his linen tunic was wrinkled as though he’d slept in it. But most of all, Luci gazed at his eyes, trying to make out the sentiment there.

Is it fear that I see? Remorse? Or simply pity?

“I know you ran from me,” he replied, his voice suddenly raw. “And you had every right to despise me. I did not know what business Lord Stillscar had here, and I am mortally ashamed that I misjudged.”

Lord Ambergrave stopped and closed his eyes. He shook his head and continued, “No, I did not merely misjudge. That

would mean I had simply made a small error. What I have done is far worse than that, something that can never be forgiven nor would I ask it of you. Luci, I was horrid and hateful to you, all because I was emphatically wrong.”

She stared in wonder, the fog that still clung to her mind refusing to lift and allow her to make sense of it. The Marquess was admitting his mistake? To what end?

“But you were so angry...” Luci managed to reply. “I did not...”

Lord Ambergrave waited for her to finish her thought, but knew that it was of little consequence.

“Luci, *you* did nothing wrong, only I. Thankfully, I have a house full of servants who appear to take extreme delight in putting me in my place when I have committed some offense,” he said, smiling only slightly before looking bleak once again. “I was informed about my inexcusable error after you left. But even should you *have* invited Lord Stillscar here for some reason—no matter whether it was chaste or scandalous—that does not give me leave to storm at you as I did.”

Before she could think of a reply, Lord Ambergrave fell to his knees at her bedside, tears once again shining in his eyes. He made no move to wipe them away this time, seemingly unconcerned as to who took notice. Instead, he clung to her hand ardently and pressed it to his lips.

“I am not deserving of your forgiveness, but I shall spend the rest of my life endeavoring to be a man who is deserving.”

Gideon kissed her hand again and added, "Only live long enough for me to prove my worth to you."

Luci looked to him, her eyes finally coming to rest on his face. She could now clearly make out the pain in his eyes, the torment that darkened his cheek. In the fog of weariness that invaded her mind, she was still able to push the haze aside and focus on him, on his words.

"I forgive you," she finally said, each word coming laboriously as she tried to breathe, "if no other reason than this... I will not die with this on your conscience."

"You must not die, but not only for my sake," the Marquess answered, clinging to her hand even more tightly. "I shall be the happy recipient of that honor, but no, you must get better for your own happiness, a happiness that I will guarantee for the rest of your very long life."

"Why?" Luci managed, her eyes closing with exhaustion from the effort.

"Because I will never forget the image of you lying upon the ground," he replied, sobbing softly. "It will be burned in my mind until such time as I no longer remember my own name, and even then, that will be the one memory I can summon. Turning you over in my arms and seeing your face as if you were already dead will haunt me forever."

"Your conscience, then?" she rasped. "I must live only to soothe your conscience?" She was prevented from saying more by a fit of racking coughs that seized her, bending her nearly in two as she fought for air.

“Never. That is not your concern, but mine,” Lord Ambergrave insisted. “But you must also live because... because I love you.”

“What did you say?”

“I will gladly repeat it,” the Marquess said sweetly, “and will say it again any time you summon me to do so. I love you, Luci. I have ever since our very first argument. You have a fire in your spirit that is unparalleled, one that seeks to understand the world, to right any wrongs. It is unmatched in any woman I’ve ever met.”

“You’re teasing me now,” she said, sinking back against the pillows and feeling a fresh wave of sadness. She knew it would be too good to be true that the Marquess might have felt anything for her, especially in her current state.

“I swear that I am not,” he insisted. “You have all of the trappings that any young lady of good manners and breeding has, but you are more than that.”

His voice shook with emotion as he continued, “You railed at me for your perception that I had misused Collin, that I had taken advantage of his mother and then cast them aside. Do you understand how many people in our very own social standing, people in this very ton, would think nothing of it? But not you. You called me out for it, and even if you were mistaken, you were prepared to declare my shame for it. It was the most noble thing I’ve ever witnessed.”

Luci was silent, her mind swirling with impossibilities. How could he love her after only a short time as this? And after his callous treatment of her? She was certainly moved by his agony and by his concern for others, but his declarations? That was another matter.

As if he could read her very thoughts, Lord Ambergrave said, “I do not expect you to return the sentiment, but I only beg of you to believe it to be true. I will *prove* my love to you, no matter what I must do. But I cannot unless you get well.”

“I shall do my best,” Luci replied, hoping her thin voice sounded playful. “If not for your sake, at least my own.”

“Certainly for your sake and not mine,” he answered quietly, placing her hand against his cheek. “It is all that matters.”

Luci could not remember a time when she had been more afraid. It wasn't fear of death that chilled her now, for death would almost be welcome if it would replace this miserable sickness. No, she feared her own heart, as it was all too willing to heed Lord Ambergrave's words and accept them as truth. But how could she? How could she allow herself to believe that a man who had accused her of the vilest of sins would have such a reformed spirit?

Though she wanted to steel her heart against his desperate words, she had longed to hear them, too. She loved this man, though she knew not why. Everything about him, about their marriage, should have turned her blood to ice in her veins. Instead, his tearful speech warmed her more than any remedy or medicine could. She felt his words and his loving sentiments moving through her limbs, repairing any harm and instilling in her a desire to be strong again for the both of them.

“Will you stay?” Luci whispered, stretching out her hand towards him so that he might take it once again.

“Yes. I will stay as long as you wish, My Lady,” Lord Ambergrave replied, kneeling at her bedside and smiling through his grief.

“Thank you,” she said as her eyes closed again. “I wish... for you to stay.”

* * *

“You there. Up on yer feet!” the gaoler bellowed through the small window as he turned the heavy iron key in the latch. He hauled open the wooden door and lunged for Bradley, pulling him up by the back of his collar.

“There’s someone as here to see ya!” he shouted as Bradley blinked in confusion. “Get a move on, ya won’t be keeping his lordship waiting.”

“His lordship?” Bradley asked, numb with both cold and confusion. “Who is this man?”

“Don’t know, don’t care. He says he knows ya and can vouch for ya, though ya got no proof of who ya claim to be.” The gaoler pressed on down the hallway lined with similar cells, spurring Bradley forward with his fist in the Earl’s back.

The stone floor echoed with their footsteps and the occasional drip of water from somewhere. Once a horse barn, the stalls had been converted to cells that could house four men apiece. They still carried the stench of horse dung and the fleas that

lived in the hay on the floor, but Bradley had heard tales of gaols that were not nearly so fine as this one.

Bradley tried not to look left or right as he walked the long passageway, but he could not help but see the men who jeered at him through the bars of their cells. He had made no friends here—in fact, he had probably made a number of enemies, should these men ever see him again—perhaps due to his insistence that he was the Earl of Stillscar.

“And I’m the blasted king of England,” the gaoler had called back that first day. The insult was followed by a punch to Bradley’s stomach that doubled him in half. An uppercut to his face had sent him sprawling backwards in a daze, and when he next became aware of his surroundings, he was in a cell.

At least it had been a solitary one, not a confined space to be shared with the others. Perhaps there was a chance these bumpkins believed him after all. More likely, the gaoler didn’t want to face a cell of his own when word got out how he’d treated a member of the upper class, and a nobleman at that.

“Here he be,” the gaoler said in a bored voice as he led Bradley to the small office—what had once been the tack room, judging by the rows of nails that ran the length of the small space, high up on the walls. “Ya said ya could claim him?”

“Yes, that is correct,” the Duke of Renfeld said, his disdain for both the gaol and Bradley obvious. Turning to his stepbrother, the Duke covered his mouth with his hand as though to ward off any contagion, and said, “Good God, it’s worse than I imagined.”

“Renfeld. Good to see you, too,” Bradley said. He knew he should be grateful for his brother’s appearance, but he was also keenly aware that his gaol cell might be preferable to whatever Bernard had to say to him.

“Ya said ya can vouch for him, eh?” the gaoler asked, reminding the Duke of the purpose of his trip.

“Yes, unfortunately,” Renfeld replied, his loathing of everything about this place—including Bradley—obvious in his tone and manners. “He is Bradley Landon, Earl of Stillscar, and my brother. I will sign the affidavit agreeing to such under penalty of lying to an officer of the magistrate.”

“Aye, ‘tis good enough fer me, Yer Grace. Put yer mark here in the book and take him out from here.” The officer pointed to a line in a ledger book that listed Bradley’s name and offense.

“Do I not need to sign for my freedom?” Bradley asked, somewhat bemused.

“Nope. Don’t care who ya are, only him,” the gaoler answered with a jerk of his head towards Renfeld. “Yer only worth somethin’ ‘cause he says ya is.”

“Lovely. Well, that sounds about like my entire life anyway, might as well be true enough here,” the Earl answered, not meeting his brother’s angry gaze.

Outside, Bradley took a deep breath to clear the stench of the gaol from his lungs, then immediately regretted it. The

surrounding yard and the nearby river only compounded the polluted air that had greeted him for the last many days. Noting how Renfeld strode off in the direction of his carriage without so much as a pause, Bradley hurried to follow him.

“I pray you have an excellent excuse for what you’ve done,” the Duke said, gritting his teeth in anger as he spoke.

“I’m certain I do, and I’m equally certain you don’t actually care to hear it,” Bradley replied.

“You’re right, I don’t care. If only because there is no possible excuse for your behavior. What were you thinking? Accosting a married woman, the wife of a Marquess, at that?” Renfeld demanded, whirling around to face his brother. “I looked into the man before I interfered in your case and came up here. Lord Ambergrave has more wealth than anyone I know, and I know plenty of well-to-do people.”

“So it would have been all right with you if I pursued a married woman so long as her husband was poor?” Bradley asked, unable to stop himself from riling up his brother’s mood with a jest.

“Watch yourself,” the Duke hissed angrily. “Ambergrave has the kind of money that can make you disappear—a favor I already feel compelled to beg of him.”

“Well, here’s to hoping he plans to invest in timber instead of manslaughter, right?” the Earl joked, following Renfeld all the way to his carriage.

“What are you doing?” Renfeld asked, turning on Bradley and grimacing. “You’re not getting in my carriage.”

“What? Why not?”

“You stink of bodily filth and you’re undoubtedly crawling with lice... or worse,” the Duke said, suddenly looking away and trying to determine whether anyone of note could see him speaking to his brother in his disgusting state. “Besides, I’m only here to clear you of this humiliating mess—”

“And I’m very grateful to you for that,” Bradley said, taking a step closer.

“I did not do it for your sake,” Renfeld said, holding up his hand to stop Bradley from coming nearer. “I did it to spare the rest of us any gossip and embarrassment. This will already be the subject of conversation throughout the ton, as if it wasn’t already shameful enough to have your lack of achievement hanging over all of our heads. If I can spare us any *further* embarrassment, it will be worth the price and my time. Here.”

The Duke reached into his waistcoat pocket and retrieved a few heavy coins. He held them out disdainfully and dropped them into Bradley’s outstretched hand, being careful that they did not actually make contact.

“This should be sufficient for you to acquire a room and a much-needed bath—preferably one with scalding water and some form of soap that blisters the skin—and a wagon to take you somewhere.” The Duke retrieved his handkerchief and coughed into it, gagging on some displeasing smell or another.

“Wait, there is one more thing I must ask of you,” Bradley said, putting out his hand to delay his brother but stopping. “I need to know some information about a certain man. Anything you can find that might help me.”

“And why should I help you?” the Duke sneered.

“Because with the proper sort of information, perhaps I could stop being a constant thorn in your side,” Bradley answered, smiling mischievously.

The Duke thought it over, giving his brother an appraising look. Finally, he nodded and agreed, taking down the man’s name. He started to climb into his waiting carriage again, but turned back only long enough to say, “And Bradley, I will not come to your rescue again. If there are any more incidents such as this, I will publicly disavow you and cut off what annual inheritance you have. Do not test me on this.”

A light rain began to fall as the Duke of Renfeld pulled away in his carriage, leaving Bradley to stare after him while his feet slowly sunk lower in the mud and grime. Looking around at his surroundings, Bradley took note of no better option than to walk in the direction of a larger town. Pocketing his brother’s gold coins, he began to whistle cheerfully as he strode away from the riverbank and its loathsome prison.

As he walked, he kept his eyes open for a farmer’s wagon where he might beg a brief ride. His mood lifted tremendously with the exercise, the first feeling of vigor returning to his spirit since the night he had visited Luci. He’d had these many days to think on what had gone wrong with his plan, and even more time to contrive a new one. He knew what he must do now, and he would set it in motion as soon as he returned home... however long that may take him.

CHAPTER 18



“If you’ll sign here, My Lord, then the bill of sale is yours. Congratulations on your new endeavor,” the clerk said, beaming at Lord Thornshire. Reginald Davids looked on, obviously pleased as well.

“Thank you, good sir. It certainly feels good to be back in business,” Lord Thornshire replied, folding the document and placing it in his leather satchel.

“Will this ship be conducting cargo under your former firm? The Delaware Company?” Davids asked, but Lord Thornshire shook his head.

“No, no, that company is finished. This will be a small operation, only the one vessel at first. From there, once the investment is redeemed, any profits will be put aside until there is sufficient funds to purchase a second,” he explained. “I have no wish to take on investors or partners again, as that is what led to all of my troubles to begin with.”

“Quite understandable,” Davids acknowledged with a firm nod, “and quite a reasonable course of action. A man of your

business sense and esteem will have no trouble at all building up his profits in a very short time.”

“Thank you, Davids,” Lord Thornshire said warmly. “That means a great deal coming from someone in your position. I will admit that our last meeting did not put me in good stead, but thanks to a matter of funds I managed to secure, I am ready to begin again. The remainder of my debt will be paid rather soon.”

Lord Thornshire’s visage clouded over briefly as he remembered how he had come into this money. With the bulk of his most pressing debts paid off and some funds set aside for immediate use, Thornshire was able to secure a steady ship and begin his business all over again. But even as his situation was improving every day, he could not help but remember that it had cost him his only child, his beloved daughter.

“Right, then.” Lord Thornshire smiled at the clerk and the undersecretary. “I’ll just be seeing to my new ship and assuring all is in order. You have the half payment, and you’ll have my first nominal payment within the week.”

“Very good, My Lord, and dare I say it, welcome back,” Davids said, bowing to the Earl.

“It’s good to be back,” he called as he left the office and headed to the docks. There, beyond many of the other vessels that awaited their place in line to be loaded, was his new ship.

While not as fancy as any of the ships in his once-grand fleet, it was serviceable and sturdy. Lord Thornshire had no need of fine accoutrements, he merely needed it to be seaworthy and

capable of reaching its destination with its cargo intact. If there was a lesson to be learned from his humiliating fall from wealth, it was that money in hand was far more valuable than the promise of riches.

Surveying his new investment, Lord Thornshire was struck with inspiration. His daughter's sacrifice had made this return to business possible, and he would see to it that it benefitted her greatly. He would set aside a measure of his profits for her use, to be determined as she saw fit. Should she voice her displeasure at any time of the choice of Lord Ambergrave as a husband, he would bring her home willingly and return the Marquess' funds in exchange.

"Insomuch as I need a gesture to remind me of this bold plan," he said to himself quietly, "I christen this ship *Luci's Return*."

* * *

Lady Thornshire stared out the window of her sister's morning room, lost in thought. The meticulously trimmed acreage stretched on for as far as she could see, an endless sea of picturesque green. Still, a swarm of gardeners was already at work despite the early hour, trimming back the hedgerows and taking clippings of the roses and camellias for the ball.

"I am not so certain of the wisdom of serving fish as the third course," the Duchess of Hardigree muttered, looking at some pages in her hand. "It might not sit well with some who have delicate stomachs, especially if there is to be much dancing and the weather turns much warmer. What do you think, Angeline?"

"Hmmm, what? I'm sorry, I did not hear," Lady Thornshire replied, looking rather sheepish. "My mind was on Luci. I have not had a letter from her in some time."

“Well, how would you? You’ve been here all this time,” her sister snapped. Her tone softened when she said, “But we have pressing matters to attend to. I must come up with something to serve during the third course.”

“Pheasant,” Lady Thornshire said dismissively. She knew it was far better to provide her older sister with an answer to her mundane problems than to attempt to make her see reason.

“What? I cannot possibly serve pheasant since there is a quail dish immediately after. I swear, Angeline, it’s as though you have no desire to be of help to me,” Lady Hardigree screeched, frightening the small dog who’d been sleeping in her lap. “Now be serious and put your attention on this most pressing matter.”

Lady Thornshire came over to sit by the Duchess and pretended to give her full interest to the planning. Her mind, though, was carried away with thoughts of her daughter. If there had been letters, surely a courier would have been dispatched by her husband. After all, her other correspondence had been sent over so that she might accept or refuse various invitations, and so she may answer letters from friends and peers. If there had been any word from Luci, she would already know about it.

“Are you still thinking of your letters?” Lady Hardigree demanded. “I told you, my sources are quite sound when it comes to these dealings. Lord Ambergrave is, by all that we can assume, an upstanding member of the ton and a wealthy man as well. There is no reason to think Luci is anything other than the picture of health. She’s probably lying abed at this very moment, taking her tea and reading through her invitations for the coming weeks.”

“I don’t know, Mary. I just have this dreadful feeling that something is not right. You said yourself that no one really knew this Lord Ambergrave. It’s simply not like Luci to pass so many weeks without a word to me.”

“Can you think of any other new bride who spends her days writing tomes to send forth to her mother? I assure you, you and I had no time for such leisurely pastimes when we were wed. I had to move an entire household to Austria, remember? And any correspondence would have taken weeks to arrive, there was simply no point in bothering.”

“That is a different and unique situation, Mary. Luci has not been skirted off to Austria, she’s only gone so far north as Ashworth Hall. I should think she would at least send word to me of how she’s getting on,” Lady Thornshire said, her voice cracking as she spoke longingly.

“Angeline, this is preposterous. You cannot pine for your daughter now that she’s a grown woman, married and well-titled. She has obligations, as do you,” the Duchess said with finality, as though the matter were settled. “Now tell me what you think of roast venison with a hearty aspic to go with it?”

Lady Thornshire listened while her sister prattled on about which gamekeeper could be dispatched to hunt the venison and then in nearly the same breath changed course and began to talk of ordering a new gown for her event. She dared not tell her sister about Lord Thornshire’s letter, though.

Her husband, true to his word, had invested in a new venture but had shunned any prospect of partners. She was fearful that he might be in too deeply to take things on for himself, but

then again, his last partner had tucked his tail and run. The whole reason poor Luci was gone was because of that wretched partner.

“If I ever chance to see him in the flesh, he will be very sorry he ruined my family’s fortunes.” Lady Thornshire thought for a moment, idly wondering if Angeline might have the name of a hired man who could find this former partner and inflict some harm.

“Oh my! I forgot to tell you that I had further news,” Lady Hardigree cried, putting down her pages concerning her silly ball and retrieving a different letter. “It concerns the true love of our dear Luci’s life, this Earl of Stillscar.”

“Really? But what of him? Luci is already wed and you’ve said there’s no cause to think her marriage should be undone,” Lady Thornshire answered, though she stood up and came closer to her sister anyway, reading the letter from her perch beside her.

“All the same, this information serves to let us know that your husband’s decision was sound. While I grieve for you both over the difficulty with his business affairs, when you learn what I have discovered, you will be grateful that it came to pass. If for no other reason, it spared our dear girl a life of misery and shame should Edgar have accepted the Earl’s offer.”

Lady Thornshire took the folded letter that the Duchess held out, her eyes devouring the words upon the page. Her emotions ran like loosed horses as confusion turned to anger and then an icy sort of fear. She looked up at her sister with an expression of horror, only to see Lady Hardigree’s knowing look.

“See? It is as I said. Lord Stillscar is completely penniless. Well, except for a mere sum his brother doles out to him, practically a charity offering,” Lady Hardigree said, taking the letter back and folding it once again. “While I do wish things had turned out differently for Edgar’s business affairs, I cannot even lose a moment’s sleep from it for I know that it saved Luci.”

“To think what could have happened,” Lady Thornshire whispered breathlessly. “And here I have grieved for the broken heart she endured on our account.”

“Don’t let it trouble you any further, then,” her sister said, giving her hand a gentle pat. “Edgar is back in business and will have recovered his fortunes in no time. This Lord Stillscar will not come within twenty leagues of Luci now, and moreover, I’m sure she is adjusting to her new role as a wife of a Marquess with all of the grace and happiness I know her for.”

* * *

Bradley read over the letter he’d penned one last time, holding it close to the old stump of a candle that lit his room. He pulled his coat tighter around his chest to ward off the chill of the empty room as he read.

The words on the page gave him pause due to the coarse nature of his language and intent, but there was no other way. He’d been wronged by a great many people, and he would not stand for any more ill-treatment. Once this letter reached its intended recipient, everything would change in an instant.

“You will pray for handouts and leftover crumbs no longer,” he told himself resolutely. “Finally, what is rightfully yours

will belong to you, and no one shall stand in your way.”

Bradley hurried down the stairs to send the letter on its way. Out on the street, he sent the letter via post and then looked at his surroundings, taking in the sights of the city. His lodgings overlooked a busy thoroughfare, and all around him, the town proper was swarming with activity.

I should be a man of business. There is no reason a man of my learning and station could not be successful in business. But of what sort? Where would I even begin, and with what capital investment?

The thought, though fleeting, was enough to spur Bradley into setting about the next phase in his plan. The letter should arrive at its destination with the week, so he had to make ready for when that time came.

Already extended on his credit, he sought out a tailor and made promise of more funds to come if the man could but fashion him a new suit, one that would be fitting for his scheme. Reluctantly, the old man took down Bradley’s measurements and assured him the attire would be ready within three days.

Where shall I be off to next? Bradley left the shop and turned down the cobblestones. He sought out a barber to see to the sort of grooming he would require for his plan to come to fruition, and after leaving much better than when he entered, Bradley headed out for home.

“Well, if it is not the man who loses all his money at the track and blames others for it,” a low voice said as he passed a trio

of men outside the tinker's place.

Bradley only looked in their direction but kept walking. His ears pricked up as he heard the distinct sounds of footsteps following closely behind him, and he felt a strange sensation run up his spine as his nerves were alerted.

“Not so dandy now, are ya?” one of the other men asked. “You were bold enough at the horse track, but now you’ve got nothin’ to say to us?”

“No, as a matter of fact, I do not. Good day to you, sirs,” Bradley called over his shoulder as he continued on his way, already darting his eyes left and right to see who might be near enough to call out to should he be in need of aid.

“That’s right, go on to your fancy house now. We’ll just walk a-ways back, take in the sights.” The three men laughed, but Bradley could not discern the source of their amusement.

Ignoring them, he continued on until his home came into view. Bradley patted his pocket instinctively, feeling for the carefully hoarded coins his brother had begrudgingly given him. They represented all the wealth he owned in the world at that moment, and he was not going to give it up without a spectacle.

Glancing back, he saw that the three men were following still, yet their expressions were now serious. He suddenly realized their intention—they were scheming to follow him and catch him unaware in his lodgings, thereby robbing him or causing him harm.

I must alert someone, he thought with a fleeting sense of urgency. Panic-stricken, he looked about for a constable who might be walking the streets, and he was relieved to see a stout man in uniform up ahead. Bradley quickened his pace until he came within shouting distance of the officer, only to stop where he stood.

What if my troubles have followed me here to my own city? Bradley was remembering how only two days' prior he'd been in a gaol cell himself. *I'm not the most sympathetic case, at least not if the local authorities have been informed of my crimes.*

“Good evening to you, sir,” the constable said, tipping his hat and giving Bradley a quizzical look. “Is everything all right? You seem to be confounded by something.”

“Oh no, everything is fine. Thank you for asking,” Bradley replied, looking back to the men who'd given slow chase. They'd stopped at the sight of the constable and were now talking amongst themselves in low tones.

“That's good to hear. Have a good evening, sir,” the constable added before continuing on his way.

At the sight of the approaching officer, the three men dispersed, leaving Bradley with ample time to slip away around the corner. Keeping a careful watch for any sign of the men, he crept up to the servants' entrance behind his building and entered his home that way.

Only once he was safely upstairs did he let go of the breath that had caught in his chest. He did not know those men, but

he knew what they were after, something he did not have to give them. Whatever funds they had come to retrieve on behalf of men from the racetrack were not to be found, at least not yet.

“But soon,” Bradley whispered, pushing back the edge of the curtain with one fingertip to look outside. “I will have all the money I require very soon.”

CHAPTER 19



“Are you going to watch me eat?” Luci asked one morning when she had finally regained enough strength to sit up in bed. Lord Ambergrave nodded at her weak smile and beamed. “Surely you have other diversions to keep your interest.”

“Seeing you take sustenance is all the entertainment I require,” he answered, taking the tray from the servant and placing it on her lap gently. “I need no other amusement today.”

“I happen to find it odd, though,” she teased before trying another small bite of the still-warm bread. “As if I’m an exotic creature brought back from abroad for the delight of the court.”

“Should I go, then?” Lord Ambergrave asked, pointing towards the door. “I do not wish to make you feel gawked at. I’m only so relieved that you are recovered well enough to enjoy your breakfast, meager though it may be.”

He looked with some disdain at the plain toast and cup of tea, and shook his head.

“Where is the meat? The hearty broth that will build up your strength?” he demanded. Turning to the servant, he added, “Go to Mrs. Cushings and fetch something more filling than this.”

“But I do not want something more filling,” Luci protested with a smile, even as the servant hurried to comply. “I fear I shall have enough trouble finishing all of this. I’m sorry, I simply don’t feel up to anything heartier.”

“Do not apologize,” Lord Ambergrave said earnestly, sitting beside her bed. “You shall have whatever you like. But perhaps if you tried some broth, you might feel up to it?”

Still exhausted, Luci only smiled. “If it will make you happy, I shall try. But that is all I can promise.”

“That is more than enough to make me happy,” he replied, smiling broadly.

True to his word, Lord Ambergrave sat by while Luci nibbled at the toast and drank her tea. When a servant returned with the broth—more than Luci could enjoy even had she been well—she took it gratefully and smiled.

“I’m not watching,” Lord Ambergrave said, laughing as he turned his chair away from her. “Eat it or don’t, I shall not be wounded either way.”

Luci laughed, a sound that surprised even her. It felt good to enjoy something, even something so insignificant as a bit of breakfast, after feeling for so long as though she might die. But before long, worry took hold of her again.

“Not that I am spurring you into leaving, My Lord, but do you not have important business you must attend to?” she asked, dutifully tasting a corner of bread that she had sopped in the clear brown liquid. “I cannot be so selfish as to keep you from your affairs.”

“There is nothing more important right now than seeing that you have all you require,” the Marquess answered firmly. A look of concern crossed his face as he said, “But I would like to ask something of you.”

“I am in no position to grant or deny anyone their requests,” she chided playfully, “but what is it?”

“I know that it is the custom to address one another more formally... and I know that we are not well-known to one another,” he said, struggling to find the words before giving up and speaking plainly. “But will you not call me Gideon?”

Luci blinked in surprise. It had not occurred to her to speak in such a familiar way, and she wondered what had brought about this change. Thinking back to her own parents, two people who were truly devoted to one another’s happiness, she could only recall them ever speaking formally when others were nearby. However, she had caught their adoring tones and familiar names for each other at times when they thought no one could hear.

“Of course... Gideon,” she said, blushing at how awkward it felt to speak thus. “And I have heard you call me Luci, even when you thought I might not be able to hear you. It is a sound I rather liked.”

It was Gideon's turn to fall into shyness. He looked away and said, "As I was shouting for you that night in the storm, it just seemed the most natural thing in the world. I wasn't inquiring after some stranger with whom I might stand on ceremony, I was desperately searching for someone who means a great deal to me, even if I did not realize it then."

"In case I have not said as much, I am very glad you found me," Luci said solemnly. She reached out her hand to Gideon and he took it eagerly, holding it tightly. "I will not lie, there were a number of moments these past few weeks when I feared I would not live through this. And there were perhaps just as many moments when I wished for it to be so. But you have given me sufficient cause since then to wish to live."

"That shall be my lifelong duty," Gideon whispered, looking away and blinking back a tear. He coughed and smiled sheepishly, then said, "But enough of somber things. I wish to talk of pleasant diversions. What shall we do when you are feeling well enough to leave your bed?"

Luci thought for several minutes, the ideas swirling in conflicting planes. What did her heart most desire at the moment? But with Gideon in tow as well? Eventually, she settled on the most honest answer she could think of.

"I truly enjoyed our excursion," Luci admitted. "To simply be out of doors, riding Jacques. I miss him terribly. However," she added with a knowing grin, "I have been informed that someone continues to see to his care and his exercise. You would not know who that person is, would you? I should like to thank them for their great kindness."

Gideon looked embarrassed again. “I know that the creature matters a great deal to you, and I also know that you enjoy riding. It seemed only fitting that I practice a much-neglected skill while tending to your horse.”

“But I saw you ride that day,” she said, confused. “Why do you think you have neglected your ability?”

This time, the Marquess remained silent. He brightened again only when changing the subject.

“What about a long journey? We could go to London, visit some people, see some entertainments and performances. Would that suit you as well?”

“Oh, very much!” Luci said, joining in this new proposal now that she saw how she had pained Gideon with her questioning. “But how long must we be gone? I would like to see my parents for a visit first if it is to be a long time.”

“How foolish I’ve been! Of course you should like to see them,” Gideon cried. “We will arrange a visit straight away, well before we make any other plans. In fact, if it suits you and once you are well enough, would you be put out if I left you in their care only long enough to tend to some business? I promise you, no more than a few days.”

“That would be wonderful, though... Gideon,” she said hesitantly, “I have been selfish. I am sorry for it. I know you have important matters to attend to, but I was feeling very put out over...well, the whole arrangement. You will not have to ferry me off to others every time you must travel. I am much relieved now and will not put that burden on you.”

“It is no burden, dear Luci.” Gideon looked somber again as he said, “I came to this arrangement with your father without much thought ahead of time. I’m fairly ashamed of how I’ve made a mess of things. In the absence of knowing you or knowing how to conduct myself around you, I simply chose to escape. It was very unfair, and I’m sorry for it.”

Luci fell back against the pillows, tired from their conversation, but she smiled adoringly. “I am making a proclamation right now. As Luci, Marchioness of Ambergrave, I hereby declare that we are finished with all of our apologies. We have both committed offenses against the other, some intentionally petulant and others completely by mistake. We have now made our amends and will henceforth move forward without looking back. Does that suit you?”

“Very much, My Lady. You are truly a wise and generous leader of Ashworth Hall,” Gideon answered jovially, joining in Luci’s game. “Come, we shall celebrate with a feast of broth and more bread.”

“I cannot,” Luci whined, laughing at Gideon’s attempt at feeding her more. “I am already uncomfortably full from the first bowl.”

“Then if it is all right with you, I shall leave you to your rest now,” he said, taking her tray himself and carrying it over to a table. “You need to become stronger, and the only way is to not tax yourself overly much. I will see to Jacques, and then I have some decisions to make about the repairs to Ashworth.”

“Will you come back later?” Luci asked hopefully. “Perhaps for supper?”

“Of course,” Gideon said, a genuine smile lighting up his stern features. “I should like nothing better. Rest now, and I will return soon.”

When he had left her alone, Luci’s mind began to churn with a long-forgotten concern—Ashworth Hall. What had Gideon just said about seeing to the repairs? In the tumultuous days of her arrival, followed soon by the disagreement with Gideon and her resulting injuries, she had forgotten all about the damage to the house.

She had intended to write to her mother and learn what she might have heard about this home and its fire, but she had not had time. Luci gasped as a new thought filled her with dread, the realization that her parents never knew she was ill.

“You’re no invalid, silly girl,” she chastised herself as she looked across the vast room to her writing desk. “Get up. You must write to your mother at once.”

Hesitating at first, Luci gently pulled her feet from beneath the coverlet and slid down until they reached the floor. It felt cold beneath her bare feet, but the feeling seemed to awaken her more. This was the first time she’d so much as stood without assistance in weeks, and she was both eager and fearful about walking even this short distance.

Clinging to the chair Gideon had just vacated, Luci managed to shuffle slowly across the distance. Each step felt stronger, and each step proved to cause her to tremble less. After some time, she reached her desk and slumped gratefully into the chair where she required several minutes to recover.

When she felt up to it, Luci retrieved a sheet of paper and her writing supplies and wrote to her mother. She was careful not to divulge anything that would cause the woman to panic, but did mention the severity of her illness, though not the full truth of its initial cause. She further inquired about the state of Ashworth Hall and any circumstances that might have led to its ruin.

“My Lady,” Mrs. Cushings cried as she opened the door to retrieve Luci’s tray. “What are you doing out of bed?”

Luci smiled at the woman who’d cared for her so tenderly throughout the weeks of her illness. “I have an urgent letter I must write. Will you help me see that it is posted?”

“Of course. But My Lady, you should not be up. Here, please let me help you back to your bed. Or at least let me call your maid.”

“Thank you, that would be wonderful. Only let me finish this first.” Luci continued to write, scrawling her words as quickly as careful penmanship would allow. Not wishing to keep the housekeeper waiting, Luci kept her letter brief.

“There. All done,” she said weakly. “Thank you, Mrs. Cushings, I will rest now.”

The housekeeper took Luci by the arm and guided her back slowly, then helped position her feet beneath the covers before tucking the blankets around her.

“Oh, and would you please tell Cook that her broth is wonderful? It has had the most amazing effect, I can already tell that I am feeling stronger thanks to her concoction,” Luci said, and Mrs. Cushings beamed.

“I will be certain to let her know, she’ll be rather pleased to hear it’s done you good,” the housekeeper answered. “But I’ll be needing the physician for the pain in my heart if you were to try to get up and fall. Don’t try to be brave, only call your maid or one of us to help you next time.”

The older woman smiled sweetly and took the tray away, leaving Luci to rest from her exertion. While it was true that the staff all doted on her, she had to wonder how deep their loyalties ran. Would any of them tell her the truth about this house if she were to ask?

CHAPTER 20



It was another two days before Luci felt well enough—and Gideon or any of the staff would even consider it—to get up and leave her rooms. An entourage of skeptical supporters all but carried her downstairs, leaving Luci to wonder how many more days it would take before she would be permitted to actually venture outdoors.

But Gideon surprised her. After she'd bathed and dressed and been led to the drawing room, he announced they would take the excursion she so desired later that day, if she felt up to it.

“Absolutely! Yes, I cannot wait to be out of this house,” she cried before remembering herself. “That did not sound polite at all, did it? I only meant to say, while this is a lovely home, I wish to see the outdoors again. If only to assure myself that a world beyond these walls still exists.”

Gideon laughed. “I assure you, the world continues to move forward in your absence, though it cannot thrive as it once did when you were a part of it. But I understand your agony. One who loves the sky above and the grass beneath their feet as you do must be longing to see it with your own eyes. We'll go after you've had your luncheon.”

“Always with the food,” Luci said, sighing dramatically and pretending to faint. “I shall be a stuffed pork roast before this is all over.”

Nothing could be farther from the truth, though, and Luci knew it. While she had written to her mother that she wished to visit, Luci was still grateful for the brief delay as it would give her time to bring some color back to her pale cheeks. She knew from the fit of her gown and the bony edges of her wrists that she was considerably thinner than before.

“What if we took it with us?” Gideon suggested, and Luci’s face lit up. “I’ll ask Cook to pack a hamper that we might take to the grove. It will be warm enough but without the glare of the hot sun there.”

Soon, Gideon and Luci were loaded into a serviceable wagon for their outing. Luci instantly felt her spirits lift at the warmth of the midday sun on her thin shoulders. She lifted her face towards the sky and closed her eyes, letting the rays revive her.

“Oh no, do not close your eyes,” Gideon said, speaking softly in her ear. The feel of his voice brushing near her ear gave her an instant thrill. “You’ll miss the surprise I have for you.”

“What surprise?” Luci asked, but she stopped short when she looked where Gideon pointed. A stable hand emerged from behind the house near the mews, leading Jacques by a line. “Jacques! How wonderful to see him at last. Am I to ride today?”

Gideon only laughed, a joyful sound that carried no ill-intent. “I fear not. Oh, do not pout at me, my dear, that is Sir

Rawlings' orders. You must take it up with him when he comes 'round again, but until then, I am going to be on my best behavior and do as he has ordered."

Luci looked sad but in truth, she was not feeling up to riding in the saddle yet. Gideon saw her wistful look, and added, "I only thought he might be nice company along the way, and he needs his exercise as much as you need this outing. Shall we go?"

They set off after Gideon tied Jacques to the wagon near Luci so that he might walk alongside her. The sunshine was a welcome sight after weeks of a darkened, stifling bedchamber. A gentle breeze carried the welcome scent of fresh clover in the air and Luci breathed in deeply, reveling in the feeling of the earthy aroma filling her otherwise poorly body.

"I do have another surprise if you're feeling up to it," Gideon said after they'd ridden for nearly half an hour. "But you must tell me truthfully if you're too tired."

"No, I feel wonderful," Luci said, fibbing only a little. The thought of returning to the darkness of her chamber filled her with dread, a sinking feeling that was far more harmful than any weariness. "What is this surprise?"

"I thought we might perhaps ride into town and see the square," Gideon said merrily. "You haven't so much as set foot there since you arrived at Ashworth, have you?"

"Why, no! I haven't had the chance," she answered, brightening considerably.

“Then we shall go, but I’m sorry, I must insist we do not linger on this first visit. I cannot chance having you fall ill again on my account.” Gideon smiled and squeezed Luci’s hand, positively beaming. “Let us return Jacques to the stables and then we’ll be off.”

Luci wanted to lean back against the seat and close her eyes, if only to enhance her enjoyment of the moment, but she dared not risk missing the serene beauty surrounding Ashworth Hall. She couldn’t help but sneak glances at Gideon as well, finally in the state of mind that would let her look on him with admiration.

What a strange journey it has been to come to this point. From heartache and anger to gratitude and adoration, I would only that it had not taken such grave danger to come around.

“What are you thinking about, dearest?” Gideon asked, and Luci blushed at the unexpected term of endearment.

“Only that I’m very, very happy at this moment,” she answered truthfully. It was Gideon’s turn to shiver slightly with giddiness, obviously pleased that Luci was here with him.

“It will be my lifelong promise that this is to be only the first of an infinite number of joyful days,” he assured her. “Now what would you like to see first? There’s a lovely chapel filled with a number of paintings, a row of charming shops, a rather small but still enchanting garden near a duck pond in the square... anything you like.”

“I think I shall want to see it all, even if today we only take a turn around the streets. Do stop me from jumping out of the

wagon in my excitement and racing after a tiny duckling, though,” Luci joked, “as I’m still not up to running around like a mad woman.”

Gideon laughed at the notion of the Marchioness of Ambergrave running through the gardens as animals fanned out before her, trying to escape her outstretched hands.

“I see,” he said after he could stop laughing. “Do not worry, I will never permit you to make a spectacle of yourself if it could result in harm to one of God’s tiny creatures.”

Luci was mesmerized by the nearby village. As Gideon had said, there were a number of shops and a market where goods from the surrounding farms were hawked. People milled about their work or their errands, waving or tipping their hats as Luci and Gideon passed.

“I don’t understand, though,” Luci said, sounding worried. “I do not see any children about.”

“Ah, then we must visit the school,” Gideon answered. “It is a unique project I’m rather fond of.”

He turned their horses down a wide cobblestone road and circled around to a two-story building beyond the chapel. A great brass bell hung from a post in the front, a rope swinging idly by its side.

“This was a cause that my mother first championed,” he explained, slowing the horses to a stop near the wood and stone building. “Unlike many that the government refers to as

a 'public school,' any child is permitted to learn here, regardless of the faith or means."

"Truly?" Luci asked, astonished. She sat up straighter to see better, adding, "Anyone? And what of their lessons?"

"All of the children learn maths, letters, readings, common health and hygienic practices, and religion. My mother's parents had championed and supported a foundlings' home in their region, and this was something of a cause for my mother when she wed and came to live at Ashworth."

"She sounds like a very smart and educated person herself," Luci suggested quietly, broaching the subject of his family with trepidation. "You must be very proud of her work here."

"Yes, I am. This school was of her own making, and I would continue to serve as its patron even should I find myself penniless, taking the food off my table to see to it that it remains open," Gideon said, looking at the school with renewed interest. "Of course, my father lent his expertise and financial support to the farmers' guild. Both of my parents were particularly concerned with the people's welfare, and I hope that my efforts continue their important work."

A door to the school suddenly opened and a melee of pupils rushed out. Luci looked at Gideon in surprise, though he only smiled.

"Their lessons must be finished for the day," he explained. He pointed to one throng of young students and said, "Ah, what fortuitous timing. There is young Collin."

“Collin? Who works in your gardens? He attends the school?”
Luci asked, somewhat surprised.

“Of course, why should he not?”

“I only thought that he would continue on in your service. What need has a gardener of lessons and schooling?” she wondered.

“Every person has a need. There is nothing wasted in learning, whether it be for a duke or a servant. Of course, Collin has showed great promise in his studies, and if he chooses to continue his education when he is older and seek some other form of occupation, he will have my support.” Gideon raised up higher in the wagon seat and waved, calling out, “Collin. Hurry, we shall carry you home.”

The boy waved wildly in acknowledgement, then bade his classmates goodbye before running to the wagon. He climbed up in the back and placed his books upon the floor carefully before sitting down himself.

“Thank you, My Lord. It is well met that you were in town today,” the boy said. “And is this Lady Ambergrave at last?”

Luci was taken aback at the friendly nature between the two, uncertain as to how to respond to such a forward request for an introduction from someone of Collins’ age and station, but Gideon was not baffled by it.

“Of course, I had forgotten you have not yet been introduced. Lady Ambergrave, may I present Master Collin Drummond, a

particularly impudent young man who is a veritable magician with the gardens but severely lacking in any sort of skill at cricket?”

Luci couldn't help but laugh, especially when she turned and saw the look of mock indignation on the boy's face. “It is lovely to meet you, Master Collin.”

“Very lovely to meet you as well, My Lady. Though I apologize that I shall be very rude to your husband and call him out for his outrageous lies. I am the better bowler, and he knows it.”

Luci laughed again when Gideon feigned anger, reaching behind him and pretending to swat at the boy while Collin ducked from Gideon's outstretched hand.

“Wait until I get you home, you insolent lad. Then I shall show you who is the better bowler. In fact, we shall make a wager, the loser owes the other a handsome sum,” Gideon roared playfully. He turned to Luci and winked, and she immediately knew how the match between the two would end.

“I accept your wager,” Collin replied confidently. “Though Mum will not let me accept my well-deserved winnings. She says placing bets is the road to ruin.”

“She is quite right, you must listen to her counsel in all things,” Gideon said firmly, then murmured as he added, “But I can still best you.”

Together, they pulled away from the school and out of the town proper, then turned back along the road that would carry them home. Gideon peppered Collin with questions about school, which the boy answered with mixed results.

“I’m afraid the new teacher enjoys very dull books,” Collin complained once, “and does not permit us to read any adventure stories. It is nothing but speeches in the Greek and Latin translations.”

“But not Homer?” Luci asked, turning back to face Collin again.

He seemed surprised that she read Homer, and agreed with her readily. “Precisely. Why can we not read of the Trojan War instead of dull lectures from ancient thinkers? I’m surprised, My Lord. You’d told me already that Lady Ambergrave was beautiful, but you had not mentioned that she is well-read, as well.”

Gideon stiffened when Luci turned to look at him.

“That’s because I have not had a great number of conversations about her schooling, Collin,” the Marquess said through clenched teeth, obviously embarrassed by the boy’s forthright nature. “But I am quite capable of seeing her face. You, on the other hand, were sworn to secrecy and not intended to tell anyone.”

Collin and Luci fell into a fit of giggles that eventually wore down Gideon until he, too, joined their laughter.

“Well, Collin,” Luci said when she could speak plainly again, “when the rest of my things arrive, I shall be sure to loan you several wonderful adventure books. I have both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, in both Greek and an English translation, but I think you shall enjoy Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift more. So long as your studies come first, of course.”

“Certainly! Thank you, My Lady, that would be wonderful,” Collin answered, beaming at what was now his new favorite resident of Ashworth Hall.

They rode on, chatting pleasantly as Luci asked further Collin about his schooling and his work in the gardens. Gideon pointed out different landmarks and interesting structures as they passed them, before letting Collin out of the wagon at his cottage.

They drove on towards the stable, Luci looking intently at Gideon. He avoided her gaze until finally he asked with mock indifference, “Is there something you wish to say?”

“Yes, there is,” she replied in a falsely formal way. “You think I’m beautiful?”

“I should think that would be obvious.”

“But you thought so some time ago,” Luci said, hinting at a deeper meaning. “You have not left my side for some time now, so you must have told the boy as such before I became ill.”

“Did I? I don’t recall when the exact conversation took place,” Gideon said, looking away. Luci smiled devilishly, aware of the game her husband was playing at.

Gideon sheepishly returned her grin when he looked her way, but then he turned very serious. “Great beauty or no, you look overly tired. I’ve taken you out for too long, I am sorry.”

“I am somewhat weary,” Luci confessed, only now realizing just how much effort she’d expended. “But I would not trade it for anything. Today’s outing was wonderful, Gideon, exactly the remedy I’ve needed. Thank you for suggesting it.”

“Anything, my dear. But come, we must get you inside now,” he replied sweetly, pulling the horses to a stop and climbing down. A stable hand took the reins while Gideon ran around to the other side to help Luci down, lifting her into his arms instead of taking her hand.

“Gideon,” she said, laughing when he did not set her on her feet. He only smiled as he began to walk towards the house, preventing her from taking a step.

“It is the least I can do after exhausting you today,” he answered, dipping slightly and using his elbow to open the latch on the servant’s entrance.

As he entered the kitchen, all eyes turned to them in surprise. Mrs. Cushings ran forward to help, assuming Luci had succumbed to illness once again, but she stopped when she heard her laughter. Gideon walked on with Luci, carrying her up the stairs while the staff exchanged amused looks.

“Well, that does beat all,” Luci heard Mrs. Cushings say with a soft giggle.

Yes, it does. Luci looked at Gideon’s adoring face. *I should think that nothing shall come as a surprise to me anymore.*

CHAPTER 21



“*I* should say yesterday evening was a success, Mary,” Lady Thornshire said kindly as the Duchess entered the room the next morning. Smiling though tired, she poured her sister some tea and held it out to her as she said, “Everyone seemed to enjoy themselves rather well, don’t you think?”

“I suppose,” Lady Hardigree replied, sitting in the chair adjacent and taking the delicate cup. “Though Alistair insisted on heading off to the cards and brandy long before the dancing was over. It was only through the sheer will of the young ladies in attendance and their insistence that the gentlemen dance with them, that the entirety of the roosters did not flock to their cigars, leaving us no one to dance with.”

“That is true. What a disaster that was averted. I had noticed a slow drip of absence as they disappeared one by one throughout the evening,” Lady Thornshire admitted with a laugh. “But at least they held off until plenty of merriment was had by all.”

“I know I have been... somewhat troublesome... these past two weeks, but this was an important event for Alistair and me,” the Duchess said, looking down at her tea cup before reaching for a piece of fatty meat and tossing it to her hopeful

dog. “I am glad of your help with it. There were important people in attendance, and everything had to be precise.”

“Think nothing of it,” Lady Thornshire said, waving off the explanation with a flick of her hand. “This time here has given me leave to ignore the troubles I face at home. First Edgar’s business, then losing Luci, I just could not imagine sitting there any longer, peering into the empty rooms as I passed.”

“Still,” Lady Hardigree said, patting her sister’s shoulder, “I am glad of your help and your company.”

A servant entered and presented Lady Hardigree with a tray of correspondence, largely invitations to upcoming dinners and balls. There were already a few notes of thanks for the evening—mostly from those who would be departing for far-flung locations that day and not at home to send word at a later time—though it was far too soon to expect many more. The servant departed and returned with a second tray for Lady Thornshire, a pile that was smaller as she was only a long-time guest.

“Oh, Mary. At last, there is a letter from Luci,” she cried, opening that one first and holding it towards the light streaming in from a window.

“You see? And you were worried like a goose, and it was all for nothing. I told you she would send word when the time was most convenient—” the Duchess began, but she stopped when Lady Thornshire cried out. “Good heavens, Angeline. What is the matter?”

“Luci has taken ill. She was prevented from writing because she was in bed with... pneumonia. But how? How could I not know such a thing? My own child had fallen ill and I knew nothing of it.” Lady Thornshire stifled a sob, remembering at the last moment how her sister despised tears.

“Well, how could you have known? You are not a traveling sideshow clairvoyant,” Lady Hardigree said, sniffing disdainfully. “But what does it say, how is Luci now?”

Lady Thornshire read it silently to herself, her eyes roving the page rapidly as she took it all in. Finally, she breathed a sigh of both fear and relief.

“She writes that she is much better now, but that the doctor said her condition is still rather precarious,” she said, reading until she had to turn the page over. “But as soon as she is well, she and Lord Ambergrave shall travel to see us. Oh Mary! I must make preparations to depart at once.”

“What? You cannot leave now, you hardly slept at all last night,” the Duchess said wisely.

“But I cannot know when she sent this letter. For all I know, she and her husband have already departed for Stonefield and I will not be there to receive them.” Lady Thornshire was silent while she made her decision, but then nodded firmly. “Yes, I must go at once.”

Lady Hardigree floundered for an argument that would dissuade her sister, but she could think of nothing that would stay her. As she thought, Lady Thornshire plucked out the remainder of her letters and examined each one.

“Oh Mary! This letter is from Edgar!” she cried out again, although happily. “Surely he must not know of poor Luci’s plight.” She read over its contents while her sister waited patiently for any news. “No, he must not, he has not mentioned it. Although I am very glad to say he has made payment on a ship and it has already delivered its first cargo. The weight of the cargo and the value of the goods has provided him sufficient profit to make the next four payments on the vessel.”

“That is astounding news. How wonderful for Edgar,” Lady Hardigree cried, taking her sister’s hand. “Most investors must share their profits with their partners and use the bulk of it to support themselves. Fortunately, with Lord Ambergrave’s money, all of this is sheer profit for Edgar. Your situation will be greatly improved in no time at all.”

Lady Thornshire put down her letters and hugged her sister tightly. She whispered tearfully, “Thank you for that kindness. There are those who would instantly blame a man of business the moment his dealings fall through. You are a rare gem who sees Edgar in much the same way I do. He is blameless in the loss of our fortunes.”

“Yes, Angeline,” the Duchess said, sitting back and looking at her sister squarely. “You must remember that always, even when the news is less uplifting. Edgar’s only fault was in trusting someone to keep their word. Always be a comfort to him, and never chide him for this error.”

“I wouldn’t consider such a thing,” Lady Thornshire said rather hotly. “He has done everything a wife could ask of her husband for all these years. Why, this situation could have happened to any one of us. If I should ever have the

opportunity to speak of my feelings on the matter to the villain who abandoned Edgar's company, rest assured that I will not finish until I have had my say."

"That's the little firebrand I remember from our childhood," Lady Hardigree said, laughing heartily. She turned serious, though, a compassionate look in her eye. "But yes, now I see that you must go. Go to await Luci's arrival and greet her properly, but also go to celebrate your husband's success. Let him know that his hard-won efforts are not without your appreciation. This must have been a terrible ordeal for you both, but he has not had the benefit of a sister to visit and take his mind off of it."

"Thank you, Mary, for everything," Lady Thornshire said softly. She brightened and jumped up from her seat and said, "I must make ready at once."

* * *

The sun had already set for the evening when Bradley dared to leave his lodgings. He had spent several days holed up inside like a mouse when the cat is near, fearful of venturing out. Every time he had so much as moved the curtain aside to peer at the street below, he was certain he'd spied those three men—or others who looked like them—waiting for him, watching his door from near the corner.

"Are you heading out, My Lord?" his servant asked. "And at this time o' night?"

"Yes, Mrs. Bryce," he answered, still piling items in a small valise. He turned to the stooped old woman who served as cook, maid, and housekeeper, the only servant he still employed, though that was largely in exchange for her room and keeping. He grimaced and said, "I shall be gone for a matter of days, but I will send word of when I expect to return."

Until then, no one is to be received or allowed inside. Is that clear?"

"Aye, My Lord. No one comes in," she repeated, a somewhat fearful look on her face.

"Very good," he said with a firm nod, then scooped up his bag and headed out through the kitchen. Through an acquaintance in the postal service, he'd managed to secure a seat on the mail coach that would carry him through the night. It would deposit him a lengthy journey from his destination, but with luck, he would secure passages with passing carts or wagons.

It will all be worth it, Bradley thought darkly as he waited for the mail coach to pass behind his building. Your days of shrinking about like a shrew are nearly at their end. The list of people who shall pay for their ill treatment of you is not long but it is varied, starting with that vapid, betrayer of a wench, Luci.

Standing alone outside in the blackness of night, Bradley's anger only strengthened him by some small measure. He still jumped at every sound, at every scurry of a cat on the prowl. By the time the large, nondescript coach finally arrived, he threw his valise on the floor and climbed in, settling on the hard, wooden bench and leaning against the window.

He attempted to sleep away the hours of the journey ahead of him, but at every stop of the coach and the accompanying shouts of workers loading or unloading the parcels from all around him, Bradley was startled awake again. His sour mood was only made worse by the coarse greetings and rough language of the men nearby. They knew nothing of him or his station, and worse, they did not seem to care.

“Aye there, sir, you’ll have to stand up for a bit,” one of them even called out, addressing him crudely. “We’ll get these bags in here good, then you can recline on them.”

“Recline? On the post?” Bradley asked, certain he hadn’t heard the man correctly.

“Aye. The post has to get there, not you,” the man said, laughing scornfully. “Be glad yer bum can fit on top with all these bags.”

Bradley fumed silently, knowing that an insult in reply would likely cost him this seat. Instead, he added the circumstance to the growing list of injustices he’d endured, spurring him on in his intentions.

I will have what’s owed to me, he thought angrily, balling his fists before climbing back up in the coach to continue on. *There will be those who pay for what they’ve done.*

As the coach bounced and jostled over the unkept road, Bradley stewed at the injustice of it all. He should have been traveling at that moment in a fine carriage pulled by horses his stablemaster had selected for his transport. He should have left home at a reasonable time, safe from scoundrels who prowled around in search of him. He should be traveling to some destination for a holiday or on important business, perhaps with a wife beside him, a wife who would provide him children to inherit his vast fortune and title.

Instead, none of that seemed likely to come to pass. He was being treated like a common stowaway, traveling by night like

a thief escaping the authorities, while wedged among worn canvas sacks of letters and lumpy parcels. The indignity of it was somehow worse than the reality.

“Only a few more days,” Bradley whispered aloud, soothed by the words he repeated to himself even as he punched down a canvas sack to make it more comfortable for the next part of the journey. “I shall have all that I desire, all that should be rightfully mine.”

CHAPTER 22



The journey to Stonefield Park was as pleasant as Luci could hope. The weather had continued to be fair, a propitious thing since she doubted she'd ever find thunderstorms to be anything other than terrifying after her ordeal. The enclosed carriage was luxurious, though a bit stifling after weeks shut up inside, at least until she pushed open the window to allow some breeze to enter.

The only damper was Gideon.

“Is something the matter?” Luci asked for at least the fifth time that day, though all of her previous attempts had only been met with a somewhat curt response or an offhand excuse.

Gideon shook his head, smiling weakly. “No, nothing at all. I just don't enjoy long journeys, that's all.”

She started to speak again, but Gideon had already turned to look at the surrounding countryside, effectively ending any discussion or attempt at conversation. Instead, Luci concentrated on the book she'd brought with her for the long journey as Christina was already engaged in a quiet nap.

Many hours later, Luci was grateful for the appearance of her childhood home in the distance, her worries about Gideon's somber mood already dissipating as she envisioned her parents' welcoming embraces. This, at least, turned out not to be a disappointment as both of her parents were already standing in front of the immense house when the carriage arrived.

"Luci! Come here," her mother cried, already winding her arms around Luci's thin frame before she'd even departed the carriage.

"Mother! It is so good to see you," Luci cried, returning her embrace. "And Father, you as well."

Gideon and Christina were momentarily forgotten in the joyful reunion, but soon enough, Luci extracted herself from her parents' arms and gestured to them.

"And you remember Lord Ambergrave?" she said, then added, "And Miss Ross is returned, as well."

After the greetings had been exchanged, the group ventured into the house, Lady Thornshire still keeping a tight grip on her daughter by winding her arm through Luci's elbow. They spoke hurriedly, the mother immediately inquiring about the girl's health.

"I am much better now," Luci said, intentionally avoiding any answer as to how she had come to be ill in the first place.

“All the same, I should like for our physician to see you,” Lady Thornshire said firmly. “He has tended to all of your childhood maladies and injuries, and I trust his judgment above all others.”

Luci noticed how Gideon bristled beside her, yet said nothing. In fact, he had said very little since Stonefield first appeared in their sight, as if his earlier quiet had been replaced by absolute silence.

Luci was determined to brush it off.

He may only be suffering a sense of shame, from the knowledge that there was another who once commanded my affection. I did remind him most cruelly how he had swooped in like a falcon and stolen me away without my consent, just as that bird plucks a poor mouse from a field.

Inside the house, Gideon bowed courteously then turned to follow the footman who would lead him to his chambers. Luci and Christina exchanged the briefest glance, though Luci could not miss the look of consternation of her governess' face.

“It has been an overly long journey. If you do not need anything, I think I should like to go lie down,” Christina said as they neared the sitting room.

“Of course!” Luci replied, already walking towards the doorway to follow her parents. “And do let me know if you wish to visit anyone while we are here. Your sister, perhaps?”

Christina nodded and left, and Luci hurried to join her parents. They sat together and began talking all at once.

“What news from the two of you?” Luci finally asked, laughing. “You must tell me everything I’ve missed.”

Lady Thornshire shared the news from the Duchess of Hardigree’s residence, telling the most important details of her visit and the ball. Lord Thornshire in turn spoke of his new business venture, and Luci noted a sense of confidence and pride that she hadn’t seen in him throughout her last days in their home.

“But what of you? I want to know all about this illness. And what has happened to your head, you have a scar there,” Lady Thornshire said quietly, looking to the door. “Was it... was it your husband’s doing?”

“What? No. Absolutely not,” Luci cried, surprised at how much she wished to defend him. “It was all part of my ordeal.”

Leaving out any mention of the horrible Lord Stillscar and minimizing the full scope of their argument that night, Luci explained that she had merely run from the house and fallen. The time that she’d endured in the elements had caused her to become ill as a result. She could not help but notice that her parents exchanged a brief glance, one that gave her pause.

“What is it?” she asked, noting their silent exchange. “I told you, all is well now. Gideon has been most attentive and kind, shouldering the blame needlessly for my illness.”

“It is not only that, my dear,” her mother said. Lady Thornshire looked to her husband and cocked an eyebrow. He only cleared his throat and nodded briefly, so her mother continued. “I have had word that Lord Ambergrave may have some troubling secrets, ones that were disturbing to me.”

“What do you mean? Who said this?” Luci asked, still looking from her mother to her father and back again.

“It actually came to us through your aunt’s relative, but one whom she says is fully trustworthy in these sorts of matters. Has Lord Ambergrave told you anything of a fire at his home?”

“In truth, no,” Luci admitted, lowering her voice and thinking back through their conversations. “I know well enough that there was once a fire, for the house is still under repair and much work has been done. But I do not know of any particulars. I was hoping, in fact, that you might know something of it.”

“It all seems to be a mystery to everyone,” Lady Thornshire explained sadly. “Only that he was gravely injured—”

“Which I know about,” Luci interjected in a way that was meant to quell any discussion of the subject that was so upsetting to her husband.

“—but that his parents died at the time. This cousin seemed to imply that perhaps Lord Ambergrave had a hand in causing the fire, too,” her mother said.

Luci sat dumbfounded, trying to reconcile all the ways her husband had acted. So cold and aloof when they wed and she first spoke with him, then so callous and rage-filled when they argued, but then so doting and attentive in the days since then. To be certain, he was very secretive about a great many things: his business, the fire, the injury he had sustained, and even Collin at first. Now he was once again stoic and distant, though she knew not why as this visit had been his suggestion.

“We are only worried for your safety,” Lord Thornshire said in a very low tone, looking to the door from time to time to see that they were not overheard. “I chide myself every day that I did not learn more about this man before accepting his offer. In my panic, I feel I may have put you in harm’s way.”

Luci thought for a moment, weighing her parents’ concerns. She had always trusted their judgment in every matter, knowing how they adored her so. She nodded, and chose her own response carefully.

“I will be very careful,” she assured them, “but I also feel there is no cause for alarm. Lord Ambergrave is at times in an odd sort of mood, but he has not shown the slightest penchant for dangerous behaviors.”

“How can you be sure he is not only on his best behavior, simply because the marriage is still so new?” her mother asked.

“I suppose I cannot. But in these past few weeks, he has even neglected his own needs to stay by my bedside, to see to it that I receive proper care, even to attempt to fatten me up.” Luci laughed, then said soberly, “It is only a feeling, but I think he is a very good man with a strong character. Whatever

transpired that terrible night, I cannot believe it was Lord Ambergrave's doing."

"I pray that you are right, daughter," her father said gravely, "but know this. We will not let any harm come to you. You must only say the word and I will see to it that the matter is taken care of in a discreet way. If the need ever arises, you must only say so."

Luci looked shocked, a sudden chill of fear settling over her. It was one thing to believe her parents were only concerned for her happiness, but quite another to know that they may fear for her safety. Her mind reeled with memories of every interaction she'd had with Gideon, with every cross word or unkind remark, but also every adoring sentiment and compliment.

"I think I should speak with him," Luci said, rising to go. Her mother looked concerned but her father only nodded. "It will be all right, Mother. No harm will come to any of us."

It took a few moments to locate Gideon's chambers, but when she did, Luci found him standing on the wide balcony overlooking the gardens. A servant had been dispatched to serve as his valet in the absence of Gideon's own, who had still not been employed after all these weeks.

"There you are," Luci said brightly, joining Gideon outside. "I knocked at your door, but you must not have heard."

"No, I did not," he replied plainly, still standing at the low wall that ran the length of the balcony.

“You have been very quiet since we left Ashworth. I know that I have asked you if something is amiss and each time you’ve said rather abruptly that there is not,” she continued slowly, “but I’m afraid I have come to the decision that I do not believe you.”

Gideon turned sharply and stared at Luci, but the resolve on his face began to crumble. He shook his head sadly and looked away, refusing to meet her gaze.

“Yes, there is something amiss,” he admitted, “but I cannot explain it to you. I’m sorry. You have been very kind and devoted, but it is not a matter I can discuss.”

“You cannot discuss it even with your wife?” Luci chided, struggling to keep an even measure in her words as her ire grew.

“No, else I would. Instantly and without hesitation,” Gideon replied, still looking away. “But I am even more sorry that I’ve allowed the matter to upset you. I will do better at maintaining a pleasant demeanor.”

“See that you do,” she replied angrily, unconcerned with manners and proper decorum. “You are a guest in my parents’ home now and have given us all reason to believe that you wish to be anywhere but here. It is beyond rude, and now borders on inexcusable.”

“Luci, I’m—” Gideon started to say, but Luci had already turned and stormed back inside.

* * *

Gideon pounded his fist against the low stone wall, fuming. How had he allowed this to happen? He'd had a clear plan in mind when he sought Luci's hand in marriage, and all of it had fallen to pieces. Everything he'd fought for during the years since his parents' deaths was coming to ruin, and for what? A beautiful woman with a sharp wit and an even sharper tongue?

"You've allowed your heart to take over where only your head should have ruled," he muttered under his breath, still standing outside as the first tendrils of dusk began to approach. Instead of calming his nerves, the beauty of the surrounding gardens only irritated him more.

Why could I not have had this life? he thought miserably, looking from the towering willow trees to the flowing water of the brook, the place where their fronds brushed the surface and left endless circles of ripples in their wake. *A loving family, a quiet home... it's all a man truly needs.*

The irony of his longing suddenly speared his mind. All these years he had been fueled by anger and thoughts of dominating the objects of his vengeful feud. But he already had a beautiful home with serene fields, tenants who farmed the countryside at his whim, and now a lovely wife who sought to ensure his happiness.

Why was it not enough for him?

"But it could be," Gideon whispered, tears of longing in his eyes as he watched a pair of swans glide gracefully across the water towards their nest for the night. "I have all of this and more, I have had it for years. There is no reason to carry this pain with me and refuse to let go of my hold on it."

The moment of clarity was like a flash of lightning in Gideon's mind. He had masked the agony of a single event long ago by encasing it in a shroud of rage. The anger lingered more than the grief, even more than the physical pain he'd endured. Losing his parents and his health in the course of one fateful evening had been the cruelest sort of torture, but even he had to admit that many others had faced similar circumstances. The difference was that they had not allowed their fates to eat at them, to destroy them body and soul until all that remained was an unloving shell of distant indifference.

Unloving... when he had a wife who sought to make him happy, tenants who proudly served him, a deserving, fatherless young boy who idolized him...

"I have everything," he said sadly, "and I've fought for so long because I thought I had nothing."

Gideon knew what he must do now. He had to find Luci, tell her the truth, and pray that she still retained a shred of the affection she might have grown towards of him. It was still possible, though, that she would banish him from her sight and never speak to him again.

"Luci!" Gideon called, racing indoors and out of his chambers, turning this way and that in the hallway until he might find her. As he hurried, his mind raced with wonder at how he might explain himself to her.

Turning the corner, Gideon collided sharply with a bitter-faced woman who cried out in surprise.

“My apologies, Miss Ross,” Gideon gushed, holding out his hands that he might prevent the woman from falling.

She swatted his hands away herself and straightened, then glared at him. “What is the meaning of this?”

“I’m sorry,” he replied formally, bowing slightly by way of apology, “but I must find Lady Ambergrave. It concerns a very important matter.”

The old governess narrowed her eyes in suspicion and spit out, “She is otherwise indisposed at the moment. Her mother is tending to her tears at this very moment.”

“Oh no, tears on my account, I presume?” he asked, concerned.

“No, of course not. My mistress is crying because they’re all out of hen’s eggs for breakfast in the morning,” she replied, sarcasm and disdain dripping in her words. “Of course you are the cause. What else would it be? What else has it been all these past few weeks?”

Gideon was stunned into silence by the woman’s accusation, but she only smirked before adding, “Oh, had you forgotten that I am employed by Lord Thornshire? We’re in his house now. I’m certain he does not wish me to speak so boldly to one of his peers, but then again, it’s not all of his peers who’ve absconded with his daughter and possibly intend to do her harm.”

“Harm?” Gideon whispered. “I would never...”

“But you already have,” Christina said darkly, leaning close so that only he might hear. “It matters not whether you intended it, the fact remains that you have done it. And I would have thought I would not have needed to speak to you about it again, yet here we are.”

“Only tell me where she is that I might redeem myself,” Gideon begged. “Where has she gone?”

“I’m certain you’ll see her at dinner, which is always served promptly at eight. Ask one of the servants if you cannot be troubled to find the dining room on your own,” she hissed before turning and storming away.

God, how that woman despises me, Gideon thought bitterly, only it wasn’t anger he felt this time. It was sadness.

I’ve done nothing to win her over or earn her good graces, she will always wonder if I’m set to hurt Luci.

Gideon wandered throughout the manor in hopes of finding Luci, but he could not. He did manage to stumble into rooms where various servants or even Lord Thornshire were occupied, but crept away lest he bother them.

She will be at dinner, I’m sure of it, and that is not far off. I will speak to her then and implore her to converse in private. I must make her see how I’ve erred before, but that the past is behind us now.

CHAPTER 23



*A*s expected, dinner began at eight. Dressed and ready, Gideon began pacing the floor some thirty minutes earlier, waiting to go down until he felt certain it was an appropriate time. With time to spare, he made his way to the dining room in hopes of catching Luci as she would enter.

“Good evening, My Lady,” he said, bowing low when he caught sight of her. She was as beautiful as ever, and Gideon’s heart pinched briefly at the bland expression Luci wore.

She curtsied low and replied only, “My Lord.”

Gideon offered her his arm, wounded when she looked at it briefly, looked to his face, then turned away. She placed her hand in his in a perfunctory way, with no trace of warmth or emotion. Ignoring this well-deserved slight, Gideon led her into the dining room where her parents were already milling together, speaking in a hushed tone.

“Luci, darling, you look lovely,” her mother said, and it did not escape Gideon’s notice that Lady Thornshire did not address him.

Whatever those two spoke about today must have severely altered her opinion of me. It is of no importance, though. I shall be as charming as I can. After we have dined, then I shall endeavor to explain everything to her.

The meal began amicably enough, with unimportant conversation peppered with compliments on the food and the place settings. Luci addressed Gideon only once—if “you’ll have to ask Lord Ambergrave” could be considered addressing him—when her father asked a question about the tenant farmers surrounding Ashworth Hall and she was unable to answer.

The discomfort of all present was both compounded and alleviated when Lady Thornshire put down her glass soundly and said, “What I really am curious to know about is this fire that occurred at Ashworth Hall. What happened, Lord Ambergrave?”

“Angeline,” Lord Thornshire said, a hint of warning in his single utterance.

“What?” she asked, turning to look at her husband with wide eyes. “Why, is there some reason I must not ask? There’s no reason to assume it was of a malicious nature. For all we know, there was a lightning strike one stormy evening, or a servant clearing away space in the attic overturned an oil lamp.”

“No, no,” Gideon interrupted, setting down his napkin beside his plate and looking around the table. “Lady Thornshire, it is quite all right. It is not something that I speak of often, but as I am married to your daughter whom you care for deeply, I feel you do have some right in being inquisitive.”

Gideon turned to look at Luci, never taking his eyes from her face as he said, "I was the one who started the fire."

The knife fell from Luci's hand and clattered to the floor with a loud, tinkling crash. She stared silently at Gideon in horror, even as her parents gasped and began peppering him with questions. He did not reply, he only watched Luci's expression with a mixture of pain and humiliation.

Gideon started to speak, to explain the circumstances, but the arrival of the butler at Lord Thornshire's elbow stopped him.

"My Lord, there is a visitor to see you. I have explained that you are at dinner with your family and are not to be disturbed, but he said it is a matter of great importance concerning both your family and your business affairs."

"Very good, I suppose. Show him in," Lord Thornshire said, casting a final look at Gideon before turning to see who might be interrupting their evening.

The butler bowed and left, then returned moments later to announce, "My Lord, Bradley, Earl of Stillscar, is arrived and wishes to see you."

* * *

Luci instantly felt faint. She must have looked as much, too, for her mother arose from her seat and came at once to stand beside her. On her other side, Gideon jumped from his chair so suddenly that it toppled over backwards, causing enough of a commotion that two servants entered.

Lord Thornshire rose last and turned to face the Earl. “What do you want?” he thundered, all good manners cast aside.

“It does not matter what he wants, he is to leave my presence at once,” Gideon shouted, his fists balling instinctively. “This villain is supposed to be in gaol for attacking Lady Ambergrave in my home and during my absence.”

“What?” Lady Thornshire demanded. She turned to her daughter and asked, “Is this true?”

Luci only sat mute, her eyes fixed but unseeing on Bradley.

“My Lord,” Bradley began in an impossibly calm voice, “if you will direct everyone to be seated—and perhaps send your servants away—you will discover that I am here on urgent business. As it turns out, you have pledged your daughter in marriage to a man who is not who he says he is.”

All eyes turned to Gideon, even Luci’s, but he still kept his glare fixed on Bradley. “I will destroy you, you cowardly scoundrel!”

“Destroy me? For telling the truth?” Bradley asked slowly. “I hope everyone takes note of how he has yet to say I’m lying, only threatens my life for the news I bring here.”

“Would everyone please sit?” Lord Thornshire demanded. He waved off the servants, who left the room and closed the door behind them, then waited while the others complied. Gideon was last to move, apparently warring between obeying his host and father-in-law and moving to harm the Earl.

“What is the meaning of this offensive intrusion?” Lord Thornshire demanded.

“My Lord, as you have already been made aware, I had every intention of seeking your daughter’s hand,” Bradley began. “I was prevented by my good nature and sense of duty, in that I would not make such a request until my business affairs were in order.”

“Your business affairs?” Gideon said wryly. “Or would that be your gambling debts?”

“There are some who might confuse the two terms,” Bradley acknowledged, “but in any case, the debts were to be paid before I would consider proposing marriage. Unfortunately, this good-for-nothing beat me to it.”

“Well then, there is nothing to discuss,” Lord Thornshire said firmly. “You did not make any such request, Lord Ambergrave did, and therefore it is final.”

“But not quite,” Bradley said. “You see, My Lord, despite your efforts at keeping your affairs quiet, word has gotten ‘round about your business failure and the loss of your fortune.”

Lady Ambergrave cried out softly, but pressed a hand to her lips. Luci reached for her mother’s hand and held it comfortingly.

“My business affairs are no one else’s concern,” Lord Thornshire shouted, turning very red in the face. Gideon

though, beside him, was suddenly very pale.

“But did you not know that your partner had intended to ruin you all along?” Bradley pressed, a triumphant tone in his voice. He looked smugly at Gideon and continued, “From the very beginning, your unnamed partner sought to ruin you. Isn’t that right, Lord Ambergrave?”

Everyone stared at Gideon, who only sat and glared fiercely at Bradley. Lord Thornshire looked between the two men for a matter of moments before realization dawned.

“You?” he whispered to Gideon. “You were my silent partner all that time?”

Gideon did not answer. He looked at Luci from the corner of his eye and noted the agonized mask of revulsion on her face. There was nothing he could say that would dispel any loathing, any hatred for him.

“I demand an answer!” Lord Thornshire roared, slamming his heavy fist upon the table. “Were you my business partner?”

“Oh, he was,” Bradley said arrogantly. “Do not let him concoct some excuse or lie. I have it on very good authority, and have also done my own investigating into the matter. The Duke of Renfeld, my brother, was able to procure documents attesting to Lord Ambergrave’s involvement in your shipping business. Does it not strike anyone else as odd that only days after you learn that your partner has reclaimed all of his investment and leaves you in ruin, that he should come here and offer to pay a hefty bride price in exchange for your daughter’s hand?”

No one spoke. The clock above the mantel continued to tick away the seconds, its gentle mechanical sound echoing through the room like a death knell. The only other sound was Luci's hoarse whisper when she eventually asked, "Gideon? Is it true?"

Without looking at her tear-stained face, Gideon simply answered, "Yes."

"How could you?" Lady Thornshire screamed, already rising from her chair and coming to stand protectively beside Luci.

"Why would you do such a thing?" stormed Lord Thornshire.

"Because you killed my parents," Gideon answered angrily, no longer concerned about truth and explanations. "I spent nearly ten years plotting my revenge and working to make it come to pass. You took the most important thing in the world to me, and I simply returned the favor."

His voice grew quieter and his expression softened when he turned to Luci, though.

"But that was before I grew to love you."

Luci, still shaking from the revelations before her, only turned her head away, refusing to look at his imploring face. Even when Gideon rose and gestured for her mother to move away, falling to one knee beside her chair, she would not look at him.

“Luci, dearest. Please look at me. I assure you that what I am saying is absolutely true. I have confessed to my horrible motives, so what need have I of lying to you now?” he begged.

“What you have done is inexcusable,” Luci muttered, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Agreed!” Bradley called out.

“No!” Luci shouted, turning her attention to the Earl. “You are not to speak to me either, not after what you did. You sought me out in my husband’s house, attempted to ruin me with your ill-conceived scheme, and then forced yourself on me while I protested. You are the lowest sort of scoundrel and I’ll not have anything to do with you.”

“I see that I was wise to keep you clear of my daughter,” Lord Thornshire said. “I had heard through connections in the ton that you had attempted such a scheme in the past, coercing another man for his daughter’s hand in order to improve yourself with her dowry. I would never have permitted a marriage between you, no matter how much my daughter may have loved you.”

“Love?” Bradley scoffed. “Unfortunately, that doesn’t matter,” Bradley said, still looking as smug as he did before. “Who cares for love when there’s money to be gained? I never cared for Luci, as one nobleman’s spoiled, silly daughter is the same as the next. I only cared for her dowry.”

“But if it is as you say and you knew I had been ruined in business, why did you continue your pursuit?” Lord Thornshire demanded.

“Blackmail,” the Earl replied with a terrible laugh. “You might not have the funds to marry your daughter off properly, but you’d move mountains to prevent me from ruining her reputation. You would either pay, or I would inform certain tongue-waggers of all the times I had my way with your very willing daughter.”

There was a flash of movement followed by a dreadful crashing sound as Gideon flew from Luci’s side and launched himself at Bradley, knocking the Earl to the ground before pummeling his face repeatedly. At Lord Thornshire’s command, two servants hurried forward and removed Gideon from atop the battered man before hauling Bradley to his feet. Blood dripped from the corner of his mouth as he cried out.

“You have made a grave mistake, *My Lord*. Your part in all of this shall be made well known.” Bradley spat a mouthful of blood onto the floor, only to have Gideon land another punch squarely in his stomach, causing him to double over. “You have no idea of the revenge I’ve already set in motion against you for taking what was mine.”

“Get that man out of here!” Lord Thornshire bellowed, pointing to Bradley. “And send word to my solicitor that I must see him at once. I will be bringing charges against you for blackmail, Lord Stillscar. There are witnesses present who can attest to your crimes.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Bradley hissed, trying to look at Lord Thornshire through eyes that were beginning to swell. “All of your names would be dragged in, there would be nowhere safe you could show your faces that everyone will not know of this.”

“Considering the source,” Gideon answered hotly, coming to stand directly in front of Bradley and causing him to shrink back, “I doubt you will be believed.”

At that, the servants half-carried Bradley from the room, leaving the rest of those assembled still reeling in astonishment and outrage. Luci was beside herself, clinging to her mother as quiet sobs shook her shoulders.

“Luci,” Gideon breathed, hurrying to her side once more. “Please let me explain.”

“Is this why you were so sullen as we traveled here?” Luci demanded accusingly. “You who have been so kind, so attentive, yet you turned cold and distant the moment we stepped into the carriage. Why did you suggest this unless it was to cause me grievous pain?”

“I never should have come here, I am sorry,” Gideon replied, reaching for her. Luci pulled away, but he continued. “You have been so ill and so heartbroken, I only meant to lift your spirits. If that meant facing what I’d done, so be it. Please let me make it clear—”

“Get away from me,” she whispered in fear, turning and burying her face in her mother’s shoulder. “I have nothing to say to you.”

“You should leave,” Lord Thornshire said darkly, putting an arm around his wife’s shoulders and the other around Luci. “I am grateful for your assistance with that cad Stillscar, but it does not diminish the fact that you stole my daughter from me

during a desperate time in my life, a desperation that you yourself had caused.”

“My Lord, I beg of you to allow me to explain, to make amends. I cannot undo what I have done, but I can make it right,” Gideon begged, but Lord Thornshire was steadfast.

“I have no desire to speak to you of this matter, and it does not appear that my daughter would wish it, either. Good evening, Lord Ambergrave,” he replied formally. He looked to the doorway and nodded to Pierson, who waited intently to show the Marquess out.

Gideon stood still, uncertain as to what to do. His wife refused to look at him and he was being cast out of her family’s home, to where he knew not. Only Lady Thornshire looked in his direction, but the stare of pure loathing she bore him did nothing to assuage his concerns.

“This way, My Lord,” the butler finally said, and Gideon had no choice but to follow.

CHAPTER 24



Immediately after Gideon's departure from Stonefield Park, Luci took to her bed. She was not to be consoled by anyone, though her mother and Christina made every attempt. Her grief was only compounded as the thoughts piled higher and higher. Why would Gideon be so cruel as to use her as a pawn in his revenge? What had he truly intended for her, a lifetime of marriage and a family whilst keeping his ruse a secret? Or a plan to break her heart and ruin her reputation by divorcing her when he tired of his ruse?

"And then Bradley... why?" she cried out in her torrent of tears. "To proudly confess that he had never cared for me, that I had been nothing more to him than a means to a fortune-seeking end? Let him say what he will, I will gladly sacrifice my reputation if it means his life ends soon with him penniless in a gutter."

Through all of her heartache and indignation, there was another thought that pricked at Luci's brain and refused to leave, giving her no relief from the memory of it: what had Gideon meant about her father? In his sharp retort to Bradley's accusation, her husband had willingly confessed to his aim of revenge, but revenge for what? He had blatantly accused her father of killing his parents... and her father had not said a word in his own defense.

“But that makes no sense,” Luci muttered as she sobbed, clinging to her pillow in misery. She thought back to the fire at Ashworth. “I saw the damage with my own eyes. It is not possible that my father had a hand in that some ten years prior. I must know the meaning of this.”

When her mother next came to look in on her, Luci tearfully pleaded with her for answers. Alas, her mother had nothing to share with her.

“I know not, myself,” Lady Thornshire insisted, clinging to Luci’s thin, cold hand. “But what a horrible accusation. Your father has never harmed anyone in his life, and he has certainly never killed anyone. But to suggest that he set a man’s house ablaze and allowed its occupants to perish... why, I would that I were a man and could call out Lord Ambergrave myself.”

Luci began to weep again, turning her face to hide her shame. Her heart was broken, her family in shambles, and now, her marriage to an inexcusable blackguard meant she was trapped with a man who sought revenge against her own father...and had used her as his pawn.

“How can a person be so cruel?” she wailed, clutching her pillow and nearly tearing the fabric. “First to accuse Father of unspeakable acts, but then to assuage his own grief by ruining my life. It is unconscionable.”

Luci cried fresh tears as the rest of the horrors returned to her afflicted mind. Bradley, the man she had pined for, the one she had prayed to be allowed to wed... he had proven to be worse than a false love. A man such as that merely changes his mind

when a more beautiful young lady strikes his fancy. No, Bradley knew he did not care for her though he'd said often that he did. He wanted nothing more than money, no matter what it cost her in the end.

As if able to sense where her daughter's thoughts had traveled, Lady Thornshire got up and came closer. Lowering her voice so that none other might hear, she whispered a gnawing question.

"Luci, dear. Is there any truth to what Lord Stillscar spoke of?" her mother asked, her words faltering as she hesitated slightly.

"Is what true?" Luci demanded, though she feared that she already knew the answer.

"He spoke of... your *willingness*."

"And after all that he's said and done, you still would believe there was a possibility that was true?" Luci fired back. "My own mother questions whether a liar and a criminal was speaking the truth where my virtue is concerned? Is he to be believed because he's a man and an Earl, and I'm just stupid girl? Or did you really think you had raised me to hike my skirts and throw my virtue to anyone who smiled in my direction? Is that what you think of me?"

"No, of course not," her mother answered, clearly flustered and now regretting her words.

"Then what gave you cause to ask?" Luci cried, sitting up and glaring at her mother.

“It is nothing. Forgive me, I shouldn’t have spoken.”

“No, Mother, you shouldn’t have. You... you came in here at the most horrible moment of my life, the moment when I now know my ‘adoring’ husband has used me to bring pain to my family, the moment when I now face the most outrageous accusations that the ton will undoubtedly believe...” Luci fought for air as her words failed her, only later to manage to whisper, “And you dare to ask me if I am a wanton slut who bedded that man?”

A strange feeling came over Luci then, one that left her reeling. It felt as though someone had enclosed the room in a glass bell jar and lit a paper underneath the lid. Slowly, painfully, the air seemed to seep out of the room as the weight of her mother’s accusation burned all of the air away, leaving nothing but a vacuum for her lungs to try to grasp.

Lightheaded, Luci’s crying stopped for but a second before she fainted, falling back against her pillow as her mother screamed.

* * *

It was nearly dawn by the time Gideon reached Ashworth Hall, weary from traveling for so long but also feeling an emptiness inside his chest that left him wondering if his heart would still beat. He looked out the window of the carriage as they crossed over the small stone bridge, its enormous form looming before him in the glow of moonlight.

“I never should have come back here,” he muttered sadly, looking at his childhood home. “I should have stayed far away.”

The carriage arrived at the wide expanse in front of the manor but Gideon directed the driver to return him at the back of the house. He climbed out without waiting for the driver to open the door, then bade the tired man a goodnight.

As Gideon opened the door to the kitchens and entered the darkened room, a flicker of lamplight floated throughout the large space, drifting over the walls and surfaces. Derwall stepped out of the hallway and immediately ducked back apace, embarrassed by his state of undress.

“My Lord, I was not expecting you. Let me wake the staff, we will have some refreshment prepared immediately—” he began, but Gideon waved him off.

“No thank you, Derwall. Let them sleep. I will be in my rooms until very late in the day, I should think. Don’t disturb them,” he said kindly.

“But where is Lady Ambergrave?” Derwall asked, lifting the lamp higher and peering around the Marquess as though she was merely hidden from view.

“She... she will not be returning, I’m afraid.”

At receiving no other explanation, Derwall ventured to say, “But My Lord? Is something the matter?”

Gideon looked down at his feet for a long time, long enough that he sensed his butler growing very alarmed. He finally

looked up and said, “Everything is the matter. Are you any good with dueling pistols, Derwall?”

“My Lord? What could you mean?” the butler pressed, coming closer despite wearing only his gown and robe. “You’re frightening me, My Lord.”

“I’m sorry, Derwall. I did not mean to, I was speaking from a place of anger and fear.” Gideon ran his hands through his hair and said, “No one shall be dueling, never fear.”

Setting down the lamp, Derwall came closer and said softly, “My Lord, if it pleases you, go upstairs and prepare to rest. I will bring you some tea myself. And if you feel so compelled, I will gladly listen should you need to explain.”

Gideon only nodded, unsure of how to answer. True, he was but a servant, but Derwall had been accurate in stating once how long he’d worked for the Cross family. He was the closest thing Gideon had to a living relative, a confidant, or even an advisor.

“Thank you, Derwall. That would be ideal.” He clapped the man’s shoulder reassuringly and headed up the stairs to make his way to his room.

Only minutes later, a soft knock at his door told him the tea was prepared, along with the sympathetic servant. Gideon opened the door, surprised and taken aback to see that Derwall had taken the time to dress formally.

“Derwall, I’m sorry,” Gideon said with a sigh, gesturing to his butler’s attire. “I did not mean for you to be bothered. I’m sorry you had to dress.”

“It is no trouble, My Lord. It’s why I’m here.” Derwall entered and set the tray on the table, then began pouring the Marquess’ tea. “I took the liberty of also bringing a bit to eat, I assumed from the time that you might be hungry.”

Once Gideon had taken a seat and had his tea, Derwall waited patiently. “Oh, good heavens, forgive me. Please, Derwall... won’t you sit?”

“Of course, My Lord,” the butler answered with a smile, sitting down opposite Gideon. “Now, what has troubled you so?”

Gideon began to pour out his troubles, and to his great surprise, the relief he felt was very real. Derwall listened patiently, affording the Marquess the opportunity to make sense of it for the first time himself.

“And so you see,” Gideon admitted in a tired voice as he fell back against the sofa, “I am deserving of every horrible thing Lady Ambergrave must think of me. Of every horrible thing everyone must think.”

“I don’t think horribly of you, My Lord, if that is any consolation,” Derwall replied quietly. “I think you’ve made a number of errors, ones that you are still quite capable of rectifying. The question is, are you willing to take that initiative?”

“What can I possibly do? I spent the entire length of the journey home trying to think of something that could resolve this terrible mess I’ve made,” Gideon answered. He sat forward and looked at the butler with earnest. “Tell me, if you know of something I might try. I will do it.”

“Well, you are a very intelligent and resourceful man,” Derwall said, crossing one leg over the other knee and looking disarmingly relaxed. “I’ve no doubt that you would be well-equipped to think of what you should do. I’m only here to listen, and would never presume to make a recommendation on the course you should follow. It wouldn’t be proper.”

“I don’t know that I can agree. My intelligence and resources and ‘well-equipped’ nature have only succeeded in destroying the person I cared about most in the world,” he answered sadly. “I give you full leave to throw propriety to the wind and tell me what I must do.”

“Since you put it that way, I will confess that honesty has always been the rudder by which I steer my life. Have you attempted to tell Lady Ambergrave the entire truth?” Derwall waited tentatively, hoping he’d caused no offense.

“There was no time, everyone was so upset and before I knew what was happening, I’d made a laughingstock of myself by throwing fists at Lord Stillscar, then—”

“Excuse me, My Lord, but did you say Lord Stillscar was there?” Derwall asked, perplexed. “After the way he treated Lady Ambergrave here in her home?”

“Yes, he was,” Gideon said, blinking slowly as recognition dawned on him. “He’s stalking her. Like a lion hunting its prey in the Savannah.”

“It would appear that way, My Lord. But to what end? She is your legal wife, it would not benefit him to ruin her reputation now, though he may only do so for spite, I suppose?”

“Oh God, he spoke of blackmail to her father, he must still intend to extort money from Lord Thornshire. And all to protect me from being a cuckold whose wife is dallying with others,” Gideon jumped up and paced the length of the room. “But the thing is, I care not what anyone might think or say of me. I only care for Lady Ambergrave and how this sort of talk might hurt her.”

“Then you must explain yourself to Lord Thornshire,” Derwall said wisely, although quietly and at odds with how it felt to give advice to a Marquess, even advice that was welcomed and requested. “Beg his forgiveness and assure him that your only intention now is to see to his daughter’s eternal happiness.”

“But I am certain I am not welcome in Lord Thornshire’s home. And how would I begin to explain myself to the man who killed my parents?” he asked, still pacing like an animal trapped in its cage.

“Then you must put those words in writing. Perhaps they will mean even more to him with your signature and seal upon them,” Derwall reminded. “But moreover, the attempt isn’t at forgiving him for the deaths, it’s about *seeking* forgiveness for marrying Lady Ambergrave under less than honest intentions.”

“So put aside my feelings of loathing and revenge in order to beg of him *his* forgiveness?” Gideon scowled as he paced. “I would rather eat broken glass.”

“I do understand, My Lord, but I fear it is the only way. You do have my deepest sympathy, however.” Derwall smiled sadly. “And if it will preserve your marriage to Lady Ambergrave, will it not be worth it?”

Gideon continued his grimace of loathing at the suggestion, but he did mull it over as he walked the length of the room. It would betray his parents’ memory to debase himself to the man responsible for their demise, but Derwall was right. He had no other choice.

“Then I shall pen such a letter to Lord Thornshire immediately,” he said firmly, striding towards his writing desk. “And one to Lady Ambergrave as well, telling her of my intentions and my longing for her.”

“Perhaps, My Lord, you might be better suited to write such sincere, important thoughts in a few hours’ time,” the butler suggested, rising from his seat. “It will not delay the post any, and you might be more coherent if you’ve slept for a while.”

“Good point, Derwall,” Gideon said, nodding. “And as always, thank you for all of your help. But I must do it now, before I spend too much effort thinking of better excuses than the one I have, which is nothing. Would you be so kind as to disturb someone so that they might ride to Stonefield Park right away?”

“It is my pleasure, My Lord,” Derwall replied calmly. “I shall leave you to your letter and then your rest if you do not require anything further?”

“No, thank you. A letter, then sleep. That’s what I must do.”

After Derwall took his leave, Gideon scratched out his letters to Lord Thornshire and to his poor Luci. After he climbed into his bed, he stared at the ceiling above him for some time.

Suddenly wide awake, his thoughts rippled with an undercurrent of sadness. He had not let himself think on his parents’ tragic end in some time, and he was surprised to find that he felt more empty than angry. Their loss was a great hole inside his chest, but at least it was no longer a white-hot ember, burning inside his ribs with rage.

He willed himself to sleep, visions of Luci’s face behind his closed eyes. The image of her beauty and her laughing face were replaced with the look of agony she wore when he spoke to her yesterday evening. Gideon’s nightmares would need no other horror than to know how he’d wounded her.

CHAPTER 25



“Where is she?” Lady Hardigree cried, launching herself from her ornate carriage before flying into the house, her wake seemingly a swirl of full skirts and ostrich feathers fluttering out from her very fashionable hat. She looked about hastily before crying out, “Where is my niece?”

“This way, Your Grace,” the butler said, leading the way to the drawing room where Lord Thornshire and his wife waited.

“Angeline!” Lady Hardigree shrieked, rushing to Lady Thornshire with her handkerchief already withdrawn. She wailed inconsolably while Lord Thornshire rolled his eyes at his sister-in-law’s dramatics.

“Mary! Thank goodness you’ve come!” Lady Thornshire cried, falling into her sister’s arms. “If anyone knows what to do at a time such as this, it’s you.”

Lord Thornshire looked perturbed as he nodded to the butler and muttered a word of thanks to the servant who’d ridden to fetch the Duchess. Lady Thornshire had been beside herself that morning, and nothing but the wise counsel of her sister would suffice.

“Now sit down and tell me everything,” Lady Hardigree began, her usually shrill voice replaced by a soothing *sotto voce* murmur. “I only know what I’ve already heard from a few of my closest friends.”

“Friends? Which friends? What have you heard?” Lord Thornshire demanded, coming around from behind the sofa where he’d been looking out the window.

“Remain calm, Edgar. It was nothing of import to your business,” she assured him, waving gently in his direction. “It only involved poor Luci.”

“How can word have possibly spread already?” Lady Thornshire demanded tearfully. “That horrible Lord Ambergrave has only left a day ago, how could he possibly have spoken out against our daughter in such a short time?”

“Lord Ambergrave?” the Duchess asked, pressing a hand to her bosom and leaning back in surprise. “Why no. I’m speaking of Lord Stillscar, the rogue who was located only yesterday, drunk in a tavern somewhere and spewing all manner of lies about Luci.” She looked at Edgar for a moment to gauge his wrath and whisper, “They are lies, are they not?”

“Of course they are lies,” Lord Thornshire shouted loudly enough for several servants working outside the door to scurry quickly away from their duties. “What do you take her for?”

Lady Thornshire looked away awkwardly, having only so recently questioned her daughter in much the same way. Finally, she pressed a hand to her sister’s and said, “Yes, that

horrible man has caused such unrest here, and is determined to ruin our daughter's name."

"Well, never think of any further concern from the awful Earl," Lady Hardigree said with a sniff of contempt. "I was certain his lewd and boastful tales couldn't be true, and it won't matter who he tells them to now."

"Of course I shall think of him, look at the harm he has managed to cause to my beautiful child in only this short time," Lady Thornshire began to cry again, tears of sorrow rather than wails of indignant anger. "In only the time since he left here, word of his horrible accusations have even reached your ears."

"Oh, don't trouble yourself with that, either," the Duchess said. "I only know of it because I am well acquainted with his brother's wife. After I bade several of my associates to handle the unpleasant matter, I felt it was my duty to speak to her and her husband and inform them of what I'd done."

"What *have* you done?" Lord Thornshire asked, his eyes widening in fear, a fear that he'd always somewhat held for his wife's sister.

"Once I was made aware of his egregious attack on poor Luci while her husband was not at home, I made it my mission to seek out the Earl and set him to rights." Lady Hardigree sat up primly and began to pick at errant leaves that had clung to her skirt in her haste to come inside. She made no further comment until Lady Thornshire spoke up.

“But Mary, what are you talking about? You paid him a visit and... and... and had tea or what not? What!”

“Why, no.” Lady Hardigree sneered with a look of disgust. “I would never take tea with a person of that sort. I did not even meet with him at all. As I said, I sent my associates to find him.”

“And?” Lord Thornshire bellowed, frustrated at the timely length her story was commanding.

“Oh,” she answered, laughing lightly. “I had him signed up as a deck hand on a merchant vessel. He’s already on his way to Australia right now. Or was it Africa? Either way. He shall not be here, which is all that matters.”

Lord Thornshire exchanged a strange sort of look with his wife while Lady Hardigree resumed plucking leaves from her skirt and dropping them into her hand. When she’d finished, she looked around for somewhere to place the unwanted foliage but caught sight of her relatives’ faces instead.

“What?” she asked, her expression blank.

“You... you sent him away?” Lady Thornshire said quietly, her voice filling with hope. “How ever did you manage it?”

“I already told you. I had some associates locate him, drag him from the tavern, and help him aboard a merchant ship,” the Duchess answered slowly, as though speaking to children. “When he awakes, he will already be very far away and most likely given a mop so that he might set to work.”

“But what of his family? You said you know them, won’t they be furious about what you’ve done?” Lady Thornshire asked, a glimmer of hope still permeating her horror.

“Oh, not at all,” Lady Hardigree answered, laughing again. “That is the best part. The Earl has been a terrible, embarrassing burden for quite some time, and his brother has already threatened to cut him off entirely for what he did to Luci at Lord Ambergrave’s house. I only aided him in providing a ruse. Now dear little brother is far away and has signed on to travel the world.”

Lady Hardigree stopped laughing and turned very serious. “But now tell me, what of Luci? How is she taking this?”

“Our dear girl won’t eat, won’t talk to us, won’t even speak to Miss Ross,” Lady Thornshire said with a fresh whimper. “We’re on the brink of calling for a physician. You know she was so recently ill and nearly died as a result. This upset cannot be good for her.”

“Not at all. It could very well cause her to lapse once again into illness,” the Duchess agreed, trembling with real fear for her niece. “But she will not even speak to that governess of hers? I thought she was still in your household for being such a dear friend to Luci?”

“Quite right,” Lord Thornshire said, coming over to sit across from the ladies and frowning with worry. “But she reports that Luci is not even answering her when she speaks. She’s very nearly numb, only uttering a sound when her silent tears take a somewhat more impassioned turn.”

“It is worse than I thought,” Lady Hardigree said with a tearful sigh. “Shall I go speak to her? Would that help at all?”

“I doubt it, especially if there is already talk going ‘round of what Lord Stillscar has... accused,” Lady Thornshire answered, balling up her much-abused handkerchief in her fists. “It shall be enough that you came to call and stayed a while. When she feels up to it, I’ll tell her you’re here.”

“Very good. But in the time between, I’m afraid we must speak of a most unpleasant topic.” Lady Hardigree looked to the door to ensure no one was lurking nearby before turning back to her sister and the Earl. “We must discuss the possibility that Lord Ambergrave might... well, seek a divorce.”

Her whisper at that last word sent Lady Thornshire into a near faint. Lord Thornshire immediately came over and put his arm around his wife’s thin shoulders for support, bolstering her up for the vital but dreadful conversation at hand.

“He would have to be the devil’s own fool to do such a thing,” Lord Thornshire roared. “Especially after he admitted in front of us that he had only black intentions for marrying Luci.”

“Well, that is quite useful,” the Duchess said in acknowledgement, “but am I also correct that he has accused you of murdering his parents?”

“That is the most preposterous part,” Lord Thornshire cried, his hands gripping the curls above his ears in frustration. “I

haven't a clue what he's speaking of, I've never murdered anyone."

"Did you not discover they died in a fire?" Lady Thornshire asked. "How would Edgar have possibly committed such a heinous act all those years ago and somehow forgotten, then married our daughter to their surviving son?"

"I know, it's as ridiculous as you make it sound," Lady Hardigree acknowledged with a firm nod. "But that is what the man uttered, did he not?"

"How do you possibly know these things so quickly, dear sister? We only just learned of the entire sordid accusation ourselves," Lady Thornshire demanded, confounded as to how her sister was so well connected and from such a great distance away.

"Pay that no mind, my acquaintances are not the sort to spread around such vicious lies," Lady Hardigree said dismissively. "But if he is the one to cast Luci aside after such a confession, he will surely not seek a return of the funds he gave you. That should be a small comfort."

"Hardly," Lord Thornshire responded. "She would still be ruined, never to be accepted by polite company anywhere. Everything I have put her through was to prevent her demise, but it would have all been for nothing."

"That is true," Lady Hardigree answered, somewhat lost in thought. "Well, should that come to pass, I cannot do much for her here. However, should Luci come to live with me, over time I think we could improve her situation greatly. There are

many causes that rely on my generous patronage, and though tongues might be set in motion at first when she begins to appear in society, there will come a day rather quickly that she is well received simply for being my niece.”

“Do you really think it will help her?” Lady Thornshire asked, clinging to her sister’s arm in desperation.

“That I do. It will take time, and I should think the best we can hope for in a second marriage might be a third or fourth son of meager inheritance, but with Edgar’s fortunes restored, that should not matter. My husband’s nephew, for example, is unmarried as of yet. He is the third son—God help his mother, she had twelve children—and though his fortune will not be vast, he is at least titled and holds property in Austria.”

“Send her away again?” Lord Thornshire moaned, mopping at the sweat that pooled on his forehead. “After all she has been through? Has she not suffered enough?”

“I quite agree, she has,” Lady Hardigree answered as she nodded sadly, causing the plumage on her hat to sway sympathetically. “But I fear it is the only way. There are no prospects for her here now, and she certainly can never return to Ashworth Hall.”

* * *

The stableman rode at a fast clip for as long as he dared, lest he risk hurting the horse. He knew not what messages he carried, only that they were placed in his hands personally by the Marquess of Ambergrave. The disheveled man had also pressed a number of coins in his hand and begged him to hurry, and the servant was determined to comply no matter what obstacles lay ahead.

By late day, the man was nearly faint from the rigors of the ride, his coins gone in order to pay a blacksmith for the use of a fresh horse. But he ventured to the rear of Stonefield Park triumphantly and rang the bell, then leaned against the door to wait for someone to permit him to enter.

“I have important correspondence for the Earl, Lord Thornshire,” the servant said, patting the leather satchel that he wore across his chest. “I have ridden from Ashworth Hall at the request of the Marquess of Ambergrave.”

“Come in at once,” the liveried footman said, opening the door wider and admitting the young man to the kitchens. “I’ll send a maid to help Cook prepare something for you straight away.”

The footman smiled as he took the letters from the servant and showed him to a seat. Placing the letters on a tray and passing them off to the butler, he flagged down one of the scullery maids and begged her assistance.

The butler looked at the seal on the outside of the letter as he moved towards the stairs, but he stopped. Looking back at the servant who now enjoyed a mug of fresh milk, he approached and stood close enough to speak to him.

“Where did you get these letters?” the butler asked, pointing to the tray.

“I rode ‘em here myself, sir,” the servant answered before taking the generous slice of bread and roast meat from the maid.

“How could you have? You covered such a great distance in that time?”

“Aye, sir. The master said it was most important, and he paid me handsomely. I even used his money to secure a fresh horse in Danbury.” The poor rider slaked his thirst with another swig of milk, then wiped his mouth and added, “I’m to wait here for a reply, but will ya let me know if there is to be none? I’ll need to ride all night to get back if I’m not to wait.”

“Oh, not at all. We’ll put you in a room here, of course.” The butler turned to the footman and said, “Please prepare a room for...”

“Joseph Early, sir. Employed in Lord Ambergrave’s stables. I race his horses from time to time, so I’m certain it’s why he chose me to come here.” The servant nodded respectfully then continued eating.

Pierson looked down at the letters one last time, then thanked Joseph and hurried upstairs. He sought out Lord Thornshire and found him in his study, knocked soundly, then hurried inside.

“My Lord, there is urgent correspondence from Lord Ambergrave,” the older man said quickly, holding forth the tray. “He sent one of his riders personally to deliver it.”

The Earl looked to his wife, seated across the room and still speaking in whispers with her sister, then tore into the letter. His eyes scanned the page silently, yet he was so taken aback that he forced himself to read it again more slowly before saying anything.

“Dearest? What is it? What’s wrong?” Lady Thornshire said, noticing her husband’s expression and crossing the room to see what was the matter. He held up his hand to prevent her while he continued reading.

Finally, he fell back in his chair, flabbergasted, and looked at her with real tears in his eyes. He held out the letter, knowing that permitting her to read it would do far more good than trying to explain.

“He... he truly believes you had some part in it, then?” Lady Thornshire whispered.

“Apparently so,” he said, defeated.

“But... but the rest is rather hopeful, isn’t it?” she pressed, pointing to the words on the page. “He says he wants to put it behind him and move forward, and conveys his deep love for our daughter.”

“How can I trust him with Luci’s affections? He blatantly stated—in my own house, no less, and seated at my table—that he only sought her hand in an effort to bring pain and potential ruin to our family. Never mind his dealings with my business and his success at sending me into poverty, of course.” Lord Thornshire bit nervously at his fingernail, unable to decide the proper course.

“Those things may be true, Edgar,” Lady Thornshire said sweetly, kneeling beside her husband’s chair, “but if we are not able to trust that he has changed his ways, then we would be

preventing Luci's own happiness as well. Could you wish that for her after all she's endured?"

"Could you trust her life to a man who has proven twice that he has no qualms about the worst of deeds?" the Earl asked.

"I find that I may have to," she answered. "After all, in the face of no good decision, I might as well trust in one that seems to lead to the least harm."

Lady Thornshire pressed a kiss to her husband's cheek and started to rise, but he took her hand and held it. He looked away, but continued to cling to her in a way that spoke of his need for her.

She smiled adoringly and returned to sit by Lady Hardigree, but called back softly, "It will be all right, husband. Somehow, it will all end up for the best."

CHAPTER 26



“Luci, can you hear me?” Christina said near her sleeping mistress’ ear. Her one-time charge stirred in her sleep but did not rouse any further. “You must wake up, my sweet girl.”

Another tear slid down the older governess’ cheek as she shook Luci’s shoulders gently. The young lady’s eyelids fluttered briefly, then slowly she opened her eyes only to mere slits.

“What is it?” she whispered hoarsely, followed by a weak fit of coughing.

“You must wake up and eat something,” Christina said, nearly begging. “It’s been two days now, and you’ve not had a bite of food nor anything to drink.”

“Leave me.” Luci turned away and closed her eyes again.

Christina stood mute as she looked down at the pale, hollow form of a once vibrant young lady. Only a matter of months ago she had been chastising this young creature for spirited away in the park to meet a young admirer, cautioning her

about preserving her all-important reputation. Now, having seen her through all manner of heartbreaks and illnesses, the girl was slipping from her grasp once again.

All of her patience, instruction, and even adoration through the years would have all been for naught should Luci seek to wither away.

“No!” Christina barked. “I will not allow it.”

Flinging the bedclothes to the floor with all her might, Christina tore at the covers as if on a rampage.

“Get up, Luci. You will not lie there a moment longer, not so long as I have a presence in this household.” She wrestled Luci from the bed and stood her on her feet, ignoring the astonished but weak cry of protest. “You will get up, you will eat, and you will walk these floors until the color returns to your cheeks. Then we will head out of doors and into the sunshine where the brisk air will do you good.”

“Why?” Luci cried, begging to be left alone. “Why are you tormenting me? I have nothing left, all I wish to do is keep to myself until I do not have to face it anymore.”

“That is not acceptable!” Christina shouted, feeling very much like she was putting the girl through her sums or her Latin conjugation again. “I have spent much of my life tending to your care and seeing to your education, and I will be damned if I will sit idly by while you suffer the effects of ignorant, pig-headed, dastardly men.”

“Let me go,” Luci wailed so quietly that Christina was not certain the sound was even human. The girl held out her arms for her bed, but the governess was not to be swayed by sympathy.

Hoisting Luci about the waist and forcing her to stand once again, Christina carried her over to a chair and plopped her down unceremoniously. She motioned to the servant to bring the laden cart and grabbed a small chunk of coarse bread, dunking it in the broth to sop it before holding it out.

“Eat.”

“No.”

“You will eat, or I will dump the bowl on your head and pray that the drops run into your open mouth as you cry,” Christina threatened. “You are trifling with a professional, my dear, and I know a thing or two about getting unruly children in the throes of a tantrum to do as they are bid.”

“If you care for me at all, why are you treating me so?” Luci cried, sobbing. She turned her head away as Christina seized the moment to force the bread at her.

“It is precisely because I care for you,” Christina retorted angrily, slamming her hand down on the table sharply. “I tended you as a babe, I saw to your lessons every single day for the duration of your education, and I have remained by your side as your own lady’s maid since that time. I have dumped out your pot when you’ve taken ill, I have bandaged your knee when you fell from your horse lest your mother find

out... and whether you care not to go on living, I will not let you go so easily.”

Luci froze, looking down in shame. Her shoulders swayed with weakness, and as such, there was no fight left in her. She refused to look at Christina, but merely hung her head.

“I will not let you do this, Luci,” Christina whispered, her anger finally giving way to sorrow as tears poured forth. She took Luci’s face tenderly in her hands and lifted it so she could look into girl’s lifeless, tear-filled eyes. “I will not let heartbreak be the end of you because then, my dear... they win.”

“I feel like such a fool,” Luci sobbed, falling into Christina’s arms and clinging to her weakly.

“Whatever for, my dear? For acquiescing to do something you had vehemently wished to avoid, marrying a stranger to save your parents? Or for making the best of it and allowing yourself to believe that he could be trusted?” Christina leaned back to smile at Luci and said, “Dear girl, the only thing you have to feel foolish for is falling in love, and that is no foolish thing at all. What I would give to have found love, for even one day.”

Christina held Luci close and allowed her to grieve for her broken heart. The murderous thoughts she held towards Lord Ambergrave magnified with every snuffle, every choked cry. Soon enough, the governess declared an end to the storm of emotion.

“Now, you’ve had your sadness, but I meant what I said. You shall not wallow in your melancholy and risk your precarious health.” Christina steered Luci towards the table and sat her in her chair again. “You shall eat, and drink, and for goodness sake, bathe. Then we shall go outdoors.”

“I still don’t want to—” Luci began, but Christina cut her off with a glare and a raised finger, pointing towards the plate.

“I don’t recall asking whether or not you wanted to. It is what we are doing.” The governess smiled, though, a more sympathetic tone to her words. “I will not lie to you, a pain such as this one does not mend overnight. But it shall never mend if you do not treat it as the wound it is. With hearty sustenance, a thorough washing, and every attempt at exercising it until it is strong enough to be healed.”

Luci nodded solemnly and looked at the food before her with an expression of disgust. Still, she picked up the soggy bread and brought it to her mouth, trying to decide whether or not to eat it.

“Be a good girl, or there shall be no ride this afternoon,” Christina chided playfully, recalling many a day in which the promise of a ride with Jacques had made Luci stop dawdling at her lessons.

Luci cried out in horror. “Jacques! What shall become of him? He is still there with that horrible man.”

“Never fear,” Christina replied firmly. “I shall go speak to your father at once, and we will see about dispatching a rider to fetch him. But if I should return and find you have not eaten

all of your bread and broth, I will not tell you what he says. Be a good girl now.”

“I’m not a child, you know,” Luci mumbled around a bite of crust.

“Then stop acting like it, and perhaps I shall remember,” Christina teased, squeezing Luci in a brief embrace. “I’m going to seek out your father now, I’ll return as soon as I know something. The maid will be here shortly with your bath.”

* * *

“Ah, Miss Ross. Precisely the one we need to speak with right now,” Lord Thornshire boomed from the drawing room. “Come in, come in.”

Christina peered inside the ornate room and froze in shock at the sight of Lady Thornshire and Lady Hardigree as well, perched stiffly on the edges of their chairs. She stepped inside, curtsied awkwardly, and waited for someone to explain.

“Edgar, do you really think it appropriate to discuss these matters in front of those in your employment?” Lady Hardigree said, her sniff of disdain rather obvious. Christina only smiled, but at her sides her hands clenched into tight fists.

“Miss Ross is hardly a servant,” Lady Thornshire argued, and Christina relaxed slightly. “She has been with us practically since Luci was born. She’s our daughter’s closest friend.”

“I don’t find that sort of familiarity at all proper, but perhaps you do things rather differently out here in the countryside.”

Lady Hardigree looked away as though Christina were of no importance.

“Please, Miss Ross, sit,” Lord Thornshire said quickly. “We have an urgent matter to discuss with you.”

“Me, My Lord? I’m not certain how I could be of assistance in any of your affairs...” Her voice trailed off as she looked around, confused.

“See? Even she knows it is not her place,” the Duchess muttered, but stopped at a fierce glance from her sister.

“Miss Ross,” Lady Thornshire said, “we have received some very important news. I know my daughter’s health is in a precarious state at the moment, so perhaps your opinion could prove valuable.”

“I think I’m rather well known for being too quick to offer my opinion, My Lady,” Christina assured her, smiling politely though still befuddled. “Of course I’m happy to offer it upon your request, as well.”

“Very good. Then perhaps it might do you well to read this first letter,” Lord Thornshire said, holding out a piece of much-read paper. He pulled it back when she reached for it though, adding, “It does contain sensitive items, so your discretion is required.”

“Of course, My Lord. Always,” she said, reaching for it again.

Lord Thornshire pulled it back a second time. “And I am under the assumption that our daughter made you privy to certain events from that unfortunate evening two nights past?”

“Yes, My Lord,” Christina admitted, growing impatient. “I had no wish to pry in your family’s affairs, but I did need to understand what was wrong with her. It is my understanding that the dinner... did not go well.”

“Ha!” Lady Hardigree scoffed. “I’ve attended hangings that were more pleasant, from what I hear.”

“Please, Mary!” Lady Thornshire hissed, swatting at her sister’s knee with her fan. “There’s no cause to speak so uncouthly.”

Lord Thornshire ignored the ladies and handed over the letter, his eyes watching Christina’s face intently as she peeked down at it briefly.

“But My Lord, what is it you hope to learn from my perusal of this letter? I know not who even wrote it,” Christina said, still confused.

“Apart from Luci, you have spent more time with this Lord Ambergrave than any of us,” he explained. “I only ask that you read it carefully. Give us your honest view of his letter and tell us if this seems trustworthy, or rather like a ploy.”

Christina looked at the three of them, noting the fear and concern on their faces, even Lady Hardigree. She nodded and

began to read, but after several minutes, the air in the room had grown very tense.

“Well?” Lady Thornshire asked, trying not to sound anxious.

“Well,” Christina began, folding the letter and putting it in her lap, “his penmanship is atrocious.”

“Leave it to the tutor to attempt to grade his work,” Lady Hardigree muttered, rolling her eyes.

“That is to say,” Christina continued, shooting an irritated glance at the Duchess, “that the poor quality of his writing leads me to believe this was written in haste and under extreme emotional duress. Therefore, I think it is genuine.”

“Do you really? You honestly believe he means what he says?” Lord Thornshire asked, sounding hopeful for the first time in days.

“I do. And I say that as someone who not only despises the Marquess for the pain he has inflicted on Luci, but also as someone who has been bold enough to tell him so directly,” she added.

“But now? What has changed? And what of his story in these pages, do you think he earnestly believes his own version of the truth?” the Earl asked, listening intently to Christina’s opinion.

She weighed her words carefully, sensing the palpable upset that all in the room felt. Christina thoughtfully said, “My Lord, I have dwelled in that house and seen the disrepair with my own eyes. For weeks, the sounds of hammers pounding the roof were a constant throbbing in our heads. But I’ve also spoken with the servants at Ashworth, most of whom were newly hired and therefore not in attendance when the terrible event occurred. All I can say for certain is that something happened there, and that it weighs upon the Marquess daily.”

She reopened the letter and pointed to different passages along the page. “Where he remarks about the great pain he has felt, that is the truest notion I can imagine. Where he further says that ruining you was the only thing that kept him from taking his own life in his misery, I must say that I believe that as well. But nothing stands out to me on this page so much as what he says last.”

Christina held the letter up closer and cleared her throat, then read, “But I have nothing in the world nor have I ever had anything so valuable to my heart as your daughter, Luci. If you can forgive me, I will endeavor to put her happiness, her well-being, and her future at the forefront of everything I will ever do or say.”

Lady Thornshire dabbed at her eyes gently, overcome once again to hear how much her daughter was loved. She nodded briefly, but still did not offer a word in support of Lord Ambergrave.

“So you are under the impression that we can trust him?” Lord Thornshire confirmed.

“I believe it to be so, but My Lord, if I may ask. Why is my opinion on the matter so important?” Christina asked, looking

around.

Lord Thornshire looked to his wife and then to his sister-in-law, the three of them wearing equally blank expressions that failed to belie their concerns. He reached into his coat pocket and retrieved a second letter, then held it out to Christina.

“Lord Ambergrave also wrote to Luci.”

Christina took the outstretched paper and held it in her hands. She looked at the Earl sharply and said, “You’ve read it? Her personal correspondence?”

“Yes, I have,” he admitted sheepishly. “I could not trust the man not to say something so wretched that it caused her any further harm, any permanent harm. It is not a decision I made lightly, I assure you.”

“While I am appalled at the notion, I can confess that your intentions were clearly centered on her best interest,” Christina said, though it pained her to take his side in the matter. “But once again, My Lord, I am at a loss. Why do I now possess her letter?”

“I was... well, I was hoping you would read it and make a determination as to whether or not we should give it to her,” Lord Thornshire replied, looking very uncomfortable at his own assessment.

“So I am requested to read a private letter between a man and his wife, and then come to a decision as to whether or not her

father should allow her to have the letter. Is that correct?" Christina asked.

Again, looks were exchanged all around. Lady Hardigree harrumphed loudly in exasperation only to be silenced with another swat of Lady Thornshire's fan.

"My Lord, I have decided that I shall not read it, as it would not be proper," Christina announced firmly. "I shall also inform Lady Ambergrave of her correspondence—"

"You'll do what?" Lady Hardigree shouted, obviously distraught at both the treachery and the insolence, but Christina ignored her.

"—and allow her to decide whether to read or respond. We are all of us, and I do mean myself included, making a grave error in continuing to treat Lady Ambergrave like a frivolous child. She is a married woman and a Marchioness, and it is time that both she and the people around her expected a certain maturity from her."

Christina stood up to leave and the Duchess moved to say something. She was prevented by Lady Thornshire, who quietly nodded at Christina.

"I do know that you had every best intention for Luci, My Lord. I shall remain with her as she reads the letter and provide any assistance or comfort she may need." Christina curtseyed and walked to the door, then turned back to say, "You have my assurance that should she need your guidance, I will suggest that she seek you out immediately."

CHAPTER 27



“Good day, My Lord. What brings you out here?” Collin asked, looking up at Gideon and squinting into the sun.

“Good day to you as well, Collin,” Gideon answered, attempting to smile but failing in the effort. “I’m going to take Jacques out for his exercise. Care to join us?”

“Of course. But I thought you were gone to Stonefield Park? I held off on pruning in the front so I could have it freshly done for your return in two weeks.” Collin looked worried about his work, but Gideon shook his head.

“I had intended it to be so, but... well, my plans have changed.” Gideon looked away as he headed towards the stable, but Collin pressed him further.

“If you’re returned home, wouldn’t Lady Ambergrave prefer to ride Jacques? I know he’s her favorite horse,” the boy said. “When she’s done, I was going to show her a new variety of flower that I thought she might like for me to plant along the hedgerow.”

“Alas, Lady Ambergrave has elected to stay at Stonefield for the time being,” Gideon started to say, but his tone gave him away.

“Is everything all right, My Lord? You seem... you seem sad.”

“I’m fine, Collin,” Gideon said, covering the waver in his voice with a cough. He entered the stable to fetch Jacques, but Collin followed him inside and down the row of stalls.

“Have you argued with Lady Ambergrave again?” Collin asked, an innocence in his voice that excused any impudence. Gideon had to laugh at the attempt at an angry expression the boy wore.

“What makes you say that, rascal?”

“I can tell when you’re not saying the whole story. It’s just as when you’re about to bowl a bouncer to me, but you end up chucking it instead. You make this odd face where you look like you’ve smelled something rancid.” Collin mocked Gideon’s expression, which only made the Marquess laugh.

“I do no such thing, you silly boy. And I do not chuck it, that is prohibited in cricket,” Gideon said, skirting the issue at hand.

“And now you’re doing this other thing where you try to talk of other things instead of what I really want to ask about, like that day I was put out because Ma would not tell me where babies come from.” Collin pinned him back with a knowing glare, one that was wise beyond his years.

“When did you get so smart?” Gideon asked.

“When did you decide to return home without Lady Ambergrave?” Collin persisted.

“It was not a decision that I made lightly,” he began, but then he somberly added, “or in truth, that I made at all. She is very unhappy with me at the moment, and she has every reason to be.”

“Were you harsh?” the boy asked, something of his childlike wonder at the world appearing beneath the surface of his question.

“Yes, you could say that I was,” Gideon acknowledged as he reached for Jacques’ bridle from its hook.

“Why would you do something so daft?” Collin asked, cocking his head and reaching for lead line to hand over.

“Ahem. I’m certain I’m supposed to remind you that you shouldn’t speak that way to your elders,” Gideon chided kindly, but he softened further as he said, “But yes, I was ridiculously stupid. And now I shall suffer for it.”

“My Lord, let me give a word of advice,” Collin said seriously. Gideon fought to stifle a laugh, but he nodded and waited patiently. “You have to make it up to her. No matter what was said or who began it all, you are the man and therefore you must take the blame.”

“Who taught you that?” Gideon asked, incredulous.

“No one. I figured it for myself,” the boy answered. “See, there is a girl at my school and I’m rather fond of her. She’s very nice and fairly pretty, but loves books almost as much as I do. But I’m smart, you see... smart enough to know that she’s even smarter. If I’ve offended her in some way but I don’t know what it is, then I trust that she does know.” Collin shrugged his shoulders as if it were the simplest matter in the world. “So that means I should make amends and try not to do it again.”

“But if you don’t know how you’ve offended her, how will you know how not to repeat your error?” Gideon inquired, playing along.

“I’m certain she’ll tell me,” Collin said. “But to be serious now, we men have all the advantages in the world. We own the land, we earn the income, we inherit from our fathers where our sisters cannot, we rule the governments and the countryside, we declare wars and we fight them if we choose... and the women just have to go along with it. The very least we can do is do our best to make them smile.”

Gideon studied the boy for a long moment, appraising him with a keen eye. Finally, he nodded.

“When did you become so wise? Were you not the same boy who was thrown from a mule and kicked soundly last year while trying to ride standing on its back?” Gideon arched an accusing eyebrow, but Collin only laughed.

“I was just a young tyke then,” he joked, taking on a very manly stance with his fists at his waist. “Now I’m a man of eleven and I’ve learned a thing or two.”

“I dare say, you are certainly more clever than me,” Gideon acknowledged, bowing low. “Then if that is so, perhaps you would like to ride Jacques for a while so that I might prepare to return to Stonefield Park?”

“It would be my pleasure, My Lord,” Collin said, returning his bow. “Would you please give my best to Lady Ambergrave? And tell her that I hope to see her again soon?”

“I will if she’ll see me,” Gideon thought as he strode towards the house. “And I hope to see her again myself.”

* * *

Christina hesitated outside the door to her young mistress’ chambers. She raised her hand to knock—heeding her own advice about changing her ways and treating “Lady Ambergrave” as befitting her station. But she stopped, her curled fingers hovering in midair, and dropped her head.

No matter what this letter contains, nothing will ever be the same. She stood, looking down at the letter. She was of half a mind to read it herself, despite her admonishment of Lord and Lady Ambergrave. After all, if they already knew its contents, what harm would there be in Christina knowing?

No, it would not be right, certainly not for someone in my position. Her parents, even while looking out for her interests and as her equals in station, should not have done so. Far be it from me to forget my place.

Christina knocked firmly and waited, but there was no sound from within. At first her face felt flush with shame, as though Luci would prevent her from entering, but then she was overcome with concern. What if the girl had stumbled in her weakened state? What if she had taken to her bed again, or had done herself some harm?

Flinging open the door, Christina was greatly relieved to see why Luci was prevented from answering. The poor girl, having finally begun eating her meager bedside fare, had called for a more substantial meal, one she was enjoying greatly.

“Oh, Christina!” Luci managed to say between bites of potatoes, “I’m glad you’re here. Is there any word about Jacques?”

“My Lady, I completely forgot to ask, as there is some important news I received from your father,” the governess said, curtsying briefly.

Luci looked at her wide-eyed, pausing in the midst of chewing a small morsel. She finally swallowed, frowned deeply, and waved at Christina’s upright posture and distance from the table. “What is this? My Lady? A curtsy? Whatever brought that on?”

“It is befitting your station, My Lady,” Christina explained in a formal tone. “Certain events have called to mind my actions all these years. I have come to realize that you have not been treated in a manner to which you should be. Too many of us—myself included at the forefront—have continued to see you as a child in need of coddling and correction rather than the Marchioness which you now are.”

Luci stared for a moment longer, then said, “Well, stop it. I don’t like it.”

“It’s only because it is strange to you now. You will grow accustomed to it in time, I’m sure.”

“I don’t want to grow accustomed to it. You’re my dearest friend, no matter whether it’s because you’re paid to do so or not. And as for my parents, we’ve never stood on ceremony. Our family is rather the exception in that we are close, loving, and fondly familiar.” Luci pouted, looking very much like the child Christina was trying to stop her from being.

“Well then, I propose a compromise,” Christina said, coming closer. “There shall be times when I can serve as your confidant and companion, but at other times, you must comport yourself as is fitting for your title.”

“I still don’t like it,” Luci argued crossly. “Is this the urgent news that you’ve brought from my father? That I am not behaving like a noblewoman? Because if recent events are any indication, I don’t think I shall be a Marchioness for very long.”

Christina looked down at the letter she fairly well concealed in her hands. “No, I’m afraid it is not. It is something I’ve come to realize wholly on my own.” Holding up the letter, she said, “This came for you... from Lord Ambergrave.”

Luci immediately turned away, as though even looking upon his letter could harm her. “Take it away. He is a liar and a traitor, and I want nothing to do with him.”

“My Lady... Luci... please heed my advice.” Christina looked at the chair as though awaiting permission to sit, which Luci granted with a flick of her hand. Sitting down across from Luci, the governess said, “Whatever this letter contains, it cannot be ignored. You must send a reply, as well.”

“I shall do no such thing. Lord Ambergrave no longer exists, so far as I’m concerned,” Luci said haughtily, turning her back on the offensive writing.

“Luci, this is one of those moments I just spoke of. Am I to treat you as a noblewoman or a child? It is your decision,” Christina said, a familiar hint of warning in her voice.

Luci paused. “I don’t suppose I could avoid being either one? Can I not simply be a young lady who doesn’t wish to endure any more sorrow at the moment?”

“My dear girl, I’m afraid you cannot,” the governess replied with genuine sympathy. “This letter may contain a demand for a divorce, which would impact your life terribly. It might contain a heartfelt apology, though, with declarations of undying love. You shall never know, not unless you read it.”

Christina held out the letter to her, but Luci faltered. She looked at Christina morosely and asked, “What if it is not what I want to hear?”

“What is it that you wish to hear? What do you hope for on this page?” she asked softly.

“I don’t know,” Luci whispered. “I want... I want to be as happy as I was for those few brief days, from the moment when I opened my eyes and my adoring husband was sitting beside me, praying fervently that I might wake up.”

“And what shall you do if this letter doesn’t promise that?” Christina pressed.

“Take to my bed again and wait for death?” Luci asked with a timid smile. Christina shook her head firmly. Luci added, “I thought not. I don’t know, I suppose I shall just have to go on in the world of the living, won’t I?”

“Of course. But now you haven’t answered the most important question,” the governess continued, still dangling the letter between her fingers enticingly. “What if the happiness you want isn’t with Lord Ambergrave? Or worse, what if it is?”

“How can it be?” Luci asked, shrugging her thin shoulders. “After all he’s done? I don’t see how it’s possible.”

“What if he is a changed man, one who was only driven to revenge by years of grief and anger?” Christina smiled reassuringly. “Would that cause you to change your mind?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to believe,” Luci admitted.

“Well, shall I stay while you read this, or should I step out? Only know that I will abide by whatever you decide upon reading it, *My Lady*.” Christina gave her a knowing look and placed the letter beside Luci. The younger woman took it and

met Christina's gaze, then stood and walked slowly to the window, holding onto her desk for support.

The governess busied herself with clearing away Luci's dishes, pleased to see that her bowl of broth and plate were both empty, along with another plate that held but a few crumbs. A large goblet of water was also drained, another very good sign. As Christina placed the items on the cart by the door, Luci turned and called out to her.

"Wait, don't leave yet," she said, holding the letter to her chest. Fresh tears filled her eyes. Suddenly, Christina was filled with a deep sense of regret coupled with fury at the Marquess, only to feel a wave of relief when Luci smiled broadly.

"I must see him!"

CHAPTER 28



“Mother! Father!” Luci called as she hurried down the stairs. She raced into their drawing room and stopped short, clearly surprised to see her aunt. “Aunt Mary! How wonderful to see you, I did not know you had arrived.”

Luci darted forward and placed a kiss on her aunt’s cheek, returning the older woman’s adoring smile.

“Of course I came, I had to see you once I learned of the unfortunate events that happened recently.” Lady Hardigree held out her hands for Luci to embrace her, and said, “My word, you look awful.”

“Be nice, sister,” Lady Thornshire said, taking Luci from her and holding her closely. “She only means that you’re too thin, and you need some color in your cheeks.”

“That may very well be true,” Luci acknowledged. “I shall have plenty of time to eat and bask in the sun during the ride to Ashworth Hall. I’m departing first thing in the morning.”

“What? Have you gone mad?” Lady Hardigree demanded, clutching at her throat in alarm.

“I have not. I know that you have all read the letter from Lord Ambergrave—do not look guilty, Mother, I would have done the same thing in your position—and therefore, you know why I must go.”

Luci left to go pack her things, most of which still sat untouched in their trunks since her arrival several days ago, leaving her parents and her aunt to exchange worried glances.

“Do you think this is wise, Edgar?” Lady Thornshire asked, twisting her fingers together nervously.

“I don’t see that we have much choice,” he answered quietly, watching Luci go. “Miss Ross was right. We have no authority over her, certainly not when it comes to returning to her own home.”

“But what if Lord Ambergrave hurts her again? How would we even learn of it if she took ill or... or worse? I cannot trust that man, not after all this,” Lady Thornshire said, pursing her lips until they were only a thin, white line.

“We can only trust that he is a man of his word. If you’ll excuse me, ladies,” Lord Thornshire said before striding towards the door of the drawing room and out of the house.

“Where are you going?” his wife asked, and Lord Thornshire paused.

“I’m going to Ashworth Hall. It’s time I speak to the Marquess face-to-face, man-to-man, and put all of this unrest behind us. If Luci is intent on returning there, I wish to know his mind beforehand.”

Lord Thornshire left and his wife moved to follow, but Lady Hardigree held her back. “Let him go. He must. He is the one responsible for Luci’s situation and he is feeling the effects of that guilt. Let him make it right.”

“Oh Mary, what can we do?” Lady Thornshire asked, desperate for some solace.

“Nothing that is in line with that law, I’m afraid,” Lady Hardigree replied, though her mind was already at work on some sort of devious solution. “I don’t suppose we could kidnap her...”

“Of course not.”

“...or shoot all of your horses to prevent her departure. I’m sorry, that is the extent of my knowledge in this situation.” Lady Hardigree smiled sympathetically, her attempt at humor clearly ineffective. “But Angeline, think of it this way. She is bolder now, about to go forward with her own decision. Is this not what you’ve wanted for her? Remember, this marriage was not of her own doing, and she was powerless to prevent it. Give her this moment to come into her own.”

“I don’t have to like the notion, but I can agree with it,” Lady Thornshire said, sitting down and collapsing against the sofa in defeat. “But is it enough?”

“Is what enough?” the Duchess asked, coming to sit close.

“His apology. His declarations. They’re merely words on a paper, are they not?” Lady Thornshire looked out the window, her face unreadable.

“They may be to you and me, but to Luci, they are everything. We must hope that they are everything to Lord Ambergrave, as well.” Lady Hardigree patted her sister’s hand reassuringly before giving her a wink. “And if they are not, *then* we shall consider breaking the law.”

* * *

Gideon had bid farewell to Derwall and the staff only that morning but already his sense of unease was flaring up, filling him with an odd sense of dread. He had a singular focus, Luci’s smiling face flooding his thoughts. In truth, she had been all he could think about these last many days, and the sudden loss of her left an ache deep inside him that refused to be healed. He knew not how she might receive him or whether Lord Thornshire had accepted his apology, but he also knew that he had to make the attempt.

Less than an hour’s drive remained before his carriage should arrive at Stonefield Park, but the driver called out a command to stop the horses. Gideon tried to see out through the windows along the side of the carriage, but could only see a small cluster of men blocking the path.

“You there. Where is he?” a loud voice called out to the driver. “Who’s yer passenger?”

The driver’s voice was muffled, but Gideon could make out his refusal to divulge any information. Suddenly, the door flew

open and beefy hands reached in for him, hauling him out by the lapels of his coat.

“Where’s our money, fancy boy?” one of the men spat out, causing Gideon to recoil slightly.

“I’m not certain what you mean. Who are you? Who are you looking for?” he asked, attempting to decipher their intent.

“Don’t play any games with me, boy. I’ll take yer head off in a blink, I will,” the man threatened, balling his fist and striking a menacing pose. “Now where’s our money?”

“Again, I’m sorry, but I don’t know what money you’re referring to,” Gideon insisted, trying to sound calm. The rough-looking men inched closer, tightening the circle around him. His driver was pinned against the side of the carriage as well a few feet away, looking very alarmed.

“We know ya have it, ya owe yer debts from the horses,” the man answered with a sneer.

“Horses? The ones I bought recently for my stable, you mean? Those have been paid for in full, I assure you,” Gideon insisted, but the closest man’s snarl of rage stopped him.

“Not buyin’ the horses, ya idjit, racing ‘em. Ya been placing bets at the track and skipping out afore ya paid up. Now we’re here to collect.”

Gideon looked around rather helplessly, noting that he was vastly outnumbered as there were four of them but only one of him. Even should his driver manage to get free, he would be of little aid against a group this size and this angry.

“I’m afraid you are mistaken. I haven’t placed a wager on horse racing in... I don’t know, ten years? I don’t even know which track you’re referring to,” he protested, confused by their accusation.

“Oh, don’t try it. We know who ya are. You’re that Lord Ambergrave, and we’ve come to collect,” the man who was clearly in charge of the group shouted.

Gideon paused, confounded as to how they knew his name but clearly had the wrong man. He struggled to think of a time he may have encountered these men or others who might know them, but could not recall. Suddenly, his eyes narrowed.

“Lord Stillscar! He had sworn his revenge, and this is how he sought to do it. With unpaid debts made in my name.”

“Good sirs, I think I know the explanation for all of this—” he began, but before he could finish, a fist to his face sent him reeling backwards into the side of the carriage.

“The explanation is we get our money or we start cutting off your fingers!” the man roared.

Still clutching his injured face, Gideon demanded crossly, “How much is this debt I supposedly owe?”

“Thirty pounds, and we’ll be adding interest every time ya open yer mouth to argue,” a slightly smaller man piped up, clearly the numbers man of the operation.

“Fine. The debt is not mine, as you have been deceived by someone who sought revenge against me,” Gideon said, nodding. “But I shall pay the debt to put this matter to rest.”

There was some grumbling among the men as they looked to one another, considering whether or not this was an acceptable offer. Gideon waited while they wrestled with their next course of action.

“Fine, then. Hand it over and be on yer way,” the first man said roughly, his mistrust obvious.

“Of course I’m not traveling with that sum of money, what would you expect?” Gideon argued. “I will have to write you a promissory note and then supply the funds once I’m returned home.”

“What kind of fools do ya take us for? Yer not goin’ anywhere. You’ll slide off and be gone and worse, call the constable or somethin’.”

For emphasis, the man darted forward and landed a punch in Gideon’s midsection, one that bent him over and left him gasping for breath. While he was unable to defend himself, the man landed another blow to his face with an uppercut.

The blows continued to rain down upon him from all sides. Doing his best to protect his face and body, his arms were

therefore useless for any form of attack. He chanced to hear an unpleasant cry that told him his driver was also bearing the brunt of this misplaced assault.

When Gideon finally collapsed to the ground, the man leaned close and said, “You’ll get our money and you’ll bring it to Corner Downs by sunset. We’ll be taking a souvenir to help ya remember yer appointment. If ya don’t show up, we’ll be comin’ to find ya and takin’ the rest.”

Unable to open his eyes, Gideon heard rather than saw the sound of a knife coming out of its sheath. He was too weak to resist when the man pulled his arm up by the wrist and held the sharp edge of the blade against one of his fingers.

“Whoa, there. What’s going on here?” a man shouted from a short distance away. His horse neighed loudly when the animal stopped short.

“Run away, lads!” one of the ruffians shouted. Gideon’s hand fell to the ground when his attacker fled on foot, avoiding the shouts of the witness who’d mercifully come by.

The scuffling of fleeing footsteps was replaced by the sound of boots running closer. The newcomer dropped down beside Gideon and suddenly shouted, “Lord Ambergrave! What are you doing here?”

Gideon opened his eye only a crack and spied Lord Thornshire, his face flushed from the effort of riding hard and coming to his aid.

“My driver... help him, please...” Gideon managed to stammer. Thankfully the Earl followed the instruction, leaving his side to go attend to the injured servant.

“Here, both of you into the carriage,” Lord Thornshire said, returning to Gideon’s side and helping him to sit up. “I shall drive us back to Stonefield, it’s not terribly far.”

The Earl helped the men to their feet and hoisted them into the carriage with great effort, letting both of them recline across the seats. Gideon heard other sounds of knocking about outside the carriage and saw that Thornshire had tied his own horse alongside the team for the ride to his home.

The first painful jostling of the carriage taking off was like a blade through Gideon’s skull. He forced his eyes open again to look at his driver, horrified to see that the poor man had turned a ghostly white and was very still. The sight of the trees and walls flying past the carriage window at such an impossible speed made him feel queasy, but it explained the agony of the carriage wheels bouncing beneath his injured head.

“We’ll be there shortly, Ambergrave,” Lord Thornshire once called out loudly from his perch atop the carriage seat, but it only added to the droning roar in Gideon’s ears.

Blissfully, Gideon slipped into fitful unconsciousness for the duration of their travels. It only compounded the suffering of waking when the carriage stopped and several men helped retrieve him from within.

“Careful now! Support his head!” Lord Thornshire called out from somewhere nearby. “Those ribs may well be broken as

well, so guard them carefully and be gentle.”

Gideon was vaguely aware of moving from the courtyard into the main house. An interminably long time later, he was finally settled in a soft bed with his bleeding head resting on a crisply clean pillow.

“Send for the physician and the constable,” Lord Thornshire ordered gruffly. “I want those men found and apprehended. Also, send for my valet to assist Lord Ambergrave. Someone please inform Lady Thornshire and Lady Ambergrave of the man’s arrival but be cautious what you say about his current state.”

“My driver...” Gideon said once again.

“Never fear, Ambergrave,” Lord Thornshire said kindly, leaning closer and speaking in a volume more welcome to Gideon’s throbbing head. “He is in a room adjacent at this very moment, and we will see to his care as well.”

“Thank you,” Gideon wheezed, the pain in his ribs increasing as he tried to speak.

“Think nothing of it,” Lord Thornshire protested. “Now rest. The physician will be here shortly. We will do everything in our power to help you.”

CHAPTER 29



“Oh good, you’re here,” Luci called out when she opened the door to Christina’s knock.

“Yes, you asked for me?”

“I did. Since I’m to return to Ashworth Hall in the morning, I thought it might be wise to go ahead and pack some more of my things to bring with me,” Luci explained, pointing to several garments laid out in a row. “Can you tell me which of the gowns I’ve laid out are the most appropriate? I want to ensure that they are in season and useful for a variety of occasions, yet still suitable for the wife of a Marquess.”

“Has no one told you, My Lady?” Christina asked, a look of horror on her face.

“Christina,” Luci began, looking somewhat exasperated, “I thought I said we do not stand on ceremony. At least not when we’re alone.”

“But Luci... I thought you would have heard by now,” Christina said, coming closer fretfully. “Lord Ambergrave was brought here nearly an hour ago.”

“Here? What do you mean, he’s already here?” Luci asked, smiling. “Why, perhaps he could not wait for a reply to his letters. He’s come to see me and to make amends?”

Christina didn’t answer, and Luci began to grow worried.

“What is it? Why is he here then?” she asked, studying her governess’ face intently.

“Apparently, he was set upon by bandits along the road. He’s been beaten rather badly. Your father’s physician is in with him now,” Christina explained. “In any event, there’s no need of packing your things. I should imagine he’ll be staying here for quite some time.”

“Why was I not told sooner?” Luci cried, throwing down the garment and hurrying towards the door only to have Christina block her path.

“I should think no one knew your feelings towards him, nor his feelings towards you. But the more urgent course was to tend to him, so it is best that you stay here for now.”

“Stay here?” Luci demanded. “I will do no such thing. Regardless of what has transpired these past many weeks, he is my husband and I shall go to wait for news of his condition.”

“Very well, then. Shall I return these things you’ve begun to pack?” Christina asked stoically, which made Luci pause.

“Yes, thank you. I’m sorry I spoke so harshly, Christina. After all the kindness you’ve shown me in what has been the most difficult time of my entire life.” Luci hugged her closely then added, “You’re more dear to me than any friend I could hope for.”

“Thank you, Luci. Now go, I’ll see to your things.”

Luci hurried from the room and down the stairs, nearly tripping on her hem in her haste to discover where they’d taken Lord Ambergrave. She finally inquired of Pierson, who showed her to a room in the east wing.

“If I may, Lady Ambergrave, I will happily go in and see if the physician is finished?” the butler offered.

“Thank you, Pierson,” she answered, a slight tremor in her voice. “I’ll wait here.”

It seemed to take ages for Pierson to return with any word about Gideon, but Luci managed to calm herself as she paced the floor. Her thoughts kept returning to his letter...

...My darling wife... I’m so sorry for the pain I’ve caused you... anything you ask of me is yours...

How quickly her sentiments had changed from utter loathing of a cold and distant stranger to adoration for a beloved husband. Luci could no longer think of being apart from Gideon, no matter how wretched a thing he might have done.

“My Lady, Sir Morrison has not finished treating Lord Ambergrave,” Pierson said after emerging and closing the door behind him. “He asks that you give him some more time, then he will seek you out to tell you how the Marquess is doing.”

“I can be patient, I suppose,” Luci replied, attempting to sound brave. “Thank you, I will wait right here.”

“Shall I have something sent up for you? Your tea, perhaps?” the butler offered kindly, but Luci shook her head.

By the time Sir Morrison was finished and came out to speak to Luci, another hour had passed. His face, though naturally grim due to the nature of his work, brightened considerably when he saw her waiting there.

“My dear Luc—I mean, Lady Ambergrave,” he said, taking her hands in his. “It has been too long. I don’t think I’ve called on you since you fell from a tree, trying to prove to your governess that you could drop an egg without it breaking.”

“Sir Morrison, it is good to see you again,” she answered sweetly. “And as I recall, the egg wasn’t the only thing that broke that day. But it healed nicely, thanks to you.”

“Ah yes. Mending broken fingers is a particular specialty of mine, I plan to soon chair a professorship at the Royal College specifically on childhood maladies of the digits.” Sir Morrison laughed loudly, then became somewhat more serious.

“I suppose you are waiting for news of your husband’s injuries,” he said, lowering his voice slightly. “Unfortunately, this is no simple matter that I can simply bind with a strip of gauze and allow it to mend on its own.”

“What happened to him?” Luci questioned. “I only know he was met with danger on the road, but no one has told me why.”

“I shall allow him to tell you that tale, I am merely the physician,” Sir Morrison said, his blue eyes twinkling beneath his bushy, gray, grandfatherly eyebrows. “Though he is in a very poor state at the moment, I think he will be fine in a matter of a week or two. His ribs are giving me the most cause for concern at the moment. At least two are broken but I don’t believe they have punctured the lung beneath.”

“Oh, that is wonderful news,” Luci said, sighing. But Sir Morrison shook his head.

“It is, though the threat of illness is always increased in cases such as these. The patient attempts to reduce their pain by breathing very shallowly, and that—coupled with the sort of bedrest his other injuries will require—can lead to infection.”

“As I know all too well,” Luci thought miserably, remembering her own brush with death too recently.

Sir Morrison looked confused, but then continued. “But there is another matter. Lord Ambergrave was beaten about the head, and he may have also struck it upon the ground when he fell. That is also cause for concern, and we must keep a careful watch over him for the next few days.”

“Do not worry, he will not be unattended,” Luci assured him.

“Of course not, My Lady. But Lord Ambergrave spoke to me of a treatment he has been receiving from his own physician, something to do with an old injury.” Sir Morrison looked thoughtful for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. “It is not a regimen that I am familiar with, but I do know that he should continue his treatments as soon as he is able. He said that they helped him greatly, but as of late, his leg has been hurting again.”

Luci thanked Sir Morrison before the older gentleman left. She hesitated for a moment before opening the door to see Gideon, though her heart fluttering unpleasantly before she reached for the handle.

What if he is cross with me? Heartfelt confessions in a moment of agony are one thing, but seeing me face-to-face is something else entirely. Luci shook the unhappy thought from her mind and dwelt instead on the better news—Gideon had ridden all this way in the first place to see her. Surely it meant he wished to see her.

Luci opened the door and peeked inside. Someone had darkened the room by drawing the curtains and dousing any lamps, making it difficult to see Gideon. She stepped inside and closed the door silently behind her, then took a hesitating step closer. Was he sleeping? She dared not risk disturbing him, but Luci had to be sure he was all right, to see him with her own eyes.

“Luci?” Gideon whispered. “Is that you?”

“It is,” she answered with a smile. “How did you know?”

“You’re the only one I’ve wanted to see. I’ve been waiting for you,” he answered, though his words were slurred and dulled from the physician’s ministrations. “I think... I think I may have hurt myself.”

Luci giggled softly. “Leave it to you to tease at a time like this, you who could not have been paid a ransom to smile for the first month we knew each other.”

“I had no reason to before,” Gideon replied, the words barely audible as he breathed against the pain in his side. “Not until after I knew you.”

She knew not how to respond to such a stirring confession, but when Gideon held out his hand to her, she took it.

“I have to... I’m sorry, Luci.” Gideon struggled for more air then said, “I’ve hurt you so much. But what I said about your father, what I did—”

“No,” Luci said firmly. “We shall not talk of that now. It is not more important than your health.”

“But I must... I’m so very sorry for telling you like that...”

“Apology accepted, now we shall not discuss it. I am putting my foot down,” Luci said lightly. “Someday we shall clear the air and my father shall have the chance to defend his name to you. But it isn’t today.”

“My girl...” Gideon said, then he closed his eyes to sleep.

* * *

Gideon awoke the next morning to find that everything was still dark. If not for a faint sliver of light entering the room where the curtains met, he would have wondered if he'd gone blind. Once his eyes adjusted, he saw something that made his breath catch in his already wounded chest.

Luci.

Seated in a chair, she'd slumped over during the night until her head rested gently on her arms at the foot of the bed. She was twisted painfully, and Gideon wished to pick her up and carry her to the comfort of her bed.

What must she think of me? I confessed to destroying her father's fortune and marrying her only to spite him, yet here she waits at my bedside. What sort of creature is she to be so caring to one who has been so callous with her heart?

Watching her sleep, Gideon longed to reach for her, to pull her close and kiss her softly the way they had kissed that day near the stable. He lacked the strength to hold her though, but worse, he worried that she lacked the will.

Trying not to wake her, Gideon sought to shift his position to ease the ache that ran through his limbs. Luci stirred in her sleep as he moved so he froze, watching her to make sure he did not disturb her again. He stayed still for so long that a numb feeling crept over his feet, exacerbating the pain in his legs.

“Gideon?” Luci asked in a sleepy voice when she felt him move at last. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he answered honestly. “Only sore. And perhaps a bit confused as well. What day do you suppose it is?”

“I can’t be sure,” she teased. “But you’ve only been here a day, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Oh good. The way I feel, it could have been weeks and I would not be more surprised.” Gideon was quiet, wondering what to say next.

For her part, Luci did not offer anything else, either. She sat up and patted her hair, then smoothed the wrinkles from her gown.

“Would you like some light?” she offered, standing up. “I can open the curtains, if you like.”

“Perhaps only a little?” Gideon replied with a weak laugh. “I was not fully honest, my head is hurting greatly.”

“Then only a tiny bit, I promise,” Luci assured him. Rather than opening the curtains, she merely folded one side back and secured it with a chair, but even that small amount of light made Gideon wince and cover his eyes briefly. “I’m sorry, but it will help you to wake up and get stronger.”

“Oh, how the tables have turned in the cruelest way,” he said, feigning a dramatic pose with his hands over his eyes. “Only how long ago was I the one sitting vigil at your bedside, ensuring you were well cared for?”

“I don’t know, but I doubt any other marriage has had such an unlucky and unhealthy start,” she said playfully. “Shall we make a pact that neither of us is to take ill ever again?”

“I choose to think we just got it all behind us in the early days. It will be nothing but health and vitality from now on,” Gideon retorted, trying to smile for Luci’s sake. His expression turned darker, though, as a new worry came to mind. “Luci, we must speak of unpleasant past events.”

“No, there’s no need of such things. Those are in the past. If I can resolve to not think of them again, then I can ask the same of you,” she insisted without meeting his gaze.

“But I cannot put them behind me, not in the way you can,” he explained, a sense of shame welling up inside him as he confessed these things. “I’ve lived the last ten years of my life plotting revenge, biding my time, setting things into motion with the express purpose of ripping them away in a cruel manner. I cannot just ignore that.”

“Then explain, please,” Luci said, sitting up straight and preparing to hear the worst. “Once it is spoken between us, then we can move on and lock those unpleasant things away forever.”

Gideon shook his head sadly. “I’m afraid it will never turn out that way. Once I say these things to you, I can never take them

back. I've already hurt you once—no, twice—with the things I've said. I accused you of a terrible act, then I admitted that I was false in my desire for you to be my wife. I hurt you deeply both times, and it was because I had not chosen the proper words to explain. What if I muck it up again and this time, you cannot forgive me?"

"Well then, I vow to forgive you," she replied brightly.

"Luci," Gideon said, laughing. "You know words don't work that way, either. They are the most powerful thing in the world. They have the power to melt a frozen heart and make someone fall in love, they have the power to destroy a man and make him bitter and old before his time. With a mere word, a king can take his country to war. You cannot simply promise to ignore what you hear."

Luci was somber, silent. Gideon knew he was right but more importantly, Luci now knew it, too. She appeared to be thinking it over, but he had left her no choice. They would speak of these things, but it would be painful, agonizing even.

"All right. I am ready," she announced formally. "But are you? Are you certain you are strong enough? Gideon, I do understand that you need to tell me what happened, but I also know that you've waited so long to put it behind you... another few days to ensure your good health will not cause you any harm."

"I will never be able to rest until I know you have heard me and I know your heart after what you hear," he replied, no longer looking at her.

“Then I am ready.”

CHAPTER 30



Luci's mind raced as Gideon's story unfolded. Her heart whiplashed between anguish and anger, fear and trepidation. Through it all, no matter how difficult it became, she tried to be brave for him. Most of all, she tried to rid her mind of thoughts that could cause more distance between them.

"But I still do not understand," she said at one point. "It is not from disbelief in your story that I say this, but tell me how my father is responsible for their deaths."

"Simple. His negligence and even his own purposeful intention sank the ship they were traveling on," Gideon answered, his voice trembling only a little. "He sought to pay off some of his debts with the insurance from the loss of his ship. My parents' lives paid the price."

"But you told me they died in a fire," she argued, then softened her tone. "At least, that's what I thought you said."

"No, they were not at home that night. They were sailing for Spain and had already perished. When I learned of their passing..." He pressed his lips together in a tight line as tears threatened to take hold of him. "...I lost all control over

myself. I flew into a rage, one induced by grief and shamefully improper quantities of my father's whisky. When I finally wore myself out from screaming and ranting, I fell into a stupor and stumbled, causing a lamp to turn over before I blacked out."

"And so the fire... the one in which you were burned?" Luci asked gently. "You believe you were the one to cause it, and perhaps that is true. But how are you the one responsible for your parents' deaths? Even if what you say about my father is true—and I cannot say for certain that it is or it is not, though I pray to God you are mistaken—that would not mean you were the cause, as well."

"They were traveling because of me," Gideon confessed, the tears he'd tried to hold back finally spilling over. "I was an unruly boy and a horrible student. I had no care for lessons or teachers, only outdoors adventures and pursuits."

"Ah, so that is why your mother sought to build a school?" Luci asked, laughing kindly.

"Oh no, that was a concept she treasured and was patron of even before I was born. It was merely a further embarrassment that I should be so opposed to being taught," Gideon said. "My parents even tried sending me to the village school with the other children, in hopes that seeing how desperately they wanted to learn and improve themselves might make me more... appreciative, I suppose?"

"And I assume it had no effect?"

“None at all. In fact, I was a horrible influence on the other pupils, I think. I was constantly being whipped and ridiculed for my lack of understanding or my insolent behavior.” Gideon grimaced. “All it served was to cause me to run away. I would set out for school and steal off into the woods for the day instead, spending my time with the animals and the trees instead of tutors and teachers.”

Luci smiled benevolently and patted Gideon’s hand. “But you are remedying the situation. You continue to support the school, you’ve grown its numbers. You even ensure that Collin attends school when I’m certain he would rather play in the fields and ride horses. Am I correct?”

“Quite so. But I have been sure to be forthcoming with him about my own failings lest he end up in my position,” Gideon added, his eyes wide. “It is a source of great humiliation that I am rather dull, I think.”

“Now I shall have to disagree,” Luci said loudly, holding his hand even tighter. “You are not dull, in fact, you are a very successful man of business and a property holder. You are also working diligently to ensure that those who come up after you learn from your mistakes and have every opportunity they choose. I think that demonstrates you are rather smart.”

“Thank you, your opinion matters a great deal to me, I find.” Gideon smiled at her, watching her face for so long that Luci looked away, rather embarrassed. He waited a moment, and then asked, “But what do you think?”

“Of your terrible tragedy and the entire ordeal?” Luci asked. Gideon nodded. “I think you’re a very brave person to even get out of bed each day. I cannot imagine what I would do if I were to learn that my parents had died, and in such an awful

way as to drown at sea. But you cannot continue to blame yourself.”

“It’s the only way I know how to make sense of it all. I was the cause of their journey, and then my reckless, childish behavior was the cause of the fire. I have no one to blame but myself... and your father, of course.”

“Yes, well, I intend to get to the bottom of that myself,” Luci assured him. “But your parents chose to take that journey. The heavens chose to send that storm. If there’s any truth to it, my father might be the one who caused the ship to sink, though I can only hope there is some other explanation.”

“Regardless, dear husband... none of that was your doing. And you cannot continue to punish yourself or those around you for what may very well be an unfortunate turn of fate.”

Luci held his hand to her cheek, letting the warmth of her skin soothe Gideon’s torment. She turned his hand so that his palm might face her, then pressed her lips there softly.

“You should rest now,” Luci said, placing his arm across his chest and pulling the covers up around him. “I’ll send someone to sit with you and to bring you your breakfast.”

“Where are you going?” he asked longingly.

“I have an important conversation awaiting me.” Luci gave him a knowing smile and left his room.

* * *

Luci's search of the immense house turned up no sign of her father anywhere. Her mother and her aunt were out, too, which she found odd. They would perhaps have gone visiting at that time of day, but surely not with Lord Ambergrave lying injured in the house?

Finally, she heard hushed voices coming from one of the rooms she rarely entered—her father's private study. Tiptoeing towards the door, Luci leaned down to peer through the keyhole and saw movement within, more than one person from the looks of it. Their hushed voices matched their frantic movements as they moved about the room quietly.

“What are you doing?” Luci demanded, opening the door wide to see her mother and Lady Hardigree rifling through the drawers and cabinets.

“Oh, Luci! You startled me,” her mother cried, turning around suddenly. “I'm looking for some papers that belong to your father. Hurry, help me look.”

“Why? Where is Father?” Luci asked, stepping in and closing the door behind her.

“He's gone to his offices at the harbor to look there,” Lady Hardigree said quickly, taking books from the shelf one by one and flipping through the pages. “We're tackling this room while he's gone.”

“But what are we looking for?” Luci asked, coming over and helping reach the books. She handed another one to her aunt then replaced the one the Duchess has already looked through.

“It’s a sheaf of papers, tied with a ribbon and sealed with wax. They’re rather old but never opened.” Her mother opened another drawer and moved things around until she saw there were no pages within.

Luci moved to the other side of the room where the shelves of books reached to the ceiling. Climbing on a ladder that leaned against the shelves, she began looking as well.

“What is important about these papers?” Luci asked as the search carried on. She caught the glance that passed between her mother and her aunt, but noted that neither spoke first. “I would like to know. What is so important that we’re ransacking Father’s belongings?”

“Luci, we’ve learned of Lord Ambergrave’s accusations against your father, and he believes he knows what they pertain to,” Lady Thornshire said cautiously.

“You’re saying his words were true?” Luci asked, horror-stricken at the thought. “I thought to only humor him in his belief until I could speak to Father, but now this?”

“No, no. We do not know for certain, as he was very vague in his letter to us,” her mother continued. “But your father has spent these past few days since that awful night and the letter that followed trying to discern what Lord Ambergrave could have meant. There is only one instance that comes to mind, and thankfully, there is proof of your father’s innocence in the matter. But we have to find it. Otherwise, it becomes only an instance in which Lord Ambergrave merely has to believe him.”

“I should think that if Lord Ambergrave were told the truth,” Luci said, sniffing with an air of disdain for her mother’s plea, “he would be such a man as to believe it.”

“Not where this is concerned, my dear,” Lady Hardigree replied instead. “You are not yet wise in the ways of the world, so let me explain it thus. When your heart is injured by someone you thought you could trust, there is nothing short of evidence that can mend it completely.”

“What do you mean?” Luci said. “I have had my heart injured—rather recently, if you’ll recall, and yes, even by those I trust the most in the world—yet I believe them when they tell me they are innocent of wrongdoing.”

“It will be that much easier to believe if there is proof. And there is such proof. We only need find it,” Lady Thornshire called over her shoulder.

Reluctantly, Luci continued her search. If the pages themselves were so important as to exonerate her father of a crime, why would they not be in a more secure place? She worked the answer like a puzzle, trying to imagine where her father might have hidden papers that were so crucial to his livelihood, and to his very life.

Think what Lord Ambergrave told you. Luci was remembering the painful saga he’d shared only that morning. *His parents died in a storm, their ship sinking...*

Her father would never want these mysterious papers to fall into the wrong hands, so they must be well concealed. Luci

came down from the ladder and turned in a slow circle, looking about the private room for anything that caught her attention.

And there it was.

“Mother, help me with this,” Luci cried, pointing to a painting of an enormous regal ship sailing through the churning waves. They converged on the painting, crossing the room to a far wall and moving a large sofa out of the way. Behind it, a table held an enormous exotic palm plant whose spiky fronds jutted out in every direction. “Careful, the leaves are rather sharp to the touch.”

Together they moved the potted plant and then the table upon which it sat. Taking one side of the gilt-edged frame apiece, they counted slowly and lifted the painting from the wall. There, glued to the paper on the back, was a packet of papers sealed with the wax mark of the Inspector General.

“Luci, you’ve done it,” her mother breathed excitedly as Lady Hardigree came over to see for herself. “How did you know?”

“I didn’t, I merely guessed at its location after what Lord Ambergrave told me. His parents didn’t die in the fire at Ashworth Hall,” Luci declared, plucking the sheaf of papers from the painting carefully. “They died in a shipwreck... a ship that Father owned.”

Lady Thornshire pressed her hand to her mouth while Lady Hardigree let out a soft cry of surprise.

“All these years, Gideon has blamed Father for their deaths. He claims that Father sabotaged his own vessel in order to recover the money through an insurance policy,” Luci said mournfully.

“How utterly ridiculous,” Lady Thornshire cried indignantly. “If that man wasn’t bedridden from his injuries, I’d horsewhip him myself.”

“So what do these important papers prove, Angeline?” the Duchess asked, peering at them over Luci’s shoulder. “No, don’t open them! The seal proves they have not been altered or falsified in any way.”

“Oh, right. Good point,” Luci said sheepishly. “I can only assume that if Father kept these papers for safekeeping but kept them out of sight, they prove that the shipwreck was purely an accident, a consequence of the storm. No?”

“I don’t know. I try to distance myself from your father’s business dealings,” her mother admitted. “But I don’t understand why he would have forgotten something so important as where these papers were kept. Perhaps he’s had so much on his mind as of late, first with his business being ruined, then with attempting to rebuild it.”

Lady Hardigree clapped her hands sharply and cried out, “It does not matter what the reason was, the pages are found. That is all that matters now. When he returns, we shall give them to him to do with as he intends. Angeline, why don’t you put them somewhere that they will be protected but not forgotten... again, I should say.”

“Good idea. I’ll take them to my room and put them in my desk. Luci, would you ask Derwall to inform me the moment your father returns?” Lady Thornshire asked before leaving the room.

“Come, my dear,” Lady Hardigree said, holding out her hand to Luci. “All of this has given me quite a case of nerves. Let’s walk outside, shall we?”

Luci followed her aunt to the stone pathway that wound through the gardens, delighting in the gentle wind that ruffled the tops of the trees all around. Birds drifted from one branch to the next as they walked, always keeping their distance.

“I suppose I should ask how married life is treating you,” Lady Hardigree began once they were outside, “but I doubt you’d have a sensible answer. This has been a chaotic case of one misfortune after another, has it not?”

“Yes,” Luci said, laughing without a hint of mirth. “I should like to return home and find a herd of cattle in the dining room. It would be a refreshing change from the ordinary.”

“It’s wonderful that you can keep a merry thought about it,” Lady Hardigree replied, praising her as she linked her hand through Luci’s arm. “I envy your mother greatly for her marriage to your father. They are such a happy couple, perhaps not enamored of one another but certainly fond. And they’ve been able to weather terrible events over the years without growing distant or bitter towards one another.”

Luci didn’t know how to respond. She’d only heard snatches of conversation over the years, but knew her aunt’s marriage to

not be a very happy one. As soon as Luci's cousins had grown of age, Lady Hardigree had moved to her own estate where she currently resided. Luci did not know if she had ever returned to her husband's home in Austria, or whether she would wish to.

"Still, darling, I know the fashion is to marry one for whom you have great affection," her aunt continued, "rather than only thinking of securing one's future with fortunes and titles. I am very pleased for you in that it appears you have now found both."

"I hope so, Aunt Mary," Luci answered, leaning her head affectionately against the woman's shoulder for a moment. "Although it grows harder and harder to know what to do in any situation. I feel as though every day it's a new test of some kind, one that I have forgotten to study for."

"Ah, child. That is life. It is true for all of us, from the richest member of the peerage down to the simpleton who mucks that master's stalls. Never fear, I think you shall find that you are very well prepared for these tests after all."

"How so?" Luci asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Because you have a good head on your shoulders and a kind heart beating within," Lady Hardigree pronounced, as though it were a known fact. "Those two things alone stand you in greater stead than many people who walk this countryside. Never forget it, my dear."

EPILOGUE



Gideon awaited Lord Thornshire's return with a mixture of hope and trepidation. Luci had sat by his bedside throughout the day, but he sensed that there was something she was not telling him. She seemed to be as pleasant as always, but when pressed as to whether or not something was the matter, she assured him she was all right but would venture to broach a new topic.

Finally, the moment arrived. The sound of voices below and servants moving quickly past the door told Gideon that the master of the house had surely returned.

"Should you go to greet your father?" Gideon asked, but Luci did not get up.

"I think not. I'm still uncertain as to everything that has transpired, and I don't know what to believe," she said, but Gideon frowned.

"Luci, though I am grateful, yet undeserving, of any loyalty you may have for me now, remember that he was your father first," he chided gently.

“Yes, a father who sold me to a man who ruined him in business,” Luci retorted sharply, “which may have only happened because he killed someone carelessly... or even intentionally. I should think you would understand my hesitation?”

“Luci,” Gideon growled, a hint of warning in his voice. “Do not let this harden your heart. Your father’s actions—and mine, in truth—are the work of men who were desperate to ease their own suffering. You are only caught in the middle of it, and I hope you can come through to the other side with both your husband and your father held in good esteem.”

“We shall see, won’t we?” she asked coyly. “I venture that is him coming this way now.”

Sure enough, there was a knock at the door. Luci looked to Gideon for a long moment before he nodded. She rose and opened it, then looked blankly at her father’s harrowed face.

“Luci! I’m so glad you are here as well. I wish to speak to both of you, it is an urgent matter,” Lord Thornshire said. Luci looked over her shoulder to Gideon before stepping back and opening the door wider.

Lord Thornshire hurried inside the room and moved to sit down, then muttered an apology as he remembered it should be Luci to sit beside her husband.

“Forgive me, your new status is still strange to me, daughter,” he said, covering his embarrassment with a laugh. He cleared his throat and brought over another chair from the desk, then sat down.

“I have just returned home and Lady Thornshire has presented me with a very important document,” he began before turning to his daughter. “Luci, I have you to thank for discovering it, I had completely forgotten where I’d hidden it.”

Lord Thornshire opened his coat and retrieved the now-familiar papers. He held them out so that Lord Ambergrave might look at the seal, still intact.

“Please note that these papers have not been opened since the investigation into your parents’ deaths,” the Earl said solemnly. Luci instantly looked to Gideon, who looked alarmed.

“There was an investigation?” he asked, his interest fixed on the papers.

“Of sorts. The investigation was actually into the person responsible for the damage to the ship,” Lord Thornshire continued. “One of the sailors on board, a man who happened to survive the sinking and be plucked up by a nearby vessel, had been hired to cut a hole in the bottom of the ship at the first sign of a storm.”

“But who would hire a man to do such a thing? And what kind of monstrous person would even think to follow through with it?” Luci demanded, clearly repulsed by this news.

“That is where the investigation was so crucial. As this crew member lived, he told all in an effort to be spared the gallows,” Lord Thornshire continued. “It was the client whose cargo was on board my ship, who was faced with

insurmountable debts. He sought to recover his fortunes while causing great loss to me and my company.”

“Further,” the Earl continued, “I had no knowledge of any passengers on board. It is always left to the captain I’ve hired to book passage and ensure a pleasant voyage for any travelers as he sees fit to bring on board. I’ve found that if the captain has this fee with which to pay his men, in addition to his wages from me, he runs a tighter ship and the journey is an enjoyable one. The cargo also gets to port on time or even sooner, since the passengers do not wish to be delayed.”

“That does make sense,” Gideon acknowledged, the first he’d spoken since Lord Thornshire began.

“But Lord Ambergrave, there is something more that you must know.” Lord Thornshire was quiet, a tear escaping his eye. “I knew not who the passengers were until after the terrible accident occurred... and I received the manifest with my own brother’s name listed.”

Luci stifled a cry and Gideon reached for her, wrapping an arm protectively around her shoulders despite the pain in his side. She wept quietly at the look of anguish on her father’s face.

“Yes, my youngest brother, the lad I had grown up with. We were the best of friends, not merely brothers. He’d been but nineteen years old at the time, and his life was taken from him in the most unimaginable way. To this day, I see his face in my nightmares at times, a cry of terror escaping his throat as he submerges beneath the waves.”

Luci covered her face with her hands as Gideon held her, and she felt the way his shoulders shook as well.

Lord Thornshire cleared his throat and said, “In any event, here are the documents. I want you to know that I do not hold any ill will towards you for seeking revenge against me, but I assure you, I had naught to do with their deaths.”

Gideon looked at the papers for a moment, then took them from Lord Thornshire. He held them in his hand and let the heft of them weigh heavily on his mind. He looked at Luci as well, noting the grief she felt at learning of her father’s loss.

“I shall not need these, My Lord,” Gideon said, holding them back out. “I quite believe you, and I am terribly sorry for the pain I’ve caused you. I was mistaken in my plot against you, and I can never repay the harm I’ve brought against you.”

“But you already have,” Lord Thornshire argued gently. “You paid a handsome sum that kept me from ruin, and you have proven to be a devoted husband to my daughter.” He smiled at Luci, and said, “If this was the circuitous route we had to endure to reach this destination, it will have been worth the awful journey.”

Lord Thornshire stood up and returned the chair to its place, then stood by the door and addressed both Luci and Gideon. “But there is one other matter, one that I cannot explain away. You will have to decide for yourselves if you are enough for one another.”

Gideon watched Lord Thornshire go, then turned to Luci, who was still sitting nestled in the crook of his arm.

“What say you, wife? Ours is a rather twisted tale, but I find that it is now irrevocably entwined. Do you wish to remain the love of my life, the one I place above all others?”

“Nothing could prevent me!” Luci said, crying softly as she leaned her head against Gideon’s shoulder. “Not tragedies or revenge or even loss of those we care about... I am forever yours.”

Gideon shifted so he could look at Luci. Her deep brown eyes still held a shadow of the grief she’d encountered, but reflected there he also saw himself, and therefore the hope he instilled in her. He smiled broadly, feeling the weight of years of torment evaporating under her adoring gaze.

“I love you, my wife,” he said. “I have from the moment we met and I found myself at a loss as to what to do with myself as a married man. Worse, a married man who had snared his victim in his trap, but found it to be an empty victory.”

“And I love you, too,” she answered, “but no, not from the moment we met. I loathed you for weeks.” Gideon laughed at her bold reply, but stilled when she turned serious and said, “But I desire to make up for all those weeks of bitterness and emptiness. I am proud to be your wife, but grateful to be married to the man I love.”

Gideon took Luci’s face tenderly in his hands and kissed her softly, the rest of the anger he’d carried all these years dissolving under the feel of her lips against his. All of the pain, the grief, the rage at both man and the world were fading, replaced by the desire to spend the rest of his life with his former enemy’s daughter.

“What is it?” Luci asked, leaning away to look at him. “You’re shaking. Are you feeling all right?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, shaking his head as he smiled. “I think I’ve forgotten what happiness feels like. Is this it? This odd feeling in my chest where I feel like I could launch myself from the window and fly?”

“Yes, I seem to recall that feeling myself, once upon a time,” she said, beaming at him. “I’d forgotten what it was like, too. But now, I find it’s the only feeling I can imagine.”

The End?

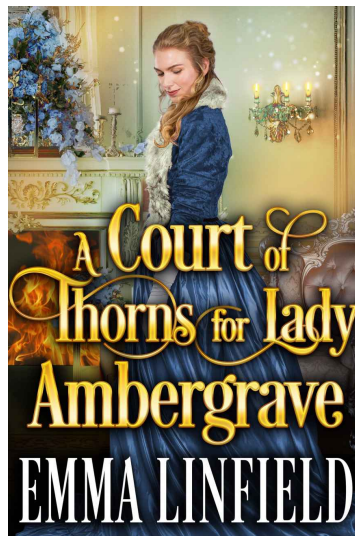
EXTENDED EPILOGUE



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PREVIEW: A FEARLESS
GOVERNESS FOR THE
FORSAKEN DUKE



CHAPTER 1



Lucretia watched as her charges put away their needlework and then formed a proper single-file line on their way to the dining room.

She packed her belongings and made her way back to the teachers' quarters. She had taught her last class for the day, not that it meant her day was over. By no means. She would have to spend the afternoon preparing for the following day.

Fortunately, given that the following day was Thursday, her most favorite day of the week, she did not mind at all. For on Thursdays, she got the chance to teach the subjects she was truly passionate about, instead of needlework and music, subjects she secretly despised.

Lucretia Nelson had been a tutor at Mrs. Doringcourt's School for Young Ladies for almost six years now, having been taken on as a tutor right after departing from the nunnery where she had been raised.

She loved the school and its headmistress, the kind, elderly Mrs. Doringcourt. While smaller than other facilities in Bath—only thirty girls attended year-round—it was a well-respected school that taught its charges more than just needlework and dance. Among the subjects Lucretia was tasked with teaching the young girls were French, Geography, and History, as well as basic Arithmetic.

Not that these young ladies would have much use for them later in life. No, these young girls were destined to become proper ladies of the *ton*, their knowledge and education little

more than a leg-up in the competitive quest for suitable husbands. In their society, skills in dance and music were valued much higher than the ability to count or know history.

It is fortunate for all involved that Mrs. Doringcourt realized I have two left feet right from the start. Now that the other teachers are tasked with the dance lessons, these young dears might have a chance to learn the Quadrille properly. If it were left to me, they would never find a dance partner.

She chuckled at the memory of her first attempt at teaching dance and the headmistress' swift decision to use her talents elsewhere.

“Lucy!” A voice called from behind her. She turned and saw Mary Hastings running her way. She stopped and waited for the young woman to catch up to her.

“Are you finished with your lessons for the day?”

Mary, the youngest teacher at the school, had arrived two years prior and she and Lucretia had shared a room ever since. Mary was accomplished in all the subjects Lucretia found herself lacking in. Mary possessed the grace and talent to teach dance, the delicate hands to create magnificent needlepoint works, and a love for poetry that was infectious and inspiring to their young charges. The only subject they both enjoyed equally was music. While able to play the pianoforte, Lucretia was not especially talented at it. Not the way Mary was. She taught the instrument with such joy even the most tone-deaf students would pick it up posthaste.

“I just finished teaching my needlepoint class. Alas, I must prepare the French exam for the morning. Why do you ask?”

“Faith! Lucy, can't it wait? I have rather a mind to take the air, for it is beautiful outside. Come join me for a walk along the promenade?”

Lucretia smiled. While a dedicated teacher, Mary did enjoy time to herself, away from the students. And Lucy knew that the young woman harbored hopes of finding a dashing young man to marry her and rescue her from a lifetime of teaching.

Thus, walks along the promenade, where she could see and be seen, were among Mary's favorite pastimes.

Lucretia, on the other hand, was quite content with her place in the world. An orphan since birth, she had been raised by the Order of Our Sacred Mary, a convent of nuns in the Derbyshire countryside. She'd rarely had exposure to the world and given little thought to the idea of marriage. She'd always assumed that she would end up either a nun or a teacher, never a wife. Always alone.

In fact, before coming to Mrs. Doringcourt's school, she hadn't had many friends, either. Thus, having Mary had been a true blessing, even if she sometimes proved a rather bad influence when it came to preparing her coursework, such as today.

"I suppose I can always prepare the examination tonight. Before we go, I must first call on Mrs. Doringcourt, for she has asked to see me."

Mary's cheerful, jolly face took on a dark shadow at the mention of the headmistress.

"Is she unwell still? Oh Lucy. It has been many weeks since she last taught any of her classes. What shall we do if she does not recover?"

Lucy shook her head. "She will be just fine. Indeed, the physician has been to see her just this morning and he did not appear alarmed upon his departure. Do not fret, Mary. All will be well."

"I wish I were as confident in the matter as you are. And I shall fret, for you know as well as I that we would be utterly devastated if the school closed. The other teachers have families to go back to, you and I do not. This is all we have."

Lucretia nodded. It was true. She and Mary were the only ones that did not have a family to support them. An orphan just like Lucretia, Mary had been raised in an orphanage until an elderly uncle took her in and gave her an education. Unfortunately, that uncle had passed away the previous year, leaving Mary as alone in the world as Lucretia.

Truly, the school was their home and there was nowhere else for either of them to go. Unlike Mary, Lucretia preferred to not worry herself over the matter. There was no use in fretting. In any case, the headmistress would recover soon enough. Wouldn't she?

"Why don't you ask her to train you as her successor? Perhaps you can take over the school one day." Mary suggested this in all sincerity, but Lucretia laughed out loud, so amused was she at the mention.

"I am not qualified to be a headmistress. Neither is anyone else at the school. I am far too young, for one. And I have not the right qualifications, as you well know."

They had almost reached their chamber, which was located on the lower floor of the teacher's building, across the main building which housed the school. Along with the teacher's chambers, it also housed the dining room, kitchen, and scullery.

"You are far more educated than any of us. You speak Latin and Greek."

Lucretia shrugged, "Thanks to the nuns, I do. Alas, it does me no good at this school nor would it help me become headmistress, should I so desire. In any case, I shall meet you shortly and we shall go and take the air. Put on your best walking costume, my friend. Perhaps we shall find you a dashing Baron or a Viscount, even."

The two women laughed at the idea, knowing well that it would be difficult if not impossible to ever marry into the nobility, even if, through some miracle, a Baron came knocking.

She hoped that a kind, comfortably established young man might take an interest in Mary, for she knew that was what her friend truly desired.

* * *

Lucretia ascended the stairs to the headmistress's chamber, which was located upstairs, in what was once the attic of the house. She'd always envied the headmistress this space, for

while it was burdensome to climb the stairs, it was quite lovely.

While the teachers' and students' chambers were furnished comfortably, the rooms were sparse with only the most necessary furnishings. Mrs. Doringcourt's lodgings were much more opulent.

In any case, Lucretia loved visiting, for the headmistress had created such a warm and welcoming space she always felt her spirits lifted when entering. However, it was not the case today.

For today, as soon as she entered through the front door, a terrible smell tickled her nose. It was the scent of disease. She was familiar with it, for she had often accompanied the nuns on their visits to the ill. She reached for her handkerchief and was about to cover her mouth when she realized that it may hurt the old woman's feelings.

"Miss Nelson? Is it you? I am in the drawing room."

The voice that called out her name was not the strong, demanding voice Lucretia was used to hearing. A feeling of unease spread in her belly as she approached the drawing room.

"It is."

She entered and found the headmistress on her settee, wrapped in a blanket even though it was September and very hot outside. She looked terrible, her cheeks were sunken in, and the bones along her collar were visible. Beside her, on the end table, was a steaming pot of tea as well as a piece of bread with butter that had not been touched.

What a sight! Poor Mrs. Doringcourt. She looks like a skeleton. And it has been only a little more than a week since I last saw her. She is wasting away and appears much more ill than I had feared.

Mrs. Doringcourt looked pale and her hair was unkempt, which was most unlike her as she was one of the most proper ladies Lucretia had ever met.

She indicated toward the chair in front of her and Lucretia sat down. She found herself pushing the chair a little away from the old lady, for she coughed in the most alarming manner.

“Would you like me to pour you a cup of tea, Mrs. Doringcourt?”

She shook her head and dabbed the corners of her mouth with a handkerchief.

“I am quite all right, my dear.”

Lucretia gave her a curt nod and cleared her throat.

“I saw the physician this morning. I hope you are well on your way to recovery.”

The woman shrugged and coughed once more, this time holding the handkerchief in front of her mouth as she did. Lucretia caught her glancing at the handkerchief once the coughing fit subsided and quickly balled it in her hand and tucked it away.

“I shall not make a cake of you or me, Miss Nelson. I am not well. The physician seems to believe I am not long for this world.”

“Faith! Mrs. Doringcourt.” Lucretia found herself gasping, her mouth open with the shock of it all. She was aware her voice had been loud and shrill which drew the old woman’s ire.

“Now, now, Miss Nelson. Get a hold of yourself. We must maintain decorum even at the most ghastly of news. Have the nuns not taught you that?”

“Of course, I apologize, Mrs. Doringcourt. I am just so saddened at the news. I...”

The thoughts swirled through her head at a rapid pace.

“Do not fret quite yet, my dear. I have some time left. Alas, we must prepare for the eventuality when I am no longer here. This is why I asked you here, my dear Miss Nelson.”

She attempted to push herself up which resulted in another coughing spell.

“Please, let me assist you,” Lucretia said as calmly as possible. To her relief, the older woman sat back and straightened the blanket over her legs. Lucretia fluffed the pillow on which she had been leaning and found it drenched in sweat. The old woman leaned back and looked up at Lucretia, her eyes tired.

“Very well. In my desk.” She pointed at the old wooden desk by the window. “You will find a number of letters there. I would like you to go to the post office at your earliest convenience and post them.”

Lucretia did as she was told and retrieved the bundle. Upon seeing the question in her eyes, Mrs. Doringcourt cleared her throat.

“I have sent word to other schools in Bath, letting them know that we are in need of a headmistress-in-training. Perhaps one of our fellow educators can point us to someone suitable. In any case, I have let them know what excellent educators we have at our little school, should the need arise for...”

She stopped and broke into another coughing fit. To her horror, Lucretia saw little droplets of blood stain the white material. Quickly, she averted her eyes as the reality of the headmistress’ illness dawned on her.

Neither Lucretia, nor any of the teachers, had been told of the exact nature of their headmistress’ ailment. Even so, it had taken Lucretia only a few moments with her to know it, for she had seen it too many times before. Consumption. The old woman had all the classic symptoms. Lucretia had seen the disease ravage so many people, young and old, during her time with the nuns. She knew there was little chance of recovery from the illness, especially given the headmistress’ age.

My dear Mrs. Doringcourt. It is a tragedy. The only consolation I can cling to is that the disease progresses slowly and we may yet have time to find someone who can take her place as headmistress, should she not recover.

Suddenly, Lucretia felt herself overtaken by a wave of sadness as she realized the woman who had been her mentor for these last few years would likely soon be gone.

Mrs. Doringcourt had taken her under her wing and helped her adjust to her new life when Lucretia first arrived in the city. That was not all—seeing how gifted she was, the old lady had encouraged her to continue her own studies. And so, for the past five years, Lucretia had spent her days teaching young souls while at night being taught Geography, Italian, and European History by the headmistress. The old woman had done the same for Mary.

Somehow, Lucretia had never considered things might change. Not for her, at least, for she'd planned to be a teacher all her life and to remain at the School for Young Ladies until she was too old to teach. And she had never even considered what that might be like without the headmistress.

“Miss Nelson?” The woman's strained voice drew her out of her thoughts.

“I am sorry, my mind drifted.”

“It is quite all right. As I was saying, I am confident I will be able to find someone capable to succeed me before this wretched disease takes me away. Soon news of my illness will spread, and certainly once the letters make their way to their recipient. I did not want you to be taken by surprise, for I know if the school closed it would be difficult for you, and Miss Hastings, of course.”

She took a sip of her tea, while Lucretia noticed how much her hands shook.

“Are you quite certain there is enough time?” Lucretia felt awful having to discuss the matter of the woman's impending death in such a manner.

Without blinking, the headmistress glanced at her over the rim of her cup.

“Quite confident. I will say that it was rather arrogant of me not to attend to this matter before now. Unfortunately for us all, I was under the impression that I was quite indestructible. I thought I had time.” She paused, “At the very least I had hoped that I would have enough time to train the person I thought would be my natural successor.”

Lucretia tilted her head and frowned. "I was not aware you had somebody in mind."

"My dear child. Your one great fault has always been that you do not think highly enough of yourself."

Lucretia raised her eyebrows.

Me? She means me? When Mary suggested it I dismissed it, for it is rather ridiculous to think that I could ever be headmistress. Let alone of an establishment as respected as this school.

"Do not look so surprised, Miss Nelson. You are extraordinarily gifted and will make a wonderful headmistress one day. Why else do you think I have bestowed all this knowledge upon you all these years? I saw your potential the moment you walked through the door, fresh from the nunnery. I knew all you needed was to find your confidence and to gain experience. I was hoping that in another two or three years you would be ready to unofficially succeed me. Unfortunately, we are out of time."

"I did not know that you thought of me in such high regard."

"That must be what living among the nuns has done to you, dear child. It is all very well that they teach you to be humble. It will serve you well in life, but do not ever forget your worth. Never forget that you are incredibly intelligent and your mind is sharper than that of any other. You have limitless potential if you can just believe in yourself."

"I appreciate your kindness more than you know, Mrs. Doringcourt."

Lucretia was touched by the woman's words, for she had not known she was valued so. It was true, living among the nuns had made her humble but also unsure of herself. The world outside of the convent had been so different that sometimes she still felt she did not have a true place in it. The old woman yawned and cleared her throat.

"I trust you will comfort Miss Hastings, for you know she is rather sensitive in nature and will not take this news well."

Reassure her. Please. And be reassured. Everything will be fine. I will not allow...

Suddenly, she clutched her chest and gasped for air, her body shaking in a violent manner. Her face lost all its remaining color and her eyes grew wide, almost bulging out.

“Ma’am? Mrs. Doringcourt!” Lucretia rushed across the room and knelt before her.

The woman clutched Lucretia’s hand in sheer panic, digging her nails into her skin. Her face turned an awful color and she gasped for breath.

“I will fetch the physician. I shall return at once. Please, I promise.” She removed her hand from the woman’s grasp and ran out of the drawing room and downstairs. She ripped open the door that led to Mrs. Doringcourt’s quarters and screamed at the top of her lungs.

“Help! The headmistress needs help!”

Mary burst from the other room and ran towards Lucretia who turned around and rushed back upstairs. She burst through the drawing room door and then froze in place.

Before her, on the settee, the headmistress had grown still and Lucretia knew. It wasn’t the open eyes that stared at the ceiling without focus, or the ashen skin. No. It was the smile. The frozen smile upon the woman’s face, one that spoke of relief, of release from pain that made Lucretia realize that her mentor, her teacher, the headmistress of Mrs. Doringcourt’s School for Young Ladies, had died.

CHAPTER 2



Benedict stood and studied the portrait before him. At first glance, the lady in the painting was indeed beautiful. Her long, golden hair flowed in luscious waves down her back, her eyes were of a piercing blue as clear as a cloudless summer sky. Her gown was of the finest silk and shimmered under the painter's gifted hand. And yet ...

"No. Take it away," Benedict waved his hand dismissively in the direction of the painting. An audible gasp escaped the painter.

"But, Your Grace, is it not as you had requested? I painted it with your specifications in mind."

The painter, Sir Rodolfo Biasi, sounded utterly deflated at the Duke's reaction. With a heavy sigh, Benedict turned around and walked toward the large painting in big steps.

"The eyes, they are too close together. She appears almost cross-eyed. And the manner in which they stare... It makes me feel utterly uncomfortable. No. I do not care for it. Take it away."

He heard the painter inhale a gulp of air. When Benedict turned to face him, the painter's visage was full of dejection. His shoulders were slumped forward as he glanced at the painting that Benedict knew had taken him months to complete.

"Do not take it so hard, Biasi. I shall pay you for the work, of course. And you will certainly find a buyer. The work is detailed and beautiful, as always. Alas, it is not to my liking.

She is too..." He glanced at the woman in the painting again. "She is cold. She is not *her*."

Cold. The opposite of his beloved Helena. She had been warm, giving, and loving. Looking into her eyes had been like bathing in a warm lake. Light and warmth had followed Helena everywhere she went. She lit any space she occupied, most of all Benedict's heart. The woman in the painting did none of it. Nor did she resemble his late wife, as he had requested. And that, truly, was the problem.

He had asked Biasi to paint a portrait that resembled Helena. He'd let him study the three portraits Benedict possessed of his late wife, and had described her in great detail to the man. He'd been quite clear. He had not wanted another painting of a beautiful woman who resembled Helena. He had many of those. No. He'd wanted Helena. Given that Rodolfo Biasi was one of the most respected painters in the country, a man who had painted the Regent himself, Benedict had been full of hope. Until today. Until he saw the final result. It was not Helena. Not in the least. No. The painting could not remain.

"Take it away, Biasi," he ordered. At once, the painter called his two burly assistants into the room and together, they carried the heavy frame away.

"Your Grace, I could perhaps modify..."

"No!" Benedict shouted. "I do not wish to have it modified. I simply do not wish to see it again."

"I apologize that my work proved a disappointment to you. I..."

Benedict shook his head and leaned against the windowsill. "Do not let this vex you so, Biasi. It will be simpler to start over. It is my fault. I should have told you more about her. You do not know her as I did. Thus, it would be impossible for you to paint her accurately. It is all about her warmth, Biasi. Her passion. Her compassion. You shall start over, and I will ensure you know all you need to in order to capture her true essence next time. That is not a problem, I am certain."

Benedict nodded, confident he would be able to assist the painter in creating the perfect painting of his wife the next time around.

Biasi's lips trembled as he shrugged. "No, Your Grace, no problem at all. We shall get started right away. In the meantime, I have a lead on a lovely painting I have located in Edinburgh. Lovely. Exquisite work and it would match perfectly in Your Grace's collection. I am traveling to Scotland next week, and I will be able to bring it back with me, should Your Grace agree."

Benedict smiled, his mood somewhat lifted after the disappointing reveal of his commissioned portrait. "I trust your judgement, Biasi, and I look forward to your return."

The painter departed and Benedict left his study, walking with large, thundering steps toward the drawing room.

There, he stopped before the fireplace, and gazed up at the painting that hung there. It was one of only three paintings that showed her true face.

Helena, his beloved, late wife. Painted while she was still living. He remembered her sitting for this painting, shortly after the birth of their son, Henry. He'd been in the nurse's arms, just to the right of Helena. It was why her gaze was slightly focused in that direction in the painting. A bystander would not have noticed the glance at all. Alas, Benedict had been there and he knew what she'd been looking at while the painter was working.

Oh, my love. If only we had more time. If only you did not have to leave me.

"Excuse me, Your Grace," the deep voice of Swindon, his butler, sounded from behind him. Benedict turned to face him.

"What is it, Swindon?"

"Your Grace, Lord Winterton has..."

"Tradegrove!" A familiar voice boomed from behind the butler, cutting Swindon off mid-sentence. Benedict smirked as his good friend, Jordan Foley, the Marquess of Winterton,

rushed past the butler, and made his way into the drawing room, a grin on his rugged face.

“Winterton! Old chum, how are you? What brings you here?”

He marched toward his friend, a wide grin on his face. The two men had been friends since their childhood days, and he much enjoyed spending time with him. It was unfortunate that, given their busy lives, they often found themselves apart for long stretches of time. In fact, Benedict had not seen his friend since the beginning of the month.

“I am well, Tradegrove. Devastated that you have evidently forgotten that I am scheduled to beat you at a game of billiards today.”

Benedict gasped. He had indeed forgotten.

“Forgive me, Winterton. I was preoccupied. I am ready now. And it shall be I who beats you, not the other way around, I declare.”

“Zooks, if you so declare.” Winterton laughed but then grew serious once more. “Was your preoccupation related to Biasi? The painter? I saw him leave, looking rather sullen with what appeared to be a canvas made of five hundred oak trees.”

He chuckled at his own joke, although Benedict did not see the humor.

“It was a painting I commissioned, of Helena. It was—unsatisfactory.” He rumped his nose at the memory of the unfortunate result.

The two men walked through the hall, followed by Swindon. Benedict, in preparation for the billiards match, was presently relieving himself of his cufflinks and cravat, which he handed to Swindon.

“I do not know why you bother, Tradegrove. You are never satisfied with any paintings you commission of Helena. Why not simply collect your paintings of other blonde beauties as you have been? Why risk the disappointment each time? Or better yet, stop tearing open your wounds and cease collecting paintings all together. Or perhaps branch out. How about a

lovely still life? Or a painting of..." Winterton waved his hand about in a dramatic fashion, "A sunset, perhaps?"

A sunset? A still life? Preposterous!

Benedict felt his irritation grow at a rapid pace but contained himself. He'd always had a bit of a temper, before meeting Helena. She had soothed his moods and brought out the gentle, more mild-mannered side of him. Following her untimely death, he'd tried hard to hold onto that, to hold on to the good she'd brought into his life. It was one of the many ways he chose to honor her memory. And most days, he succeeded. Unless anyone called into question the manner in which he chose to remember his wife.

Of all people, Winterton knows the meaning behind my portrait collection. He was there the day I first laid eyes upon a painting that so resembled my beloved I simply had to purchase it. He knows how much finding that very first portrait soothed me after many months of suffering. I still recall the way my blood froze upon seeing it, as if confronted with Helena once more. Winterton even helped me negotiate a fair price for the artwork. For him to question it now—I cannot comprehend it.

Benedict sighed, remembering the day he'd returned home with the painting. He found that it comforted him. Even though it was not Helena, it looked enough like her to where it helped him conjure up her image in his mind. Soon, a second painting had joined it and now, at last count, he owned twenty-five paintings. And yet, it was not enough. No. It was never enough.

As they walked along the hallway, he glanced up at the paintings. The women looked down upon him from high up as he felt his heart grow heavy.

"No, old chum. I have no interest in a still life or sunsets." He turned to his friend. "It is one of my greatest regrets to not have commissioned more paintings of Helena. Thus, I must attempt to make up for it by finding those that resemble her. It is my only way to keep her memory alive."

His friend sighed and shook his head. “By Jove, her memory lives within you. Indeed, I worry that being surrounded by these paintings will keep you from finding happiness once more because they hold you captive. Captive to a memory, captive to the past. Benedict, it has been four years since you lost Helena, do you not feel that one day there might be another who...”

Benedict stopped in his tracks and turned to his friend, one finger rapidly moving back and forth.

“Do not say it, Winterton. There are no other women out there. Not for me. Helena was perfection. She was all I ever wanted and ever dreamt of. No. I shall be content spending my life surrounded by her likeness. And one day Biasi will succeed in capturing her beauty in another painting. Then I will commission more from him. That shall be my goal. That will sustain me until I am reunited with her.”

He turned and marched on, not waiting for a response from his friend. He heard the Marquess sigh as he rushed to catch up with him.

They had reached the billiards room and Benedict picked up two sticks, handing one to his friend, who looked at him with a deep crease upon his forehead.

“Tradegrove...”

“Are we going to play, or have you decided to concede before we even start?”

He shrugged. “Let us play.”

“Very well.” Benedict set up the table and indicated for his friend to take the first shot. He did, sending the billiard balls flying wildly across the table, sinking one.

“A good start!” Lord Winterton said and indicated where he intended to sink the next ball.

He was about to take his shot when the sounds of laughter sounded from outside. Benedict watched as his friend lifted his head and looked outside. On the grass, just outside the window, Benedict saw that his son Henry was running in circles around his nurse, Miss Babette. The woman appeared

utterly frazzled and, despite her young age, had trouble keeping up with the boy.

“He is looking more and more like his mother, Lord Henry is,” his friend commented.

Benedict swallowed hard. It was true. Henry had inherited his mother’s blue eyes and fair complexion. Even his laugh reminded him of her. It was one of the reasons he found it so hard to be around the boy. While the paintings that resembled his wife comforted him, being near his son who had so much of the woman he loved in him, was unbearable.

He watched the little boy run and stumble. He shook it off and began to run once more. The nurse lifted her blue uniform gown and rushed after him, her hair wild in the wind. Then, suddenly, she stopped and placed her hands on her thighs, bent at the waist and gasping for air.

“Indeed, he does. He inherited her endurance and love of the outdoors, too.”

Winterton straighten up and faced his friend.

“Perhaps he needs to expel some of his energy. We could take him for a hike or a ride. We could take him for a tour of the estate.”

Benedict shook his head. “Perhaps when he is older. For now, he needs to be taught manners and proper decorum. And he needs an education.”

His friend looked at him from the corner of his eyes.

“Indeed, he does. Perhaps it is time for the boy to have a governess, rather than a nurse. Horace and Frances have had a governess for some time now and it has been wonderful for them.”

Benedict shrugged. He had not been in charge of his son’s education nor care since the death of Helena. His sister, Clementine, the Dowager Marchioness of Blinddale, had taken the responsibility after Helena’s death. She had arranged for the nurses and overseen Henry’s care. Alas, she’d been called away, back to her late husband’s estate, in order to settle

affairs with her husband's heirs. She would not return for quite some time.

"Perhaps when Clementine returns, I shall discuss the matter with her."

Winterton shrugged. "I shall ask Mrs. Lester for a recommendation in the meantime."

"Ah, Mrs. Lester. You would not be interested in parting with her, would you? Given how you like to sing her praises."

Winterton gasped in mock horror. "Zooks! My darling governess? How dare you, Tradegrove. She is worth her weight in gold. Now, before you talk me into giving up my most treasured employee, how about we resume our game?"

"We shall, my friend. We shall. Now, I was about to beat you, was I not?"

"In your dreams perhaps, Tradegrove," his friend laughed and sunk the next solid colored ball into the left-most pocket.

* * *

After three rounds of billiards, Benedict found himself the unlikely victor in his game with his friend, which lifted his spirits. It had been refreshing to spend some time with his good friend. Unfortunately, both he and Lord Winterton had business to attend to and so their afternoon was cut short.

Benedict was taking his friend back through the Great Hall toward the front door, where his carriage would be awaiting him, when something caught Winterton's attention.

"That is some interesting tiling, Tradegrove," he said and pointed up ahead where splashes of brown were splattered among the black and white tiling.

Benedict glanced down as they got closer and indeed, the entire floor was covered in splatters of mud and two different sets of shoe prints were visible. One adult, one child-sized.

A moment later, his housekeeper, Mrs. Harrison, appeared with a bucket of water in hand. When she saw him, she stopped so abruptly that water splashed out over the sides.

“Your Grace. I am sorry about the mess. I’m afraid there has been a little incident.”

“I can see that, Mrs. Harrison. Now, pray tell, why is my head housekeeper about to wash the tiles? Where is Maggie? And Molly?”

Mrs. Harrison swallowed.

“Maggie has taken ill again due to the pregnancy and Molly is attending to her. I’ve dispatched one of the footmen to fetch Maggie’s mother from the farm, thus...”

Benedict raised his hand to stop her. “Very well. Have one of the scullery maids clean the floor. That is not one of your duties. A few more moments of mud on the floor shan’t make a difference. It is not as though we are hosting a house party. But first, tell me, what has happened here?”

Mrs. Harrison sighed.

“It appears as though young Lord Henry has discovered a mud hole in the garden, due to the rains we’ve had. According to Miss Babette, he has grown rather fond of it, much to her chagrin. She’s been able to draw him away from it the last couple of days, but today Lord Henry got away from her and found his way to the mud hole.”

“I can see that.” Benedict took in the mess on the floor while beside him, his friend chuckled.

“I’m afraid the chase led through the house and back outside where Miss Babette is presently running after Lord Henry.”

“I am telling you, old chum. Henry is in need of a governess. Structure. None of this child’s play. Don’t you agree, Mrs. Harrison?” Winterton crossed his arms in front of his chest.

Mrs. Harrison’s eyes grew wide. She had been in his employ for so long that Benedict could not remember a time when she had not been part of the household. She’d been a house maid when he was a boy, working her way up to serve as his mother’s lady’s maid and then eventually, she’d been promoted to be the housekeeper, in charge of the entire household. She was capable and ruled the household staff with a kind, but stern and guiding hand.

Benedict was well aware that Mrs. Harrison was not used to being asked her opinion and she was clearly uncomfortable at Winterton's question. To his surprise, however, she cleared her throat.

"Well, since Lord Winterton has brought it up. I was wondering if Your Grace may have a moment to speak with me regarding a.... That is to say I, I have a cousin who is..."

Benedict frowned. It was unlike the old woman to speak in such a halting manner.

"What is it, Mrs. Harrison?"

"Well, I was going to speak to you about my cousin who..."

She could go no further as they were all startled from the commotion outside. They heard a loud shriek, followed by some rather unladylike language being uttered by a woman.

"By Jove! Tradegrove, look at that sight," Winterton laughed as he looked out the window. Hesitantly, Benedict joined his friend, followed in short order by Mrs. Harrison, who gasped.

"That poor woman."

Benedict had trouble controlling his laughter. Outside, the nurse, Miss Babette, was walking toward the house, covered from head to toe in mud. Henry was nowhere to be seen which, given the nurse's expression, was perhaps best.

Benedict watched, his eyes wide, as the nurse made her way across the garden and up the stairs. Her face was like thunder and when he caught a glimpse of her eyes, the laughter froze in his throat. Upon seeing the nurse's face, Winterton turned to Benedict.

"I believe you have a full plate, old chum. I shall bid you farewell. And I will ask Mrs. Lester for the recommendations, as it appears you may need them sooner rather than later. Mrs. Harrison," he tilted his head to the housekeeper and went out the door, just as the nurse entered.

Her pale face was caked in mud, only her amber eyes were visible and they were positively aflame with anger.

“Your Grace!” She said loudly, stomping one mud covered foot on the already dirty floor. “This is too much. There are not enough guineas in the entire realm to make up for this. I have had enough. I shall resign at once.” She stomped once more, sending mud flying around the room and then stormed away the way she had come, leaving Benedict behind and unsure if he should laugh or cry.

CHAPTER 3



Lucretia returned from her last lesson of the week and found Mary already in their chamber. Sitting on her bed, her friend had her head in her hands and sobbed quietly. Lucretia sat beside her and wrapped one arm around her, rubbing the other along her forearm.

“All will be well, believe me.”

Mary looked up, her face and her eyes red from the tears she shed almost daily over the last two weeks.

“How? The postman has just left and I’ve had another rejection, this time for Mrs. Marvis’ School for Little Ladies. Nobody is looking to hire a teacher in the middle of the school year. What are we to do? We have only a fortnight before we are homeless. We shall be sleeping in the streets like beggars. Oh, Lucy. I will end up a lady of easy virtue.”

Mary had spent the past two weeks in an utter state of despair. First, the death of Mrs. Doringcourt had shaken teachers and students alike, for she was an immensely popular lady, and then news that the school was to close by month’s end had been announced.

It appeared as though the good Mrs. Doringcourt had not only not secured a successor to her position, but she had used much of her own fortunes to purchase school supplies, leaving nothing in reserves to pay for the property.

More than half of the students had already departed, and the ones who remained would soon be collected by their parents as well. All of the remaining teachers, Lucretia included, had

sent letters to other schools, looking for employment. But Mary was right, nobody was looking to take on new teachers in the middle of the school year.

What shall we do? Certainly, we will not be made homeless. Certainly, the owners of the building will show mercy and allow us to stay. Someone will surely need a tutor for their child. I cannot believe how our lives have been upended in so short a period of time.

“Mary, have you thought of writing to Almack’s, in London? It is the London season soon and perhaps they may know of some young lady in need of a dance teacher? Or a harp teacher?”

Her friend looked up and wiped her eyes.

“Faith, Lucy. I do not think that is how Almack’s works. They do not concern themselves with hapless women such as ourselves. They have their own established tutors for the *ton*. No. I shall have to go into the poorhouse. At least you can return to the nuns, if you must.”

Lucretia swallowed hard. She had considered it, though she was not certain they would take her back.

“I do not believe I can. Not unless I wish to become a nun. Sister Agnes, the Mother Superior, passed away some years ago, and Sister Marie, her successor, does not care for me. She has held a grudge against me ever since I refused to eat her dreadful pottage as a child. No, Mary, I am afraid we shall both be headed for the poorhouse, my dear.” Her friend shook her head.

“This is a travesty. All of it.” She turned to face Lucretia.

“You have had some letters also. Yolanda placed them on the desk for you. Perhaps you shall have better luck than me.”

Lucretia got up with a heavy sigh and picked up the letters from the rickety old desk by the door. She ripped open the first one and found herself rejected from a girl’s school in Brighton, after having already been rejected by all the schools in Bath. She dropped the letter in the garbage can. It was soon joined by another, this a letter from a family she’d hoped might take

her on due to her having given their daughter private tutoring lessons in French earlier in the year.

“I am sorry, Lucy,” Mary said as she shook her head.

Lucretia shrugged and picked up the last letter. Her heart skipped a beat when she realized it was not a letter from a school or a private family she’d applied to. No! It was from Betsy Harrison, her mother’s cousin. Lucretia sat down on the old wooden chair and opened the letter with shaking hands. She read the few lines her cousin had written in her neat, tiny script and clutched her chest.

“What is it Lucy?” Mary jumped up and was by her side in no time at all, placing a hand on her shoulder as if to comfort her.

“It is from my mother’s cousin, Betsy.”

“The one who works for the Earl, down in Gloucester?”

“He is a Duke, but yes, she is the one. I wrote to her last week, utterly desperate and in hopes she might be able to help me find employment among one of the families in her area. Faith, I would work as a scullery maid to avoid being out on the streets.”

Mary bounced up and down beside her. “As would I. Now, what does the letter say? Is it good news?”

Lucretia nodded. “It is. Let me read it to you.” She raised the letter up and shook it to straighten the paper.

My dearest Lucretia,

I was overjoyed to receive your letter, as it has been too long since you last wrote to me. I am ever so sorry to hear of the events at Mrs. Doringcourt’s School for Young Ladies. I know you were fond of the headmistress. Alas, you must look forward and secure a position for yourself. As you know, I would never allow a family member of mine to fall into a desperate position and would certainly do all I can to assist you. To that end, I am pleased to report that His Grace, Benedict De Clare, The Duke of Tradegrove, has agreed to give you an audience and discuss possible employment here at Amberley Manor, as governess to his son, Henry De Clare,

The Marquess of Tenwerth, five years of age. Bring proof of your qualifications and come at once.

“I am to report immediately. Can you believe it?”

Mary clasped her hands in front of her mouth and then went to hug her friend tightly.

“Faith, Lucy. You must collect your papers at once. And find a coach. I am so pleased for my dearest friend.”

Lucretia looked at her friend’s bright face and while she was greatly relieved at the prospect of finding employment, she felt a sense of sadness. Indeed, she felt guilt. She was perhaps saved from the poorhouse, but what of Mary? What would happen to her best friend?

Mary, always seemingly one step ahead of her friend, placed a hand on Lucretia’s shoulder.

“Do not worry about me, my dear. The worry is written all over your face. I shall be fine. Any day now I shall receive a letter myself with a wonderful offer. You’ll see.”

“If you do not, I shall find you a placement, if I am fortunate enough to receive this position. We shall plan it all when I return.”

“We shall.”

The two friends embraced, and Lucretia set out in search of a coach that would take her to the Duke’s manor.

* * *

Lucretia rushed to the hackney station and haggled with the jarvey for a fair price to take her to Gloucester, given that it was a fair distance and very late notice.

She boarded the coach, dismayed to find that it was dirty inside. She wiped the seat and found a considerable amount of dust flying into the air. With a sigh, she sat.

The journey to Amberley Manor, while taking some hours, was rather adventurous. The jarvey directed the coach along a side road which proved bumpy, sending even more dust into the air. In addition, Lucretia discovered that the window was

broken and could not be closed. This, at first, proved to be enjoyable. The coach was hot and her gown, while of a light material, had begun to stick to her skin in an uncomfortable manner. The light breeze that came through the broken window helped ease the burden of the summer's heat on the passengers.

Alas, a half hour into the journey, the weather changed and the breeze swiftly turned into a strong wind which whipped into the carriage, causing Lucretia's mop cap to fly off her head. Her hair, arranged in an elegant half-up do by Mary, began to come loose as strands hung in her sweaty face. Soon enough, rain began to pour and—to the passengers' great dismay—the roof of the coach proved leaky.

Droplets of water soon turned into a steady drip overhead. Lucretia found herself pressed against the side of the coach as her fellow passengers attempted to avoid the water that now poured from the ceiling.

I shall smell like a wet dog by the time I arrive in the Manor. What a disaster. I must impress the Duke, for certainly he will not want to hire a governess who looks as though she was dragged to the manor by wild horses. Perhaps Betsy can assist me.

By the time the coach stopped on the road outside the Manor, Lucretia was well and truly frazzled. Her hair had come undone and while the rain had stopped, the water dripping inside the carriage had left dirty stains on her pale blue gown.

She made her way along the driveway, all the while scrubbing at the stains on her gown. When she realized there was nothing to be done about it, she decided to fix her hair as best she could. By the time she arrived at the Manor, she felt somewhat dejected and hopeless. Certainly, the Duke expected someone much more sophisticated.

With a heavy heart she knocked on the front door, and to her delight, was met by Betsy Harrison, her mother's cousin. She had not seen her in years, but recognized her at once. She had brown eyes with a small speck of amber in each eye, similar to

Lucretia's own. Her old face was wrinkled but kind, and the smile on her face when she saw Lucretia warmed her heart.

"Lucretia! My darling! Come here, let me hug you." Lucretia bent down, for Betsy was nearly one whole head shorter than her. "Faith, Lucretia, what has happened to your gown?" Betsy asked. Lucretia's smile fell off her face and she cast her eyes down. "And your hair."

"It has been a difficult journey. Oh, Cousin, can you help me clean up before the Duke sees me?"

The old woman's kind smile returned and she beckoned her younger cousin inside.

"We haven't much time for the butler, Mr. Swindon is his name, has already informed the Duke of your arrival. But come..." She led Lucretia through the large hall which was adorned with antique columns and lined with magnificent marble tiles. They arrived at a small staircase that led downstairs, to the servant area.

Lucretia followed along a narrow path, past an array of maids and footmen and past the many servant quarters until they arrived in Betsy's office.

"Sit, sit," Betsy motioned for a chair. With quick, steady hands she pinned Lucretia's hair up around her head in a style more often seen on maids than on ladies. Still, it was much better than the messy state Lucretia's hair had previously presented itself in.

"Mrs. Harrison!" A voice bellowed along the hall.

"That's Mr. Swindon now. The Duke will be ready for you, my dear. Here." She pulled a white apron from a hook by the door and threw it over Lucretia's neck. She tied it behind her, covering most of the stains on the gown. She clapped her hands together.

"Very well. It shall have to do. No matter. His Grace invited you due to your credentials, not due to your looks. Now, when you speak to him, address him as Your Grace, never with My Lord or anything of that nature. Highly disrespectful. Keep in mind, Dukes are only one step below the Royal Family itself.

Show respect, answer when questioned, and you shall be fine. You are what he needs, and we shall convince him of it.”

“Mrs. Harrison! Where are ye? Where is this governess of yours? His Grace...”

A man stopped outside Betsy’s office. “Is this her? Well, then. Let us go. His Grace is waiting.”

Lucretia followed Mr. Swindon along the narrow staircase and through the parlor. They walked down the Hall which was lined on both sides with a collection of portraits. At first glance, they all appeared to be of the same lady, the Duchess, presumably.

She was a gorgeous woman with pale skin and luscious, thick golden hair which was complemented by lovely, rich gowns. Her eyes were of a deep blue.

The more paintings she saw, the more apparent it became that the woman in them was not the same at all. No, they were simply women who resembled one another.

In some, the woman had a heart-shaped face and in others it was round. Sometimes, her eyes were very close together and others far apart. How curious it all was. Lucretia frowned.

The Duke seems rather fond of blondes. Not a painting of a dark-haired woman anywhere to be found. I hope he is not by nature opposed to brown hair, for I shall have no hope of getting this job. I am as far removed from a blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty as one can be.

The butler walked down a smaller hallway and stopped outside a large double door. He knocked and then opened the door after receiving word from within.

“Your Grace, Miss Lucretia Nelson has arrived.”

He nodded his chin for her to enter as she followed. Too closely as it turned out, for she accidentally kicked him in the heel with her toe, causing both of them to stumble forward.

“I am ever so sorry,” she mumbled as Mr. Swindon glared at her. Ahead of them, she saw a man sitting behind a large, dark oak desk with his head buried in papers. He casually waved

one arm in their direction, unaware of the small scene that had just occurred.

“That will be all, Swindon.”

The butler nodded and turned, glaring at her once more before closing the doors behind him.

Lucretia stood there and waited for the Duke to lift his head. As she stood, she attempted to smooth her wrinkled gown. While the apron her cousin had given her covered some of the stains, the rest of the gown was still wrinkled from the journey. Giving up on the venture, she instead opened her reticule and retrieved her papers of reference when at last the Duke looked up.

She felt startled at once, for he was much younger than she had expected him to be, given Betsy’s description. His face was pale, as if untouched by the sun. His eyes were blue, not unlike those of the ladies in the paintings. However, there was darkness in them. She recognized it at once, for she’d seen it many times in the eyes of the nuns who’d spent their time caring for the sick and dying. It was sorrow.

“Miss Nelson, I presume?” he said at last. His voice was deep and smooth, almost soothing.

She nodded at him and their eyes locked for a long moment before she realized—he was waiting for her to curtsy.

Lucretia found herself utterly discombobulated, for she could not remember the proper way to curtsy to a Duke. She knew there were a multitude of different curtsies, depending on who you were curtsying to.

She decided to bend as low as she could go, for as Betsy just told her a Duke was but a step removed from the Royal Family. She ended up wobbling and tumbling forward as she went, earning a smirk from the Duke who motioned to the chair across from him.

“Are these your papers?” He pointed at the reference letters in her hand.

“Yes, My Lo...I mean Your Grace.” She leaned forward to hand them to him, upset with herself for almost using the

wrong form of address.

He did not appear to mind, however, and instead inspected her letters.

“Your aunt has spoken of you with the highest regards. One would be led to believe you are fit to tutor the Prince Regent’s children.” He chuckled a little at his own joke and Lucretia forced herself to smile. She wanted to correct him, to let him know that Betsy was her cousin, not her aunt, but she suddenly felt very aware of just what high a position this man held within the peerage. Surely one did not correct a Duke.

By Jove! He likely knows Prinny personally. Perhaps they are even friends. Could it be? Faith, does the Regent ever come visit? No. Don’t make a cake of yourself, Lucretia Nelson. Betsy would certainly have mentioned if he did.

Lucretia shook her head to chase away her rapid train of thought, for she knew her entire future depended upon this interview.

The Duke flipped through her letters of recommendation with some interest and then glanced up at her, his blue eyes wide open.

“You speak Latin and Greek, as well as French and Italian? That is rather impressive.”

“The nuns taught me all but the Italian. Our dearly departed headmistress taught me that. Along with history and needlework.”

The Duke grinned, and for a moment the sadness disappeared from his eyes.

“Well, my son won’t be needing your assistance in needlework. As a future Peer of the Realm, I should like him to learn history. Not just ours, but the continent’s as well. Arithmetic, too. And I see you are well-versed in all of that.”

“Indeed, I...” Before she could continue, he rang a little bell and a moment later, Mr. Swindon appeared.

“Swindon, please take our new governess to her chamber. Miss Babette’s former quarters will do.” He turned to her.

“You will start his lessons in the morning. Let Swindon here know of anything you require. He can arrange to have your belongings collected from Mrs. Doringcourt’s School and brought here.”

Lucretia’s eyes grew wide. She was to start now? He had hired her? Without returning to Bath?

Sensing her confusion, he looked up once more. “Is there a problem, Miss Nelson? I was under the impression you were in need of immediate employment.”

Lucretia cleared her throat. “Yes, My L... Your Grace, I am. And I am ever so grateful. Thank you so much.”

“Well then. You are to start Henry’s lessons tomorrow morning. You may converse with your aunt, as she is aware of what he has been taught thus far. Once my sister returns, she will want to sit with you and discuss his lessons and so forth, but that will not be for another fortnight at least. Until then, I shall leave my son’s education in your capable hands.”

Mr. Swindon, the butler, had arrived while the Duke had instructed her further and now that he was done, he indicated for her to follow Mr. Swindon.

She swallowed and rose, giving him another curtsy, this time an impeccable one, and followed the butler outside.

* * *

Lucretia exhaled when the heavy doors closed behind her

“His Grace only appears intimidating, Miss Nelson. Don’t let him scare you. He’s a kind man at heart.”

Lucretia looked the butler in the eye and was surprised to find that his formerly stern countenance had been replaced with a kind expression and a slight smile. She nodded at the man, grateful for his words. The Duke had indeed intimidated her.

“Tis my first time speaking to someone so high up in the peerage. Thus far, the highest-ranking person I ever met was an Earl. The father of one of my students at Mrs. Doringcourt’s school.”

The butler indicated the direction in which she should walk and gave her another nod.

“I see. I find the nobility, in the end, are a lot like us commoners. They endure their hardships same as us, especially His Grace. Keep in mind, they’re all just human, only with a more comfortable way of life.”

Lucretia frowned. She wondered what hardship the Duke had endured. She had certainly sensed the air of sadness and suffering around him, but she was not certain what caused it. Now that the butler had made this ominous comment, she found herself all the more curious.

Alas, she did not have much time to wonder about the subject, for up ahead she heard a screeching sound followed by the sound of two sets of feet running across the marble floor. The sound echoed and then faded somewhat, somewhere behind them. Lucretia turned but saw nothing.

“Ah, Lord Henry is excited today. I shall warn you, Miss Nelson, our little boy has an abundance of energy, and the nurses have thus far struggled to contain it.”

The footsteps sounded once more behind them as they made their way back toward the main hallway.

“I trust you are of a more robust nature than those that preceded you. At least, Mrs. Harrison appeared to think so.”

“I have had my hands rather full with a classroom of energetic young ladies, Mr. Swindon. I trust I shall be able to handle one young boy.” She smiled at the tall butler who tilted his head back and forth.

“You may find one young boy more work than a classroom full of ladies, Miss Nelson. Particularly this young boy.”

They turned and Lucretia found herself back in the Hall which connected the various wings of the manor and she was once again confronted with the portraits of the strange, golden-haired ladies. She would have to ask Betsy about them, when she got the chance.

“I assure you, Mr. Swindon, nothing vexes me, not when it comes to our little...” she did not get any further because she

felt herself pushed forward with some force and lost her footing.

Her arms grasping at nothing as she tumbled forward, she saw the great Hall's magnificent marble floor coming toward her at great speed and then—suddenly—she found her world going black.

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Thank you for allowing me to keep doing what I love!

Emma Linfield

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma Linfield has always been passionate about historical romances. Ever fascinated with the world of Regency England and being utmost inspired by Jane Austen and Georgette Heyer's work, she decided she wanted to write her own stories. Stories of love and tradition being mixed in the most appealing way for every hopeless romantic, much like herself.

Born and raised in Southern California, Emma Linfield has a degree in Creative Writing and English Literature, and she has been working as a freelance writer for the past 10 years. When she isn't writing, Emma loves spending her time with her own prince charming and two beautiful children, all the while enjoying the famous Californian sun and ocean.

So, hop on to this exciting journey of Dukes, Earls and true love with Emma and find pleasure in the old fashioned world of Regency - an Era of pure romance, elegance and high fashion!

