



Cobalt Fairy  
PUBLISHING



A  
*Duke's*  
*Lessons*  
OF  
*Seduction*

MAYBEL BARDOT

*A Duke's Lessons of Seduction*  
A STEAMY HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE  
NOVEL

MAYBEL BARDOT



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# *Before You Start Reading...*

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## *About the Book*

***“Are you still afraid of being touched?”***

Dreading her imminent marriage, what Lady Diana fears the most is the touch of her husband-to-be. Until, her brother’s friend, Duke Edmund proposes a most scandalous plan: teach her how to be intimate with another. It is outrageous, yet she can’t resist...

But these sinful lessons take a menacing turn, when they uncover a heinous plot against her family. And now everyone she loves is in grave danger...

## *Chapter One*

“I can’t wait!” Lady Diana Arnold said excitedly, buttering another slice of fruitcake at the breakfast table.

“There’ll be picnics and carriage rides every single day and balls or theatre visits in the evenings,” she continued. “Then, of course, I’ll get to see Queen Charlotte and all her attendants. Arabella Benton said that at court, the ladies-in-waiting change their gowns three times each day, and the Queen a full five times. Can you imagine? I’m not sure I believe that.”

Percy Arnold smiled kindly at his younger sister. Having turned eighteen last winter, this would be the first London Season for Diana and the most exciting phase in her young life, so far. Aside from holidays in Bath, Brighton, or Harrogate, she had spent most of her life at Fernside, the family’s estate in a green and peaceful corner of Hampshire

Five years older than his sister, Percy could still remember his own pleasure in coming up to London as an adult for the first time. Oxford had been fun during his student days, but it was nothing compared to the thrill of the bright lights, high gaming stakes and pretty girls of London. He’d been enjoying the capital city thoroughly ever since making its first acquaintance...

“You must remember to set aside time for sleeping, Diana,” he said. “Or you’ll fall asleep in the theatre and disgrace yourself by snoring loudly during the most tragic scene.”

“I would not!” Diana said indignantly, turning her bright, hazel-brown eyes on him and raising her chin defiantly. Her face could have looked fierce if it had not been framed with natural blonde curls and softened by rounded, rosy cheeks. “You’re the only one in this family who falls asleep in public places, Percy Arnold. And the one who snores the loudest!”

“Am I never to be allowed to forget my graduation day?” He laughed. “I was extensively toasted with champagne, against my will I might add, by my college friends and fell asleep in the coach on my way to meet you all for dinner. I was two miles outside Oxford before anyone woke me up, and that was only to bother me for the excess fare.”

Diana giggled, evidently remembering her brother’s red-faced and disheveled appearance after having run all the way back to Oxford to find them, with his cap and gown all askew. Initially angry, her parents soon saw the funny side, and Percy’s propensity for falling asleep in public places had been a family joke ever since.

“I’m glad you’ll be in London with me too, Percy. There’ll be so few people I know.”

“In London with Diana?” their father, the Earl of Templeton, questioned, looking up from the book he had been reading and glancing around the table at his family. “I thought Percy was meant to be spending time with me this summer to learn how to manage the family estate and investments.”



“Well, Richard, he will have to do both, won’t he?” Lady Templeton said diplomatically. “If you’re going to be up and down to Fernside all the time, we will need a gentleman to escort Diana with me.”

“He won’t be able to accomplish either task if he’s out carousing half the night with his friends,” the Earl grumbled.

“Me, carousing? I never carouse...” Percy said with a wink at his sister. “All rumors of my carousing are entirely false. Or possibly just exaggerated.” His face was as innocent as a choirboy with the same blonde curls and rosy cheeks as his sister’s.

Both of his parents sighed and shook their heads, but their eyes still twinkled at him through their disapproval. Percy was as lovable as he was irresponsible.

“I remember my first Season,” Lady Templeton said with a smile, turning back to her daughter as she began to reminisce. “I was so nervous at first about the presentation at court and all the protocol. I was sure I would fall on my face or say something foolish but in the end, it was perfect, and the Queen looked straight at me and nodded. I was happy for days afterwards.”

“You will talk me through the presentation again and how I should curtsy to the Queen, won’t you, Mother?” Diana asked anxiously then. “I’m worried I’ll forget something important.”

“Of course, my dear. We’ll practice as many times as you wish. But don’t worry too much about the formalities. There

will be so much fun to be had too. I had such a wonderful time during the summer of my first Season. So many parties and so many new friends. So many handsome young men too, and your father the most handsome of all of them.”

“Hmmpf,” the Earl said, pretending to be absorbed in his philosophical tract again and disinterested in anything as frivolous as the London Season but actually smiling slightly as his wife caught his eye.

“He was the finest dancer too,” she continued. “We danced until dawn at Lady Jameson’s ball, the last of the Season. Do you remember, Richard?”

“I remember how much my feet ached in those heeled shoes men used to have to wear in those days,” he said grumpily but then looked up to meet his wife’s gaze. “But it was worth it to keep the most beautiful girl at the ball in my arms all evening.”

“I should love to dance all night at a ball like that!” Diana exclaimed dreamily. “Just to dance on and on until the sun rises...”

“Whom would you be dancing with?” Percy asked. “If you’re planning an all-night dance, I suggest you pick at least five strong young men. Otherwise, it would be like running the mail coach from London to Edinburgh without changing horses. The poor creatures would drop down dead unless they have Father’s stamina.”

“Oh, anyone as long as they’re tall, handsome and good at dancing...” Diana trailed off.

“How about my friend—”

“Don’t tease your sister about young men, Percy,” their father admonished then. “Diana, remember that you’re to marry your cousin Andrew. The London Season is all part of growing up, but you can ignore much of the frivolity you’ll encounter. You won’t be hunting a husband at all those balls unlike most of the other poor girls. There’s no need to get too excited about the young men.”

“Of course, Father,” Diana said flatly, and Percy saw the light go out of her pretty face at their father’s words. Their parents didn’t seem to notice anything at all and carried on with their breakfast, beginning a conversation about whether one or two carriages would be required in London for the Season.



Diana’s betrothal to her second cousin, Andrew Arnold, had been a *fait accompli* in the family for as long as she and Percy could remember.

Over the last century, Arnold family marriages had brought with them several complex and unusual entails around items of land, Christian names, and financial bequests, which were to be split and passed through the principal female line, while the title, central estate and its income continued to pass through male heirs.

Their respective grandparents and parents had decided long ago that the simplest way to keep the whole estate together and avoid legal headaches for several generations would be for

Diana and Andrew to marry. They had all been brought up with this idea but it had seemed so far in the future until now.

“There are so many places I can show you in London, Diana,” Percy said, and she could see that he had noticed her downcast face and was trying to cheer her up. She smiled a little at his effort, not really knowing why she felt so crushed by her father’s words.

Diana had thought about her first London Season for so long, and her daydreams had always involved dancing with a strong, graceful, and proficient partner whose features were somehow always in shadow. She didn’t really know if she were dreaming of a man who was dark or fair, slender or muscular, jolly or serious.

Until her father’s comments at the breakfast table, Diana was not sure she had ever considered her eventual marriage to Andrew any more seriously than as a fairy story. Perhaps even less seriously than a fairy story.

She knew that the imaginary dance partner of her daydreams was not her cousin, Andrew. She also knew that when they danced, there was nowhere in the world she wanted to be more than in her imaginary partner’s arms.

Pulling her attention back into the breakfast room, she found that Percy was still talking

“... Then there’s theaters, operas, concert halls and the park where all the most fashionable riders come out to display themselves. I’ll have a good scout around when I’m in town next week and make a list for you.”

Unfortunately, his listing of the city's manifold pleasures only attracted his father's attention again. Richard Arnold put down his book.

"London, London, London. Why does the place have such a fascination for you, Percy? I thought that after Oxford, you'd settle down here with me and start learning the ropes properly for managing Fernside and all our family investments. But no, you're forever dashing off to London."

"He's not always in London, Father," Diana said, looking at Percy sympathetically. But their father had already launched into one of his lectures on duties and responsibilities.

"You're the son of the Earl of Templeton, my boy, and one day, you will be the Earl yourself. When that day comes, you need to be able to manage this estate and this family without me. I won't always be here to guide your hand and tell you what to do, will I?"

"I know that Sir," Percy tried to reassure him, but their father now had momentum and couldn't be stopped so easily.

"Last year when I had my attack while walking in Regents Park, do you know what my greatest worry was, Percy? It wasn't dying or facing my maker. It was how on earth my family was going to cope without me. And where were you? Weekending in Brighton with all the other fine young fellows."

"Those London doctors had you back on your feet in no time, Father. And Dr. Hughs said that angina is quite common in

men of your age and can be managed.” Some real anxiety was evident on Percy’s face despite his attempt at words of reassurance. He did not like to think about his father’s mortality.

“What would you do if I popped my clogs tomorrow, eh?” Lord Templeton persisted. “You wouldn’t have the first clue where to begin, and all because you’ve spent the last few years gallivanting about in London and Brighton.”

Thankfully, their mother interrupted now, her face even more upset than Percy’s.

“Don’t talk that way, Richard. Please. You’re very healthy for a man of your age, even with your angina. The physicians said that if you follow their advice you could live to 90.”

“I know, I know,” Lord Templeton grumbled. “A moderate diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables, no strong drink, and rich foods only at Christmas.”

“And if you also do as Mother tells you and take a brisk walk every day after luncheon, you might even make it to 100,” Percy added with a winning smile, his comment breaking the tension again.

Lady Templeton passed the fruit bowl to her husband pointedly, and he took the reddest apple from it without objection.



“Why does he always do that?” Percy complained to his sister after breakfast as they walked together to the morning room. “Anyone would think I was the biggest rakehell and gambler in society by the way he goes on. Just because I like a little innocent amusement with men my age rather than being stuck in the countryside all the time.”

“You could try to be a bit more responsible, Percy. He worries about you,” Diana sighed. “You know Father. All the cares of the world are on his shoulders.”

“He keeps them there quite deliberately,” Percy said. “I believe he likes the burden. I wouldn’t mind so much if he didn’t keep trying to slip a few unnecessary cares onto my shoulders when my mind is on other things.”

“They’re not all unnecessary, Percy.”

“But so many of them are, dear sister. Our father needs to learn to relax sometimes and stop trying to control everything.”

As they were speaking, Jenson, the family’s rather stately butler, entered the room.

“Lord Greene, Lady Diana.” Jenson nodded at each sibling in turn. “Lady Templeton wishes you to know that the Dowager Viscountess Birks has called and is taking tea privately in the library with your father. Lady Templeton, therefore, requests that you will remain at home for luncheon today.”

The siblings exchanged surprised glances as Jenson left the room.

“How mysterious! I wonder what brings Aunt Henrietta here unannounced.” Percy said.

“And why should she wish to speak privately to Father?”

Henrietta Arnold, Dowager Viscountess of Birks, was the widow of their mother’s cousin, John Arnold, Viscount Birks. Despite the marriage arrangement planned for Diana and Andrew in their infancy and the distance between Fernside and Hayward House being only a three-hour ride, the two branches of the Arnold families had not remained close after John Arnold’s death.

In her widowhood, the Dowager Viscountess appeared to be devoted to two main things in life: her children and a good-tempered but smelly golden Labrador called Fluffles. Diana’s parents considered that both the children and the dog were very much spoiled, which was perhaps the reason why the families had drifted slightly apart.

Their relationship was largely limited to visits during Christmas and Easter. The Dowager Viscountess had also occasionally brought her children, Andrew and Kitty, to join them on family holidays when they were all small. While kind, their aunt could be quite an overwhelming personality at close quarters, and it was always a guilty relief when she left.

As for Andrew, one of Diana’s only memories of him was that he had not allowed her to play with his elaborate model boats



because she was too young and he thought she would break them.

In fact, being almost ten years her senior, Andrew had never wanted her to join any of their games, Diana now recalled. He had even called her a silly baby when she cried, and Percy had left the model boats to look after her. Andrew had never exactly been cruel, but he simply had no interest in her whatsoever.

The return of such childhood memories only strengthened the foreboding she had begun to feel with her father's words.

"Maybe Fluffles is finally dead and she's come to formally announce it and request that the whole family goes into deep mourning," Percy suggested. "I'd love to hear what he would say to that!"

"If Fluffles is dead, she'll want to build a monument in their churchyard with a dog-angel on top."

"In that case, I bet she'd want a contribution from Father for the cost of having the best marble shipped from Italy."

"Actually, I think Fluffles is alive and well and has finally got sick of all her fussing and run away to join the circus as a ring-master's dog. The circus owner won't let him go, and she needs Father to get him back," Diana joked.

"Or perhaps when she met the ring-master, it was love at first sight and now Aunt Henrietta wants Father's blessing to marry him!"

“Oh, Aunt Henrietta in a circus with Fluffles!” Diana giggled.  
“What would she do? I don’t believe she can do juggling or acrobatics, do you?”

“She can put on a beard and be the bearded lady,” Percy said.  
“They can both ride on an elephant’s back while Fluffles balances a ball on his nose...”

“In sparkly tights, long satin gloves and a jeweled corset!”  
Diana gasped, wiping a tear of laughter from her eye.

“And that’s just Fluffles!”

They both now collapsed onto the sofa with laughter at the idea of their aunt in such an absurd situation. Diana could hardly wait until lunchtime to find out what really lay behind the visit.

## *Chapter Two*

“I ’m worried about Percy,” Edmund Turner, the young Duke of Colborne, said. He drummed his fingers thoughtfully on the dark oak side table in the small drawing room upstairs at Brook’s, a gentlemen’s club. “He was meant to be arriving back in London today, but I’ve heard nothing. I expected him to join us for dinner.”

“You should know Percy by now,” his friend, Jacob Boyle, Marquess of Wycliff, said with an unconcerned grin as he knocked back the last of the post-dinner cognac in his glass. “Easy come easy go. He probably meant tomorrow.”

“Maybe...” Edmund muttered, unconvinced.

“Do you remember when he was meant to join the shooting on my estate last autumn and he turned up three days late without any notice or adequate explanation? Just that cherubic smile and a shrug of his shoulders.”

Edmund considered Jacob’s reassurance, but the concern did not leave his green eyes and a thoughtful furrow remained between his dark eyebrows as he sipped his own cognac.

“Percy knows me by now, too. We’ve been friends since our schooldays, and he knows I’d expect a message if his plans have changed. I prefer to lead a more orderly life than either of you.”

“You certainly do. I’ve seen how you run your estate. Your agents must be exhausted. Still, I do expect this is just Percy being Percy. He’s an unreliable man but enough fun that no one cares. Don’t let it ruin your evening,” The Marquess said.

Edmund exhaled slowly, shaking his head.

“I’m still worried about Percy, but I’ll agree with your second point. There’s no use in sitting here and speculating. What do you say to another cognac and a game or two of billiards before we call it a night?”

“A fine idea, Edmund.”



*“Hey ho, to town we go, to find a maid so pretty*

*That every man with hand and heart must sing the same true ditty...”*

Edmund fell back against the wall with laughter at his friend’s tuneless singing. They had agreed to walk across the park and get some fresh air after leaving the club rather than sending a messenger to summon the cab to the door of Brook’s. All concerns about Percy had been temporarily forgotten in good food, drink, and company.

Lord Wycliff squinted at Edmund with drunken dignity.

“You don’t like my song!” he accused, stumbling along Carlton Gardens slightly ahead of Edmund. “Very well. But it’s a fine song. Just wait until I get to the verse about when she’s at her bath... Howzit go again?”

Lord Wycliff took a breath before continuing.

*“So black her hair, so blue her eye, so pink her satin cheek,*

*So round her breast and fine her flank, her lovers cannot speak.”*

“Hush Jacob!” Edmund urged, still choking back his laughter. “You will never be invited to another hostess’s musical soir e if anyone hears you.”

“It’s a fine song!” his friend protested again. “Or are you taking issue with my voice?” He paused now to negotiate the stone steps down to The Mall. “I’m told... I have... a fine baritone.”

“I’m sure you do, but not after we’ve split an entire bottle of cognac and all the wine we had with dinner. You sound like a half-strangled cockerel!”

“Charming. If you’d drunk more, then I would have drunk less, wouldn’t I? You’re far too responsible. So, all your fault

anyway. Did I have a carriage?” the Marquess suddenly asked, looking around him in confusion. “I thought I might do.”

“My carriage is waiting on the other side of St. James’ Park. I’ll drop you home if you want.”

“No need. No need. I’m going to Chelsea to find the fair Rosie.”

“Do you even know where she lives, Jacob?”

“I know where she works which is just as good. She’s up at all hours being painted by that artist fellow. Rosie is even more beautiful than the song...”

“In that case, I’ll drop you on the Strand and you can pick up a Hackney carriage.”

“Ah, fair Rosie. Someone should write a song about her beauty...” Jacob sighed, leaning on Edmund’s arm as they crossed The Mall.

“Best leave Rosie’s posterity to the painters, I think,” Edmund advised and started laughing again at Jacob’s offended expression.



The next morning, Edmund awoke rather muzzily to the sound of raised voices outside his bedroom door. He didn’t know exactly what time he’d stumbled back into his family’s

London house near Regent's Park, but family and staff were all long in bed, and he'd used his latch key to get in.

On reflection, it must have been after midnight. So, perhaps he had been home by one o'clock in the morning.

It was therefore probably the after-effects of cognac rather than the lack of sleep that made it sound as though he had ten sisters rather than two arguing in the passageway a few feet from his bed.

"Sophia! Don't snatch it like that."

"It's wrong to open someone else's letters, Beatrice. You know that very well, and I shall tell Mother."

"I was going to read it to him. He's still in bed."

"Oh run away and play, Beatrice. I'm sure that if it's anything exciting, Edmund will tell you at luncheon."

"I'm nearly eighteen, Sophia..."

Edmund opened the door in his nightshirt, just as his mother rounded the nearby stairwell, coming to investigate the noise.

"Girls! What on earth is all this squealing and shouting about? Look, you've woken Edmund too, although it's past time for it and he has missed breakfast."

Taking advantage of his mother's interruption, Edmund plucked the half-opened letter from Sophia's hand and immediately recognized Percy's rather scruffy handwriting on the envelope.

While his mother was sending his sisters away to burn off their energy with a walk in the park, Edmund opened and read the letter quickly, his frown deepening.

"Oh no," he muttered, shaking his head. "Poor Percy!"

"What is it, Edmund?" his mother asked quickly, coming to his side. "Has Percy got into some sort of scrape?"

"Worse than that. His father is seriously ill. That's why Percy didn't come up to London yesterday. He was meant to be coming to the theatre with Jacob and me tonight... I knew something was wrong."

He passed the letter to his mother so she could read it herself. A sudden, violent illness had come over the Earl of Templeton without warning the previous day. While he was known to suffer from angina, it had appeared to be well-controlled and would not account for this collapse, unless there had been a misdiagnosis on the part of several eminent doctors.

Lord Templeton was now confined to his bed, unable to speak and drifting in and out of consciousness. The family's physician could not say what was wrong or whether he would recover at all.



“Richard seemed fit as a fiddle last time I saw him, despite the issues with his heart last year. Poor man! Esther must be out of her mind with worry too.”

“I’ll write to him immediately,” Edmund announced. “Richard has always done everything in that family, and Percy probably doesn’t know where to start. It won’t take long and then I’ll dress. I know we’re seeing our London agent and then making a withdrawal at the bank this afternoon to fund Beatrice’s first Season.”

Unity Turner, the Dowager Duchess of Colborne, looked fondly at her son with the mingled pride and sadness she had always felt when regarding him since his father’s death. Always an intelligent and principled boy, he had grown up fast in the three years that he had held the title of Duke of Colborne.

At four and twenty years old, Edmund was a tall, dark, and well-built young man with deep green eyes. He looked very much like his father, Fitzwilliam, when he was the same age. He also had his father’s innate sense of responsibility to his family and friends and great capability in dealing with both private and business affairs.

On a personal level, his father was much missed by all the family, but Edmund’s management of the family’s estates and finances had been impeccable from his first day as head of the family. There had been no additional worries in the aftermath of Fitzwilliam’s death because Edmund had handled everything and everyone so competently.

Sometimes, Edmund’s conscientious and dependable nature itself worried his mother, given his relative youth. She often

had to remind him to think of himself as well as the family, or even force him to do so, when he would listen to no one else.

She was proud of him, of course, but she also wanted her son to have his own life and his own dreams beyond being the Duke of Colborne.

“Better than writing, why don’t you and Jacob go straight to Fernside yourselves?” Unity suggested. It would be good for Edmund to spend some time with his friends, and she did believe that he could be useful to the Arnold family at this difficult time. Percy was a sweet boy, but his ability to stand in for Lord Templeton was doubtful.

“I can deal with the agent and the bank by myself, you know. I often did in your father’s time. It needs only your signature on the papers before you go.”

“Are you sure, Mother? You’ve been so busy in recent weeks. I hate to leave you dealing with so much by yourself.”

Unity laughed and patted her son’s arm reassuringly.

“Who is more incapable, Edmund, me or your friend Percy?” she asked pointedly, and he smiled in acknowledgement.

“Percy is possibly the most incapable man I’ve ever met. And you are the most capable woman.”

“Then go to Fernside, take Jacob with you, and perhaps you can be of some assistance to Percy’s family. You can take my

letter to Esther with you, too. I'll write to her now."

"You're right, Mother. I'll have Trevors send a message straight to the Marquess of Wycliff's house and we'll take two of Jacob's good horses. I don't want to leave you and the girls without transport. Helms, my valet, can follow us with Jacob's coach and our clothes."

"That sounds like a sensible plan. Give my love to Diana too. She was always such a darling child."

"I will," Edmund said absently, never having paid too much attention to Percy's younger sister, who had usually been busy with her governess or playmates during his visits.

Asking Helms to pack an overnight bag, Edmund washed and dressed quickly and neatly. He remembered the final weeks of his own father's life well and the grief of his mother and sisters which had pained him as much as his own.

He could only pray that Percy, Diana, and Esther Arnold would not yet have to suffer in the same way.

## *Chapter Three*

“**Y**ou must eat something, Mother,” Diana urged gently, stroking Lady Templeton’s shoulder. “You’ve eaten nothing all day and only had tea at breakfast.”

Esther trembled, and tears began to well again in her eyes as she glanced between her daughter and the unconscious figure of her husband in the bed beside them.

“But what if your father wakes up and needs me? He did wake up and drank water a few hours ago when Henrietta was sitting with him. But then, he fell back into this state.”

Henrietta had been staying at Fernside Dower House since Richard Arnold fell ill at that luncheon on the day of her unexpected visit. She had taken charge decisively when Richard collapsed in the dining room, loosening his shirt, trying to revive him with brandy and telling Jenson to summon the doctor.

After the doctor’s first puzzled and unproductive visit, Lady Templeton had commented on how glad she was that Henrietta had been there. Her relative had immediately announced her intention to stay as long as she was needed. With Andrew out

in India with his firm and her daughter Kitty away visiting friends, there was no need for her to go home.

Esther had accepted her kind offer gratefully, and a maid had brought a case of Lady Birks's belongings from Hayward House the following morning.

At ordinary times, a visit from their aunt would not have fueled much enthusiasm in either Percy or Diana. The effusiveness of her affections and personal observations on their growth, deportment and diet had always left them embarrassed and squirming as children. As adults, they could appreciate her kindness although they never felt entirely at ease in her company.

But now, Diana was glad that there was someone else there to support her mother and sit with her father for a few hours each day, even if it were only her aunt Henrietta and her silly dog. Lady Birks did mean well, and she was certainly a woman of action when she believed it was needed.

"We will bring you something simple to eat here on a tray," Diana said soothingly to her mother.

Lady Templeton nodded without really listening and then took up her husband's hand again in her own. He stirred slightly and muttered something unintelligible before falling still once more.

Diana left them and instructed Mrs. Bridge, the housekeeper, to bring a small table and a light meal to the sickroom for her mother. Mrs. Bridge reminded her that the doctor was due to call again at seven o' clock although there had been no change

in the patient. Dinner would be served at eight o' clock for Diana, Percy, and Lady Birks.

“Thank you all so much for keeping the house running so smoothly,” Diana said gratefully. “Please pass on my thanks to all the staff on my mother’s behalf as well as my own. I don’t know what I’d do without you all and Aunt Henrietta.”

“You’re doing a fine job, my lady,” Mrs. Bridge assured her. “Especially with your brother... Well, I do hope His Lordship is recovered soon.”

“So do I.” Diana smiled sadly. She knew what Mrs. Bridge had been tempted to say about Percy and couldn’t fault her for it.

In this crisis, Percy was like a lost little boy, letting his mother, his aunt, and his sister handle everything. He had been so very muddled in dealing with the doctor that the frustrated man had ceased to address him and now spoke only to Henrietta, Diana, and her mother.

Diana found Percy sitting alone in their father’s study, his hair in disarray and his face stained with tears. Piles of papers, bills and letters sat on the desktop in front of him, and he seemed to regard them with mingled bewilderment and fear.

“Percy?”

He looked up and tried to wipe his eyes when he saw her but stopped trying to hide anything when she came over and put her arms around him.

“It’s no good, Diana. I don’t understand any of it. It all might as well be in Chinese. What am I going to do? Oh God, please let Father get better.”

She hugged her good-hearted but foolish brother close and patted his back.

“Stop looking at Father’s papers now and go wash your face. Dinner will be at eight, and I’ll deal with the doctor when he comes. Tomorrow morning, we’ll look at all this together while Aunt Henrietta is sitting with Father and Mother.”

“But you don’t know any more about business and money than I do, Diana!” Percy groaned.

“Well, I’m sure we can work it out together. I’ve always been good with arithmetic, and I do read. You must know some things, surely. You’re probably just too tired to think clearly.”

“I hope you’re right,” he said and stood up, sighing. “Thank you, Diana. I know everyone thinks I’m useless, and I probably am...”

“Percy, go and tidy yourself up. We’ll talk later,” she said firmly, suspecting that any further conversation on the matter would only make him worse but unsure how to make anything better.

He obeyed her instruction, and Diana occupied herself with tidying the desk as best she could. Somewhere nearby, she could hear the sound of horses’ hooves on gravel and guessed

that the doctor had come early and perhaps brought a colleague. Whether that was a good or bad development, she could not say. As she was locking the drawers, Jenson entered the room.

“My lady, in Lady Templeton’s absence, I must inform you that two gentlemen have arrived.”

“Of course, Jenson. Do bring them into the house. I will speak to them here, and then we can go through to my parents. It will give my mother a little time to eat.”

She sighed and brushed down her slightly crumpled day dress while the butler returned to the hallway.

“His Grace The Duke of Colborne and the Marquess of Wycliff,” Jenson announced at the door.

Startled, Diana watched as two very dusty young men entered the room and looked around expectantly. One was of medium height, with red hair, blue eyes and a kind, freckled smile. The other was tall and dark, with broad shoulders and strangely familiar green eyes set in a calm and dependable face.

“Welcome to Fernside,” she began to say with as much formality and confidence as she could muster while she tried to make sense of this unexpected visit. “You will find us in some disorder at the present time, I’m afraid...”

The green-eyed man was looking at her with great concern, and something suddenly clicked in her head. She remembered once falling from a tree on the grounds and hurting her ankle



when she was about twelve. Those green eyes had looked at her with the same concern while checking her foot before he set her upright and pronounced that it was only a sprain.

“Edmund!” she exclaimed. “Oh, Edmund, I’m so glad you’ve come!” She dashed across the room and only just resisted the impulse to hug him, before wondering if she should shake his hand instead. He saved her the decision by lifting her hand and giving her a short bow, which saved her from feeling foolish.

“Jenson, please inform my brother of his friends’ arrival and let Mrs. Bridge know that we will be two more at dinner.”

“Very good, My lady.”

“I sent a letter ahead of us but it looks like Jacob’s horses are as fast as the express mail,” Edmund said with a frank and apologetic smile. “We came as soon as we heard the news, and I can see that we’ve taken you by surprise.”

“I thought you were the doctor when I heard the horses,” Diana explained, still feeling great relief by simply looking at Edmund’s face. “He’s due to call again before dinner, you see.”

“We’re here now and at your service in whatever manner is required, Lady Diana.”

“Just Diana, please. You’ve never called me Lady Diana before.”

“Yes, but you were a child then. Now, you’re a grown woman who seems to be running the whole household.”

Diana smiled at his words, feeling warmth at his recognition of both her actions and her adulthood.

“How is your father?” Edmund asked.

“No better, sadly. The doctor is expected again this evening. My mother won’t leave his side, but she really must eat and sleep sometime.”

“My mother has given me a letter for Lady Templeton, and she sends you her love.”

Tears came to Diana’s eyes for a moment for the first time since her father had fallen ill. She had been too busy looking after everyone else and had no time to cry. She blinked them quickly away, not wanting her brother’s friends to find her childish, especially Edmund.

“I’m so grateful that you came,” she said. “I fear that Percy and I will have to take you at your word on the services you offer. There are so many things that my father normally deals with, and my mother is in no frame of mind to advise us. So much is new to me and Percy is...”

Her smile dropped a little at the corners, and she felt the tears pricking her eyes again.

“Percy is Percy,” Edmund said simply with a reassuring smile.  
“We know him well enough.”

Diana nodded, glad for his easy understanding. Then, she suddenly remembered the duties of hospitality, forgotten in the surprise of their arrival and the circumstances surrounding it.

“Can I get you something to eat or drink? You must have been traveling all day. When Jenson returns, he will show you to your rooms to freshen up. Edmund will have the room next to Percy, as usual, and Lord Wycliff can take the Blue Bedroom.”

“With thanks, we can take care of ourselves, *Lady Diana*,” Edmund shook his head. Then, he laughed a little. “I half can’t believe that the same little girl who was playing ball on the lawn with her friends a few years ago is now assigning my bedroom.”

“Time moves on,” she said lightly, strangely glad by his observation. “We all have to grow up, eventually.”

“You have definitely grown up, Diana,” Edmund said, and when Diana looked at him now, she saw something slightly different in his gaze. Perhaps more interest, or perhaps just a different kind of interest. The feeling that passed through her was like the one she felt when she imagined dancing with her imaginary partner.

The images merged, and for a fraction of a second, it was Edmund in her imagination, whirling her around the ballroom floor in his strong arms. She felt her cheeks flush red with the fear that her thoughts could be somehow visible on her face.

Edmund was still looking at her intently, and she wondered what was in his mind.

His red-haired friend cleared his throat then.

“May I be introduced, Edmund? If you’ve finished reminiscing...”

Edmund put his arm around Jacob’s shoulders.

“Of course, forgive me. Lady Diana, this is my good friend Jacob Boyle, fourth Marquess of Wycliff. He was at Oxford with Percy, but I don’t believe he’s ever met the rest of your family.”

Jacob and Diana bowed to one another formally but then raised their heads and smiled.

“Thank you for coming too, Lord Wycliff. Edmund is an old family friend. Please forgive me if I seemed to ignore you.”

“There is nothing to forgive, Lady Diana. We’re here to help, not to be waited on.”

“Thank you so much,” was all Diana could say again, once more fighting back the tears that seemed to well up in her eyes in waves, trying to break through.

She was glad that Percy now slipped into the room and greeted his friends heartily, allowing her to slip away once more into

the background and check with the staff about arrangements for meals and bedrooms. Once more, Mrs. Bridge and Jenson already had everything in hand, but they seemed pleased to be given certainty by a member of the family.

After an unproductive visit from the doctor, dinner was a strange affair, for the gathering of their disparate group around the table. It was not helped by the smell of Fluffles emanating from under the table nor Henrietta's conversational opening.

"Darling Percy, you should be sitting at the head of the table," she observed. "It's your place in your father's absence. It's only proper."

"I don't. I can't..." Percy mumbled, shrinking from the idea and his relative's inquiring grey eyes with the raised eyebrows, which seemed to signify permanent mild disapproval.

Diana could see how much the suggestion upset him, but Lady Birks seemed oblivious to his feelings. She began to alternately praise the good qualities she knew were inside him somewhere and lightly chide him about taking up his responsibilities. Her ever kindly but somehow disappointed face looked the way it had when she had scolded Percy for eating some of Andrew's sweets as a child.

How could such a lovely boy do such a wicked thing? She and Andrew loved Percy so much and would never have guessed that he was someone who would steal another child's treats. It would be so very disappointing for Percy's poor mother to hear. In retrospect, Harriet's comments seemed a little absurd, but Diana guessed that her aunt's over-protectiveness of Andrew lay at the root of the matter.

It was another long-forgotten and now returned memory. Diana also remembered thinking that Andrew had been greedy not to have shared the sweets with all of them in the first place.

“It seems to me... I would say—” Diana tried to support her brother at the table, but their aunt talked over her, regardless.

“Cousin Esther has such high hopes of you, Percy, as her only son and the future Lord Templeton. When she writes to me, she always tells me of your accomplishments and good qualities. It brings tears to my eyes to think about it at the present moment, with your poor father lying so ill in the house.”

Then, Edmund spoke up politely but more forcefully.

“Lady Birks may be right on the matter of young men taking on family responsibilities, but in a crisis like this, there is surely a need to create as little additional work as possible for anyone. We won’t be disturbing Jenson and the staff to rearrange the table settings while your father is lying ill, surely?”

“You are quite right,” Percy said with some relief at his friend’s intervention. “I don’t want to create any additional work tonight. There’s enough going on with sick room arrangements and the normal running of the house. Now we have three guests too.”

“We’ll all pull our weight,” Edmund promised.

“You’ve been running your own estates for some years, I understand, your Grace?” Lady Birks asked, turning her attention to him. Diana couldn’t tell if she were irritated by Edmund’s intervention or genuinely interested.

“Yes, ever since my father died three years ago. It has been challenging work but well worth the security and comfort it has brought to my mother and sisters.”

“I’m glad to meet a young man who has lived up to his responsibilities,” Henrietta said, and Diana resented the further slight implied in her words towards Percy. “It will be so good for dear Percy to see and learn from you, Your Grace. Your mother must be very proud of you.”

“I hope she is, Lady Birks. It’s my aim in life to make her so.”

“Then she is as lucky as I am. My son, Andrew, is a marvel. So clever and so good with people. He’s made such a fine start to his career with his trading firm in India, and I can imagine him one day in politics in the service of the nation...”

They all listened to her politely as she extolled the virtues of her sainted son. Diana struggled to reconcile the picture painted by his mother with her own, admittedly blurred, impression of a selfish, disinterested and spoiled teenage boy. She hoped for her own sake that her aunt’s view was the more accurate.

When the meal was over, the plates cleared and Fluffles retrieved from his place under the table where he had apparently been making sport of poor Jacob’s leg throughout the meal, Diana realized that Lady Birks had been looking at

her thoughtfully for some minutes with that expression of mingled affection and chagrin that took her back again to her childhood.

*“What a beautiful child Diana is, Esther. Quite, quite delightful. But is she growing well? She does seem rather small for her age, and it would be as well to consult a physician. I would hate to see any permanent harm done.”*

*“I’m sorry that you’re so sad Diana, but it’s not really kind to ruin everyone else’s fun, is it? Andrew was having a lovely time with his boats, and now, he’s all upset and so is Percy because of you. Why don’t you just watch them like a good girl and let’s see a pretty smile.”*

*“Diana, my darling, what a naughty story to make up. We know that Andrew would never deliberately hit Percy, would he? He’s a young gentleman of excellent manners. Now, run along back to Andrew and apologize. I don’t want to hear another thing about it.”*

Henrietta now spoke up gently and firmly, “Percy and Diana, my dears, I would welcome a few minutes alone with you before I retire to the Dower House, if I may.”

For some reason, her aunt’s request chilled her without even knowing the subject to be raised. Percy also looked as though he wanted to refuse, but Diana saw Edmund giving his friend a reassuring nod.

“Of course, Aunt Henrietta,” Diana said dutifully. “Shall we speak in Father’s study?”



## *Chapter Four*

The three of them sat down together at the small table beside the safe in Richard's study. It was where Diana's father usually sat with his agent or lawyer, or anyone else who came to talk business with him. She had never sat at this table before and it made the conversation seem grave before it even began. Percy wriggled uncomfortably in his chair beside her.

Lady Birks sighed and looked at them both with great compassion. The sympathy in her eyes was so heavy that it gave Diana an odd sense of guilt, even though the current situation was entirely beyond her control.

"My dear children, it has been a hard week for everyone in this family, I believe. The doctor told us tonight that your father's illness could continue indefinitely. Or end suddenly."

"He might also get well again," Percy piped up. "Dr. Hughs said it wasn't impossible."

"Oh Percy, Percy, my dear boy..." Henrietta patted his arm as though he were still a small child. "He also said that we should not get our hopes up on that account," she reminded him.

Percy's face fell, and Diana took her brother's hand in her own.

"It's a strange illness, and Dr. Hughs has admitted that he isn't familiar with its progress or symptoms. It may be that angina was the wrong diagnosis last year and something more dangerous has settled in his system. I believe we should be prepared for the worst and help your mother to bear it as best she can," their aunt continued.

Percy turned slightly grey at her words, and Diana thought that he might cry again. She knew that she would have to be brave for both of them.

"We will do everything we can to support Mother and Father," she told her aunt. "Won't we Percy?"

He nodded silently.

"Good boy. I knew you could be counted on. Believe me, I will do everything in my power to help you both," Lady Birks said earnestly, the heavy sympathy in her tone and expression again overflowing until it seemed to weigh down Diana and Percy even more than their aunt.

"Now, I wanted to talk to you about the last conversation I had with your father before he fell ill. We had reached an agreement on a very important matter, and I was looking forward to telling you in more joyful circumstances. Perhaps you can guess what it is, Diana?"

Henrietta's smile made Diana feel queasy with its curdled mixture of happiness and commiseration. She shook her head dumbly. She could not imagine anything that could make her or Percy feel joyful beyond their father's recovery, in which their aunt clearly had little faith.

"Your cousin Andrew has been traveling back from India and is due in London next month to start work at his firm's London offices. He is well established in the company and will soon join its most senior ranks. It is therefore high time that he marries. Now that you are eighteen and he is so well-placed, we decided that there was no reason to wait any longer."

"Married!?" Diana gasped, feeling as though the bottom had fallen out of her stomach. She quickly masked her expression as much as she could to spare the feelings of her aunt, who was clearly so pleased with the idea, and Percy, who looked more lost than ever.

Diana could not comprehend how anyone could be thinking about marriage at a time like this. Perhaps she had somehow misunderstood what her aunt was saying.

"But I'm due to have my Season in London," she heard herself saying. "Mother has been preparing me for presentation at court. All my dresses have been ordered."

Diana knew how childish her words sounded as soon as she uttered them. Lady Birks did, indeed, reply to her with the same adult condescension as when she had spoken to Percy a few minutes earlier.

“My dear girl, you will still be going to London but as the wife of a man of consequence rather than a foolish young débutante. Won’t that be even better? Your new clothes will make a fine trousseau.”

“Everything was already arranged,” Diana protested weakly, now drowning in her aunt’s enthusiasm and conviction. “We’ve already accepted the invitations for the major balls and events. There’s so much on the calendar... I don’t know how we would undo it all.”

“Darling Diana, you must not worry your pretty head over these little details. I can deal with all the letters that must be written and the explanations we must give to your hostesses. In fact, I’ve already agreed on this with your mother. The poor woman is in no condition to handle such correspondence herself at present.”

Now Diana thought she might weep at the thought of those letters cancelling all the balls, picnics, and theatre outings she had been anticipating with so much pleasure. At the same time, she felt ashamed that she could still care about such gaiety while her father lay so ill nearby. She bit her lip, not trusting herself to speak again.

“There, my dear,” Lady Birks said, patting her arm gently. “I’m sure that the dinners and parties you’ll be hosting for Andrew’s friends and contacts will keep you even busier than the Season’s frivolous balls and dancing. As will the arrival of Andrew’s heir, in due course. I imagine he’ll want to continue the family line as soon as possible.”

Diana flushed scarlet and gripped the table as a surge of horror ran through her.

“Oh, I cannot!” she blurted out, unable to control her reaction. She had never actually imagined the idea of being pregnant or giving birth before. For some reason, the idea of carrying Andrew’s child was particularly repulsive to her. Even the thought of him touching her or kissing her was sickening. “Percy, I cannot!”

Turning to her brother for support, she saw only his confusion and unhappiness. Their aunt had turned to him at the same time, and with sympathy and good sense, she started stating all the reasons why a speedy marriage would benefit the family.

“... So, you must see, Percy, as your father’s proxy in such matters now, that this would be the best thing for everyone, including Diana. Perhaps you imagine your sister too young, but you must trust my experience in this. I have seen many very happy brides Diana’s age and even younger.”

Percy kept trying to interrupt and asked for time to think, but as had happened to Diana at the dinner table, his aunt talked straight across him. Diana tried to signal her distress to him with her eyes, but Lady Birks held him firm with the stream of her arguments.

“... Think of the joy it could bring to your mother in her time of distress, to see Diana so well settled with her husband. A first grandchild in her arms before the end of the year might help her bear even the hardest of sorrows. And all in accordance with Lord Templeton’s express wishes...”

“She’s right, Diana,” her brother said faintly, at last. “This could be our father’s last request. We have to respect it.”

Feeling utterly lost and betrayed, Diana burst into a flood of tears and ran from the study to her bedroom. Her whole life had been rendered hopeless, and there seemed to be no one she could turn to without causing pain through her own selfishness, immaturity, and superficial desires.

Why could she not feel as happy as her aunt evidently expected?

She cried herself to sleep on her bed without undressing.



“So, I’ve arranged for your father’s agent to call this afternoon. He will then set up meetings for you with your family lawyer and a representative from the bank, which holds the majority of the Arnold investments,” Edmund said.

“The bank...” Percy blinked.

“Yes, the bank, Coutts. They should be able to establish you as a proxy on your father’s account with the requisite medical opinion which I’m sure Dr. Hughs can provide. Jacob and I have been through the papers that were on the desk and marked the ones you should read now, those that require action, and those that should be passed on to others.”

“I can’t thank you enough,” Percy said, looking at his two friends gratefully.

“You can thank us by sitting down at this desk and beginning your reading,” Edmund said with a touch of sternness in his smile. “Then, you can ask each of us any questions you may have about the Arnold estate or how we each deal with the same issues on our respective estates.”

Percy sat down awkwardly and pulled a pile of papers towards him, his face instantly wrinkling in alarm at what he saw.

“But this is all numbers! And there’s so many of them... Do I need to add them up? Would the agent not do that for me?”

Jacob stifled a snort of laughter and shared an amused glance with Edmund.

“Those are your family’s recent laundry bills, Percy. I suspect that if you pass them to Mrs. Bridge, she can tell you if they’ve already been dealt with.”

“Thank God for that! I thought a cravat might also be a type of sheep, although they grow wool rather than silk don’t they?”

Now Jacob could not contain his mirth.

“Dear Percy! How you ever managed to graduate from university and stay alive until the grand old age of five and twenty remains a wonderful mystery to all your friends. But I’m glad you’ve achieved it if only for the endless amusement you provide.”

Both Edmund and Percy now joined in Jacob’s laughter.

“I am such a fool, aren’t I?” Percy sighed after they’d quietened down. “It feels like I do everything wrong sometimes and, I’ve been feeling rotten all morning after our conversation with Aunt Henrietta last night.”

“What was it all about?” Jacob asked. “Is there anything we can help with?”

“If it was an increasingly tearful plea for you to face up to your responsibilities,” Edmund said, “the best way to put a stop to that is to take up your obligations and do it well. That will give you the courage to face down a whole army of well-meaning aunts.”

“And their smelly dogs,” Jacob added, wrinkling his nose at the memory of Fluffles last night. At least, Lady Birks had not joined them for breakfast. Nor had Diana.

Percy shook his head.

“No, Aunt Henrietta wants to bring forward Diana’s marriage to her son, Andrew, and have the wedding as soon as possible. She had agreed on it all with Father just before he fell ill, and it seems that Mother is relying on our aunt to see it all through.”

“What did you say?” Edmund asked, conscious that his friend’s words had just made his heart start to beat faster as a feeling of displeasure crept into his blood. He’d heard vaguely about this arrangement in the past, but it had been something both distant and impersonal. Now it was imminent and no longer felt as impersonal as it once had.



“Well, I agreed. I had to since it was our father’s last wish. Aunt Henrietta is delighted about the whole thing, or she would be if she weren’t so grieved about Father. The way she explained everything made great sense, too. I think it was a shock to poor Diana though. She was looking forward to her first Season in London, and now, that will all be cancelled.”

“I had wondered why she wasn’t at breakfast. Do you mean to say that she doesn’t want to marry this cousin?” Jacob asked curiously.

“Well, she’s never objected to the idea before. Our parents arranged it all so long ago, and she was used to hearing it mentioned in passing, I suppose. But coming right now, bringing the wedding forward has hit her hard.”

“If it was arranged so long ago, I doubt she ever understood,” Edmund said rather stiffly. “Arranged marriages are all very well when both parties go in with their eyes open. But from what you say, it doesn’t sound like something Diana would have chosen for herself.”

He spoke more bluntly and with more feeling than he intended. But his words still reflected only a fraction of the resentment he actually felt at the idea of this sweet, dutiful and competent – but still barely formed – young woman being coerced into an unwanted marriage with the man who was so lauded by his own mother at dinner the previous night.

The situation put him in mind of someone catching a beautiful butterfly and pinning it to a page while it struggled hopelessly to escape.

“I feel guilty enough, Ed,” Percy said dejectedly. “But what can I do? Our parents agreed to it all, and they said it ties up a lot of legal strings for our families. As long as Diana cooperates, then it has to go ahead. She might have been miserable last night, but she’s always been the dutiful one in the family, and I can’t imagine she’ll want to let our parents down.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Edmund said as neutrally as he could. He certainly understood family responsibilities, and he reminded himself that this marriage was none of his business, especially if Diana herself were willing to go along with the family’s plans for her.

Still, the idea rankled with him, and he had to admit to himself that it had more than a little to do with how attractive he found his friend’s newly grown sister.

## *Chapter Five*

Leaving Percy to his reading, Jacob went outside to visit the stables and gardens, consulting the grooms and gardeners about any decisions that needed to be made and taking a ride around the full estate.

Edmund did the same indoors, speaking to Mrs. Bridge and Jenson before spending some time in the sick room with Lady Templeton. In each case, he found that Diana had already been there shortly before him, making the same inquiries and providing the same reassurance to the household. For one so young, she really was doing an excellent job of holding the family together, and her grit impressed him.

Despite any physical resemblance, Diana and Percy clearly had very different characters. He and Jacob had decided that Percy should be left alone in the study until lunchtime to force him to knuckle down and think for himself.

In the meantime, with Diana already having organized so many of the household arrangements, Edmund decided to go to the library and write to his mother. He had promised her regular updates and knew that she would be awaiting his news as well as any messages from Esther.

He shook his head as he thought of the plans for Diana's marriage, knowing that his mother would be unlikely to approve any more than he did, for she had fond memories of Diana as a child and strong views on the inadvisability of hasty weddings. Still, the pragmatist that she was, he expected that her reply would only advise him not to interfere in such a delicate family matter.



Diana's heart jumped as she heard the library door close and footsteps walk across the room towards the writing table. She pulled herself up from the large chair where she had been curled into a ball and forced herself to stop crying as someone peered down at her.

"Diana!" Edmund exclaimed, stepping back. "I thought you were a pile of blankets or clothes on that chair. Shall I leave you in peace?"

She straightened her face as best she could, wiping her tears away with a white handkerchief from inside one of her sleeves with slightly trembling fingers.

"No, I'm absolutely fine, Edmund. Just ignore me. You can use the library. I'll go and see if Aunt Henrietta is ready to sit with Father in a minute or two. It's only when she or I are there that Mother will leave him even for a moment."

"It's been a long week for you, hasn't it?" Edmund said, his voice always so calm and reassuring. "I know you're close to your parents, and it's natural to be upset. When my father was in his final illness, I certainly cried."

As Diana looked at him, she felt her distress and consternation breaking again through her polite mask. In contrast to the same emotion from Lady Birks, Edmund's sympathy made her feel lighter and able to speak more rather than less.

"It's not that, Edmund. I can be strong for Father and Mother. Until yesterday, I hadn't cried at all, you know. I'm so ashamed of myself."

"Then something else is bothering you?" he asked.

Diana nodded and another sob escaped unbidden from her throat. She covered her face with her hands to hide her tears. Quietly, Edmund walked over to her and picked up the handkerchief she had dropped.

"You can tell me," he assured her as he pressed the damp, lace-edged cotton back into Diana's hand. Looking at their hands together made her realize that Edmund's hand was almost twice as large as her own. The disparity in their sizes made her feel unexpectedly protected and safe.

"They want me to cancel my London Season and get married as soon as possible," she confided in a rush, "to Cousin Andrew. I haven't even seen him for at least seven years."

Edmund exhaled thoughtfully and nodded to let her continue speaking.

"He didn't even like me when we were children, and now, we don't know each other at all. I have to marry him, but the

thought of him touching me makes me feel sick. I can't bear it! How will I bear it?"

Her last words were like a plea. She stopped herself from saying anything more and felt embarrassment rising. Edmund was Percy's friend, and he barely knew her as anything but his friend's younger sister. Until yesterday, he had seen her only as a child.

"I'm so sorry. I shouldn't be speaking to you like this, Edmund. Forgive me. I didn't have..."

"You didn't have anyone else to talk to," he completed her sentence as she paused to find words, and she nodded. Edmund seemed to understand and speak her language so easily, and now, he was looking at her again with that look of intense interest she had never received from a man before yesterday.

"How could I say something like that to Percy? Or to Mother right now? I certainly can't speak to Aunt Henrietta," she continued, imagining Lady Birks's face upon hearing that the idea of touching her precious son revolted his future bride.

"Diana." Edmund's deep green eyes met and held her gaze. "Do you like to dance?"

The question was so unexpected and out of place that she laughed, and the expression in his eyes intensified as she smiled at him. The image of Edmund as her daydreamed dancing partner returned, bringing the same strange thrill as when it first occurred.

“Yes, I love to dance. It was what I was looking forward to most about the London Season. Dancing all night...”

“Then, Lady Diana, may I have this dance?” The Duke bowed formally before her and extended his hand. “It’s a waltz, I believe.”

Diana smiled again and stepped forward to take his hand. Edmund drew her into his arms and began humming a light waltz tune as he swirled them about the room. She laughed and moved with him, feeling the strength and elegance of his body as well as the security of his embrace. After several turns around the room, he stopped humming and smiled back at her as they danced.

“So, I’m holding you in my arms and touching you now. Does that feel so very bad?”

“It feels wonderful,” she admitted. It was even better than her daydream because it was real, and because it was Edmund. She could sense the heat of his body close to hers and feel the caress of his breath on her cheek and neck as they spun.

“Being touched by a man in other contexts should feel like this, but even more so,” Edmund told her. “Don’t you believe me?” His face was earnest but also held a hint of a mischievous smile. Diana was conscious that his words were now taking them beyond the limits of what was appropriate as a family friend.

“But it isn’t just this, is it?” she asked quietly, bringing their waltz to a standstill but remaining in his arms, not wanting

their dance to end. “Even if I could bring myself to dance with Cousin Andrew, there’s more to touching in a marriage.”

“There is more,” Edmund agreed, his hands exerting gentle pressure on her hand and her waist. “There’s so much I could tell you about what feels good between a man and a woman, although I do think showing can be better than telling. Do you want me to show you how it begins?”

Diana looked at him uncertainly, her heart racing. What did he mean? Could he be joking? What was he going to do? At the same time, one of her hands had instinctively moved and now rested against his chest, feeling the powerful beat of his heart under his shirt.

Cupping her face gently in one hand, Edmund leaned forward and pressed a light kiss to her lips, before pulling back to look into her eyes and see her reaction.

“Oh!” Diana gasped, feeling a bolt of sensation shoot through her body at the simple caress. Between the fluttering in her heart and stomach and the intense throb that settled in the secret place between her thighs, she feared that she would have fallen had Edmund’s arms not been holding her up. “Oh, Edmund! Do that again...”

“With pleasure, Lady Diana.” He smiled and lowered his head to hers once more.

Edmund’s lips were so warm, gentle, and knowing as they settled on Diana’s and began a slow, tingling exploration. One of her hands instinctively found its way into his hair, unconsciously caressing him and keeping him close.



She had never imagined that a simple kiss could feel this way. She had never known that a man's lips and tongue could give such pleasure, especially when enhanced by Edmund's strong embrace and his fingertips stroking her face, shoulders, and arms. It filled her with such unbearable longing for something more.

Diana had no idea how long they stood entwined in the library like that. but when Edmund finally released her, she felt breathless, flushed, and feverish with desire. Edmund stepped back, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again and looked at her, she could see the same wildness she felt reflected on his face and disheveled dark hair.

"We need to stop now or we'll both get carried away, Diana," he said, walking away to sit down at the writing desk. "That was not my intention and would not do it again. I wanted only to show you how good it could feel."

"Edmund..." She breathed again, unable to form any answer to his statements but so aroused that she knew she would have let him do anything he wanted at that moment, regardless of the consequences. She sank down into one of the comfortable library chairs.

"Did you like the way I kissed you?" he asked with a grin when they had both caught their breath.

"You felt so good," Diana told him. "Does kissing always feel like that between a man and a woman?" She touched her lips wonderingly as she asked the question, feeling them still tingle with the memory of Edmund's touch.

Edmund reflected before he answered.

“When they desire one another, it does,” he told her. “It feels so good that it can be dangerous if they don’t have sufficient self-control.”

“So good...” Diana breathed again but then sighed as reality kicked in. “But I must go and check on Father now.”

Edmund nodded his understanding.

“So, are you still afraid of being touched?” he asked before she reached the door.

“Not by you,” she answered, surprising herself with both her boldness and the truth of the statement. She could not imagine being afraid of Edmund’s touch, even if it could be as dangerous as he had warned her.

“Then let me know if you want to learn more.” He smiled. “I’m at your service, Lady Diana.”

Blushing, Diana went out into the hall before she could be distracted further by the look in his compelling green eyes.

## *Chapter Six*

With the support of their three visitors, the household settled into a regular rhythm over the next few weeks. Every morning, Edmund and Jacob would help Percy deal with estate and financial matters while encouraging him to stand on his feet. They also had their correspondence and occasional visitors to manage while away from their own homes.

“I can’t feel quite right about enjoying myself like this.” Diana sighed on their third afternoon as she knocked the ball through the croquet hoop on the lawn. “But then,” she said, looking up at the sun shining brightly in the lightly clouded sky, “even the sun shining seems wrong and I can’t stop that.”

She went to stand beside Jacob as Percy took his turn, glancing a little shyly at Edmund. He tried to smile back at Diana reassuringly.

“You’ve done more than your duty, Diana,” Edmund said. “Both in the household and in sitting with your father. Lady Birks is with your father now and may be able to persuade your mother to take some rest.”

“But perhaps I should be in there too,” Diana uttered doubtfully. “Aunt Henrietta is so very capable, but I am his daughter.”

“Let me read you what my mother says on that account,” Edmund said, producing the letter he had received that morning from an inside pocket.

*“You must tell Lady Diana to make sure that she gets enough good food, fresh air, and rest. From your description, she seems to be a capable and conscientious young woman and a loving daughter. Remind her that if she does not take care of herself well, she will be less able to help her family, and that will serve no one.”*

Diana blushed prettily at the compliments from Edmund’s mother.

“The Dowager Duchess of Colborne is a very wise woman,” Jacob chimed in, now stepping forward with his own mallet after Percy had entirely fuddled his turn. “You should listen to her.”

Edmund folded the letter away and returned it to his pocket. He would not read out what his mother had said on the foolishness of the Arnold family in pressing forward with Diana’s marriage at the present time.

*“Two young people should have fuller time and the support of their families to complete a sensible courtship. To enter the married state with no knowledge of one another’s habits, preferences and moods is rarely a recipe for happiness.”*

*I do wonder about Lady Templeton's agreement to this sudden development, but then, with her husband's illness, her mind is no doubt distressed beyond its normal faculties. In different times, I expect that she would have wanted Lord Birks back in England for several years before any wedding was announced."*

As he had anticipated, his mother had gone on to warn him about involving himself in the matter.

*"Lady Diana was always a sweet child. I am sure that regardless of her reservations, she will bend herself to the will of her mother and her aunt with the conviction that they have her best interests at heart, and that she must do her duty to her family.*

*Whatever her views on marriage, she does not yet have the age or maturity to sway the senior Arnold family members nor to understand the importance of her own needs. They may well believe that they are acting in Lady Diana's interest. But in other times, and under less pressure, I do wonder if Lady Templeton and Lady Birks might themselves see the matter quite differently.*

*I could perceive the concern in your words as you explained Diana's distress, my honourable son. But there is nothing to be gained from your opposing this marriage and much to be lost if the family ceases to trust your judgement or welcome your continued assistance at this difficult time.*

*So, do be careful how you speak of this marriage, and refrain from expressing strong views, even casually in conversation with your friend Lord Greene. All you can do is offer kindness and understanding to Lady Diana. It is only her well-reasoned*

*convictions that could influence current plans, and have any right to do so, not yours."*

Edmund would do his best to heed his mother's advice. Being kind to Diana came very easily to him, but he knew that biting his tongue on the subject of her marriage would be harder to master.

In the afternoons after their croquet game, once necessary work had been completed, the young people often planned small outings: simple horse rides, picnics, and games on the Fernside estate.

Persuaded by the advice from Edmund's mother, Diana usually joined the young men, keeping up with their pace easily despite her long skirts. While she was often sad, Edmund and Jacob were both able to cajole her into smiles.

Unlike Percy, Diana often found it hard to eat after spending time in the sick room, and the two young men developed a kind of double act at their picnics to encourage her. Jacob would pick an item of delicious food and eat it with great rapture before Edmund reminded her sternly of his mother's instructions until she burst out laughing at both of them and ate what she could.

Meanwhile, Lady Templeton and Lady Birks preferred to remain close to the house. Lady Birks had appointed herself the keeper of the sick room, chief liaison with Dr. Hughs and mainstay for the grateful Lady Templeton. The physician continued to find Lord Templeton's rapid decline inexplicable, and consultation with London doctors had so far produced no breakthroughs. Hopes for his recovery were fading daily.



“I feel like a schoolmaster,” Edmund observed to Jacob at the end of their first week when reflecting on how well their system seemed to be getting Percy on track. “Giving Percy a half-holiday if he does well in his tests.”

“Or a nursemaid,” Jacob joked, “teaching him his ABCs. Either way, I’m sometimes tempted to get the cane out when he pulls that little-boy-lost face...”

Recognizing her competence, Edmund and Jacob now left Diana to deal with running the domestic household, and she managed it superbly with the support of Mrs. Bridge and Jenson. All the staff clearly liked and respected the daughter of the house, and her quick, practical mind had no problem grasping and handling any issues and decisions that required her attention.

It was also at the end of the first week that Edmund overheard two maids gossiping about Diana being married off without completing her London Season.

*“It’s a terrible shame, Elsie. Such a sweet young lady. And that Lord Birks never having so much as sent her a letter in all this time. You’d think he would, wouldn’t you?”*

*“Oh, it’s very unfair for Lady Diana. She would have been the belle of all the balls in London. There would have been lords and dukes and all sorts wanting her hand.”*

*“That would have bucked up Lord Birks’s ideas, I’ll wager...”*

He could only silently agree with their assessment, and it provoked his growing resentment at the absent Andrew Arnold, Viscount Birks, who for whatever reason had been given the right to lead this dutiful but passionate young woman to the altar.

Well, Andrew wouldn't be giving Diana her first kiss. Edmund had done that and was still feeling rather pleased with himself that she had enjoyed it so much. He was also glad that Diana didn't seem to regret their kisses and certainly hadn't avoided him afterwards, although they had not been alone again since that day.

Initially, Edmund had intended only a light flirtation in the library, something to show her that a man's touch was not necessarily to be feared. But once in close proximity to the young woman, his instincts and desires had proved stronger than he had realized.



“It looks like the weather is going to be fine this afternoon. Shall we take a picnic down to the lake later?” Percy suggested hopefully at breakfast as the third week of his friends' visit opened. “I have two letters to write to tenants, some bills to sign off and one legal letter to read that will probably take me the rest of the morning. But after that...”

Edmund and Jacob both welcomed the idea.

“It does look like a good day for a picnic. Might it be warm enough to swim in your lake?” Jacob wondered.



“That depends on how tough you’re feeling today,” Percy teased. “Edmund and I used to swim there during every school holiday, regardless of the weather. We even dared each other to swim when it was snowing.”

Percy sounded so proud of himself that Edmund and Diana couldn’t help smiling, catching one another’s eye as they did so and holding that gaze for a few seconds longer than they needed to.

Every time Edmund looked at Diana now, he couldn’t help remembering how it had felt to explore her softly seeking mouth with his own. He could still visualize the pink flush on her cheeks as she looked up at him with desirous eyes and slightly parted lips.

Then, there was the memory of the way she had gasped softly and said “oh,” between kisses. That came back to haunt him in his bedchamber at night, sparking fantasies about what sounds she would make if he unfastened her bodice and covered her bare skin in kisses.

Or showed her some of the other slow, skilled, and varied ways in which he knew how to use his tongue for a woman’s pleasure...

“Will you be joining us today, Lady Diana?” Jacob asked, as she remained silent.

“Not if you’re swimming, no!” She laughed at the idea, which he clearly hadn’t thought through. “None of you are schoolboys anymore.”

“I won’t be swimming,” Edmund said immediately. “We can take a walk while these two hardy souls are stripped and shivering in the water. Come and keep me company.”

As an old family friend, and with her brother nearby, it was an entirely proper suggestion, but he still didn’t know what she might make of it. When Diana looked at him now across the dining table, considering his suggestion, he was glad that it was desire he saw in her eyes rather than shyness or embarrassment.

Percy and Jacob could have no idea how eagerly he awaited her answer.

“Yes, I’d like that,” Diana said and smiled at him again.

## *Chapter Seven*

“Do you still want to swim then, Wycliff?” Percy asked while lolling lazily in the early spring sunshine at the lakeside. “I could race you to the other side.”

Jacob laughed.

“Lady Diana won the stone skipping contest, Edmund won the guessing game, and I won at charades. You know your lake better than I do and you just want your chance to win something now.”

“That’s true. But I also fear that I ate far too much food an hour ago and will probably sink like a stone, so I’d best not go into the water alone.”

“Race or rescue, eh? Why not...”

“I think that’s our cue to take a walk,” Edmund said, looking up at Diana. She had been sitting with her back against a willow tree and her bonnet cast aside on the ground while Edmund lay at her feet, absently making a daisy chain. Now, he knelt up and placed the flowery crown on her curly blonde

head before standing and offering her his hand to rise. She accepted it with a smile.

On her feet, Diana glanced at her discarded hat.

“Leave it,” Edmund urged impulsively. “Please. You won’t need it if we walk through the woods here, will you?”

In truth, she looked so beautiful with the flowers decking her hair and the breeze lightly lifting her curls that putting on the hat seemed a travesty. But he couldn’t tell her that here in front of her brother and his friend.

“Enjoy your swim!” Diana called to Percy and Jacob, who had already stripped off their shoes and jackets. Taking Edmund’s offered arm, she then gave him a thrilling secretive smile as they walked together down the woodland path.

“You look like a dryad, a mythical tree nymph,” he told her when they were alone. “The most beautiful nymph in the forest.”

“If we’re in a world where I am a nymph, does that make you a faun or a satyr?” She laughed, dappled in sunlight and pink with fresh air.

“Whom would you prefer?” Edmund asked. “One is safe and the other more exciting.”

“But you have both of those qualities,” she answered, her hand pressing on his arm.

“I suppose that makes me an ordinary human hero then, simply bewitched by the beauty of the woodlands.”

“A hero coming to rescue me, perhaps...” she said wistfully, her smile fading. Edmund guessed that she was thinking of her impending marriage. Did she want to be rescued? Or was this mild flirtation with him merely a respite from a bitter duty she was determined to accept?

They were some distance from the lake now. Edmund stopped walking and took Diana carefully and deliberately into his arms, stroking her flower-crowned hair. Her arms slid quite naturally around his waist, and her face pressed against his chest.

“What do you want from me, Diana?” he asked her. When she raised her face and looked at him with those determined but vulnerable hazel eyes, her appeal was almost irresistible.

“I think I want you to kiss me, Edmund,” she said slowly, and with a sound of sudden desire that was almost a growl, he complied.

The combination of Diana’s innocence and responsiveness was intoxicating to him. Her hands pulled his head down to hers for even deeper and less controlled kisses, but then her eyes opened wide as he cupped one of her breasts through the light muslin of her dress.

The small gasping sound she made at his simple touch set him on fire. His hand slipped inside her bodice and caressed her

warm bare skin and hardening nipple with his palm as she moaned his name.

Edmund swallowed her small cries in his kisses, thinking that he had never wanted nor enjoyed a woman more in his life. A flash of satisfaction also shot through him at the knowledge that this was another first that Andrew Arnold would never get. It was Edmund whom Diana had first desired and Edmund who had first awakened her body to physical pleasure.

What other firsts with Diana did the absent Viscount of Birks not deserve to enjoy?

Their embrace was disrupted by the sound of Percy and Jacob calling their names. Edmund immediately withdrew his hand and allowed Diana to adjust her dress as he smoothed his hair.

“Do I look all right?” she asked breathlessly, and he reached out to adjust her crown of daisies.

“You look beautiful,” he said softly and leaned in for one more brief and daring kiss before he walked her back towards the lake.

“That water is damned freezing, Edmund!” Jacob complained, his teeth chattering as he pulled the lapels of his jacket up to his ears. His wet red hair was plastered to his head. “I got halfway across and decided that it wasn’t worth the effort. Percy wins by default, and now, I want to go back to the house for a warm bath and some cocoa.”

Cold but happy with his default win, Percy was toweling his bare torso vigorously, not having dressed as quickly as Jacob.

“You haven’t trained like Edmund and me, you see, Jacob. Years of practice...”

Edmund offered Jacob his own jacket for additional warmth, and it was gratefully accepted. Jacob laughed at himself, swore again at the coldness of the water, and then apologized to Diana for his language and dreadful appearance.

“You look best amongst all of us this afternoon, Lady Diana,” he added a compliment by way of redress. “The flowers in your hair suit you wonderfully.”

“Thank you,” she said with a slight blush that only made Edmund want to scoop her up and carry her back into the woods. He realized then that whatever happened with her marriage and her family, he would never be able to look at Diana again without desire.



After the lightheartedness, joy and passion of the afternoon, dinner that night was a somber affair. They talked in hushed voices about the doctor’s latest visit earlier that evening.

“Mother is still distraught,” Percy said. “Perhaps she should not have spoken to the doctors.”

“That would make it even worse, Percy!” Diana objected. “Mother isn’t like you. She doesn’t choose not to see the

things that bother her. Not knowing could only make it harder for her.”

“That’s not what I meant, Diana.” Percy blushed. His friends said nothing, both silently agreeing with his sister about Percy’s preference for burying his head in the sand.

“Diana is right, Percy,” Henrietta said sorrowfully. “You must bear up bravely under this strain, and we must all face up to hard reality however little we might want to. My dear niece and nephew, your family’s future depends on you now. It’s clear that neither Dr. Hughs nor Dr. Kramer sees any hope of recovery.”

Percy dropped his cutlery on his plate and closed his eyes.

“They might still be wrong. They’re men, not gods!” he said petulantly. “Maybe... maybe we should get another opinion. In fact, maybe we should get two or three more...”

“Your dedication to your father is touching, Percy.” Lady Birks sighed. “But it helps no one to indulge in fantasy at such times as this. Dr. Kramer is the foremost heart specialist in the country. He does believe that there is more to this case than angina, but with your father in such an unresponsive state, further diagnosis is difficult and treatment is likely impossible.” She shook her head sorrowfully. “But Father must get well. He must!” Percy cried, looking again towards the still-empty seat at the head of the table where he had declined to move. Beside him, Diana put a comforting hand on his arm.



“He may not, Percy. We must look after Mother too. I suggested hiring a nurse, but she won’t hear of it. Could you help to persuade her, Aunt Henrietta?”

“I’m afraid it won’t be long now,” Lady Birks said. “As Dr. Kramer advised, your mother’s diligent care and ability to get broth into him whenever he stirs even faintly have kept him alive so far. But without solid food, it can’t go on indefinitely. I would let your mother make peace with that in her own way. There may not be a need for a nurse soon.”

Diana nodded at her aunt, knowing the truth of her words, and too upset to speak.

“Would Lord Templeton have welcomed a priest?” Edmund asked gently. “I do not know his religious views, but at the end, my own father was much comforted in the hours he had with Reverend Timmerson, hearing some of the psalms again for the final time.”

“He might,” Diana admitted very quietly. “Our local minister is new and has had the living for only a few months. But the Bishop of Winchester is an old friend of Father’s. Perhaps we might write to him?”

“Oh, my dear girl.” Lady Birks’s eyes overflowed with emotion. “How right you are! Here we are worrying about your father’s body and neglecting his soul. A bishop can do more for him now than another doctor or a nurse. Let this now be the focus of our efforts.”

“Percy and I will write to him after dinner,” Diana said bravely as her aunt lavished her with an extravagantly sad smile of

compassion which her niece seemed to shrink away from.

Regardless of Lady Birks's uncomfortable tendency to effusive emotion, Edmund respected the dedication and support that she was giving to her cousins in the Arnold family. She was evidently a strong woman. Having been through grief and widowhood herself, it was good that Esther had a friend like her to lean on.

They ate in silence for some minutes, and then, Lady Birks put down her cutlery and sighed herself into a smile of sorts.

“But life goes on, children, however hard we may find it. I do have one piece of good news for all of you to look forward to, though. I received a letter from Andrew, who has already arrived back in London. He'll be traveling up to Hayward House tomorrow, and I'd like to invite all of you for dinner with us on Thursday.”

The glow that had been on Diana's face since her encounter with Edmund in the woods—and had somehow survived the anxiety of the latest doctor's visit—abruptly vanished at her aunt's announcement. Edmund looked at her with both compassion and tenderness, wishing that there were something more he could do to help but was stymied by her apparent cooperation with this unwelcome marriage arrangement.

“Yes, Aunt Henrietta,” Diana said blankly.

“Your mother will naturally remain here with your father. Your Grace, Lord Wycliff, you are also invited. I'm sure Andrew would be very pleased to meet the friends who have been so good to his cousins and his future wife.”

Edmund took a long sip of red wine from his glass.

“You are too kind, Lady Birks,” he said, not really wishing to meet this man and considering how best to politely decline her invitation. He couldn’t imagine that it would be much fun for Jacob either.

But then, he looked again at Diana, who was visibly miserable despite the forced smile she had given her aunt and thought of her facing her unwanted fiancé alone.

“Of course, we would be pleased to join you for dinner on Thursday,” he added, ignoring Jacob’s raised eyebrow across the table, and noticing the way Diana’s face had relaxed at his acceptance.

Perhaps his presence at this dinner would be the last service he could offer Diana. It was clear that she would soon be another man’s wife and there was no way for their flirtation, or whatever this was between them, to continue under those circumstances.

He would find it humiliating and dishonourable to be entangled with a married woman, and he suspected that Diana would feel the same once she had taken her wedding vows.

With Viscount Birks back in the country, at last, it became clear to Edmund that he and Diana must start keeping some distance from one another. However hard this might prove.

## *Chapter Eight*

Diana felt guilty again as she looked down at the drying daisy crown inside one of the drawers of her dressing table.

Her father was probably dying, her mother was distraught, and she herself was soon to be married to Andrew and become Viscountess Birks. Despite such life-altering developments, she had spent much of the past few weeks having fun with her brother and his friends. And kissing Edmund, the Duke of Colborne.

Kissing him was scandalous enough if anyone had known. But it had been something more than kissing, hadn't it?

*Do you want me to show you how it begins?*

Diana shivered deliciously as she remembered Edmund saying those words to her in the library before he kissed her for the first time. The kisses, the strokes, his hands caressing her breasts in the woods... they were all the start of something wonderful. Where would it end?

It was like a trail she desperately wanted to follow to the end while knowing that it was utterly forbidden and might lead to ruin.

Closing the drawer, she tried to concentrate on brushing her long, blonde curls and pinning them back into a neat twist, finishing with an emerald studded golden hair comb and pins. She had never liked anyone else dressing her hair. Even as a child, the thickness and curls required patience and a gentleness of touch that she doubted most maids would possess.

After fastening her grandmother's pearls around her neck, she stood and pulled on the long satin gloves that Elsie, the chambermaid, had left hanging over the mirror after she had helped Diana into her high-waisted dress of shimmering cream muslin embroidered with tiny golden flowers.

The flowers made her smile. They were an echo of the daisies in her drawer.

"I don't regret any of it!" she said fiercely to her reflection in the mirror. For a moment, she felt brave again, but it faded with the knowledge that she must now go downstairs to the coach and travel to finally meet Andrew again, the man who was destined to be her husband. Whether she wanted him or not.



"She's rather small, isn't she?" Diana heard an unfamiliar man's voice say as Percy helped her down from the coach in front of Hayward House.

Standing at the top of the steps outside the front door, she saw Henrietta, who had traveled back there earlier in the day to oversee preparations for the dinner, together with a tall and ruddy-faced young man of solid build, not yet fat but tending towards it. Fluffles sat beside them, and Jacob groaned quietly under his breath as he took in the dog's presence.

An attractive, dark-haired young woman stood slightly behind Lady Birks with a welcoming smile. Diana easily recognized Lady Katherine, known as Kitty, who must now be three and twenty.

In contrast, the young man who must be her cousin looked entirely unfamiliar. But as Diana reflected on his rather bored and petulant expression, she could see how the spoiled and disagreeable boy she had once known could easily have developed into such a man.

“Oh, she'll do, of course,” the man added, as his sister frowned and his mother whispered something to him.

Diana flushed and looked down at her feet for a moment, hoping that no one else had heard his remarks, something that could render the evening even more awkward than it already promised to be. Such expressions could not be perceived as anything other than an indication of dissatisfaction with his bride.

When she raised her eyes, she saw Edmund looking sharply at the speaker. Percy and Jacob were closing the coach door and giving instructions to the driver, informed by surly advice from a rather unkempt man with overlong hair and a bearded face, who had presented himself as the groundskeeper.

She wished for a moment that she could rush into Edmund's arms and hide her face against his chest. Faced with the reality of Andrew Arnold and Hayward House, their previous embraces now felt like an impossible dream.

Even in the darkness, Diana could see that the gardens were as unkempt as their supposed keeper, and there were no torches set outside to light their way up the path. Glancing up, she could see shutters on many of the windows.

She only supposed that with Andrew in India for so long and Henrietta and Kitty frequently away visiting friends, Hayward House had been vacant for some time.

Lady Birks welcomed them inside, gave their coats to the maid who seemed to be the only servant in sight, and made the formal introductions to her son and daughter. She left aside Diana until the very end.

“And of course, Andrew, you cannot have forgotten your future wife, Lady Diana Arnold. Diana has been so very eager to meet you again, especially after I told her all about your successes in India and your prospects in London. What a wonderful pair the two of you will make in society!”

Diana made a small curtsy to her fiancé and smiled faintly, feeling just as nervous and uncomfortable as she had feared.

“Charmed,” Andrew said briefly, looking her body up and down in a simultaneously salacious but disinterested fashion that repelled her on both fronts.

Lord Birks's general aspect of undisguised boredom had only grown throughout the introductions to Edmund and Jacob and a short conversation with Percy. His patience seemed to have run out entirely by the time Diana was reached. It was as though he'd seen her, accepted her as fit for purpose and had nothing more to say on the matter.

"Let's get some drinks, Mater," he said with purpose almost immediately after the introductions. "I'm parched."

"Of course, my darling boy. If you would bring Diana through to the drawing room. The Duke of Colborne can bring Katherine, and I will follow with Percy and Lord Wycliff. Come along, Fluffles."

With an ill-humored sigh, Andrew offered Diana his arm, and she took it awkwardly. It was a distinct contrast to the graceful offer and smiling acceptance of Edmund and Kitty beside them. They made a better couple than she and Andrew, Diana observed sadly.

"How was your journey?" Diana asked her cousin politely to break the ice.

"God-awful. Six months on bloody boats and the worst rum you've ever tasted. If the company tries to send me back again, I'll tell them to go to hell. They probably won't if I have a wife though, especially if you can get pregnant quickly. I hope you will."

Diana was speechless at his rudeness, tactlessness, and bad language. No one had ever spoken like this to her in her life. The disgust she felt at the idea of touching this man or



carrying his child was even stronger now than it had been when he was merely a half-remembered silhouette.

“I see,” Diana managed to reply, glad that they had now arrived at the drawing room so that she could drop Andrew’s arm and step away from him. She hoped her revulsion did not show too plainly on her face, but Andrew did not even look back at her as he headed towards the drinks tray on the sideboard and prepared himself a strong whisky.

“Ah, that’s the stuff!” he said with satisfaction after taking a long swig from his glass. Diana noted the redness of his nose and eyes and wondered how many times he refreshed himself from the drinks tray each day.

“Perhaps the ladies would like a glass of sherry, Lord Birks?” Edmund suggested lightly as the rest of the group continued to stand empty-handed. “Lady Katherine was telling me that you brought some fine sherry back from your travels.”

Diana could see the incredulity on Jacob’s face and the confusion on Percy’s at Andrew’s lack of manners and attention to his guests. The duties of a good host were at least one item even within Percy’s area of competence. Lady Birks continued to look at her son affectionately; and Kitty’s attention was all for Edmund, a fact that made Diana unexpectedly uncomfortable.

“Yes, excellent sherry. I got a whole case of the best Spanish stuff on my way back. That maid’s put a bottle out, I see. Yes, sherry all around, I think.”

Andrew lined up the glasses, poured measures of sherry for all and handed them round brusquely without asking anyone what they might prefer. He downed his whisky and soda quickly before taking up a glass of sherry and beginning a story about his time in India, addressed principally to Edmund, Jacob, and Percy.

For a time, he appeared to have forgotten that Diana was even there, which was in some ways a relief. On deeper consideration, as a hint of their shared future, it made her feel hopeless and forlorn.

It was only when the maid announced dinner that Andrew seemed to recall her existence. He again offered her his arm with barely concealed impatience and led her to her seat at the dining table as if he were merely dropping off a parcel or tying up a horse somewhere.

Diana found herself barely speaking throughout the meal. Whichever way she turned at the table, her heart ached at all she saw and heard that night.

One at each end of the table, Andrew and Lady Birks monopolized much of the conversation with yet more tales of Andrew's accomplishments during his time in India and his bright future ahead with his firm in London. Whenever they could, Edmund and Jacob also conversed at polite intervals with Kitty, who was seated between them on the opposite side of the table from Diana.

Meanwhile, Percy, who was on Henrietta's left-hand side, was subjected to a flow of his relative's thoughts on Andrew and Diana's wedding plans, apparently already agreed on with Lady Templeton. Three possible dates, a selection of guests,

and even a choice of menus were run past Percy without sparking anything more than a general, unresisting assent.

Diana wished that she could close her ears to those particular discussions and find a way to pretend that the wedding wasn't happening at all, although in such close proximity, Andrew himself was a solid reminder of her unwanted future.

At Andrew's right-hand side, and with a long gap along the side of the table between her place and Percy's, Diana had little chance for any actual conversation at all. Most of Andrew's comments seemed directed at the men in the room or his mother, and he apparently did not expect that Diana could have anything interesting to say. Most of her attempts to engage him were talked over or met with a short nod or grunt.

It was only when she asked him about his case of Spanish sherry that he responded with more than a single word or two.

"Ha! That is a story. I won it, you know, won it outright from a very good chap in the Guards. On my first night back in London, I was gaming with some fellows I know at Boodles. One of them, being low on funds, staked this case of sherry already on its way from the continent..."

He stretched out the story of his successful gamble for a full five minutes while Diana listened with polite desperation, each second eroding her slim stock of remaining future hopes. Glancing across the table, she noticed that Edmund had also been listening to the conversation with scarcely veiled anger on his face.

When he noticed her eyes upon him, he quickly looked away and resolutely began a conversation with Kitty about her plans for the London Season. As Kitty began to list all the parties and events she was planning to attend— parties and events that had been on Diana’s calendar too only a few short weeks earlier— Diana thought that she might cry.

It came to her that perhaps it wasn’t simply the loss of her London Season she was mourning but the impending loss of Edmund too, and all that he represented to her. In a short period of time, he had come to mean security and excitement together, each stimulating the other to a higher and higher degree.

Kitty’s pretty face was shining with pleasure, and the expression on her face as she looked at Edmund was unmistakable. Lady Birks also glanced at her daughter and smiled benevolently at seeing her rapt in conversation with the handsome young Duke of Colborne. She looked at Diana with a satisfied smile, and Diana made an effort to answer it with her own.

It would be an excellent match for Kitty. Why should her mother not be pleased? As her cousin, Diana should also be pleased. The Duke must surely be one of the most eligible bachelors in the kingdom.

“Do you plan to be in London for the Season, Your Grace?” Lady Birks asked pleasantly. “We’re throwing a ball for Katherine in June, and we would be honoured by your presence. Andrew and Diana will be there, of course, unless she is... indisposed by that time.”

“My plans for the Season are still somewhat uncertain,” Edmund said before taking a sip of wine with an inscrutable

expression and turning to smile kindly at Kitty. “My youngest sister is being presented this year, and I must keep family commitments before I can indulge my own wishes. I’m sure that Lady Katherine will shine very brightly whether I am there or not.”

“Your responsibilities are well understood, Your Grace. I will send an invitation to your London house. Naturally, it will include your mother and both of your sisters.”

She smiled again at Edmund and then remembered Jacob.

“You are also invited, Lord Wycliffe,” she added as an afterthought. Diana saw Jacob force a smile and suspected that he didn’t want to attend Lady Birks’s ball any more than he had wanted to attend her dinner.

“I would love to meet your sisters, Your Grace,” Kitty said, the way she looked at Edmund already somewhat adoring.

“On behalf of my family, I thank you both for your kindness. You can expect a reply to your invitation from my mother, Lady Birks. I will mention your ball next time I write to her.”

“It is good to know that there are other sons in the world as dutiful as mine,” Henrietta said. Accepting that she would not get more commitment from Edmund tonight, she turned her attention back to Andrew.

“Dear Andrew wrote to me so often from India, even when he was so busy with his work. Every other week, there seemed to be a letter.”

“Asking for money, more often than not...” Kitty laughed then fell silent with the full force of her mother’s and brother’s glares.

“Banking in India is damned complicated, Kitty, and communicating with bank branches anywhere civilized is hellishly slow,” Andrew said in his defense before Kitty could expound any further on her comment, his brow creasing crossly at his sister’s words.

“I was only saying that—”

“Katherine,” Lady Birks interrupted harshly, “we do not discuss the contents of private letters.”

“Of course, Mother. Forgive me,” Kitty apologized, although her expression seemed conflicted. In passing, she caught Diana’s eye, and Diana imagined that she detected a brief flash of warning.

She also noticed the short look that passed between Edmund and Jacob and wondered what it could all mean. Without her parents’ guidance, she knew that she would have to somehow work this out for herself.

It was a relief when the meal ended and the ladies went to the drawing room for coffee, leaving the men to their port. Diana wondered if she might have the chance to ask Kitty more about her reference to Andrew’s letters, or her brother’s character in general. Being five years apart in age, they had never been close in childhood, but Kitty had not been unkind.

Unfortunately, Lady Birks descended immediately on Diana in the drawing room to further sing Andrew's praises and inform Diana of the arrangements she was making for their marriage. Diana could only nod along silently. Kitty dutifully agreed with all her mother's comments on Andrew and enthusiasm for the wedding.

"I have always wanted a sister," Kitty told Diana with a smile. Diana smiled back, as it seemed the only genuine and spontaneous comment that her cousin had made since they left the dining room.

When the gentlemen joined them in the drawing room after only a brief time, Diana noticed that Percy entered the room with Andrew while Edmund and Jacob hung back slightly, talking between themselves in low voices.

Andrew was once again the first at the drinks tray. After watching him downing another whiskey and trying to count how much he must have already drunk that evening, Diana turned away, wishing she could simply leave.

"Are you all right, Diana?" Edmund asked, coming to her side for the first time that evening. The kind tone of his voice was almost painful to hear, especially as Kitty's eyes were following him around the room.

"I'm just tired, Edmund."

"Can I get you a drink? Perhaps another sherry?"

“Nothing to drink, no,” Diana said with a shudder, thinking of the way Andrew poured whiskey down his throat. “I don’t think I ever want to drink again.”

From the understanding on Edmund’s face, she wondered if he had guessed her thoughts.

“Would you like me to arrange for the carriage to be ready shortly? There is no need to be here late if you would rather go home to your parents. I must speak to Lady Katherine and will then see to it if you give me the word.”

Diana glanced back at Andrew and noticed him now looking at her with slightly narrowed eyes, another drink in his hand. She did not like the expression on his face.

“Please do, yes. Thank you,” she managed to say to Edmund, and he slipped away with a nod back to Kitty’s side.

Andrew detached himself from the drinks tray and walked towards Diana then. She steeled herself for a further uncomfortable conversation. Would it be another story of drunkenness and gaming exploits or more inappropriate comments?

“Would you take a walk with me tomorrow, Cousin Diana?” he asked abruptly.

“Walk with you?” Diana repeated, startled and confused.



“Well yes,” Andrew said impatiently, misinterpreting her surprise. “There’s no need to be so shy. We’ll be sharing a bed in a few weeks’ time, so I hardly think taking a walk is inappropriate.”

“Oh, Andrew! You have been out of England a long time,” his mother chided, affection overlaying any attempt to be truly severe. “You must mind your manners when you talk to a lady. Look how the poor child is blushing.”

“Well, she is going to be my wife,” Andrew said, irked by his mother’s fussing and clearly unable to see any problem in his address to Diana.

The rest of the room had fallen silent around them. Andrew’s indelicacy was acutely embarrassing, and Diana did not immediately know how to respond to it.

“You will get used to his ways, dear,” Lady Birks said to her niece in a stage whisper, as though Andrew had merely said something eccentric or puzzling.

Diana’s instinct was to refuse Andrew’s crude request outright, but how could she? Henrietta was now smiling beatifically at them again in joyful anticipation of their forthcoming nuptials. Percy was looking on with helplessness and expectancy. Diana thought of her father lying semi-conscious in his sickbed with her mother by his side.

“Of course, I will take a walk with you, Cousin Andrew. When shall I expect your visit?”

“Andrew and I will come to Fernside for nuncheon, and the two of you can walk together after that,” Lady Birks proposed. “It will be quite wonderful for your mother to see the two of you getting along so well. Perhaps I will bring Kitty too if these young gentlemen will keep her entertained.”

Diana found herself giving yet another silent nod and wishing that the ground would swallow her up.

Andrew was already back at the drinks tray fixing himself another whisky and soda, indifferent to his mother’s arrangements or Diana’s discomfort. She noticed how careless and clumsy his hands seemed as he rattled the bottles and glasses, and his lack of consideration for anyone else as he again failed to offer drinks to his guests.

Jacob had moved to the table with the coffee pot tray and offered the ladies more coffee before he poured his own. Again, Diana was struck by the relative lack of attendants at Hayward House. Normally, after dinner at Fernside, at least one member of staff would help to serve coffee and drinks in the drawing room unless dismissed by the family.

The lack of staff present might also explain the thick layers of dusk apparent on mantelpieces, shelves, clocks, and ornaments. It seemed as though little housework had been done for far longer than Henrietta had been ensconced in the Dower House at Fernside.

Miserably, Diana watched Kitty conversing easily with Edmund, a beaming smile on her face, and his own features as kindly, handsome, and attentive as they always were. Diana looked away and occupied herself for some minutes by examining a selection of small ornaments in a glass case in the corner.

“All worthless rubbish,” Andrew commented, appearing suddenly at her shoulder again. “Pater was a collector, but not one with any taste. When I had that lot valued, they were only worth a pittance. Silly old fool.”

Shocked at how he spoke about his dead father, Diana did not know how to reply.

“I must speak to Kitty,” she said, turning away from him with the first excuse she could think of and walking blindly across the room, wishing again that there were somewhere she could hide.

“Diana?” Edmund asked her for a second time as Kitty put her hand on Diana’s arm to attract her attention. She had almost walked straight past them. “Kitty and I have made the necessary arrangements, and the coach will be ready in fifteen minutes. Would you like more coffee while you wait?”

“Oh, no, thank you so much. I won’t sleep,” Diana said once she realized that she was being addressed and then looked away quickly from Edmund’s face to smile unconvincingly at her cousin instead.

Looking into those green eyes now, even for one brief moment, was both compelling and painful.

While she had hoped that her experiences with Edmund would make it easier to experience the physical side of marriage, she realized that it was only going to make it harder. Because Andrew wasn’t Edmund and never could be.

## Chapter Nine

Diana awoke early the following morning, a feeling of utter hopelessness enveloping her as soon as she opened her eyes and remembered the previous evening and all that lay ahead for her in the coming weeks, months, and years.

*“...you will still be going to London, but as the wife of a man of consequence rather than a foolish young débutante...”*

*“...we can have the wedding before the month is out...”*

*“...he’ll want to continue the family line as soon as possible...”*

*“...Andrew and Diana will be there, of course, unless she is... indisposed by that time...”*

However Henrietta might have originally intended her words, they now haunted Diana like vengeful demons.

The life she saw stretching out ahead held no value for her. But still, it had worth for her family, she supposed, and she must live it for them if not for herself, without joy. For a

moment, she remembered the joy of her walk in the woods with Edmund that day, but the memory of such happiness made her present state seem even more grim.

Most immediately, Diana was dreading the walk with Andrew that afternoon. It was clear that they had as little in common now as when they were children and that his adult disregard for her was even greater than that of his youth. After last night, she did not believe that she could ever come to like him, never mind love him as a wife should.

Still, there was no way out of it, barring feigning a broken ankle or illness, both of which would only bring greater anxiety to her family. Even if she did attempt to avoid Andrew's company today, it would not change the fact that the wedding date was in the process of being set and could take place within a matter of weeks.

The night would still come when she must get into bed with that boorish, selfish man and do whatever married couples did. His bulk intimidated her, and she suspected that Andrew would not care if he hurt her, or perhaps even notice.

Rising abruptly to escape from her intrusive thoughts, Diana opened the curtains and splashed cold water on her face from the washstand in the corner. Moping about her fate was not going to help anyone. There was a household still to be run at Fernside, and if she could not be happy, she could at least be useful.



“Is Edmund not joining us?” Diana asked Percy and Jacob as the three of them sat down for their usual coffee and cake mid-

morning. Having eaten breakfast before the rest of the household rose, Diana had not seen any of them yet that day.

“Edmund has some business letters to write,” Jacob said. “I believe they will occupy him until later this afternoon. He asked me to pass on his apologies to your cousins if he is unable to join us for nuncheon.”

Diana nodded. While she thought it was probably wisest that she and Edmund avoid one another from now on, she did feel a pang at his absence. There was also a wistfulness at the thought that he, Jacob, and Percy would likely organize their own outing with Kitty while she was occupied with Andrew.

Lady Birks and her children, having still not arrived by half past one, Diana went to sit with her father, relieving her mother’s vigil for a short time.

When she took Richard’s unresisting hand between her own, the skin was warm, and Diana imagined that his color looked better today. She did not allow herself to go further and imagine that his health would return, but she did begin to talk to him.

“Aunt Henrietta and Cousin Andrew are visiting today, Father. You’ll be pleased to know that she has all the wedding preparations in hand, just as you wanted. I only wish...”

Diana hesitated, afraid to say certain things aloud, even though her father was unconscious and no one else was in the room.

“I only wish I could be happier...” Unable to stop herself, she burst into quiet sobs. “I don’t want to marry Cousin Andrew, Father. I wish so badly that I didn’t have to. I wish that you could see for yourself the kind of man he is.”

Had she imagined the slight pressure of his fingers on her hands? Diana dismissed the idea. Her mother had imagined such things before, and then their hopes had been dashed.

“He doesn’t love me, and I can never love him,” Diana continued. “I don’t even understand why he would want to marry me. He doesn’t even like me. And why must it be so quick, with my Season cancelled and you in your sickbed? I’m not ready for this. Oh, I wish I could just talk to you again. Why did you have to get sick, Father?”

This time, the pressure of her Father’s hand on hers was unmistakable.

“Father? Can you hear me?” Diana gasped, leaning forward over the bed. She saw signs of movement on his pale, grey-haired face on the pillow. Her father’s eyes opened and fixed on her with clear effort.

“Diana...” he breathed. “Diana... wedding...”

“Father! Do not overstrain yourself. I will summon the doctor immediately. Be still and save your strength.”

Running from the room, Diana almost collided with Lady Birks, who was walking briskly in through the front door

while her son alighted from the carriage more slowly and stretched his legs on the driveway.

“Heavens, child! What are you about?” her aunt exclaimed.

“It’s Father, I think he’s waking up!” Diana told her excitedly. “I must find Mother, and we must summon Dr. Hughs.”

“Good heavens! Can it be?” her aunt exclaimed, clearly just as shocked as Diana. “Go and find Lady Templeton immediately, but do not distress her. I will go through to your father straight away.”

With an expression of resolution, Lady Birks headed directly towards the sick room as Diana dashed away in the opposite direction.

Like a mad creature, Diana tasked Jenson to summon Dr. Hughs and then ran upstairs to seek out her mother. Despite her aunt’s warning, her own excitement was transmitted quickly to Lady Templeton.

They raced together back to the sick room only to find Richard lying still and quiet in his bed as though nothing had occurred. Henrietta was taking his pulse and looked at them both with great compassion.

“I’m sorry, Esther. It seems that there’s no change after all.”

“He squeezed my hand!” Diana insisted shakily. “He talked to me.”



“What did he say?” her aunt asked, the heavy sympathy on her face and pity in her voice increasing. As Diana paused to think, her aunt’s hand came to rest on her shoulder, but it brought her no comfort.

“You can tell us, Diana. No one is going to be angry with you. What did you think he said?”

“He said my name,” Diana told her, instinctively keeping back the topic of conversation which had led to his brief revival.

Her mother sat down again in the chair beside the bed and tried to compose herself after her crushed hopes.

“He did, Mother!” Diana insisted, sensing that the two older women were both thinking that she had imagined the scene.

“Diana, go and take Andrew into nuncheon and then out for your walk,” her aunt instructed her firmly but not unkindly. “You need some fresh air and company. Do not upset yourself over what was clearly a misunderstanding. I’ll stay with your parents, and I’ll let you know if there’s any change. Have Mrs. Bridge bring us some food in here.”

Soberly, Diana nodded and left the room. After informing Jenson sadly that Dr. Hughs would not be required after all and ordering the necessary food for the sick room, she then found Andrew alone in the drawing room absorbed in making notes on a pamphlet with a pencil.

“Would you care for some nuncheon, Cousin Andrew? We have cheeses, bread and cold cuts laid out in the dining room whenever you are ready.”

“Damn it!” he said crossly without looking up at her. “Looks like the Brighton races were a washout. Never mind. York will be better for me. It usually is.”

Diana could make no comment to that, knowing nothing about betting on horse races except that her parents strongly disapproved of the pastime and discouraged Percy from engaging in it.

“You’re a quiet little thing, aren’t you?” he said suddenly with a wolfish smile, discarding his pamphlet and pencil carelessly on the table. “I hope you’ll have more to say for yourself after we’re married in three weeks. It’ll be a damned dull honeymoon if you don’t, and I’ve been looking forward to our wedding night all the way back from India, ever since I got Mater’s letter.”

Again, Diana could think of nothing to say to such a remark, whose crudeness only reminded her that she must still actually live through the reality of what Andrew was anticipating in words. A wedding night, a honeymoon, and a life together.

“If you’re not hungry, I’ll send our other guests in to eat without us,” she said blandly. “We were expecting you earlier, and they have waited for you.”

“Are you another one of this family’s bloody complaining women?” Andrew guffawed. “Mater was hopping mad that I wasn’t up earlier today. You should have seen her. But a man

should be able to lie in at his own house once in a while without all his womenfolk making such a damned fuss about it.”

Andrew’s rudeness and failure to make even rudimentary inquiries after her father or mother no longer surprised Diana. Her parents had been correct in their whispered judgement that Henrietta had spoiled the boy. He had been allowed to do as he pleased and speak as he pleased ever since his father’s death. The man before her was the unfortunate result of that indulgence.

“Would you like to eat nuncheon now, Cousin Andrew?” Diana repeated neutrally.

“Food, you say? Yes, might as well.” He finally hauled himself up from the couch and followed her into the dining room.

The midday meal was as uncomfortable as dinner had been the previous night. Even without his mother’s encouragement, and with little engagement from the others around the table, Andrew droned on persistently as only a man who loves the sound of his own voice could manage.

Edmund and Jacob were polite, and Percy was slightly lost as Andrew fixed on the subject of horse racing. He presented himself as an expert with access to contacts and betting tips that the other men must envy and appeared unaware of their disinterest or disdain for his comments.

To Diana’s admittedly untutored ear, some of Jacob’s comments and questions indicated more expertise in the matter

of horses and racing. Lord Wycliffe shared a knowing look with Edmund after Andrew's response to one apparently very simple question about his plans for the Royal Ascot, and it gave her the impression that Andrew had been tested by her brother's two friends and was very much found wanting.

Once the meal was finished, Andrew pushed his chair back with a groan.

"I suppose I've got to take you out for a walk now," he grumbled to Diana as if she were a dog. "It's a shame we can't just bring in the local vicar and jump straight to the wedding night."

Offense and resentment rose again in her bosom.

"If you don't wish to walk, then I have no desire to force you," Diana said as sweetly as she could. "Please do amuse yourself as you normally would after nuncheon."

As she stood and looked across the table, she noticed that Edmund was glaring at Percy, who had acquired his 'little boy lost' face and was shrugging his shoulders helplessly.

"You are a little devil, aren't you?" Andrew guffawed, amused at her anger. "I'm only saying that we've been engaged for years. Our families have agreed on everything, and there's no real need for this courtship business when you think about it. Come along then."

His cursory order made Diana's blood boil harder, and she inhaled deeply, strongly tempted now to absolutely refuse

Andrew's company.

As he walked towards the door, Andrew looked back at the other young men.

"Bloody women, eh? You know how they are."

"No, Sir. I'm afraid I do not," Edmund said coldly. "I have the greatest respect for the women in my life. I'm very sorry for you if you do not."

"Edmund!" Jacob hissed warningly. But with his rhinoceros-thick hide, Andrew was oblivious to the implied criticism of his behavior and continued out into the hall without further comment.

Diana still stood behind her chair and looked after the departing figure of her cousin, still in two minds about whether or not to follow him.

"You'd better go with him, Diana," Percy said after a short pause. "Mother is upset enough already today."

Leaving the room, she stood in front of the door for a moment with her eyes closed to gather her thoughts. Through the wood, Diana could make out muffled snatches of Edmund coolly berating Percy.

"... your own sister... speak to her like that. What kind of man... should be horsewhipped..."

The fact that Edmund found Andrew's behavior as objectionable as she did was some comfort. But Diana knew it wasn't enough to make any difference. Her fate lay in the hands of her family, not her brother's handsome friend. She went to find her coat.

As she passed her father's sick room, she found her mother and aunt in animated conversation. Evidently, Lady Birks would again be staying at the Fernside Dower House at both Lady Templeton's request and her own inclination. She apologized profusely to Diana's mother for not having returned in the carriage with the younger family members last night.

"I don't know what I was thinking, Esther. I should have been here at Fernside to support you and Diana right until... well, as long as you need me. The poor child is clearly overwrought, and you are exhausted."

Overwrought and exhausted Diana certainly was, but not for any reason that she could possibly expect Henrietta to understand.

## *Chapter Ten*

“Horses, whiskey and cigars are the only things worth investing in, as far as I can see...” Andrew opined confidently, going on to reflect extensively on some of the best of each he had encountered in recent years.

During the hour they had walked around the paths of Fernside, Diana had gradually ceased to be angry or resentful and become merely bored. As far as she could determine, Andrew’s sole interests in life were horse racing, gambling, drinking, smoking, and of course, himself. He could talk indefinitely about any of these subjects. Like his mother, diverting him from his set conversational path was almost impossible.

His interest in women in general, and Diana in particular, appeared extremely limited, regarding them as only decoration or breeding stock. She was glad that it had not yet occurred to him to offer his arm as they strolled around the gardens. She might not have been able to summon the politeness to take it.

Now at the furthest extent of the formal gardens, Diana hoped that reaching the hedges here would be excuse enough to turn back for the house.

“They were the finest batch of cigars I ever smoked. From Havana, and costing a pretty penny, I can tell you. But worth it. Rolled on the thighs of virgins, to make them all the tastier, so they say.”

“Do they?” Diana said coolly, finding the remark as distasteful as the man.

“God only knows where they find them from what I’ve heard about Cuban women...” He guffawed, not needing any encouragement to continue in the same vein. “Do you reckon you could roll a cigar on your thighs, Diana?”

“Cousin Andrew!” she exclaimed now, alarmed by the personal turn of the conversation. “I do not find that an appropriate remark.”

“Why the hell not? You are a virgin, aren’t you?” he asked, and he laughed out loud at the redness and discomfort on her face. “Of course you are. Only a virgin could be quite so prim. Unless, of course, you’re merely an excellent actress...”

Without warning, he grabbed her arm roughly and pulled her close enough towards him that she could smell his whiskey-sodden breath.

“Maybe I should investigate further.” He laughed as she struggled, reminding her again of the bully he had once been. “A little taste before our wedding, what do you say?”

“Let go of my arm or I’ll scream,” Diana said as calmly as she could, suspecting that Andrew wanted to get some reaction



from her, not much caring if it were only fear or tears rather than enthusiasm.

“Scream? Why would you? You’re going to be my wife in a few weeks,” he said, both impatient and baffled. “I can’t see that it would much matter to anyone if I tugged you early. Anyway, no one can hear you from here.”

“Get off me!” she exclaimed, panicked by his statements, and beginning to struggle against him with all her strength.

Andrew seemed even more amused by her resistance.

“I was only joking you know, but now I think I do deserve at least a kiss for all your earlier coldness, don’t I?”

He pulled her even closer against him. Flailing her head to avoid his disgusting lips, Diana’s forehead inadvertently made a smart impact with his nose, causing him to clasp both his hands to his face in pain and release her.

“I said, get your hands off me!” She panted.

“You little bitch!” Andrew growled, looking up at her with blood trickling from one nostril.

As he advanced towards her and Diana prepared to run, a tall figure came briskly around the corner of the hedge.

“Leave the lady be, Lord Birks,” Edmund said, his green eyes glinting angrily and his voice stern.

“What? I was just—”

“I heard what you were just doing,” Edmund interrupted him. “I saw some of it. What kind of man are you to assault a helpless young woman who should be under your protection?”

“Assault, Sir? She’s as good as my wife already, and I’ll do with her as I please. How dare you interfere!” Andrew blustered, applying a handkerchief to his bleeding nose.

“I do dare,” Edmund said darkly. “Don’t doubt that, Birks.”

Instinctively, Diana had gone to his side and now stood there, trembling slightly from the aftermath of the confrontation. Andrew looked nastily between the two of them.

“Oh, so that’s how it is, is it, Your Grace? Well, if I find no maidenhead between this lady’s thighs on my wedding night, I’ll know whom to blame, won’t I?”

“Have you no shame at all, Sir? How can you speak this way before any young lady, especially your betrothed? It is a matter of honour.”

“Honour?” Andrew laughed contemptuously. “You do sound ridiculous, Colborne. What are you going to do, call me out for a duel for wanting to kiss my own wife?”

“She’s not—” Edmund’s eyes narrowed as he decided not to complete that sentence and changed tact. “If I did challenge you, would you accept, Sir?” he said warningly.

Diana gasped in horror as she grasped the situation. If Edmund called Andrew out, either one or both of them could be killed. Andrew’s death would destroy Lady Birks and the rest of the Arnold family, while the very thought of Edmund’s death felt like it would rip out Diana’s whole heart.

Whether from alcohol, infirmity, or fear, she noticed that Andrew’s hands were shaking as he considered Edmund’s words. In contrast, every part of Edmund seemed steady and alert as he faced the other man down.

“Don’t be absurd, Colborne. I can only assume you’re joking,” Andrew said at last, looking away with tremulous laughter. “What reason could we possibly have to fight? I’m not going to blow this out of proportion, and I hope you’re not.”

The happy chatter of Kitty, Percy and Jacob burst in on them then as the trio rounded the hedge and came upon Diana and the two men.

“What made you go racing off like that, Edmund?” Jacob asked with good humor. “I blinked, and you were suddenly jumping over the bushes. Percy said it was too much lemonade at nuncheon, but I thought better of you.”

Kitty giggled, as Percy denied ever being so indelicate. Then, the joking died out as they observed Edmund, Diana, and Andrew all frozen in stony silence.

“Lord Birks has a nosebleed,” Edmund said to the group after another heartbeat. “I believe he needs to return to the house.”

“Yes, I think it’s time for me to return to Hayward House,” Andrew declared, evidently glad of any excuse to escape from Edmund’s presence. “I’ll see you at the wedding,” he called back as he marched away from them, and Diana sighed in relief.

“I’d better go with him.” Kitty sighed regretfully, taking her leave of the young men, shooting Edmund a particular smile before she hurried after her brother.

When she had gone, Jacob looked at Edmund, still largely silent and serious.

“What’s going on Edmund?” he asked. “Did something happen to Lord Birks?”

“Percy, your sister needs to talk to you in private,” Edmund said abruptly. “Jacob and I will take another walk on the grounds.” He looked back at Diana before he rounded the hedge.

“Tell Percy everything,” he advised, and then he was gone.



“Because he had a nosebleed? I don’t understand, Diana,” Percy said, confused. “He was rude to you, he tried to kiss you, and then he had a nosebleed. Then Edmund heard you calling out. Now you can’t marry Cousin Andrew?”

Diana had tried to explain to her brother what had happened in the gardens but found it impossible to even repeat the words that Andrew had used. She was still shocked by the experience, and it had come out all wrong, lacking the very real physical threat that had been so apparent to her and Edmund. Percy seemed to think that Andrew had just tried to peck her on the cheek when she wasn't expecting it.

If only Edmund had stayed to explain what he had actually interrupted.

“Percy, can't you see that this match is impossible? You were there last night. You heard him at nuncheon. I can't even begin to tell you what could have happened if Edmund hadn't come to find me in the gardens. How can you let this marriage go ahead?”

“Because I have to, Diana!” Percy snapped. “What you say, or Edmund, or Jacob, come to that doesn't matter. Andrew isn't the man you or I would have chosen for you, but this is a longstanding family commitment and we must keep it for Father's sake.”

“I cannot vow to love, honour, and obey that man, Percy. I can't ever share his bed. Can't you see that?”

“You should speak to Aunt Henrietta. She can explain all this far better than I can. We each have a duty to our parents, and marrying Andrew is your side of that duty. Once you're married, your duty will be to him. My duty is heading the household as our father would have done if he were able.”

“I don’t believe that if Father were well, he would allow this.”

“Diana! Don’t...” Percy half shouted and half pleaded. “Aunt Henrietta already told me that you imagined Father spoke to you. There’ve been so many false alarms. He’s not going to wake up. He’s not going to speak. We have to accept that now just like she says!”

“You’re a fool, Percy Arnold!” Diana shouted. “A completely willing fool who will be taken advantage of by every ill-intentioned individual he ever meets. And you’ll deserve it too.”

Turning on her heel, she ran back to the house, heading for the back door and the servants’ quarters in case the Birks’s carriage had not yet departed.



“They’re asking for you downstairs, My lady,” Elsie said after knocking on Diana’s locked bedroom door for a second time. “The dinner’s all set.”

“Please, would you tell them I have a headache, Elsie? I don’t want to be disturbed before morning.”

“Very good, My lady.”

Alone in her room, Diana spent the next few hours thinking over her limited options.

She could go along with this marriage, temporarily placate Percy and her aunt, and presumably her parents, but be locked into lifelong misery with Andrew.

The obvious alternative was for Diana to refuse the marriage outright. It was certainly her legal right, and no one could drag her to the altar and make her speak those vows. But this option would entail disappointing Henrietta, who had already invested so much time and energy in the match and the planning of the wedding.

Diana knew how hard it was to refuse anything to this woman of such deep kindness and sympathy. After all that Lady Birks had done for Diana's family, it would be a betrayal impossible for her aunt to understand or accept.

Aside from filling her with guilt, shame, and self-loathing, what could the family really do to her if she refused to marry her cousin? Diana didn't know, but she suspected that even an unpleasant, restricted and resentful life amongst angry relatives would be better than being shackled to a man like Andrew.

A third option, of course, would be to take all her jewelry and run away somewhere, like the characters did in books. Or as girls sometimes did in real life and then were never spoken of again, except in hushed whispers. But they were girls who ran away with men.

What if she ran away to her old governess, Miss Spring, in Bath? Would she still be considered respectable then? And how would it affect Miss Spring and the small school for girls that she had recently founded in that city? No, she could not drag Miss Spring into this nor cause such worry to her mother while her father lay so ill.

What should she do? What did she really want? Diana asked herself these questions again and again, exhausting herself without making any practical decision.

It was after eleven o'clock at night that she finally readied herself for bed and sat down at her dressing table in her white cambric nightdress to brush her hair.

“What do you want, Diana?” she said wearily to her reflection.

Without thinking, she pulled open the drawer of her dressing table that held the now-faded crown of daisies woven by Edmund's hands. Looking down at it, Diana recalled again the warmth of his lips, the gentle knowingness of his hands and the security of his embrace. The sensation was almost like a euphoric drug, especially after the memory of Andrew's unpleasant roughness.

Thinking about Edmund now could only be a distraction from the serious decisions she must make but dismissing him from her mind was easier said than done. There were far too many feelings tied up with thoughts of Edmund for her now.

As well as the pleasure of his touch, Diana remembered the discomfort she had felt when he talked to Kitty, the sadness when he seemed to be avoiding her in the house, and the warmth of his support against Andrew's conduct.

Diana closed and then opened the drawer again, her fingers lightly touching the semi-dried flowers. She wanted Edmund, but she could not have him. It came to her that the only way to clear her mind was to tell him this.



Scooping up the flowers and ignoring the late hour, she quietly unlocked her bedroom door.

## *Chapter Eleven*

“Diana!” Edmund exclaimed in a whisper, genuinely shocked. “What are you doing...?”

Without finishing his sentence, he stepped past her into the corridor outside his bedroom and looked left and right quickly before drawing her inside and locking the door.

Diana’s heart drummed hard as she stood before him in her long, white nightdress, with the handful of dried flowers still hanging from her fingers. He was still wearing his trousers and a partially unbuttoned white shirt but had discarded the rest of his clothes. From the candle burning on his nightstand and book on his pillow, he had presumably been reading before bed.

“Diana,” he breathed again, looking from the flowers in her hand up to her face with mingled pleasure, confusion, and concern. “You shouldn’t be here. Percy is asleep in the next room.”

“I came to tell you that I want you, Edmund,” she said. “But I know I can’t have you. I need to give this back to you, and then maybe I’ll be able to think clearly and find a way out.”

“I don’t understand,” Edmund said. “What do you mean?”

“I can’t marry Cousin Andrew, but Percy and Aunt Henrietta are determined, and I don’t know how to stop them. I don’t know what to do. Then, when I try to work it out, I just keep thinking of you and can’t focus on anything else.”

“If you don’t want to marry the man, you don’t marry him, Diana,” Edmund said, and she thought she detected a slight irritation in his voice. “In this country, at least, marriage is a matter of consent by both people.”

“You say that like it’s something so simple!” she protested.

“It is simple. It’s not easy for you, I’ll grant you that. But it’s very, very simple, and it’s the only honourable way out you have.”

“I thought of running away...”

“Don’t be so foolish and cowardly!” Edmund hissed. “Leave that to Percy. There’s more than one way that Lord Birks could ruin your life, and having you run away from your family is certainly amongst them.”

“I didn’t say I would do it,” she clarified crossly. “I only thought about it and all the reasons it wouldn’t work. You talk to me as if you’d already decided that I was a fool and a coward.”

Edmund took a deep breath and then exhaled.

“I’m sorry, Diana. I’m angry at your brother for not defending you from that man at nuncheon and then doing nothing after what happened in the gardens. His behavior is inexcusable. If someone treated my sisters in such a manner, they would quickly regret it. But that is Percy’s fault, not yours.”

“I’m sorry too, Edmund. I’m making my problems yours. That’s another reason for me to try to put you out of my mind. This isn’t fair to you. You have your own life and your own concerns.”

Edmund shook his head in wonder, and there was a glow in his green eyes that reawakened the twin sensations of excitement and security that had so overwhelmed her in the wood.

He came close to her and gently lifted the hand holding the flowers with his own.

“So, you thought that you could just come here and give those flowers back to me and somehow we’d both be free of anything we’d ever thought or felt or imagined?”

“Yes,” Diana admitted. His proximity and the feelings his mere presence sparked in her body made her begin to recognize the enormity of such an undertaking and how absurd her attempt had been.

“You are so young...” Edmund murmured, caressing her face, his touch delighting her as much as Andrew’s had repelled her. “What you tried to do would be impossible, you know.”

“I know that now,” she whispered, wondering if her longing was evident on her face in the candlelight.

“And is it really what you want? To stop thinking about me and forget that we ever touched?” he asked. “In the library, in the woods, here tonight?”

“No!” Diana said fiercely, and in response, Edmund lowered his head to press his lips against hers, first gently and then with more hunger.

“I never want you to forget me, Diana. Never!”

He kissed her passionately now, and Diana felt herself melting against him, Edmund’s body seeming perfectly shaped to hold her close against him.

“I want you so much, Edmund,” she murmured, stroking the faintly rough line of his jaw with fascination and desire.

Catching her up in his arms and lifting her off her feet, Edmund carried Diana over to his bed and laid her down, the now-crushed dried flowers falling from her hand across the linen, like blossoms on snow. She drew his head eagerly back to hers as he lay down beside her.

“Oh, Diana...” he breathed, and she felt his hands roaming over her body through the fabric of her nightdress, which was the only barrier now separating her skin from his. Their embrace felt so entirely right that the only real sin seemed to lie in stopping.

Diana pressed up to his touch with undisguised enjoyment and then buried her face hotly in the place where his neck and shoulder met as one of his hands skimmed beneath her gown and began to lightly discover the naked curves of her body.

Her own touch on her body had never aroused feelings of this pitch and intensity, and it was hard to process what was happening. She knew that Edmund was kissing her deeply while fondling her naked breasts and that his touch was close to ecstasy. The throbbing at the apex of her thighs grew to become something almost unbearable.

“Oh, I want, I want...” she pleaded breathlessly.

“I know what you want,” Edmund answered, his own breath ragged, his face damp and his kisses now more demanding. “I want to give you what you want. I want you to feel every sensation I can give you.”

One of his hands left her breast and moved to caress the curves of her buttocks and thighs before sliding around to rest on the patch of hair below her belly.

“Edmund!” Diana pleaded again.

“Slowly,” he breathed. “Let it build slowly.”

Diana rubbed her face against his skin, frantic with the heat pulsing in her groin as he cupped her most intimate place in his hand.

“First with my hands, and then with my tongue,” he whispered. “I want to touch you, taste you and show you what pleasure your body is capable of feeling.”

Diana was already beyond speech as his hand shifted and his fingers slipped into her hot, wet slit. This was forbidden territory in every way she could imagine, and she jerked with the spasm that passed through her at the new sensation.

Fire and wonder animated her secret flesh wherever his fingertips touched and pressed: the pulsing bud below her tufts of hair, the swollen lips beneath it and the tight, slick entrance to her body.

Edmund was gentle but sure in his exploration, and she could only gasp and moan as he caressed her slowly with his fingers, first teasingly and then more purposefully and rhythmically, leading her towards the destination she craved.

“You’re so tight and wet,” he whispered in Diana’s ear, his fingers stretching her insides while his thumb continued its pressure on the pleasurable nub above. Diana could only whimper at the unfamiliar sensation and arch her back in pleasure.

“So beautiful... You’re so... very... beautiful, Diana,” Edmund said under his breath, pressing fervent kisses on her rapidly rising and falling breasts, catching her nipples briefly in his mouth when he could.

The sensations were both wonderful and unbearable. Diana was so lost in pleasure that her open mouth no longer emitted any sound but that of her labored breathing. Edmund’s touch,

voice and scent overwhelmed her as she pressed helplessly against him.

“Let it happen,” Edmund urged. One hand still asserting its possession of a rounded breast, his other hand stroked her to a climax of shuddering intensity that left her feeling shipwrecked on a warm and welcoming shore.

Looking up at her lover’s intent face in the aftermath of her climax, Diana smiled breathlessly and without a word began opening the remaining buttons of his shirt.

“Oh Diana,” he groaned.

“I want to give you what you want, too,” she explained. “I want you as naked with me as I have been with you.”

“Diana, we can’t,” he said, but without resisting her efforts to undress him. Edmund’s face was suffused with conflicting passion and concern, and she remembered his warning about the danger of such feelings as these between a man and a woman.

With his shirt removed, she could feel every contour of his strong, well-muscled torso and sense the controlled desire beneath his skin. Still, she wanted to feel his skin against hers from head to toe. Her hands continued downwards.

“Oh Diana,” he moaned again.



Before her hands reached the waistband of his trousers, there was a sudden knocking at the connecting door between Percy's suite and Edmund's.

Diana gave a yelp of shock, and Edmund quickly put a hand over her mouth.

"What is it, Percy? I'm in bed."

"Oh, nothing. I heard something and thought you might still be up. It must have been someone else."

"Goodnight, Percy," Edmund said firmly. "Go to sleep. We can talk in the morning."

"Goodnight, Edmund."

They lay in complete silence for long minutes, only caressing one another's faces in the flickering light of the candle, too afraid to do more and yet unwilling to release one another entirely.

"You should go," Edmund whispered at last. "You don't understand the risks we're taking."

"I wish I could stay," Diana murmured. "I wish it so much..."

"I don't want you to go, but you must," he replied softly.

When everything had been still and silent in Percy's room for some time, Edmund nodded decisively and then kissed her again while pulling them both to their feet with a sigh of resignation.

Quietly, he opened his door, and Diana felt his eyes following her all the way back along the corridor.



Jacob was loitering near the stables when Edmund came back from an early morning ride the following day, chatting casually to the head groom as two stableboys went about their business in the stalls.

Edmund had galloped through the extent of Fernside's grounds and then let his horse pick its own way back slowly along the woodland paths, his head full of fantasies of Diana in that setting.

He imagined her naked and smiling, with flowers in her hair, running through the trees, dancing in sunlit glades, spread invitingly before him on the mossy ground... A true nymph of the forest, and the woman he loved.

The confrontation with Lord Birks and the all-too-short interlude of pleasure in his bedroom last night made it impossible for him to deny his feelings for her. He was prepared to do anything for Diana if she would let him. But would she?

"Something got you out of bed early, Colborne," Jacob observed lightly as Edmund slid down from the horse, patting

it gently before turning the reins over to the expectant groom.  
“Hard ride?”

“Hard enough,” Edmund replied, pushing his windblown hair back from his face. “I woke early and couldn’t go back to sleep.”

“A mysterious incident in the gardens yesterday afternoon, rows between Percy and his sister, hard early morning rides... Do you want to tell me what’s going on, Ed?” Jacob asked. “I’ve known you for a long time, and I have a sharper mind than dear old Percy. There’s nothing to gain from keeping me in the dark.”

Instead of leading them back into the house, Jacob had chosen a path towards the gardens, far from potential listeners. Edmund had noticed what his friend was doing and went along with it. On some level, he did need to talk to someone.

“Diana.”

That one word was all that Edmund needed to say before understanding dawned on Jacob’s good-natured freckled face.

“You’re in love with her, aren’t you? I’ve seen the way you look at one another, and I had begun to wonder. Does she feel the same way?”

Edmund thought of Diana’s beautiful body writhing with pleasure at his touch last night. Then, he thought of her eyes fixed intently on his face afterwards as they lay there, waiting for silence in Percy’s room.

“I believe she does,” he said carefully, not wishing to compromise Diana in any way.

Jacob considered this thoughtfully as they walked, not making any further comment for several seconds.

“I know, it seems hopeless, doesn’t it?” Edmund said, misinterpreting his friend’s silence. “You must think I’ve lost my senses to be falling in love here and now, in this situation, with Percy’s sister, who is already engaged to a complete—”

Edmund paused, almost grinding his teeth, unable to choose the words strong enough to express his loathing for Lord Andrew Birks.

“Pull yourself together, Colborne,” Jacob said smartly. “Let me state the obvious for you since you’re refusing to see it yourself. Diana is not interested in Lord Birks. Not even slightly. If her family weren’t pushing it, this marriage would never take place.”

“But they are pushing. They’ve already set the wedding date. That race was over before I even got to the starting gate.”

“They can easily un-set the wedding date, just like they did with the poor girl’s season,” Jacob pointed out reasonably. “I’m sure there are good reasons why that marriage was originally arranged, linked to family money, status and the rest. But weighed against that is another obvious fact. You’re the Duke of Colborne.”

Edmund looked at his friend blankly.

“Edmund, wake up! You’re the catch that parents of presentable young ladies dream of. Birks is a viscount, but you’re a duke. Marrying Birks keeps a certain amount of money or land in the Arnold family, but you could settle five times that amount on Diana in the marriage contract and barely notice. Her family already knows and respects you. For most men, the situation is hopeless, but not for you.”

“You think I have a chance to change their minds?”

“Yes, dammit, I do. I think you should do the honest and honourable thing for everyone concerned. Go and speak to Percy and make him see that you’re a better match than this foul cousin of theirs. I wouldn’t wish Lord Birks on any woman, and certainly not Lady Diana. She deserves better.”

Jacob’s encouragement rearranged Edmund’s thinking far more effectively than the horse ride had done. He saw that he had been too passive in accepting that only Diana had the power to save herself from her unwanted betrothal. But Jacob was correct. Edmund’s social position, fortune and standing with the Arnold family placed him perfectly to make a credible counterproposal for Diana’s hand.

“You’re right,” Edmund agreed. “I’ll speak to Diana as soon as I can. Then, I’ll find Percy. If he cares at all for his sister’s happiness, he must listen to me.”

## *Chapter Twelve*

“Diana, dear, I must speak to you about the dressmaker’s visit to finalize your trousseau,” Lady Birks said, intercepting Diana at the library door as soon as Mrs. Bridge left the room after their conversation about food and laundry needs for the week.

In the hallway, Edmund lingered by the sideboard, having picked up his letters from the tray but seeming in no hurry to read them. Their eyes locked instinctively, and Diana knew that he had also been waiting for her. Unfortunately, her aunt could not be easily shaken off.

“I thought that was already arranged, Aunt Henrietta. Madame Corvette is only coming to check that my size has not changed since Mother and I called in London to finalize my clothing for the Season. You said that my dress order wouldn’t change even though my Season was cancelled.”

“Oh, my child, you are so very young in the ways of the world... Now that this is your trousseau, there are some attentions needed to reflect the fact that the dresses will be for a married woman rather than a young girl. I promised your dear mother that I would see to this on her behalf.”

Diana steeled herself for disappointment, expecting to be told that even this last vestige of her dream was to be snatched from her.

“What kind of attentions?” she asked reluctantly, half looking over her aunt’s shoulder to where Edmund had now opened one of his letters and was at least pretending to read it.

“Well, the necklines of your evening dresses may be slightly lower once you’re married and wearing some of the Arnold necklaces. Your night attire may also need some, ahem... consideration,” Lady Birks’s voice dropped as she mentioned night attire, with a significant glance at Edmund. “And we should make sure that your choice of day dresses can accommodate any... changes in shape,” she finished in a whisper.

“Oh,” Diana mumbled, her skin already crawling once more with the idea of marrying Andrew. Her revulsion against him had intensified even further after the unpleasant encounter in the gardens the previous afternoon.

“No need to be so shy, my dear,” her aunt assured her, then she swept her along towards the drawing room. “It’s an endearing trait, and very proper in a young woman, but we do need to make sure that you’re ready for marriage in every way...”

Glancing back helplessly at Edmund as she was dragged away, Diana was struck by the depth of yearning on his face. It was close to the expression he had held when she began to undress him the previous evening. She restrained the urge to push Lady Birks and all her kindnesses away and run back to him.



After a long, over-involved and confusing discussion of Diana's trousseau, Henrietta seemed determined to remain at her side for the rest of the day. Diana was left wondering whether Lady Birks knew of her son's behavior the previous day and was somehow trying to make it up to her in her own overly sympathetic and exhausting way.

She accompanied Diana during her hours in the sick room with her father while Lady Templeton bathed and ate. She was at Diana's side throughout dinner, walking her in and out of the dining room and dominating all conversation in between. She could not be dissuaded from helping Diana select and arrange flowers from the garden around the rooms at Fernside.

Worst of all, Henrietta insisted on joining Diana for an after-dinner walk in the gardens to talk about "the most important subject of all."

"Now then, my dear, be perfectly frank with me. Did your mother ever speak to you about your wedding night, what will happen and what will be expected of you by your husband?"

Crimson under the cover of darkness, Diana made an awkward croaking noise, horrified at having to speak of this with her aunt.

"I mean, no... I've never had such a conversation with Mother," she managed to say awkwardly after finding her voice. "Shall we go back inside? It's getting cold."



“Diana, my dear, there can be no running away from your duties,” Lady Birks said, her arm firmly linked through Diana’s to keep her in step. “You know that your whole family is relying on you, don’t you?”

“I know,” Diana admitted dejectedly, feeling like a sacrificial animal being led to a different kind of altar.

“Good girl. Do trust that what I tell you is for your own good. Now, Andrew knows that you’re still a little naive and unworldly, but I promised him that I would make sure you wouldn’t get too much of a shock the first time. It will be his wedding night too, and he’d like to enjoy himself.”

Glad that the darkness hid her expression from her aunt, Diana said nothing, choosing only to tell herself repeatedly that whatever her aunt was about to say would never happen. Her mind still wasn’t clear on how she intended to stop this sequence of events, but somehow, she must make sure that she was never alone, naked and vulnerable with Andrew.

“What do you know about the physical union of a husband and wife, Diana? We’ll start with that.”

“It happens in bed,” Diana replied, horribly uncomfortable and feeling like each word was being extracted from her under torture.

“Yes, that’s usually true but not always. Your husband will always have access to your bedchamber or can summon you to his, and you may not refuse him.”

Diana ground her teeth, willing both the walk and the awful conversation to be quickly done with.

“What else do you know?” Henrietta pressed with forced patience.

“They can be naked,” Diana whispered. “They touch each other and kiss.”

“Then what happens, Diana?”

“I... don’t know...” Diana admitted, realizing that she largely spoke the truth. She had no young married friends of her acquaintance, and this subject was certainly not covered in any of the books she had read.

Still, it was not the whole truth. From her experiences with Edmund, Diana suspected that whatever happened next was something that would feel wonderful, bringing more of the same pleasure he had given her with his hands and mouth. She refused to share even a hint of that private joy with her aunt, the mother of her unwanted fiancé.

“You really don’t know, do you? Oh, my dear girl...”

Lady Birks laughed gently and stopped walking to turn and embrace Diana, who tolerated her affection with stiffness and embarrassment.

She then went on to describe the marital act in blunt anatomical terms that seemed impossible to reconcile with the

gentle ecstasy Diana had already experienced in Edmund's arms.

"Don't look so appalled, my dear." Henrietta smiled. "You will get used to it in time. It might hurt a little at the beginning, but you must endure that and not ruin your husband's pleasure. It's the only way to conceive a child, so that's one thing to think about if it feels uncomfortable. Just a little discomfort in exchange for a great joy..."

Lady Birks was looking at her with sympathetic kindness once more.

"It's a lot to take in, isn't it?" She sighed. "But it's far better to hear these things in advance from an older woman than go to the marriage bed entirely unprepared. You will thank me later, I'm sure."

"I do thank you, Aunt Henrietta," Diana said a little desperately, wanting both to be alone and to find a way to expunge her brain of the brutal images conjured by Lady Birks's explanation of the facts of life. "But I'm feeling tired and unwell. I think I must go to bed."

"Of course, you must," her aunt agreed, chucking her under the chin like a small child. "I will take good care of you, Diana. You're very precious to me, you know. No less than my own daughter."

Smiling somewhat weakly at Lady Birks's over-effusion of sentiment, Diana found herself walking back to the house and straight upstairs to her bedroom. Tonight, her aunt even

dismissed the maid, put Diana into her nightgown and tucked her into bed.

Sensing that the older woman would go away more quickly if she didn't resist, Diana curled up obediently under the covers and counted to a hundred after she heard Lady Birks wish her goodnight and leave the room.

She lay awake for several hours, listening as the rest of the household went to bed. It was only when the house was quiet and her disconsolate pull towards Edmund could no longer be restrained that Diana rose and found her bedroom door had been locked. There could be no nocturnal wanderings for her tonight.

The key which was normally inside the room had been moved outside. Henrietta must have turned it.



Diana was not released until Elsie came upstairs to her room at 9 am the following morning, finding Diana already washed, dressed, and pacing the room impatiently.

“Oh my word! Did someone lock you in, My lady?” Elsie asked in astonishment. “It’s no time for Lord Greene to be up to his tricks, surely?”

“Lady Birks must have done it by accident when she wished me goodnight, Elsie.” Diana laughed with a shrug. She could come up with no better explanation but made a point of pocketing the key before going downstairs for breakfast.

“Look who has just arrived to spend the day with us!” Lady Birks crowed as Diana entered the breakfast room. Her face looked as kind and affectionate as ever, giving Diana no clue to explain the incident with the key.

Her cousin, Kitty, smiled up at her from the table where she had been in conversation with both Edmund and Jacob.

“Cousin Kitty can join us for our ramble and picnic this afternoon,” Percy said happily. “Andrew has important business to attend to and sends his regards.”

“I’m very glad,” Diana muttered, taking the remaining empty seat beside Lady Birks. No one had sat at either end of the table since the night Percy had refused his father’s seat. “It’s always wonderful to see you, Kitty.”

Kitty sat between Jacob and Edmund, with Percy across the table from Edmund on his aunt’s other side.

“We were just wondering whether you might even persuade your mother to join you for a short outing one day soon, Diana,” Henrietta commented. “She was looking so worn out this morning. I could not persuade her to leave your poor father at all last night. She must look after her own health too. I can safely watch him all day if needs be.”

Diana nodded thoughtfully.

“I’ll try. Mother believes she’s the only one who can get the broth into Father, and that’s what’s keeping him alive.”

“Alas, prolonging the inevitable, my poor children. Has the Bishop responded to your letter, Percy?”

“He comes on Saturday,” Diana, who had dictated Percy’s letter and read the Bishop’s reply, said.

“You must be ready to receive the Bishop, Percy,” Lady Birks warned. “Remember that you must address him correctly and be ready to answer appropriately any questions he might have.”

“We can discuss that with Percy tomorrow,” Edmund offered as Percy’s brow knitted. “My family’s acquaintances include a number of Bishops. I am happy to share what he needs to know.”

“That would be so very kind of you, Your Grace. Percy is lucky to have such a friend at his side. A friend willing to give up so much time for him.”

Lady Birks looked at her daughter and then back at Edmund with an affectionate smile.

“Indeed, our whole family is lucky to have you. I do hope that the Arnolds and Turners will always have a strong friendship. Don’t you agree, Kitty and Diana?”

Kitty echoed her mother’s smile and murmured her appreciation of Edmund’s kindness to her cousins. Diana only dared to lock eyes with Edmund for a moment and then looked away, afraid that the yearning she saw again would be automatically answered and visible on her own face.

“There is no need to thank me for kindness to my friends,” Edmund said with quick deprecation, “although your sentiments are very much appreciated, Lady Katherine.”

With her dark flashing eyes, rosy cheeks and dimples, Kitty could be considered a very good-looking young woman, Diana realized. Jacob’s eyes were certainly following her intently, but all of Kitty’s attention still seemed focused on Edmund.

*They make a handsome couple.*

But the thought broke Diana’s heart.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

When breakfast ended, Kitty came and took Diana's arm.

"Do you think we might talk, Diana? I've so wanted to get to know you before the wedding, but everyone else keeps getting in the way. I'm even glad that Andrew had his nosebleed so that I could come here alone and finally have you all to myself. He's still recovering, rather than answering letters, if you want to know."

Kitty's face was earnest and her smile was friendly. Diana couldn't help responding positively to her cousin's entreaty, although part of her pleasure could be attributed to the fact that Andrew's nose was still sore given his behavior the previous day.

"Has he been writing more letters asking for money?" Diana couldn't help herself from asking.

"I hope not!" Kitty replied. "I shouldn't have spoken like that at dinner the other night, Diana. Do accept my apologies. Mother was quite upset with me, you know."



“But was it true?” Diana pressed. “Was Andrew always asking your mother for money when he was in India?”

“Oh, young men always need money, or so he tells me,” Kitty said evasively with an uncomfortable laugh. “You heard his explanation at the time. Andrew would be angry if he knew I was speaking to you of this again, Diana. So would Mother.”

“I’m glad you told me,” Diana admitted, now even more unsatisfied with this glimpse of Andrew’s hidden life. “Whatever they say.”

“I thought you might need a friend, too,” Kitty continued. “Young men and aunts aren’t always the companions one needs, no matter how good their intentions are.”

Diana smiled back now and squeezed Kitty’s arm. Her cousin’s sympathy felt light, whereas her aunt’s was heavy. She could also sense her aunt’s approval as they left the room together. The older woman made no attempt to stop or join them, something that Diana had feared after the surfeit of attention on her the day before. Today, Kitty could be her shield.

They chatted about Kitty’s recent travels with friends and upcoming plans for the London Season as they walked towards one of the smaller sitting rooms where they would be unlikely to be disturbed. Diana thought she could perhaps enjoy something of the Season’s fun vicariously through her cousin despite her own grief and disappointment.

As they sat down together on the flowered sofa, Diana sighed with relief.

“It is good to spend time with someone closer to my age,” she admitted, and Kitty smiled.

“Mother can be a bit too much can’t she?” Kitty asked. “I think that’s really why she sent the message last night, asking me to come over first thing today. She was worried that she was boring you, I suspect. She never likes to give any trouble. But at the same time, she does need to be here to support your poor mother.”

“Aunt Henrietta has been terribly kind,” Diana agreed. “Oh, I hope she doesn’t think I’m tired of her. She has done so much for me, you know, Kitty. I would hate to seem so ungrateful.”

“No, we all understand the pressure you’re under, including Mother. Don’t give it another thought,” Kitty assured her. “I’m certainly not sorry to visit you again. Fernside always seems like such a friendly home. Hayward House is shut up so often that it only feels like I’m passing through it on my way to somewhere else.”

“I did wonder about that,” Diana admitted. Then, she added tactfully, “It didn’t have the air of a place that was truly lived in.”

“But it will be different once you’re married to Andrew, won’t it?” Kitty enthused. “You’ll make it into a real home, and maybe our London house, too. We only ever open that one during the Season. Perhaps being married will put Andrew in a better temper too. I’m looking forward to having you with us so much.”

Diana felt a growing burden of guilt at the contrast between Kitty's joyful anticipation of the impending marriage and her own growing dread and urge to balk at it.

When she saw Kitty frowning slightly and biting her lip, she thought that her cousin had detected her unhappiness, and her stomach churned as she wondered how to respond.

"Do you know the Duke of Colborne well, Diana?" Kitty asked, throwing Diana off guard with the sudden change of subject.

"Edmund? Well, he was at school with Percy. He seemed to be here half of every holiday for as long as I can remember."

Kitty smiled brilliantly now.

"Then you must know him. I hoped you did. What is he like?"

Diana couldn't help smiling back, even though a slow, dumb tide of sadness was rising simultaneously in her chest. Edmund and Kitty would make such a handsome couple with their dark glossy hair, Edmund's glinting green eyes, and Kitty's rich brown eyes and long black lashes.

"He's one of the kindest, cleverest and most responsible men I've ever met," Diana answered. "It seems that everyone loves Edmund."

"Mother certainly likes him." Kitty sighed. "I think that could be another reason why she asked me to come over for the day."

Are there any women in his life?"

"Well, his mother and two sisters feature prominently," Diana deflected again, making herself smile. She enjoyed talking about Edmund even while feeding the flames of another woman's interest in him. "But that probably isn't what you meant."

"No." Kitty laughed. "I meant any... young lady of particular interest. Engagements or understandings. Have you heard him say anything to Percy perhaps?"

"I'm sure he has no engagements or formal understandings," Diana replied with confidence, choosing not to address the first part of her cousin's question.

Kitty was blushing happily now.

"I am glad to know that. There must be so many women running after someone like His Grace. I wouldn't want to make a fool of myself..."

She raised her eyes cautiously to Diana again.

"I do like him, Diana, and I'm sure Mother would approve if he had any interest in me. Tell me honestly, do you think that it would be ridiculous for me to have any hopes of marrying him? I would truly value your judgement."

Diana shook her head very slowly.

“Not ridiculous,” she managed to say. “He’s a very eligible man, isn’t he? I’m sure you’re right that Aunt Henrietta would approve. The idea has already occurred to her, I’m sure.”

“He seems so thoughtful about other people,” Kitty said dreamily. “The way he’s put his own life on hold to support Percy and you, Diana... It’s marvelous. How many other young men would do that?”

“Jacob has,” Diana pointed out fairly, remembering how Edmund’s red-haired friend had also seemed to show interest in Kitty. “He has many estimable qualities too, I believe.”

“Of course he does, but the His Grace is someone... special,” her cousin admitted. “Oh Diana, I feel as silly as a schoolgirl, but I’m sure you won’t judge me for it.”

“Not at all,” Diana assured her, knowing all too well how it felt to long for Edmund Turner, Duke of Colborne.

“Do you think you could...” Kitty began cautiously, and she took a deep breath before continuing, “Do you think you could help me to know him better? I don’t know how to begin to capture his interest, but he clearly likes you very much. I’m sure he would listen to your advice.”

“Oh, Kitty...” Diana sighed, unable to express the combination of guilt and dismay she felt at the suggestion that she bring her cousin together with the man she loved.

“With your betrothal, I suppose there’s only ever been Andrew for you, so maybe you won’t understand,” Kitty continued.

“But I would dearly love the opportunity to make His Grace happy.”

“He deserves to be happy,” Diana agreed. “If anyone deserves a good woman who can return such great love as his in equal measure, it is Edmund.”

“Then you will help me?” Kitty asked eagerly.

Diana looked at her, suddenly feeling just as trapped with Kitty as she did with her aunt and Andrew, despite Kitty’s lighter touch.

The wave of sadness that had been building inside her swept over her now, drowning the remains of her hopes.

How terrible it would be for both her and Edmund to desire one another once she was married to Andrew. It would be both a betrayal and a sin. If she were to do something as dreadful as fleeing from her family, she would equally be lost to Edmund. A disgraced creature, forever.

Perhaps even if she simply refused to wed Andrew and was kept by her family in bitter country seclusion, there would be no way for them to ever be together...

Diana’s eyes filled with tears as she accepted this part of her fate. Had she always known this on some level? Whatever path she chose, she would have to end things with Edmund sooner or later. Now, that moment had come.

“Yes, I will help you. He is a good man, and you seem like someone who would care for him.”

“Thank you, dear sister,” Kitty said, embracing her. “It would mean so much to me.”

“Would you tell Edmund that I need to speak to him, Kitty? Don’t let anyone else overhear, including Percy or your mother, please. I’d like to be discreet in whatever I say.”

“Of course,” Kitty agreed, her eyes shining as she hurried away on this welcome errand.



Diana waited for him at the window overlooking the small side-garden where the cook grew her herbs.

“Diana!” Edmund called as he strode into the sitting room a few minutes later, his handsome face creased with concern. “At last. Kitty promised that I should find you here. I’ve been trying to find a time to talk to you, but your aunt has been like a limpet this past day...”

“Close the door, please, Edmund,” Diana said as firmly as could, and her voice trembled with the effort of remaining apart from him across the room when she longed to run into his arms.

“We need to stop. We need to stop meeting, stop talking, stop touching... It’s all wrong.”

“What?!” he spluttered, his face whitening and struck with disbelief.

“It’s time for this to end, isn’t it? There’s a wedding being planned for me in less than three weeks’ time. In the eyes of my family and the church, I’m probably already doing wrong by simply being alone with you and feeling... everything I’ve felt—”

“I don’t understand,” he interrupted. “Diana, what are you saying?”

“I’m betrothed to someone else!” she cried. “I’ve always been betrothed to someone else, haven’t I? We’ve just been pretending that I’m not. That I’m free like Kitty, or like you. I can’t ever be free.”

“This isn’t you talking, Diana. This isn’t what you feel,” he objected.

“I’m supposed to feel something for Andrew, not for you! Not for you...”

“You can’t mean this, Diana!” he protested, beginning to walk towards her, his eyes, his voice, and his body all compelling. She held up her hands to ward him off.

“Edmund, no! It’s over. Please listen to me, for all our sakes.”

“You don’t want it to be over,” Edmund said with a certainty that enraged her because it was true.



“Why do you have to say these things? Why do you have to be what you are? I wish you’d never even come here!” She sobbed and ran for the door.

“Then throw your damned life away then if you must! Be a coward and a fool, Diana, and I hope you enjoy the bed you make for yourself!” he shouted after her angrily as she fled. The words pierced her heart like a knife.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

“In May?” Edmund asked cynically. “Who on earth hunts ducks in May?”

“They’re about the only things one can hunt in May,” Jacob said rationally. “It’s the wrong time of year for just about every species, but if we’re lucky, we could still get a good few ducks for the kitchen from the big lake on the other side of the woods.”

“It sounds dubious to me,” Edmund objected with uncharacteristic negativity. “Perhaps we should really be thinking about going back to London, Jacob. Percy seems to have a firmer hold on Fernside now, and Lady Birks is holding Lady Templeton together. Diana clearly doesn’t require anything from us. I’m not sure we need to stay much longer.”

“Jacob isn’t wrong,” Percy chimed in, looking up from his father’s desk where he was working assiduously on a rather blotted letter. “I did it a few times when I was younger and bored during the Easter holiday. Usually, after you’d abandoned me, Ed. Please don’t go just yet, by the way.”

“Percy...” Edmund sighed, unable to explain the ache in his heart and hopelessness of mind that made him want to be

anywhere but Fernside right now. He had already written to his mother, hinting that he was feeling tired and might soon be coming home, regardless of how things progressed with Lord Templeton. Unity had not yet replied.

“Calum, the chief groom, thinks it’s a reasonable plan,” Jacob defended his idea further. “And the gamekeeper doesn’t care as long as we stay away from all his pheasant eggs and chicks. Today or tomorrow, do you think?”

“Let’s do it this afternoon,” Percy said when Edmund failed to reply. “I’ll let Diana know of our plans. She doesn’t hunt, but since she said she was busy with wedding concerns anyway, I don’t think she’ll be disappointed at being left behind today.”

Edmund nodded, relieved at least by her absence. He had only managed to sit at breakfast with Diana for ten minutes that morning before excusing himself on account of business correspondence. The disturbance of spirits from even seeing her face across the table had felt too great to endure.

“If we must.” He sighed and walked over to the window to stare out into the windy garden. Percy met Jacob’s eye questioningly and Jacob shrugged.

“I’ll go and arrange the horses with Calum,” Jacob said before Percy could ask awkward questions, or Edmund could change his mind.



“Race you!” Jacob shouted suddenly and set off at a gallop down the path across the fields between Fernside and the

woods, his fowling piece slung securely across his back and a pouch of ammunition at his belt.

“Ha!” Percy responded, digging his heels into his black gelding, and leaning forward to urge him after Jacob’s brown bay mare. “Come on Colborne!” he called back as they streaked ahead of Edmund.

With resignation, Edmund urged his own horse forward. Eager to keep pace with its companions, it raced ahead regardless of its rider’s initial lack of enthusiasm for the game.

As the forest rapidly approached, the group of three split, Jacob continuing along the path beside the trees while Percy’s and Edmund’s horses ran neck and neck on the dirt path through the woodland. At a fork, they split again and raced off down different routes.

“Bad choice, Ed!” Percy shouted. “See you at the lake this afternoon!”

“Nonsense!” Edmund threw back cheerfully, remembering the path well enough to call Percy’s bluff. It would rejoin the main path further along, and if he could just go faster than Percy for a couple of minutes, he could still beat him to the lakeside.

He did, indeed, reach the main path again a couple of lengths ahead of Percy, and he laughed at his good fortune.

“Dammit, Colborne!” Percy shouted, pressing his own mount to go faster until they were once again level. Percy might have lacked some of the more intellectual and practical skills in life,

but no one could say that he was not as fine a horseman as Edmund.

With a yell of mutual triumph, they both burst out of the trees and onto the lakefront, sending a mass of panicked ducks quacking loudly into the air around them.

“Well, that was clever,” Jacob deadpanned, having clearly arrived ahead of either of them, and waited quietly in the brush. “I can tell that you both really want to bag some ducks today.”

After a few heartbeats of gasping silence, they all burst out laughing as their horses stood catching their breath.

“Even without the ducks, it’s so good to be out here with the two of you,” Percy said happily. “Look at that sky! Look at the lake. And I couldn’t have better friends to share it with—”

A gunshot so loud cut off whatever Percy was going to say, causing all three of the horses to rear and buck. Jacob and Edmund managed to hold their seats. But Percy jerked so violently in his saddle that he was thrown onto the rocky lakefront.

“Percy!” Edmund cried, jumping down quickly from his horse, and running to his friend. Blood was already seeping into Percy’s blonde hair and running down the pale pebbles around him. His face was pale, and he was unresponsive.

“Jesus Christ!” Jacob exclaimed, also dismounting, and rushing over to the pair. “Is he hit? Percy!”

Edmund was already speedily examining Percy's head. A small graze was visible on his temple, but he seemed to be bleeding from the back of his head, which lay beside a piece of protruding stone.

"I don't think he's been shot, but he's hit his head badly on this rock. Look."

Jacob had already ripped off his own cravat and Percy's to try and stem the bleeding.

"Who the hell would be shooting around here?"

Looking up, Edmund caught a glimpse of movement in the trees and leapt to his feet without hesitation.

"Hey you! Stop!" he shouted furiously, running into the trees in pursuit of the rapidly vanishing figure with a rifle slung across its shoulders.

Edmund's speed was also driven by anger and love for his injured friend. However, the other man had both a head start and a plan for escape. Being tall and long-legged, Edmund began to gain on him, coming close enough to observe the presumed culprit's rough clothing, overlong hair, and unkempt appearance. But the man untied a horse that was tethered in a glade and rode swiftly away.

"Damn you!" Edmund shouted as the man retreated into the distance ahead of him. Gazing at the figure, Edmund realized

two things: one was the fact that this had been a premeditated attack, two was that he had seen that man somewhere before...

Without pausing to think further, he ran as quickly as he could back to Jacob and Percy.

With Percy's head now bandaged as well as could be done with cravats and shirts, Jacob tried to pull him up from the ground but failed. Percy seemed to be semi-conscious and moaned fitfully, his face frighteningly pale against the growing scarlet staining his bandages.

"He got away," Edmund panted in response to the question on Jacob's face.

"We need to get Percy back to the house and get the doctor out here as fast as possible. My horse is best able to carry two. Help me get him up."

After the struggle to lift and steady Percy's weight between them, they managed to get him onto Jacob's horse. Edmund tied him to the saddle for further security.

"Get him home, Jacob. Perhaps I can still find that man on horseback or at least some clues. I know I've seen him somewhere before."

As Jacob moved off at a careful trot and Edmund swung himself into his own saddle, the memory he was searching for came back like a bolt of lightning.

“Hayward House!” he exclaimed. “That supposed gardener...”

At the thought of Lord Birks, and with the sight of Percy bleeding dangerously, Edmund’s anger now ran very, very cold. His hand instinctively reached out and fingered the pistol in his saddlebag holster.



“Send for Dr. Hughs,” Edmund shouted as they came riding up the driveway, calling loudly for assistance. Calum and his stable boys came rushing to the side of their horses and helped to lift Percy carefully down so that his friends could carry him inside.

“Dear God, Percy!” Diana, who had rushed across the garden from where she had been walking as soon as she saw the strange party returning with one riderless horse, gasped. “Jenson, send a man to fetch Dr. Hughs immediately. Tell him it’s a head injury.”

The butler was already in the doorway, and with a nod to Calum to prepare a fresh horse, immediately dispatched one of the footmen on his way.

“What is this to-do?” Lady Templeton asked, rushing out of Lord Templeton’s sick room with Lady Birks close behind her. When Esther saw the sight of her bleeding son being carried inside through the front door, she screamed then fainted, collapsing on the floor.

Conscious that Percy must now be the priority, Edmund and Jacob continued carrying him to the dining room, guided by Jenson, who walked ahead of them and threw a cloth quickly



over the table. Diana shouted for Mrs. Bridge to assist her mother and then ran after her injured brother.

Jenson's calm and level-headedness were a relief, and Edmund now recalled Percy telling him that the man had spent some years in the army before going into service.

“Put the young master on the table, Your Grace. It's the best height for the doctor to examine him. Elsie, bring plenty of boiled water, fresh bandages, and old cloths. Jasper, bring warm blankets from the spares box. Susan, stoke up that fire. We'll need to keep him warm.”

They followed Jenson's instructions and allowed him to inspect Percy's head wound as he stirred again, muttering in some agitation, and then falling back again into a stupor. Diana coordinated the servants coming in and out, arranging all the items required on a small table which she pushed over beside Percy's head.

“What happened?” Jenson finally asked when the other servants were gone.

Jacob opened his mouth to answer, but Edmund silenced him with a meaningful stare when he saw Lady Birks's ashen face appear in the doorway.

“Lady Birks, can you attend to Lady Templeton?” Edmund asked politely but firmly. “Jenson will help us with Percy until the doctor arrives. We need peace in here until then. Please close the door, Diana.”

Diana closed the door on her aunt without compunction and returned to the table to take one of Percy's hands.

"You were going to tell us what happened?" she asked, looking between Edmund and Jacob. Jenson nodded beside them.

Edmund pushed the thought of Lady Birks's son temporarily from his mind, knowing that his anger could only cloud his judgement at this moment. There would be time later to deal with Andrew.

"There was a man at the lakeside with a gun. We think he tried to shoot Percy but luckily missed." Edmund indicated the graze on his friend's temple, and Jenson nodded thoughtfully in agreement with Edmund's surmise. "Percy's horse was spooked by the gun and threw him. He hit his head on a rock."

Devastated, Diana bent over her brother and pressed her cheek to his, carelessly getting blood on her hair and face in the process.

"Percy! Why would anyone shoot poor, dear Percy?! He'd never harm a fly. Oh God, why do these terrible things keep happening to our family? We were all so happy only a few weeks ago."

She stood again, covering her eyes with her hands to hide her distress. Edmund didn't even notice that he'd automatically put an arm around Diana's shoulders to comfort her until she turned her head at his touch and looked up at him with bewildered but beautiful eyes, making no attempt to move away.

“On Percy’s account, it makes no sense to me either,” Jacob agreed. “Of everyone I know, Percy is the least likely target for anyone with ill intent. But perhaps this was not some personal grudge...”

“Did you see the shooter, Lord Wycliff?” Jenson asked then. “Perhaps we should alert the constables and send out search parties. This sounds like a dangerous man to have roaming around the countryside, whatever his motives might be.”

“I saw him,” Edmund said grimly, keeping his voice low. “That’s why I didn’t want Lady Birks in here. It was the gardener employed by her son at Hayward House. We can only guess his reasons, but it seems unlikely to me that the mind behind the attack belonged to the person whose finger was on the trigger. Who stands to benefit?”

“Well, the Fernside estate is not entailed, Your Grace,” Jenson observed with a thoughtful frown. “If anything were to happen to Lord Greene, it would pass to Lady Diana and her issue rather than directly to Lord Birks. I would not want to speculate further before the gardener has been questioned.”

“With a wedding being forced through at breakneck speed, it doesn’t take much speculation to see that direct or indirect inheritance might be academic,” Jacob said, shaking his head.

“You’re saying that Andrew was responsible for this, aren’t you?” Diana gasped in horror. “How could he? I knew already that he was not an honourable man, but to shoot his own cousin?! And why should he want Fernside? He has Hayward House and the rest of his family’s estate. I just don’t understand.”

“Money, I suspect,” Edmund muttered.

Before there could be further discussion, Dr. Hughs swung in through the door with his medical bag in hand and urgency on his face.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

“Thank God I’d decided to come early to see Lord Templeton,” Dr. Hughs said. “The messenger met me on the road and we galloped the whole way back. How is the young man? I hear he had a bad fall and hit his head.”

As he talked, he was already at Percy’s side examining the head wound, taking his pulse, and then reflecting light into his eyes with a small mirror and a candle. He worked quickly and efficiently with the confidence he had lost in treating Lord Templeton’s recent illness. Falls from horses were more familiar ground in his local practice.

Diana held Percy’s hand tightly while Edmund and Jacob described again how he had come to injure his head. When Diana looked up, Edmund met her eyes with a slight but reassuring smile, and she admitted to herself how glad she was again that he was there in yet another family crisis.

Percy himself began to come around again while Dr. Hughs was testing him. He responded to his name which seemed to give the physician some satisfaction but could say little else of sense before he closed his eyes once more. Once Percy’s head had been cleaned and re-bandaged with the water and cloths already prepared, the doctor gave Diana a cautious smile.

“I think your brother has been very lucky, Lady Diana. Head wounds always bleed a lot, but I don’t believe there’s any fracture to the skull, and his reflexes are largely working as they should.”

“He’s going to be all right?” she questioned tremulously, not immediately able to believe it.

“Probably. Lord Greene has a concussion, and the effects of that can be hard to predict. But he’s young and strong, so I’m optimistic. I’d like to keep him under observation tonight if you’ll permit me to stay.”

Beside the table, Edmund and Jacob embraced one another with relief. Diana looked at them both joyfully, all three united in strong emotion.

“He should be kept warm in bed and watched constantly for the next twenty-four hours,” the doctor continued. “When Lord Greene wakes, he may have water, warm milk, or gruel but no solid food yet. After I’ve seen Lord and Lady Templeton, I’ll stay with him until dawn. Others can take over then if all seems well.”

“Of course, we’ll arrange whatever you need,” Diana said quickly, glancing at Jenson for confirmation.

The butler nodded.

“I’ll make the necessary arrangements now, My lady. We’ll have a stretcher made up to carry Lord Greene upstairs as soon as the room is ready.”

Once Jenson opened the dining room door again, Diana saw Lady Templeton waiting in the hallway outside, shaking like a leaf in her cousin's arms. She noticed how frail her mother had become over the past few weeks. She looked like a shadow of her former self.

"Percy's going to be all right, Mother," Diana called out to her immediately. With a loud sob, the older woman broke away from Lady Birks and hurried into the dining room to see Percy for herself and hear Dr. Hughs repeat his assurances.

"I'll go and sit with Lord Templeton while you're treating the young man," Henrietta said from the doorway. "I'm sure Esther wishes to spend some hours with the dear boy."

The doctor shook his head. "There's no need, Lady Birks. Everything is now in hand with Lord Greene, I hope. We'll go and spend some time with Lord Templeton while his son is being transferred to bed."

Dr. Hughs walked Lady Templeton back out into the hallway and towards the sick room, offering her his arm to lean on.

Unable to make sense of the bewildering succession of expressions crossing her aunt's face in the seconds following the physician's statements, Diana only knew that she saw relief, displeasure, and then fear before the mask was tightened again. Lady Birks nodded in acknowledgement and said that she would take some rest herself in that case. What was she thinking?

Considering again the conversation which had been quickly dropped by Edmund and Jacob upon Dr. Hughs' arrival, Diana now wondered whether Lady Birks had her own suspicions about her beloved son or not and if it was the case, whether she had buried them somewhere deep under a carapace of thick maternal over-affection.



Edmund and Jacob carried Percy upstairs on the stretcher themselves and settled him in the bed. They both helped Diana to undress him as Jenson oversaw the placement of a comfortable couch for the doctor and all other required provisions.

“My heroes,” Diana had told them with a smile. Jacob laughed a little and bowed with self-deprecation, and Edmund gave a tired but appealing smile.

“I only wish I was, Diana,” Edmund murmured. Then, he busied himself at the bedside while Jacob tactfully pretended not to have heard anything.

Now, Percy was safely tucked in a warm bed, alternately dozing and talking Percy-like gibberish that delighted his sister. Dr. Hughs was asking him questions about the year, the prime minister and how many fingers were being held up.

“Would you say he's returning to his usual self?” Dr. Hughs asked the three of them when Percy said that he was quite sure his aunt was well on her way to becoming the prime minister.

Diana laughed and nodded in agreement. Dr. Hughs began taking Percy's temperature and told them that there was no



need for him to stay any longer.



As they walked away from Percy's room, the unexpected sound of a coach and horses outside drew Diana to the window at the end of the corridor. She peered down from the window, frowning, and saw a carriage moving away from the house along the driveway.

"Aunt Henrietta is leaving," she said in surprise. "She never said anything about going home today."

Edmund and Jacob looked at one another and back at Diana soberly, the three of them then huddling together at the window.

"What if she knows what happened?" Diana continued to think aloud. "What if she overheard us earlier? She might warn Andrew and his man."

"Lord Birks will not be that hard to find, whether she warns him or not," Edmund said. "Society men cannot just vanish after all. His company, his bank or his club will surely know his whereabouts. There should also be records of people in his employ, and perhaps witnesses to the nature of that employment."

"Still," Jacob said, "I share Lady Diana's alarm and judge it advisable to get the constables out sooner rather than later. I'll speak to Jenson."

When Jacob was gone, Edmund and Diana stood together at the window and gazed at one another with warmth and longing. In the light of the day's events, so many things no longer seemed to matter, and others mattered more than Diana could have thought possible.

"We need to talk," Edmund said.

"We do," she agreed. "But not here. Let's go for a walk."

"In the garden?"

"Further. There's no one left here to care," Diana said with a shrug.



"So, he thought that he could kill Percy, marry me, and just take Fernside!" Diana exclaimed once they were beyond the hedge at the bottom of the formal gardens and walking along the path to the woods.

"Kitty even tried to tell us how much he wanted money, didn't she?" Diana continued. "And no one would listen to her. If you and Jacob hadn't been there and seen his man today, they would have made me marry a murderer..."

"You can't marry Andrew Arnold now," Edmund stated bluntly, "no matter what happens next. Jacob and Jenson will have the constables ready to go to Hayward House soon, I'm sure, and we'll get to the bottom of things one way or another."

Edmund found the stresses of the day finally dissipating with each step away from the house, Diana's presence beside him a source of a growing pleasant tension. She had silently taken his arm once they were out of sight, and they had walked instinctively together towards the woodland without any discussion of their destination.

"I can't marry him, can I?" she half agreed and half questioned. "He can't hold me to any kind of betrothal after this. No one can. Thank God! I would have married the devil himself rather than have Percy harmed, but thank God that Percy is recovering and that I don't have to marry Andrew Arnold!"

Diana shook slightly with her last statements. The threat to Percy's life had been a serious one, and Edmund knew that Diana had always loved her brother dearly. Then, she continued to pour out her fears,

"When I think of how close Percy came to dying today, it feels like I'm on the edge of a cliff. It's an awful sense of vertigo..."

Edmund put a reassuring arm around her shoulders and held her even closer as they walked.

Until Lord Templeton's illness, Diana's life had been a fortunate one, relatively sheltered and filled with good people and kind acts. Someone being driven to kill for want of money, whether by avarice or gambling debts, was new to her. Unlike Percy, she had an innate mental toughness under the surface, but she was still shaken and hurt by the day's revelation.

“How could Andrew even do such a terrible thing? I’d seen so many faults in him since he returned from India, of course, but even so, I never could have imagined something like this. He’s a bully and a coward, but a cold-blooded killer too?” Diana shuddered and closed her eyes with the thought of all that she had not guessed about her cousin. “What if he comes back here before the constables, Edmund?”

“If Lord Birks shows his face near you again, I will call him out and I will shoot him dead,” Edmund said in an ominous voice. With Lord Templeton and Percy both out of action, he was ready to do whatever was necessary to protect Diana. “You can also rest assured that Jacob and Jenson would not let him near Percy while we’re out here today.”

She pressed against him, squeezing his arm for a moment, and nodded her thanks.

“I hate him!” Diana snapped suddenly a few steps further on, her emotions jumping ahead. “I always hated him, I think. But I knew I wasn’t really allowed to. Now that he’s responsible for hurting Percy, I have a reason to hate him that no one can object to.”

“Your feelings are your own, Diana. No one else can tell you what to feel, surely.”

“They’ve tried, and I’ve been foolish enough to let them,” she said, biting her lip, and looking angry at herself. “All my life in one way or another, I’ve let my family tell me what to do and called it duty. Now that no one can make me marry Cousin Andrew, it seems so clear how hard everyone tried to tell me

what to feel all along. I've had enough of holding my tongue and pretending to be blind."

They were moving into the cover of the trees as they talked. The sun dappled the path in front of them and the air was warm, lilting and scented with blossoms. Birds sang and insects buzzed in the greenery. It was one of those spring days that were like the promise of the coming summer.

"Does that mean you've decided what you want now?" Edmund asked, raising her unresisting hand to his lips, and kissing her fingers.

"Edmund Turner," Diana said as the touch of his lips sent tingling sensations throughout her body. "You know I want you, don't you?"

"I do prefer that you tell me," he admitted, "rather than having to guess. Or you could show me..."

At his suggestion, Diana stopped walking and looked into his green eyes, sliding her hands on his shoulders.

"I can't reach," she whined. Edmund needed no further invitation to bend down and kiss her.

Diana's lips and tongue were irresistibly responsive to his own, and the exploratory caress of her fingertips on his jaw, head and shoulders brought back intense memories of the night she had gone to his bedroom. He could think of nothing he wanted more than Diana Arnold, naked, willing, and ready in his arms like that again.

“You can’t marry Andrew Arnold, but you could marry me,” he said, lifting his head and looking seriously into her eyes. “If you’re ready to marry anyone, of course.”

Diana’s smile lit up her whole face as she nodded and kissed him passionately in answer.

“After my Season?” she added, her cheeks pink, and her hazel eyes twinkling. “Do you think I might still have it now? Even for just a few weeks? But with Father so ill and Mother unable to leave him, maybe it’s still impossible...”

“I don’t see why not.” Edmund smiled, her youthful burst of fun and concern for her parents both endearing. “With Birks off the stage, there should be a way. Perhaps if Lady Templeton agrees, we could even bring you to London, and my mother could launch you with my sister.”

“Oh, Edmund!” Diana threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly. “That would be wonderful!”

Laughing, he kissed her blonde curls and then her forehead before she turned her mouth up to his and captured one of his lips briefly and teasingly with her teeth. In response, he cupped and stroked a rounded breast under her thin muslin dress and was rewarded with a soft moan of pleasure.

Diana said his name again, her voice now huskier and her kisses hungrier. While she might have a young girl’s natural appetite for dancing and parties, she was certainly very much an adult woman in her other desires. The woman he loved.

“Let’s go further,” Edmund said, feeling a tightening in his loins and hearing the roughening of his voice. He sensed the metaphorical shackles being thrown off, and energy unleashed between them.

Hand in hand, they ran deeper into the woods until Edmund spotted a sunny glade a little distance away through the trees. He drew Diana with him off the path, chasing her as she ran ahead of him through the bushes and then lifting her off her feet when he caught her, letting out a cry of triumph as he kissed her.

There, on the dappled moss and grass of a forest glade edged with irises, Edmund stripped off every item of Diana’s clothing until she was entirely naked in his arms, breathless, tremulous, and eager for his touch. Her own desperately seeking hands had disposed of his shirt, waistcoat, jacket, and belt. Their boots lay discarded at the edge of the glade.

“Diana,” he sighed with enjoyment as she kissed and rubbed her face against his bare chest with affection and curiosity, the soft tickle of her hair and damp warmth of her flickering tongue exciting him unbearably. “Let me look at you, Diana,” he urged.

Holding her gently away from him, he took a step back and then gazed at her with unbridled lust, the woman he loved now seemingly merged with the forest nymph of his fantasy.

Unclothed against the woodland backdrop, every physical characteristic he had already observed seemed both accentuated and erotic. Diana was so small and sweetly curvaceous, her limbs slim and strong and her skin the color of

pale golden cream with accents of pink on her lips, cheeks, and the stiffening tips of her quivering breasts.

Under the blond curls, her face was both mischievous and aroused. He could only imagine the slick heat waiting for him within the dark blonde triangle of hair below her belly.

Stepping close towards him again, Diana's hands came to the front of his trousers, now distended almost painfully with his desire for her. She fumbled slightly with the unfamiliar buttons as his breathing grew more labored. Then, she pushed his breeches down, and he kicked them away.

It was Diana's turn now to stand back and look at his naked form, her expression unafraid of what she saw, although a little uncertainty mingled with her desire.

"Now, we match," she breathed, raising her eyes to his.

"Satyr or faun for my woodland nymph?" he asked.

"Neither. You're my hero," Diana said, holding out her arms to him and melting in his embrace as he laid her on the ground.



To be naked with Edmund in the woods, their bodies twining and pressing together, was something glorious. The day had been terrible, but she had been set free by what had happened. She was free to choose Edmund.



Her hands ran over every long, firm line of his body as he kissed her with alternating passion and tenderness that left her gasping. The intensity of Edmund's expression and the tension in his body were visibly growing but still kept under some control. Just as she thought that his control must break, he paused and looked down at her face.

"I love you so much, Diana. This, what we do with our bodies here, it is more binding than a betrothal," he managed to say. "You do understand that, don't you? It's important that you do."

"I know that you could get me with child," she said. "With this."

She touched the most sensitive and male part of him cautiously and felt it surge slightly in her hand. Edmund groaned appreciatively at her touch.

"Aunt Henrietta told me all about this part of a man and where it goes. She warned me that it could hurt, but I'm not afraid of that if the man is you. I want you, Edmund."

Edmund shook his head at the mention of her aunt and began to shift himself down her body, dropping kisses on her breasts, her belly and then her inner thighs.

"I expect Aunt Henrietta never told you about this," he said, looking up from between her legs with a raised eyebrow as his hands spread open her sticky, swollen sex.

Diana cried out with an aching thrill, disorientation and surprise as Edmund's tongue and fingers delved purposefully into her, seeking and finding her pathways to pleasure. He was right. Neither her aunt nor anyone else had ever spoken of the ecstasy to which he was now introducing her. Her climax under such stimulation was even stronger than the one delivered by Edmund's fingers alone that night in his room.

When it was over and Diana lay back moaning and reflecting that she would never have believed such pleasure possible, she felt Edmund move to kneel between her open thighs. Looking into her eyes, he positioned his shaft at the still softly pulsing entrance to her body, causing a new jolt of impossible sensation.

"Yes, Edmund, yes!" she urged and then closed her eyes as his length surged forward and filled her. There was no pain, only overwhelming sensations of fullness and stretching, and a deep excitement at the very idea of Edmund's body inside her own.

He thrust inside her so slowly and deeply, his face almost agonized by the pleasure. Both fascinated and aroused, Diana gradually found herself moving with her lover, pressing herself against him and clinging with desperate gasps at each thrust and swirl of his hips. Both helpless with desire and excitement, they peaked at almost the same moment, with Diana's teeth at Edmund's collar bone and the rhythmic throbbing of her core driving him over the edge.

It took some time before either of them had the breath or the inclination to speak.

"Will we do that every day when we're married?" Diana asked dreamily, stroking his back, her legs wrapped firmly around his waist and refusing to release him.

Edmund raised his head from the ground, a lock of sweat-damp hair falling over his face.

“Sometimes more than once. I may insist upon it.”

“I may also insist upon it.” She sighed contentedly.

“That is your right as my wife,” he agreed. “I will have a duty to satisfy your needs in this regard.”

“Aunt Henrietta never mentioned that.” Diana laughed, marveling at all that she hadn’t known before Edmund.

“Enough of Aunt Henrietta,” Edmund said with mock sternness, pinning her arms to the ground with his hands and kissing her again until she could only sigh and wriggle beneath him. “No more of her today, I say!”

Diana felt Edmund’s body stirring again in their play fighting and pressed herself against him with a blushing smile.

“More than once?” she reminded him. With a grin, he rolled over onto his back and swung Diana above him, guiding his shaft back to rub against her wet folds. She let herself sink down onto his length with her eyes closed, feeling the same thrilling stretching, pulsing and fullness in the new position.

“Ride me,” Edmund challenged her, and she did.

When the second time was over, they disentangled themselves at last and lay side by side in companionable silence, beginning to notice both the fading light and falling temperature.

Diana felt herself shiver and tried to ignore it, not yet wanting to put her clothes on and return to reality at Fernside. Edmund noticed and pulled her back into the warmth of his arms.

“Just a few more minutes,” she whispered, her head on his chest, and his heart beating steadily beneath her ear.

“We’ll have more than minutes,” Edmund whispered back. “I promise. When this is all over, Diana, when the time is right, I’ll make a formal proposal with a ring, a request for your family’s permission and everything else. For now, can you just promise me that when I ask you to marry me, you’ll say yes?”

“Yes, and yes, and yes,” Diana said, loving him with every beat of their hearts.

## *Chapter Sixteen*

Jacob came rushing out to meet them in the garden as Diana and Edmund returned to the house in the glow of a glorious sunset. They had held hands until they left the woods, but even now standing deliberately apart, Diana could still feel an almost visible link between them.

“Where have you two been?!” Jacob exclaimed in reprimand. “Questions started being asked and I’ve been fending them off as best I could.”

“We walked down to the woods,” Diana volunteered. “I think we lost track of time...”

“No, don’t tell me anything. Just listen to what I told everyone else and see if you approve. I said you both wanted some air and then Edmund probably decided to return to the crime scene and check for clues. I assured Mrs. Bridge that Edmund was a gentleman who would know to have Diana home before dark, so thank God you managed that much.”

He ushered them inside, looking them both up and down, but saying nothing more about the state of their clothing and hair, and the glow on their faces.



The two local constables arrived together at Fernside the next morning after breakfast accompanied by four strong hired men. Diana knew both of them and introduced them to Edmund and Jacob as family friends who were supporting her and witnesses to the attack on Percy.

“Mr. Langford is one of the most respected lawyers in this county,” she said, gesturing towards the sober, grey-haired gentleman in a well-cut black suit. “Mr. Burnham is an equally respected naturalist and writer. My father and Mr. Burnham know one another well.”

For Diana, the day itself felt bright, light, and new. Everything had somehow been smashed and had reformed itself in an improved pattern, like the resetting of a wrongly placed broken bone. Edmund loved her, Percy would live, and she would no longer be forced to marry Andrew. Even her father’s condition seemed less grim than yesterday, both she and her mother perceiving him squeezing their hands.

Both constables were sensible men who took their duties seriously, and their presence promised further resetting and resolution. After half an hour closeted with Edmund and Jacob, and another with Jenson, they spoke to Percy, who was now wide awake and relatively well apart from a headache and a weakness due to blood loss. Confident in his patient’s recovery, Dr. Hughs had retired for his own rest.

All morning, Diana flitted between her father’s sick room, Percy’s bedroom and conference with Edmund and Jacob, trying hard not to let her eyes shine too brightly when they landed on the tall and dark handsome man who was now

irrevocably betrothed to her. His smiles back to her were muted for prying eyes but full of love and meaning.

As polite but distracted as she was, Lady Templeton managed to receive the constables briefly in the hallway after their other conversations. Lord Templeton had shown more signs of returning consciousness that morning than in many weeks, all witnessed this time by his wife, his daughter, and Mrs. Bridge. While not yet wishing to get her hopes up, Esther wanted only to be at her husband's bedside.

“Thank you both so much, Mr. Langford, Mr. Burnham. I do hope there need not be too much scandal for the sake of my children, especially Diana. First her London Season was cancelled and now very likely her marriage. Do keep her name out of the affair if you can, gentlemen.”

“If the betrothal is known to be terminated by you, Lady Templeton, that could help to distance Diana from the fallout affecting Lord Birks,” Edmund suggested, his words making Diana's spirit soar.

“Yes,” Esther murmured thoughtfully. “Yes, that would be best, wouldn't it? Please, could you see to it with Percy as soon as possible, Edmund? I know I can rely on you.”

Then, she sighed apologetically and excused herself to return to the sick room.

“I am sorry that I must leave you to Diana and Edmund now, gentlemen, but you will understand that with Lord Templeton so ill and now Percy injured, my time is not my own.”

“Of course, Lady Templeton,” Mr. Langford said with a bow. “I assume that your son and daughter can give us all the facts about the betrothal and legal arrangements between your family and these cousins?”

“I can find all the papers on Father’s desk,” Diana confirmed. “Edmund will make sure that the betrothal is legally voided by Percy, won’t you?”

“I will,” he said very firmly. “Immediately. Completely voided.”



“If you sign the note now, Jenson can have a footman take it to the lawyer’s office for registration before lunch,” Edmund explained. “It will then be legally valid before whatever happens at Hayward House this afternoon.”

“It’s what Mother wants,” Diana confirmed, biting her lip while standing at the door of Percy’s bedroom as Edmund presented her brother with the document rendering the betrothal agreement null and void to sign as Lord Templeton’s proxy.

Percy looked bewildered for a moment, trying to process all the explanations and instructions he had just been given. Then, he sat up determinedly and reached his hand out for the pen.

“Never mind what Mother wants,” he said with unusual purpose in his voice. “Or damned Aunt Henrietta, come to that. It seems to me that Cousin Andrew tried to get me killed in order to steal our home. That man is not marrying my sister even if both mothers begged me!”



He signed his name with a flourish and handed the document back to Edmund.

“Well said, Sir!” Edmund nodded and took the document quickly away for dispatch. Diana kissed her brother’s cheek and smiled at him.

“You look happy,” Percy observed. “Happier than I’ve seen you for a long time.”

“That’s because I am happier, you silly man.” She laughed and fluffed his pillows. “You’re getting better. I don’t have to marry Cousin Andrew... and I just have a good feeling that things are going to turn out well for our family now.”

“Diana,” Percy said hesitantly, “I wanted to apologize to you. Your instincts were right about Andrew. I should have listened to you instead of pushing you into the marriage.”

“Well, you’re listening now, aren’t you, big brother?”

Percy nodded.

“When I tell you whom I’m going to marry, or not marry, you must promise to support me.”

“I will. I do promise.” Percy smiled and then lay back as Diana left him to his rest.



As she came downstairs, an express messenger was just departing. In the hallway, Edmund, Jacob and the two constables were poring over some documents.

“Good God!” Mr. Langford exclaimed. “He’s been digging himself in deeper for years.”

“What is it?” Diana asked, following them as they walked into the library and closing the door. “Did the messenger bring something important?”

Edmund nodded.

“We had a hunch that money was at the root of this, given what Lady Katherine said and Lord Birks’s obvious predilection for gambling and liquor. So, Jacob wrote to some people he knows in the racing world and I made similar enquiries through my agents to banks and companies associated with their family.”

“Lord Birks is very heavily in debt,” Jacob continued. “He has been for some years, and it’s probably the reason why he chose to go to India five years ago. Both of his houses are mortgaged to the hilt, and Lady Katherine’s dowry is long gone. Creditors have already begun knocking at the doors, and there are some very unpleasant people threatening to have very cross words with him if he doesn’t come up with their money soon.”

“He was probably counting on your dowry to fend them off,” Edmund added. “But then, he realized that even that wasn’t enough. That’s probably why he needed to get his hands on Fernside, too.”

“What a terrible man! Poor Aunt Henrietta! Poor Kitty!” Diana exclaimed, feeling more sympathy for her relatives now that she was safe from Andrew. “What will become of them?”

“My guess would be that they will be forced to sell whatever they can and live in highly degraded circumstances.” Mr. Langford re-read the extensive debts listed in the documents enclosed with the letters to Edmund and Jacob before adding, “I assume that your family would not wish to take them in.”

“I cannot say,” Diana muttered. “We must think about that once Lord Birks is dealt with.”

With the arrival of the evidence of Andrew’s spiraling debts and the dispatch of the document to the Arnold family lawyers via the same express messenger, the constables announced that they were ready to go to Hayward House.

They would take their hired men, expecting to take the gardener into custody if he were present, and question all members of the family and staff, particularly Lord Birks. Edmund was asked to join them to identify the gardener and help in questioning the family.

“Lord Wycliff and I will both join you, gentlemen,” Edmund told them. “We will have our own horses and our own weapons if they should be needed.”

“I’m coming too,” Diana announced.

“Are you sure, Lady Diana?” Mr. Burnham asked in surprise. “This could be an extremely dangerous man. And won’t your mother need you at home?”

“Dr. Hughs and Mrs. Bridge can do more here today than I. While I’m very grateful to His Grace and Lord Wycliff for all their assistance, there really should be a member of our side of the Arnold family present for any action against Lord Birks and his people. The harm done has been against my brother and my family’s interests after all.”

“If you are quite decided, Lady Diana,” Mr. Langford said doubtfully. “We do not yet know what we will find at Hayward House, of course.”

“She will be under my protection,” Edmund assured them.



The constables and their party all rode on horseback for speed, seeing no need to slow themselves with a carriage. They planned to take a wooden cart from Hayward House to transport any prisoner, if necessary.

Diana, Edmund, and Jacob rode a short distance behind the constables and hired men in order to allow them to arrive first, and so they could talk privately amongst themselves. Without the encumbrance of a carriage, they reached Hayward House within two hours.

Andrew was already standing at the top of the steps as they rode up the driveway. Glancing upward, Diana saw Kitty at an upstairs window, her hand covering her mouth in horror.

“What is the meaning of this, Sirs?” Andrew demanded coldly, looking from the constables to Edmund and Jacob, and taking in Diana slightly behind them. “Why have you brought these men to my home? I didn’t invite any of you.”

The constables, Edmund and Jacob dismounted while the hired men and Diana remained on horseback behind them.

“A very serious accusation has been made against a member of your staff, Lord Birks,” Mr. Burnham said, coming up the steps to present him with a document that he declined to even look at. “As the local constables, we’re bound to investigate the matter thoroughly to the best of our ability and bring the culprit before the courts if necessary.”

“What are you talking about, man?” Andrew asked insolently, waving him away. “What kind of accusation and against whom? Is all this because Percy fell off his damned horse?”

Diana thought that she could already see a red flush from alcohol underneath his bluster.

“Mater told me about that fuss over Percy. I hope he’s recovering, but he was always falling off horses when we were children and no one ever sent the constables out because of it.”

“Percy was a far better rider than you ever were,” Diana said angrily. “The only times he fell off his horse were when you

made it happen. Just like yesterday.”

“Is that any way to talk to your future husband, Cousin Diana? I’ll have to teach you some respect when we’re married.”

“You’re not my future husband,” Diana hissed. “Percy has already cancelled the betrothal. I won’t be marrying you, ever.”

“What?!” He came down the steps, his ruddy face whitening in shock. “You can’t just do that! Everything is set up. We’re getting married.”

“It’s already done,” Edmund confirmed, stepping in front of Andrew to stop him from advancing towards Diana. “I witnessed the document and dispatched it to the lawyers myself. Now, you have bigger problems than a cancelled wedding. Where’s your gardener?”

“My gardener?”

“He doesn’t do much gardening does he?” Mr. Langford commented, voicing Diana’s observation of the grounds at Hayward House. “But perhaps you employ him for other skills and tasks?”

“My gardener?! Why the hell would you want to speak to Allerton?” he demanded, scratching his head in puzzlement.

Some of the air seemed to be going out of Andrew now. It was almost disappointing to watch. Diana had hoped that he would

first deny everything then dramatically admit to planning the attack before being dragged away to jail. In reality, he sounded too stupid and too shocked by everything, and she began to feel that they were missing something fundamental.

“Allerton was seen fleeing the scene of the attack with a gun yesterday afternoon. I’m sure you’ll therefore appreciate the urgency of talking to him,” Mr. Burnham explained with great politeness.

“He usually eats nuncheon at this hour.” Andrew shrugged. “He’s probably in his shed at the back. You can go round and see if you wish.”

Mr. Burnham nodded to the hired men, who slid down from their horses and went to find the gardener.

“Do you recall what time you last saw Allerton yesterday afternoon?” Mr. Langford asked.

“My gardener?” Andrew repeated stupidly for the third time, and Diana winced for him. “I have no idea of his comings and goings. Why would I?”

“Would the rest of your staff know?”

“The maid is normally indoors. There’s no one else.”

The constables looked at one another.

“How’s that in a place this size, Lord Birks?”

“I’m just back from India,” Andrew said irritably. “I’ve had no time to spend on domestics. I was expecting to get married and have my wife arrange such things.”

“Not a question of money?”

“How dare you, Sir!” Andrew shouted. “You come to my house, you make wild accusations, and you insult my honour with slurs about my financial situation!”

“John McCready, Jim Sutton, Harry Bluefield,” Jacob named three of the very serious men to whom Lord Birks owed very serious money.

Edmund added the names of the institutions and money lenders holding the mortgages on the Birks’s properties.

Ashen-faced, Andrew fell silent.

“What do you want?” he asked hoarsely. “You know I can’t pay them. Especially not without her money.” A jerk of his head indicated Diana.

Suddenly, Lady Birks appeared in the doorway, her appearance, as always, making Diana’s heart fall and guilt rise in her throat.

“Andrew? What’s going on out there? Who are these people?”



Looking quickly over the group and seeing Edmund, Jacob, and Diana amongst them, she made herself smile in welcome.

“I think you’d better come in.”

## *Chapter Seventeen*

Ordering their maid to make a large tray of tea, Lady Birks brought the party into the library, suggesting that it would also be the best place for them to interrogate Allerton. Her son followed her back into the house, his face sulky and full of resentful glances towards Diana.

Apologizing briefly for the distress he might cause, Mr. Langford stated the facts in the case including Lord Birks's debts and the sighting of the armed gardener at the lakeside.

"Oh, dear Andrew! Of course I knew that he had a weakness for gambling, but I never knew that it was this bad. My main hope has been that the love of a good woman might save him. When he marries Diana—"

"The wedding's off, Mater," Andrew interrupted gruffly. "Percy's cancelled it. They all think I had something to do with his accident."

Now, Henrietta looked stunned. She shot Diana the worst expression of betrayed sympathy and violated trust.

“No! You can’t possibly do that to my poor boy. Not when he needs you so much. Not after all that I’ve done for you...”

As Allerton was marched into the library between the hired men, Lady Birks fell silent, pulling herself back together in front of them.

“Well, Allerton, I hope you have something to say for yourself. The constables report that you were at the lake on the Fernside estate yesterday afternoon and that you shot Lord Greene, causing a bad accident.”

“I wasn’t there, My lady,” Allerton said.

“I say you were,” Edmund snapped, looking the man in the eye. “You were wearing the same clothes and carrying a rifle. I saw you myself.”

“I was working in the garden here as you well know, My lady.”

“How should I know?” Lady Birks said distastefully. “I do not keep an inventory of your comings and goings. All I know is that His Grace saw you at the lake and that my son’s life may now be ruined because you have brought this house into disrepute for some unknown reason.”

“I was here, My lady, all afternoon and all evening,” the man insisted sullenly.

“I say you’re lying,” Edmund pressed again. “You know you were there. You saw me as clearly as I saw you, and I’m willing to swear that in a court of law, Mr. Allerton.”

“Christ!” Andrew muttered, and everyone turned to see him helping himself from a decanter behind the large globe in the corner. “If Allerton was seen there and has no alibi, why doesn’t he damned well say so and put an end to this? It’s pointless denying it, man!”

“My son is quite right, Mr. Allerton.” Lady Birks went to Andrew’s side and put the decanter back in the cupboard. Her hand delved into her pocket for something, presumably the cabinet key to lock away alcohol from her son. “You should speak up, or it will go worse for you. Perhaps it’s all a misunderstanding and you were there to fish without asking permission?”

Edmund made a scornful sound as Lady Birks filled a small silver sugar bowl from a plain brown paper packet in readiness for the tea.

“That’s hardly the most obvious use for a rifle,” he noted as the maid brought in a fully equipped tea tray with shaking hands and set it down by Lady Birks, leaving quickly at her mistress’s nod.

“I was here all afternoon,” Allerton maintained. “I do what I’m paid for, don’t I?”

“What’s that then?” Mr. Burnham asked. “I am curious about what you are paid for, given the state of the gardens.”

Allerton looked at him tight-lipped and then glanced almost fearfully towards where Lord Birks and his mother stood.

“What do you pay him for, Lord Birks?” Mr. Burnham directed his question towards the employer rather than the employee.

“My gardener?!” Andrew reiterated blankly.

“Oh, take him away, Constables,” Lady Birks said irritably now. “Whatever Allerton’s reasons for firing that gun at the lakeside yesterday, it has nothing to do with my son. You’d have more chance of understanding his reasons than I.”

Edmund, Mr. Langford, and Mr. Burnham conferred quietly together for a few moments before Mr. Burnham and the hired men removed Allerton from the room, presumably away to the town jail.

Lady Birks poured tea for Andrew and the others in the room, adding milk or sugar as requested. She left Diana until last, adding a large spoon of sugar from the silver bowl and passing the drink to her with a martyred smile.

Diana did not like sweet drinks but thanked her aunt and took the cup.

“I do not blame you, Diana,” Lady Birks murmured with great sorrow and sympathy. “Doubtless you and Percy really believe that wild story of Andrew somehow conspiring with a man like Allerton...”

She watched Diana intently as she spoke, but her stare and her certainty failed to have their usual paralyzing effects this time.

“I am only saddened that you could not talk to me or even wait for the investigation before abandoning us,” she continued. “We have always been there for your family, through thick and thin. Now I see that I was duped in the return of our affection.”

“There are too many things unexplained, Aunt Henrietta,” Diana said. “If you knew anything about Andrew’s debts, why didn’t you tell me or my family? Neither of you should have kept this secret.”

“Oh you ungrateful child!” her aunt admonished, her face now becoming tearful and her voice weakening. “Do you think you’d be the only woman to marry a man with a few secrets? Every man has a past, but his wife ensures his future. Andrew’s future should have been brilliant, and you should have been a part of it. But now, that’s all over for both of you.”

As Henrietta hid her face in her handkerchief, her son put a comforting hand on her shoulder and looked angrily at Diana.

“Now look what you’ve done! You have no idea how upset Mater has been since yesterday.”

“The least you can do is drink your tea,” her aunt said before the handkerchief came up again. “Or is that not good enough for you either?”

Edmund’s hand came swiftly to Diana’s aid before she could raise the cup to her lips. He poured the over-sweetened tea into

a pot plant and replaced the cup on her saucer without a word. His hand caressed her shoulder briefly.

When Lady Birks's handkerchief came down again, she at least seemed satisfied by the empty cup, although there was also new anger in her eyes. Diana suspected she had seen Edmund's hand on her shoulder and guessed at its meaning.

"Where's Kitty?" Diana asked as the others drank their tea.

"You won't see Kitty again," Lady Birks snapped. "If you reject Andrew, you reject all of us. You should know that."

"Then I'd like to say goodbye to her before I go," Diana said.

"Oh, she's moping around somewhere," Andrew noted, less angry than his mother and more worried by her volatile mood. "Go find her if you like. It means nothing to me."

Diana opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. She didn't have to go far to find Kitty, who had come down from her room and sat at the bottom of the stairs crying silently.

"How's Percy?" Kitty asked.

"Much improved," Diana answered. "I assume you've heard that I won't be marrying Andrew."

Kitty nodded, red-eyed and puffy with weeping.

“I do understand, you know, but don’t judge him too harshly. He’s never been good with money. Or people. Or pretty much anything else. But Mother always pretends the opposite. Things aren’t always what they seem, are they?”

Lady Birks stuck her head out from the library.

“Kitty? Come and sit with me in here, please. You’re not a child to sulk alone on the stairs.”

“Yes, Mother,” Kitty said dutifully, wiping her eyes again.

Diana hugged her impulsively, and Kitty returned her embrace for a moment before obeying her mother’s order. They both returned to the library.

“Kitty, as you’ve probably detected from your ill-mannered eavesdropping out there, Diana is jilting poor Andrew and abandoning our entire family in our darkest hour,” Lady Birks explained dramatically. “This is the last time you’re likely to see one another. I hope that one day we can all find it in our hearts to forgive this young woman, but it will not be easy.”

“Are we poor now?” Kitty asked. “I heard what you were all saying about money. Will we have to give up Hayward House?”

“Andrew will make it all right,” Lady Birks said confidently. “He has a brilliant career ahead of him. By this time next year, with his skills and contacts, he’ll be sailing ahead again, even without Lady Diana.”



“Mother,” Andrew growled, instinctively reaching out for the drinks cabinet door again and rattling it with annoyance when he found it locked.

“Well, you will, darling boy. No one is going to get in your way, not Allerton, not the constables and certainly not Lady Diana Arnold!”

“Please don’t carry on like this, Mother,” Kitty begged, breaking down in a new flood of tears. “It isn’t fair to Andrew if he’s not who you want him to be. It doesn’t help anyone to pretend he’s someone he’s not. We need to help him in other ways.”

“I don’t need your help, Kitty,” Andrew sneered. “Although you’re right that I wish Mater would stop talking so much and just give me back the key to my own damned drinks cabinet.”

“Enough!” Lady Birks snapped at her children, and the room fell silent. In the hush, everyone heard the sound of a commotion outside.

“What’s going on out there?” Andrew asked with further irritation. “I thought they’d have Allerton halfway to town by now. Infernal man. I don’t know why we ever hired him. These constables are right that he’s never done a damned thing for the gardens, as far as I can see.”

“As if you’ve ever paid the slightest attention to the state of the gardens, Andrew,” his mother said dismissively. “We hired Allerton because he was cheap if you recall, less than half the price of the agency men we were offered. As these gentlemen

today have so crudely and unnecessarily brought into light, we've been under a great deal of financial pressure."

"I'm sorry, Mother," Andrew mumbled dejectedly.

"So, our only option for a gardener and odd jobs man was Allerton. I've taken on a great deal on your behalf, Andrew. Without a wife to support you." Henrietta paused and shot an accusing glance at Diana before continuing, "Be assured that I will continue to act in your best interests."

"Yes, Mater..."

Over the course of the morning, Diana had become more and more struck by Andrew's weakness. She had come to Hayward House prepared to face down an evil villain but found herself feeling only contempt and even pity for a hollow man who was prey to his own vices. The idea of Andrew deliberately planning Percy's murder felt somewhat ridiculous. She wondered if it had been a drunken misunderstanding.

The raised voices outside suddenly sounded even louder and closer.

"Ask her yourselves, ask Lady Birks!" They all heard the gardener shouting angrily.

Henrietta's face turned bright red as she went to the window to see what was happening. Edmund and Mr. Langford followed, looking over her shoulder.

On the driveway, beside one of the flower beds, Allerton stood restrained between two of the hired men while Mr. Burnham stood before him, asking questions in a low voice

“I don’t bloody know why. I don’t ask those questions. That’s the family’s own business,” Allerton shouted in answer to whatever had been asked of him. “Ask her!”

Pulling back the curtain and pushing up the sash angrily, Lady Birks stuck her head out of the window.

“Why is that man still here, Constable? I insist he be removed from my son’s property at once. He is clearly a dangerous criminal who should be locked up for public safety.”

“Oh no, you don’t, My lady,” Allerton snarled. “I’ve had enough. I’ll be transported for this anyway and you can’t threaten me with anything worse.”

“Take him away!” Lady Birks repeated loudly with her full measure of authority but perhaps a little more urgency than usual. “You can see what kind of man he is.”

“No, bring him back in here, Mr. Langford,” Edmund said with equal authority, stepping into the window space and edging Lady Birks away from the central view. “We’d like to hear what Mr. Allerton has to say.”

## *Chapter Eighteen*

“**Y**our Grace, this is quite unnecessary. I must protest,” Lady Birks said immediately in response to Edmund’s request. “If you truly believe that Allerton was the dangerous individual responsible for shooting poor Percy, how can you countenance bringing him back in here to us, especially with ladies present?”

“I am sure that Mr. Langford and Mr. Burnham chose their men well for today’s work, Lady Birks. I am also fully armed and experienced in using my pistol when necessary. No one need be in any danger.”

“Yes, I agree with His Grace,” Mr. Langford put in. “Let us all hear what Mr. Allerton has to say for himself.”

Once again, Diana saw a rapid succession of different expressions on her aunt’s face: anger, fear, hatred and then back again to strained politeness. It made her shiver.

“Andrew, why don’t you take your sister outside? She’s very distressed. Perhaps she needs some air—”

“I’d rather stay here,” Kitty interrupted, now standing close to Diana.

“God, I need a drink,” Andrew muttered. “Mater, can you open this damned cabinet? We could all do with something strong right now.”

“I said, take your sister outside now, Andrew,” Henrietta insisted, an odd urgency in her voice. Edmund and Mr. Langford exchanged glances. “Go! I know best, and you are not in any position to argue with me.”

Whatever her intent, it was lost on Andrew, who remained rooted to his spot near the inaccessible bottles.

“No one leaves this room until Mr. Langford and Mr. Burnham tell them to,” Edmund said, taking a position by the door, his voice firm and even. Henrietta’s face flashed with hatred again, this time directed straight at Edmund. He did not flinch.

Diana felt that something was happening in the library around her but could not yet understand what it might be. She and Kitty shared a look of pure bewilderment.

“I just want some whiskey,” Andrew whined, kicking the drinks cabinet resentfully like an angry teenager.

Kitty went to her brother’s side and took his hand, drawing him to sit with her on the other side of the room away from their mother.

Lady Birks drew herself up to her full height as Allerton was marched back into the room by the hired men, with Mr. Burnham behind him. Edmund closed the door.

“Mr. Allerton, will you please repeat what you told me outside, for the benefit of Mr. Langford?” the constable demanded tersely, and the gardener nodded with a bitter laugh.

“I will. I’ve had enough of being played around and used by the likes of them. I couldn’t stick being ordered around in the militia by all the officers and risking my own neck for no good reason. But then, this house beats the army hollow.”

“Good gracious! A deserter!” Lady Birks exclaimed in a horrified voice. “You see, he is a dangerous criminal. Do take him away. I’m sure he’s guilty of all you suspect and more.”

“A damned deserter! Good God!” Andrew spluttered. “I had no idea. The man should be transported, if not shot.”

With consternation, Diana realized that she recognized the sincerity of Andrew’s shock. He really had not known.

“Yes, I’m a deserter. As well you know, your ladyship” Allerton said with a hostile laugh. “It’s the main reason you brought me in to run after Lord Birks, isn’t it? I’m what you wanted. A desperate man you could hire for half-pay to do all your dirty work. You thought you could let me swing in the end too, didn’t you? But I won’t let that happen.”

“The man’s raving.” Lady Birks shook her head. “He’s talking nonsense. Trying to drag my poor Andrew into all this and

smear our good name.”

“Good name of Birks? Ha! That’s a good one, your ladyship. Everyone knows by now that Lord Birks is a drunken sot who has gambled away the entire family fortune, his sister’s dowry and more. You’re about the only person who pretends differently. There are half a dozen men around the country who are getting ready to break his legs the next time they see him out alone.”

“You were hired to... protect me?” Andrew asked slowly with dawning comprehension.

“God! The boy’s slow on the uptake. Not like his ma, is he, Lady Birks?” Allerton taunted. “Yes, Birks. Your mother wanted an armed man watching your back once you returned to England. You’ll be lucky if you can still walk away after some of your creditors get their hands on you. Unpaid debts are bad news in their line of business.”

Andrew swore loudly, his face now red and sweating partly from the usual effort of thinking.

“Is this true, Mater? You knew all along about Allerton and brought him here anyway?”

“What else could I do, Andrew?” Lady Birks exploded. “I knew that you’d be in danger as soon as you stepped off that boat. I couldn’t let anything happen to you, could I? Any mother would have done the same. I couldn’t know that he would go off and start shooting people—”

“Ho, ho, no you don’t, your ladyship!” Allerton intervened again. “This young man here.” He indicated Edmund with a jerk of his head, “Wanted to know why I was down at the lake on the Fernside estate. Well, I’ll tell you exactly why I was there. Because she sent me, told me what to do and even paid for the ammunition to do it!”

His final words were delivered with a triumphant sneer. Kitty and Andrew both gasped in shock.

“No!” Andrew gasped. “It can’t be true. The man’s talking nonsense, obviously trying to save himself at our expense.”

“That’s not all either, is it, your ladyship?” Allerton carried on, clearly enjoying his revelations. “I was the one you sent to buy the poison you wanted from that apothecary in London. I’ve still got the bit of paper you wrote the name of the stuff on and the receipt, see?”

He produced a crumpled note and a bill which were confiscated and inspected by Mr. Langford as Diana looked over his shoulder.

“Shut up, you fool!” Henrietta hissed, her face now a mass of seething hatred as the mask slipped entirely. “I could have saved us both if you’d held your tongue.”

“Tell them it isn’t true, Mater!” Andrew begged; his face utterly confused. “Tell them that none of it is true. What’s the man even talking about?”

Allerton threw back his head and laughed.



“God, this is priceless, isn’t it? His mother is paying someone to help get family enemies out of the way and he’s so befuddled by drink that he hasn’t noticed a thing.”

“Percy was no enemy!” Diana cried then. “He never did anything to anyone, especially not our cousins.”

“Do you want to tell the young lady or shall I, your ladyship?” Allerton said. Lady Birks almost growled, her final layer of disguise cracking and falling away.

“I’ll happily tell the little bitch. What happened to her brother was her own fault, and she deserves to know while she can still hear it,” Henrietta hissed, her face now twisted and unrecognizable with such animosity.

Lady Birks’s bad language and ill feeling were like a bomb detonating in the room, unsettling everyone and creating a truly evil atmosphere that seemed to lower the temperature by several degrees. Edmund came back to Diana’s side and put his arm around her shoulders again, in defiance of the expression on Lady Birks’s face. Andrew and Kitty huddled together like two frightened children.

“How dare you!” Diana’s voice shook with anger. “You sent this man to shoot my brother and now you blame me?”

“I didn’t send him to shoot your brother, you little fool. I sent him to shoot your lover, the Duke of Colborne!” her aunt crowed, her features entirely deranged as she stopped trying to control them. “It’s not only the reputation of the house of

Birks that will be smashed in this room, but also that of Templeton!”

“Yes, Diana and I fell in love and will be getting married soon,” Edmund affirmed, pride evident in his voice. “There is no shame on her family name in acknowledging that fact.”

Even in the middle of this storm of accusations and the horror of realizing that it was Edmund who had been targeted, Diana’s heart throbbed at her lover’s words. Still, she couldn’t bear to look back at Kitty after hearing her cousin’s small squeak of surprise upon learning of their happiness.

“Getting married? Getting married?” Lady Birks cackled hysterically as though the idea were hilarious. “What a delightful joke. You think you’re going to get married? Never! I will never allow it. Do you hear me?”

“But why would my mother want to kill Colborne?” Andrew asked slowly, still several steps behind everyone else in the room.

“Because I needed to prevent exactly this from happening, Andrew!” his mother shouted at him in exasperation. “Why should he have Diana’s dowry rather than you? Why should he have Diana? He doesn’t need the money, and she’s yours by right.”

“I don’t understand,” Andrew said again, incomprehension still creasing his face.

“I did it for you! She could not be allowed to marry another man. Diana’s dowry belonged to you and was the only way we could ever pay off your debts and hope to maintain our position in society. I couldn’t let the Duke get in the way and ruin everything, not after I’d already gone so far.”

Kitty’s sobs now became audible as she took in the unveiling of her mother’s evil plotting.

“There’s no point in crying about it, Kitty. It’s on your shoulders too, you little fool,” her mother proceeded cruelly. “To begin with, I thought that your beauty might be enough to lure the Duke away from Diana, and then we might have two advantageous marriages. But you were no match for her wiles and the lustful spell she’s cast on him. You’re nothing but a disappointment!”

“You’re mad,” Diana realized aloud. At a subtle nod from Mr. Langford, two of the hired men had quietly moved into position near Lady Birks.

“You couldn’t keep your eyes off one another,” Henrietta rambled, her voice ever louder and less controlled. “Now you can’t keep your hands off one another either. Look at you! Oh, I could see it all coming. It’s why I had to lock you in your room, Diana, to preserve your virginity for Andrew.”

Diana pulled a face of disgust at her aunt’s words, and Edmund continued to hold her close to him.

“Diana is right,” Edmund said. “You are mad, and I pity you. There is no other excuse for your behavior towards your cousin’s family.”

“Oh yes, it’s all coming out now, isn’t it, your ladyship?” Allerton, who had been listening with interest to Henrietta’s confession and the reactions it provoked around the room, laughed. “All the family’s little dark secrets. You shouldn’t have tried to set me up, should you?”

“Why did you have to miss your shot?” she snarled at him. “You told me you were a sharpshooter, a noted sniper in your regiment. But you couldn’t even hit the right man!”

“Lucky that I did miss,” he retorted. “Or it would be the rope for both of us. As it is, I think I’m heading for Australia, and you’ll be in Bedlam if you’re not careful.”

“Enough of that, Allerton,” Mr. Langford said severely. “Tell us more about this poison. Why did you buy poison for Lady Birks?”

“She wanted that girl’s father out of the way, didn’t she? There had to be a quick marriage before Lord Birks’s debts caught up with him, and she didn’t think old Templeton would ever agree to it.”

“You poisoned Father?!” Diana cried in horror. “You were trying to kill him too!”

“He was in my way,” Henrietta sneered contemptuously. “As was your mother. I knew that Percy would be far easier to manipulate once they were out of the way. Your parents didn’t want you married before you were one and twenty, and that would have been much too late for Andrew. I had to do something to protect his interests.”

“How could you betray them like that!” Diana exclaimed. “They trusted you. Mother has been relying on you night and day since Father collapsed. You watched her suffer constantly while knowing that it was all your doing!”

“Oh yes, I had to be so careful with the poison doses to avoid arousing any suspicion from your family or the doctors. Esther’s devotion to her husband became a real obstacle, too. She was always there and kept on pouring enough broth into him to prevent simple dehydration. He would have been dead weeks ago if I had my way.”

“That’s why he started to revive when you were away from Fernside overnight...” Diana said, putting together the various pieces of the jigsaw from the period of her father’s mysterious illness. “It’s why you wanted me to get Mother out of the house and leave him with you.”

“Well, I don’t make the same mistakes twice. Given your size, the dose I gave you should kill you within the hour!”

Diana looked at Edmund, her heart thumping violently. Had Lady Birks poisoned her, too?

“What is she talking about, Edmund?” she whispered, a note of panic in her voice.

Edmund shook his head and squeezed her shoulder, his face calm as Henrietta cackled madly in the background.

“You haven’t been poisoned,” he assured her.

“It wasn’t sugar in her tea,” Lady Birks uttered gleefully. “It was poison at a much larger dose than I ever gave to Richard Templeton.”

“Then I’m afraid that your pot plant here is not going to thrive this year, Lady Birks,” Edmund said coolly. “I confess that I noticed Lady Birks behaving suspiciously with Diana’s tea and poured it away immediately.”

“Damn your interfering! She’s not yours, she’s ours!” Lady Birks screeched and made to run towards Diana as Edmund stepped in front of her. The two hired men quickly seized the older woman and held her back as she struggled against them.

“Looks like we’re in the same boat now, doesn’t it, your ladyship?” Allerton snickered.

“I think we’ve heard enough to know that this woman is likely criminally insane,” Edmund said. “Lord Birks, will you give your consent for your mother to be restrained by the constables until we can get two doctors to certify her insanity and place her somewhere secure for everyone’s good?”

“Yes...” Andrew mumbled, his face now as tear stained as Kitty’s.

“Andrew, stop them! You can’t let them do this. I’m your mother. Everything I did was for you. Everything!”

“I never asked you to do any of this,” he protested. “I wanted to marry Diana, but never like this. Why couldn’t you just

leave things as they were?”

“Do you have a suitable facility to hold her?” Edmund asked, and Mr. Langford nodded.

“The attic above my law practice has been useful in similar cases. It’s civilized and secure.”

“This isn’t over!” Lady Birks spat angrily at Edmund. “Don’t think you’ll get away with this. You’ll never have her. I’ll destroy you. I’ll destroy all of you!”

“Bring them,” Mr. Burnham ordered, and both Lady Birks and Allerton were escorted forcibly from the room. The former cursed and struggled while the latter only laughed cheerfully at his companion’s efforts.

“Thank you all,” Mr. Langford said gravely. “This can’t have been easy for any of you. We’ll lock both of them up in town for now while I get the legal papers drawn up and alert the courts. If Lord Birks would like to appoint his own doctors to assess his mother, he may do so, or I can see to that on his behalf.”

“You do it, if you would, Sir,” Andrew muttered gruffly. “You know better than I about these kinds of doctors. And as everyone heard, I have no money for specialists in any case.”

“I will come to see you tomorrow,” Edmund said as Mr. Langford headed for the door after the rest of the group.

“Very good, Your Grace.”

The silence that followed was like the aftermath of a disaster. Everyone was left stunned and reeling from the revelations they had heard. An hour ago, this sequence of events would have been unimaginable, but now, it was somehow reality.

“I’m so sorry, Diana,” Kitty said at last. “I would never have imagined such evil in my mother. I had no idea. I would have stopped her if I’d known. I would have told someone and asked for help. Please believe me.”

Diana nodded uncertainly, not quite sure what to believe yet. Kitty’s eyes were red and hurt, her lips still trembling.

“I’m sure you weren’t involved, Lady Katherine,” Edmund assured. “I know you’ve never been close to your mother.”

“She always preferred Andrew,” Kitty admitted. “For my mother, I was just a decorative part of the Birks family scenery and potential material for an advantageous marriage. I don’t think I existed beyond that.”

“I had no idea either,” Andrew mumbled, all his bluster crushed out of him. “My own mother going round poisoning and shooting people... Good God! My own mother...”

Kitty and Andrew stood together like two people marooned after a shipwreck, still trying to orient themselves on the shores of a new land.



Diana held out her hand to Kitty.

“This wasn’t your fault, Kitty. None of it.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Kitty took her hand and shook it. More cautiously, Diana turned to Andrew, without extending a hand to him.

“You’re not responsible for your mother’s actions either, Andrew. Only for your own.”

“Oh, I know our marriage is off, of course. No chance of a loan though, I suppose, Diana? Or you, Your Grace?” Andrew asked gloomily. “I can’t even pay the maid’s wages.”

Diana looked at him in disbelief, and Kitty sighed, “Oh, Andrew!”

“No,” Edmund said decidedly. “There is no chance of any loan.”

“We should ride home quickly to Fernside and alert Dr. Hughs about the poison.” Diana headed towards the door. “Once he knows what it was, there may be something he can do for Father.”

Edmund confiscated the small silver bowl of white crystals from which Lady Birks had tried to poison Diana’s tea, wrapping it tightly first in paper and then in a clean handkerchief.

“We can take this sample for Dr. Hughs, too. It could help.”

“I just hope we’re not too late,” Diana said anxiously.

## *Chapter Nineteen*

Diana and Edmund travelled back to Fernside as quickly as their horses would allow. Diana rode just as well as her brother, and Edmund glanced admiringly at her form beside him more than once, due as much to her skill on horseback as her beauty and his love. Despite the morning's shocks, her face was sure and determined.

When she sensed him watching her and smiled, Edmund could see both hope and fear in her expression. He prayed that the discovery of the poison had come in time for Lord Templeton.

Jenson met them at the front steps of Fernside as they slid down from their horses, Edmund catching Diana lightly in his arms and passing the reins quickly to the waiting stable boy. He knew he was looking for any opportunity to touch her, and probably would do for the rest of his life.

“Is Dr. Hughs still here, Jenson?” Diana asked immediately, walking ahead of them both into the house. “We have news that might help Father.”

“Yes, My lady. He's with Lord and Lady Templeton now. But there's something you should know...”

Diana looked back at the grave-faced butler in panic before he could complete his sentence, one hand flying to her mouth in horror. Then, she caught up her skirts and ran as fast as she could towards the sick room.

“Diana!” Edmund called and then raced after her, fearing that the worst had happened in their absence and not wanting Diana to face it alone. He didn’t catch up with her until she flung open the heavy oak door and stepped over the threshold.

“Father! Mother!”

“Diana,” Lord Templeton said weakly, propped up now on three pillows. Lady Templeton was holding one of his hands with a loving smile as Dr. Hughs checked the pulse in his other hand.

“Father! Thank God you’re alive. Thank God...”

From the doorway, Edmund echoed Diana’s thanks silently in his head. This family had suffered enough. Diana dropped to her knees beside the bed and burst into tears as she pressed her cheek against her father’s face.

“It was Aunt Henrietta. It was all Aunt Henrietta. She poisoned Father and tried to poison me too. She had someone try to kill Edmund, but Percy was injured instead...”

Lady Templeton looked up, startled, and met Edmund’s face behind Diana.

“Is this true, Edmund? Can it be true?”

“Every word, Lady Templeton, and more. Dr. Hughs, we brought this sample back with us. I thought it might help.”

He carefully took the container of poison from his pocket in all its wrappings.

“How could she do something so wicked?!” Esther exclaimed. “Diana, are you harmed? You said she tried to poison you too.”

“Edmund saw her and poured it away. I’m safe, Mother. I didn’t ingest any of the poison. Only poor Father has been harmed, and Percy through Aunt Henrietta’s other actions.”

Equally surprised as Lady Templeton but always a man of action, Dr. Hughs had already released Lord Templeton’s arm and took the package from Edmund’s hand. He unwrapped it and inspected the white crystals cautiously.

“I will take this to the apothecary in the nearest town, and we will see what the two of us can make of it.”

“The man she sent to buy the poison from an apothecary in London said it was this...” Diana recalled, going to the desk in the corner and quickly writing down the Latin words she had seen on Allerton’s note. “I’m afraid I don’t know what it means. I only studied the Aeneid and some history in Latin.”

The doctor frowned as he looked between the writing and the crystals.

“You’re very lucky to be alive, Lord Templeton,” he commented. “With a large dose, you would have been dead almost immediately.”

“She was trying to avoid raising suspicion by giving him small doses every day,” Edmund told them. “I think she hoped that if Lord Templeton were unconscious for long enough, he would slip away, and the family would attribute it to illness.”

“But you kept him alive, Mother, because you wouldn’t leave him and you managed to keep feeding him,” Diana said, smiling through her tears. “She couldn’t complete her plan because you were here so often.”

“Oh Richard.” Lady Templeton exhaled in dismay and relief, holding her husband’s hand between both of hers and kissing it. “I couldn’t have guessed what Henrietta was doing. But I knew, I just knew that I mustn’t leave you, whatever anyone said. I was right.”

“Esther...” Lord Templeton breathed with the ghost of a smile. “You saved me.” His wife nodded with tears in her eyes.

“Yes,” Dr. Hughs agreed. “Without Lady Templeton’s care and all that broth, you would have been dehydrated or starved weeks ago, even if Lady Birks never administered a single fatal dose. She has done more for you than I could.”

“But why?” Lady Templeton demanded, still trying to grasp what her relative had inflicted on her family. “Why would she want to hurt Richard? Or Percy? Or Diana? We’ve never shown anything but kindness to Henrietta and her children. Andrew and Diana were even betrothed!”

“She wanted to get my dowry quickly to pay Andrew’s gambling debts,” Diana explained. “He’s bankrupted the whole family and they’ve lost everything. But you would normally never have agreed to something so precipitate. So, she needed Percy in Father’s place and you distracted, Mother. That way she could manipulate all of us.”

“God save us all!” Lady Templeton breathed. “It’s the work of the devil.”

“Then, she tried to have me shot,” Edmund continued. “Because she saw that I was an obstacle to her plans. In the end, she tried to kill Diana too rather than let her marry any man but Andrew.”

“The woman must be mad!” Lady Templeton exclaimed incredulously. “Quite mad.”

Edmund nodded in agreement.

“Mr. Langford will be arranging two doctors to certify that fact shortly. I imagine that she will be locked up safely somewhere for the rest of her life where she can’t do any further harm.”

As he spoke, he saw Lady Templeton taking in the fact that he was standing close beside Diana, with his hand resting on one

of her shoulders.

As Diana rose, she took Edmund's hand instinctively in her own and remained close at his side beside the bed, oblivious to her mother's watching eyes. Edmund made no attempt to step away, and Esther only nodded slowly at what she saw, clearly not displeased but having many other things on her mind.

"Now that Lady Birks is gone, will the poison clear itself from my husband's body?" she asked Dr. Hughs. "Is there any medicine we can give him?"

"It should clear within a few days if this description of the poison is correct," the doctor told them cautiously, fingering the piece of paper again. "Still, there could be ongoing effects and internal damage. We won't know for days, weeks, or even months. Lord Templeton clearly has a strong constitution, but we have no idea how much poison was administered to him."

"We will get you well again," Lady Templeton vowed, stroking her husband's hair. "I insist upon it."

"For you, Esther, anything," Lord Templeton managed to say.



"My word!" was all that Percy could say when Edmund and Diana related the same story to him and Jacob a short time later. Sitting up in bed and looking much stronger, Percy was even more astonished than Lady Templeton had been.

"Aunt Henrietta! Of everyone I could think of, she would have been the very last one I'd have guessed for a poisoner and



commissioner of murder. I believed everything she said. What a fool I must be! Every single word she said..."

"We all believed her, Percy," Diana said sympathetically. "It wasn't just you."

"Well, I can say that I never liked the woman," Jacob admitted with a smile. "Or her damned dog. In retrospect, the devoted owner of a pet like Fluffles couldn't possibly be sane."

They all laughed a little, and then Percy looked serious again.

"But when I think what could have happened to you, Diana, my blood runs cold. She used me to manipulate you, and I didn't suspect a thing."

"Then don't think about it, silly. Just get well again, please."

"Apart from anything else," Edmund added, "Diana may well be needing a brother to escort her through her first London Season if your parents let me make the necessary arrangements."

"Really? I thought that was all off," Percy said, brightening up at the thought of a series of summer balls, parties, and other events.

"It doesn't need to be," Edmund observed, and Jacob nodded his agreement. "If Lady Templeton agrees, I'll write to my mother and see if she could sponsor Diana this year, along with my sister."

“But it’s not just that, is it?” Percy said, exchanging a look with Jacob knowingly, as if both of them could see that Edmund was holding Diana’s hand again behind their backs. “I thought there might still be an imminent wedding?”

“What has Jacob been telling you?” Edmund sighed, turning to smile at Diana sheepishly, but neither of them made any attempt to deny their relationship. He suspected it was probably written in the contentment on their faces anyway.

“Very little, in fact. Percy has observed the two of you and asked me some very searching questions earlier today. I can only conclude that the bang on the head might have finally knocked some sense into him,” Jacob joked.

“I will marry Diana as soon as she is ready,” Edmund confirmed, receiving a beaming smile from his beloved. “But there are some steps we need to take first. The first is getting your parents’ permission. Diana is well under one and twenty after all. The second is giving Diana a taste of the London Season.”

“I would love it if I could do that,” Diana said wistfully. “I looked forward to it for so long.”

With their secret in the open, at least in this room, Edmund brought her hand to his lips and kissed it.

After smiling at them, Jacob’s good-natured face lapsed into a troubled frown. Something was clearly bothering him, although he was reluctant to speak.

“Jake?” Edmund probed. “What is it?”

“What will become of Lady Katherine?” his friend asked earnestly. “From what you say, she is blameless in the whole affair, and yet, she will lose everything. Her family, her home, her dowry. Every prospect and security she’s ever had is gone.”

Diana and Percy looked at one another, each of them considering Jacob’s words in their own way.

“She doesn’t deserve that, does she?” Percy thought aloud. “Kitty’s a good sort, even if the rest of her family are rotten.”

“No, she doesn’t deserve it,” Diana agreed, remembering Kitty’s enthusiasm at Diana marrying Andrew and coming to live at Hayward House to make it a home. Despite being Andrew’s sister and Henrietta’s daughter, Diana could not summon any real animosity towards Kitty or hold their deeds against her. “All she’s ever wanted is a proper home.”

“She has no other relatives,” Percy continued, his face now becoming almost as troubled as Jacob’s. “Apart from us, she has no one. I think we must do something for her, even after all this.”

“I’ll speak to Mother,” Diana said quietly but decidedly. “Especially if I will be leaving Fernside soon.” She looked at Edmund with a tender smile. “Perhaps she could be good company here for Mother.”

Now Jacob smiled.

“You’re marrying into a wonderfully brave and generous family, Edmund,” he said.

“I know.” Edmund nodded, feeling his good fortune and love for Diana surge once more.

Diana released his hand and headed towards the door.

“I’ll find Mother now. Let’s see what she says.”



Before dinner, Edmund walked in the woods with Diana again. Finding the same welcoming glade as the previous evening, they pressed against one another once more with desire and affection. With time more limited, they did not undress and only pulled obstructing clothing carelessly aside so that he could once more kiss, stroke and fill her until she cried out his name.

Afterwards, Diana rested comfortably in Edmund’s lap beneath a tree, her hair and breasts both in beautiful disarray before him, brushed and stirred by the forest breeze.

“We may not be able to do this again once everyone is well and watching our every move,” he said regretfully as he gazed at her. “While I hope that Percy and your father are both on their feet soon, I will long for you every day that I can’t have you.”

“If I can’t touch you, I will have all the more to look forward to on our wedding night,” Diana murmured, snuggling into Edmund, and kissing his neck.

“We’ll dance together at every ball of the Season, and when I hold you close, you’ll know I’m thinking about making love to you in these woods,” he added.

“Oh yes,” she breathed, closing her eyes, and resting her head on his shoulder. “In the meantime, when I write to you and say that I’m remembering our walks amongst the trees, you’ll know that I’m thinking about the same thing.”

“Do you think Jacob is in love with Kitty?” Edmund asked abruptly after a few moments, causing her to open her eyes again.

“He might as well be, although maybe he’s just kind. Still, Kitty wanted you, not Jacob, you know. I don’t think she’s really noticed him yet.”

“Poor Jake!” Edmund sighed. “However, I don’t think Kitty was really that struck by me. We only just met after all, and she’ll get over a little crush faster than she’ll get over everything else that has happened. I’m glad your mother agreed that Kitty could come to Fernside. I don’t know what would have become of her otherwise.”

“Poor Kitty!” Diana said. “She really has lost everything.”



Richard made such good progress over the course of that afternoon that Esther actually joined them at dinner for the first time since his collapse, leaving Mrs. Bridge reading quietly in the sick room while Richard slept a normal and natural healing sleep.

There was real joy around the table that evening. Percy had also been allowed back downstairs, the bandage around his head and Jacob's solicitude at his elbow on the stairs the only signs of his accident the previous day.

Jenson brought in a note for Lady Templeton halfway through dinner.

"A message from Hayward House, My lady," he announced as he handed it over. Lady Templeton glanced around the table as the butler left the room and then opened the letter quickly while everyone watched.

"Kitty has accepted my invitation," she told them as she read. "She will be ready to depart Hayward House as soon as we can send a carriage for her. Andrew will be returning to India as soon as his passage can be arranged and does not intend to return. Their mother has now been certified by two doctors and taken away... Oh, poor girl..."

She broke off and read silently for a while.

"What is it, Lady Templeton?" Jacob asked tentatively.

"Her private thoughts, Lord Wycliff," Esther said meaningfully. She would not be relaying them to the table.

“Suffice it to say that she feels some guilt about what her family had done, even though she had no part in their actions. Poor, poor girl...”

“Lord Birks’s departure back to India is probably the best thing he could do,” Edmund commented. “There’s nothing left for him here.”

“That’s true, and there’s nothing he can do for his sister by staying,” Lady Templeton added. “Her dowry is entirely gone, along with her family reputation. His presence could only drag her down further. At least here with us at Fernside, she can still have a quiet and respectable life, even if it’s not the one she probably hoped for.”

“I could take my carriage and collect Lady Katherine if it suits you,” Jacob offered. “Perhaps one of the maids might accompany us in case she requires assistance with her packing?”

“That would be truly kind of you, Lord Wycliff, but I was going to send a carriage for her very early in the morning and would not wish to inconvenience you. The sooner she is out of that place the better.”

“I don’t mind,” Jacob said eagerly. “I only wish to be of service.”

Lady Templeton nodded with slight bemusement at his enthusiasm but accepted his offer gladly.

“You and dear Edmund have already been of great service to our family, and we are considerably in your debt. But very well, if you really wish it, then please go ahead. Mrs. Bridge will have Ethel ready to go with you and assist with Kitty’s effects as you suggest.”

Edmund and Diana smiled at one another across the table at Jacob’s evident pleasure in being dispatched to rescue Kitty. Edmund noticed Lady Templeton’s eyes on him once again then and saw a smile at the corner of her mouth. It was definitely time for him to say something to Diana’s parents about their marriage. With a nod to Diana, he cleared his throat.

“Lady Templeton, I wonder if you might have a few minutes to speak to me after dinner, and Lord Templeton too if he’s well enough. There’s something important I wish to ask you both...”



## *Chapter Twenty*

“I will miss you tremendously,” Diana said as Edmund and Jacob prepared to leave Fernside a few days later. They had already said their goodbyes to her parents, Kitty and senior staff like Jenson and Calum. Only Diana and Percy stood out in the driveway for their final farewells.

Jacob was adjusting the tack on their horses as the carriage with their belongings, a valet and a coachman rolled off ahead of them down the driveway. Edmund smiled at Diana, his dark hair and green eyes very striking in the morning sun as he bent down to kiss her briefly and softly on the lips.

Although they did not plan to announce it publicly until the end of the Season, they were betrothed now, with the full blessing of Lord and Lady Templeton and the knowledge of the household. A simple kiss did not feel unseemly here in the safety of their own grounds.

However, even such light contact thrilled Diana beyond bearing, reminding her of other deeper and more intimate kisses in the woods. She closed her eyes to control her dizzying feelings and restrain the urge of her hands to roam freely over Edmund’s face and body.

“I’ll see you in two weeks,” Edmund promised her. “If your father continues to make such excellent progress, your parents will bring you to their London house for the Season. If Dr. Hughs thinks Lord Templeton needs more time and rest, I will come with my mother and bring you to our London house.”

“I can’t wait,” Diana said.

“You’ll have to, I’m afraid, my love,” Edmund teased her. “Just imagine how good it will feel when we can finally... walk in the woods again.”

They kept their voices low so that even Jacob and Percy could not hear them and looked into one another’s eyes for long seconds.

Then, Diana tore herself from Edmund and glanced at Jacob, seeing the sadness on his freckled face.

“I’m going to miss you too, Jacob,” she said. “You’ve been such a wonderful friend to us.”

She shook his hand and kissed him on the cheek.

“Thank you. I’m glad things have turned out well in the end. I’m very happy for the two of you, you know. It’s a fine thing to see two good people find one another.”

He looked back towards the house longingly and then shook his head and turned back to the horses.

“Come on, Colborne,” he said with some of his more customary cheerfulness. “We need to be on the road, or our clothes will reach home before we do. You can write Diana long love letters from home.”

“She might even answer them,” Percy chimed in. “If she’s not too busy trying on all those ballgowns and evening dresses that have started arriving.”

“I always answer my letters, Percy, as you well know!” Diana objected, laughing.

Percy hugged each of his friends and gave his own heartfelt thanks for all they had done. Then, he stood back with Diana as Edmund and Jacob mounted their horses and rode away down the driveway, their work at Fernside complete.

Diana sighed as they disappeared from sight, and her brother put a comforting arm around her shoulders.

“It won’t be long, Sister, I promise. And there’s never been a man as loyal as Edmund Turner. You’ve nothing to worry about there.”

“I know,” she said, and they walked back into the house together slowly.



Unity Turner was delighted to see her son again after a month away from home and delighted also with the news he had written to her in his last letter about his betrothal to Diana Arnold. He had charged her to keep it secret for now,

especially from his chatterbox younger sisters who could not be expected to hold such news in confidence.

Sophia and Beatrice seemed to alternately talk, argue and dance around him as he ate a cold lunch in the dining room on his first day home. At great length, they gave him all the news on friends, relatives, and preparations for Beatrice's presentation and first Season in London. Despite missing Diana, Edmund couldn't help being glad to be with his lively and loving family again.

Eventually, Unity told the two girls that Edmund would be tired and instructed them to go out for an afternoon walk with their maid. When they were alone, she sat back down at the table with Edmund and looked at him expectantly and with affection.

“So, Mother, are you pleased with how my visit to the Arnolds turned out? I wish I could have asked your counsel in advance about many things, but they were very strange times at Fernside. I had to do what I thought best.”

Unity only laughed and patted his arm.

“Dear Edmund, I could tell from your letters that you were falling for Diana, and she for you. I only hoped that it wouldn't hurt you too much when she had to marry. The whole business seemed so desperately sad. If Lord Templeton had not been so ill, I would have written to Esther myself, but as you say, they were strange times.”

“I think I fell in love with Diana within five minutes of seeing her again,” he admitted. “She was like someone new and yet at

the same time, someone I'd known all my life. I can't imagine what I would have done if she'd been forced to marry that awful man."

"She's a wonderful girl," his mother agreed. "I'm very glad that you found one another and that you've finally done something good for yourself, rather than living only for your family and friends."

"I'm always enjoying myself, Mother!" Edmund protested. "I'm out with Jacob at least once a week, and I'm certainly no puritan in my entertainments."

"Edmund..." She smiled, shaking her head. "Precisely. Once a week when all your work is done, your family is taken care of and no one around you needs assistance. Do you know that I've never seen you do a single irresponsible thing in the whole of your young life?"

Edmund thought of kissing Diana for the first time in the library at Fernside, of allowing her into his bedroom late at night, and then of her lips sighing against his neck in the woodland glade as their bodies joined. He flushed slightly and looked away.

"I cannot pretend to that," he demurred. "But you're right that I always take my responsibilities seriously."

"As you should," Unity said. "I only wanted to say that there's nothing wrong with spontaneity and following your heart when you can see that it's on an honourable path. I hope that falling in love with Diana has taught you that."

“Yes,” Edmund agreed, smiling again. “I learned a great deal at Fernside...”

“Good. Now, to business. I’ve done all that you and Esther requested with regard to arrangements for Diana’s season. I wrote personally to every hostess involved and also had Diana reinstated in the order of presentation at court. Luckily, the Chamberlain had not yet filled her spot with any other girl.”

“Thank you, Mother. This first season means so much to Diana.”

Unity looked at him again, her eyes slightly narrowed as though considering her words with care, and then she spoke seriously.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea, Edmund? The Season, I mean. We could be arranging a wedding instead and launch you on the social scene together. It might be easier for Diana that way, you know.”

“It’s certainly unusual for an engaged girl to be presented with all the other young ladies, but there are no rules against it, and Diana has looked forward to her presentation for so long. As we’re making no public announcement of the betrothal yet, no one outside the family need know anyway.” He shrugged.

“That wasn’t what I was referring to.”

The Dowager Duchess tapped her fingers thoughtfully on the table and then continued to speak.

“As I said, I wrote to all the society hostesses who had previously invited Diana to their events. Lady Alton, the Duchess of Stratton, the Marchioness of Greyson and all the others. But you should know that some of them have been... less than welcoming in their response.”

“What?” Edmund asked in puzzlement. “In what way *less than welcoming*? I don’t understand.”

Unity gave a long, sympathetic sigh.

“News travels very fast in these days of mail coaches and gossip broadsheets. With a ruptured betrothal to a notorious drunken gambler behind her and an aunt who has been certified insane, it seems that there are already those who do not want Diana in their homes.”

Edmund swore and then excused himself to his mother. This was something that had never occurred to him.

“Especially not if she’s accompanied by her cousin, Lady Katherine Arnold, the daughter of the insane aunt,” Unity added. “You should know that the whole affair has quickly become a scandal, perhaps not a major one by London standards, but big enough to do some damage to the reputation of both Diana and Kitty.”

“But none of this has been Diana’s fault!” Edmund emphasized. “Nor Kitty’s, come to that. Are the whole Arnold family now going to be forever tainted by association with those who tried to harm them?”

“Society can be very cruel,” Unity said gently. “Especially to women. Once married to you, Diana would be the Duchess of Colborne and none of these hostesses would dare to snub her, with or without her cousin in tow. Think about that.”

“There’s also Lord Templeton to consider,” Edmund added, shaking his head. “He’s still recovering. We hope he’ll have enough strength to get to London for the Season, but he will probably still be kept to the house for a good while. We wanted to have the wedding when he’s strong enough to take part and enjoy it. Diana is his only daughter after all.”

“I understand, Edmund, I really do. Diana having her fun and Richard being part of the wedding are clearly very important to the two of you as a couple. But there are other considerations, too. Tell me, how else can you protect Diana from such humiliation as these hostesses are threatening?”

Edmund felt all his innate stubbornness and rejection of unfairness rising in his blood. He could not bear the idea of these bigoted people looking down on Diana, slighting her and bringing her yet more unhappiness.

“Well, if they won’t have Diana and Kitty, they can’t have me,” he said firmly. “And I dare say they can’t have Jacob either. Or some of the other fellows we know once we speak to them. Show me these letters right now, and I will begin writing to every single hostess to politely decline any invitation I have already accepted.”

“And when these good ladies ask me why, as they undoubtedly will?”



“You can tell them that this season, I will only be attending events where the Arnold ladies are present.”

“That will start tongues wagging, my boy, earlier than you would like,” Unity warned, but with a smile that told him she approved of his plan.

“Let them wag. It can do no real harm when we’re already betrothed.”

Abandoning the remains of his meal, Edmund stalked from the dining room and went to the study to begin writing his regrets to all the biggest events of the Season.

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

“Damn them all, the fusty beldames and their beloved Mrs. Grundy!” Jacob exclaimed when Edmund dropped by his house the following morning to apprise him of the latest developments regarding the upcoming Season and the attitudes forming against Diana and Kitty.

Edmund had been surprised to find the young Marquess of Wycliff already washed, dressed, and as freshly turned out as a choirboy on Sunday morning. Jacob usually made the most of his first nights back in London after visits to the country.

“I’m with you, my friend,” Jacob told him staunchly after hearing Edmund’s account of recent correspondence about invitations. “I will decline the lot and spend the entire Season at the races if I must rather than see those two young women slighted in this way after what they and their family have suffered.”

Within the hour, he had taken Edmund’s list and written to decline invitations from all hostesses discriminating against Diana and Kitty. By that afternoon, Jacob had gone even further, lunching at his club, and taking the lead in recruiting others amongst their friends to the same cause, citing the beauty and virtue of Lady Katherine Arnold as his reason.

The first ripples of impact were felt the following day as Edmund and Jacob took a table for luncheon at Brook's to discuss further action.

They were beginning their soup when Lord Alton spotted them from the doorway. After twirling his grey mustache for a moment in thought, he approached their table.

"Lord Wycliff, Your Grace," he said. "May I join you for a moment?"

"Of course, Lord Alton, although we do have private business to transact today," Edmund answered politely but formally, not wanting to encourage the intrusion.

"The thing is, gentlemen, my wife was terribly upset that you've both declined the invitation to our ball. Especially since she received another five regrets this morning, all from young men. Lady Felicity is coming out this year, and we can't have a ball without anyone to dance with, can we?"

"No, I don't suppose you can, Sir," Jacob agreed cheerfully, offering Lord Alton a glass of claret which was declined.

"Lady Alton was frantic when I left her an hour ago. Absolutely frantic. So you'll understand that I want to ask you to reconsider and perhaps persuade the other young chaps to do the same?"

"Out of the question, unfortunately, Sir," Jacob said regretfully, enjoying himself far too much in Edmund's opinion. "Out of the question."

“Is there a clash of some sort we don’t know about? Some sporting event perhaps?” the older man continued to press a little desperately.

“No, Lord Alton,” Edmund said before Jacob could draw out the conversation even further. “It is simply that Jacob and I prefer to spend this season at events where our good friends, the Arnold family, are present. You might have heard of the tragic events at Fernside already. My mother tells me that the news has already reached London.”

“Hmmpf, yes, something of the sort. The daughter was engaged to that rogue Birks, wasn’t she? The one who’s now had to leave England.”

“That was a formality only, a childhood arrangement between the families which was terminated as soon as her parents became aware of his character. And his mother’s.”

Lord Alton looked confused.

“Really? I heard that the wedding was all arranged, and then he upped and left her when his mother went mad.”

“Nonsense,” Edmund said sharply. “I was at Fernside at the time, and I witnessed Lord Greene formally dissolving the betrothal agreement on his father’s behalf.”

“Ah, well then, you clearly know more than me,” Lord Alton conceded, unsure what he was now dealing with but conscious that it was a matter that the Duke took extremely seriously.

“Yes, I can tell you that Lady Diana Arnold and Lord Birks were never close and that the engagement was dissolved at her family’s instigation. She had no more to do with his behavior than Lady Katherine Arnold had to do with that of Lady Birks.”

“I see, I see,” Lord Alton twirled his mustache again. “Look, the fact of the matter is this... what should I tell my wife?”

“You may tell Lady Alton exactly what we’ve told you, Lord Alton. Jacob and I prefer to spend this season at events where our good friends, the Arnold family, are present.”

“An increasing number of our friends feel the same way,” Jacob added. “I suspect that number is only likely to grow.”

“I understand,” the older man said, his forehead creased in thought. “So, if the Arnolds were to be invited to my wife’s ball...”

“Then your daughter and her friends would have no shortage of eligible dance partners,” Jacob finished for him. “It might be that simple, although I can obviously only speak for myself.”

“Thank you, gentlemen. You’ve given me a great deal to think about. Do enjoy the rest of your lunch.”

After Lord Alton had left the dining room still working his mustache with anxious fingers, Jacob grinned at Edmund, his blue eyes determined and full of mirth.

“That was a stroke of luck, Edmund. The old buffer will head back to his spot in the smoking room now and spread the word to all the other worried society fathers who will then go home and speak to their sour old wives.”

“Yes,” Edmund agreed. “But we must keep turning up the pressure.”

“I have that covered,” Jacob assured him with zeal. “I know you need to be more discreet, but I intend to spend the entire day lobbying for the Arnold girls in the billiard room here, at the Boodles’ gaming tables tonight, and at the races tomorrow. If I have my way, the society hostesses won’t be able to field a single presentable man under forty this season.”

Edmund smiled his approval of the plan, believing in its fairness and impact, and also suspecting that it relieved some of Jacob’s urges to help Kitty further without quite knowing what he could do.

When he returned home after lunch, the house was busy. His mother was just seeing someone out of the drawing room, and his sister Sophia pulled him quickly from the hallway into the study to prevent him from being seen.

“They were talking about you,” she whispered excitedly, putting a finger to her lips. “Listen.”

“Indeed, Lady Sunbury, I do very much hope that it can all be resolved quickly. It would be such a shame otherwise. But young men do have a will of their own, and the best of them

are not under the thumbs of their mothers. Edmund must do as he thinks best.”

“Quite, Your Grace, I do understand. But it has made things so very awkward for us suddenly having seven fewer men, and all of them young, single men of good fortune.”

“I will certainly tell Edmund that you called.” Unity’s voice was loud and clear enough for Edmund and Sophia to recognize that she knew they were in the study. They grinned at one another. “Lord Greene has always been a close friend of his, just as Lady Templeton has always been a good friend of mine. I do understand his sympathy.”

“Yes, dear Esther... of course. You must give her my love.”

“Naturally, Lady Sunbury. I will be writing to her this very afternoon with all the news.”

There was a pause, and Edmund imagined the two ladies standing together at the drawing room door, his mother smiling sweetly but with her usual iron behind those finely drawn features. He had seen her cry at his father’s death but never before or since.

“Then, please, could you let her know that she and her family would be very welcome at our ball next month?” Lady Sunbury asked. “Since you are handling the family’s arrangements for the Season due to Lord Templeton’s illness, I will send the invitation here, if I may.”

“Certainly, that would be best. Esther will be very glad to hear from you. It means a great deal to know that her friends are thinking of her.”

After a few more pleasantries, Lady Sunbury was shown out by the butler, and Edmund and Sophia emerged from the study.

“Insufferable woman!” their mother said shortly, shaking her head at the front door. “Did you hear her? Dear Esther, my foot! She was ready to snub the poor woman without a second thought.”

“It sounds like you used up all your patience in speaking to Lady Sunbury,” Edmund observed.

“Oh no, it wasn’t just Lady Sunbury. I’ve had quite a stream of callers while you were out Edmund. All hypocrites and following the same pattern. Do not repeat any of this, Sophia, especially not to your younger sister.”

“I never would, Mother,” Sophia assured, always keen to be included in adult conversation rather than lumped together with Beatrice who was only just coming out. “Although I don’t quite understand what’s going on. Felicity Alton said that Edmund and many other young men have sent regrets for her ball, and that’s one of the biggest balls of the Season. What are you all up to?”

Unity and Edmund exchanged glances.



“I have declined several invitations this season,” Edmund admitted slowly and carefully, “because the hostesses in question have chosen to discriminate against the Arnold family, good friends we’ve always been close to. It would be wrong of me to accept their hospitality while knowing the hurt they’re inflicting on people I respect and care about.”

“So, now they’re all coming to call on Mother and she’s talking them around. That is clever, Edmund. I did think it was jolly rotten what happened to Percy and his family. It’s horrid that people want to make them even more miserable now. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“If you’re asked about me by any of your friends or their mothers,” Edmund said, “tell them exactly what we’ve told you.”

“But not a word to Beatrice in the meantime,” Unity reiterated. “She’s expecting to have Edmund beside her at all these events. I do hope we can untangle this before the Season starts.”

Unity continued to field similar calls the following day, and the next, as the little campaign continued to bear its fruit of distressed society ladies suddenly lacking eligible young men for their events. Unity, Sophia and Jacob’s band of various brothers, nephews and cousins all made it known that the exclusion of the Arnold girls lay at the root of the problem.

The trickle of invitations that began to arrive for Diana and Kitty became a flood within the week. By the time the Arnold family was due to arrive at their London home in Belgravia, they were invited to more events than had ever been on Diana’s original calendar, and the young men of London’s elite

suddenly found that they were available for Lady Alton's and the Duchess of Stratton's balls after all.

The night before the Arnolds were due to arrive in London, Unity invited Jacob to join a family dinner as a small celebration of their campaign's success, although they had to rein in their conversation when Beatrice was present.

For Beatrice and Sophia, Jacob was only an old part of the family's furniture. Well-loved but of no real personal interest to them. They excused themselves quickly from the table after pudding. Once the two young women were gone, Unity had Grigson, the butler, bring in some fine port, and she toasted Edmund's and Jacob's victory in fuller measure.

"I'm very proud of both of you for standing up for the Arnolds as you did." She smiled as she lowered her glass. "It might spoil some of Diana's and Kitty's fun for the Season to know of this battle of society wills over them just yet, and I will keep it to myself. But I will tell them both later if you don't. They should know the kind of men you are."

"I will tell Diana." Edmund nodded. "When she's finally sick to the teeth of the London Season and its hostesses."

"I'd rather that Lady Katherine didn't know it was me," Jacob admitted, his face slightly pink. "I don't want her to feel under any obligation to me. I just didn't want her to be hurt anymore. It wasn't fair."

"Jacob—" Unity began to address him, but then Grigson interrupted, entering the room briskly and presenting Edmund with a sealed note on a silver tray.

“An express message, Your Grace. It arrived this very minute. No answer was expected.”

“An express?” Edmund muttered, breaking the seal as Grigson left the room. He looked at the handwriting. “It’s from none of the Arnolds.”

Jacob and Unity watched expectantly as he read, his green eyes opening wide and then narrowing again.

“You’d better read it yourselves,” he said, tossing it on the table with some agitation. “Lady Birks has escaped.”

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

Sophia and Beatrice had risen and breakfasted early so that they might ride together in Hyde Park before the crowds came out. Edmund ate together with his mother, glad that he didn't have to hide his concern before his sisters.

“As Mr. Langford said in his letter, Lady Birks is an older lady, alone and without access to any money, clothing, or transport. How far could she realistically get by herself?” he thought aloud as he chewed a piece of toasted fruitcake. Unity drank the last of her tea thoughtfully.

“Not far, in my view. She has probably found a local bolt hole and is hiding out there, hoping that she remains out of view until people begin to forget her. Perhaps she's with a former servant or a tradesperson who remembers her fondly from years ago and knows little of what has recently transpired.”

“But the woman is still mad.” Edmund sighed and shook his head. “You should have seen her face, Mother, her eyes when she realized she'd failed to poison Diana... I can't forget that expression or the intensity of her hate. If the guards Mr. Langford employed had seen that expression, they would have been more careful when transferring her to Dr. Britten's mental institution.”

Finished with her breakfast and risen from the table, Unity put her arms briefly around her son's neck when she passed his chair and kissed his hair lightly.

“Don't dwell on it, Edmund,” she advised him. “All the constables in the local area have been alerted, and I'm sure they'll find her again soon. When they do, they won't make the same mistake twice.”

“You're right, Mother. Still, I must make sure that Mr. Langford's message reaches the Arnolds too as soon as they arrive in London. They've been traveling slowly because of Lord Templeton's health and had already left Fernside by the time Lady Birks escaped.”

“It will be another shock for all of them, I fear. As we're planning to have Beatrice with us when we call later today, I suggest that I go a little earlier and speak to Esther alone to make sure that your note has been read. She will know best how to tell her husband and Kitty.”

“They must take some basic precautions even if the chances of Lady Birks reaching London are small,” Edmund warned, his brow wrinkling again.

Unity nodded her agreement and left to prepare for her various morning calls.



“Oh my!” Diana exclaimed, looking up from the thick pile of cards and programs on the coffee table in her family's drawing room with astonishment in her wide hazel eyes. “There's so many. I didn't remember there being quite so many events.”

“You’re coming to Lady Alton’s ball, too,” Beatrice added, bouncing a little on the sofa beside her with glee, seeming younger than her eighteen years and far more girlish than Diana. “I’m so glad. I thought I wouldn’t know anyone there and would have to spend the whole evening with Edmund. He is good company, of course, but he is still my brother.”

“I will lend you my brother Percy, if needs be, if you will lend me Edmund for a dance or two,” Diana said with a twinkle in her eye. “I’m sure that neither of them will complain.”

Edmund gave them a short bow of acquiescence from where he stood beside the fireplace, meeting Diana’s eyes briefly and knowingly as he rose.

As was arranged between Esther and Unity, the Turner family was the first to call on the Arnolds that day. There were many arrangements to be finalized for the Season. Lord Templeton remained in bed to recover from the long journey, and Percy was meeting his father’s agent in his stead.

Edmund leaned against the mantelpiece, watching Diana’s small but capable hands at work with the cards. His nagging worry over Lady Birks’s escape was temporarily put aside as he watched the successive expressions of pleasure chasing across Diana’s face. She was radiant today with a glow as intense as when she lay naked with him on the forest floor, seeming to draw him closer with each gasping breath.

Diana had clearly taken the message about Lady Birks well. When Edmund arrived with Beatrice and the family clustered around to welcome them, she only pressed his arm and whispered briefly in his ear that they would find her soon.

Then, with a knowing glance at Beatrice, she fell back, and her voice took up the normal register for a social call with family friends.

Lady Templeton and the Dowager Duchess both smiled at Diana indulgently as she sifted excitedly through the various invitation cards, showing some to Beatrice and setting others aside for particular consideration later.

Her clear delight over the invitations felt like ample reward to Edmund for the efforts he and Jacob had made on her behalf and Kitty's. With her father's health improving every day, her betrothal to the man she loved, and her season about to begin, Diana seemed brimming over with joy.

"You're invited to many of the same events too, Kitty, apart from those for girls in their first season," Unity said to the dark-haired young woman sitting quietly in the corner, trying to draw her into the conversation and fun.

"You've been very kind," Kitty murmured, a slight wobble in her voice. "Everyone has been so exceedingly kind to me. Do excuse me for a moment. I will ask the servants to bring more tea."

She left the room as unobtrusively as she could, Edmund guessing that recent traumas and the news of her mother's escape both affected her more than she cared to reveal.

He wondered what he should say to Jacob when he asked him how Kitty was faring but then found his eyes drawn back again to Diana, who was laughing happily again as Beatrice

showed her how she intended to wear her hair for the court presentation.

“What are you staring at, Edmund?” Beatrice asked. “You look like you’re going cross-eyed.”

“Beatrice!” Unity warned while shooting her son a cautionary smile. He straightened up and composed his face.

“Well, he is just standing there staring at us,” Beatrice complained. “He’s been doing it the whole time.”

“I’m looking at you, young monster, finally putting up your hair, wearing long skirts and planning to attend balls. The same girl who was putting holly in my bed and hiding toads in my desk only last year.”

“I was not!” his sister denied, blushing. “Anyway, that was years ago.”

The two mothers laughed, and after a moment, Beatrice joined in too.

“He’s such a tease,” she told Diana, who quickly drew her back into perusing the invitations with only a tantalizing flicker of her eyes at Edmund.



Holding the loop that held the skirts of her elaborate white and pale gold dress high enough to walk, Diana waited nervously



in the line of young ladies queued before the grand drawing room door at St James Palace.

Higher in the order of social precedence, Beatrice— as a duke's daughter— would have been presented slightly earlier in the afternoon. The ladies around Diana now were unfamiliar and distracted with their last-minute tweaking of hair and dresses. Some of the mothers looked at her speculatively, but she told herself that they would probably look at anyone in the same way.

Diana imagined Kitty being presented by Lady Birks five years earlier, with so many hopes and dreams of her own. She even remembered reading scraps of newspaper sent by Lady Birks reporting that year's presentation and showing that Kitty had been thought one of the brightest and most beautiful of that Season's newcomers.

Now, at Percy's insistence, Kitty was out riding with him, the Arnolds wishing her to be occupied and included. By birth and by virtue of her previous presentation to the Queen, Kitty might have accompanied Lady Templeton today, but they all knew the social ripples her appearance at court could cause despite her innocence. Kitty herself had ruled out the possibility before Esther could even raise it.

Diana's headdress with its eight ostrich feathers and strings of tiny pearls had been placed carefully on her blonde curls that morning by her mother's maid and adjusted to perfection by Lady Templeton as they stood in line to wait her turn. Her satin slippers felt strange and new on her feet, and she only hoped she would be able to curtsy fully without falling.

As they drew closer to the doorway, Diana turned to look nervously at her mother.

“Mother...”

“You will be fine, my darling girl. You know what to do.”

Then, they were through the doorway, and a servant in a powdered wig and striking uniform announced their names and titles. At the end of the room on a large chaise lounge, surrounded by small dogs and colorfully arrayed ladies-in-waiting, sat Queen Charlotte herself. She was an imposing figure in the most ornate gown and wig that Diana had ever seen.

Diana walked forward gracefully as she had practiced with her mother and bent her knee to the ground in a deep curtsy before the Queen, lightly kissing the be-ringed hand extended to her and then rising without a single wobble. An instinctive smile broke out across her face at her accomplishment and seemed to pass to Queen Charlotte and her ladies, who all smiled back.

“I can see that you will be a wonderful addition to our society, Lady Diana,” the Queen said amicably. “I do look forward to seeing what you do next.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Diana said immediately despite her surprise at being addressed. “I’m honoured.”

At the Queen’s nod, she backed away carefully until she met her mother at the door, avoiding turning her back on the monarch. Then, they were ushered out once more by the palace servants.



Once the nerve-wracking experience of her presentation to Queen Charlotte was done, the first few weeks of the Season were the colorful whirl that Diana had always imagined. Escorted by Percy and accompanied by her mother, or as part of the Colborne party when her mother was busy with Lord Templeton's care, Diana had the time of her life.

"Is it all you imagined, Diana?" Esther asked her daughter affectionately as they travelled back in their carriage late one night after a private concert, supper and dance given by the Honourable Mrs. Arabella Grant.

Percy sat on the seat opposite them snoring gently, his hat slipping down over his face. Diana giggled at her brother and then laid her head on her mother's shoulder and sighed contentedly, unable to believe how lucky she was.

"Oh, it's wonderful, Mother! All of it. Concerts, suppers, dances, theatre trips, outings on lakes... and so many balls still to come. Thank you so much."

Misty-eyed, Esther looked at her happy daughter in her delicate blue ballgown, slippers and her grandmother's pearls and diamonds.

"To be young and in love is a wonderful thing indeed, isn't it?" she said, and Diana nodded with another laugh.

Diana had danced until dawn ball after ball so far, always ending the evening in Edmund's arms, whispering together,

longing for one another, and wishing that the final dance would never stop.

“I only wish that there was something more I could do for Kitty,” Diana added quietly.

“Well, I’m glad that the hostesses and all of you young people are including Kitty so much. Even if she declines to join, I think it matters for her to know that she’s wanted.”

“Kitty has only been to a handful of social events so far,” Diana observed. “Lord Wycliff is very disappointed, poor man. He looks for her everywhere but must make do with me and Edmund’s sisters. Kitty just pleads her duty to keep company at home with Father after all the kindness you have shown her.”

“We must give Kitty time,” her mother stated. “She’s too sad to enjoy anything and more worried about her mother than she dares to tell us. I don’t like to think about it, but if Henrietta has been out in the countryside for so long with no food or shelter, perhaps she is no more. I’m sure this is on Kitty’s mind too.”

Diana kissed her mother’s cheek, seeing the glint of a tear in her eye.

“That would be a terrible end to all this, Mother,” she said, keeping to herself the rather un-Christian thought that it actually might be the best outcome for everyone.

In sympathy, Diana insisted on Kitty at least accompanying her on her regular walks in Regents Park with Edmund where they would often be joined by Jacob. Despite Lord Wycliff's kindness and thoughtful attention to her, Kitty remained despondent and took little notice of anything happening around her.

Edmund was of the same opinion as Lady Templeton, arguing that she needed time, but Diana remained sad for her cousin. Her own life was blossoming in every direction while Kitty's had been struck and blighted by a storm.

After her mother's words in the coach, Diana felt that they were waiting every day for news of Lady Birks's demise. Hope and guilt swirled in her chest every time she looked at Kitty.

When Mr. Langford's next express letter arrived at breakfast time two days later, the Arnolds all froze and looked at Esther as she opened it. Everyone seemed to be waiting for the ax to fall.

Lady Templeton read the short message quickly and then looked at her white-faced niece with great compassion.

"Kitty, I'm so sorry. It's news of your mother from Mr. Langford. He writes only briefly, but I'm afraid they've found a body..."

## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

“The Duchess of Granby cornered me last night, Edmund,” Sophia told Edmund at breakfast.

“Did she indeed?” he murmured, not having any interest in the Granbys, and having paid little attention to anyone but Diana at last night’s ball.

“Oh yes. She wanted to know all about Diana, actually. I think she has her in mind for one of her sons, maybe even the eldest.”

Edmund laughed out loud.

“Is that so? Well, I hope you didn’t give the Duchess any false hopes.”

Unity looked on with silent interest to see how Edmund would play this conversation with his sister without revealing his engagement to Diana.

“The second son is nice,” Beatrice commented. “Alfred brought me sherbet when I was exhausted by all the dancing.”

“That’s nice, Beatrice. No, Edmund, but I did tell her how admired Diana was everywhere she goes, and how all the best families want to know her.”

Edmund could only shake his head in both amusement and bemusement at the turnaround in opinion wrought over only a few weeks. London society was even more hypocritical than he had thought.

“That much is certainly true, and I am definitely amongst her most ardent admirers, as you know.”

“Don’t tease, Ed!” Sophia said severely. “I just wanted to warn you that you have competitors out there, and if you are thinking of making an offer, I wouldn’t want you to miss your chance. None of us would.”

“What makes you think that I’m considering an offer to Lady Diana?” he asked innocently. Sophia and Beatrice looked at one another and burst into laughter as their mother shook her head and drank her tea.

“Because it’s entirely obvious,” Beatrice said. “You get dreamy eyes when you look at her.”

“In that case, there’s nothing more to be said on the matter.” Edmund smiled gently and rose from the table. “You must be right. Speaking of Diana, I do want to call on the Arnolds this morning after yesterday’s news.”

“What news?” Beatrice asked, and Sophia quickly whispered in her ear.

Unity nodded compassionately.

“Do tell them that I will call this afternoon too if that is convenient for the ladies.”

“Will Lady Katherine be in mourning?” Beatrice asked. “Even though her mother was a—”

“Speak no ill of the dead, Beatrice,” Unity interrupted her daughter kindly but firmly. “I do not know what Kitty will do in this regard, or even what she should do. Still, she has been so reclusive this season that perhaps it will not be commented on either way.”

“Diana and Lady Templeton have been worried about her, but I think that Lady Katherine’s social absence and shyness of company have worked in her favour in some respects,” Edmund mused.

“Yes, poor girl. I suppose she is acting as society believes a young woman should act when their family has been so disgraced and this is endearing her to those who might otherwise judge her ill.”

“I overheard them talking about Kitty last night,” Sophia said. “All the elderly matrons in Marchioness Hadlow’s set.”



“Speaking unkindly?” Unity asked quickly, her expression indicating that she might have words to say to the Marchioness and her friends if so.

“No, not at all. They’re very sorry for her as you’ve said. They were only saying how lucky Kitty was to have been taken in by the Fernside Arnolds, otherwise, she would have been facing disaster and perhaps would even have been forced out of England along with her bankrupt brother.”

“Not to be repeated, Beatrice,” Unity directed the oft-repeated stricture at her youngest and most garrulous child. “They’re right though, Sophia. Well, if these ladies are taking pity on her, perhaps that is the best Kitty can hope for, I’m afraid. It’s sad, but it is what it is.”

“Will she be an old maid now?” Beatrice asked cautiously.

“Maybe. There are worse things than that,” Edmund said, and his mother nodded in agreement. “At least she’s not a social outcast.”



Edmund thought about the breakfast conversation as he walked towards Belgravia, which was a good forty-five minutes from his family’s house. With her good manners, petite form and air of gentle reassurance, Diana was certainly being very much fêted around the Ton. He had already seen how society mothers were fussing over her, competing for her presence, and seeking her interest for their single sons.

Edmund had already known that Diana was lovable and now saw it confirmed at every turn by those around them. Elderly

ladies pronounced her as charming and elegant as any young woman ever presented. The fathers of eligible sons took care to call on Lord Templeton on the slightest pretexts, slipping the excellent prospects of their offspring into casual conversation.

Young men looked at her with longing eyes while mothers and sisters jostled to introduce her to their bachelor menfolk. Still, Edmund felt no jealousy at seeing her spin by at a dance in the arms of others, her eyes ever catching his and sharing that secret smile that promised him they would soon be alone together once more.

As for Kitty, while she was obviously no longer considered a suitable match for the sons of the elite, as a charity case, an object of pity and an undemanding addition to make up numbers at afternoon tea parties, she was certainly welcomed.

It was indeed as though inevitable spinsterhood had descended on Lady Katherine Arnold overnight despite her years, her beauty and the kind, vivacious personality she had once possessed. Although Jacob might happily marry her regardless of fortune and reputation, he had no confidence that Kitty would accept his hand, or that hi0073D` family would accept the match. It was better that no one had false hopes about Kitty's future.



“Have you read the gossip rags this week, Ed?” Jacob asked as they sat in a park café drinking lemonade and wolfing down cake one sunny afternoon as they recovered after a dance that had continued until 4 am the previous night.

“I never look at them, Jacob,” Edmund answered. “Sophia reads them aloud to me at breakfast sometimes, but I think she’s been too busy this week with preparations for Beatrice’s coming out ball.”

“You should read this one.” Jacob smiled mysteriously and pushed a paper across the table to him.

“Rumor has it that one of the Arnold girls has already found a permanent dance partner, with the young huntress making the same choice at the end of every ball this month. Could this be the first engagement of the Season? And how will Lady Alton and the Duchess of Stratton decide who should get the credit for bringing together such a well-matched pair?”

Edmund raised an eyebrow and shot a smile at his friend with a shrug.

“It’s certainly not Lady Katherine they’re referring to, is it?” Jacob said regretfully. “I go to every ball on the chance that she will be there, but she never is... No, it’s obviously you and Diana who are being noticed.”

“Well, it’s all perfectly true apart from the bit about Lady Alton and the Duchess of Stratton. We’ll give them what they want at the end of the Season anyway.”

“I understand. But be careful with Diana’s reputation for now, and especially where you put your hands. I know you’re betrothed but others don’t, and these rags can turn nasty quickly. I’ve seen it happen before. You should show her this and have a little chat, I think.”

With their secret engagement and the family's regard for Edmund, no one pressed to chaperone their daytime meetings at the Arnolds' London house, although he often did bring his mother or sisters with him. Today, he was there alone to relay his conversation with Jacob, although he did not feel the same level of concern as his friend.

Diana thought the gossip column very funny and laughed as she dropped it back on a table in the family drawing room.

"They've got to talk about something." Edmund smiled. "This week it's us. Next week it will be some other couple. It's all just part and parcel of the Season's fun for some."

Diana looked at him speculatively and then stepped forward to place her arms around his neck.

"Well, I wonder what they would all say," she said softly into his ear as he bent towards her face for a kiss, "if they knew that I was already carrying your child..."

## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

Edmund looked at Diana with surprise and wonder, and then laughed, his arms finding their way inevitably around her.

“Really? Are you sure?”

Diana nodded, shy pleasure in her expression.

“This is the second month I haven’t bled, and everything feels... different.”

“Oh Diana.” Edmund whirled her around in his arms and kissed her full on the lips. “You are with child! I thought you looked more beautiful than ever. Now I know why.”

After a moment of reflection, an expression of concern settled on his face, overlying the joy that remained beneath.

“But we will have to marry very quickly now. I’m sorry. There can be no delay.”

“Sorry?” Diana asked, stroking his face with her hands. “I’m not sorry at all. What are you sorry for?”

“Sorry for being so impetuous in the woods. Sorry that you won’t get your full season after all. It meant so much to you, and I wanted you to have it.”

“Edmund Turner.” She laughed again. “I’ve had almost a month in London, and that has already confirmed that there is only one man I want to dance with and he’s in my arms right now.”

Edmund smiled again and dropped to one knee on the carpet before her, taking her hand in his.

“Diana Arnold, will you marry me?”

“Yes,” she replied, a mischievous dimple appearing on her cheek. “How many times do I have to tell you, Edmund Turner?”



As he strolled home early that evening, Edmund felt pleasantly light-headed with the developments of the day, the speedy agreement he had reached with Lord and Lady Templeton, and the several glasses of champagne forced on him by Percy afterwards.

The Arnold family had been happy and accepting of the new proposal, and there had been little questioning of Edmund and Diana’s explanation for the changed speed of their wedding. The gossip column almost publicly outing their romance and

the rapid improvement of Lord Templeton's health were both seen as sensible and sufficient justifications for quicker action.

At his mother's dictation, Percy speedily composed and despatched an announcement of the upcoming nuptials for the following morning's *Times* and then sent an urgent request for a home visit from Madame Corvette, the dressmaker. In consultation with her father, Diana put together a rather short list of those who should be invited to the service and wedding feast, limited to friends and relatives currently in London.

Meanwhile, Edmund wrote a short message to the Vicar at a church near his London home requesting a short interview the following day and hoping that his family had done enough in terms of service attendance and good works to be considered parishioners.

Once these tasks were complete and messenger boys were racing through the streets of London, a bottle of champagne was cracked open, and even Lord Templeton managed a small glass.

Humming happily to himself as he walked through his front door, Edmund was pleased to see his mother come out to meet him in the hallway.

"I have something for you, Mother," he said with a playful grin, producing Diana's guest list from his pocket for Unity to add her side of the family. "We've decided to move faster after all."

"Aha!" Unity said, looking at the names under the heading 'Arnold' beside the empty 'Colborne' column and instantly

grasping what was afoot. She smiled and pulled down her tall son's face to kiss his cheek but seemed distracted.

"I have something for you too. Less pleasant news, I'm afraid. This came by an express messenger about half an hour ago."

She handed over a short note in an unfamiliar hand addressed to him, or to her in his absence.

"Good God!" Edmund exclaimed as he read the first lines of the message from Mr. Langford, instantly sobering up despite the earlier champagne. "Can it be true?"

*"I am sorry to say that the situation is far worse than we imagined when I wrote my previous letter. It seems that Lady Birks's cunning and criminal mentality were both far stronger than her guards were prepared for. After slipping away from them, she did not go to ground locally as we imagined, but she assaulted and robbed an elderly lady of her money and clothing."*

With a surge of adrenaline and a wave of cold sweat, Edmund felt himself being ripped from the blissful and erotic imagination of imminent marriage to Diana back into the nightmare of Lady Birks's insanity.

*"It was the corpse of this tragic woman who was found and mistaken for Lady Birks."*

"She's alive..." he muttered, cursing under his breath, and forgetting to excuse his language to his mother.



*“Her victim was left bound and gagged in a shed, wearing Lady Birks’s outfit, and bludgeoned to death, deliberately confusing identification. Meanwhile, Lady Birks took this lady’s place in the stagecoach to London, apparently changing coaches twice enroute. I am notifying the Bow Street Office and London Magistrates by the same express post. I pray my message reaches you all before Lady Birks can arrive in London.”*

“I must get word to the Arnolds,” Edmund said urgently. “We should set armed guards at both houses and go out as little as possible until this woman is caught again. Perhaps Diana would be better here with us... I must think. Where are Sophia and Beatrice?”

“They’re upstairs, perfectly safe. I didn’t know what time you’d be back, so I’ve already sent out a message to Bow Street myself. They may call on you, I suspect, since you’ve met Lady Birks and were part of the original arresting party.”

Edmund nodded as they walked towards the study. He opened a locked drawer where he kept a small pistol and slipped it into his jacket before he sat down at his desk.

“With Mr. Langford’s letter, I hope the Bow Street Runners are putting out alerts across the city already,” he said. “Let’s hope that London’s professional criminal investigators and law enforcers are more of a match to Lady Birks than the local guards and constables.”

He took out ink, a quill and paper and then shook his head.

“Rather than write, I’d like to quickly ride back to the Arnolds in person, but I don’t want to leave you and the girls here alone and unprotected.”

“You’re not the only one who can shoot straight, Edmund,” Unity reminded him crisply with a flash of her own pistol which had been concealed in the pocket of her skirts. His surprise made her smile.

“You forget, Edmund, that your father held a commission in the army until you were five and I was a soldier’s wife living in Scotland during the Jacobite uprising. We didn’t know whom we could trust. Your father made sure I could protect myself, and you, from raiders and spies while he took his regiment north. Paid guards are all very well, but it doesn’t do to be defenseless.”

“Mother, you are a marvel,” Edmund said with some relief. “In that case, I will take the message myself and return as quickly as I can. But first, we must see to paid guards. They have their place, as you say.”

“I’ve already spoken to Grigson about security for this house. He will be bringing in some suitable men for you to interview tonight.”

Edmund nodded.

“I will make sure we have those who are trained and armed as required. Do the other staff know, apart from Grigson?”

“They know that they’re not to bring in anyone from outside and that there’s a dangerous female murderer on the loose who might try to get into the house. The youngest maid was apparently so scared that she fainted.”

“At least the wedding announcement for the *Times* didn’t mention the venue,” Edmund mused.

Calling for his horse to be saddled quickly, he went to fetch his coat and riding boots.



Jacob was already at the Arnolds’ house in Belgravia when Edmund arrived. Lord Wycliff had been dining at his club with Percy when a message from Diana summoned the latter home urgently.

Lord Templeton sat upright in a comfortable chair by the fireplace in the drawing room, leaning forward on the cane he was still using to help him walk. Having lost so much weight due to the poisoning, his face looked gaunt and spare, but there was spirit and energy in his manner again.

“That infernal woman couldn’t even rest easy in a grave,” he was saying to his wife as Edmund entered the room. He then launched into a more fulsome blast of bitter, if deserved, invective against Lady Birks.

“Where’s Kitty?” Edmund whispered to Percy and Jacob as Lord Templeton’s words made his wife blush.

“Upstairs in her room,” Percy answered. “Diana is checking on her now. This latest news has been too much...”

“Lord Templeton, Lady Templeton,” Edmund called, drawing their attention to his arrival.

“Edmund, thank you so much for coming back,” Lady Templeton said, standing up to draw him further into the room. “Mr. Langford said that he had written to you too. Such appalling news. You must be as concerned as we are.”

“It’s horrific,” Edmund agreed. “There are clearly no depths she won’t sink to. We must have armed guards at both houses.”

Then, without prevarication, he added, “I would urge you also to consider temporarily moving the household to a secret location until Lady Birks is apprehended.”

“During the Season?” Jacob asked doubtfully. “Every empty house in London is rented, Edmund, and all the suitable hotels were bought out months ago. Even if the Arnolds went to stay with friends, they would be known and found as easily as here.”

“That young fellow is quite right,” Lord Templeton said from his chair. “And why should we be hounded from our home by that madwoman? No, what you said first was right, Edmund. We must have armed guards. Jenson is a good man with a gun, and we have Percy. But we’ll need more, especially with me in this state.”

“Let me stay with you, Lord Templeton,” Jacob offered. “I’m an excellent shot, and I have no wife or children of my own to consider. If you agree, I’ll send for my man to bring over my two best pistols and ammunition right now.”

“Could you fight a woman, eh?” Lord Templeton questioned. “I’m not sure Percy could, although he’s a strong enough hunter. Personally, I’d put a bullet between her eyes as soon as I’d look at her if my hands weren’t still so shaky from that poison.”

“Woman or not, I can do whatever is necessary to keep your family safe, Lord Templeton,” Jacob answered stoutly. “When a dog becomes a killer, putting it down is the kindest option for everyone.”

“Make sure you don’t repeat that in front of Kitty,” Diana muttered, entering the room, and closing the door behind her. “She’s distraught already. I’ve given her a sleeping draught.”

“I’ll be interviewing and appointing armed guards for Colborne House tonight. Would you like me to also select some men to join Jenson, Percy, and Jacob here?”

“Thank you, Edmund.” Lady Templeton said as her husband nodded approvingly.

“I just wish I could be here myself, as well as at Colborne House,” Edmund admitted a few minutes later as Diana walked with him to the front door. Diana nodded her understanding and kissed him swiftly on the cheek behind Jenson’s back as he opened the door.

“I will be quite safe here with Percy and Jacob,” she reassured him. “Go and deal with the armed guards, the Bow Street Runners and the church for our wedding.”



The six days that followed were tense but uneventful. A single possible sighting of Lady Birks was reported to Bow Street from one of the minor staging posts on the outskirts of London, but then, the trail went dead and nothing more was heard.

Bow Street officers temporarily increased their night patrols in the vicinity of both Colborne House and the Arnolds' London home. A warning and paid request for information had also been issued to all London apothecaries to make sure that they would be better paid for turning in Henrietta than selling her poison. Meanwhile, Edmund went about town each day fully armed and on high alert.

The sudden disappearance of Diana from the social scene was noticed, but the explanation of busy wedding preparations was grudgingly accepted as the reason for her withdrawal. The excitement following the sudden announcement in the *Times* along with invitations to the church service and feast of the Season's first wedding were acceptable consolation prizes to soothe the ruffled feathers of various society hostesses.

Thankfully, the news of Lady Birks's escape and flight to London had not yet made it into the society press, although sketches of her face were pinned up at crossroad inns and staging points around the city, offering a financial reward for the capture of this dangerous criminal. Edmund guessed that it was only a matter of time before the story blew up one way or another.

He longed ever more for his wedding day, now duly arranged at All Saints church near his home. Before Lady Birks's unexpected return from the dead, Edmund's anticipation of the wedding had been more about simply being together with Diana again and free to make love to her whenever they both wished.

Now, his longing was equally about keeping Diana safe. Edmund was determined that nothing would be allowed to threaten his wife and child. After the wedding feast, he and Diana would depart for Colborne estates in the Scottish Highlands. They planned to remain there until after the birth of their child.

No more guns, no more poison and no more murderously insane relatives. Was that too much to ask?

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

**B**arely a week after sharing her news with Edmund, Diana stood outside the church doors with her father. The morning of the wedding had finally arrived.

Her bridesmaids, Sophia and Beatrice, chattered excitedly behind her, delighted to have such a role in the first wedding of the Season. By virtue of their lack of acquaintance with Lady Birks, they were less disturbed than the rest of the family by her still being at large.

Kitty, as maid of honour, smiled as much as she could in handing Diana her bouquet and then gave the signal for the younger women to lift the small train, ready to enter the church.

“I wish you both every happiness,” Kitty whispered, kissing Diana’s cheek, and falling back to take her place at the rear of the small procession. Diana looked back with tears in her eyes and mouthed a thank you.

There had still been no real questioning of the acceleration of their marriage. Lady Birks’s escape had seized the families’ imaginations, displacing any speculation that might otherwise have taken place. And an unexpected message of



congratulations from the Queen herself set the ultimate approval on proceedings.

Even the seamstress letting out the bosom of Diana's presentation dress, now modified and simplified for her wedding, passed entirely without comment. Diana's queasiness first thing in the morning was attributed only to wedding nerves on top of the situation with Lady Birks.

With a nod from Diana to the two ushers, the doors were opened, and she stepped inside the church by her father's side. While the pews were full of acquaintances and fashionable London folk who wished to be seen at this royally supported wedding, Diana only saw Edmund, tall, dark, and handsome at the altar with Jacob beside him.

Edmund's green eyes flashed as he watched her approaching, mirroring the physical longing that she also felt. Looking at Diana's bouquet of ferns and forest flowers, he smiled, and her love and desire for him blazed through her body.

Finally, they were standing together at the altar and the service began.

*“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God...”*

Edmund's hand was as warm and reassuring on hers as the first time he had taken it in the library and then danced with her around the room. She also knew how good his hands would feel again on her body later that night after all ceremony and social obligations were done with.

*“... if anyone here knows of any impediment, why this man and this woman may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, confess it now...”*

A loud cry of “Yes!” crashed into Diana’s daydream and shattered it, the whole congregation gasping and twisting in their seats to see who had spoken.

Edmund and Diana turned around and looked down the aisle. A figure in heavy, old-fashioned puce brocade with a matching hat and veil could be seen about halfway down the church standing and pointing at them accusingly.

People began muttering and shrugging.

“Lady Hadlow...”

“The Dowager Marchioness of Hadlow.”

“Old Hadlow’s widow...”

The figure in puce raised her head and lifted her veil. It was not the Marchioness of Hadlow.

“Diana Arnold is promised in marriage to my son, and no other man shall ever have her!” Lady Birks shrieked, raising a knife that had been hidden in her skirts.

There was a moment of uproar as the congregation screamed and scabbled away from the madwoman with the knife.

Edmund put Diana behind him.

“No, Mother!” Kitty shouted, rushing down the aisle and standing in front of her mother before she could reach the couple at the altar. “Don’t do this. Please don’t do this!”

Lady Birks cackled. “If you get in my way, Kitty, I’ll slit your throat first and—.”

Before she could finish her threat, the church doors burst open, and two Bow Street officers ran inside, brandishing pistols which they aimed at Lady Birks’s head.

“Stop or we’ll shoot!” they shouted as the congregation ducked down for cover in the pews, many now too terrified to even scream.

“This is a house of God!” Reverend Mayford called out desperately. “Your weapons are all sacrilege here.”

By now, Edmund had drawn his own small pistol and trained it on Lady Birks with an unwavering hand. From the front pew, Unity did the same thing to the surprise of other members of the Turner and Arnold families around her. Diana felt the same surprise but also a good deal of admiration for the woman who had raised Edmund so well.

“There are four guns now pointing at your head, Lady Birks,” Edmund warned. “If you come one step closer to Diana, I will be forced to shoot you. For everyone’s sake, go quietly with the good gentlemen who have come to collect you.”

“You have no right to steal what belongs to my Andrew,” Henrietta hissed. “You think you can do whatever you want, Colborne, but she’s not yours to take.”

“You have no right to talk about me like that!” Diana exclaimed, looking at her aunt from behind Edmund, unable to keep quiet any longer. “This is the nineteenth century, and the only people who have any say in my life are my parents until my twenty-first birthday and the husband I choose for myself. I don’t belong to Andrew or you. I never have and I never will.”

Raging at Diana’s words, Lady Birks raised her knife, and Kitty cried out once more as she saw fingers tightening on the triggers.

“Oh God, no! They’re going to kill her... Mother!”

With all the congregation’s attention on the spectacle of Lady Birks, the couple at the altar and the four guns, no one had noticed Jacob quietly emptying out a large wooden bin of soft pew cushions in the corner of the church and unobtrusively stepping back into the front row of seats close to Lady Birks.

At Kitty’s cry, Jacob jumped swiftly on the bench and dropped the wooden bin neatly down over Lady Birks’s head, knocking her to the ground stunned and freeing the knife from her grasp. He then immediately rolled the barrel up the aisle until he reached the two Bow Street officers, Lady Birks’s feet spinning and kicking at one side.

“All yours,” he said shortly. “Take her away and lock her up. You should also look for the Marchioness of Hadlow whose

clothes and invitation appear to have been stolen by this woman. She may have come to grief.”

“You, you, you...” Lady Birks sputtered impotently at Jacob as she was extracted from the barrel and chained by the officers, now hatless and missing a shoe. Everyone else in the church was completely silent, unable to quite believe any of the scenes they had just witnessed.

“Before you go, I just want to tell you,” Lord Wycliff said with dignity as the Bow Street officers prepared to take her away, “your dog Fluffles is a bloody awful animal and you deserved one another.”

A collective sigh of relief, a loud wave of chattering, a few scattered snorts of laughter and rounds of applause rang through the church as Jacob returned to his place in the front row. He helped Kitty up from where she was sobbing on the ground and delivered her into Esther’s kind arms before he sat down again.

“Well played, Jake,” Edmund said, putting the safety catch back on his pistol and returning it to his pocket. Diana took hold of his hand again, and they turned back towards the red-faced and sweating priest.

“Given the disruption, I think it would be best if we—”

“Complete the wedding service immediately,” Diana sweetly said, cutting across Reverend Mayford’s suggestion before it could be voiced. “Yes, we agree.”

Reverend Mayford looked rapidly around the church where most of the congregation had found their seats again and waited expectantly for something else to happen.

“That woman wanted to prevent this wedding for her own evil ends and was willing to bring violence into your church to accomplish that. Don’t let her win,” Edmund urged.

Gulping down a deep breath, the priest mopped his brow and then nodded.

“If anyone here,” he began weakly, his voice gaining volume and resonance as he continued, “knows of any impediment, why this man and this woman may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, confess it now...”

After several long heartbeats of silence, parts of the church burst into laughter, and the wedding service proceeded to its normal conclusion.

Jacob was still sitting in the front pew when Edmund and Diana returned from signing the register. The rest of the congregation was waiting outside to shower the happy couple in rice, flour petals and good wishes.

“I thought you’d want to know that the Marchioness of Hadlow has been found and is unharmed apart from shock and a few bruises. Lady Birks hid in her carriage house and somehow managed to hijack the old lady on her way here. The coachman found the Marchioness inside the coach bound and gagged in her underclothes. They’ve taken her to her sister’s house to recover.”

Diana breathed out and nodded.

“Thank you, Jacob. Poor woman! But she was luckier than Lady Birks’s other victim. We were all lucky, and you were both very brave today.”

Jacob shrugged off her praise, always uncomfortable with attention being drawn to his good deeds. He quickly changed the subject.

“Despite being put together so quickly, I can say definitively that this has been the wedding of the Season. The whole *ton* will be talking about it for years to come.”

“Then it’s probably just as well that we’re going to Scotland for a little while,” Diana commented, a smile dimpling her face.



“If there’s one thing that everyone, friends and family alike, know about Edmund Turner, Duke of Colborne, it’s his excellent judgement in all things. Including his best man obviously... and his choice of bride.”

“Here, here,” some of the guests called out, clinking glasses, and laughing as Jacob opened his speech at the wedding feast. Following the drama in the church, many of those present had already taken a drink or two more than their usual quota.

Noting that he was banned from relating any stories from their university years (cries of “shame!” echoed from some of the

older gentlemen but were quickly hushed by their wives), Jacob instead went back to Edmund's school days.

Not having been at school with Edmund himself, Jacob brought in Percy to relate some more innocent jokes and scrapes suitable for the family audience, ending with the story of how Edmund had once helped Diana after she sprained her ankle falling from a tree as a girl.

At first, the audience was puzzled, wondering how this last tale fit in with anything, or where the joke might be. But Jacob quickly picked up the thread again.

“So, if Lady Alton, the Duchess of Stratton, or any of our other kind hostesses this season are still wondering where this match was first made and who was responsible, perhaps the award cannot be given to any of you after all. I suspect it began at Fernside, only in friendship and kindness, and was made in the woods of that fine estate.”

Diana and Edmund smiled silently at one another, giving nothing away to their audience.

Without speaking the names of Lady Birks or her son, Jacob talked of the difficult times the Arnold family had recently experienced and how Edmund's support and friendship had helped to see them through. Diana too had been a rock for her family through thick and thin regardless of her own feelings, taking on more than her share of responsibilities.

“Here, here,” Percy cried with feeling. “Couldn't have done without Diana or the two of you!”



“After this meal, the Duke and Duchess of Colborne will be departing London for their Scottish estate, Edwick House, up in the Highlands. More usually, of course, we hear stories of young couples running away to Scotland before a wedding takes place...”

Laughter echoed around the grand hall as Jacob raised his eyebrow, some of the older ladies ready to be disapproving of whatever he said next.

“But given two people as responsible and dutiful to their families as Edmund and Diana,” he continued, “I am unsurprised to find them reversing this convention. Join me now in wishing them well as I raise a toast to Edmund and Diana, the Duke and Duchess of Colborne!”

Glasses clinked and cheers for the newlyweds rang out.

## *Epilogue*

After the doctor departed into the snowy February night and the nurse had finished tucking up Diana and her well-wrapped baby in the giant feather bed, mother, father, and child were finally alone together.

Sometimes, it seemed that their months in Scotland were flying by quickly in beautiful walks together around the estate, rowing on the loch and teaching Diana to shoot on a homemade target range Edmund set up in the lower field where the view was clear in all directions and no one could wander within range accidentally.

Before he came to sit beside his little family, Edmund stirred up the fire and adjusted the curtains around the bed again to ensure they would be warm and safe from any ingress of the biting wind outside. Edwick House was a very old stone building, solid but drafty in some of the upper rooms where the wooden window frames were no longer tight. In the summer, he would commission repair works.

Oblivious for the moment to the passage of time, the biting wind, and the maintenance of Edwick House, Diana was gazing at their child with starry eyes and rocking the small form in her arms. When she felt Edmund's weight sink into the

mattress beside her, she looked at her husband with a tired but happy face.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” she asked, and she offered the child into Edmund’s arms for the first time.

He took hold of the swaddled little creature, the baby they had made together, carefully as if she were the most precious thing in the world.

“She is beautiful, Diana. She’s perfect, just like her mother.”

He dropped a kiss on his daughter’s forehead and then his wife’s lips.

“The doctor said she wasn’t a bad weight at all for such an early arrival,” Diana commented with a twinkle in her eye. “Six and a half pounds. She seems strong, too.”

“Good,” Edmund said. “Just small enough and far away enough that no one can ask inconvenient questions about dates. What shall we call her?”

Diana looked down again at the baby’s sweet, chubby little face still slightly purple from birth, and thought to herself.

“Iris,” she suggested. “What do you think of the name Iris?”

He remembered immediately the irises edging the glade where he had first made love to Diana, and where perhaps their

daughter was conceived.

“Iris is the right name for her,” he concurred. “Lady Iris Turner, do you find your name agreeable?”

The baby mewed and wriggled in his arms without opening her eyes.

Smiling, Diana leaned her head against Edmund’s shoulder and began to sing a lullaby.



“Look at this, you two.” Jacob laughed, pushing a piece of newspaper towards Diana and Edmund on the grass of the top lawn of Blackmore Manor, Edmund’s estate outside London.

Diana took it and read with a smile while Edmund continued to tickle Iris’s toes and blow raspberries on her belly to her evident delight. Lord and Lady Templeton dozed in comfortable chairs on the paving beside the conservatory while Edmund’s mother and sisters played croquet with Percy and Kitty on the middle lawn.

The whole family had been delighted to finally welcome little Iris to England, and short visits to Blackmore Manor had been extended and blended until the whole group was there together. Jacob had expressed some reticence about intruding on family occasions, but at the insistence of almost the whole party, he had stayed long beyond his originally planned week.

Edmund had been sad to see the way Jacob sought Kitty’s eyes when he last asked whether he should not return to London.

Older family members had insisted he stay to save Percy from being worn out as a dancing partner by all the girls. Younger family members wanted him to stay because he was so much fun. Edmund and Diana announced him as an adopted member of the family.

But Kitty had only sat alone, looking out the window and seemingly unaware that the question had even been asked or that Jacob was actually seeking her answer.

“The gossip sheets are wondering if the Duke and Duchess of Colborne will be gracing London with their presence this season,” Diana told Edmund, pushing the paper under his nose, and picking up Baby Iris who gurgled and batted happily at her mother’s face in the sunshine. “Apparently, a ball at Colborne House would be both welcomed and expected by the *ton* after our lengthy stay in Scotland.”

“Indeed?” Edmund said, reading the few paragraphs and seeing the small cartoon of a coach on the road from Scotland.

“I’m not sure I can be bothered.” Diana shrugged, and both men burst out laughing.

“Lady Colborne doesn’t want to dance? That’s a first.” Edmund grinned. “I’m not sure I believe it either. Nanny MacDowell will take good care of Iris, you know. She always does.”

Diana leaned over to kiss her husband.

“I always want to dance with you,” she assured him. “But I’ve never organized a ball. All those invitation lists, calls, working out precedence and so on. It does seem like an awful lot of work. I think I’d need a very good reason to hold a ball.”

“Three beautiful unmarried young ladies in the family. Is that not reason enough for any ball?” Jacob smiled. “Society ladies hold events for far poorer causes than that.”

“If we did, it would be the only ball of the Season that Kitty would probably attend,” Edmund observed. “I heard our mothers saying that she’d declined everything she could for this season. She’s only accepted a handful because Lady Templeton would like to attend her friends’ events and wanted her as a companion.”

“In that case,” Diana said with a gentle smile at Jacob, “perhaps we should. Our mothers can advise me on how everything is done after all, and your sisters will be very excited.”

“Who’ll be excited about what?” Percy asked merrily, ascending the slope to the top lawn, and swinging his croquet mallet as he walked. Beatrice and Sophia followed closely behind him, as jubilant in their victory as Percy was magnanimous in his defeat.

“We’re going to hold a ball this season.” Diana’s announcement was met with exclamations of pleasure from her brother and sisters-in-law.

“I do believe that you’re more excited than the girls, Percy,” Jacob teased.

“Young men do have feelings as strong as young women,” Unity observed with a smile, coming up the slope with her arm through Kitty’s. “There’s no shame in that, Jacob.”

“None at all,” Jacob agreed, springing to his feet. “Can I get chairs for you, ladies?”

His offer was declined by all but Unity, Edmund’s sisters preferring to sit on the ground with baby Iris and talk to Diana about the ball. Meanwhile, Kitty announced her intention to write some letters and went into the house alone, leaving Jacob gazing after her.



“What are we going to do about Jacob and Kitty?” Diana asked Edmund that night as they readied themselves for bed after dinner.

“There’s nothing we can do.” Edmund shrugged then sighed. “They must find their own way as best they can. It won’t be easy for either of them.”

Diana nodded then stripped down to her chemise.

“He’s so sad,” she observed, taking off her jewelry at the dressing table and brushing out her long blonde curls. Edmund came up behind her and kissed her hair, his hands on her shoulders and his deep green eyes meeting hers in the mirror.

“So was I when I thought I would never have you. There’s not much we can do to change their situations, but sometimes, things have a way of working themselves out, don’t they?”

“We were very lucky,” Diana said as she turned to meet his kiss. She sighed with pleasure as Edmund slowly and gently unfastened all remaining buttons and ties on her underclothes, drawing her to her feet and pushing the fabric away so that it fell to the floor.

Unhurried, he caressed his wife’s nude body lovingly from every angle until she pressed against him, seeking his mouth hungrily as one of her legs wrapped around his hip.

“Now it’s my turn,” Diana whispered huskily and began to deftly unfasten and strip away Edmund’s clothing, more impatient than he had been because of the arousal he had already sparked.

When they were both entirely naked, Edmund lifted Diana in his arms and carried her to the large oak bed which was the centerpiece of the bedroom suite, a family heirloom of unknown age and provenance.

The headboard and the four posters were carved with trees, flowers and fruits of the woodland, an image made familiar and highly erotic to both of them since their return to Blackmore Manor. Diana made a small sound of anticipation as Edmund laid her down beneath that scenery again.

“We were fortunate in this bed too,” he observed, settling himself beside Diana and stroking the length of her body



patiently with warm hands. “It seems to have been made for us.”

“Maybe one of your ancestors enjoyed loving his wife under the trees outside just as much as you,” Diana suggested breathlessly.

“Maybe his wife also enjoyed it just as much as you and he wished to remind her of such pleasure every time they lay down together in here at night.”

The only response from Diana was a long, drawn-out “ohhh!” as Edmund’s hand sought and found the slick, swollen center of her pleasure, fingering her lightly and kissing her deeply. He kept up the light pressure in time with the mounting of her excitement until she cried out sharply, overwhelmed by the intense spasms and helpless ripples of her climax.

Urgently then, she drew Edmund above her and felt the fullness and tingling upon receiving his member while she was still throbbing from the touch of his fingers.

“No wife ever enjoyed her husband as much as I enjoy you,” she declared, wrapping her legs firmly around his waist.

“Then I expect Iris will only be the first of our many children,” Edmund breathed with a smile, and all further words were lost in the loving compulsion of their bodies.

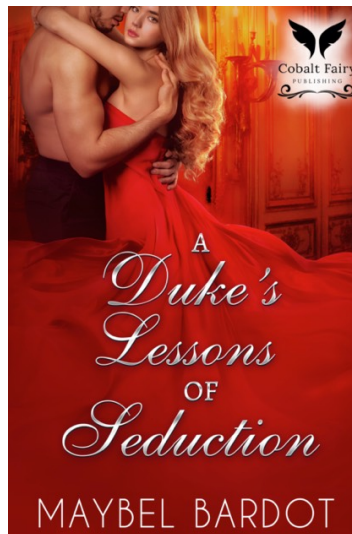
*The End?*

# *Extended Epilogue*

Are you eager to take a peak on **Diana and Edmund's** future?  
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*Preview: A Marquess to Prove  
me Wrong*

## *Chapter One*

“Oh dear, do I feel there is much work to be done this evening.” Charlotte wrinkled her nose, her eyebrows turned down dubiously, as she studied the first ball of the season. Handsome couples spun by, entranced in their dances while servants paced the ballroom, balancing trays of appetizers on their fingertips.

“Charlotte, that is no way to be,” Benedict grumbled.

“It is every way to be,” she refuted, digging her gloved fingers spitefully into her brother’s arm as he guided her onto the floor. “If I do not save the season’s debutantes from slaughter, then who will? All these mamas are parading their daughters about as if some terrible fate does not pursue them. It is positively sickening to watch.”

The ballroom of the mansion was bathed in a golden glow. On the ceiling, elegant chandeliers sent spires of brilliant light bounding across the room. On the far side of the floor, a violinist began a romantic, yet upbeat solo piece.

“Terrible?” Arabella frowned. “There is nothing terrible about marriage.”

“Marriage is not what I speak of.” It did take a moment for Charlotte to bite her tongue, as she was keen to make her own preferences known. Marriage was simply not for her. The very idea of giving oneself and all their agency and pride up for the hope of catering to a husband sounded far too difficult to stomach. “You simply have no idea how wretched and poorly behaved some of these men are. Isn’t that right, dear brother?”

Would you ever approve of our Arabella marrying that wicked Lord Lofton?"

"Absolutely not. The man is a brute."

Charlotte smiled, having proven her point. "Precisely."

When Benedict stepped aside to greet an acquaintance, Arabella was pouting, her soft brown curls obscuring the tilt of her eyebrows. "It is not nearly the way you make it sound," she said.

Charlotte crossed her arms, letting her gaze drift over the sea of faces—some familiar and some new to her eyes. "I do not detest marriage. I simply believe that if it is for you, then it is something that must bring joy. I want you to marry happily and with as much a romantic notion as can be achieved. Anything less is not worth pursuing."

Arabella nodded, biting her cheek. "That is my greatest wish, as well."

Charlotte smiled although she couldn't help her disappointment that her sister would never question anything different than the status quo. Life had to be more than birthing children and embroidering pillowcases that scratched at your cheeks as you slept.

Ladies had been taught to be fearful of anything else. In fact, sometimes the word *spinster* seemed like it was forbidden from even lingering on one's lips.

*Spinster.*

Everyone was afraid such a fate, but to Charlotte, it provided a comforting promise—a promise that she could be anyone she wanted, alone, without a man or child to define her. That was the greatest comfort in the world. When all was said and done, Charlotte desired to be someone great. The world seemed to only put praise on women that catered to a great husband or gave birth to a valuable man. Whatever she did now, whether people liked it or not, was to simply carve a space that was able to accommodate her talents alone.

"The night is wrought with possibility for you," Charlotte said, ignoring her innermost thoughts.

Arabella giggled, nervously glancing up at the handsome men that passed them by. She was the luckier sister. She was naturally more beautiful, graceful, and polite than Charlotte. As the pair passed by, Arabella did not seem to be ignored by many of the bachelor's at the evening's ball. Every man was hungry for success and tonight set the tone for the whole season. A lovely, bright-eyed, and obedient wife was the making of any season's diamond.

"For me, though..." Charlotte slumped just a little, straightening quickly when she imagined what her mother would say of her posture had she attended. "The season feels as boring and repetitive as it always has. It is as if everyone is too depressed to admit that I may spend the rest of my days enjoying the partnership of a parakeet and nothing else. Why am I here, but to keep up the charade?"

"You are so terribly pessimistic," Arabella shook her head. "Besides, what would you really do without your most beloved hobby? If you are not protecting the virtue of this season's debutantes, then where does that leave you? As a terrible pianist?"

"You are so cruel," Charlotte snapped. "I certainly enjoy other prospects, nor is my playing that bad."

Arabella giggled into her palm once more. "Yes, of course."

Charlotte startled when she felt a hot breath tickle her ear. "Your playing is indeed that bad, and so is your subtlety." Benedict leaned away, staring his sister down with a challenge in his eyes. He was older than his sister, and the heir to their late father's fortune. This was the fourth year that he was the Earl of Pemberton. He was tall, well-bred, and liked by the *ton*. Throughout their lives, these two Elkins siblings were far more likely to overshadow Charlotte at most anything.

"Do you think I wish to be subtle? May the whole *ton* fear my judgment."

He raised his eyebrows slightly as if to suggest that he doubted that she might enjoy being the subject of such gossip. "Do your sister and I a favor. Hate upon the sacred union of a man and wife quietly, but do not ruin the prospects of the young

ladies in attendance tonight. What you fail to realize is that every encounter is precious, and some men have the capacity to change.”

“So...” Charlotte grinned, a sardonic dimple punctuating her cheek. “Then you are warming up to Lord Lofton?” She turned her gaze to her sister. “Good news. I hear the wedding bells so clearly!”

“That is *not* what I meant,” Benedict was quick to point out. His strangled smile wasn’t lost on Charlotte. He had always liked their banter even when it ended at his own expense.

“That is—dare I say—what it sounded like,” she said. At some point in their conversation, Mary Ann; Benedict’s wife, had met back up with them, after a friend tugged her away upon their arrival. She glanced between the two siblings, disinterested in yet another argument.

“Are you not ashamed of yourself?” Benedict lowered his voice so as not to fluff out his dirty laundry in front of his peers.

“Ashamed? Nay,” she assured him. “I rather like the idea of making a spectacle out of myself.”

“Good.”

“*Good*,” she jeered back.

“Char—“

Mary Ann cleared her throat, interrupting his rebuttal. She leaned in close to their argument, shooting a decisive look her husband’s way that told him that he knew better.

“I do not recall the invitations including children,” she said. “So stop acting as such.” Delighted by all the admonishment her brother was getting, Charlotte lifted her head slightly to gloat. It wasn’t long until Mary Ann directed the same scathing look her way. She frowned, making an ugly face at her brother when their critic looked away from her.

He didn’t make a face, but Charlotte could tell in his dark eyes that he really didn’t appreciate her taking the last metaphorical word.

Once they were released, Benedict fell back in line with her and they quietly observed the dance floor. If either of them had anything rotten to say to the other, then it was best kept under wraps so as to avoid the ire of Mary Ann. She was positively bothersome, which is how Charlotte had always known she'd make a fantastic mother.

“Oh, my,” Charlotte smiled as her gaze settled on Lord Gouldsmith, a well-known rake. He was indeed very honeyed, his bed attracting an astonishing number of the *ton* into his grasp. It was very easy for a young lady to fall for a handsome face, but Charlotte likened herself to be completely immune to such charms.

That is, until she noticed the man shooting him a stern look. His gaze was so intense, it caused Charlotte to choke back a laugh. Benedict glanced at her warily, but couldn't tell what had made her laugh, a sentiment that seemed all the more distressing.

The man that stood opposite Lord Gouldsmith was perhaps the most handsome man that Charlotte had ever laid her eyes on. He was tall, broad-shouldered, his brown hair softly coiled and his brown eyes intense and unfaltering. She was immune to the charms of marriage, but that didn't mean that she was immune to the other charms a man might possess. It was best though to never get entangled in such matters. Even a fleeting look was an invitation too far to these rakes.

The young lady was positively simpering under Lord Gouldsmith's gaze. Beside her and the handsome man stood a woman so divinely similar in countenance that Charlotte could only assume she was the lady's mother. She didn't seem aware of the rumors either. Lord Gouldsmith had a penchant for attracting the attention of debutantes who were unaware of his desires.

“Is that...oh goodness, that *is* Lady Catherine.” Charlotte turned to offer a mischievous grin at her siblings. “I simply must offer my greetings.”

Charlotte began walking away, but after a few steps, it became clear that her siblings were aware that her attentions were



turned elsewhere.

“Oh no,” Arabella whispered.

“Come back this instant!” Benedict had tried to whisper, but Charlotte was too far away nor did she care to take any heed whatsoever.

She had to rescue this poor debutante. It was her duty.



It had been a while since William had been surrounded by the *ton*. It had been best that way because now that he was back, he had noticed well-meaning, yet patronizing looks that were thrown his way. William didn't like a lot of things, but most of all he hated pity. The thought that someone might think less of him because of what happened burned. Maybe if it were his choice, then perhaps he wouldn't feel such shame with each passing look. It wasn't though. None of this was his doing and that made it feel all the more pathetic.

William brushed off the looks and returned his attention to his younger sister Lavinia. She was debuting this season and as excited as could possibly be. Despite marriage being wrought with complications and anguish, she still retained such naivete and elation. Maybe she didn't know better or maybe she was just luckier than he was. Her dream was to marry well and so it was his dream to help her make such a match happen.

“Do you know him?” Lavinia turned her attention towards a man walking their way.

William sighed. “Ah.” It was all he could say because he was surprised to see his acquaintance from college, Arthur, who was the Earl of Gouldsmith. Of course, he didn't want his sister to marry down in rank, but he especially didn't want his sister marrying someone with such bad intentions. In fact, it wasn't his plan to marry. Lord Gouldsmith was attracted to all the benefits of marriage without making a commitment. Every season he vied for the debutantes. This was, however, bold of him, considering how well William knew of him. “Good

evening,” William said to his acquaintance. “It has been some time since I last saw you.”

“My condolences,” Arthur said, turning back to William. “I heard of the news of your broken engagement. I truly thought Miss Dawkes and you were meant to be.”

William narrowed his brows, annoyed at the way he had phrased it, and even more annoyed that he brought it up. His mother shot him a sympathetic look. Everyone around him thought he was broken, and it was mortifying, considering that he felt just as bad.

William couldn’t help but grit his teeth before flashing an unbothered smile. “And you? Have you had better luck securing a betrothed?”

Arthur laughed lightly, shaking his head, but the hungry gaze he budgeted for Lavinia was painfully obvious. She seemed at least curious, and he couldn’t blame her. He appeared to be a perfect gentleman. He turned back, looking expectantly at William. He desired an introduction, but William was in no mood to be accommodating. He placed his hands behind his back, widened his stance, and attempted to make his boundaries clear.

Arthur bowed. “Your son has always sought to vex me since our college days,” he nodded, regarding William’s mother. “Allow me to take the liberty of introducing myself. I am Arthur, Earl of Gouldsmith.”

She smiled and curtsied. “Pleasure to meet you. And since my son is too inflexible to be of assistance, allow me to introduce my eldest daughter, Lady Lavinia Humphries.”

His sister bowed, holding up her wrist. Arthur kissed it, his lips lingering a moment longer than desirable.

“I must reserve a dance with you. You are positively bewitching.” His smile looked genuine, his eyes glittering with sincerity. He was telling the truth, but that was not what William was worried about.

Lavinia blushed, shaking her wrist as demurely as possible to bring his attention to the dance card that hung like an

ornament on a tree. He smirked, penning his name in the booklet and gently brushing her inner wrist when he released her hand.

“How interesting,” a voice said. “You must be careful not to fully book yourself so early in the evening.”

William couldn't help but snicker even before he turned his head. The woman beside him was perhaps a bit plain looking, but something about her, maybe her feathery brown hair, or her impish green eyes gave him pause. She smiled, her soft lips parting, revealing a gap in her teeth that was as charming as it was unique. Perhaps she wasn't so plain after all. Before he could even figure out exactly what he was feeling, a warmth fluttered up his chest and a thrilling rush trailed the back of his neck.

“I am sorry?” Arthur turned to the woman, who had come up to them without so much as an introduction completely unprovoked. Cheeky of her.

“Lady Charlotte Elkins,” she curtsied. “I just mean to say that you seem rather *bewitched* by nearly every woman here tonight. Am I wrong to assume?”

Arthur recoiled, glancing at Lavinia whose focus was glued to the mysterious stranger. “Well...well with so much beautiful company it is...”

“Of course,” Charlotte smiled. “I heard you making plans to meet in the study later with a young lady. All innocent I presume, so I imagine you will take a moment to peruse the shelf and see if there is a book that may entertain me tonight. It would be greatly appreciated. The company seems...” she paused, eyeing Arthur. “Well, some of it seems rather dull.”

Arthur scoffed, stumbling back. He hesitated for a moment, looking at the upset look on the women's faces. He smiled awkwardly, reaching out and scratching his name out of Lavinia's dance card before taking his leave.

“Oh dear, was that rude?” She asked, turning to William. “I think that may have been rude.”

“Um,” William paused, looking down at the young woman. Before he could stop himself, he ran his tongue across his bottom lip and swallowed hard. “I do think it came across that way.”

“Oh dear,” she repeated.

“Was that true?” Lavinia asked.

The woman shrugged. “Must have been. He looked rather sheepish.” She smiled lightly. “Truly, I am not one to interfere,” she said. “I simply could not bear to watch him lie to you. Almost laughable the way he attempted to convince you that his intentions were noble.”

“That is fine,” Lavinia’s shock melted into thankfulness. “I had no idea.” The woman nodded, smiling. She seemed almost flattered, which was strange enough. Most young women didn’t interfere in the affairs of others nor did they take great pride in being so meddling.

William cleared his throat. “You are, pray tell?”

“Lady Charlotte Elkins. I have already introduced myself. It is you that has not.”

“William Humphries,” he said. “Marquess of Holdford.”

“Oh,” Charlotte nodded, seemingly not very impressed at all. “You seem rather perplexed, Lord Holdford.”

“How could I not be?” he asked. “The insinuation that I was not apt to protect my own sister from ruination is insulting at best.”

“And at worst?” she asked, causing William to draw back, opening his mouth to reply before thinking better of it.

“William, dear,” his mother interrupted. “I believe that she had only the best intentions. Had we not known that Lord Gouldsmith wasn’t vying for your sister’s hand in marriage, we might have accepted his influence.”

“I knew,” William pointed out.

“Then speak up.” William frowned before Annette continued. “I suppose I am the one doing the introductions tonight. I am

the Duchess of Seton, and this is my daughter, Lady Lavinia Humphries. We appreciate your rescue. Had we any idea he was so well-acquainted with the ballroom, we would have excused ourselves.”

“I realize I am doing something rather untraditional,” Charlotte admitted. “I am not the courting type, but I listen and in turn, I hear many things. Marriage, if pursued, should bring happiness. That is not something you will find with the Earl of Gouldsmith.” She turned her lip in. “And beware of Lord Lofton. If I say he is no good, you must believe me.”

“Absolutely,” Lavinia nodded, making a mental note to herself.

“I will take my leave, then,” Charlotte curtsied and turned to walk away. Strange how William’s chest could twist with disappointment when he was so keen for her to stop talking.

“William!” Lavinia called out, startling Charlotte who looked back over her shoulder. “You should thank her.”

William nodded, studying Charlotte for a moment. She smiled lightly, and although it might have convinced another it was genuine, he knew it was full of challenge. The thought of her teasing him so simply made him lose his breath a little like she was drawing all the oxygen out of him on purpose. From what he knew of her, if she had such an ability, she would certainly capitalize on it. “I think that would be excessive.”

“I would have to agree,” Charlotte said.

“You should dance with her.” Lavinia turned her head up and smiled.

Under his breath, William cursed and from the way Charlotte looked at him, he was sure she had heard it. “May I have a dance?”

“How could I say no?” She asked, smirking. He closed the distance, reaching for her dance card. He couldn’t say no. In fact, he didn’t want to say no. With that said, however, he knew he should have said no if given the choice. Arthur’s rakish ways looked all the more appealing from this angle. Not

that he would in good conscience ruin her. Not that she'd even let him get close enough.

As he scrawled his name onto her card, he couldn't help but keep his eyes on her. If she were to walk out the door, he would have followed her. It was exactly thoughts like that that made him realize how cruel it was to be a man. It was as if she had access to water and he had been wandering a desert his entire life. Lust was no good for anyone, but with distance, it was a great deal easier to cure than love.

She looked back at him, eyebrows knotted and lips wavering between a smile and a frown. It was as if she was going to laugh at him. Like she thought it was funny that they had so clearly repelled each other in spirit but were forced together for the sake of propriety. But something flickered in her face the longer he looked at her. Maybe it was the soft peachy blush that crawled across her cheeks or the feeling of their shared pulses roaring in each other's veins as they each pressed a finger to the other's wrist. Did she feel it too or was his ego getting the better of him?

When he finished, she looked at her card and raised her brows. "How I will always remember the first and likely only gentleman to sign my dance card so..." she paused, looking at his name. "So...chaotically."

William frowned, glancing at her card. He probably should have paid some attention to his own hand when he was writing. His penmanship looked boorish.

When she finally walked away, William frowned, and his mother offered him an amused look. Short of death, there was no way he was getting out of this dance. That much was certain.

## Chapter Two

“And so I looked at Timothy and I asked him ‘*What on earth do you think you are doing?*’ And he looks at me and you know what he says? ‘*I am painting*’ Oh, I could have killed that boy. The walls were destroyed!” Mary Ann was animated as she told her story, arms gesturing widely through the air, acting the part of both her and her son.

Arabella laughed hard and Benedict stood by, grimacing as if he remembered it clearly, but hadn’t decided if it were funny just yet. He had always been very neat and orderly. A child scrawling all over his walls with a pen made Charlotte laugh for the simple reason that Benedict would have done the exact opposite. She was glad that Timothy was acting up after all the annoyance Benedict had caused her growing up. It certainly served him well.

Benedict had married Mary Ann a few years prior, and within two months of their union, announced they were having a child. Mary Ann usually observed before she got involved with anything. It was her careful and analytical nature that had attracted Benedict to her in the first place. Their love was quiet and understated, but it was clear that the two were crazy about each other. They simply were very private people when they were around others.

Despite trying to laugh it off, though, Charlotte was still a little nervous about her dance. First of all, she was not an accomplished dancer. Usually, Arabella was the one that had a full dance card while Charlotte unapologetically rejected the attentions of suitor after suitor because she worried one might

get the wrong idea and attempt to court her. No one had, and so she had considered herself quite lucky in that regard. Some might suggest however that that was completely her fault.

This was different though. Lord Holdford would never court her. In fact, it was very obvious to her that he liked nothing about her at all. He was certainly handsome, but he couldn't keep up with her. Maybe if a man could, he might impress her, but as far as Charlotte was concerned, she was on a dais all her own. She was not better, per se, just wittier and sharper.

The *ton* liked to talk about men and women as if they were in different groups, and only certain ones had the pleasure of mingling with others. Visually, Charlotte likened herself to rank low. She wasn't average enough to be considered handsome, nor was she exquisite enough to be rare. Intellectually, Charlotte liked to believe that she was somewhere above all the noise, but she also realized this meant she had a tremendous ego. And maybe that was simply why Lord Holdford did not like her.

Once this dance was over, Charlotte would avoid him. It was that simple. He did not wish to associate with her, and she certainly wished nothing from him, even if he appeared to be carved out of marble.

As the current song came to an end, Charlotte's heart beat just a touch faster, and she tried not to look as Lord Holdford made his way over to the group. Benedict smiled easily, lifting a hand in greeting. Charlotte hadn't been aware that the two were friendly. She'd never met Lord Holdford, but she was never one to gawk at her brother's friends. There were far too many much handsomer and more emotionally intelligent men in literature. A fictitious beau was the only one Charlotte needed, because he rarely complained, and only spoke when she wanted him to.

"Holdford!" Benedict called. "How are you, my friend?"

"I was doing well," he said. Everyone had missed the *was* except for Charlotte. William seemed pleased with himself when she soured her look. His gaze was challenging when he



looked at her briefly, but he didn't look angry. It seemed that he maybe enjoyed their rivalry.

"Allow me to introduce my wife, Mary Ann, Countess of Pemberton, my sister, Lady Arabella, and my other sis—"

"We are acquainted," William stopped him, holding out a hand.

Benedict drew his mouth back slightly and sighed through gritted teeth. "My apologies for her behavior."

"Brother!" Charlotte tried to stop him, but he ignored her.

"I fear..." he leaned in close and brought his voice down to a whisper. "She was dropped as a baby."

Mary Ann nudged him, but he joined William in laughter. Charlotte angered, her face reddening this time with frustration rather than embarrassment. He had always seemed to love poking fun at her in a way that he would never have done to Arabella. She supposed it had something to do with him not having to worry about messing with her prospects.

"That is not true!" She assured the group. "I was far more advanced than most of my peers, I can promise. I have always been very intelligent."

It seemed for once, Mary Ann was completely on her side. "How can you say something so awful about your own blood?"

"I am sorry," he said, huffing on laughter. "Did I say dropped? That did not come out the way I intended."

"You meant to say thrown?"

"I did!" And again, the two began cackling. Charlotte squinted and crossed her arms. If she had said that he wasn't witty or clever before, then she stood corrected. It was irritating that he was now controlling the conversation just outside of her reach when only moments before, she had done the same to him.

"Well, on that note," he smiled sheepishly at Charlotte, holding his arm out. "I believe the next song will begin shortly."

When Charlotte grabbed ahold of his arm, she made sure to configure herself in the most obnoxious and uncomfortable way possible so as to convince him that she had never been led by proper society. If anything, it was to prove to him that she might have been thrown as a baby if that is what it might take for him to leave her alone.

Out on the side of the floor, the family gawked at them, Benedict amused that she was feigning ignorance, and Mary Ann simply embarrassed. Anyone could tell it was a rotten idea. She would have hated for anyone to take the idea of her finally entertaining a suitor to be serious. That was mortifying.

William drew her in, grabbing her hand and adjusting forcefully when she tried to pretend that she didn't know how to hold him. He was calling her bluff, so she turned her nose up and looked to the side.

"You did not have to do this."

William was snickering about something. "Oh, but I did."

"I would not have been offended."

William began to laugh again before motioning for her to give him just a minute to collect himself. "No, no really, this is not about you. I want my family to see me as respectful."

"Even if you are not?"

William laughed again. "Pardon me, I cannot stop thinking about how amusing it would have been if your mother was around to hear me accuse her of throwing you as an infant."

Charlotte glared at him, tightening her grip to his hand in an attempt to show off her strength. "Could you let that go, perhaps? Such a silly jest."

"I do not think she meant to do it." He laughed, trying to suffocate his amusement.

"You are just being cruel now," she said. "Like every other lord out there. Cruel, loutish, and cavalier."

"Oh, no do not compare me to Lord Gouldsmith. That is ridiculous."

“Are you upset now, my Lord, that the joke is now in your expense?”

He paused, dabbing his eyes with a handkerchief before quickly depositing it back into his pocket. He made a noise, somewhere deep in his throat as if to convince himself that he no longer found the thought humorous. “I believe we can easily agree that you are odd and perplexing, but it cannot be agreed that I am loutish.”

“But you will accept cavalier?”

After some thought, “I will.”

“So then if we are bargaining, I will take perplexing, but not odd.”

William shrugged. “Then it is settled. I am cavalier and you are perplexing. Does that not make an attractive couple?”

“Couple?” Charlotte couldn’t help but to bare her teeth. A couple? How could he accuse them of all of that? She had trusted that he disliked her but now he was likening himself to be with her? “I will never be part of a couple, I will assure you.”

He pressed his lips together and made a face that would suggest he was thinking. He thumbed his ear, and the silence grew, until it was fizzing at the top of Charlotte’s chest. “I think we are more similar than you realize. I too, have been hurt while courting.”

Charlotte made a point of accidentally stepping on his foot as they spun in circles. “Then we are not similar at all. I am not the courting type. I never have been. I never will be.”

The two broke away, as per the choreography and looped hands with another partner. Maybe she would have recognized who she was sharing a dance with, if her eyes hadn’t been on William as if he was the only man in the room. It was ridiculous. She was uncomfortable, but she was also keenly aware of a heat growing at the top of her thighs. It felt sort of miserable as if it only served to remind her that even on her best days, she was still bound to desire and want.

When the dance brought them back together, Charlotte was acutely tuned in to every touch—his hand on hers, his fingers just a touch lower on her back than what should have been, fingertips grazing her curves and sending a tremor down her legs. “You have never been hurt by these so called *cruel, loutish, and cavalier lords*? Never?”

The space between her eyebrows twitched momentarily. She understood his words, but not the context. The thought that he might be leading her into a conversation designed to get the better of her made her feel sick. “I am sorry. I wish I had some desperately pathetic backstory for you to sink your teeth into. I am unaffected, untethered, and simply uninterested.”

“Never? You have never been hurt?”

“How could a man that I am not in want of hurt me?” When she phrased it like that, and it was too late to take back, she could hear just a tinge of pride. Did she really believe it to be some supernatural ability like she said? When everyone else was falling in love around her, it made her feel invincible to have avoided it for so long.

It was true. She likened herself to be capable of things others were not. Her pride rested upon it, no matter how stifling it might be. One man couldn’t make her doubt herself, though. She had never fallen in love. If she was twenty-three and unattached, then it was very clear that she never would be. The only difference now was that she was eager to prove it to anyone who doubted her, because maybe a small part of herself was also doubtful.

“I do not believe you,” he said.

“Is that so?”

“I think you are lying to me. It does not make you appear nearly as tough as you think. We all feel things.”

“I am not doing it to be tough. I am not doing it at all. It simply does not happen.”

William scoffed, fingers dancing slightly on her back. She shifted uncomfortably, but it was clear that he had hardly registered his own touch. “You are speaking of things you

have no experience with. If you have come here with every intention to avoid marriage yourself, then you are so entitled, but do not bring every other lady down with you. For many of us, marriage is exactly what we desire,” he hissed. “There is not much more assuring than the promise of a good life.”

“For you as well?” She couldn’t help but ask. He had said as much, but just as he doubted her, now she sensed he was lying in turn.

“Well maybe not...” he made that same noise at the base of his throat again, animal enough to make her fingers feel fuzzy like she was craving a bit more than such a simple touch. There it was again, that pesky feeling of want. Of course, she was not immune to that after all. It was a far cry from love. The forces of nature were designed to push and pull. If they repelled each other this much, then they were bound to pull back in the other direction. That was just the way the world worked. Magnetism was sort of sick like that. Made absolutely rubbish sense. “Maybe not now,” he finished. “But eventually, yes.”

“Just not now,” she reiterated.

“No, not now.”

“Fair enough,” she shrugged. “*Just not now,*” she repeated. The repetition was designed to provoke because likewise, she believed hardly anything he was saying to her.

*Just not now because you are unlucky? Just not now because you are heartbroken? Just not now because you are taking advantage of your youth while it still serves you? Why not now, but certainly later?*

He scoffed once more. “You do not believe me?”

“Oh, I never said that.” She didn’t have to. “It is you that I believe has been hurt before, but if you think you can rise above it, then by all means. That is a beautiful sentiment.”

He looked angry for a moment, his brows narrowed, his brown eyes swirling like a storm on the horizon, and his shoulders squared. After a moment, however, he relaxed. “And if I admit it? Then what will you admit?”

Charlotte could not help herself. She stifled a laugh with her palm, looking back up at him to see if he was serious. He was. Talk about odd. “If you so fully believe that I am lying, then maybe I should court someone just to prove it.”

He laughed again and he leaned in close enough that his heated breath sent a shiver down her spine. “I should very much like to see that.”

“Who should it be then? I have no prospects. I do not know if you can tell, but I am not the standard of beauty.”

He shook his head. “That makes you all the more lovely,” he said. Now it was him that was blushing. Naturally, Charlotte refused to blush to establish her superiority, which was incredibly difficult and perhaps not even possible. William cleared his throat, obviously flustered by his lack of control. “Nothing? Not one prospect?” he asked. Yet the whole time, Charlotte’s lips burned as she was certain he was staring at them.

“Not one.”

“You are right,” he said. “I did get my heart broken. That is not to complain, only to say that my family has been worried about me, and their pity is only serving to make me miserable.”

“Now you are being forthright?”

“If you believe yourself up to the challenge, then allow me to court you, but do not fall in love with me. I will not want to marry you and, in addition, my family will not worry about me any longer,” he said. “We both have something to prove, so what is to stop us from some competition this season?”

The way he had so easily suggested it gave Charlotte pause. She tried to swallow, but all of a sudden it was as if she forgot how to complete basic functions. Could he be trusted? Could she be sure that he would pose no danger to her reputation, when moments ago he was so eagerly looking at her mouth?

She knew it was a terrible idea. It almost beckoned disaster. If anyone found out that she had made such an arrangement, she would make a fool out of herself and her family. Arabella was

still unattached. Charlotte didn't want to make it difficult for her to find a good match.

But the idea that Lord Holdford so much as doubted her was enough to annoy her. The implication that a handsome man could have such control of her was insulting. She would love nothing more than to prove to him that she was the one in control. She always had been. No one could make her falter.

If Charlotte was one thing, it was not odd or even perplexing. She was stubborn, defiant, and pigheaded. She nodded assuredly. "I can certainly handle that. One season?"

"Just one," he confirmed. And with that, the song ended, and he let her go. Without his touch, she stumbled back a step feeling only the memory of his desire coursing through her veins. He bowed, smirking, and offered his arm. She hesitantly accepted, and together they walked back towards Benedict. Halfway across the floor, William went rigid and he stepped to the side. Charlotte turned to look at him but he was as pale as the full moon.

"Are you ill, my lord?"

"You must..." he paused, stumbling to the side and glancing over his shoulder. "You must excuse me."

And without even a bow, he left, walking in the direction of the double doors that led out to the garden. Charlotte looked back, but Benedict hadn't seen her yet, so if she disappeared a moment, he wouldn't know where she had gone. She followed William, stopping short at the doors before she exited, waiting to catch her breath. She had to make sense of how in the span of ten minutes, she had fully agreed to a courtship just to *prove* that she was not interested in courtship. How ridiculous.

She could do it, but the feelings that had bloomed inside her when he so much as looked at her were beginning to make her nervous. From her side it was simply desire, but she worried about the possibility that it might be more for him. She wasn't exactly interested in breaking any hearts herself. What if he fell in love with her? What if, worst of all, she fell in love with him? That was something that could not easily be remedied.

Taking a breath and steeling herself, Charlotte opened the door and snuck out into the darkness of the gardens.



## *Chapter Three*

Charlotte lifted her skirts and raced down the steps of the garden. Out on the grounds, the music inside the manor was dulled, rumbling like a heartbeat in the chilly night. Something felt poignant about nights like these. Far enough away from the city, the sky was a thick blanket of stars, and the moon was like a pillow. There it sat, neatly tucked above the world, soft, inviting, cool. Once Charlotte stepped into the grass, she worried she would stain her slippers, giving away her whereabouts, so she kicked them off and tucked them under a bush. She hadn't come out here to misbehave, but if anyone found out, they would likely believe nothing else.

The gardens twisted into a labyrinth of hedges. The long corridors of greenery slowly dissipated into a lush clearing of flowers, with romantic nooks for sitting, and other areas that boasted tables for sharing a morning tea. It was quiet and peaceful and even though it was still quite early in the year, hardy flowers withstood the chill, dabbling the night in watercolor purples, blues, and passionate pinks. As Charlotte turned another corner, she stopped when she saw William sitting on a bench underneath a domed hedge that shielded him from the outside world.

"My Lord," Charlotte whispered. He looked up at her and suddenly his melancholy drained. Her presence kicked up a fire in his eyes so vibrant that Charlotte no longer felt cold.

"What are you doing?"

"You left so suddenly," she said, but it was hardly an answer. "And if I am being honest, I was very curious as to why."

“So, this is not about compassion?”

Charlotte tilted her head, thinking it over. “No, I suppose not.”

“You must leave at once. If someone sees us, your reputation will be ruined.” He stood up from his seat, urging her to leave, but all she did was shrug and sit beside him. She placed her palm flat on the bench, pulling her white gloves back up over her elbows.

She glanced over at him, raising her eyebrows slightly. “That is not an issue. Your implied ruination of me will only serve to hinder a wedding I do not want.”

He paused, taking a deep breath and sitting beside her. For a moment, she thought he might tell her what was wrong. “How can I have only known you for shy of two hours and I can already feel you grating on my nerves?”

“I have been known to have that effect,” Charlotte shrugged. “What made you leave?”

He shook his head. “If I say that I saw my former betrothed, would that be enough for you?” he asked. “It was the first time since she ended our engagement and as you have already figured out, it is all still very raw.”

Charlotte nodded her head and smoothed out the wrinkles on her seafoam green dress. The satin shimmered, catching what little light illuminated them in the gardens. His face was nearly a shadow, but he still drew her in, his lips soft and lonely. “And you still love her?”

William started from the question, shifting in his seat, he turned towards her more, his knee pressing against hers. “What kind of business do you have asking me such things?”

“We are courting,” she reminded him.

He scoffed. “Not until tomorrow morning. Tonight, we are nothing but strangers.”

She shrugged. “Hm.” She paused. “That does not dissuade me from asking.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, and relaxed, his knee pressing more against hers. “Yes,” he said.

“Pardon?”

“Yes, I am still in love with her. Are you happy?”

“Delighted,” she said, biting her lip hard to stop it from stinging as she’d already shredded it throughout the course of the conversation. “It makes me feel better to know that you are too occupied to fall in love with me.”

“Fall in love with you?” He nearly fell out of his seat.

She nodded, eyes widening to assure him that he was the daftest man she’d had the pleasure of meeting in quite some time.

“How insulting,” he said. “With you? No. I have better things to do.”

“Then may I ask why you look at me the way you do?”

“The way I do?”

“So...” she laughed. “It is strange. I have never noticed a man look at my mouth so much. I am hoping to learn that you hear by manner of reading lips because I do not...well I think it would be complicated if you sought anything from it.”

William released a breathy laugh, his mouth hanging open at her forwardness. He frowned. “Are you insinuating that I am physically attracted to you?”

“How rude!” She swatted his shoulder with her hand. “But yes, that is precisely what I am saying.”

“Mmhm,” he nodded. “And if I were, would that be unwelcome?”

“Um,” she paused. She knew what she wanted to say, but wording it elegantly was not so easy. “This is an interesting turn of events. If I admit to such feelings, then I would not be surprised to hear that you duped me into a confession when you yourself are against the very feeling. You are precisely the kind of man to trick me, but I am no fool.”

“I am doing no such thing.” William paused. “It seems ignoble to tell a woman that you find her physically pleasing and nothing else. I am not a rake.”

“Oh,” she said. “Never have been? Never? Not even once?”

“Not even once, what?” he asked.

“I can only hold my suspension of disbelief for so long, my lord. I am sure you are as much a sinner as the next man.”

He frowned. “I am not a rake,” he repeated.

“But if you were,” she suggested.

He stilled, looking back at her mouth. It was a fleeting glance, as if he caught himself and looked away as soon as he could.

“If I was? I am not.”

“Yes, I know, but look at it as an exercise in theater. If you *were* a rake, might you be so forward as to state your desires?”

There was a pause and a light breeze passed through the gardens, forcing Charlotte to wrap her arms around herself for warmth. William couldn't help but laugh. He rubbed a palm against his forehead. “Alright. For the sake of theater, yes?”

“Yes, the theatric arts are dying, Lord Holdford.” She was only half telling the truth. The last time she had gone to the theater was particularly grueling, but that may have had more to do with her seatmate breathing heavily through his mouth the entire time and not any fault of the actors themselves.

“If I am on stage? On stage I am attracted to you,” he said.

“Oh dear, now that is very interesting.” She held a hand over her lips for a moment. “You see, on stage, I am attracted to you too.”

“But that is where it ends?”

“Oh yes. I couldn't imagine you being any more than a thrill.”

William cleared his throat and stood up. “Ah, but alas, we are not on stage, so we must never act upon it.”

Charlotte couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. She wasn't one for marriage, but she would still find her blood ran just as red as anyone else's. “How presumptuous of you, to think I even considered it.” She was starting to think that she might actually contemplate the theater with how effortless it was to lie to men.

“I apologize,” William said. “Do you believe I had considered it?”

Charlotte stood up, turning to him, to match his closed off stance with her own. “Men are not capable of much less, I am afraid.”

“There you go!” he shouted. “You are always making generalizations. Do I look, act, think, breathe, like anyone else you have ever met?”

Charlotte wanted to draw back once she stirred his ire, but she stayed firmly in place, posturing to look more commanding than she was. “How should I think you to be any different? Have I missed something that sets you apart?”

He opened his mouth to respond, but no noise came out. He simply stared back at her, dumbfounded by her reply. She did not miss him accidentally looking at her mouth again. That was right. He was just like the rest. He wanted one taste of her, and then he’d discard her with the remains of his last feast. It seemed after all of their conversation, he couldn’t get her out of his head. That might have made Charlotte feel good, if not for the fact that she wanted him just as desperately.

The voices of two or three men startled them into quiet. By the sounds of it, they were just around the corner and none the wiser of who they were about to run into. William reached out, grabbing ahold of Charlotte, and pulled her towards him in the shadow of the alcove. She whimpered and he pressed his hand against her mouth to quiet her. They stilled and so did the sounds of the other party.

“Did you hear that?” One of the men said.

“Might be a cat?”

“Do you suppose it is hurt?”

“I am not sure. Can you see it?” Rustling followed their voices as if they were looking into the shrubbery and flowers.

Charlotte’s heart hammered away in her chest, so loud that she feared they might hear her. She thought she wasn’t afraid of being found, but now all she could think of was the reputations of her family if she were caught in such a way. The fact that

they had shared an improper conversation made it all the more inappropriate. If people called her a lightskirt, then maybe she was one, after all.

“Shh,” William whispered, his warmth permeating his fingers and warming her lips. His scent was intoxicating, like sandalwood and lavender. Just that was enough to get her lost for days in thoughts of him. He was a troublesome man, but his countenance could certainly make up for all of that if he didn’t speak.

The men shuffled around more, their voices getting closer. Charlotte’s heart nearly jumped out from her chest when they passed by the hedge corridor, However, due to their spot in the shadows, they remained hidden and before long, the voices faded.

William removed his hand from her mouth, steadying her body against his. They were still pressed up close against one another, the heat from each other’s body warming them through the early April chill. In the space between their mouths, the air fogged up, a visual representation of just how hard they were breathing now that they had crossed a line of physical touch that they were never meant to.

Now it was Charlotte who was admiring his lips. He had given her the idea and it was starting to sound like a tempting one. She exhaled, melting against him. He leaned towards her. In the most hesitant of ways, his nose brushed against hers. She parted her lips, and together they moved, as if wanting nothing more than to meet, but realizing with every part of their minds that they shouldn’t.

While they hesitated, their hands moved, roving over the other’s body. Exploring his muscles and the curve of his waist, the rigidity of his hips and the strength in his shoulders was thrilling. Charlotte bit her lip, feeling frustrated. She wanted him in a way that she wasn’t supposed to. She wanted him in a way that was strictly forbidden and yet that only made her more hungry.

The pull was too much. Once William’s lips met with hers, their kiss was intense, pulling every last bit of reservation

under the surface and drowning it. His lips were hungry, his tongue searching, his hands pulling at her shoulders as if he couldn't get her close enough. She ran her hands down his chest, wishing that she could rip apart the fabric and take what she could before she was forced to move on.

His lips were soft, yet strong at the same time. Guiding her, drinking her in like she was sugar water. She pushed up against him, until he was leaning on the not-so-sturdy branch of the topiary. His hands ran down her back-across the valley in between her shoulder blades, over her spine, across the small of her back before stopping. She wouldn't have objected if he had gone further, but she had surely made it sound as if she would.

She shivered, whispering his name back into his mouth. She dragged her fingernails down the back of his neck, causing him to lean back and exhale softly. She pressed her lips once more to his and thrilled in the taste of his mouth. It was impossible to describe, as indelible as the scent of someone. She stilled, savoring in the moment while he continued to kiss her lips and jaw. She gasped, closing her eyes, parting her lips, and savoring the moment as if it was only designed to end.

He pulled away, hesitantly. Their eyes were closed, both afraid to look at the other. Their hands released each other and drew back, almost in a gesture of surrender. They both knew what they had done was wrong, but it had felt impossible to avoid. Coming to, Charlotte stepped back, nearly tripping over the concrete bench and falling into the topiary on the other side. She caught herself before hiking up her skirts. She looked back at William sheepishly and he appeared to take a deep breath.

“And you are definitively not a rake?”

He rubbed his face with his palm, likely internally shaming himself for having lost his control. “Not...not typically, no.”

“Oh my, Lord Holdford. With such saccharine words, I am sure you will sweep me off my feet in no time,” she mocked him.

“I will, um,” he cleared his throat, still cloaked in the shadows. “I will call on you in the morning to mark my intent to start a courtship.”

Charlotte wrinkled her nose, surprised at how easy it was to resume their back and forth even after a passionate moment. “Maybe...” she paused. “You do not have to do that. Maybe we are better off just...” she swatted at the air. “Moving onward. I am afraid you may lose if I am being honest.” She was not being honest. Something in her chest was starting to act up and the miserable realization that it might have been that easy to develop an interest in someone. The feeling was bearing down heavily on her.

“Oh no, no,” he replied, straightening his cravat. “We are just getting started and I am not even close to forfeiting. Are you?”

“No,” she interjected quickly. “Not at all.”

“Perfect,” he said. “Then I will see you tomorrow.”

“Absolutely perfect,” she whispered, gritting her teeth. She lifted her skirts and ran off back into the night in search of the specific bush she foolishly left her shoes in. Her brain was so addled at this point, she’d be lucky to so much as remember her own name.

She shouldn’t have done it, but it sounded so cathartic when William had cursed under his breath earlier, so she took the liberty and indulged herself. It sounded quite crass coming from her lips, but it felt good.

This was bound to be a night she would relive for a very long time, but she wasn’t sure if it was simply because it made her heart race and her skin prickle or if it was because she was already too deep to let go, but too stubborn to forfeit.

**Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.**

**[A Marquess to Prove me Wrong](#)**

**Thank you very much!**



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## *About the Author*

Maybel Bardot has spent her life lost in stories. From girlhood to her years in teaching and finally, as an author, books have been her solace. Immersing herself in different worlds she has managed to live a thousand lives, each one a journey of imagination.

A degree in English Literature was a no-brainer. And a later career in teaching gave her the opportunity to pass on the knowledge she was so grateful to receive. A romance lover herself meeting her husband felt like something out of a fairytale and their three children completed their happy ending.

Having grown up reading Austen and Bronte, she fell in love with the Regency era from a young age, fascinated by the society and romance. Now retired, she is ready to try her hand at stories of passionate love between Lords and Ladies as they traverse a world full of balls, gloved touches in dark corners, and hushed whispers of desire.

