



A DUKE'S
LONGING
*G*AZE

LUCY
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A Duke's Longing Gaze

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

LUCY LANGTON

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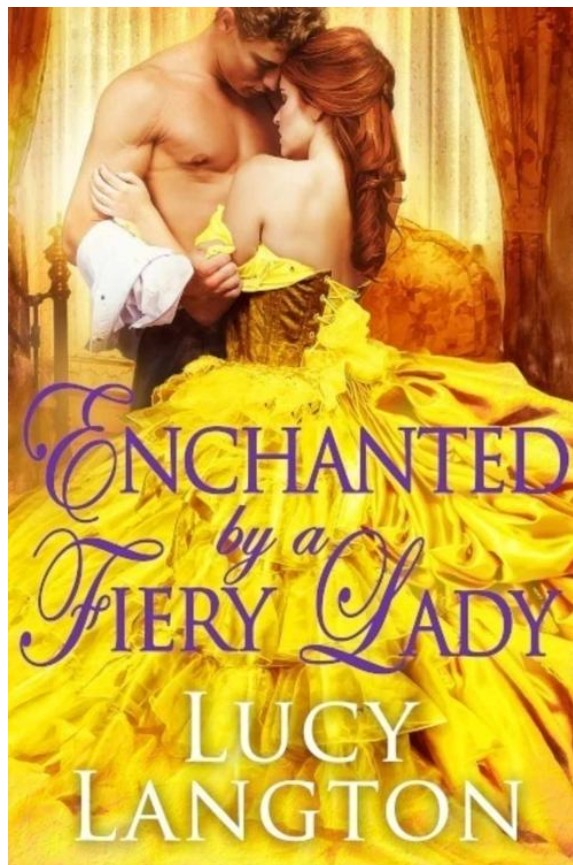
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A Duke's Longing Gaze

Introduction

After losing her mother and brother, Diana Carlisle was left with her impoverished Baron father and no hope for the future. As if her life was not already a tragedy in the making, her best friend's marriage is about to shake her world forever. While trying to turn down several gentlemen's requests to dance and sneak away, she suddenly notices a vigorous stranger's eyes on her. As she leaves, their eyes meet again and Diana feels tantalising passion conquering her for the first time.

No such thing as true love existed in her mind until she met this tempting stranger...

While chaperoning his sister at a soirée, Lord Francis Steele's glance stops to witness a man attempting to approach the most seductively elusive young lady. Unable to pull his eyes away, he observes her faking a limp, and politely rejecting several men. In a glimpse of an eye, she is gone from his site, haunting his night with sinful thoughts. Therefore, he decides to move heaven and earth to find her again...

Luck may be by his side, but does he have the recipe to win her fiery heart?

Lustful glances across a crowded room will only be the beginning of Francis and Diana's passionate connection. However, interfering parents and noble rules of etiquette are threatening their blooming romance. Will they overcome the influence and schemes of those who seek to stand between them and turn this sizzling desire into an everlasting love? Or will their affair go down in flames?

Chapter 1

Sheffield – 1815

“I do wish Mother was still here,” Diana remarked as she looked at Martha through the mirror longingly.

Her remark was more of a deep wish than a complaint because Diana missed her mother very much. Martha, the housekeeper-come-general maid, had been with the Carlisle household for Diana’s entire life. Going to the servant for her gentle care and guidance was like having a substitute for her mother.

“Do sit still, Miss Diana, or you will end up with a pin in the wrong place,” Martha instructed her. She was attempting to make Diana’s long, dark hair presentable for the soiree she was to attend that very evening. “And I agree with you, I miss her too.”

“I know you do, Martha. If she was here, she would be the one fixing my hair. Then I would not be bothering you as I do,” Diana admitted.

She felt bad at how much she depended on Martha, who saw to her every need as well as keeping Rose Cottage running efficiently. The housekeeper worked long hours and never complained, not once. “What would Father and I do without you, dear Martha?”

“You know I love you both, and I would have it no other way,” Martha replied, putting the finishing touches to Diana’s silky curls. “Now then, do you not just look the part? You are very beautiful, my dear, and your mother would be proud to see how you’ve grown.”

“I cannot believe it has been four years since she passed,” Diana said, looking back at her own sad, pouting face in the mirror before her.

“And little Joshua too, he was the prince of cuteness,” Martha added with a smile. Though Diana could see through the mirror that the housekeeper’s face reflected the same sadness that she herself felt.

“My little brother was a terror,” Diana said, smiling at the memory. “And I loved him to bits.”

“To be taken at such a young age was heart breaking for those left behind,” Martha said with glassy eyes as she now looked despondent.

“Father has never been the same since the fever took them both from us,” Diana remarked. She knew that he had always blamed himself because they could not afford a doctor at the time.

“Well, we shall stop this now,” Martha declared. “You are to go out this very night and have a happy time. I hear that Miss Henrietta has found herself a husband after presenting herself in London this year.”

“I wish I did not have to attend their homecoming party, but she is my best friend,” Diana admitted as she clipped on a ruby

red earring. “As are you, Martha.”

“Oh, stop that silliness now will you, Miss Diana.”

Martha chuckled, but Diane knew she was secretly pleased that she had referred to her as a friend. “I will be around for a long time to come yet. Now then, I do not want to be hearing any of this nonsense about you not going. That, Miss Diana, is part of your problem. You do not go out and have enough fun. When I was your age, I had plenty of friends to get up to mischief with.”

“I cannot imagine you as a child or a young lady, Martha,” Diana giggled.

“Oh, you cheeky little imp,” Martha said, showing a faux stern look in her eyes, which soon slipped as a smile broke out on her face.

Diana turned to take one last look in the mirror before she stood up before the carriage arrived to take her to Woodberry Hall.

“I wonder what it is like to come out in London?” Diana sighed, knowing it was never something that her father could afford for her.

“You will attract a handsome suitor when the time is right, mark my words,” Martha said as she hurried Diana out of the bedroom door. “Now come along I hear the carriage pulling up. Let’s not keep the driver waiting. No more dawdling.”

“Should I say goodnight to Father before I leave?” Diana questioned as she rushed down the narrow stairway to get her coat that was hung up in the small hallway. She was never sure what mood he would be in, so always checked with Martha first.

“I would not, Miss Diana. He took to the brandy glass straight after dinner,” Martha warned. “But I will be waiting up for you.”

“No, Martha, you need your rest. I will manage on my own, I have my key,” Diana said, attempting to talk her out of waiting up.

“We will see,” Martha replied, opening the front door to wave Diana off.

* * *

Her friend, Henrietta, was waiting for her arrival as she stood on the doorstep of Woodberry Hall. She looked excited, and as Diana ran up the steps to meet her, they hugged one another enthusiastically.

“Oh my, how I have missed you,” Diana said, reluctant to let go of her friend.

“Well, I have not missed you one bit, because I have been far so busy,” Henrietta teased.

“You mock me?” Diana questioned as she pulled away from their warming embrace.

“Do not take me too seriously, Diana! Of course, I have missed you, silly,” Henrietta told her, looking back at her with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “But I am a woman now, and I have so much to tell you.”

“I am a woman too,” Diana remarked, wondering what her friend could mean. “We are the same age, remember?”

“But I am now married and—”

“Henrietta, dear, do come and speak with Lady Jasmine,” Diane heard her friend’s mother call out.

“Oh, I have never been so popular.” Henrietta giggled. “I must go for my audience awaits. We will catch up later. Off you go and mingle. Oh, and Diana, you look stunning.”

“Thank you,” Diana replied as Henrietta let go of her hand and disappeared into the crowd. Diana watched as her friend was swallowed up by the guests attending the soiree; it was a crowd of people that Diana hated.

She had always felt uncomfortable among the Ton because she knew that she did not belong. But Henrietta had been her lifeline, always including her and making sure she was accepted. Without her friend by her side, Diana felt vulnerable.

Making her way into the drawing room, she peeked inside before entering. There were one or two faces she recognised but most of them were strangers to her. They were not hostile towards her, but she often overheard insulting remarks about her father. He was a baron in his own right, but after her mother passed, he sold off what little land they owned.

After that, he had slowly withdrawn from the public eye. Her father had no interest in life anymore, and he had no interest in her either. If not for Martha, she too would have likely become a recluse.

But her friendship with Henrietta had pulled her through. Now that she was married, Diana wondered what would become of her with no one to hold her hand around the nobility.

“Miss Diana,” a male voice cried out behind her, distracting her from entering the drawing room. “Would you care to dance?”

It was Victor Fletcher, one of the younger sons of a very wealthy merchant. He was a spotty young man, and always had a sour odour about him, but nonetheless, she agreed. It would help her to enter the large drawing room without being noticed.

She allowed him to lead the way as they headed towards the pianoforte. There, one of the daughters of a noble was playing a melody that had encouraged many of the younger guests to dance. Diana and her temporary partner took their place in the

space allowed, and she soon found herself being swept along to a jolly country dance.

Dancing was never serious at a soiree, not as it was at a ball, that much she knew. And so, she did not concentrate too much on her steps, nor on what Victor was saying to her.

“Would that be acceptable then?” she heard him ask, catching the back end of his conversation. “I mean, you are the prettiest thing here, so I would be most honoured if I could call on you.”

“Oh, no, that is not possible, sir,” she replied, realising that he wanted to take their brief relationship a little further. “My father does not allow visitors.”

She was relieved when the dance ended, and everyone began to leave the dancing area. What happened next though, she did not expect.

Her dancing partner placed his hand upon her bare shoulder, allowing his fingers to stroke her exposed skin. Instantly she shook her shoulders, turning around to glare at him.

“Oh, come now, Diana, you look like you could do with a little fun,” he said, leaning into her ear to speak in a hushed tone.

Diana was left speechless. Without Henrietta by her side, she felt so unprotected.

“Good day to you sir!” she snapped without even looking at his face as she marched away.

The incident had shocked her to the bones, making her hands shake as she sought to leave the noisy room behind.

“Miss...erm... may I have the next dance with you?” another young man asked her in the doorway, and it was the last thing she wanted.

“I thank you, sir, but my ankle is a little sore. I do believe that I must rest it,” she told him, not even knowing who he was.

He did not look too disappointed, no doubt he had soon hunt down some other young lady to take to the dancefloor. Someone who would be better pleased that such a young gentlemen sought her out, but that lady was not her.

Leaving the busy drawing room behind, she made her way to one of the smaller parlours. But then, for no reason she could fathom, she changed her mind and began to head in the direction of the library. As she crossed the hallway though, she felt as if eyes were upon her.

Turning back to glance over at the room she had come from, there was a small group of men chatting and laughing. One of them stood out to her because he was staring after her. Their eyes met and she felt a shudder run through her entire body. His stare was so intense that it felt as if he was looking directly into her soul and exposing all her desires.

She was drawn by his handsome features and struggled to pull her eyes away from his. As their eyes locked, he bowed his head very discretely at her. At last, she managed to pull away, but her cheeks were so flushed she felt quite lightheaded.

Quickly, she entered the library and closed the door behind her. Leaning against it, she barred the way so that no one else could enter.

What just happened to me? I have never felt so...so...what was it that I felt?

Taking a seat, she decided that she would stay within the quiet confines of the library for a few more moments. She wished she could stay there for the rest of the night and read a book. But Henrietta would never forgive her if she found out.

I will step back out there when I am ready, but I must wait until I at least stop shaking, she told herself, unsure why she had reacted in such an odd way. Then again, it was not something that had happened to her before, that a gentleman of such refinement had noticed her.

Not only did her hands shake, but her legs too. But even more perturbing was the strange sensation passing through her body. At the same time, a warm glow tingled between her legs, and it was not entirely unpleasant.

The handsome gentleman certainly had a strange effect on her, and she was not sure whether she liked it or not. Her mind was thinking unsavoury thoughts that she did not care for. *What would it have been like if he had touched my bare shoulder?* “I do believe I may have let him!” she declared to herself. *Oh my! I must stop thinking such things, but he was most handsome and...*

Diana gasped as she jumped up from her seat. “I must get out of here,” she cried out to herself. “I cannot be in here and alone should a gentleman enter. Whatever is wrong with me? I must find Henrietta. She will help to calm my nerves.”

Diana left the library in a hurry, hoping that the unnatural thoughts would be left behind. She glanced over to the doorway of the drawing room, where she had seen her mysterious stranger. The group of men was now gone, and she was unsure if she was relieved or disappointed.

Turning, she headed back in the direction of the drawing room to see if she could find her friend. Though she knew that she would never share the wicked thoughts with Henrietta. *Whatever would she think of me now that she is married?*

Chapter 2

“Promise me, brother, that you will not ignore all the ladies who wish to dance with you,” Francis’ sister begged under her breath. “I hate it when you do that because they all talk about you.”

“Then we should give them something to gossip about, should we not?” he teased her as their carriage pulled up outside Woodberry Hall.

His sister, Sarah, had met many new friends when she had been presented in London in the summer of that year. Some of them were already wed, but he was thankful that she had not been interested in finding a husband yet. He felt her far too young for such responsibilities. However, the daughter of the family they were visiting was one such lady, and the party was for her homecoming with her new husband.

As they too lived in Sheffield, Francis had agreed to accompany his sister to the party, but that did not mean that he wanted to be there. Frankly, he would rather not be, but he

loved his younger sister, and she could wrap him around her little finger.

“Francis, no!” Sarah cried out, nipping at his arm in admonishment.

“Ouch, that hurt.” He sniggered, pretending to rub the wound.

“Then behave yourself,” she growled at him, though in a hushed tone. “I want them to like me, not dread my presence because my older brother is mean. I wish I had another brother to escort me everywhere, a kinder one.”

“Now that hurt, even more, little sister. But for you I would do anything,” Francis replied, smiling at her with his lopsided grin as he opened the carriage door. He leaned back into the carriage to help his sister step out in her extravagant party gown. “I promise you that I may dance,” he told her.

“Tell me that you will dance, not may,” she said, staring at him.

“Well... only if I can find a pretty enough partner.”

“Oh, I do declare that you are intolerable, brother,” she said as she was forced to accept his hand, so he did not miss the little step. “Can you not think them all as pretty, Francis? Treat all my friends nicely and stop being so fussy. I swear you will never marry because no woman will put up with your ways.”

“But, dear sister, that would be a blessing, if you ask me,” Francis joked. “Besides, you and Mother put up with me, and that is enough.”

“I do wish you would take the matter of marriage more seriously,” Sarah said. Francis could see her pursing her lips in annoyance as they walked towards the main front doors. “If you keep up like this, I may even marry before you, and I am the younger one.”

“You, my dear sister, will marry only for love, I will make sure of it,” he assured her, escorting her up the steps towards the open double doors of Woodberry Hall.

There they were met by the stewards at the door, who bowed to greet them and escorted them inside.

In truth, Francis found such soirees tedious. But his sister had nagged at him telling him she had made a very good friend of Lady Waverley. The Lady was now married to a Scottish laird and might leave in a few months for Scotland. She had assured him that, at the very least, there should be some interesting gentlemen for him to mix with to pass the time away.

Francis was not blind to the fact he was an eligible bachelor. For this reason, he had to put up with the young women and their mothers fawning all over him. But the last thing he wanted was the faux attentions of such young, virginal ladies.

All seeking to find a husband with a title. He had the title and the wealth that went with it, making him as attractive to unmarried women as blossoms are to bees.

Of course, it was his duty to escort his younger sister to these tiresome events. After presenting herself at court in London this year, socialising was the next step in her development. Francis was fiercely protective of her and intended to fight off any suitors who he felt were not equal to her requirements. He had also made a solemn promise to her that he would not allow their parents to force her into any marriage she did not want.

Making sure that his sister was delivered to her group of friends, he left her side to wander around. For a homecoming, it was a big event, but then the guest of honour had returned with a new husband, so they would see it as a reason to invite many guests.

Avoiding the eyes of the very excitable young ladies in attendance, he acknowledged one or two of the gentlemen. Most of the guests were from the local nobility. There was a great deal of wealth gathered there, with many familiar faces.

As he left his sister in the drawing room, he met a couple of men one of whom he was acquainted with. They pulled him aside enthusiastically, asking if he wished to join in a game of

cards. But it was not a pastime he was fond of, so he declined. Though he stayed on to chat with them as they discussed other matters first.

His mind soon wandered as he watched the scene around them while he answered an odd question or two among his acquaintances. As he did so, his attention was drawn to an uncouth spotty young man. The cheeky cad was attempting to maul his filthy hands all over a pair of pale-creamy delicate shoulders.

As he moved his eyes to the face of the lady in question, he could see that she was not at all pleased, and she shook him off. Not many ladies would be so brave, but she glared at the young man with disgust as he leaned in to say something to her. It appeared that whatever he was whispering, the lady was not too pleased to hear it. Even from the distance, he could hear the icy tone in her voice as she bid him goodbye.

Her demeanour reminded him a little of his sister when she was trying to act maturely. Sadly, his sister had not quite managed it yet, but this young lady wore an air of confidence about her, yet there was a certain vulnerability there too.

It was not only her forthrightness that he found refreshing, but she was a most attractive young lady. Francis could not help but feel she looked out of place, but he could not quite put his finger on why. One thing for certain, he was unable to take his eyes away from her.

He watched her attempt to walk away from the spotty young man, only to be approached by another who was no doubt asking for a dance. As she moved closer to his group, he overheard her reply that she had hurt her ankle, which he found odd as she was not limping a moment ago.

How peculiar, he mused to himself. *Most young ladies want to dance as often as they can.*

Her feigned ankle was clearly a ruse because she made her way through the crowd without the slightest hobble. He could not help but smile as she turned down yet another young gentleman. This little beauty was not the typical young woman that he normally came across. She had no interest in flaunting herself, that much was obvious.

And then she turned his way and as their eyes met, he felt a thudding in his chest. As their eyes locked, it seemed that

neither could pull away, each mesmerised by the other. Then she blinked with long, dark lashes, and her cheeks turned from pink to red. He had embarrassed her by staring, yet he could still not pull away. Instead, he bowed his head in a way that only she would notice it. His reward was a small smile and as he watched her cherry lips curve, something in his stomach felt odd.

This was not a woman whose cheeks were pink because of a false powder; he could see that her beauty was all her own doing. No fancy gown, or elaborate jewels. No face powders or lip balms. That simple act sent his pulse racing, and he felt the familiar stirrings in his loins. Now that he could see her properly, he was captivated by her freshness, her locks of hair that did not want to stay in the pins, and her delicious ruby lips.

Whoever this woman was, he needed to get to know her better, and maybe even intimately. It was clear he felt an attraction to her, she was a slender little thing, with dark curls and mysterious dark eyes to match.

The more he thought about the enigmatic young woman, the more he was enamoured by her beauty. Where most young ladies wore fine jewels to enhance their looks, but she was so very different. Her brown gown was even rather dull. She needed nothing to enhance her features, her alabaster skin was

radiant. He noticed the silky skin of her cleavage and realised that it was no wonder the spotty young man had pestered her as he did.

It could be your dark curls that appear wild and out of control. Are you the free spirit that your demeanour indicates? he pondered. She was not from wealth, of that, he was sure. A sudden thought popped into his head, causing his already growing member to stiffen further. *Such flawless breasts would fit perfectly into my hands.* And then she was gone.

Turning his attention to the group of men he was conversing with he was about to make an excuse to leave. But one of them asked him to rethink his refusal of a game of cards.

“Come on, old boy, where’s the harm in a small wager,” Taylor pushed on. “I promise that we will not raise the stakes if it makes you so nervous, Steele.”

“Alas no, you do not tempt me, Taylor.” He smiled. “I must go and find my sister, or she will hang me out to dry if I do not pay her some attention.”

They were all there escorting sisters and mothers, so they knew what he meant. Not that they took their responsibilities as escorts as seriously as he did. Besides, looking for Sarah would give him an excuse to search out the young woman who had escaped his grasp.

What shall I call you, my mysterious one? he mulled over as he set out to enter the drawing room. No doubt his sister would be at the far end that had been set aside for dancing. He doubted he would find his elusive beauty there; she had no appetite for dancing.

Yes, you are an elusive beauty, and I will find you. I will dance with you too. Then I can place my hands around your waist and feel the warmth of your body close to mine. You can only escape me momentarily. Soon, you will be within my grasp. What illicit pleasures await us, only fate can tell.

Chapter 3

“Where has my beauty hidden herself?” Francis mumbled under his breath as he walked around the many rooms and hallways of the grand house.

Where are those stunning eyes and those wild, dark locks of hair? he wondered as he searched for the shimmering brown fabric of her gown. Let me gaze upon those naked, slender shoulders once again, and get a fleeting glance of your soft, plump breasts. Where are you, my lovely?

Still, his elusive beauty was not to be found anywhere. Of course, she could have gone into the ladies’ chamber to rest awhile. Then again, it was not as if she had needed to rest because she had overtaxed herself with dancing. That much he felt knew about her, she did not like to dance.

Besides, she did not seem the type to want to join in with the gossipers. She was more of a quiet, mysterious kind of woman. A woman who kept things to herself.

I bet if we made love, you could keep it a secret, could you not, my lovely? he thought as his imagination got the better of him. “This is doing me no good,” he muttered to himself again as he came to a stop.

“What was that?” a young lady had overheard him speaking, and she turned to face him. She must have thought he was talking to her as she answered, “Yes, my Lord. A dance with you would be very pleasurable.” The pretty, young blonde thing grinned back at him.

“Thank you, Miss Annabella,” he said graciously, accepting the situation for what it was because he recognised her as one of his sister’s little group.

The time had come to make some effort at this soiree, at least on his sister’s behalf. Lord, he would not be at this wearisome gathering if not for her. He smiled at the young lady and held out his arm for her to take. Leading her to the dancing area, they would have to wait for the present dance to end first. The effort to please his sister was all the more annoying because now it would mean he had to have pointless chatter with Miss Annabella.

“Your sister is looking wonderful today, my Lord,” Annabella said, as Francis continued to glance around the crowd. Where, oh where, was his mysterious lady?

“Hmmm... yes, well... she took long enough getting ready it,” he grumbled, not concentrating on what he was saying.

Annabella giggled at his response, and he looked back at her in surprise. “You are never meant to comment on how long a lady keeps you waiting,” she said with the pure honesty of youth.

No doubt you have never broken a rule of etiquette in your entire short life, he thought to himself as his mood continued downhill. Give it another ten years and it will be a different tale to tell.

“Am I not? Really? Did I do that?” he asked her, raising his brow and grinning at the same time. “I never said that, surely not. You must be mistaken.”

“Well, sir, one supposes you are allowed to say things like that about your sister,” she said, resigned. “But do not let her hear you, or you will be in deep trouble.” She giggled again.

In the back of his mind, he was grinding his teeth. That was something that annoyed him at the best of times, giggling young ladies. But for his sister, he must contend with such behaviour. He was aware of the similarities between Miss Annabella and his sister. She too had been presented at court this summer, and she too had brothers.

“Then let me be more accommodating, Miss Annabella,” he said, softening to the young lady’s cause. “You too look wonderful, and I apologise if I offended you in any way. Ah, the next dance set is about to begin, shall we?” he bowed his head and held up his hand for her to slip her fingers into as they readied for the dance steps.

They joined the group and took their places, waiting for the Cotillion to begin. Standing in a circle, to begin with, they waited for the music to start. Soon, the entire group moved toward the centre of the circle, to meet the opposite couple. It

was an informal but lively enough dance and thankfully also a short one with it being a soiree and not a ball.

As it turned out, the dance helped to take Francis' mind away from his elusive beauty. His partner was a pretty young thing but still immature in her outlook. Her breasts were modestly covered, a little more so than his mysterious young woman. Though he could see that they were formed to the full as he glanced at the bouncing mounds.

Being covered only served to heighten the expectations of any man. He was grateful this particular dance required only little physical contact. Otherwise, the poor young thing might become aware of his growing erection!

Hah! If that were to happen it would no doubt cause a scandal and be gossiped about for months, if not years, to come. It would mortify my poor sister, who would likely become a recluse all because of her randy brother's behaviour! The thought made him smile a little; Oh, for the innocent ways of such young ladies. If only they knew what went on in the minds of their menfolk.

Finally, the dance ended, and he gave her a courteous bow before they both left the dancefloor. As he did so, he noticed his sister looking at him with approval. Heading her way, he was grateful she had seen him dance with her friend, it would put him in her good books. But he was only too glad she could not read his mind.

“Thank you, brother, for behaving yourself,” Sarah said as he approached, she even smiled with her approval.

“I promised you that I would, and I am a man of my word,” he said, sharing the smile back at her. “I am surprised not to see you on the dancefloor.”

“That is all I have done since last I saw you. And now my feet ache as I have not yet stopped,” she remarked, showing him her flat, pump shoe. “See, my heels are all worn out.”

He laughed, understanding her joke because pumps had no heels. As always, he felt a pang of pride in his little sister. She was such a merry little thing, always laughing and always bright.

“So, I gather you are having a good time then?” he asked rhetorically.

“While ever you behave yourself, yes, I am.” She nodded. “And I even shared a toast by drinking a small glass of champagne with Henrietta and her husband. He is a very handsome man. You will notice him if you see him as she has thick red curls, and would you believe, he is wearing a traditional Scottish kilt.”

“I will shake his hand and congratulate him when I come across him. For now, it is good news that you are enjoying yourself, sister,” Francis remarked. “I will leave you to your mingling.”

She soon returned to her group of young friends. They were all in the same situation as her, single and ready to marry. Though he was in no rush for Sarah to find a suitor, there would be plenty of time for that in some other year, but not this one.

For now, he must find his mysterious lady, but a stab of disappointment hit him. He felt in his heart that she had escaped him on this occasion. It could even be that she had left the soiree.

As he mingled around the various rooms, they all felt empty, even though they were full of chattering socialites. He was surrounded by people, yet he still felt alone. It was likened to one of his sister's favourite French folktales that he had often read to her as a bedtime story, Cinderella.

“My Cinderella has fled the ball,” he said to himself, unable to hide the disappointment in his whispered words.

And now, he had enough of the soiree and all the giggling ladies, so he headed for the room where the gentlemen were gathered. He would pass the rest of his time in there; the talk of men was far more interesting than that of young women and their mothers.

A couple of hours later, he left the room to find his sister.

“Where have you been?” she asked him, looking flustered. “I am exhausted and ready to retire for home.”

As he looked at her, he was thankful that she was tired so he could leave, and he led her to their carriage in the darkness of the night. Many other carriages were awaiting their owners, with lamps alight so the lords and ladies could all find their way around.

His sister slumped upon the bench seat, leaning her head on his shoulder while she rested during the journey home. As she did not want to chatter, Francis took the time to ponder on his loss.

Will I ever find you again, my mysterious beauty? he questioned himself as his thoughts meandered into a more passionate area.

He imagined lying in his bed, leaning over the mysterious stranger who was now completely naked. Oh, how soft her skin felt under his fingers as they glided over her pert and erect nipples. Her eyes were closed as she enjoyed his

attentions, and he pressed his lips onto hers. They tasted of sweet cherries, and she breathed heavily as their kiss ended.

Her warm breath tickled his cheek, and he leaned down to nibble at her bare throat. She groaned as his tongue danced across her bare skin and he licked down toward the soft mounds of her breasts. He was imagining engulfing her puckered areola into his mouth and how he would lather it with his tongue. But his dream was soon to be disturbed as the carriage jolted, dragging him from his fantasy.

“Are we home yet?” his sister asked, bringing him completely back to reality.

“Yes, almost there,” he said, though in truth he had not a clue where they were. The darkness that encompassed them meant that the windows revealed nothing. But he knew by the timing of the ride that they should not be far from their home.

“Thank you, brother,” she said with a sleepy voice. “I had the most wonderful of times.”

“As it happened, I had a good time too,” he told her as he leaned over to stroke her hair with fondness. “You will soon be tucked up in your nice warm bed,” he assured her, knowing the words would be a comfort.

“I am worn out,” she moaned with a croak to her voice. “But I cannot wait to tell Mother all about it tomorrow.”

They travelled in silence for the rest of the journey. Before too long, the coach pulled into the long driveway to their home on the Ashbrook Estate. Their parents would no doubt have waited up for them, his mother wanting to fuss over Sarah as she put her to bed. Their life was good, but his life would be better if only he knew who his mystery woman was. And he had every intention of finding out.

Chapter 4

Diana felt shaken after she had found herself staring at a very handsome gentleman. He had looked at her like no other man had ever done before, and it felt strange—and good. The man had stirred something inside of her, something she had never felt before.

It was a strange sensation that started in the pit of her belly and radiated out to all the sensitive areas of her body. Startling her, she could not help but blush as elicited thoughts had overtaken her mind before she pulled her eyes away from him.

Once she had escaped the noisy party and sought the silence of the library, she knew that she did not want to go back out there again. Not that she blamed Henrietta, she was celebrating her homecoming, and Diana had felt obliged to be there for her. Showing off her new husband to her friends was keeping Henrietta busy.

Diana wished she was like all the other ladies she knew, yearning for a husband to look after her, but she was not.

Whenever she was among the ladies of the ton, they always made her feel clumsy and ugly.

If not for her friend, Henrietta, she was sure she would never attend any balls or soirees because she did not fit in. No doubt though, if she married it would be a relief for her father. But she had little in the way of romantic dreams. She would be lucky to marry a merchant, let alone a lord.

Although the lord who had captured her eye before she had escaped all the noise, had turned her head. But a man of such high status was out of her reach. She wondered what she had done to catch his attention and then assumed that he must have been a friend of Henrietta's. Her friend might have encouraged him to pay her some attention. That is the only way a lord such as he would even notice the likes of her.

Putting such thoughts aside, she made her way to the secret door in the library. There were many of these doors in old manor houses such as Woodberry Hall. As children, she and Henrietta had found them all.

This one would lead her to a back corridor where she could make her way to the reception hall and find her outdoor coat.

Now that she had spoken briefly with Henrietta, she doubted she would be missed. Her friend was far too busy circulating among her guests to notice her absence.

Once in the main hallway, she found a steward to get her coat. Within ten minutes, she was exiting the double doors at the front, even as others were still arriving.

Although she had had a carriage to bring her to Woodberry Hall, she did not have such a luxury for the return journey. But she did not mind as she had trodden the path home many times before. Setting off down the gravel road, she soon passed through a gap in a hedgerow that led her onto a grassy trail. This would lead to a woodland path that would take her home.

As she trundled along the darkened woodland, she thought of how things were going to change, now that her best friend was married. The shrill scream of a vixen rang out, but it did not bother her as she was accustomed to such noises.

Being out in the dark on the night alone had never bothered her, she had taken many a night-time stroll while her drunken father slept on. It was a perfect night for such a walk, with clear skies full of twinkling, silver stars, and almost a full

moon to light her way. She loved the outdoors and all the noises that went along with it.

“I suppose I will be even more alone if you leave for Scotland?” she said to herself as her mind returned to Henrietta.

At times like this, she missed her mother. Her father cared nothing for her, he was too deep in his own troubles. If she were lucky enough to marry and leave home, her father would not even notice her gone. For years they had had little contact with one another.

It had been her mother who had known Henrietta’s mother well, and that was how they had grown up together. Their two mothers had also been good friends when they were younger, and when each of them married they continued that friendship.

But once her mother passed away, her father had all but frightened off anyone who showed sympathy towards her. And so, she had practically become an outcast.

“I will be sad to lose you, Henrietta,” she continued to talk to herself as she moved along. No one was around to hear her, and she was used to chatting with herself these days. “But I am happy that you are starting a whole new life. How exciting to have such a handsome man for a husband.”

Although she had not spoken with Henrietta’s new husband, she had seen him from a distance. He looked tall and strong, but there seemed to be a gentleness about his demeanour. Diana felt that he would be a good husband to her friend.

Thinking of this, her mind wandered back to the gentleman she had locked eyes with before she left. He too had looked strong and tall of stature. He had looked at her with a strange passion and in return, she had felt an odd desire to go up to him and...

“Oh, for goodness sake, Diana Carlisle, whatever are you thinking!” she cried out to herself as she realised she was pondering on those strange desires once again. She paused to look up at the moon. “Though his lips were most kissable, and... oh dear, that is not how a lady should be thinking,” she admonished herself once again and set off on the last part of her journey.

Her home stood at the edge of the woodland, and she was soon walking up a small driveway to enter Rose Cottage. Through the glass in the front door, she could see a glimmering light in the hallway. The redbrick building had once meant a lot to her, a place of safety and love. But since her mother was no longer there, nor the laughter of her little brother, it was now a lonely place.

A curtain twitched in one of the windows to the right of the door. *It must be Martha looking out for me. She will be reading a book in the small parlour at the front of the house.* Rose Cottage was still home and there was still love in it, provided by Martha who she had known all her life.

She looked up at the top floor of the house to see if there was any light burning in her father's room. Of the six windows on the first floor, two were her father's bedchamber. Her room was at the rear of the house because she liked the view better from that side. His room was in complete darkness, her father no doubt oblivious to the world from the intoxication of brandy.

As she approached the house, the front door opened and she could see a figure standing there, holding up a lamp.

“What are you doing on foot, Miss Diana?” Martha cried out in a panicked tone.

“I did not like to bother Henrietta for a carriage, Martha. She was so busy mingling with her guests,” Diana explained as she stepped inside the relative warmth of the house. The night air had been chilly, and she was glad to be home.

“Get yourself into the front parlour, I have a fire burning,” Martha commanded as she took off Diana’s overcoat. “Glory be, girl, your mother will turn in her grave at the thought of you out there in the dark on your own. I am going to make you a warm milky drink, so you go warm up.”

“It was not as if I was lost, Martha,” Diana complained. “I know the pathways well.”

“Maybe you do. But you do not know if there’s someone out there waiting to rob you,” Martha mumbled. She shook her

head as she disappeared towards the kitchen at the back of the house.

Diana was glad of the warming yellow glow emanating from the hearth and was soon enjoying the warm drink that Martha returned with.

“Did you dance then?” Martha asked.

“Yes, but not with anyone I liked,” she answered as she pursed her lips, recalling how the spotty young man had manhandled her.

“Were there not any handsome young men of your liking then?” Martha joked, placing a warm blanket over Diana’s legs.

“Well, there was one gentleman. Though I did not get to dance with him,” Diana told her, wanting to talk about the best part of her night.

“And what did this gentleman have to say to you?” Martha pushed.

“Nothing, we did not speak,” Diana admitted. “We kind of stared at one another, but it was a magical moment.”

“And why did you not speak?”

“I have no idea who he was. I could hardly go up to him and introduce myself, could I?” Diana questioned, staring into the orange flames as the heat warmed her cheeks.

“Could you not have asked Henrietta to introduce you,” Martha asked.

“She was very busy tonight,” Diana said as she shrugged her shoulders. “Now that she is a married woman, she has many new duties.”

“Yes, it worries me that you have lost your only friend,” Martha said as she tugged at her ear in thought. “Why then did you find this man attractive?”

Diana let the first remark about losing her friend drop, instead choosing to speak about the handsome lord.

“It was only a fleeting moment. Though it felt as if I knew him because he put me at ease as he stared at me,” Diane explained.

“I see, so there is a man out there that has an interest in you then?” Martha asked, cocking her head to one side as she awaited an answer.

“No, it was not like that,” Diana said, feeling a little shy about discussing it now. “There was something about him that I liked, but I cannot tell you what that was. His blue eyes were warm, and he was dressed very smartly.”

“I should think so at an event such as that,” Martha said with some surprise.

“He had long hair that was tied at the back,” Diana described him as she remembered. “He wore a crisp white cravat, and light beige waistcoat with a golden chain that must have led to a pocket watch.”

“My, my, girl, you did notice a lot of detail about him in such a short space of time,” Martha half laughed.

“It seemed as though time stood still as we caught one another’s eyes,” Diana said, feeling as if she was now only dreaming that he had existed. “As I said, I felt as if I knew him, but I know that was not possible.”

“That, my dear girl, sounds like love at first sight if you ask me,” Martha said, looking concerned.

“Whatever it was, it was a nice feeling.” Diana smiled dreamily.

“It is a pity that he did not seek out an escort so that he could introduce himself to you,” Martha pondered.

“Oh, I left after that,” Diana informed her as she sipped the final dregs of milky drink from her mug.

“If only your mother were here to advise you on these matters,” Martha said in a soft voice as she reached over to take Diana’s hand in hers. “I know very little of lords and ladies, I am afraid. Things are so very different for commoners; we do not have so many rules. If that had not been a party for the gentry, you could have gone up to the young man and introduced yourself.”

“I could never have behaved in such a forward way, Martha,” Diana declared, looking shocked.

“No, I would not want you to,” Martha said, squeezing Diana’s hand. “I am only saying how I cannot advise you in these matters. Now your father could, if only—”

“Shh...” Diana said. “I do not wish him to know that I smiled at a strange man. He will be livid, and he will shout at me.”

“Do not worry over that, my girl, your secret is safe with me,” Martha assured her. “Now let’s get you off to your bed, where you can dream about your young man without anyone else knowing of it.”

Chapter 5

After a restless night, Diana woke to the sound of the cockerel in the chicken coop at the bottom of the garden. They had long since kept chickens for the eggs, and every morning gathered up any freshly laid eggs.

Getting out of bed, she stretched out her arms to force herself awake before going to open the drapes. From her bedchamber, Diana could see the chicken coop. It was not quite light, yet so she could not make out where the noisy old rooster was making his morning call from.

They only hired a cook for the main evening meal, so Diana put on a warm dressing gown and made her way down to the kitchen to help. Even though she was earlier than normal, Martha was still up before her.

“Why are you up and about so early in the day, Martha?” she asked the housekeeper as she yawned and took a seat at the kitchen table. “Do you ever even go to your bed?”

“Of course I do, but I do not need much sleep,” Martha said with a warm smile on her lips as she placed a teapot on the table. “Besides, I’ve bread to bake at this time of day.”

“That is what the delicious smell is!” Diana remarked, enjoying the smell of the food.

By the time she usually had her breakfast in the kitchen, the bread was already out of the oven and cooling. She and Martha shared breakfast every day, then Martha would take a tray of food to her father’s bedchamber. No one would see him until later in the day because he seemed to sleep more and more these days.

“And why might you be up at the crack of dawn?” Martha asked, taking bread from the black oven range.

Diana watched as Martha set the bread out on the cooling racks. She then refilled a large copper kettle which she hung back over the burning open fire range.

“Well, are you going to answer me?” Martha asked again, this time taking a seat opposite Diana at the table in the centre of the room.

“It was Rodger the Rooster, he woke me up,” Diana told her as she went to pour the brewed tea from the teapot.

“Ah, he’s been very vocal lately,” Martha replied while putting a fresh bread roll on Diana’s plate. “I do believe that we are having trouble with a fox.”

“I will secure the wire better when I go down there later,” Diana said, spreading a curl of butter on her warm bread. “I can make sure there’s nowhere it can dig its way in. They are tenacious when it comes to chickens.”

“That is true enough. Pass me the pot of jam will you, dear,” Martha said. “And then you can tell me all about your dream

of the mysterious stranger you met last night?” Martha asked, her brow raised in curiosity.

“How do you know I dreamt about him?” Diana asked, her voice raised high in surprise.

“I told you, it is love at first sight.” Martha giggled, shrugging her shoulders. “Well... did you dream of him then?”

“I cannot remember but I must admit, his face was the first thing I imagined when I woke up.” Diana smiled, a twinkle in her eye. “I wonder who he is.”

“If there’s no interesting dream to talk about, then you have all day to wonder about him,” Martha said, looking disappointed at the lack of a romantic dream. “For now, get your food down you, we have chores to be done around here.”

“I am sorry to disappoint you. Anyway, you should find your romance to dream of.” Diana chuckled, but Martha was right,

it was time to go and gather the morning eggs from the chicken coop. “I am going to do my chores.”

As she drank the last mouthful of warm tea from her mug, she put on a pair of boots that she kept in the kitchen. Once wrapped up, she made her way outside. The air was bracing and felt cool on her skin. Heading off to the bottom of the garden, the young gentleman from the party came to her mind again. He kept invading her thoughts without her permission, so persistent was he in popping into her head.

Shaking her head and laughing at how she was smitten over a man she did not even know, she began to check out the chicken coop. Rodger the Rooster had done a good job of warning his hens to hide, and all were still present and accounted for. Once she had secured the area, Diana collected the eggs and headed back inside to begin her day.

The rest of the morning continued with much the same routine as every day. By midday, she was ready to go out for a ride on Daisy, her grey dappled mare. The horse was one of the few luxuries that she had managed to hold onto once her father’s income had taken a turn for the worse. Although she had to care for the horse all by herself, she did not mind mucking out the stable and grooming her.

“Miss Diana!” Martha cried out as Diana was about to leave through the back door. “Can you take this cloth bag with you and collect some apples from the old orchard? I can use them to make an apple pie along with some apple sauce for the roast.”

“You know me, Martha,” Diana smiled, accepting the empty bag. “I will do anything for a piece of your apple pie.”

With a gentle trot towards the wild orchard, she was soon dismounting Daisy. As always, she left her loose so she could graze while she was busy. Setting about the large old apple, she soon found her footing and started to climb to the tree.

She hummed a merry tune as she climbed to the higher branches, already knowing that is where the best fruit would be. Diana knew every nook and cranny in this old tree, making her way quite high up was not unusual when she was picking the plump fruit.

Once she had found a good place, well into the centre of the thick branches, she sat on the hook of a huge branch and rested. A little out of breath, she opened the cloth bag and started to pull off the best of the hanging red fruits.

Glancing down to the ground, she could see that Daisy had wandered off to graze elsewhere. It was common for her horse to stray away, but a whistle would soon bring her back again.

Her bag was only half full when she took a moment to rest again. It was not easy climbing trees and balancing on branches in a dress. Though when out riding, she always wore an old pair of her father's breeches because she hated to ride side saddle. The pants helped when she was clambering up trees too.

As she sat pondering, her thoughts turned to the handsome man she saw at Henrietta's soirée.

"Why am I so obsessed with you?!" she cried out louder than she meant to. "You seem to have invaded my life with your most handsome of faces," she continued to mutter to herself as she went back to picking apples. "Not that a lord like you

would have any real interest in the likes of a lady who wears men's breeches and climbs trees.”

Sighing at that thought, she stopped once again and took a bite from a plump, red apple. The sour juice hit her cheeks, but she continued to chew on it even though it made her eyes water.

“I do not suppose I will ever marry,” she said to herself as she looked up to daze at the sharp blueness of the sky. “Maybe a farmer if I am lucky. Or a vicar... lord no, that would be far too dull. What about a merchant? Yes, that would do, I suppose. Though he must be young and handsome, like the gentleman who keeps popping into my head.”

Chomping her teeth more on the apple, she tried to remember the finer features of his handsome face. *You had a fine and solid nose, and a good strong jawline*, she mused. *Your eyes were your best feature. Then again, perhaps not. Your lips looked most sensuous but masculine too*, she nodded to herself.

Yes, you were certainly masculine, with your strong, muscular body that stood tall and strong. Your legs were long and met in

the middle with creases to your pants, and a mound that must have been your—

Diana stopped herself from thinking any further. She had become carried away with her thoughts, which had taken a most scandalous turn. *What would Martha think if she knew she?*

Forcing herself to finish picking the rest of the apples, she was soon making her way back down the tree again. But then she was forced to pause as she heard the sound of horse hooves approaching. It was not Daisy because she would not stop grazing until she was called.

Someone was passing by the tree, so she stayed deathly still, hoping they would soon be gone. The last thing she wanted was to be caught up in a tree. *Whatever would they think to see a full-grown woman up a tree and wearing pants underneath my day dress at that!*

Remaining as still as possible was not easy when balancing on a tree branch. Diana prayed the person would soon be gone so that she could get down. But to her shock, the rider stopped, right underneath the huge apple tree.

“Curses!” she hissed in a whisper. “Why choose to stop right there?”

Peeking down through the branches, she could make out that it was a lone rider, and it was a man. He patted his horse’s neck as the horse nickered, no doubt sensing Daisy’s presence.

Holding her breath, she continued to spy on the rider, knowing that she could hardly declare her presence, halfway up a tree. If the man were to see her climbing down, he would also see right up her skirts. Then he would find out that she wore men’s breeches too.

Damn, she mused, willing the rider to leave. I hope he does not stop for a picnic. Whatever will I do? I cannot stay up here!

It seemed that he was about to move on when the sound of Daisy snickering echoed out from behind a large bush.

“By Jove, is that a loose horse?” she heard the man say to himself.

She had no choice now, but to come down the tree despite any embarrassment that it might cause. “Well, I cannot let him take my horse, can I?” she mumbled as she was about to make her move, but things were not to be that easy.

Diana attempted to make the rest of the descent, when she missed her footing, causing her cloth bag to tip a little. Out tumbled a few pieces of her gathered treasure, and she rained apples on the man below.

Panicking, she gasped and tumbled down. Her day dress flapped open, and her legs flayed all over as her body soon thumped onto the soft ground of fallen leaves and rotting apples.

Diana was a little dazed from the fall as she looked up at the man. At first, she thought she was in a dream, she could barely believe who was looking down at her. It was her mysterious man from the soiree, and he looked most concerned as he dismounted from his horse.

Chapter 6

Francis had taken his horse for a ride to try and clear his head. The mystery woman he had smiled at from a distance at the soiree yesterday, was haunting his mind. All night he had dreamed of kissing her and caressing her pale shoulders. When he found himself awake in the early hours of the morning, he longed for her to be by his side and in his bed.

Soon drifting off again, he dreamt that his lips were traveling over her creamy skin. Only to be disappointed when he jolted awake to find he was alone. *Why am I so obsessed with this elusive beauty?*

Trotting towards an apple tree, he knew the fallen fruit would make a good treat for the horse. Yet once under the tree, another whinnying horse caught his attention. Looking around, he spotted a grey horse, which seemed to be on the loose.

There were no wild horses around these parts, and the mare looked too well cared for. As he looked closer, he could see it was saddled. *What has happened to your rider?* he pondered as he made a quick scan of his surroundings.

He turned the reins to instruct his horse to trot over to the mare, but before they left the shelter of the apple tree, heavy apples fell all around him. A few struck him about the head and shoulders and then bounded from his horse's back. Looking up, a little baffled at the event, he spotted a young woman who was now crashing through the branches. Before he could do anything to help, she hit the ground with a loud crash.

“Ouch!” the woman shouted out, soon followed by, “Bloody sacs of balls!” To which Francis could not help but stifle a smile.

He was quick to dismount, intending on going to the aid of this damsel in distress. In his haste to help her, his foot caught in the handle of the discarded bag, causing him to lose his balance. He was soon to join the young damsel, in a heap on the floor. For a few moments, there was a deathly silence as he fought to get his breath back.

That is when it registered in his mind that he was laying on top of the woman. Immediately pushing himself up on his hands and knees, he looked down at the young lady with a growing

sense of disbelief. It was the woman who had haunted his dreams all night long.

Time seemingly stood still as each of them stared at the other, both in shock. He was close enough to feel her warm breath on his face. But at that point, he had an overwhelming urge to plant his mouth upon her full, sensuous red lips.

What am I thinking? He shouted out in his head as he came to his senses. “I...erm...we seem to be in a spot of difficulty,” he spoke to her, attempting to unravel his foot from the strap of a cloth bag. “My apologies, Miss, I am...erm...my foot appears to be caught in something, so...if I can just—”

Still on hands and knees, he looked down at his foot. The handle of the bag was twisted around his ankle, but that was not the worst of it. The woman’s dress was high up her leg and could see that she wore men’s breeches.

He looked up at her face again, this time in wonderment at her attire. She looked horrified as she gasped at the knowledge that he had seen her predicament.

“It is you!” she exclaimed, her chest heaving as she breathed heavily.

“I...I am trying to untwist my ankle so that I can get up and assist you, Miss, but I appear to have become entangled in something.”

“Please sir, you...you. Oh no, it seems that my bag is the culprit,” she cried out, looking past him to the ground.

Following her gaze, he too spotted the culprit and reached down to yank the bag free, but it would not budge. “Ouch!” he cried out as the rough burlap handle rubbed at his skin. “That is not helping matters...if you will allow me, Miss...I will lean on my other knee and...

Using his elbow, he shifted his position to use the other foot to push the bag free. Swiftly standing he looked back down at the young woman. Once he was upright, he shook the leaves and dirt from his clothes while the young woman attempted to sit in an upright position.

“Would you like your bag of apples back.” He smiled, pointing to the bag. “Oh, and do not worry Miss, your secret is quite safe with me. I promise to tell no one of your profanities,” he added with a lopsided grin.

She looked up at him in a bit of a fluster, her cheeks pink and eyes shifting all around him.

He reached down and offered his hand to her. “Would you like some help in getting up?” he asked.

It was not that she needed assistance, far from it. But it was an excuse to be able to touch this young woman who had been in his thoughts for a whole night. She did not hesitate to grab hold of his hand and he pulled her to her feet with little effort. As he helped her into a standing position, she was a little unbalanced. It gave him the perfect opportunity to reach out and hold her arms to stop her from falling over again.

“It seems that we are destined to meet then?” he put the rhetorical question to her, not expecting an answer.

“I cannot apologise enough, my Lord,” she blurted out, her eyes wide with embarrassment. “To have you witness my clumsy efforts up a tree, and then my bag causing your fall...I am so utterly appalled at my behaviour.”

Instead of replying to her plea, he continued to hold her arms with gentle firmness. At the same time, he was unable to look away from her enigmatic gaze. His manhood had stiffened, and he had that same urgent urge to kiss her. But it was not to be, she walked backward and pulled herself out of his embrace.

“Truly, my Lord, I am sorry,” she continued to apologise. “As for my cursing... Let me assure you that I never use such foul words in company. It was more that pain had shot up from my bottom...I mean, my legs, as I landed on the hard ground, and —”

He raised his arm to stop her from talking. “Have no fear, Miss. I shall keep the secret that you curse. And that you wear

men's breeches underneath your dress..." He smiled with a softness because he did not want to scare her away.

"Oh no!" she cried out, putting her hands over her face to cover her flushing cheeks. "I am so embarrassed that you have seen up my dress."

"I tell you what, Miss, let us start again, shall we?" he suggested, holding out his hand towards her. "Let me introduce myself, I am Francis Steele, and I am most delighted to make your acquaintance."

He watched as she placed her petite, but trembling, fingers into his hands, and he gave her a smile of encouragement. Pushing his luck in this ridiculous situation, he brought her hand to his lips, brushing them over the skin on the back of her hand.

"My name is D...Diana...Diana Carlisle," she answered as she stared back into his eyes.

He did not want to lose her gaze, it was intoxicating. for some unknown reason, he felt an instant connection between them. But if only he could touch her cheek, or feel her lips on his...

“H... how is your bott... I mean your legs?” he asked with a wicked smile, pleased to see her lovely face flush pink.

“I...erm...do believe we have already met, if only from a distance,” she replied. “I had a rather uncouth young man following me around.”

He could tell that she was doing her best to regain her composure. Surprised by her candour, he spoke up, “I see that you are not afraid to speak the truth.” Though he was left a little disappointed when she pulled her hand away from his.

“Ah, and I am not afraid to curse either.” She grinned. “That is how one behaves when living on the fringes of society.”

“I see, and where might it be that you do live, Miss Diana, may I call you that?” he asked, thinking there were much better names he had like to call her, such as *my love*.

“Please excuse me while I call for my horse,” she said, putting her fingers to her lips and screeching out with a loud whistle. “Oh, my apologies once again, but she will not come if I do it too quietly.”

Immediately, the grey-dappled mare that he had seen earlier came walking towards them from behind a bush. She greeted the horse with gentleness, and he was pleased to see that, like him, she had a good respect for horses.

“You were saying where you live?” he asked again, determined to learn at least that much from her.

“I doubt you will know of it,” she said as she started to walk, holding the reins of her horse so she would follow. “It is a small abode called Rose Cottage. It belongs to the family that held the soiree where we first, you know...where we first met.”

“I do wish we had met properly so that I too could have asked you to dance,” he said, walking by her side with his horse. “Do you know the Graham family well?”

“I do,” she replied. “Henrietta, who was the guest of honour along with her new husband of course, is my very best of friends. And her father, Lord Graham was kind enough to rent us the property where we now live, which sits inside his borders. And you, my Lord, do you live far? I have not seen you before, but then I do not get about much.”

“My father’s lands are some thirty miles from here. But I found myself riding this way for some reason,” he said, not admitting it was because she was haunting his dreams and this area now pulled him in.

“You are a long way from home, my Lord,” she said as she slowed down at a fork in the road.

“It is nothing to ride this far when I am in the mood,” he told her, and it was the truth. “I love riding.”

“Well, I am to go this way,” she said, pointing her hand to the right road that came off the bridleway where they were presently walking. “Martha will be waiting on these apples, though there are not many left in the bag anymore.”

“We could return and pick more if you wish,” he offered, keen to spend more time with her now that he had found her.

“No, she will be worried, I have been gone longer than I should,” she replied.

“Before you leave me, Miss Diana, may I ask an impertinent question?” he asked her, hoping she would not mind his bluntness.

“Now that you have my curiosity going, you are free to be impertinent, my Lord,” she answered.

How he loved her boldness, she was like a breath of fresh air. Unlike any ladies that he knew of.

“I would like to ask if I may see you again?” he said, watching her face to see if she was shocked.

“I would like that very much, my Lord, but is it not a long way for you to ride?” she enquired.

“Do you know the Village of Osmay?” he asked. “We could meet there, almost halfway, if you are up to riding so far. If not, then choose a spot to your liking.”

“I know Osmay, my Lord, I will meet you at St Martin’s church if you wish,” she suggested, smiling at him with a twinkle in her eyes. “It is a good landmark.”

“Excellent, shall we say tomorrow at midday, then?” he asked, pleased to see her nod in agreement. He stepped closer and

was delighted that she did not back off or stop him from taking her hand in his.

Stooping a little, he once again brushed his lips over the back of her hand. It thrilled him to sense a little quiver from her, and although barely perceptible, it was definitely there. “I look forward to getting to know the real Miss Diana Carlisle. The young lady who curses and falls out of apple trees.” He grinned.

“And I look forward to spending some time with you, my Lord,” she said as she turned to walk away and down the lane with her horse in tow.

“What do you think then, Jasper?” he said to his horse as he mounted. “Fate has led me here, I am sure of it.”

Chapter 7

Diana had no idea why she had agreed to a meeting with Lord Steele without a chaperone. If anyone was to find out, it would cause a scandal. Then again, not many of the ton even knew that she existed so it is doubtful they had even notice.

But what of the Duke? It would not go down well for him, would it? For this reason, she decided that she would bring it up when she met with him today at the church.

A letter from Henrietta awaited her that morning. It was an invitation for dinner that evening at Woodberry Hall. She would prefer family dinner to a soiree anytime, so she would be in attendance. For now, though, she was on her way to the clandestine meeting with a very fine handsome man, though she did worry that he might not turn up.

As her horse arrived in the tiny hamlet of Osmay, she could see from her position on the dirt track that the Lord had arrived. His horse was already grazing, although he was nowhere in sight. As she neared, he appeared out of the churchyard and called over to her.

“There is a fine stream at the back, shall we make our way over there? he suggested. “It will be a most tranquil place, and the horses can take a drink.”

Dismounting, she joined him to lead the horses to a clearing by the stream. Conveniently, there was a fallen tree trunk that they could sit upon as they spoke. Both horses were let loose to wander around as they pleased, their owners watching over them from the tree trunk.

“Miss Diana, I am so pleased that you came,” Lord Steele said to her as he put his legs on either side of the tree trunk. She liked that he had sat down close her because he was now facing her.

“Please, call me Diana,” she said. “I do not care for being reminded that I am a miss, and most likely will stay one until my dying breath.”

“Now that, I do not believe.” He grinned. “You underestimate your beauty.”

His flattery made her blush. Martha had often told her she was beautiful, but no man had ever said that, and she enjoyed the feeling it gave her.

“I want you to call me Francis because I would like to consider you as a friend,” he said, looking her directly in the eyes.

She gulped involuntarily and bit at her lip, knowing that this was not right. “But if I see you with others around, I must refer to you as Lord Steele.”

He said nothing but took hold of her hand, as he had done so the previous day.

“You and I will have a very special friendship, I can tell,” he told her, moving her chin with his other hand because she had

looked away in embarrassment. “I mean it, Diana. When I saw you at the soiree, I wanted to dance with you all night long so I could be close to you.”

“I would have danced had you, had you asked me. But when we happened upon one another, I was heading to the library,” she explained as she looked into sharp blue-green eyes. “I know the house well and I was taking a secret door to escape the soiree.”

“Ah, that is what happened to you,” he remarked as he let go of her hand. He looked as if a mystery had been resolved for him. “I searched for you and could find you nowhere.”

“You did?” she asked, unable to keep the surprise from her voice. “May I confess something to you?”

“You may tell me anything you like,” he said, still smiling as if being with her pleased him.

“I too have thought of you since I saw you last,” Diana admitted to him. Though she instantly regretted it, almost expecting him to make fun of her.

“That pleases me,” he told her. “It means that we both feel the same way. We were meant to meet.”

“It does seem that way, but I doubt I was meant to be up a tree when we next met one another.” She giggled as she glanced down at the stream.

He laughed and followed her eyes. “I know the secret why you wear men’s breeches too,” he told her as he watched the horses in the water. “Are you blushing?” Francis laughed. “I promise I will not look at you if I embarrass you. But I noticed today that you ride your horse with your legs astride her body. That is no mean feat in a skirt.”

“You have me all worked out, Francis,” she said shyly. “But I do worry about us meeting alone like this. You are a Duke, and it could cause you much embarrassment if we were to be spotted.

He turned to look at her. “Hmmm... that is of no concern to me. Would it bother you?”

“I have told you already, I live on the fringes of high society, no one cares what I do, but for you—”

“Forget that. Tell me, have you ever tickled a fish?” he asked, his brows raised at the question.

“I...no... why would I have ever done such a thing?” She laughed.

“Because it is a way to catch them,” he explained, climbing off the tree trunk, and looking at her. “Come with me down to the water and I will show you how it is done.”

Diana was quick to get up and follow him, for she was now intrigued whether such a thing was possible.

She watched as Francis started to take off his boots. “Come on, you need to take yours off too,” he instructed her. “Give me your hand and I will help you into the stream.”

She did as he asked and placed her small hand into his large palm. It felt good, holding hands with this man with, whom she was fast becoming attracted to. Francis led her out into the middle of the stream, each of them treading carefully over the uneven riverbed that was covered with moss, making it slippery.

The deeper they went, Diana was forced to pull up the bottom of her dress and tuck it into her waist. At least, she still had breeches to cover her legs, even though they were getting wet.

“Whoa! Be careful,” he cried out as he helped her to keep her balance. “Now then, this should do,” he said as they stopped. “Watch a master at work,” he boasted, giving her a little wink.

Diana smiled and observed as he bent over to put his hand in the trickling water. At first, nothing happened, but there were numerous, large brown fish around their legs. She watched in amazement as Francis began to use his fingertips to tickle a large fish from its tail and going around to its belly.

The fish became calm in the water as if it too was mesmerised by Francis' actions. Within moments, he swiftly moved his hands and pulled the whole fish out of the water.

“And here we have our dinner,” he declared with a firm grip on the head and tail of the fish. “It is a trout, and we can cook it or put it back, which would you prefer?”

Diana went closer to look at the fish that seemed in a trance-like state. “It appears to be asleep, who taught you to do that?”

“Would you believe, a poacher on Father's estate?” he answered.

“The best thing to do is to put it back in the water before it dies,” she urged, starting to feel sorry for the poor thing.

Francis did as she requested and gently let it go. The fish swam off as if nothing had happened.

“That is a true skill,” she said, admiring Francis. “And did the poacher get punished?”

“No, I left him to his task because he was fishing for dinner for his family,” he told her. “And he had taken the time to teach me a valuable lesson. I thought he deserved to feed his family that day.”

“You are a kind soul, I can see,” she remarked. “I am pleased you let the poacher go free.”

They both waded out of the stream and Diana untucked her dress as she put her boots back on again.

“I felt there was plenty of fish in our waters for everyone,” Francis explained. He too put his boots back on and she noted that his feet were much larger than hers. “Now and then I bump into him, though not when he’s poaching. The man is one of our farm labourers and we always stop to chat.”

“I am afraid my father no longer owns any lands, but he did when my mother was alive,” she told him, unsure why she was speaking so freely.

“I am sorry to hear that your mother passed, and your younger brother too, so I understand?” he questioned her, but his eyes were soft as she glanced into them. “Shall we take a small walk along the bank of this stream?”

Diana nodded in agreement. She was enjoying being in the company of this man, but she was curious how he knew so much about her family.

“It seems that you know of my family, and I know nothing of yours,” she mentioned, hoping her words did not insult him.

“I have to admit that after I knew your name, I asked around after you,” he admitted. “Does it upset you?”

“Not at all,” she smiled as they strolled along. “I am honoured that you are curious about me. But I doubt the gossip would be pleasant about my father.”

“It saddens me when a strong man is brought down,” Francis said, and his words surprised Diana. “It is my understanding that he held shares in the tin mines, and it caused him great losses.”

“I do not know of the finances of my father, but he has shown little interest in life once we lost Mother,” she told him. “He also lost his heir, so it hit him hard.”

“But he has you, is that not enough to continue to celebrate life?” Francis asked.

She felt unable to answer him, thinking that he must have much love in his own family life. It was good that he had no understanding of how a family could become shattered.

“The time has come for me to depart, Francis,” she announced, not wanting to discuss her family a moment longer. “I have somewhere to be so I must leave and get ready. Though it has been a most interesting visit with you.”

He turned to look at her and took hold of her by the arms, “My apologies if I have upset you, Diana. That is the last thing I wish to do.”

As he held her, she felt her knees tremble. This was a man who made her feel things that she had no understanding of. She felt weak in his presence, and her face was forever glowing pink. Further, and more unnerving, when she was around him, she had a yearning for something that she felt only he could fulfil the strange void.

Diana opened her mouth to respond, but before any words were spoken, she felt his lips upon hers. She knew this was wrong in every way, but she could not help but surrender to his tender ways. His soft lips on hers flooded her body with a sensation she had never felt before.

He held her so close that her breast pressed against his firm chest. She would happily stay there for an eternity. It was the briefest of kisses and a most forbidden one, but for her, it seemed to last an eternity. As he pulled away, she felt the remnants of his warm breath brush her cheek.

“I am not sorry that I did that,” he told her as he once again looked into her eyes. “I have longed to do it ever since I first laid eyes upon you.”

“Nor am I sorry, Francis. But for the sake of your reputation, I do not think it should happen ever again,” she told him, breathless from her desires.

With her last words, she turned and ran to the horses, mounting Daisy as soon as she reached her.

Without looking back at Francis, she spurred her horse into a gallop, riding away at speed. Diana was confused. She knew that it was immoral to allow a man to touch her in such a way, let alone be alone with him.

She must put what she had done aside and make haste. Henrietta had invited her to dinner that evening, and she did not want to be late. She had not wanted to leave Francis, but she could not have stayed another moment, so strong was her growing passion for him.

Chapter 8

“I am worried about it, Miss Diana, I cannot deny it,” Martha grumbled as she brushed at her mistress’s hair, helping her get ready for dinner at Woodberry Hall.

“My fondness for you causes me much alarm at what you both risk. You must be sure you like this gentleman, and it is worth the risk of scandalous gossip among the nobility.”

“I know what you mean, Martha, but the risk is greater for the Duke than it is for me.” Diana nodded. “No one even knows I exist when I am not with Henrietta.”

“Keep your head still so I can get all the curls in the right places,” Martha said, stopping Diana from nodding.

“I do not need to look perfect, Martha.” Diana laughed. “I am only going to dinner with my best friend’s family.”

“Well, you never know who might be there. Are other guests to be invited?” Martha asked.

“I do not think so. But then I am no longer privy to the social proclivities of the Graham family. Not now that Henrietta is married,” Diana said, noting the sadness on her face in the mirror’s reflection.

“In the past, when I was invited to dinner, Henrietta would have come to Rose Cottage, and we would have helped each other prepare. Now, I must do it alone.”

“Stop that pouting lip will you because you are never alone, not while ever I am around,” Martha rebuked. “There, you are ready. If I am not mistaken, I do believe I can hear the wheels of a carriage arriving.”

“Already?” Diana queried in a panic as she stood up to look out of her bedchamber window. “Blast! I had better get a move

on. I would have preferred to make my way there, but Henrietta must have had other ideas.”

“Well, I for one am glad that she has you a carriage,” Martha said, following Diana down the stairway. “She always was the sensible one between the two of you.”

In the hallway, Diana could see her father in his study, but she did not bother to go through to greet him. She noticed that he looked her way, and then he got up from his desk and shut the door to his study. She said nothing as Martha helped her put her arms into an outdoor coat.

“Do not worry over your father,” Martha stressed to her. “He has lived his life, but you have yours before you.”

Diana leaned in and embraced Martha. “What would I do without you, Martha?”

“You shall never be without me,” Martha said, after returning the hug. “Now off you go and do not keep the driver waiting or he might be off without you.”

* * *

Henrietta met Diana at the main door to Woodberry Hall, and they were both joyful to be greeting one another. Diana had been worried that now her friend was a married woman, she would have less time for her.

“Why did you leave so early?” Henrietta asked her friend with some urgency. “I could not believe it when I heard that you had walked home in the dark. What will I do with you?”

“You know perfectly well that I have done that walk hundreds of times.” Martha feigned annoyance. A servant took her coat, and she followed Henrietta toward the drawing room.

“I do not want you doing it ever again, do you hear me?” Henrietta cautioned. “Now listen, we have other guests for dinner, but you are seated next to me. I know that I am married now but you are still an important part of my life.”

“I needed to get away from the soirée because—” Diana stopped midsentence, frozen to the spot as she entered the room.

“Diana?” Henrietta whispered in her friend’s ear. “What is it? Are you unwell? Please tell me that you are not going to faint, you look awfully pale.”

“No, no, I am fine,” Diana replied, letting out the breath that she had been holding in. “I was thinking of an incident with Father before I left, and it caused me to stutter.”

“Oh Lord, what has he done now?” Henrietta asked, looking concerned.

“Nothing of any importance.” Diana pushed the topic aside, not wanting to discuss her father. The truth of the matter was not the incident with her father. She had been shocked at who the other guests were for dinner.

Pulling herself together, she continued to follow Henrietta. Her friend led her towards the seating area, where others were gathered and chatting.

“Mother, Diana has arrived so we can let the servants know that we are all present,” Henrietta informed her mother. She then turned to Diana.

“Let me introduce you to my other guests. This is Sarah, who I met in London and cannot believe that we have not met sooner. You will adore her as much as I do once you get to know her,” Henrietta said as she led her to a slender young woman with bright blonde hair.

Sarah curtsied as Henrietta approached, and she smiled at Diana, leaning in to kiss each of her cheeks upon their introduction.

“I am most pleased to meet you, at last, Miss Diana,” Sarah said with an enthusiastic tone to her voice. “It feels as if I already know you so well. Henrietta has shared much about you,” Sarah added as she turned sideways toward a very familiar figure.

“This is my older brother, Lord Francis Steele. And my most favoured escort wherever I go.”

Diane could not speak as a sharp lump seemed to parch her throat. She did manage to curtsy, bowing her head a little to hide her embarrassment, and purposely not looking at Lord Steele.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Diana,” Lord Steele said to her, showing no sign that they had already met.

As their eyes met for but the briefest of moments, she felt a warm sensation flood all her senses, unnerving her completely. It took a great deal of self-control to quell her feelings, and she

managed to say in a steady voice, “The pleasure is all mine, Lord Steele.”

“Dinner is ready!” Lady Graham cried out to the assembled guests.

Miss Sarah took her brother’s arm so that he could lead her into the dining room. Henrietta then introduced Diana to another young man who was present.

“Diana, this is Lord Harry Waverley, my new brother-in-law who, with your permission, of course, would like to escort you into the dining room. He is seated on your right-hand side. That way you will enjoy pleasant company,” Henrietta explained. Diana noticed that she looked quite pleased with herself at her matchmaking skills.

Diana had guessed what she was up to, but Henrietta did her best to hide what she was doing. Diana curtsied to the handsome young man, who had a head of thick, wavy red hair. He spoke to her with a strong Scottish accent, which she found most appealing.

It was difficult for her not to keep glancing at Lord Steele, and every time she did so, she found his eyes were on her. Although she was enjoying the company of Lord Harry Waverley, he did not stir the strange feelings that Lord Steele had managed when they met.

Following the meal, the whole group sat around playing cards and chatting with one another. Diana found that the young Scottish lord stuck with her, entertaining her with light conversation. She politely accepted his efforts but wished that Lord Steele would speak with her more than he had. He was sitting at a separate table, playing cards with his sister and Henrietta's parents. Whereas Diana had been directed to sit with the Scottish visitors and Henrietta.

Finally, everyone retired to the drawing room where the buzz of light conversation could be heard. Lord Steele was seated by his sister on a different settee to her. Diana sat with Henrietta on a seat close to him, which pleased her. Though it upset her that he seemed to be going out of his way to ignore her.

“Will you be returning to London, Lord Steele?” Lord Graham asked. “I hear that you enjoy attendance in parliament, now

and then.”

“I do have to return, but not for parliament. We have a house in London where I will host an important business meeting,” Lord Steele replied.

“And is your sister to accompany you?” Lady Graham asked.
“No doubt she adores London now.”

“It is my opinion that she has had enough excitement for the summer. She needs to rest at home for the winter,” Lord Steele replied.

“Are you investing in the textile trade?” Lord Graham asked.
“I am hearing good things from my business partners.”

“Indeed, that will be the purpose of my business meeting, but I am not attending for a few weeks yet,” Lord Steele replied, speaking with ease. “There are things to be sorted out much

closer to home first,” he added, glancing at Diana who caught his stare.

“I would imagine that involves finding a match for your sister?” Henrietta asked, smiling at her friend Sarah.

“I need no assistance from my brother, thank you very much,” Sarah spoke up for herself. “Fortunately, my parents have agreed that, at least for now, I should rely on my instincts as opposed to an arranged marriage.”

“That is very commendable of them,” Lady Graham said with a smile. “We felt much the same way for Henrietta, and look at her now, she is happily married and in love all at the same time.”

“Mother!” Henrietta cried out, her face flushing. “Please do not use me as an example, though it is all true, Sarah. I am very much in love,” Henrietta admitted, smiling at her new husband.

With all the talk of husbands, Diana felt out of place. She shifted in her seat, wishing the floor would open and swallow her up. It had not been a topic of conversation that had bothered her much in the past. But for some odd reason, it stirred her emotions being so close to Lord Steele.

Why she did not know, it was unlikely the heir to a dukedom would have that sort of interest in her. If anything, it seemed that he might even be regretting their brief friendship. After all, he had made no effort to make it known that he knew her.

Did that make her a fool to have met him on her own? Perhaps she should not encourage any further meetings with him, but then they had not agreed upon any anyway. Was she reading too much into their brief encounter? It was clear that she was confused over the whole affair, but deep down she knew that she would meet him again, should he ask.

The night soon came to a close, and a carriage awaited Diana to take her home safely. She said her farewells to all and went climb into the carriage. But before she sat down, she noticed something on the cushioned bench seat. There, she spotted a folded piece of paper and took it in her hand.

Whilst she could see her name had been handwritten, she was unable to read it in the dark. Tucking it into her purse, she would read its contents once she was home. Having a good idea who it was from, she prayed that she was right.

Chapter 9

“I was doubtful you would come,” Francis said as he greeted Diana at the same place where they had met the previous day.

“I was not sure that I should,” Diana replied, leading her horse to the water. “But I cannot deny that there is a certain attraction I find hard to ignore, my Lord.”

Without warning, Francis scooped her up in his arms, and they were soon staring into one another’s eyes. “And I have a growing fondness for you, Miss Diana. Do stop calling me by my title or I may have to punish you.”

Diana giggled at his bold move, and he was pleased that she had not demanded he put her back down. He looked into her dark blue eyes and likened them to swirling pools that pulled him in with a seductive tone. Unable to control his inner desire to kiss her cherry-red lips, he bent his head and gave in to his desires.

It pleased him further that she did not resist. Holding her in his arms, he could smell the sweet essence of lavender and rose petals, so pure was she. Their kiss was a longer one than the first time he had tried. It stirred his desire even further, knowing that was so accepting of his advances.

“Are you going to put me down?” she asked as their lips parted. “Before you drop me.”

“I could carry you around with me forever,” he answered, smiling back at her, but keeping a tight hold. “You can become one of my limbs and follow wherever I go.”

“Hmmm, I do not think that a very practical idea, my Lord.” She chuckled, as he carried her under the branches of a thick willow tree.

There, he placed her carefully on the ground and then lay by her side.

“Thank you for coming,” he said to her, propping himself on one elbow to lean over her. That way he could enjoy further contact with her soft lips.

“I know that this is wrong,” she said as she panted between his kisses. “But I cannot help myself, you are like a force of nature that I cannot resist”

“Why is it so wrong?” he asked. “It is clear to me that we are both attracted to each other.”

“If it was not wrong, then would you not have made our friendship known at Henrietta’s dinner?” she asked.

Francis was taken aback a little by her accusing tone and he could see the hurt in her eyes.

“Ah, I see, that is why you sulked quietly to yourself that night,” he replied, returning her stare. “But I did not wish to

risk embarrassing you.”

“I was not sulking. As it happens, I spent a rather pleasant evening in the company of another young lord,” she said teasingly.

“I longed to be him that night so that I could be the one by your side who was making you laugh,” he told her.

“I longed to be by your side too, but I followed your lead. I knew it will not be good for you to be friends with a woman such as myself,” Diana admitted.

“Do you think I care what others might think?” He said sternly, “No, I do not. All I care about is that I have a few days to spend with you before I must go away. During those days we can become better acquainted,” he said, hoping she would agree.

“You must come and visit me at my home. We cannot keep meeting outdoors all the time,” she suggested.

“Are you sure?” he checked. “What of your father?”

“Father has no interest in my affairs,” she explained, and he thought he noticed a glimmer of sadness in her eyes. “Not to worry, I will sneak you in any way. By midday, he is usually too intoxicated to know I even exist.”

“My poor Diana, living with so little love in your life,” he said as he gently caressed the skin of her neck with his lips.

“That tickles.” She giggled, attempting to stop him. In playful fun, he pinned down her hands while planting little kisses on any bare parts of skin he could find.

Francis was pleased with how she succumbed to his insistent attention. It seemed clear, from the small whimpering sounds she made, that she was enjoying his kisses. He relaxed his grip

on her wrists, feeling a slight disappointment when she pushed him away so that she could sit up.

“Enough, we are outdoors, anyone could come along,” she told him. “Let me take you to Rose Cottage now, and I will introduce you to Martha,” she said, standing up and escaping his boisterous attempts to keep her down.

Martha, he discovered, was the household servant, but he could tell that she meant much more than that to Diana. That afternoon they spent chatting in the parlour. Diana played the pianoforte and sang to him. He then sang to her and then they danced to imaginary music.

When he left, before the darkness set in, their final kiss had grown long and deeply passionate. He dared to toy with her lips with his tongue and was content when she returned the gesture.

The next day, he returned even earlier, and they ate breakfast together in her parlour. They walked outdoors in the morning. Then returned to spend an afternoon playing card and enjoying one another’s company. They talked and talked, never seeming to run out of conversation.

By day three, she asked if he wished to stay for dinner, and he agreed. As a heavy storm moved in, Diana offered him the guest room. All the while, he noticed her housekeeper frowning at him whenever she saw him.

The next day they ate breakfast together again, and went out for a long horse ride, taking a picnic with them. Their kisses were frequent as they spent most of their time attached to one another in some form or other.

For the next six days, they spent every day in one another's company. Francis had told his parents and sister that he had a new business partner close by and that they had much to discuss. Not that he needed to make up excuses for his whereabouts, but they were curious why he kept missing dinner.

As they ate dinner together again that night, Diana explained that Martha did not approve of what she was doing. It had upset her as the housekeeper was very important to her. She went to tell him how it had caused conflict in her life because she had grown fond of him and loved spending time with him.

What had started as a simple friendship, had fast turned into something else. He had courted many young women, but none had ever stirred his heart, or his loins, the way that Diana did. His planned trip to London was fast approaching, and he hoped they could take their relationship to another level before he left. He wanted to secure their future together and return to the knowledge that she would be there for him.

After their last dinner together, he rode off into the darkness, leaving Diana tearful on the doorstep. But as he made his way home, he knew that there was still unfinished business between them, and quickly he turned around and rode back to Rose Cottage. He had to tell her how he felt and not leave her this way.

Standing underneath her bedchamber window, he threw a pebble at the glass. Almost immediately the window opened as if she had been expecting him to return. Soon, she was opening the door to let him in.

Immediately he embraced her, and between their passionate kisses, he asked if he could stay awhile longer. When she agreed, they made their way to her bedchamber, where they soon locked in a passionate embrace.

Diana was dressed in a thin nightdress and a strap had slipped from her shoulder. When Francis saw her pale smooth skin, he was soon planting little kisses all over her bare flesh once again. His gentle kisses turned into gentle nibbles. Followed by his tongue making its way down to her cleavage to nibble at her soft mounds. When she did not resist, he peeled off her nightdress and it fall to the floor, revealing her naked form for him to devour.

“I came back for a reason,” he panted between breaths as he took her face in his hands. He looked directly into her soft eyes, noticing the reflection of the pale moonlight. “Because I wanted to tell you, Diana Carlisle, that I love you so very much.”

Pulling her close to his naked chest, he noticed the wetness in her eyes. Using a finger, he removed a stray tear that trickled down her cheek. She gasped as he cradled her in his arms.

“Do not cry, my love. This is a time for us to be happy,” he whispered into her ear.

She nodded her agreement, and he kissed her once again. This time, he felt a yearning to kiss every part of her slender body, to comfort her, and to keep her safe. As he feverishly kissed her, his tongue felt the hardness of the bud on her naked breast.

Something stirred within him as a dormant beast awoke in his soul. His hands wandered over her skin with lustful greed. Before he knew it, he had found himself feeling the silkiness of her inner thighs.

How inviting and warm she felt, and his manhood ached to be inside her. Every move he made, she accommodated. As his passion grew, so too did his need to take her. Instead of little kisses all over, he now bit gently, eliciting a passionate moan from her open, wet lips.

Sweeping her up into his arms, he carried her to the bed. As he threw her down, her naked breasts shook. As they slapped together, the sound drove his passion further.

Using his knees, he spread her legs wide apart. His eyes feasted upon her exposed private area.

Quickly, he positioned himself between her legs, his erection lay on the softness of her inner thigh, prodding at her skin. Unable to resist a moment longer, he thrust forward, burying his manhood into a wetness that received him willingly. It felt as if they had known one another all their lives, and now they celebrated that union, securing it forever and ever.

Francis did not want to rush, but with their joint eagerness they soon built up a frantic rhythm. Each of them was panting at their wanton lust. Diana murmured with delight as she lay underneath his naked form, which made him thrust even harder, and even faster. His hands squeezed at her perfect breasts, his fingers leaving indentations in the soft mounds. His tongue licked at her salty skin, his lips tasting the sweetness of her tongue as they kissed yet again. Rocking in and out of one another, their speed built up to a climactic crescendo.

Diana screamed out as she climaxed, and he was forced to place his hand over her mouth so as not to alert anyone in the house. But he could feel his desires reaching a peak and could not control himself much longer. Quickening his pounding pace inside of her willing body, he was soon past the point of

no return. His body shuddered as he spilled his seed into her, grunting out with an ecstatic sound of satisfaction.

All too soon, the gratification faded, and normality returned to his mind.

“Will you stay with me?” Diana whispered.

“I will stay with you forever, my love,” he whispered back as he pushed his sweaty body away from her, to lay by her side.

She reached to spread her arm over his nakedness, while he held her tight in one of his arms. That was not the end of their lovemaking for they awoke intermittently, repeating the performance over and over. When finally, he woke up to the sound of a rooster, he decided that he must leave before her servant found them together.

Waking her sleeping form, he whispered that he had to leave.

“No, I want you to stay,” she complained, not wanting to let him go.

“I promise you this much, my love,” he whispered sweetly. “In a couple of weeks, I should be back. And when I am returned, I will announce my love for you to my parents. If you will have me, then I will arrange a suitable date for our marriage. What say you, my love?”

Diana swung her arms around his naked shoulders as he lay on top of her.

“I say that I love you so much I wish you did not have to leave,” Diana replied. “And, yes, marrying you will be the best thing that has ever happened to me in my entire life.”

“And so it shall be,” he assured her. “Until I return, keep my love locked away in your heart.”

With that, he swiftly dressed and crept out of the house before anyone spotted him. Not that he cared if he was seen, for he was ready to tell the world of his love for the adorable Diana Carlisle.

Chapter 10

Diana did not tell Martha of everything that had occurred. She did not feel ashamed because she knew that she loved Francis, and he loved her. Though she did feel a little worried about what they had shared so intimately. As each day passed by, she fretted more and more over what had happened.

One morning, a week later, Diana did not go down for breakfast. A knock on her bedchamber door brought in Martha with a tray of bread and tea.

“Get into your bed and stop staring out of the window,” Martha told her. “It will not bring him back any quicker.”

“I am not looking for Francis, I was merely seeing what the weather was doing,” Diana replied, slumping back into her bed.

“Sit up, and let me set the pillows for you,” Martha fussed.
“Now eat some food and stop this sullen moodiness.”

“I cannot help it, Martha, I am in love with Francis,” Diana dared to say the words out loud for the first time.

“I know what happened that night,” Martha said as she sat in a chair to speak with her mistress. “Even though you both think me blind. What will you do if you never see him again?”

“I cannot think what you mean, Martha,” Diana replied defensively. “We did not do anything, as you put it.”

“Stop that child,” Martha snapped as she stood up to look at Diana with sternness in her eyes. “You allowed the man into your bed, and your mother would be horrified if she was here. Though it is not my role to speak up, Miss Diana, I do wish that you had resisted the temptation.”

“Oh, Martha, I am so glad that you know,” Diana said, a tear trying to escape from the corner of her eye. “You see, he returned after leaving that night. I now know how foolish I was, but it seemed so right at the time. He told me that he loves me. Upon his return, he is to inform his parents that we are to be married.”

“Well, that is something, I suppose.” Martha sighed, but Diana knew that she did not look convinced.

“I am going to go and see Henrietta today, and tell her what has happened,” Diana said. “I cannot keep it to myself a moment longer, or I will break down.”

“Is it wise to share such news?” Martha questioned, showing concern for the child who she had watched grow into a woman.

“I do not know what to do for the best,” Diana wailed. “I wish he would return early to announce the news, but I need someone to talk to. Someone who understands how I pine for him.”

“Yes, that is as clear as the nose on your face,” Martha said. “You are quite right, perhaps Henrietta can offer you some advice while you await his return. There is no point in fretting over it, what’s done is done, and you must live with it. But know that I am here for you too.”

“Dear, dear Martha, why have you not said anything about it until now?” Diana asked, pouring tea into a China teacup that sat on the breakfast tray.

“It was not for me to bring up, Miss Diana, or rather I hoped that you would tell me yourself,” Martha explained. “I am an early riser and I heard him leave. You do not need to worry; I have said nothing. It is your father I worry over, as he has asked me what is wrong with you, so he has noticed that something is amiss. Now eat some food and you can take that walk over to see Henrietta. By sharing, it may lighten your burden.”

* * *

Diana was soon walking through the gardens of Woodberry Hall with Henrietta, who had been most pleased with her surprise visit. At first, they chatted about Henrietta's new life as a married woman. The talk soon turned more serious as Diana confessed to her friend about her recent actions.

"Francis is to inform his parents of our love, and that we are to marry," Diana said, feeling a thrill of excitement at saying it out loud.

"I cannot believe it, I am so very happy for you, Diana," Henrietta said, her hand over her mouth as she gave out a little giggle. "It will be wonderful for us both to be married."

"But promise me you will say nothing yet," Diana begged as they took a seat on a stone bench near some yellow roses. "It is for Francis to make the news public, and not me."

"I respect your privacy, Diana, you know that I do," Henrietta said with a look of seriousness. "But I am so delighted that you are in love. When do you expect his return?"

“He estimated his business would take a couple of weeks, so I am hoping he will be home in another week,” Diana explained.

“And have you told your father of your future?” Henrietta asked.

“No, there is no point until it becomes official,” Diana replied. “But Martha knows, though she worries that I have allowed things to go too far. And I know she is right, but I do love him so very much.”

“Well, I confess that I was foolish too. I made love with my husband before we were wed, but Mother does not know,” Henrietta admitted. “And I would not change a thing.”

“Thank the Lord.” Diana sighed. “We both lost our cherries in the same way. I was beginning to think that I was heading for damnation at what I have done.”

“Well, I suppose that I was officially engaged,” Henrietta pointed out. “But still, I knew that what I was doing was wrong. And on the night that we made love, I thought it would be terribly painful. But my fiancé was so very gentle with me,” Henrietta confessed all, though she spoke in hushed tones in case any of the servants were around.

“I too was a little afraid, not knowing what to expect, but it was all so wonderful,” Diana professed. “And once I had... you know... done it, I wanted to do it again. We made love many times, all in that one night. I miss him so much.”

“Fear not, my dear friend. I am sure that he will be home in no time at all, and will settle all your worries,” Henrietta said, though Diana knew that she was only trying to cheer her.

* * *

Time seemed to go so slow, and the allotted date that Diana expected Francis to return home had passed by. Then, another week crawled by, and still, Diana had heard nothing from him.

Three weeks turned into a whole month, and she started to wonder if she had misunderstood his intentions.

Should I ride to his parent's estate and ask after him? she deliberated. If only to make sure that he was well. But then his family has no idea who I am so that would be foolish.

Martha helped her through most of the tearful evenings, but Diana felt heartbroken.

“Why has he not at least written a letter to me?” she put the question to Martha one evening as they both sat sewing by an open fire.

“A woman can have no understanding of how a man's mind works,” Martha replied, in an attempt to help her through.

“Even if his business took longer than he had planned, you would think that he could have at least sent word to me, somehow,” Diana said. At the same time, she sobbed into her

handkerchief. "I am beginning to believe that he does not love me."

"You cannot know that, Miss Diana, you must have faith," Martha tried, but Diana knew what she must be thinking.

"Oh Martha, I have made a terrible mistake. I should not have allowed him into my bed," Diana cried out, her mind confused, and her heart broken into tiny pieces. "I am so sorry for what I have done."

"You get off to your bed, and I will bring a warm drink up to your room," Martha suggested.

That night, Diana was inconsolable. She was equally grateful to Martha, who sat by her side as she sobbed herself to sleep. There were many similar nights to follow, and Diana could feel herself slipping into a dark depression, unable to understand *why, why, why...*

“He told me that he loved me, Martha, and his words seemed so genuine,” Diana said between sobs.

And so, each night passed her by, and still, there was no word from Francis.

Finally, on one of the nights she was sewing in the parlour with Martha, her father burst in and witnessed her tears.

“I will listen to this no more,” he told her, wagging a pointed finger at her. “I am to go to Cheshire on business in the morning. At least there I will get away from your incessant wailing, daughter. When I return, I expect not to hear another word of this man.”

“Father, you can never understand,” she cried out, uncontrollable tears rolling down her cheeks. “We are to marry ___”

“I am a man, am I not?” her father questioned, looking at her with sober features. “What’s more, you will marry no man that I do not approve of, do you hear me? I will decide who you marry, and you, daughter, will do your diligent duty as part of this family.”

Diana could take no more and she ran out of the room, and up to her bedchamber.

How dare Father interfere? He knows nothing of love.

Martha followed and soon arrived to console her once again. She hugged her tightly, allowing her to cry until she fell asleep in her bed.

When she awoke the next day, Martha informed her that her father had indeed left on his trip. Diana was glad to see the back of him, but she knew that she needed to find a way to get over Francis. It was fast becoming clear that he had lied to her, and he was never coming back.

Her mood swings were changing and now she was starting to feel angry with Francis. Half in a mind to ride to his home and confront him. Thankfully, Martha calmed her and made her see the sense of her actions.

“I will never love another, Martha,” she spat with vengeance stinging her heart. “I should have known by the behaviour of Father; men are not to be trusted.”

“I cannot speak from experience, Miss Diana,” Martha commented, as she attempted to soothe her mistress’s displeasure. “But I find that unlikely. Look at Miss Henrietta, I mean, Lady Henrietta Waverely, she is quite content to be married. It was you who assured me that she is very much in love with her new husband. It will happen to you one day too. I am sure of it.”

“It will never happen to me, Martha, because I do not trust men,” Martha snivelled.

“Father is right, I will marry whomever he wishes, for the sake of the family name. Not that I hold any respect for my family,

but what do I care anymore? My heart has been broken and it will, never, never be fixed. I do not wish to discuss this ever again. As far as I am concerned, the name of Francis Steele will never be uttered from my lips, ever again.”

With that, Diana stood up and left the room. She banged the door hard, as the harsh closure of the door meant that past events were now shut out and to be forgotten.

Chapter 11

“Was that Father I heard returning last night?” Diana asked Martha as they shared breakfast on the large wooden table in the centre of the kitchen.

“T’was,” Martha replied with a frown, unwilling to elaborate any further.

“What is it, Martha?” Diana asked, looking worried. “Was he terribly inebriated? Do tell me that he did not show violence towards you again?”

“No, he was quite sober, I will give him that,” Martha answered, her brows raised at the surprise of such a prospect.

“Perhaps that is why you feel uneasy,” Diana said, knowing it was rare that her father was sober. “You do not know what to make of my father if he is not drinking.”

“No, it is what he said to me as I unlocked the door to let him in,” Martha said warily as she stood up to clear the table.

“Are you going to tell me, or is this a game of guess?” Diana asked with a half-smile as she remained in her seat.

“Oh, my dear, it is not a game, I wish it was,” Martha explained, bustling around the kitchen. “He wishes to speak with you in his study at eleven sharp. Not a moment after, he added.”

“What? Why? Did he say?” Diana asked, it was so unusual for her father to speak with her, other than to complain about something or other. “Oh, my Lord! Do you think he knows what I did?”

Now she was feeling fearful, for very few knew of her indiscretions, and she preferred it that way. With the fact that

Francis seemingly used her and lied to her, she wanted no reminding that she allowed the man in her bed.

“I am afraid I have no idea on that one,” Martha went on. “He arrived back home by a hired carriage. I opened the door for him and after giving me his coat and hat, he gave me the instructions. He stressed that I was to pass them on to you and went straight to his study. I have no idea what time he turned into his bed.”

“That does not sound good, does it?” Diana said, putting down her empty China teacup. “Do you think that perhaps he visited a doctor, and is to tell me he is unwell?”

Martha shrugged. “Could be anything, Miss Diana. I have no idea what he is about. At least you will be put out of your misery at eleven.”

“I will never be put out of my misery, Martha. Not after what has happened,” Diana remarked as she stared off to gaze into the orange flames in the burning hearth fire. “Francis has made sure of that.”

“I am sorry, Miss Diana. I did not mean to remind you of that,” Martha said as she approached the table to squeeze Diana’s hand in fondness. “Know that I am always around for you and that I love you dearly.”

“I do not deserve you, Martha, you are a sweet and kind person, and me, I am... a wretch.”

“No, you must not say that,” Martha said, stopping her mistress from saying such detrimental things about herself. “We all make mistakes in our lives. Half of the ladies of the ton have no doubt done something similar, but they would never admit to it. Stop punishing yourself over it because it cannot be undone.”

“How I wish it could be, but I did love him, Martha, truly I did,” Diane said with a slight quiver in her voice. Thinking of Francis still stirred her emotions to the point of tears.

“Come, come, my dear,” Martha said as she went to hug Diana, something she had done since the day the girl was born.

“If your mother were here, after giving you a lecture on how a lady should behave, she would then tell you to move on. She was never one to hold a grudge and she would want you to pick yourself up and get on with your life.”

“At times like this I do truly miss her,” Diana said, allowing a little sob to escape her throat. “I am so very grateful that I have you.”

Martha lifted the corner of her apron to dry Diana’s wet cheeks. She then smiled at her as she said, “Off you go and prepare yourself for the meeting with your father today. I will collect the eggs from the chicken run.”

“Yes, I had better make myself presentable,” Diana agreed. “Though I must question myself why I bother?”

“He is still your father, and you are his only child,” Martha reminded her. “It may be some good news, you never know.”

* * *

Diana knocked on her father's study door and awaited his baritone voice to permit her entrance.

As he did so, she entered to see him standing with his back to her. Holding his hands behind his back, he looked out of the study room window. Diana took a seat at the other side of his large, chestnut desk and awaited his attention.

Shortly after her arrival, he turned around and sat in his chair, but still said nothing. Leaning back, he put his fingers together and made the shape of a church steeple. Still, she said nothing as she waited for him to speak first.

Finally, he separated his hands, only to put one hand on his desk and incessantly tap his fingertips. It was all starting to annoy Diana and she could take his silence no more. As she

opened her mouth to speak, he raised his palm at her to stop her.

“Your recent behaviour has brought to mind my responsibilities as your father,” he began. “As a female, you are born with certain weaknesses, and I suppose it is my duty to secure your future.”

Diana could tell that, although her father had paused in his speech, he did not really wish to speak with her. As a dutiful daughter, she remained silent. Not once had he looked her way, as if seeing her was not something that he enjoyed.

“For this reason, I have secured your marriage to the Earl of Cheshire,” he announced, with no other explanation and clearly expecting her to comply.

She looked at him aghast, “What? I...I cannot marry, Father. I am betrothed to Lord Francis Steele. If you ever took the time to speak with me, you would know of this.”

“You misunderstand, daughter,” her father said as he now looked her in the eye, causing her to shudder at his cold, grey stare. “You do not have a choice in this matter. The arrangement is made, and you will do what is expected of you, whether you wish to or not.”

Diana’s heart sank as a wave of nausea overcame her. She knew that she must have looked shocked, but her father’s stare did not change.

“What of my—”

“There are no what or if, daughter, and there are to be no other suitors!” he yelled at her as he stood up. “Your only commitment is to this family. And in that, you are duty-bound. The Earl has offered me a good sum of money for your hand, and I have accepted it.

The funds will keep this house functioning once you are gone. This matter is not open for discussion. You are of an age when you must leave my household. I have no time for your

fickleness, and you should be grateful that I have managed to secure a wealthy future for you and your offspring.”

Diana could not believe the words coming out of her father’s mouth. She could see there was no point in arguing with him, it appeared that her future was not open to discussion. Instead, she stood up and rushed from the room, banging the door to give herself the satisfaction of annoying him.

How dare he marry me off to some old man I have never even met and do not know? she thought as the flow of tears could not be stopped. Not wanting her father to hear her sobbing, she ran up to her room and closed the door with another bang. Throwing herself upon her bed, she buried her face in a pillow to muffle the sound of her crying.

“Why? Why, Francis, do you not come back for me?” she murmured as she thumped her pillow with her small fists. Overwhelmed with anger, she could not stop herself. It was anger at her father and anger for the man who had used her and then deserted her. “I do not understand why you lied to me. You used me, and now look at what is to happen to me,” she continued to speak into her pillow, her tears now uncontrollable.

She felt a pair of arms around her shoulders and knew that Martha was there, but nothing and no one could ever comfort her now. Martha helped Diana to sit up and embraced her so that she could sob on her shoulders.

“He is to force me into a marriage I do not want, Martha,” Diana sobbed out loud, not caring who heard her. “He will not accept that I am betrothed to Francis. He will not listen to my pleas.”

Martha said nothing, she merely held Diana tight, allowing her to cry her heart out. As Diana began to calm down, she closed her eyes and rested her head on Martha’s shoulder. Soon, her strength began to return, and she lifted her head as Martha released her embrace.

“There, there, child,” Martha said as she once again wiped away Diana’s tears.

“I am to marry a friend of father’s and he is the same age as Father, can you believe that?” Diana said, her voice intermittent as she tried to control her sobs.

“I am assuming that you mean the Earl of Cheshire?” Martha said. “I know that he is a good man, Miss Diana, and he will care for you better than your father ever has.”

“Father’s hatred for me gave me my freedom, Martha, and I will lose all that,” Diana argued. “I do not wish to join the Ton, I never wanted that.”

“I know you never cared for their ways, but you are a grown woman now, Miss Diana. In that your father is right, you must look to your future,” Martha explained.

“You could have done much worse for yourself. Your father has at least ensured that you will have a respectful marriage. This is a good thing, Miss Diana. You and your future children will have a wonderful home.”

Diana nodded her agreement, even though she did not want to. Everything that Martha said was true, she should learn to look

upon it as a good thing.

“I...I cannot help it though, Martha, I still love Francis so very much,” Diana said, holding back her sobs. Yet, deep inside, she knew it was time to stop fretting over Francis.

“I know, Miss Diana, but you will get over him soon. Not only that but when you marry you will also escape your father, surely that is a good thing too?” Martha asked, lending Diana a little smile of approval.

“I suppose so.” Diana nodded again. “But I am not telling Father that I agree just yet. I must hold out on the hope that Francis will return for me.”

Martha took hold of Diana’s hands in hers. “You are cold, child, have a lay down until the shock wears off,” she said, helping Diana to lie on top of her bed.

Diana felt a warmth take away the chill as Martha lay a blanket over her, and she allowed sleep to take over her mind. Soon, she was sinking into a fitful dream.

Chapter 12

The day had arrived that Diana had dreaded for a while. She was to meet her future husband, and she now awaited his arrival. Deciding to take a turn around the garden to clear her head, she also wanted to avoid bumping into her father in the house more than anything else. Perched on a bench, as far away from the house as she could get, memories of her intimacy with Francis flooded her mind.

His kiss had been so loving, warm, and moist, and had sent tingling sensations through all her body. The feeling of fullness had been utter bliss when he had thrust his maleness into her willing body. And when they reached a climax in unison, it had felt as if she had died and had gone to heaven. Would she do it all again? Yes, she would, because she knew that she loved him.

When he had told her that he loved her too, his words had seemed so genuine. Never would she have thought he might have been lying. Whilst she had heard of gossip of women laying with a man all too easily, she was sure that was not what had happened between her and Francis. They had been two people in love with one another and that was different.

He had loved her there and then—of that, she was sure. They had enjoyed one another's bodies in many loving ways. His passion had been greedy, but so too had hers. She had doted on the feel of his warm skin, his thick, muscled arms, and his light-coloured hairy chest. Even now, recalling the memory of his body, gave her a warming sensation between her legs.

Was she a true woman now that she had allowed a man to enter her? Or did it make her one of the loose women who made love all too easily with a man, and out of wedlock?

She had believed Francis when he had told her that he wanted to marry her. Why would he have lied about something as important as that? He was not that sort of person, he was an honest and respectable gentleman, not a liar and betrayer.

A part of her knew that if he did not return soon, she would be forced to wed her father's choice of a suitor. Yet still, in her heart, she wanted only Francis. The thought of another man's doing all the things that Francis had done to her, only served to repulse her. She would never allow any other man in her bed so that surely meant that she was not a loose woman.

Not that anyone had called her that, other than herself through her own guilt. Getting up from the garden seat, she continued her stroll in the garden. Something drew her to look towards the gate, and she longed for Francis to appear there.

If only she could *will* his appearance, so that he could tell her that it was time for her to meet his family. If only he would send word to her and reassure her that all was well. Instead, she had nothing but memories, and, of course, a broken heart.

Was it time to accept that he had betrayed her? Another week had passed her by since her father announced her impending engagement to the Earl. This very day she must prepare herself to receive him. No amount of talking with Martha, begging her to speak to her father to cancel his plans had worked.

Martha had told her that her father was sober these days, so he knew what he was doing. Besides, she did not think it was her place to make demands of her master.

Diana had not been able to bring herself to speak with her father. He too had betrayed her, and she hated him for it.

* * *

The Earl of Cheshire, Lord Henry Plough, arrived in a fine carriage. It was not too grand, but it was large and shiny, with brass handles and comfy seats. She was aware that he had been married before. His wife had died of a fever three years ago.

It seemed that many people died of consumption then. Not only that, but she had also been barren, though he had loved her, by all accounts. And now, so Diana believed, he wanted a younger wife to produce an heir for his estate.

The Earl was an honest man. He did not hide the facts and spoke to Diana quite frankly about the need to produce a son. On his trip to Rose Cottage, he made his engagement to Diana official. He was a man in his late fifties and had lived a good, long life, according to his account. Lord Plough was a strong-looking man, tall and regent in his stance.

The top of his head was hairless, and he grew large sideburns down the side of his face. Diana thought he had a small mouth and a large nose, but once she got to know him better, she soon realised that he was a kindly gentleman.

It would be unfair of her not to give him the chance to get to know her because he went out of his way to make her smile. Even on the very first day of their meeting, she had taken a liking to him. He was hard not to like because he was so considerate and generous. It turned out that her father had known him from some business dealings in his younger years. The Earl had recalled her mother too and remarked how alike they were.

Diana found it comforting that the man she was to marry had known her mother. By the sound of her parent's friendship with him, it sounded to her like her mother would approve of him. As the days passed by, she began to accept that this man would indeed take care of her. There would be no betrayal, as there had been with Francis.

Lord Plough stayed with the household for three weeks, and they strolled together every day. She enjoyed many a long talk as they went on horse rides and even a picnic. Before he left, Diana even managed to introduce him to her friend Henrietta. On a horse ride one day, they called upon Henrietta's childhood home to see if she was still home.

Diana was overjoyed to find out that she was. But when Henrietta found out that Francis had not returned from London, she was shocked. Nonetheless, Henrietta accepted the Earl as Diana's suitor and soon-to-be fiancé.

Her future husband had insisted that Diana attend every meeting that he held with her father. He wanted her to participate and join in the plans that would mould her future. His charming character swept her off her feet, lending her some happiness that she thought was gone forever.

Diana was forced to admit to herself that it was time to put her romance with Francis aside. Some things were better swept under the carpet and forgotten about, and that was how she would treat her experience with Francis. Diana found herself wanting to accept her new husband and her new life.

When it came time for Lord Plough to leave, it was agreed that Diana was to follow him in a month. She and her father, along with any servants she wished to bring along, would be the Earl's guests at Smeeton Hall.

He told her that the Hall would eventually be her new home, so she should familiarise herself with it. Henrietta had also informed her that it was a huge country mansion set in a large fifty-acre Estate.

It all sounded quite frightening in comparison to Rose Cottage, but Lord Plough was quick to put her mind at ease. Upon their visit, he wanted to host a ball in her honour. At the ball, they would be announcing their official engagement to the ton.

* * *

Diana had no idea how much her life was to change. The Earl wanted her by his side every minute of the day, from the moment she agreed to it. He made it obvious that he adored her, and Diana soon began to feel happy and content with her new life. How could she not, with such a devoted man by her side?

Martha soon became her personal maid. It pleased Diana because her friend was beginning to struggle to keep Rose

Cottage going all by herself. After the wedding, her father returned to Rose Cottage, and she did not see much of him over the following years.

He had been rewarded well by the Earl, and Diana never shook off the feeling that her father had sold her. Even if her new life was better than she had expected.

Despite her devotion to her new husband, not once did Diana ever forget Francis; she thought of him often. Lovemaking with her husband was pleasurable enough, but they never reached the heights of passion that she had felt with her first love.

But it was now all in the past. She made no attempt over the ensuing years to discover what had become of him. Diana had assumed that he had betrayed her and taken advantage of her naivety and foolishness.

The Earl had very little in the way of family, other than a rather obnoxious nephew, the son of his only brother. Lord William Plough was nearer to her age, and from the very start, she had learned to dislike him immensely.

He had the same drinking habits as her father and gambled money away with no care whatsoever. Not one to interfere when her husband bailed out his nephew of the many gambling debts that followed him around, she did not see it as any of her business.

But after three years of marriage, the Earl finally decided he had had enough of his rogue nephew. He cut off all ties with him, refusing to help him with any more financial debts. Diana was aware that it had put a strain on her husband, having to make such a decision, but in secret, she was quite pleased.

Diana did bear children for her husband, but her first son was stillborn. It had been a heartbreaking experience for them both. For her though, it had taken her many months before she could allow her husband into her bed once again. Her second child miscarried early on, and again, it took her many months to get over her loss.

And then, one day, her husband went out on his daily horse ride, and he did not return. The horse had made its way back to the stables, triggering a search for the Earl. His dead body was found, and everyone presumed he had fallen from his horse because he had suffered the injury of a broken neck. Diana was devastated and could not accept or understand it.

Her husband had been such an experienced and excellent rider. She would miss him more than she could bear. Her only wish was that she had been able to produce an heir for him. Then she would have someone around to remind her of her kindly generous husband.

A year after his death, Diana still missed the Earl, and life was becoming quite lonely without his cheery persona around her home. She was now a very wealthy woman, having inherited all her husband's estates and wealth. But she cared nothing for the wealth and would much rather have had her husband by her side.

Devoting her life to doing good with his wealth, she made large donations to aid the poor, and in particular orphaned children. She felt that her husband would have approved. What surprised Diana the most was that now she was alone again, she could have returned to being a recluse if she had wanted. But instead, she remained involved with the gentry, attending balls and soirees. Perhaps it was all down to her late husband's lasting influence.

His nephew, William, unfortunately, did not go away. It was not long before he showed his true colours. Resenting that Diana had inherited all his uncle's wealth, while he had been left with nothing. This had caused William to hate her, with a vengeance. He believed that he should have been the sole heir as he was the Earl's only living blood relative. William and Diana fast became enemies.

Chapter 13

2 Years Later – Earl of Cheshire's estate in Kent

“My Lady, your period of mourning over Lord Plough was officially over a whole year ago. Why then are you still insisting on wearing such dull colours?” Bailey, her lady’s servant asked.

“Because her Ladyship’s mind is still dulled by her loss,” Martha replied on Diana’s behalf.

Diana was thankful to her, for she knew that her lifelong companion was only trying to make her see the truth of things. It was time to stop being the grieving widow.

Martha had become her close companion soon after her husband’s death. Alone, once again, Diana found herself relying on her lifelong friend to help her through her grief.

And she had grieved for a very long time, most likely longer than is expected of a lady.

Diana had grown very fond of her most loving husband. It had been a different kind of love than she had remembered feeling for the first love of her life. Although that was now a faded memory, Lord Francis Steele still had a place in her heart. With him, she had experienced a very passionate kind of love.

The Earl of Cheshire had loved her with a passion too, and they had enjoyed many happy years of marriage. Her only regret was not producing an heir for him, which had been the real purpose of their marriage in the first place. But Lord Henry Plough had been very forgiving, and he had assured her that she filled his life with joy every single day.

That, for him, had been enough for their marriage to be successful. For Diana's part, she too had been most content in her marriage, even though it had been arranged by her father.

But it was all in the past now, and Diana found herself seated on a comfortable bedroom chair, overseeing her maid packing gowns for her London trip. Every time Bailey attempted to put

a garment of bright colours into the case, Diana stopped her with a frown.

“Well, I for one am glad that you have agreed at least to go to London,” Martha said as she assisted the maid. “You are in great need of some cheer, Diana, and that is the best place to find it. You will be forced to do more socialising and it will do you some good, do you not agree with me, Bailey?”

“Stop bullying Bailey into agreeing with you,” Diana tutted. “I have agreed to go, is that not enough?” Diana scorned her companion and then turned her attention to her maid.

“Please accept my apologies, Bailey. You have my permission to pack whatever you feel is appropriate, and I will not interfere. Martha is constantly reminding me to stop being so dull, so I will allow you both to choose my attire for the trip.”

“I was going to suggest that you go and read a book,” Martha added with a smile. “Then we can finish packing you a whole new wardrobe for London.”

Diana was about to answer her when a light knock sounded out at the door. Bailey went to open it and Diana could see that it was Hobbs, her butler.

“What is it, Hobbs?” Diana cried out, waving her hand for him to enter her bedchamber.

“There is a gentleman to see you, my Lady,” Hobbs replied as he bowed his head in respect. “He says that he is your father.”

Hobbs seemed to finish his statement with a raised brow as if he was asking Diana a question.

“Good Lord,” Martha announced. “You have not seen him since the Earl’s funeral.”

“Yes, but we have written to one another,” Diana informed her. “And I did mention to him that my door was always open should he wish to visit.”

“What do you suppose is the purpose of such a visit?” Martha thought out loud.

“Show him into the blue parlour room, Hobbs. I shall join him shortly,” Diana instructed her butler, but she wanted time to ready herself.

The relationship with her father had been cordial over the years but always strained. It was true that he had come to pay his respects at the Earl’s funeral, but he had not lingered for more than half a day. They had written to one another, at least twice in a year, and though their words were always formal, they were never unkind.

Her father had never remarried, after losing her mother, to whom he had devoted his life. He had but one servant to care for him, telling her that was more than adequate, even though she had offered to pay for another. The last time she had seen him, he had appeared quite frail, but then he was getting on in his years.

“Well, it appears that I must learn to trust in you both, and I will leave you two to it then,” Diana said to her companion and her maid. “Though do try to put matching colours in there. I do not wish to look like a travelling performer whilst in London.”

“Would you not prefer me to accompany you, Diana?” Martha asked, looking concerned.

“No, this I will do alone,” Diana replied, before leaving the room.

She entered the blue parlour to find her father already seated on a settee. Diana seated herself opposite him and on the low table between them, a tea service had been set out. A maid was in the room, awaiting her arrival so that she could pour the fresh tea into the tableware.

“Father,” Diana said, bowing her head at him, to acknowledge him with a decorum of respect.

“Daughter,” he replied, also bowing his head in return.

As the maid continued to pour tea, they both remained silent.

“Thank you, Chivers, that will be all,” Diana said to the maid who left the room.

“You must wonder on my visit, do you not, Diana?” her father was the one to begin their conversation.

“I do, Father, it is most unexpected.” She reached out for a China cup, filled with tea. “But not unwelcome, I assure you,” Diana added, wanting to appear respectful towards her father, even if she did not feel it.

“As you can see, I grow old and weak as the years pass me by,” he said. All the while his face remained stern as he

occasionally glanced her way.

“Age comes to us all, Father,” she said, unsure what to say to the man who had rejected her ever since her mother had passed away.

“I heard tell that you are to go to London this season,” he announced, surprising her that he knew.

“I am surprised that you still hear gossip about me, Father,” she half smiled. “You are not one to mingle among the gossipmongers.”

“I read that the London home of the Earl of Cheshire was being re-opened,” he explained. “So, I took a guess that it was you who was arranging to stay there for the summer season.”

“You guessed correctly, Father,” Diana said, pleased that her father still read newspapers to keep in touch with the world.

“My companion tells me that I am becoming too dull, so it is time for a change of scenery.”

“I see. I am assuming that you mean Martha?” he asked, and she nodded politely. “I know that you will never forgive me for forcing your hand into marriage,” her father admitted, and Diana felt shocked at hearing him take the blame. “But I knew that the Earl was a good man.”

“Indeed, we were very happy,” Diana admitted.

“I was aware of what you had gone through with Lord Steele,” he announced, surprising her yet again.

Upon hearing that name, a shiver rippled its way through her body. Francis Steele had been a man she had trusted and loved without question, and she had never really got over him.

“I felt it my responsibility to mend things for you,” he added, showing sadness in his watery eyes. “I was sorry that things

had not quite worked out for you then. But now you have wealth, and you are secure, are you not?"

"Yes, Father, I have all those things, but I did lack the love of my parents," she said, feeling brave for some odd reason.

"I ensured at least that you had a good husband, proving I did my duty as a father," he said, indicating that he felt no guilt for events over the years. "And now I have come to wish you well on your trip, for I will be unable to travel to London."

"That is most kind of you, Father," Diana said, even though she did not think it. She still felt a certain amount of hatred toward her father and how he had treated her after her mother's death. It was a time in her life when she needed his love, and instead, he had rejected her very existence.

Diana had little in the way of happy memories from her childhood, but what she did have was not all bad. Her mother had been a very beautiful woman, and a loving mother. She had given her father an heir to the small estate where they had lived as a family. When her mother and little brother passed away from consumption, she knew that her father wished it had been her who had died, instead of her brother.

At the time her mother caught the disease, Diana had been staying at her friend, Henrietta's home. That visit may have saved her life, and even though her father had not died, he had been quite ill for some time. He still suffered to this day, as a result of his illness, as the disease had affected his lungs.

“Will you continue to write to me?” her father asked.

“If you wish,” she replied, struggling to muster much enthusiasm.

“I know that life in London can be busy, your mother loved...”

Her father left his sentence unsaid as he gazed off with some distant memory.

“Allow me to lend you a more comfortable carriage for your journey home, Father,” Diana suggested. “I do not doubt that you suffered a bumpy ride on the mail coach.”

“Yes, that is agreeable,” her father said as he stood up and readied himself to leave. “My business here is done.”

“I thank you for coming all this way,” Diana said, as she too stood up. “Please, will you remain in the comfort of this room while I go and organise your trip? A servant will come for you when the carriage is ready.”

And that was the end of her visit with her father, but it suited Diana well. Like him, she was not fond of showing her emotions in public. After her first love had betrayed her so many years ago, she had never been one to open up. Other than to her husband and her dear friend Martha, and on the occasional visit from Henrietta, Diana had become a quiet individual.

Content to remain in the background of life, she never craved to be the centre of attention. She had attended balls and soirees, but not so many. Her trip to London was meant to bring her out of her shell, and that was at Martha’s insistence.

Diana went to find her butler, but as she located him, he announced that she had yet another visitor, who he had taken to the green parlour room. After ordering the carriage for her father, she set off with a feeling of dread, for she knew who now waited for her arrival, and it was not a man that she liked.

Chapter 14

“William!” she announced with a firm voice as she entered the green-set parlour room.

Her husband had been the one who had designed the parlour rooms with differing colours to distinguish them from each other. The green one was one of her favourites, as it boasted large French doors that opened onto a green lawn.

“I do not suppose I need to ask what you want?” she said with a hint of venom in her tone because this was a man who did not mince his words, not even in the company of a lady. “You are likened to a fly that is drawn to the light, only in your case it is money that you are drawn to,” she remarked. Unable to help the sarcasm, she took a seat on a green armchair situated by the French doors.

While she was speaking with this visitor, it would soothe her mind to keep looking outside at the greenery before her. Anything was better than looking at her husband’s nephew, Lord William Plough. She hated that she shared the same surname as him. Her husband had been such a gentleman and

given they were of the same blood, there was nothing gentle about this man.

“I know that it was you who turned my uncle against me,” he snapped, bitterness evident in his tone.

He did not take a seat, instead, he paced around in front of her.

“As it happens, though you will not believe me, I never interfered in any dealings between you and your uncle,” she informed him. Not that she cared whether he chose to believe her words or not.

“I will bet!” he barked and at the same time, he continued to pace the room like a wild animal about to pounce its prey.

“How strange it is that until you came along, and you, not even a member of the gentry I might add, my uncle adored me.”

As he prattled on in his own glory, Diana noticed spittle spraying from his mouth. The crude man was spewing his bile around her home, and she felt an urgent need to run. But she remained seated as she listened to his foul mouth.

“I know that you are well informed that my father is a baron in his own right. Not that it is of any concern of yours,” she said in a calm voice, wondering to herself why she defended her maiden family name.

“Your father is a drunkard more like,” he snapped.

“Yes, well you would know all about that habit, would not you?” she bounced back at him.

Their conversations were always the same whenever he turned up. It was like a game of bat and ball while one insulted the other and then the other way around. Though she never cowered to him; he was too weak a man to be respected in any way whatsoever.

“You forced him to change his will, I know you did,” he began again. It was an argument he brought up time and again.

“As always, I ask where is your proof?” she gave her usual reply to his nonsensical allegations. “I am aware that he left you something, so he did not ignore your needs as your accusation insinuates.”

“Pfft! He left me a pittance.” William threw his arms in the air to emphasise his point. “A useless amount of money that would not even keep a pauper in food for very long.”

“If you had been more frugal with your inheritance, it would have been more than enough for you to live off for years to come,” she said. “But it is not my business what you spend your money on, William. What does concern me is why you are here in my home, once again insulting me?”

She watched him from the corner of her eyes as he finally took a seat on one of the settees. As he did so, he bent over to run his hands through his hair, his elbows resting on his knees.

“You know very well why I am here,” he said, his voice a little more under control. “I want you to give to me what I am due. Of course, I would not expect my uncle’s entire estate, but I do expect more.”

“You have whatever your uncle felt that you deserved,” she replied. “I was not involved in that decision, and you have my assurance that I will not give you a farthing more. I will not go against my husband’s wishes.”

William sprang up from the settee, ever dramatic as he always was. For a brief moment, Diana believed he might be physically violent towards her, but she remained in her chair and did not flinch. Instead of violence, he came at her with tears in his eyes and a desperate look on his face.

“Then at least have the decency to lend me the money!” he yelled, his eyes wide in desperation. “My creditors are threatening me, and I do not know how much longer I can

keep them off. My very life is at stake, will you show me no pity?"

"Then they are fools for allowing a man such as yourself to have access to any credit in the first place," she replied, feeling no sympathy for him.

"Oh, stop playing games, will you!" he spat at her. He was a man who could jump from one mood to another in a matter of seconds. "The fact is that you are keeping my money from me. You are the thief in this game, and I am the victim of your greed."

Diana did not give an immediate response because, as always, she had to force herself to remain calm.

"Had you behaved more responsibly when your uncle was alive, he would have rewarded you generously," Diana told him. As she did so, she stood up to show that she was ready to leave the room. "The Earl was not a mean man, but you broke his heart. It was you who caused him a great deal of unhappiness with your constant misbehaviour."

“It is a huge coincidence, is it not, that he was generous towards me until you came along,” William yelled, pointing his finger at her.

The door burst open, and her butler walked in. Following him were a couple of house stewards. She knew that he would have lingered outside the door because these meetings were always filled with fury.

“Is everything under control, my Lady?” Hobbs asked, looking at the visitor and not at her.

“You may show Lord Plough the front door now, Hobbs,” she replied, making her way to the parlour room door.

“I am not finished with you yet!” William screamed as he moved towards her. The stewards and the butler played their part and were quick to stand in front of him, protecting the lady of the house should he become violent. “Move out of my way, you cretins!” he yelled at them.

“What you do not understand, William, is that I cannot, nay, I *will not* go against my husband’s wishes,” she turned around to tell him. “You see, I can neither loan nor give you any money because my husband made it quite clear to me that I was never to do so.”

“How could he have done that when he died so suddenly?” William shouted out. “It would not surprise me if you had my uncle murdered so that you could gain his estate and wealth.”

Diana stopped in her tracks at the accusation. She too had thought the same about him, but she had never shared her suspicions with anyone. He would not have known that her husband had changed his will, even she had not known what was in his will.

“And I will tell you something else!” William continued to speak with her in a raised voice. He turned to pick up a silver candelabra. “I am taking this to sell because everything in this house should be mine!”

Hobbs went towards William to take the silver ornament from him, but she stopped him. “No, Hobbs. Do not lower yourself to his level. He is criminal and always will be, though I doubt that the candelabra will pay even a pittance of his debts.”

“Oh, you are so confident when you have your servants to protect you, are you not?” he yelled with one of his fists pounding in the air. “Let me tell you something, Miss Diana Carlisle. Yes, that is who you are because to me you will never belong to this family. One way or another, I will get my money. You are not of the blood of this family. Your blood is tainted and filthy. I am my uncle’s only heir, and I will have the lion’s share of my inheritance.”

Diana said not another word as he offended her in every way he could. His words were always cruel as if he knew exactly how to stab her in the heart. She wasted no more time and quickly left the room. It was always the same whenever she was forced to give an audience to her husband’s nephew, it never ended well. From now on, she would instruct the staff to never let him in her home again. Because this was *her* home and not his.

As she entered the hallway, she knew that insults would soon follow. She had smelled the alcohol on his breath and was also

aware that he was an addict to opium. Her husband had revealed this to her with a warning attached.

He had told her that she was never to confront him, and he would be the only one to deal with his rogue nephew. But then, neither of them had known that her husband would meet an early death.

“You are a whore!” she heard him yell as the stewards had been forced to manhandle him to get him to the front door.

“A filthy little tart that seduced my uncle. I will expose you for what you are, and for what you have done. I have been deceived! You are the criminal, and not I. You are nothing but a piece of strumpet that my uncle toyed with. It would not surprise me if you gave him the clap, you filthy little twat!”

Martha appeared on the stairway, looking shocked at the filth that was echoing around the entranceway.

“Oh, my dear Diana,” Martha cried out as she dashed to Diana’s aid. “You should not have seen that man by yourself, I keep telling you that. Come, let’s go and sit in the garden room where your nerves will be calmed.”

If not for Martha taking her by the elbow and holding her up, Diana might well have swooned right there and then. The only reason she ever met with her husband’s nephew alone, was that she did not wish to put anyone else through his insults. But his behaviour was getting worse, and she knew that she could no longer meet him without an escort.

“Thank goodness for Hobbs and his quick thinking,” Diana said to her companion. “I could smell the liquor on his breath from the other end of the room.”

“Come, come, dear Diana. You know how that man always leaves this house with profanities,” Martha reminded her. “Do come and tell me how the meeting went with your father. That will help take your mind away from that vagabond.”

Diana allowed Martha to lead her. Martha was always her saviour and her companion had been right, the moment she sat down in the garden room, she began to relax. This was a room

where her husband had enjoyed tending to his many plants. It had been a great hobby of his, to collect tropical plants and care for them in this glass room.

Whenever she entered the glass garden room, she felt close to him. She wished so hard that he was still here because she missed him so very much.

Chapter 15

A ship on the ocean, returning to London

“Are you ready to return to your land legs?” Francis’ friend, Gregory, asked of him as they stood on the deck of the *Siren Song*.

“I cannot keep riding the oceans forever, can I, my friend?” Francis replied as he stood on the starboard with the captain of the large Barquentine ship. “Beautiful as all her sails are, Gregory, I must answer to the duty of my family commitments.”

“She’s a fine enough vessel,” Gregory remarked with pride, overseeing the crew manning his ship. “But the stench of the livestock we carry on this run is becoming unbearable even for me,” he mocked. “I suppose you will be seeking a wife, now that you’ve inherited the dukedom?”

It was Francis' turn to pull a face of disgust, and it was not at the smell of their cargo. "If I am honest with you, I do not feel ready for any of it. Though I do not doubt that it will be a responsibility expected of me."

"You say that with a sound of dread on your tongue." Gregory laughed as the ship swayed on the rising waves. Not that the rocking of the ship bothered Gregory, he had lived most of his life out at sea. If anything, it was land that made the captain dizzy; he had never give up his sea life for anything or anyone.

"Aye Captain, I do dread marriage." Francis smirked as he too rocked with the motion of the roiling deck. "As you know when I joined you, I thought I was done with women for life."

"Many a man has run away to sea for that exact reason, for as long as women have existed." Gregory laughed. "I must say that I do enjoy a different pair of woman's bosoms at every port, but I am all too glad to leave them behind as well."

"You know that you love every one of them." Francis chuckled as he patted the captain's back in camaraderie. "You have been a good friend to me, Gregory. I shall miss you, and the *Siren Song*, and all its crew, there is no doubting that."

“I am glad to see your touring years have come to an end, if I am honest, Francis,” Gregory told him as a spray of salt water splashed at his hair from a high wave. “You are too much of a gentleman to live this kind of life for long.”

“If being a gentleman means fighting the livestock corner, then I suppose I am. I still insist that if you washed out the livestock more often, your ship would not stink so bad,” Francis remarked. It had been a running debate between the two men over the years. Francis had always argued that the captain should treat the animals better.

“Nah! They are all going to slaughter anyway, so what does it matter how they die?” Gregory had always disputed. “Though I will miss your lectures on telling me how to run my ship.”

“Only your live cargo, Captain. I assure you that if you listened to me, you’d make more money. With better care, you would not be throwing so many of their carcasses overboard,” Francis claimed. Though he knew that all the ships carrying live cargo treated the animals the same way.

It was the same for the human cargo that was classed as slaves, and it appalled him. Though at least new laws were improving the situation for humans, it was not so for animals. None of the crew wanted to go down into the hull to deal with the stench.

“Aye, I know that you have a point there, and as a reward for your services, I promise I will think on it.” Gregory smiled. “It can be your legacy. Though, you know me, I will not deal in live cargo if there’s other goods available.”

“If you will consider my advice, then I must be grateful for that at least,” Francis said, holding out his hand to shake that of the captain’s. “And now that we have performed a gentleman’s agreement, you had better stick to your word.”

Some hours later, the ship was finally mooring up in one of the busy, overcrowded London dockyards. By the end of the day, Francis was disembarking from the *Siren Song* for the very last time. He had said his farewells to the captain and his crew, and it was time to step back on land.

The ship had been his home for a couple of years and the crew his family. They had sailed around many continents, as Gregory made his living transporting cargo in his ship's hull. It had been a hard few years, learning the ways of the sea, and Francis felt that he had learned much of the world in his travels. Now, he was coming away a better man.

His seafaring days were doomed to change when he received a letter at one of the ports. It was one of many that his mother had sent out to inform him of the death of his father. It saddened him that he had not spoken to his family much over the years, but that was the way of life at sea.

Now, it was time to return home and start the role he was born into, master of the family estate. But being on land was flooding his mind with the memories of why he had left in the first place.

A carriage awaited him, and he waved his last goodbye to his good friend Captain Gregory Montgomery. A fine merchant, and an even better friend. He would indeed miss his life at sea, it had helped to heal a broken heart after his first love had betrayed him.

Coming back to England to take over the dukedom had only served to remind him of the woman he had hoped to marry, and now she haunted his dreams once again. An image of the young Miss Diana Carlisle appeared in his mind as the carriage now rocked him, instead of the sea.

He recalled how his father had sent him to London to receive a shipment of tobacco, sugar, and rum. It was arriving from their family plantation in the West Indies. When it had not turned up, his father had insisted that he travel to the West Indies to find out what had delayed the cargo.

Agreeing to do his father's bidding, he had asked his father to get word to Miss Diana of his delay, after admitting to his family that she was to be his future bride. It had come as a surprise to him when he found out that they were already aware of his intentions.

When he had arrived at the plantation, the shipment had not even left yet, and so he returned to London with it. But it was many months before his return, and all the while he could not wait to get back to Diana. Knowing that she was waiting for him was the reason he had rushed the trip, never stopping anywhere for long so that he could return home quicker.

But when he had finally visited Rose Cottage, Diana's father had seemed angry with him, informing him that she no longer lived there. The old man refused to explain anything, and it was from others that he had discovered how Diana had married another.

Filled with bitterness at her betrayal, he could not understand why she had not waited for him. In an attempt to overcome his broken heart, he had left England and everyone he knew behind. Going to sea, he joined his good friend Gregory, who was the captain of his own ship. It had been the only way he could go on living, a way to put behind him the betrayal of his first love.

His journey home, in the confined carriage space, was a long and weary one. At least the carriage stopped at an overnight inn, giving him some respite. When finally, he arrived at his home estate, his mother and sister were still in mourning. He was pleased to see that the family solicitor had taken over the provisional running of the estate, but now it was time for him to pick up the mantle.

His priority was not the estate, but his family. Francis spent time comforting his mother and sister, for they had not taken his father's death well. His mother informed him that his father had taken ill some months ago. She told him that she

had written to him then, sending letters out to many port offices.

It did not surprise him that he had not received the letters as they had moved around from port to port. Gregory never followed the same trail, going only where the money led him.

He had missed the funeral, and that saddened him, not only that but he had missed the chance to say goodbye to his father. They had parted on bad terms because Francis had been annoyed that his father had sent him away without any notice. He remembered the argument they had had before he left.

And then, his father had claimed that he was turning his back on his family duties. Although Francis made occasional return visits, they had been brief, and his father was always distant and cold towards him.

But now, he was home for good and he needed to put the past behind him. That included any memories of Miss Diana Carlisle, but it would not be easy. Over the years he had managed to discover snippets of information about her life. He could not help but think about her, and even though his life

was busy with other things, she was never far from his thoughts.

“Ah, Francis,” his mother’s voice interrupted his daydreaming as he sat in his father’s study with the door open. “Will you take a turn with me in the garden, that is if you are not too busy?”

“I will always find time for you, Mother,” he obliged, standing up to join her as they went outside for a stroll together.

“I know you have not been back long,” his mother said as they followed a pathway that the gardeners had created. “And I hate to put pressure on you when you are learning the ways of the estate.”

“Do I detect a ‘but’ coming there, Mother?” Francis asked, smiling to put his mother at ease.

“Indeed.” She nodded as she placed her arm in the hook of his elbow. “We must speak of your plans in choosing a suitable wife.”

“It sounds to me as if you have already begun the process,” Francis said, stopping and raising his brow at her questioningly.

“Well, I may have compiled a list for you. It includes many suitable and eligible, single ladies,” his mother admitted. “But only to save you time from wading through all the eligible young ladies yourself.”

He patted his mother’s hand as he placed it back into his own arm and encouraged her to keep walking.

“I will have a look at your list, Mother,” he assured her. “And I thank you for your help. Finding a suitable wife has not been a priority for me, but I do know of its urgency.”

“Thank goodness my suggestion has not brought about your annoyance at me.” His mother sighed, sounding relieved.

“You know that I trust your judgement in choosing me a partner that will be suitable for our family,” he suggested, knowing that would please her. “You and my sister carry out the many visits to meet them if you wish. Your assistance would be appreciated so that I can concentrate on the estate and picking up Father’s business dealings.”

His mother beamed at the news, though in truth he was relieved. Not only had he been dreading meeting so many ladies, but he was also dreading being married. Having lived only in the company of men over the last few years, he feared that he might have lost some of his societal manners. He had every faith in his mother, she would choose perfect wife material that would fit with the duties expected of him.

Chapter 16

Arriving in London without her husband by her side felt odd for Diana. He had been quite a social creature and enjoyed hosting balls for her. In London, he had always take her to the finest of places. With him by her side, she had quite enjoyed it all, though she had never been one for constant hustle and bustle.

Nonetheless, she made an effort for him because she had wanted to please her husband when he made so much effort to keep her entertained. The Earl had constantly reminded her that she was too young and beautiful for him to keep all to himself. Ever the flatterer, she had appreciated his company in all the numerous social events they had attended.

Now that she had no reason to visit London for the season, she found herself wondering why she had allowed Martha to talk her into it. But then, she would get to see Henrietta, and that in itself was a good enough reason.

One of the properties bequeathed to her in her husband's will was a large manor house in London, though it had remained

closed until now. It was no wonder the Ton had noticed it was opening again, hence the article in the newspaper that her father had read.

Henrietta and her sister, Celeste were also coming to stay with her. It was far too large a home for her to rattle around on her own. Of course, she had brought along plenty of servants too, but they would not sit with her by the fire at night, keeping her company. Henrietta, on the other hand, was with child and had informed Diana that she looked forward to lots of rest, in between a few balls and soirees.

They arrived late at night after the arduous journey. While Diana loved to ride by horse, she did not enjoy long carriage rides. Even though it was her private carriage, she had still insisted on staying at the Halfway Inn overnight, to break up the journey.

Henrietta was already at the house because she had arrived in London first. It would be Henrietta's last London season for a while, now that she was to be a mother, and Diane assumed that her friend wanted to relish every day she could get. Henrietta stayed up for their arrival, but Diana was exhausted. Once the initial greetings were over, everyone dispersed to their private rooms.

Because it was the first time Diana had visited their London home since her husband had passed away, it felt lonely without him. As she made her way to bed, she was pleased to be feeling so tired, it would help her sleep on the first night alone.

Although, she awoke many times during the night, imagining that Henry was by her side. The large bed felt so empty without him. At one point she had dreamed she was underneath her husband as they made love, only to wake up in a hot sweat. She had come to love their intimacy, but it had never been the same as it was with her first love, Francis.

Shaking the thought aside, she soon dropped off to sleep again, only this time she dreamt of Francis. She was running her fingers through his dark blonde hair as she leaned in to stare into his blue-green eyes. And then his eyes turned into ocean waves, and she was swimming in the sea with him. When next she awoke, it was morning. Dreaming of Francis, which she did often, usually left her angry or feeling good.

“And today, I am feeling good,” she said to herself as she stretched out her arms, throwing off her blankets.

Martha entered the room with a tray of tea and freshly cut bread with butter and jam.

“Cook brought along some of your favourite blackberry jam, so eat it up. You are going to need some new energy after yesterday’s journey,” Martha said.

She went to open the heavy, blue velvet drapes to let the sunlight wash into the room.

Within the next few hours, Diana joined Henrietta in the parlour where she was busy knitting a blanket for her baby.

“Oh, Diana, are you much refreshed now?” Henrietta asked, looking very pleased to see her friend.

“Indeed, I am, and now we can chat away as long we want,” Diana replied, equally as pleased to be with Henrietta.

“My sister will be arriving this afternoon,” Henrietta reminded her. “It was good of you to put up with the both of us. She would much rather stay with us because our parents have not yet arrived in London. It would mean her being alone in our big townhouse.”

“The more the merrier.” Diana smiled as she took a seat. “I am told that it is time for me to partake in a busy social life once again.”

“Yes, you have been a tad quiet, have not you?” Henrietta said, unsmiling. “I mean, I know that you attended some small soirees, but you were never at any of the balls when I looked for you. I have missed you, my dear friend.”

“I did attend a winter ball somewhere or other, ask Martha, she will tell you.” Diana shrugged, looking over at her companion who was just entering the room.

“Ask me what?” Martha asked, looking quizzical.

“I want you to tell my friend that I have not been a recluse this past year,” Diana insisted. “Of course, in my first year of mourning, I will admit that I saw no one. It was all such a shock at the time.”

As she spoke, Diana felt a lump in her throat as she thought about that first year without Henry. She had become so accustomed to his company, that without him she did not know what to do with herself. The long nights had been the worst. Without a man by her side, she had felt cold and alone.

They had always slept together because he had told her that he loved to wake up with her next to him. It pleased her that she had brought him some joy in their marriage, even though she was against the marriage to start with.

“Never mind, Martha, come and sit down and join us,” Diana said, not wanting to talk about the past. “We can listen to Henrietta tell us all about how she feels now that she is to be a mother.”

Henrietta beamed with delight. Diana could tell that it was one of her friend's favourite topics of conversation.

“Well, I spent the first few months feeling very ill,” she began as she shared an overly exaggerated miserable face. “Oh, how I suffered,” she wailed before she burst into a fit of giggles. “And now, as you can see, I am blooming, or so my husband tells me.”

“And when is Trevor joining us?” Diana asked with genuine enthusiasm because she was fond of him and looked forward to some time spent in his company.

“Not for a few days yet, though I must tell you that he did not want to come at all,” Henrietta squeaked. “I had to do my nagging thing on him, and then he had no choice but to agree in the end, or I would have sulked all summer long.”

“Yes, you always were an expert at sulking,” Diana smiled, recalling a few memories at the back of her mind.

“I beg to differ. But no matter, we are both truly excited to welcome this little one into the family,” Henrietta said, rubbing at her large belly. “Oh, I am sorry, Diana, I forget myself,” she said, suddenly looking troubled.

“Whatever for?” Diana asked, wondering what had happened to dampen her friend’s jolly demeanour.

“I should not act this way when you have lost so much,” Henrietta replied, now holding her belly with both hands in a protective manner.

“My experiences should not dampen your happiness, Henrietta,” Diana assured her. She had soon realised that her friend was referring to her own tragic pregnancies. “This is a time for you to celebrate life, and not be thinking of death. I insist that you remain happy, or I will send you home.”

“Very well. But instead, let us talk of my sister’s intended,” Henrietta was quick to change the subject. “I can tell you in confidence, because I love you so much, that he was not Celeste’s first choice for a husband.”

“Oh no, are you telling me that Celeste is being forced into an arranged marriage?” Diana asked, surprised at this as it was not the way that Henrietta’s parents behaved.

“My sister is head over heels in love with a man named Arthur Pincher. But father believes that his prospects are not good enough for his daughter,” Henrietta explained. As she did so, she looked disappointed for her little sister.

“That is terrible,” Diana exclaimed. “Could you not persuade him otherwise?”

“Father simply forbade any discussion on the matter,” Henrietta reported. “He would not even allow Mother to speak on her behalf.”

“That is so very sad. I must admit though, that true love can bring terrible pain. Perhaps your father is acting with wisdom,” Diana remarked, even though she knew that Celeste would be hurting.

“That is not always true, Diana,” Henrietta rebuked. “I am in love with Trevor, and I do not find it painful in the least.”

“I am afraid, Henrietta, Diana’s heart was broken all those years ago, and she never got over it,” Martha joined in.

“Ahhh... well, there is a tale to be told there because...” Henrietta spoke as if she was about to discuss Francis, but Diana did not wish to listen.

“I have a terrible headache,” Diana announced as she stood up. The conversation was getting too personal. Although she had believed herself over the anguish of her first love, she did not wish those feelings to be rekindled with idle chatter. “Please excuse me for a while.”

Diana did not linger, but as she was about to leave the room, Celeste arrived, and she looked equally as miserable as Diana felt. She greeted Henrietta's younger sister with an apology that she had a headache and needed to rest for an hour or two.

Martha had discerned that Diana was upset, and so she followed her out of the room. "It seems that even now you are still tender when it comes to talking of love," Martha said in a hushed tone as they climbed the elaborately decorated stairway.

Diana stopped, and she looked around to see if anyone was within hearing distance. "Yes, Martha, I never did get over the incident, but only you and I know that, and I wish to keep it that way."

She continued to climb the stairway, holding onto the oakwood rail as her legs felt a little weak. Not wishing to discuss the past further, she remained quiet. Though she had often wondered what had happened to Francis. Never having made any enquiries over him, she had felt it best left alone at the time. Now, it was in the past, where it belonged.

Chapter 17

Henrietta dragged her sister and Diana into the bustling streets of London, to visit Madam Arnaud's modiste shop. Celeste had not wanted to impress her suitor with a new dinner dress, so to encourage her to find some enthusiasm, Diana found herself agreeing to go too.

"It is so good of you to host the dinner," Henrietta thanked Diana while Celeste was being fitted for the dress. "None of us have met her suitor yet. We have no idea who he is because Father has not revealed his name to us yet."

"How very mysterious," Diana remarked, feeling relieved that she was no longer under her father's spell, as she had been when she was Celeste's age. "Poor Celeste, she could be marrying an old man for all she knows."

"Why must I have a dress fitting?" Celeste complained as Madam Arnaud had her on a pedestal as she adjusted the dress with pins.

“Our parents instructed me that we must make an effort to impress your fiancé-to-be,” Henrietta told her. Though Diana spotted a look of sympathy on her friend’s face.

“I must say, it surprises me that your father is forcing Celeste into this arranged marriage,” Diana whispered. She had been confused at the decision when Henrietta had confided in her. “They did not force you into a marriage of convenience.”

“There is a reason, but you must not share it with my sister,” Henrietta revealed. “Father believes that she was being manipulated by the man whom she truly loves, though it is not true. I happen to know that she lost her virginity to him, and they are deeply in love with one another.”

“Oh dear, I understand that dilemma of that situation only too well,” Diana said, recalling her own first love.

“I thought you had forgotten all about your first love,” Henrietta discerned. “But when we meet her future husband

for the first time at the dinner you are to host, we can help her through it.”

“And the man that she is in love with, how is he taking all this?” Diana enquired. “Do you know much about him?”

Henrietta shifted in her seat uncomfortably. Diana glanced over at Celeste to make sure she could not hear them. The poor girl looked quite miserable as she underwent the dress fitting.

“I do feel sorry for my sister, but my being pregnant sets limitations for me,” she replied, leaning forward to rub at her back. “I have no strength nor stamina to argue things out with Father on Celeste’s behalf. You see, not only is Arthur the third son of a viscount, but he makes his living through his paintings. Father is not convinced that he can provide for Celeste, given his situation.”

“Is his full name Arthur Pincher, did you say?” Diana asked, joining in the rubbing of her friend’s back to ease her discomfort.

“That is much better, thank you, Diana,” Henrietta sighed as she sat back up again. “Yes, why? Do you know of him?”

“I have one of his paintings, or rather, Henry bought it for me at an art display in Bath. It was not long before he passed away, as it happens,” Diana informed her. “Arthur Pincher dabbles in landscapes and is a most accomplished artist.”

“What? Do you think there is a chance that the young man could be successful?” Henrietta whispered. She did not want her sister to overhear their conversation.

“One cannot judge something like that,” Diana replied. “But I took up the mantle of sponsoring the art gallery that my husband was so fond of. It is a place for upcoming artists to showcase their work.”

“Do not mention this to Celeste,” Diana warned as she glanced over at her sister.

“What are you two whispering about?” Celeste called over as she caught her sister’s eye. “Is the dress not good enough? Does it make me look dull?”

“Nonsense, sister!” Henrietta called over, laughing. “The dress is fine, it is your lack of a smile that makes you look dull.”

“The dress is divine,” Diana added, noting Madam Arnaud’s scowl at the suggestion that one of her gowns might not be good enough.

“Well, I know that you two are whispering about something, what is it?” Celeste asked again, not looking at all happy.

“We are discussing the upcoming dinner where you are to meet your future fiancé,” Henrietta said, saving the day. “Diana wants a list of our guests.”

“Hah! You will need to ask our parents about that,” Celeste spat as Madam Arnaud lifted the gown to continue with the fitting. “It seems that I am not privy to know who they expect me to marry. The whole situation is a farce, and totally unfair.”

“Celeste!” Henrietta cried out her sister’s name with urgency. “We do not discuss family matters in public.”

Diana noted that the poor girl’s face flushed, and she looked on the verge of sobbing. Of course, Henrietta was right to reprimand her, modiste shops were the height of gossip and most especially in London.

“Are you almost done, Madam Arnaud?” Diana asked, judging that Celeste could not manage much longer before she might burst into tears.

The dressmaker nodded her head with a smile. “Two more minutes and it will be enough for me to finish the dress.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Henrietta remarked. “I cannot sit in such a stiff chair much longer.”

Diana stifled a smile as the dressmaker once again scowled over at them.

“We must stop insulting such a reputable modiste shop,” Diana whispered to her friend. “Or we will find ourselves the centre of gossip among the ladies of London.”

“Pfft! Good. Those ladies need some entertainment, do they not?” Henriette remarked as she stood up to stretch her back as discreetly as she could.

“Yes, but not at Celeste’s expense,” Diana reminded her. “Come, let us go and try on a hat or two,” she suggested as she too stood up and led her friend to the corner where the haberdashery items were on display.

Before they left for home, the three ladies took afternoon tea in a nearby teashop, fussing over Celeste to help her relax a little. She did seem to settle a little, but Diana pitied her for the situation she had found herself in. Pondering on how Celeste lost her virginity brought to mind her own first love, Francis Steele.

As the two sisters chatted, Diana envisioned the muscular body of Francis Steele. His sculptured muscles had been incredible in comparison to her husband's. They had never discussed her situation with Francis, and she had never known if he had known that she had lost her virginity.

Could a man tell these things? Or, indeed, had her father informed him? Though she doubted the latter as it might have risked the Earl's refusal to marry her. She was only too grateful that the years that followed her heart being broken were happy years, spent with a good man.

“Are you daydreaming, Diana?” Henrietta's voice infiltrated her mind.

Diana became aware that she was still in the middle of a tearoom, and she pushed all thoughts of making love with

Francis aside. There was no place in her mind for past regrets.

“My apologies. My mind is a flurry with visiting London. Especially when Martha’s not with me, I can lose myself quite easily,” she said in jest, though there was much truth in her statement. Martha helped to ground her, and that helped to stave away her conflicting emotions. It was good to have such a good person by her side.

“Why did she not join us today?” Henriette asked. “I adore Martha and would be happy for her to accompany us on our trips.”

“You know Martha, she’s ever the organiser,” Diana replied, calling over the server for the bill. “She is putting together all the invitations we have received since arriving. She will be creating an itinerary of social events for me to attend.”

“London should be exciting,” Celeste said, with misery written all over her face. “Not a chore.”

“And so it shall be,” Henrietta assured her sister as she took hold of her hand in support. “You will meet your future husband, and then we shall party. You can accompany Diana to as many events as you like. Is that not so Diana?”

“I will be glad of your company, Celeste,” Diana said with an understanding smile. “Henrietta can be quite miserable in her condition.”

“Oh, you two are intolerable,” Henrietta chided. “And I shall be at some of them, making sure that the pair of you do not forget to smile.”

* * *

The evening dinner for Celeste’s big moment had finally arrived. Diana had chosen a dark purple dress because she wanted Celeste to be the brightest one in the room. This was going to be her special moment, even though she did not welcome it.

“Henrietta’s not well,” Martha informed her as she entered her bedchamber to fix her jewels in place.

“Oh no, how bad is she?” Diana asked, worried about her friend’s pregnancy.

“She’s snoring away in her bed, you do not need to worry about her. She’s just exhausted with the pace of London life,” Martha explained. “But she said to tell you that she has every faith in you to support her sister, and she will try and join you all after dinner.”

“Celeste will have my full attention.” Diana nodded as she glanced in the mirror at the sparkling necklace Martha had fastened around her neck. “I had better get down there, I want to be by Celeste’s side when the mystery fiancé arrives.”

“The poor girl,” Martha sympathised. “Let’s hope he’s a handsome and kind gentleman.”

A knock on the door brought in her butler to announce that the guests were now waiting in the drawing room. “I will down in a moment,” Diana told him. “Will you bring down Celeste, Martha? I want to be in the room when she arrives, so stay with her until you deliver her to me.”

As they left Diana’s room, Martha headed to Celeste’s room, and Diana went down the stairway. There would only be three guests in all, and so she prepared herself to greet them.

Entering the drawing room, the chattering voices came to a stop and an eerie silence greeted her. Her eyes scanned across the room to take in the guests, and she was met with a most alarming shock.

Staring into a familiar set of eyes, she felt for a moment that her legs might give way. *What? Why is he here?* she questioned herself.

Mustering all the resolve she could find, she approached the guests, “You are all most welcome to my London home.”

The older woman was the one to speak, "Thank you. I am Lady Adele Steele. This is my daughter, Miss Sarah Steele. And my son, Lord Francis Steele, the Duke of Ashbrook."

Chapter 18

Francis choked on the wine he was sipping, becoming aware of exactly who the Graham family were. He had relied on his mother and sister to choose his bride, being so wrapped up in the estate and business dealings. But now, standing before him was his first love, the beautiful Diana. His chest felt constricted and his stomach heavy; What in the world was she doing here?

He had thought that he was visiting his intended's family home in London, and turned to his mother asking, "Who is hosting this dinner, Mother?"

"We are at the London home of the Earl of Cheshire, why?" she asked.

It began to dawn on him who that family name belonged to. He was standing in the home of the Plough family, as in Lord Henry Plough, the Earl of Cheshire, and Diana's husband. Of course, his mother had never known of his love for Miss Diana Carlisle, he had only shared that secret with his father. Standing staring at her, he recalled that she had connections

with the Graham family too. It was where they had met in the first place.

Why did I not put this together?

“Is that a problem?” his sister asked in a whisper, noticing the look of horror on his face. “Do you have quarrels with the Earl?”

“No, I...for some reason...I thought we were dining at your London home, Miss Celeste,” he said to the group, attempting to pull himself together again.

“My parents have not yet arrived in London,” Celeste replied, looking pale and fretful.

“Do you know the Earl’s wife well, Miss Celeste?” his mother asked as she watched Diana approach them.

“She is lovely,” was all Celeste managed to tell them before Diana arrived at the group.

“Welcome to my London home,” Diana said to Francis’ mother. She went to stand at the side of his intended. “I will chaperone for dinner. May I ask, have you been in London long yourselves?”

He could tell that, even though her demeanour appeared relaxed, her voice had a slight tremble. She was the perfect picture of beauty, a true lady, and exactly how remembered her to be.

“My daughter and I arrived yesterday, but Lord Steele, my son, arrived only today,” his mother explained.

“Please, shall we take a seat on the couches while we await the call for dinner?” Diana suggested, holding out her slender arm, adorned in a long, grey lace glove that matched the short sleeves of her dress.

In between the top of the glove and the dress sleeve, he noticed her bare, silky skin. It caused his loins to stir as he remembered the last time he had touched that skin. How he had kissed every inch of her naked body. His eye inadvertently wandered to her ample breasts, almost as if they had a mind of their own. Much the same as his manhood, which had decided to stiffen at the erotic memories.

Francis could not sit down in view of the ladies, so he made his way to stand behind the settee where his mother was seated. That way, no one would notice the growing bulge in his pants. Still, he could not drag his eyes away from Diana's cleavage, across which a delicate grey lace hid the delights that he knew were underneath. Again, he longed to kiss the exposed skin on her breasts, but once he realised he was staring, he made to look away.

"I must apologise, Lady Steele," Diana spoke, focusing her words on his mother rather than him. "Celeste's sister is with child and in need of some rest. And, as you are now aware, her parents have not yet arrived in London."

“But she promised she would be with me?” Celeste cried out, and Diana thought she seemed very lost.

“I am here, Celeste, to chaperone you and lend you my guidance and support,” Diana said as she smiled at his intended.

His mother had chosen him a young wife. She was most likely his sister’s age, which, now he thought of it, seemed too young. Although she was most attractive, she did seem a little immature from what he had observed of her.

Nonetheless, he had committed himself to her, after promising his mother that he trusted her judgement to choose his future wife. After all, he did not need a wife to love, only to run the manor house and provide him with an heir.

He looked around the room, wondering why the Earl was not in attendance, and he was about to ask about him when his mother spoke up.

“It is a shame that your parents are not to be present at your introductory dinner?” his mother pointed out her opinion.

“They...erm...I do not know the full details, Lady Steele, but they will arrive in London later in the week.” Celeste managed to explain, despite her nerves.

“Lord Steele has not been back in the country long,” his mother told Diana. With that revelation, he watched her reaction closely, wondering if she knew where he had gone after she betrayed him.

“I see, have you been abroad, my Lord?” Diana dared to ask as she looked his way.

“I have travelled upon the seas, visiting many continents,” he replied, not wishing to discuss his life in any depth with her.

It surprised him as she raised her brows at him, but she asked no further questions, turning back to his mother.

“It seems I have yet a second apology to you once again, Lady Steele,” Diana said. “Until tonight, none of us knew who Lord Graham had chosen for Miss Celeste’s suitor. I must ask for your patience with us a little longer, at least until they arrive and take over Miss Celeste’s chaperoning.”

“Yes, it is rather unusual that they are not in attendance for this first meeting,” his mother remarked. “But we do thank you, Lady Plough, that you have been gracious enough to step in and save the day.”

His mother went on to speak with Celeste, and his mind switched off, or rather he stole another glance at Diana. He did not know if he hated her or...well, he knew that he was still in love with her. Seeing her for the first time in years had confirmed that for him. His love for the beautiful Diana had not faded, not one little bit.

Their eyes met and he became transfixed with her, cutting out all the voices around him. Again, his mind teased him as he

recalled her silky body, warm and inviting. Her perfect breasts had tasted delicious and—

“Is that not so, brother?” his sister’s voice interrupted his salacious thoughts as he became aware that he was being spoken to.

“Hmmm...what was that, Sarah?” he asked, pulling his attention away from Diana.

“I am looking forward to becoming friends with your intended, we are going to be the best of friends, are we not, brother?” Sarah smiled.

The remark served to remind him yet again how young his intended was. He was starting to believe that this was a poor match for him when a servant entered the room and went to speak with Diana.

“It appears that dinner is ready,” she announced and stood up to lead the way to the dining room.

Her arrangement of the seating had put her at the head of the table, which must mean that her husband was indeed away. He had have liked to ask her, but there had not been an appropriate moment yet.

Celeste was seated at one of her sides, and he at the other. He could imagine how uncomfortable that must be for her. It sounded as if she had not been aware of who exactly was coming to dinner. Otherwise, he was sure she would have changed the seating arrangement.

The dinner conversation had been civil, if not a little strained. Not only because of his situation with the hostess, but Celeste was a quiet young lady. His sister was seated beside Celeste, and even she could not muster a lengthy conversation from her. His mother was by his side, and it was she who had led most of the table chatter. As usual at these affairs, she talked of balls and London, not once mentioning their pending marriage.

Often, he found his thoughts wandering, it was all he could do to take his eyes away from Diana. Her father must not have mentioned his visit, the madman had threatened to beat him if he did not get off his property. It had come as such a surprise as he had envisaged a romantic time of lovemaking with her as they came together again. Instead, he got the complete opposite.

How long had she waited for him, a few weeks, a month? Yes, he had been gone longer than he had expected, but had not his father told her of his trip? The last thing he had expected was that she would marry another man in his absence. They were meant to be betrothed, but it seemed that she was not a woman of honour.

If only she knew how the news had crushed his very soul. At the time, he could not bear the thought of life without her. Nor could he bear the thought of her in another man's arms. He had thought their lovemaking had shown they were the perfect match.

Bah! Instead, she had jumped into someone else's bed the moment my back was turned. And now, you treat me as if you hate me, he mused, while pretending to listen to the conversation, which in reality was going over his head. Yet, it was you who broke us apart.

“A travelled man, is man of wisdom, is he not, my Lord?” he heard her voice speak at him. They must be talking of his travels, but he had no idea as he had not listened. His response was to fake that he had been paying attention.

“Wisdom of the world is not the same as the wisdom of life, Lady Plough,” he answered. It had meant to be a hint that he had been stupid to have trusted her.

“Life can take us down many paths. Once travelled, we either walk that path again or we avoid it forever,” Diana retorted. Her answer confused him.

Is she saying that she prefers to avoid me?

“Well, I have many people I like to avoid.” Sarah laughed.
“But do not worry, Celeste, I will guide you around them all.”

Celeste hardly even managed a smile back at his sister, and it annoyed him that she made so little effort to get to know his family.

“It is not wise to avoid people, in my opinion,” he voiced, looking at Diana as he spoke. “If you do not like someone, then you should confront them with honesty.”

“So, you believe in honesty, do you, my Lord?” Diana asked him, fire in her eyes giving away her anger.

“Honesty can lead to embarrassment,” Sarah joined in, his sister was not privy to the deep meaning of the conversation he was sharing with Diana. “I prefer to bend the truth, but only a little. I would never tell a big lie, Mamma,” she said, looking guilty at their mother.

“I would hope not,” his mother countered. “Why are we discussing dishonesty? It is not an appropriate topic matter when there are young ladies present.”

“How true, Lady Steele,” Diana agreed. “Young ladies are very vulnerable and easily misled. Shall we return to the drawing room for coffee?”

What did she mean by that? He knew the comment was targeted at him, but he had never lied to her, it had been the other way around.

Francis longed for the night to come to an end; he could not wait to get away. He would have preferred to have avoided the whole event in the first place, had he been aware of their host.

They arrived in the drawing room to be greeted by Celeste’s sister, at which point, Diana excused herself and left the room.

The moment she was gone he felt empty. He had not wanted her to leave but he could do nothing about it. What he needed to do was to end this farce of an engagement. He could not envision himself marrying the young Celeste, but he knew that his mother thought her the perfect match for a Duke’s wife.

Not wanting to think about that problem yet, he thought instead of what kind of man had stolen his sweetheart. Whoever the Earl of Cheshire was, he would never like him. He hated the man, even though he had never met him.

He forced himself to stop thinking of Diana's husband and turned his attention to the chattering ladies. As soon as he could, he would suggest that it was time to conclude the evening; he had to leave this house, at least for now.

Chapter 19

Diana felt a sense of relief to find Henrietta waiting in the drawing room, following their dinner. At last, it gave her a reason to excuse herself, she could not bear another moment in the presence of Francis. Henrietta looked well-rested, refreshed, and ready to take on the mantle of her family's commitments.

Diana leaned down to whisper in her ear, "Do not look at him, but Celeste's intended is the man who seduced me all those years ago."

Henrietta looked up at her from her seat and nodded her understanding as she stood up to accept the guests.

First, Diana did the introductions, and then she politely thanked all her guests for coming to dinner before excusing herself. Francis looked a little taken aback at her departure, but that only served to annoy her all the more.

How dare he come into my home after what he has done to me! she growled at the very thought, rushing to make her way to her room.

Unable to hold back the tears of frustration, she sat at her dressing table and looked back at her image. Her face had not aged much since he had left her stranded, but her mind had matured for the better. She was no longer the naive, young thing that he had taken advantage of. Sex out of marriage was a scandalous affair, but lucky for her, few had known of their intimate liaison.

It was a tired-looking woman who stared back at her from the mirror, dark rings under her eyes surrounded by pale skin. Yet her mind was racing with memories as she recalled Francis' firm naked body next to hers. She swallowed hard, fighting back an attack of utter sadness over losing him all those years ago.

She watched through her mirror as Martha entered the room. Her companion showed pity on her face as she approached her.

“I should have slapped his face in front of everyone,” Diana said as she cupped her face in her hands, pushing back a fit of sobs.

Unable to stop herself, she turned her hand into a fist and slammed it on the dressing table. “I hate him!” she cried out.

Martha turned her around and hugged her head towards her chest, stroking her hair as she had often done when Diana was upset. Diana hugged her friend’s waist, remaining seated on the dressing table stool.

“Seeing him again makes me feel so humiliated, Martha,” Diana wept.

“I know, dear, but move your mind to recall all the happy years of marriage with the Earl,” Martha advised. “Let that comfort you.”

They continued to hug one another until Diana's sobs began to fade, and Martha released her hold, "Do you suppose that he did it on purpose?" she asked.

Diana shot a look at Martha, taking in a long breath. "I doubt that Henrietta's father would have known of my relationship with the man that he chose for his daughter's husband. From what I understand, no one knew of my affair with him, other than people who are very close to me."

"Does Henrietta know?" Martha asked as she watched Diana go and lay on her bed.

Diana needed to lie down before her legs collapsed from underneath, so she made her way to her bed.

"No, she did not know anything about the suitor, but I managed to warn her before I left," Diana replied, laying her head on the soft pillow. "I first met Francis at a soiree that Henrietta's mother was hosting. If I remember, it was his sister who had met Henrietta in London. They had both presented themselves in the same year."

“I do hope this does not come between you and Henrietta,” Martha said as she remained standing by the dressing table.

“There is nothing that will break my friendship with Henrietta.” Diana tensed, tears once again threatening the corners of her eyes. “I do not know how I can ever look that man in the eye when I see him with Celeste on his arm.”

“Let me at least help you get undressed,” Martha suggested. “You do not want to fall asleep with a dinner dress on, do you?”

“I will manage myself tonight, Martha. You are no longer my maid, but my friend,” Diana reminded her.

Martha was quick to answer, “Well, let me send in your ladies’ maid. You will be much more comfortable putting on your nightclothes.”

“No. Please instruct Bailey that I do not wish to be disturbed tonight,” Diana asked. “I will undress myself when I am ready.”

“It does you no good to shut yourself away from the world, you know that,” Martha told her. Diana could see her concern was genuine.

Biting her lip, she spoke softly, “I know, but I need to be alone at least for tonight.”

Martha nodded her head in understanding and went to leave the room. “But only for tonight,” she stressed before closing the door behind her.

He looked well, she thought, the ensuing years have changed him a little, but he is still a handsome man with a considerable presence about him.

Burying her head in the pillow, thoughts of him would not go away. His stare had been intense, but his green-blue eyes were as soft as they ever were. His hair was longer, and he now adorned more hair on his face. He had not worn that style when she had known him, but it was neatly trimmed and quite suited him.

If anything, he looked more mature, with thicker arms and a larger chest. At one point, she had sneaked a glance at his broad shoulders and thought he had lost his lean youthful look. It was now replaced by the mature man who had presented himself as Celeste's suitor.

Closing her eyes, she sneered at the thought of Francis between Celeste's legs. The thought of him kissing his wife's breasts and caressing her naked body caused her to shoot her eyes open again.

"No, I cannot punish myself like this!" she muttered. "He is not mine and I am not his. That will never be."

Diana stood up and began to undress for bed. Catching a glimpse of her breasts in the long mirror, she recalled how he had adored her naked body. Taking her breasts in her hands,

she imagined it was Francis holding them. Quickly, she grabbed her nightdress and put it on, refusing to look in the mirror again.

Blowing out the candlelit lamp, she snuggled under her blankets. But she could not dispel the thoughts of the man she loved so very much in the past, and who was now in her house only to be betrothed to another. Oh, how she wished things had been different and a naked Francis was now by her side. Diana closed her eyes in the hope that sleep would dispel the vivid memories of her first love.

Sleep was not to come, and the image of Francis standing naked by her side filled her thoughts. She tossed and turned on the pillows, feeling guilty for daring to have such intimate thoughts with any other man than her late husband.

Other intimate memories were evoked in her head, and she became aroused. In their love-making sessions, he had once kissed her feet, taking each one of her toes into his mouth. She recalled the light kisses he gave her, up inside her thighs, leaving a trail of wet saliva with his wicked tongue. When he had arrived at the top of her thighs, he had done things with his tongue that she had never thought possible.

Diana shot up into a seated position in the dark, jealousy setting in at the thought of him doing all those things to Celeste. “Am I envious of Celeste?” she asked herself. “No, Of course, I am not. I had a perfectly good husband and... and...”

Throwing herself back onto the pillow, she chastised herself for her weakness over Francis Steele. *The man used me and then rejected me like a piece of garbage. I should hate him at the very least. Yet I can never hate him.*

Yes, she was angry with him, that was true. But hatred? No, that could never be because she knew that she had never stopped loving him. Imagining herself stroking the skin on his broad back, she closed her eyes. Without realising it, she was soon drifting off.

* * *

Waking up with a start, Diana knew that she had dreamt of Francis, and it had been a wonderful dream. It was morning

already and it must be almost time to get out of bed. It was also time to face the realities of the day before her.

For now, she lay under the warmth of her heavy blankets, her head resting on the softness of her white pillows. She recalled how her lips had melded with his as his tongue had searched out hers. They had thrown themselves together in her dream. It had not ended there either; he had been between her open legs, his manhood inside her. She had been excited with a feeling of fullness, a feeling of ecstatic desire.

“Do not worry, Diana,” she whispered to herself. “No one else to privy to your dreams.”

She found herself laughing out loud, filling the room with a serenade of joy.

“Glory be, Lady Diana, you are in a good mood on this day.” Bailey smiled over at her as she entered the bedroom and opened the drapes. “Shall I choose a brightly coloured dress to match your mood?”

Following closely behind her lady's maid was Henrietta, who waddled into her bedroom with sleepy eyes.

"I am so sorry, Diana, I had no idea," she said, looking as if she had not slept much that night.

"Sshh..." Diana hushed, pulling back her covers for her friend to climb into the bed next to her and keep warm. "Listen, we do not need to share this secret with Celeste."

"I agree, and I have said nothing," Henrietta said, resting next to her friend while the maid readied her mistress's outfit for the day. "She is miserable enough without us giving her reason to feel worse. And tell me, how do you feel?"

"How do I feel?" Diana repeated the question as she sat up in her bed. "I am lucky that my best friend is not only by my side but that she is with child. I am happy to be in London, despite my initial reluctance to come. Though I admit that I am confused, but I will get over that, I promise you. I have no intention of interfering in your family's affairs and am only too glad to be a part of your life."

“You are such a good friend, Diana,” Henrietta replied before yawning.

As Diana climbed from her bed, Henrietta closed her eyes. By the time Diana had cleansed herself from the water bowl and was ready to dress, Henrietta was fast asleep in her bed.

“Do not waken her, Bailey, she needs her rest,” Diana instructed her maid as she looked down at her friend’s peaceful face. “I will take my breakfast downstairs today with Martha.”

The two of them quietly left the bedroom, leaving the pregnant Henrietta alone to rest.

“Poor thing,” Diana remarked as they walked down the stairway together. “She looked like she had not slept all night long.”

No doubt she had stayed awake worrying over the man that her father had chosen for her sister's suitor. But it was not anyone's fault. Although, it was her opinion that the blame lay with Francis. He was an inscrutable man and one she wished was not to marry poor Celeste.

The girl did not deserve a betrayer, a man who had no values or sense of decency. She deserved better, like the man who she truly loved. But there was nothing that she could do about that, or was there?

Chapter 20

His mother had been delighted with Celeste, even telling him that her grandchildren were going to be most attractive. Sarah had liked her too, but then she would, given that they were about the same age. In fact, he had calculated that his sister had presented herself the same year as Henrietta, his intended's sister. And Celeste did so only last year, making her most likely younger than his sister.

My God, what a dilemma, he thought to himself whilst riding in a carriage, and on his way to court the young Celeste. On top of that, she was still staying at Diana's London home. *What is a man to do?*

He hoped that today he could get to know Celeste a little better. By the way that she had behaved, he had got the impression that she was not keen on the marriage. Maybe she thought him too old for her, but he was not of mature years yet, not in his mid-thirties.

And then there's Diana, what am I supposed to do about constantly having to see her? his mind churned, along with

what seemed like a million other problems.

He had said nothing to his mother or sister yet because they were right, in that Celeste would make a fine duchess. And who was he to refuse her that opportunity? He supposed then that he could grow to like her. With no plans to do anything yet, or at least not until he had got his head around the whole mess, he would act like the charming suitor that he was meant to be.

It could be that Celeste had a shy personality; she was young after all. His mother was right too, in that she was pretty. He would be proud to have her by his side, but only if that is what she wanted too. The carriage pulled up outside Diana's large home, and a butler opened the door.

"I will inform the ladies that you are here," he said after taking his hat and coat.

Francis was standing on a pure white marble floor with a huge stairway to his left, that matched in colour. He noted the black metal rails following the curve of the stairway and admired the Earl's taste. Or was it Diana who had designed the bright reception hallway?

“Would you like to follow me, Your Grace,” the butler said upon his return. He was then led into a pale pink parlour room, certainly, a lady’s touch had adorned these walls.

As he stepped into the room, he paused for a second because seated on a couch was Diana. He took a deep breath and composed himself, giving her a respectable bow. Before either of them could say a word, the door opened and Miss Celeste entered the room with her sister, Lady Henrietta. He wished he had had a chance to speak with Diana alone, but he was here to visit Celeste and he made an effort to look pleased to see her.

“Good afternoon, Miss Celeste. I must apologise for arriving unannounced, but I thought you might like a turn around one of London’s marvellous parks?” he asked of her.

Celeste did not reply, instead, she looked at her sister nervously.

“That would be splendid, Your Grace,” Lady Henrietta was the one to reply.

“Who is to chaperone me?” Miss Celeste asked, looking quite fearful at the very idea of joining him.

“Now there is a conundrum,” Lady Henrietta said, putting her hand to her chin as she thought on the situation. “You see, Your Grace, I have been placed on bedrest by the doctor. I was meant to be the one chaperoning my sister until Mother arrived but—”

“Lady Diana, will you please accompany me?” Miss Celeste asked Diana, and Francis could see that she looked a little flustered at the request.

He had not thought about spending an afternoon with Diana. Not that he would refuse the opportunity, and he found himself hoping that she would accept.

“Of course, my dear,” Diana replied with a kind smile, and he recalled how she used to smile at him like that. Now, she only gave him scowls. “Would you excuse us, Your Grace, while we go and ready ourselves? Henrietta, could you keep our guest company for a short while?”

“It will be my pleasure,” Lady Henrietta said, offering him a seat. “I will not arrange tea,” she continued to speak with him as they both sat down. “They should not be too long.”

It was an awkward fifteen minutes with Lady Henrietta saying very little, and he kept catching her staring at him. She was Diana’s good friend, so it might be likely that Diana had confessed to her of their relationship.

When the two women were finally ready, it felt good to escape the house. He was sure that Lady Henrietta had been scrutinising him. They took a carriage to St James’s Park. His initial intention was to walk along the two-mile circuit to help Celeste get used to talking to him. The place was crowded with well-dressed folk, some out for a leisurely walk too, others out to impress.

“I had hoped it would be quieter,” he said to Miss Celeste who walked by his side but left a respectful gap between them. “Kensington Gardens is usually the most popular, have you been there, Miss Celeste?”

“I do not know, I go along with my sister or Mother, but I never ask what the places are called,” she answered with a grim face.

Her answer annoyed him, though he made an effort not to show it on his face. *How could she not know the names of the famous London Parks, has she no education?* He regretted his negative thoughts; it was almost as if he was looking for her faults. He knew that he should give the girl a better chance to come out of herself.

“I find the canal quite pleasant, but then I am fond of water features,” he tried again. All the while hoping to encourage a question or two, or at the very least a short response.

Instead, she merely half smiled back at him. Was she was telling him that she had no interest in anything he might choose to discuss?

Diana walked behind them, keeping back a little to give them some privacy. *At least she has the decency not to interfere*, he thought. *But then, I would quite have liked the opportunity to talk with her.*

“It is good that we have the weather for a pleasant stroll,” he remarked, this time not expecting an answer.

In all honesty, he cared nothing about whether Miss Celeste spoke with him or not. It was something of a strain to keep talking to her when the real person he wanted to speak with was Diana.

The woman who crushed my heart, and yet I still have feelings for her. This is a torturous situation, and I must bring it to an end. What am I to do? I cannot, and should not, be in the same company as Diana, it is too painful.

“Are you ready to return in the carriage, Miss Celeste?” he asked.

She answered without hesitation, “Yes, I would like that.”

The carriage ride back was silent, until Diana broke the noiseless journey. “Could I offer you afternoon tea with Miss Celeste?” she asked, but he knew it was out of politeness.

He wanted to refuse but then again, he knew he had to make an effort for his future wife. “That would be most kind,” he said, accepting, even though he felt it was the wrong thing to do.

When they arrived inside the manor house again, he was introduced to Lord Trevor Waverley. It turned out that was Lady Henrietta’s husband.

“I warned my wife that London would be too much for her,” Lord Waverley said as they all chatted. “But when does a

woman ever listen to a man's advice?"

"It will be a burden I can bear much easier now that you arrived, husband," Lady Henrietta said, and she looked happy to be seated by his side. "Will you ask His Grace about the opera?"

"Ah yes, Your Grace. I am to accompany Miss Celeste to the opera, so it seems." He smiled as he looked at his young sister-in-law with fondness. "Would you care to join us?"

"I am partial to the opera, and it would be a pleasure to spend more time with Miss Celeste," Francis said in agreement.

"If you cannot come with us, sister, can I have Lady Diana by my side?" Miss Celeste requested.

"Will your mother not have arrived by then?" Diana questioned, and he could tell that she was not in favour of the idea.

Though secretly, he hoped that she would go to the opera, but he had no idea why he was punishing himself over her.

“Please Lady Diana, say that you will come with me,” Miss Celeste begged her. “If Mother comes, she will talk all the way through, and you know how much I love the opera.”

That was the most he had heard Miss Celeste say in all the times he had been with her. So, she did have a voice then.

“Do say yes, please, Lady Diana,” Miss Celeste pleaded with her.

“Only if Henrietta is not up to it,” Diana gave in, it was clear to Francis that she was fond of the girl and did not want to let her down.

He found himself enjoying the rest of the afternoon tea party as he chatted with Lord Waverley, who he liked very much. The Scottish laird was the kind of fellow that Francis could get along with, so he was glad to have accepted the invitation to the opera. His mother would be pleased too, as it would appear as if he was making an effort with Miss Celeste.

While he did not get the opportunity to speak with Diana again, it was probably for the best, there was no reason to sour the day. A few times they both made eye contact, and he felt the anger in her eyes had softened. She bore a deep sadness, but he did not dare to bring up such a personal question.

He would have liked to have asked why her husband was away at the moment but thought better of that too. Most of the conversation had been about the mountains of Scotland and its cultures. Lord Waverley even invited him to go and stay with them when they returned, which would be fitting if he married Miss Celeste.

By the end of the afternoon, he flagged down a hire carriage and made his way home, feeling quite good with himself. He was looking forward to spending a night at the opera house in Diana's company. Francis found himself hoping that Lady Henrietta would not be well enough to accompany her sister. That would guarantee Diana's attendance.

Anyone would think I was courting her and not the silly young woman that she will be chaperoning, he deliberated, smiling to himself.

Whilst it felt good being in Diana's company again, he knew that it was wrong. What was he doing, thinking about another man's wife? With that thought, he felt annoyed with himself once again. This was all very confusing, and, in a sense, he wished he had not come to London.

One minute he thought Miss Celeste was the right choice for the family. The next she felt that she was too different from Diana, the only woman he had ever loved. Could he bear the thought of marrying anyone but Diana?

He only hoped that over the season his mind would become clearer. Once Diana's husband returned, he would soon stop thinking of her in such an intimate way. If he could not, he knew that jealousy would overcome him, and that was the last thing he wanted.

Chapter 21

Diana was plagued with mixed emotions. She could not decide if she was disappointed or excited at the prospect of attending the opera where Francis would be present. Hoping that Henrietta might be well enough to accompany her sister, she knew that it would be unfair to force her. And so, Diana accepted that it was likely she who would chaperone Celeste on the night of the opera.

When the day arrived, poor Henrietta was quite ill because of her condition. She had been bedridden for a while, and Diana could see that Trevor was fretting over his wife and unborn child. By the afternoon, Diana had called for a doctor.

As she paced the garden room, she hoped to find solace in the plants that grew around her. Her husband's horticulture interests had also extended to their London home, and now she was glad of it. The garden rooms in their homes comforted her more than they used to. It allowed the feeling that her husband's presence still lingered, if only in spirit.

She was surrounded by miniature palms, orchids, and fanning green ferns. Stopping next to a fruit tree, she realised the nectarines had not fruited this year. It could only mean that she was not caring for them well enough and as she pondered bringing in an expert to care for the garden room, Celeste entered.

“I thought you would be in here, Lady Diana,” she said upon greeting her sister’s friend. “The doctor has said all is well, but Trevor insists on staying by my sister’s side until the baby’s born.”

“Thank goodness you bring me good news, Miss Celeste,” Diana said, smiling at the young woman. “Yet, why do I detect a look of worry on your face?”

“We were due to attend the opera this very night,” Miss Celeste explained, unable to hide the disappointment in her tone. “It is one of the few places I enjoy on our visits to London.”

“And worry not my dear, we shall still attend the opera,” Diana assured her, knowing that deep down she too still wished to go to the event.

“We shall?” Miss Celeste cried out, her eyes wide and her face now lit up with delight.

“Indeed, we shall, but for now I must visit with your sister,” Diana said. “Then I can put my mind at rest so that we can continue with our evening event.”

Diana and Miss Celeste made their way up the stairway together. When they reached the top, it seemed that the young woman had different ideas than visiting her sister again.

“I will be in my room,” Miss Celeste said, a renewed excitement obvious in her voice. “I must begin to prepare for this evening, it is only a few hours before we go.”

Diana smiled as she watched the young woman practically run to her bedroom chamber. She almost envied her for the enthusiasm that she too had once possessed when going out, but that had been when her husband was alive.

Knocking on the doorway to her friend's room, she entered. "I hear that you have a fretting husband to contend with, as well as an unborn child," she said with a smile as she looked over at Henrietta in her bed.

Henrietta looked tired but she was in good spirits as she replied, "Trevor cares more about our baby than he does about his wife, I am sure of it."

"I object," Trevor said with humour in his voice. "I happen to adore both mother and child," he said lovingly as he sat by Henrietta's bedside.

"It is better that you stay close to Henrietta until she's able to get about again," Diana said as she took the empty chair by Trevor's side. "I am so pleased that the doctor has confirmed all is well with your unborn child."

“I do rather feel like one of those huge whales you read about, that live in the oceans,” Henrietta complained as she shuffled around in the bed. “I had such plans for our London trip, Diana.”

“You speak as if this will be the final London trip ever,” Diana said in surprise. “We will have many more to come, but we will have children in tow, and I cannot wait.”

“You are the dearest of friends, Diana,” Henrietta smiled back at her. “But as a mother, my life will be so very different.”

“Those changes happened when you married,” Diana said, glancing at Trevor, who raised his brow at her questioningly. “And were they not for the better? We must learn to flow through life’s changes and remain happy and content with all that we have. Life is very precious, especially when you can share it with someone you love and who loves you in return.”

“You are right, Diana, and I know that motherhood will be a joy,” Henrietta said, smiling at Trevor. “But I must complain that I am so large right now.”

The three of them laughed together and Diana was pleased to see Henrietta in such good spirits.

“Well, the time has arrived for me to ready myself for the opera,” Diana declared as she stood up to leave.

“Goodness, I forgot all about that,” Trevor said. “Will you manage to chaperone Celeste on your own?”

“Stay with your wife, Lord Trevor, I am quite sure I can manage a night at the opera without you,” Diana assured him.

“But...what of Lord Steele?” Henrietta asked, looking equally concerned.

“What of him?” Diana replied, with a certain cockiness in her tone. “I am there to chaperone your sister and enjoy the opera.

That is my plan, anyway.”

“Thank you, Diana,” Henrietta said with a sigh. Diana knew why she was concerned for her because Henrietta was well aware of the history between her and Lord Steele.

* * *

A few hours later, the carriage pulled up outside the opera house, where Francis was waiting for them. Despite everything, Diana’s heart seemed to jump around in her chest when she saw him.

“Is Lord Waverley not with you?” Francis enquired, and it surprised her when Celeste spoke up, and explain things to him.

She could only assume the young woman was so pleased to be attending the opera that she had gained some newfound confidence to deal with her suitor. Watching, she followed in

the couple's wake as Francis guided them up some stairs and into a private box.

They all sat in a row of chairs with Francis surprisingly seating himself between them. Young Celeste had not seemed to notice him by her side as she squinted down her opera binoculars to peer at the stage.

"Is this not so exciting," she squealed to no one in particular. "I do so adore the opera."

As she finished speaking, the curtain went up and the audience hushed; it was time for the music to begin. Diana did not share Miss Celeste's enthusiasm for the opera, though she had attended a few with her husband.

Although Diana tried to concentrate on the opera, she sensed a strange drumming in her chest as she sat by the side of Lord Francis Steele.

He is so distracting. How could he still stir such feelings inside of me? It is most annoying.

The night moved on and they spoke little until the break halfway through when everyone was standing up to stretch their legs.

“I can see a friend of mine in the audience,” Miss Celeste cried out excitedly as she waved to a young woman who was waving back at her. “Do you mind terribly if I go and speak her?”

It was Francis who gave her permission, while Diana remained silent.

“I am not so sure that a young lady should be running around the opera house alone,” Diana said to Lord Steele once they were alone. “I should be escorting her.”

“I wanted the opportunity to be alone with you, Diana,” he replied, using her first name as if he had the right to do so.

“How dare you assume that—”

Francis raised his hand to stop her midsentence. “Because I would like your permission to meet with you alone. We need to talk, and I know that you must have things to discuss too.”

The sides of her mouth filled with warm saliva, and she imagined herself about to be so very ill. Diana knew that she could not escape this confrontation because her legs felt so weak. She could even feel the heat from his body as he moved his chair closer to hers; what was he doing behaving in such a way?

“May I ask how long your husband is to be absent?” he asked, and she felt like telling him it was none of his business.

“My...my husband has passed away,” she replied, surprising herself with how calm her voice sounded.

Francis turned to look at her; why was he so close? He instinctively reached out his hand to touch hers as he replied, “I had no idea, I am so sorry.”

His touch caused a tingle to ripple through her body and she felt frozen to the spot. What she should be doing was pushing him away, but she seemed incapable of moving. When he leaned in, it felt as if the years had melted away and they were once again lovers. His lips brushed the back of her hand as he brought it to his mouth, and Diana could not stop him.

Francis stared into her eyes and her heart thawed as she grasped at the truth: *yes, I do still love you.* He leaned in even closer and as his lips almost touched hers, she came to her senses and pulled her hand from his.

“Please, sir!” she cried out a little louder than she had meant to.

Luckily, people were still returning to their seats and their chatter drowned out her voice.

“I...I must find Miss Celeste, for I am not well,” she told him, unable to look at him as she backed away.

Turning around, she almost bumped into the young woman as she was dashing back onto their private box.

“I have asked Charlotte to join us in the box, will that be acceptable, Lady Diana?” she asked with such eagerness that Diana could not refuse.

“Of course, I will sit at the back here,” she replied, grateful not to be seated by the side of Francis again. “Please, Miss Charlotte, have my seat at the front, where you can enjoy the view of the stage.”

The two girls giggled as they dashed to be seated next to one another. Diana looked at Francis, defying him to dare to say a word. Instead, he took a seat separate from the young women. Diana remained at the back of the box, willing the night to end.

And when it did, she could not get away quickly enough. Standing back, she allowed Miss Celeste to keep her friend by her side as she said her farewells to her suitor. It was a relief when finally, Francis was gone, and Miss Celeste then said her farewell to her friend.

All the way home, Miss Celeste chatted about the opera and how wonderful it was to have bumped into her friend. All the while, it allowed Diana to push away the fact that she had almost allowed Francis to kiss her. What was she thinking?

“Will that be acceptable, Lady Diana, it would make me so happy to have my friend by my side?” Miss Celeste’s question broke her thoughts. “Will you give your permission for Charlotte to come and stay with me? We must stay with you now that my sister is bedbound, but it makes me feel so alone in London. Please say yes?”

Diana looked into Miss Celeste's pleading young eyes, reminding her of herself, and not that long ago.

“Of course, you are right, Miss Celeste. You do need a companion and it sounds like the perfect solution,” Diana answered with a strained smile.

She then switched her mind off to Miss Celeste's joy. The young woman chatted on about all the things she wanted to do with her friend while she was in London. Yet, it seemed to Diana that she had forgotten something quite significant, her suitor would be calling on her too.

Chapter 22

Diana had not been aware that all the time she was in the opera house, she was being watched. Lord William Plough had been surprised to see his uncle's widow at the opera house, but he certainly was not going to greet her. From the moment he had spotted her, his fury was riled up at the very sight of her.

He was tempted to somehow humiliate the woman while they were in public, but she was up in a private box. The fact that she had a private box, while he was down with the common audience, also maddened him.

He had noticed that she was seated by the side of a gentleman, which piqued his curiosity as to who he was. Did she have a new suitor tagging along?

Before the curtain had risen, he had taken out his opera binoculars to look closer at the man seated at her side. To his shock, it was the Duke of Ashbrook, whom he had heard was courting the young lady of an Earl, the Graham family if he was not mistaken. Could it be the young lady by his other side? Was Diana merely a chaperone?

He turned to speak with the woman he had brought with him, Trudy Webster, who happened to work at the best modiste shop in London. They were only friends because she stole him gifts that he could pass on to the real ladies he dated.

Passing the binoculars to her, he asked, “Do you know who that young lady is, sitting next to the Duke of Ashton up in that box?”

“Are we spying on people?” Trudy giggled, and he smirked back at her, she was a buxom young woman but did not have much in the way of intelligence.

“I find her quite pretty, that is all,” he told her teasingly.

“That is all well and good, but am I not pretty too?” Trudy asked, looking annoyed. “I will not tell you who she is unless I get the right answer.”

“My dear, you would not be with me, among all the nobility around us, if I did not consider you worthy,” he said, knowing that his answer would do the trick.

“Awww...” Trudy said in a loud voice as she took his cheek in her hand and squeezed it. “My handsome sweetheart’s falling in love with me.” She grinned.

“Hmmm... so then, do you know who the young lady is?” he reminded her, ignoring her comment about falling in love with her.

“I do,” she replied. “She had a fitting with Madam Arnaud for that very dress she’s wearing.”

“Well...who is she then?” he spat, growing impatient with her.

“Do not get all huffy with me, William Plough.” Trudy scowled as she poked at his arm. “She happens to be a Miss Celeste Graham. She’s the daughter of—”

“An Earl,” William interrupted her, not noticing her frown at cutting her short. “Lord Graham of Woodbury Manor, if I am not mistaken.”

“Why you so interested in her anyway?” Trudy asked, looking envious that his attention was not on her alone. “I borrowed this gown from the modiste shop, especially for tonight, and all you can do is look at another woman.”

“You mean that you stole the gown,” William corrected her because he knew all too well of her light-fingered exploits.

“No... borrowed,” Trudy huffed, glancing enviously up at the box with the pretty Miss Graham. “I will be returning it.”

“I like that the ladies of the ton never know if their dress from the wrack has already been worn by my pretty little tart.” He chuckled.

“Aww, you called me pretty.” Trudy grinned as the curtains began to go up. “Ooh, time for the show.”

William wished he could make Trudy disappear. It would be much easier to spy on the occupants of the private box without her by his side. He could not help himself when it came to his uncle’s widow, he hated her with such a vengeance.

When it came to the break in the middle of the show, Trudy excused herself to visit the ladies’ powder room. William knew that she liked to mix with the real ladies in there, it made her feel worthy he supposed.

He remained in his seat and glanced up at the box to continue his spying. It seemed that the young Miss Graham had left the box, and Diana was now alone with the Duke. That in itself was not interesting, especially when the Duke moved closer to her. And now, he watched them much closer; was she having an affair with the Duke, he wondered?

His spying paid off because, after only a few moments, the pair were so close together that they almost kissed. Yes, there was something between them, that much was obvious.

“I am thinking that Miss Graham’s father would like to know all about the naughty behaviour of his future son-in-law’s tart,” he mumbled to himself.

“What was that, my dearest?” Trudy asked him as she returned. “I heard you mumbling something.”

He ignored her question as he was forced to stand up to allow other members of the audience to get to their seats. Taking the opportunity to look up at the private box, he could no longer see Diana. Instead, there were two young women seated at the front of the box, and a stiff-looking Duke who had taken a seat apart from them.

I need to ask around about the Duke of Ashbrook. I do not know much about him, he mulled over as he continued to watch the scene in the private opera box unfold. *I will get my revenge on you, bitch, it is only a matter of time.*

Unable to concentrate on the opera, his mind was far too excited about getting to work on finding something he could use against Diana. It would be most useful if he could find something scandalous. What a pleasure it would be to put that woman down.

He had not spotted Diana in the box again until he came across her later, as the crowds were departing from the opera house. *So, she did not leave. She must have moved to the back of the box where I could not see her.* He pondered as he observed the group heading towards the hire carriages. Having a good feeling that she was up to something, and he had every intention of finding out what it was.

Laughing in his mind, he thought, *There's a dirty little secret that you are hiding, is there not, Lady Diana? Well, I will be finding out what it is and using it to my advantage. See you soon.*

Trudy was expecting to be wined and dined after the show, but he needed rid of her now. “Here’s some money to hire a carriage to take you home,” he instructed her, and she looked back at him in shock.

“I thought we were going to have fun tonight,” she complained.

“And we did,” he snapped, impatient to be rid of her. “I took you to the opera for Christ’s sake, woman.”

With that, he pushed a few coins into her hands. He walked away, leaving her standing alone and looking disgruntled at her lot. *That woman’s more hassle than she’s worth*, he complained to himself as he headed toward Brooke’s.

It was the only club he could get into at the moment, but it should serve his purpose of finding out information on the Duke. Once he got his rightful inheritance, he would soon be accepted at all the top clubs, like White’s.

At Brooke's gentleman's club, he intended on asking around about the Duke of Ashford, Lord Francis Steele. It was time to see what his connection was to Lady Diana. By the end of the night, he hoped to find out if anything was interesting enough, that it might cause a scandal. *And if there is, you bitch, you will bend to my will, and I then I will have back all my money.*

Chapter 23

Diana had thought long and hard over what had happened between her and Francis on the night of the opera. She was not afraid of bringing scandal to her own family. But she cared very much for Henrietta, and for that reason, she would have nothing more to do with Francis.

Her side of the family only consisted of her and her father. The only blood relative to have come forward on her husband's side had been William, his nephew, and he was only interested in money and the selling of the land.

It had saddened her very much because it meant the end of the line to her husband's earldom. His male relatives had all perished in the French wars. On top of that, Harry had refused to allow William the title of heir presumptive in his will, cutting off all ties with him. He would never have allowed his nephew to inherit his estate.

To some extent, she could understand William's fury, but it was not in her control. There were times when she wished

Harry had simply allowed his nephew his rightful inheritance by blood.

That had been the initial reason why Harry had married her, wanting a younger bride to produce an heir for the title of his peerage. They had thought there was still plenty of time for it to happen, even though she had lost two children.

It was not unusual to lose babies in childbirth, but still, it was heart-breaking for them. Of course, his sudden death had come as a shock and had left the earldom without an heir. Now she was left with the title of Dowager Countess, though she seldom used it.

Diana had hoped that William would begin to realise there was nothing he could do to change his uncle's will, yet still he persisted. His last visit had been a most unpleasant one, but for now, she needed to put that behind her and concentrate on the problem at hand. That of Lord Francis Steele, Duke of Ashbrook and future husband of her best friend's sister.

The last two years of her life had been hard ones. William had constantly harassed her, even while she was in mourning, threatening her over the ownership of Harry's estate. His

intimidation had caused her to become quite reclusive in the beginning. As time moved on, she began to come out of her shell and refuse his constant requests for money.

Never though, had she expected Francis to affect her as he had. Whilst he was her first love, he was a man who had passed through her life so quickly. Did she still love him? Had she ever even stopped loving him? It could be the only explanation for how she felt.

Henrietta being bedbound and unable to chaperone her sister was making things difficult for Diana. For this reason, she had agreed to Celeste's friend coming to stay with them. It meant that no matter where Celeste went or who visited her, she would not be alone.

It meant that Diana could spend more time alone and she had taken herself into the garden room to enjoy a book. The room helped her to feel closer to her late husband. Not long after she settled, she could hear voices echoing out from the reception hallway, but she ignored them. If she was needed, someone would come for her. But it soon dawned on her that one of the voices was Francis; he must be calling on Celeste.

The garden room door opened, and Celeste appeared, “Lady Diana, will you accompany me on a visit with Lord Steele?”

“It would please me better if you could find Lord Trevor, for I am about to go to my bed with a headache,” Diana replied, hoping to avoid Francis.

She noted the disappointment on Celeste’s face, but the young woman did as she bid and left her in peace. Diana listened out for the chatting in the hallway to subside, and then made her way to her bedchamber. This was to be her new tactic to avoid Lord Steele.

If she evaded all his visits, then what almost happened at the opera could never happen again. They had come so close to kissing one another that it had shocked her to the core. Never again did she want to be in his company. It was the only way to make sure her feelings were not stirred.

The next morning, when Diana dined at breakfast, she was joined by Lord Trevor.

“Good morning to you, Lady Diana,” he greeted her with a cheery tone.

“Good morning in return, and tell me, how is Henrietta?” she enquired.

“Sleeping like a baby, so I have escaped to come and eat like a civilised man.” He grinned as a maid filled his plate with bacon and kidneys. “I have eaten most my meals by the side of her bed these past few days, and I long to sit at a table.”

“Henrietta will appreciate having you close by,” Diana smiled, sipping from her teacup. “You are a loving husband, Lord Trevor.”

“Talking of eating from tables, I took the liberty to invite Lord Steele to dinner this evening,” he informed her. “He is such a likable man, is he not?”

Diana looked on, unable to speak at the sudden panic of dining with Francis.

“I hope I have not overstepped my welcome by inviting him?” Lord Trevor asked, looking at Diana in dismay. “Henrietta asked me to oversee Celeste’s courtship so I presumed it would be acceptable. But then I forget that we are your guests, Lady Diana, I do hope you can forgive my forwardness.”

“No, no, Lord Trevor,” Diana managed to speak and attempted to cover up her initial surprise. “Please, treat my home as yours, I would have it no other way. However, I cannot join you for dinner this evening, so I trust you will oversee the event?”

“Had I known you were away, I would have chosen another day, my apologies—”

Diana raised her hand to stop him. “There is no need for apologies, and neither is there a need for me to be present during Celeste’s courtship. I am sure things can progress without my interference,” she said in jest.

“Perhaps shortly we can transfer to the London home of Henrietta’s parents. It is difficult while she is bedbound,” Lord Trevor said, looking a little sheepish over the whole thing.

“We both know that neither Henrietta nor her sister wish to go and stay with their parents,” Diana said with a smile, to give Lord Trevor a boost in his confidence.

“I do not boast to know or even understand the politics of my wife’s family, but you are quite right, Lady Diana,” he replied with a small nod of agreement.

“It seems to me that they fell out with their father after his declaration that he had chosen a suitor for Celeste,” Diana explained.

“Well, in my opinion, he has chosen well because Lord Steele is nothing but an honourable gentleman,” Lord Trevor quipped. “Not that I know much of English Lords either, but I have welcomed him to visit my home in Scotland, if we ever get back there, that is.”

“Have you no plans to return?” Diana asked, noticing a sadness on his face.

“After the baby’s born because I do not wish to cause my wife any hardship in the long journey to my home,” he explained. “I will play the host at tonight’s dinner, Lady Diana. Are you away for the entire evening?”

Diana had no plans to go out that evening, but she was doing all she could to avoid Francis Steele. She had one or two acquaintances she could call upon to make sure she was absent over dinner. Most likely she would send word to Dowager Lady Bray, of whom she had much in common. They had become friends through her late husband, and she too was in London for the season.

All went as planned, and Diana managed to escape her home before the arrival of Lord Steele. But the next day, Celeste came to join her in the parlour where she was sewing.

“Lady Diana, I wonder if you might chaperone me to a ball?” Celeste asked of her. “I am to attend with Lord Steele, and I would so love to have you by my side.”

Initially, Diana agreed, but all the while she knew that she would find an excuse not to attend. And this became her way over the next few weeks. She made up excuse after excuse whenever something involved the attendance of Lord Francis Steele.

She had hoped that Henrietta would be up and about soon to handle it all. Yet on the rare occasion, her friend had managed to leave her bed, she would soon be back in it because she so easily became lightheaded. Poor Henrietta, her pregnancy was taking its toll on her. Diana was starting to accept that she could not continue to avoid every request to chaperone Celeste.

“I am most grateful that you allow us to stay with you, Diana,” Henrietta said to her when she visited her friend in her bedchamber. “You know that Celeste prefers it here rather than at our parents. Mother would only lecture her every day on her courtship.”

“I like having you all with me,” Diana replied. “The house would be a very lonely one if not for all the noise your family makes in it,” she said in jest.

“I will repay you one day, for all that you have done for us while my sister is in courtship,” Henrietta half smiled. “I know it is not easy for you, given who Celeste’s suitor is. I must say that Lord Steele is a most caring gentleman, but though Celeste does like him, still she does not care to marry him.”

At that moment, Celeste entered the bedchamber with a letter in her hand. “I have another invitation to attend a ball with Lord Francis,” she informed them as she waved the invitation in the air. “I cannot possibly go with Mother again, she makes these events so unbearable. Please, Lady Diana, will you chaperone me?”

Diana wanted to refuse, but the desperation in Celeste’s voice was more than she could bare.

“Of course, Celeste, I would be happy to accompany you.”

“Oh, thank the Lord,” Celeste cried out. “I only hope now that Mother will not be in attendance, so let us keep this between us, shall we?” she asked of them.

As Celeste left the room, looking much happier than when she entered it, Henrietta said, “Thank you, Diana,” with relief in her voice. “Mother can be overbearing at best of times. At least with you there, Celeste can have a little freedom with her friends before she is tied into this marriage forever.”

Diana could hear her own voice saying how she was happy to help, but as she left the room she leaned against a wall and sighed. The time had come when she had run out of excuses and could no longer avoid the company of Lord Francis Steele, whether she liked it or not.

The trouble was, she did like the idea, and there lay the biggest problem of all; she was still very much in love with Celeste’s future husband. Now, she must ensure that she concealed those feelings so that no one would ever know.

Chapter 24

Diana's carriage had arrived at the London mansion where the ball was to take place. It was not as grand a house as some of them were, but the ball was a private one, which should mean only around fifty to sixty guests. That had been why Diana had agreed to chaperone Celeste in the end, for she hated the large, noisy public balls.

But to Diana, it was one of many balls that she had attended since she had become a married woman, whereas for Celeste it was a time of great excitement in her young life.

"I do love dancing," Celeste said excitedly as they walked towards the front door of the mansion house. "Do you think it will be too bold of me to fill my dancing card?" she asked her chaperone with a look of hope.

"As there is no official announcement of your engagement yet, I do not see why you cannot dance with other gentlemen," Diana replied. "But do ensure that you reserve at least two dances for Lord Steele."

Celeste nodded her agreement. “Will you be vetting all my choices? she asked.

“This is a private ball. I must trust in the host’s judgement that all the gentlemen are respectable,” Diana answered. She hoped that Miss Celeste would relax at the ball before she headed into all the responsibilities of marriage soon enough.

“Thank you, Lady Diana, I will have a good time, I know it,” she squealed once again. Before Diana could answer, the young woman rushed off to meet with a crowd of her friends who were standing near the entrance doorway.

How very young you are my dear, to be marrying, Diana deliberated as she followed the group of young ladies into the house. Servants were there to greet them and take their coats. All Diana could hear was the girls giggling and chatting excitedly. Celeste soon returned to her side so that they could enter the ballroom together, and it was there where they met with Lord Trevor.

“I had not realised that you would be here, Lord Trevor,” Celeste said in surprise at the sight of her brother-in-law.

“I am in attendance with Lord Steele,” he said with delight. “Besides, Henrietta insisted, and she said I was to tell you both to put me on your dancing cards,” he added, laughing. “Apparently, she does not want my dancing skills to become rusty, but I am not inclined to dance with the ladies I do not know, and nor do I want any introductions.”

“If my sister insists, then I suppose I must,” Celeste said with a pout as she wrote his name on her card. “But you can only take up a single slot. Lady Diane will give you two at least, I am sure.”

Diana smiled at Celeste’s honesty. “I most certainly will not,” Diana declared with a faux surprised look in her eyes. “You will have a single dance from me, Lord Trevor. I do seem to easily tire these days.”

It was not quite true because she too loved to dance, but with the right gentleman by her side. Diana was only too relieved that Miss Celeste intended on enjoying the dance. No one knew when the Duke was to announce their engagement, but

once it happened, Miss Celeste would be accountable for every move she made.

As they stood chatting, various young men came and requested a dance with Celeste. Diana noted that she was purposely not filling her dance card, assuming she was keeping to her promise to reserve two dances for Lord Steele.

As Celeste wandered off with her first dance partner, Diana's female acquaintances soon came to join her. At some point, a few gentlemen requested a dance from Diana, and whilst she did not fill in a dance card, she did agree to a few dances. Dancing was most exhausting at the best of times, but she did not want to appear unsocial for Celeste's sake.

Diana could see Celeste was in her element, being the centre of attention, even when she danced with Lord Steele. It stirred her heart to see him again, after avoiding him for the last few weeks. How lucky Celeste was, not that the young woman would agree as she had no interest in marrying Lord Steele.

But Diana could not help but envy her, even though she hid it well. She had not even confided how she felt with her friend,

Henrietta, because she did not wish to burden her friend with yet more worries.

Because this was a private ball, the rules were a little more relaxed and so too was Diana. Watching Celeste have such fun was gladdening her heart. Though she was a little taken aback when a younger man approached her for the last dance before supper.

“I came to see you earlier and request this dance, do you not recall?” he asked.

“Of course, I do,” Diana replied, not admitting that did not recall the incident at all, but then she had been rather busy watching over Celeste. “It would be my pleasure to have the next dance with you.”

Diana allowed him to lead her to the dancefloor and was pleased the dance was an uncomplicated one. It gave her the opportunity to speak with the young man. When he told her that his name was Arthur, something niggled at the back of her mind. Where had she heard that name before?

At the end of the dance sequence, he bowed and led her back to her chair. There she waited alone until Celeste arrived back, hooked in the arm of Lord Steele. He was accompanying her to supper, and Lord Trevor was with them to escort Diana.

Once they were in the dining room, guests were to follow their name cards. The servant seated Diana by Miss Celeste, and at her other side was Lord Trevor. It meant that she did not need to converse with Francis much at all, for it would mean talking over Miss Celeste.

She toyed with her food, not having much of an appetite, likely because she was conscious that only a few feet away sat her first love. For the most part, she had avoided looking at him, but when she had happened to glance his way, his eyes were boring into hers.

Diana felt uncomfortable time and wished that she could make an excuse and leave, such as asking Lord Trevor to chaperone Celeste. Sitting back in her chair she glanced Francis' way, but to her surprise, he had done the same and was staring back at her. She could still read him, and somehow, she knew that he longed to speak with her. Quickly, she moved forward, hoping that no one had noticed the panic on her face.

They all returned to the dance hall, once supper was over. Diana noted that the young man who had called himself Arthur was now taking Celeste to the dancefloor. Within moments, she recalled who the young man was and smiled to herself. Celeste was such a shy little creature, yet here she was dancing openly with her true love.

Even worse, she was doing it in front of her future husband. Not that anyone was aware, and Diana certainly would not be the one to divulge their secret; not when she had such similar secrets too.

Standing closer to the dancefloor than she normally did, she observed the young couple as they moved around to a country dance. How they managed to dance with such energy after a long night, and after eating, was beyond her comprehension. Not that she considered herself old in years, but she knew that all she wanted right now was a chair to sit on.

But she also wanted to watch Celeste who looked so happy as she danced with this particular partner. She pondered on whether to say anything to Celeste, deciding that she would speak with Henrietta about it tomorrow.

As she had made her decision, she was about to move away when she felt a presence by her side.

“It was my understanding that the young Miss Celeste was to become engaged to Lord Steele,” one of the older married women said to her. “Yet, she has danced two dances with that same young man.”

Diana knew straight away that it was going to cause gossip, but it was too late, the harm was already done. She also knew that such gossip would not bother Lord Steele, but still, it would no doubt all fall upon her shoulders. After all, she was meant to be chaperoning Celeste. All she could do was hope the gossip would not become too fierce. This being a private ball meant that one could relax one’s etiquette a little more than usual.

Making her way to a chair where she would not have to watch them anymore, she took a seat. She was soon joined by Lord Trevor, who came to stand by her side.

“Do you know that young man who Miss Celeste is dancing with?” he asked her, looking puzzled.

“Oh, not you too.” She sighed, hiding her face behind her fan as she cooled herself.

“What?” Lord Trevor smiled down at her. “What have I said that offends?”

“It is an old friend of Celeste’s,” Diana grumbled. “But already there is gossip that they have danced around the floor together too many times.”

“And does that not concern you?” Lord Trevor asked, raising an eyebrow. “But then, what do I know of English aristocratic ways.”

“I will speak to her,” Diana replied, convinced that Celeste was not the shy little thing that she made herself out to be.

“But I have an inkling that she knows what she is doing.”

Lord Trevor bowed his head in acknowledgment. “I will be in the card room, as it is my belief that may be the safest place to be right now.”

Diana smiled at him, wishing she could find somewhere to hide too. Once the elite began their gossiping, there would be no rest. In a sense, she felt a little annoyed with Celeste, for disrespecting the Duke’s reputation. No doubt Francis would hear the tittle-tattle going around the room.

Sometimes, she felt that society ladies were more like a nest of vipers. She, for one, had never involved herself in gossip, but then she had been fussy in choosing her friends.

From what little she had seen of the young Arthur, he would make an excellent husband for the flighty Celeste. He was a handsome young man with a softness to his eyes that only a fine gentleman possessed. Unfortunately for him, that was not enough.

Being the third son of a viscount was of little importance when it came to fathers choosing suitors for their precious daughters. Henrietta's parents would be appalled when word got back to them of their daughter's daring behaviour at a private ball.

Diana remained in her chair, unwilling to budge. She was attempting to keep out of sight from the groups of gossiping ladies. But she could hear their ever-growing opinions being voiced out louder and louder as the evening went on.

If anything, she was starting to change her mind about the shy Celeste, and now admired her for being so daring. In a sense, she was beginning to wish that the young woman could marry the man of her dreams because a young woman's first love should never be forgotten.

Chapter 25

Francis had been observing Diana from a distance the whole night. How radiant she looked in her gold-shaded ball gown. Her dark curls were pinned up, with straggling ringlets laying against her cheeks. The best part had been the creamy, silky skin of her shoulders, exposed with the cut of her dress.

Aware that she had been avoiding him for a few weeks, he knew that he must approach her with care, but approach her he would. For he was determined to speak with her, one way or another.

After spending most of his time in the card room, he became aware his dance with his intended was due shortly. Entering the ballroom for his allotted dance with Miss Celeste, he overheard people whispering Miss Celeste's name.

Not only that, but it seemed as if a gossiping frenzy was making its rounds. By the time he arrived to greet her, he had learned that she had danced with some unknown gentleman more than once. In truth, he had no care over the matter, though he knew that he should. Yet, he found it hard to muster

much interest in the activities of someone he did not care for very much.

Francis chose not to mention it when he arrived by Celeste's side. Holding out his hand, he led her to the dancefloor with his head held high. He could not even muster any interest in who the young man was that he was supposedly competing with, for in that he had no care either.

When he had spoken with her earlier in the evening, he had made it clear that she could take dance partners at the ball. He had even taken to the dancefloor himself with other partners because they were not yet officially engaged. On that point, he knew that he was delaying it, though in truth he had no idea why.

Well...of course, I know why, but I do not like to admit it to myself.

Diana was a constant thought in his head. One minute, he felt anger towards her because she had not waited for him. The next, he knew that he could not fight the love he still felt for her. Whenever she was close by, his entire demeanour

changed. But with Celeste, he felt almost like a father figure, even though she was to be his wife.

Celeste would make the perfect wife for his estate that was a fact he could not deny. She had good breeding and the makings of a young healthy mother to his heir. She was pretty, although a little too shy for his liking. Then again, it was a brave move she had made by dancing with a gentleman more than once. Was she trying to make a statement to him? He had to admit to himself that he had never for one moment assumed that she would not wish to marry him.

In his role as a duke and that of a wealthy bachelor, he was a popular gentleman among the women of the Ton, including mothers for their unmarried daughters. Women all around him sought his attention, but he was not of a character to welcome their attentions, if anything he found it all annoying. Perhaps it was time to announce the engagement, if not for any other reason than some peace in his life. But then, in the back of his mind, all he wanted was to keep delaying it.

During the dance with Celeste, they spoke very little, and he chose not to mention the gossip of the crowds. He felt that once he admitted there was gossip, he would learn something he did not want to know or deal with. His only purpose that evening was to speak with Diana. He had invited Celeste to

the private ball in the hope that Diana would be her chaperone. At last, he had struck lucky.

When the music ended, he whispered to Celeste that he would walk her to her chaperone, which she accepted with grace and composure. As he neared Diana, the excitement he felt was almost overwhelming his very being. It felt so good to be near her again.

“Lady Diana, I do feel that I must rest awhile,” Celeste said giddily. “For I have not yet missed one dance, but I am tiring at last.”

Neither Diana nor he mentioned the gossip, but that was not why he had led Celeste to her chaperone.

“Lady Diana, would you do me the honour of joining me in the next dance?” he asked her with a loud voice so all around would hear.

It would be considered most ungracious of her to refuse, and he could see her eyes darting around to see if anyone was listening. Indeed, all ears and eyes were on them, and it pleased him that she would be unlikely to refuse him.

“Of course, Your Grace,” she replied, standing up to take his offered arm.

Celeste sat down in Diana’s vacated seat, and he could see that for once, the young woman had a confident air about her. She did not seem to care that the Ton was looking her way. He too ignored the stares; he was not in the mood to protect Celeste. At that moment, Diana was the only one that mattered to him.

He had chosen this dance for a specific reason; it was a new dance called the Waltz. After hearing lots of gossip about it, he knew that it meant not only holding one another close but also holding each other’s hands.

Before the music began, he asked Diana, “Are you familiar with this latest fashionable dance?”

“I am, Your Grace,” she replied without even looking at him as she held up one arm to hold one of his hands, resting her other arm on his other arm. “Although I do feel it is a dance more appropriate for your intended,” she added, and he could see the sternness in her eyes.

“Has she not enjoyed enough gossip about her for today?” he enquired, raising his brow at her to show that he was aware of it all. “It is our turn now, and besides I would like for you to explain to me why you have been avoiding me?”

Diana did not answer, instead, she waited for the music to begin and then took the relevant steps of the dance.

“I told you that we needed to talk, you and I,” he tried again, whispering near to her ear.

“We have nothing to say to one another, Your Grace,” she replied, though at least she kept her voice low.

“While I realise that you did not wish to wait for my return all those years ago, surely, you did not wipe me from your memory altogether?” he dared himself to ask.

Her shoulders went stiff at his question as if she was annoyed by his words, but he was determined to get some answers.

“You took advantage of my naivety, as well as telling me lies, only then to abandon me,” she said, after a few moments of silence.

He let the words settle into his mind; she had accused him of abandoning her, but he had never done any such thing. Why was she saying that? Was it her excuse in her own mind?

“Abandoned is a strange word to use,” he mumbled, unsure of what she was accusing him of. “I had family duties to perform.”

Again, she remained silent, and he noted that people were looking their way. “It seems that Miss Celeste has stirred a hornet’s nest and all eyes are upon us. My experience of young women, as it was with you, is that they are impatient and immature.”

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace?” Diana spat back at him, pulling a little as if she wanted to part ways. It pleased him that the dance required their heads to be positioned almost side by side, so no others could listen in.

It continued to feel as though she would rip herself from his arms at any moment. Though he knew that she would not do that, and nor did he want her to. Francis knew he had better say something calming. “I am sorry for your loss, Lady Diana,” he expressed, feeling frustrated that he could not have this matter out with her there and then. She seemed to relax a little in his arms, but he felt that he had to have his say. “Yet, how quick you were to take a husband.”

Diana faltered in her steps, and they almost fell apart, but he was quick to save the routine. He knew in his heart that he would always protect Diana, if only she would let him. But this tactic did not seem to be working, they could not talk while everyone looked on at them because of Celeste’s rash behaviour.

“As I have said, Your Grace, we have nothing to discuss. That is unless you wish to talk about your future engagement to Miss Celeste,” she said as he knew that the music was coming to an end.

As it did, he felt reluctant to let her part from him; a part of her pulled away while he still had hold of her hand.

“Marrying Miss Celeste is most convenient for my estate,” he said to her as she met his eyes in defiance. “But it will be a marriage without love, for I will never allow another woman into my heart.”

Francis felt uncomfortable at the shock on her face.

“Miss Celeste does not expect any empty promises from you, Your Grace,” Diana spoke directly to him, looking into his eyes with a wicked stare. “We all understand only too well that you have no love in your heart.”

With that, he let go of her hand, disappointed that she would not soften to him so that they could speak of past events. It seemed that he would never know why she did not wait for him, despite that his father had sent his apologies with an explanation for his delay. The bitterness he had carried around in his heart all these past years was all her fault, yet he could not rid himself of her.

It took all his resolve to leave the dancefloor and ignore the glaring stares. He wanted to be rude to the other guests and tell them to take their gossiping tongues elsewhere. Show them that he cared not a fig about who Miss Celeste had or had not danced with. But that would only give them all too much pleasure, feeding their greedy natures.

Turning his line of sight to follow Diana, he accepted that she had left him in an angry mood. What did she mean when she said that he had no love in his heart? Had he not proved his love for her all those years ago? It was she who had rejected his love and made him into such an uncaring man.

Things will not end like this, he mulled over in his head. I will have an explanation from you, Diana. Do I not deserve that at the very least?

Chapter 26

Diana could not leave the dancefloor fast enough to escape Francis. She was furious that he had forced her into a dance and then had the audacity to accuse her of being impatient and immature.

So angry was she, that she ignored those around her who she knew were watching the Duke with eagle eyes. Once gossip was ignited among the Ton, it had to flare up to a crescendo before it would die back down again.

As she passed by a set of open French doors, she spotted Miss Celeste outside and thought to approach her to see if she might be willing to leave early. Passing through the open doorway, the cooler air hit her senses and she found it refreshing after the heavy heat from indoors.

Glancing around, she wondered where Celeste had disappeared to. The garden was in darkness, other than a few carefully placed candle lamps that gave off little light. Diana spotted Celeste's pink gown as she walked among some trees

not far from the house. What piqued her interest the most was that Celeste was not alone.

“What is that girl up to now?” she muttered, but she knew in the back of her mind that Celeste’s partner in crime would be the handsome young Arthur Pincher.

Debating whether to go and confront the couple, Diana decided to take a short stroll herself. Confusing thoughts whirled around in her head, she needed to be alone and so she walked in the opposite direction of the young couple.

The peaceful setting was very welcoming, with the moon bright enough to light up parts of the garden. At least it was bright enough for her to take advantage of it, and she breathed in the cool, night air, hoping it might clear her head of thoughts on Francis. She headed towards a garden gazebo that she could see was empty of any of the guests.

What a mess this all is. Celeste sneaking off with her lover and me doing nothing about it. What will Henrietta say if she finds out about her sister’s inappropriate behaviour? What will her father say, or even Francis for that matter?

Diana soon found herself in the darkness of the night as the silvery moon became covered with dark clouds, but she did not care. It felt so good to get out of that stuffy ballroom and she needed to clear her thoughts of Francis before she went after Miss Celeste. And what would she find? Did she even want to go after the girl?

“Is that your answer then?” Francis’ voice came to her from nowhere. “To always run away from me when you cannot explain yourself?”

Diana jolted at the shock of his voice breaking through the silence of the night. She turned to face his dark figure readying herself to flee, but his hand grabbed her arm, and he pulled her into the gazebo. Once he had her, he forced her to sit on the wooden seat.

“Damn it, woman! I will have it out with you, whether you like it or not,” he demanded, and she could tell he was gritting his teeth to hold back his anger.

“You risk too much, Your Grace,” she snapped at him as he let go of her hand and stood looming over her. “We would not want to be seen alone in this way.”

“Ah...well there we differ,” he said to her as he began to pace the small area of the wooden structure. “You see, I am a patient man and have waited far too long for this moment alone with you. I must ask you, for the love of God, why you could not have waited for me all those years ago. I have to know, Diana. We were meant to marry, yet you took another man the moment my back was turned. Why?”

“What?” Diana cried out to question him as she stood up, her whole body shaking with anger. “It was you who abandoned me. Without a word, you disappeared from my life. I waited and waited, but still, you never returned. How dare you accuse me of being impatient.”

Francis moved to stand in front of her. As the moon slithered momentarily from behind a cloud, Diana glanced at the puzzled look that marred his handsome features.

“I did not abandon you. I sent word so you would know of my delay,” he told her as they stood so close together, they were almost touching.

“I see that you continue with your lies, as you did when I was naïve and you told me that you loved me,” Diana countered, her mind becoming oblivious to where she was.

“I never lied to you, I did love you, that is why I asked for your hand in marriage, but you could not wait while I was delayed abroad—”

“Abroad? You told me you were going to London,” Diana was quick to cut him off, his words were confusing her. The tension of the moment was making her feel lightheaded, she did not care for such confrontations.

“My father sent me to our plantation, but you know this. He informed you of my delay,” Francis said to her, and she could feel his ragged breath on her cheek as his mouth almost touched her cheek. “I told him all about you and that we would marry upon my return.

“No, Francis, you are telling me lies once again,” Diana panted as she took in a gulp of air and stepped back a little. “I have never even met your father.”

“I do not know what you mean?” he questioned. “He promised me that he would inform you of my delay.”

Francis reached out to hold both of her arms so that she was forced to look at him.

“I was never informed of any delay,” Diana said, panic setting into her mind. “I had no idea you were abroad. I thought...I assumed that you had duped me...used me...and then—”

Before she could take another breath, she felt his warm firm lips press against her mouth. Her mind reeled as she closed her eyes to shut out the world, allowing herself to sink into the warm embrace of her first love.

She was overcome with the memories of her youthful passion for this man. His wet tongue entered her mouth, and she could taste the very essence of Francis Steele. This was the man whose memories she had suppressed throughout her entire marriage to Harry.

But even the memory of Harry did not stop her desire to be with the man before her. His firm hands groped over her dress, stroking at her back until he pulled her into the firmness of his body. She could feel his manhood harden and suddenly she was stuck in time. It felt as if they had been transported back to those summer days when they had made love out in the open air.

It was as though they had never parted ways, and here they were again, embraced with their aching hunger for one another. She knew that each of them craved for the heat of their kiss to boil over, as their lustful embrace aroused them both.

Finally, their lips parted, only for Francis to kiss the exposed skin of her throat. She grabbed his hair in her fists, longing for him to take her. An exquisite pain tingled through her as he bit at the plumpness of her breast, his tongue snaking all over the uncovered skin of her soft mounds.

His strong arms forced her to the seat again, and he lay her backward so that he could press his hard body over hers. He held her tightly so she would not fall, his muscles taught at the strain of holding back on all that he wished to do to her. She knew at that moment that he loved her still. Her first love had never abandoned her, if only she could have waited longer, but her father had forced her into marriage.

“Stop...” she panted, trying to push his hands away as they made their way down to lift her dress. “We...I...cannot...”

He kissed her again and she could not resist the familiar taste of his moist tongue. It was a tongue she knew so well because once...oh so long ago...it had explored every part of her naked body.

“Please...” she panted as their lips parted again. “Francis, you must stop. Please...I beg of you.”

“You beg of me to take you, is that what you beg for, Diana?” he panted, his warm breath in her ear. “You want me inside of you, that is what you really want, is it not, my love?”

“Yes...no...this has to stop,” she said with a louder voice but still she was reluctant to push him away. “We must stop this, and now,” she panted as she struggled to breathe.

How she managed to push him away and stand upright, she had no idea. All she knew was that she had to put a stop to things. If she had not found the strength to stop things, she knew it would go too far. Diana wanted Francis more than anything else in her life. The love of her life was back again, and it was true, she did want him inside of her, but no...it could not be.

Dashing towards the entrance of the gazebo, she turned to look at Francis, who was still seated on the bench. Diana did not want to leave him, she wanted this moment to last an eternity. But she knew that she could not allow herself to become so out of control.

“It is not that I do not love you, Francis,” she said to him, wanting to give him an explanation of why it must stop. “I

have always loved you, Francis Steele, always.”

With that declaration, she turned to run. Once she had left the gazebo, she paused to straighten herself up before returning to the ballroom. But before she set off again, she froze in her tracks as a dark figure materialised before her. The moon was still hidden, making the darkness almost blinding, she had almost bumped into the man.

“My apologies, Sir, I...I did not see you there,” she panted, and she could hear the nervous quivering in her voice.

“Oh, but I could see you, Diana,” a familiar deep voice replied. “Come, Lady Diana, allow me to accompany you out of the darkness. Let us go and share a dance together, shall we?”

Diana was numbed as she permitted the man to lead her toward the dim light of the house. She knew exactly who was escorting her back, and it was the last man on earth who she wished to dance with. Yet, she could not refuse, for she suspected that he may have witnessed her encounter with the Duke. All confidence had escaped her, but she knew exactly what this man wanted of her.

Chapter 27

“May I accompany you back to the house, Lady Diana?” William spoke, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “We do not want you to be ravaged by some lustful duke, now do we?”

Diana could find no voice as she stood transfixed on the spot. Unable to stop him, William escorted her back into the light and they stood on the stone patio, staring at one another like two rabid dogs.

“What do you want, William?” Diana found her voice and spat the words with venom.

“Oh, I am most certain that we can come to some kind of compromise, my Lady,” William replied with a leer.

What surprised Diana the most was how sober he was. This was a man who always seemed to be intoxicated whenever she met with him.

Yet here he is, at a private ball, with not a drop of liquor on his breath. And how did he get an invite, anyway? He's most likely sneaked in, the greasy little...

“I suppose what I mean, Lady Diana, is that I know of your dirty little secret with the Duke of Ashbrook. A duke, I must add, who is meant to be courting the lovely Miss Celeste, who I also happen to know is the sister to your best friend.”

“You know nothing,” Diana barked as she looked him in the eye and noted how they looked almost black in the dim light.

“Oh, but I do, my Lady.” He chuckled. “I heard every word the Duke spoke to you as he ravished your fine body in the garden gazebo. And, might I add, I happen to know much about Miss Celeste's father too. For I made it my business to find out all I could about you and your sordid little affair with her intended. You see, I first suspected it at the opera, would you believe, when I spotted you both seated alone in your private little box.”

“As always, nothing but filth comes from your mouth because that is how your mind works,” Diana replied, her hands shaking as she tried to act bravely.

“Filth, you say? Hahaha...I am not the one trying to hide dirty little kisses, am I? Fear not, my Lady. I will only ask for what is rightly mine. I want nothing of yours because it was never yours in the first place,” he said, turning his back on her. “What I will have though, is the next dance. It will give us the opportunity to talk, you and I. You are, after all, my aunt, are you not?”

She knew she could not refuse him, but her temper was almost at a boiling point. Diana did not like the man, and even worse, she was afraid of him. He seemed even more sordid when he was sober than the snivelling idiot he was when he was drunk.

They entered the house, and he led her toward the dancefloor. She took her place by his side and was soon swept away in the steps of the dance. Every ounce of her being wanted to scream out for help. But who would come to her aid?

“Your Duke is eyeing us up,” William remarked as they met up to perform the dance routine.

Diana purposely did not follow his eyes, for she did not want to see the look of confusion on Francis’ face. As the music ended, she felt relieved she would be rid of her late husband’s nephew, but still, he lingered close to her.

“You will spend the rest of the ball with me, Lady Diana. That way, I can go through the tale of all that I know,” he said, leaning in close to her ear as he guided her away from the dancefloor.

“Come, we will take our seats in the comfort of those armchairs around that table over there. Normally I would leave such seats vacant for the married women to rest their old bodies, oh...but then you come under that category, do you not?”

Diana shook her arm to try and loosen his grip on her, but he dug his fingers deep into her pale skin. She could feel a sharp burning sensation where his fingers touched her.

“Now that we are settled,” he said across the small table. “I will tell you a story that I have heard of recently. It begins with a duke, as these sordid little tales often do.”

Diana sat with her back upright and her body rigid. She could not see Miss Celeste nor Francis anywhere. It felt as if she was in a room full of strangers that kept glancing her way to throw her their devilish stares.

Of course, they would blame her for Miss Celeste’s indiscretions, as she was the girl’s chaperone. Yet there she sat, daring to dilly-dally with some young man. Yes, that is what they would all think of her in their evil judgment of her behaviour.

“This duke I refer to, well, he agreed with an earl, and a very respectable one I must add, that he would marry the said earl’s youngest daughter. What the earl did not know though, was that the duke was having an affair with another earl’s wife... ha, ha, ha...what do you think of that then?”

“It is a lie! All you have done is twist the truth of things,” Diana snarled, wishing she could get up and run. Where to she did not know, but anywhere away from William would do.

“Ah...but here’s the thing, it does not matter about the truth.” William smiled back at her. “You see, it only takes a few words in the right ears, and scandal will be afoot. Let’s not forget the doings of Miss Celeste too. Yes, I know about that as well.”

“What do you know, you low-life piece of—”

“Now, now, Lady Diane,” William said, wagging his finger at her. “It will not do to have a lady of your standing speaking like a whore, will it?”

“You will not drag Miss Celeste into your dirty little bag of tricks, do you hear me?” Diana hissed the words as she leaned over the table to look into his face.

“But she is out there as we speak. The woman is wrapping her arms around a man who is not her intended,” he said as he looked back at her with a growing sternness in his eyes. “What’s more, her intended is out there wrapping his arms around an older woman no less. What do you think the fine ladies and gentlemen of the ton would make of that story?”

Diana’s heart thudded hard and fast in her chest. Her stomach churned with acid as if she would vomit at any moment. It took great determination to stop herself from standing up and lashing out at the man seated in the chair opposite her.

What a fool I have been to let all this get so out of control, she told herself.

“What is it then, William? What is it that you want to get your grubby little hands upon?” she asked him.

“I have always thought I had quite nice hands,” he said, looking at his hands in an exaggerated manner as if he was hurt by her insult. “Nonetheless, you are very perceptive. There is only one thing that you and I have in common, and that is my uncle’s inheritance. I am of his blood,” he said through gritted teeth. “And you, well...if only he had known

that you are a whore who tries to steal other women's husbands."

Diana knew that had she not been seated in a chair; she might very well have fainted on the spot. She could not take much more of this conversation, she had to find a way to end it.

"Yes, I can see that this has all come as a bit of a shock to you, my sweet Diana," William began again.

"Do not dare call me that!" Diana cried out, maybe a little too loud as a group of chattering older women turned to look their way.

"But that is what you are to me now, a sweet honeypot of money," William said, giving her another of his ugly grins. I tell you what, Diana," he added and then paused as he smiled over at her.

“For tonight, I will let you go back to your sordid little life. But tomorrow, know that I will be knocking on your doorstep to collect what is mine. Oh, that is unless you would prefer me to spread the scandalous gossip?”

With his final words, he stood up, straightened his jacket, and walked away. Diana watched his back as he did so, but then he stopped and turned to look back at her, giving her a little wave with a pathetic smile.

Diana was glad that he had gone, but she found herself unable to move. That cretin of a nephew of her late husband's was blackmailing her, and she could do nothing about it. Never could she allow the truth to come out that she and Francis were once lovers.

Nor could she allow any further gossip to circulate over Celeste and the mystery man who she kept dancing with at tonight's ball. For that was what they were saying, and no one seemed to know who he was.

Of course, she knew who he was. And because of her own first love, she sympathised with Celeste and the ridiculous situation she had found herself in. Her marriage to the Duke would be a

farce, neither of them was fond of the other. What a mess; Celeste loved Arthur Pincher, she still loved Francis and he still loved her.

This would be the talk of the town for months to come if it got out. Not that she cared if others talked about her, and she felt sure that Francis did not care much either. But what of poor Celeste?

All the girl was guilty of, was falling in love with a man her father did not approve of. Why could Henrietta not have talked her father into accepting Arthur?

It was time to go and find Celeste and get the hell out of this place. She would not acknowledge Francis if she happened upon him because she could not encourage him a moment longer. He had to come to his senses and accept his responsibilities, as she had done all those years ago. Francis must be forced to make a good husband for Celeste; despite that, they were not in love. He would be kind to her, as her own husband had been to her.

Standing up, she gripped the edge of the table to steady herself. With weak, shaky legs, she began to walk through the

crowds to find her charge. When she did, Celeste was just leaving the dancefloor with Arthur. Diana gave the girl a stern look and that was all it needed. She should have done it earlier in the evening, but she had so wanted Celeste to enjoy the ball. Now, look where that had got her!

“We must depart, Miss Celeste,” she said with an unyielding tone to make sure that the girl did not try to object.

Though the look on the girl’s face indicated that she knew all too well her mischief was over. Diana watched as Arthur squeezed her hand. Diana led Celeste to the main door and Arthur followed from a distance. The murmur of a low buzz hit Diana’s senses—oh yes, the ladies were a gossiping!

Once in the carriage, Celeste tried to apologise but Diana raised her hand to stop her.

“We will speak no more of this night, Celeste,” she told her. “We have allowed enough of a stir and will indeed pay for it tomorrow. For tonight, we must sleep and build up our strength for what is to come.”

Celeste seemed to accept her advice as she sat back and said nothing in reply.

When Diana's head hit finally lay on her pillow, she thought not of Celeste's tomfoolery, nor William's threats. Her only thoughts were of Francis and the touch of his skin, the feel of his body, the delight of his kiss. Tomorrow would come all too soon enough, but tonight she was determined to dream of her first love once again.

Chapter 28

Diana was beginning to regret agreeing to come to London, but Henrietta had talked her into it, saying it may be her last season for a while. And then poor Henrietta had ended up spending most of her time in her bed, while Diana seemed to jump from one disaster to another.

Diana had lain awake most of the night once she had finally climbed into her bed. Her thoughts jumped from that precious, soft kiss with Francis, to the horrendous dance she had had with William. Would William go through with his blackmail threat? Even worse, was he going to start turning up on her doorstep demanding money all the time?

The thought of that was enough to make her feel ill and she could not face breakfast that morning. How could she eat with such a threat lingering over her head? She could go to no one for help because then she would have to admit that she had given in to Francis' charms. If she went to Henrietta, she would have to tell her about her sister's liaison at the ball with her lover, Arthur Pincher. It was Celeste's secret to share with her sister, not hers.

Pacing around her bedroom chamber that morning, a light knock came at the door. It was Hobbs, the butler who she had brought to London with her.

“My Lady, a letter has arrived for you,” he informed her, holding out a silver tray with the letter resting upon it. “It came very early this morning, but as you did not come down for breakfast, I thought I had better deliver to you in your room.”

Diana went to the tray and picked up the letter. “Thank you, Hobbs.”

He bowed his head before she closed the door on him.

The letter did not have a family seal on it and she did not recognise the handwriting, though it was quite untidy. Opening it, she read the words. As she did so, she felt a heavy weight in the pit of her stomach.

Diana

It was charming to dance with you at the ball last night. See how generous I have been giving you the entire night to think all about our little discussion. It seems I am far more kind-hearted than you have ever been to me. But we both know that attitude is to stop.

I am not a greedy man and know that we must do this in small stages, to begin with. I will expect a deposit of £500 in cash to be delivered to me at Brooke's Gentleman's Club at noon tomorrow, on the dot. Make sure it is not delivered late, you do not want me to loosen my tongue among the nobility, do you?

Until next time, which I assure you will be soon.

William

Diana did not know if she was more angry or more scared because she felt both of those feelings, and more besides.

Leaving her room, she walked down the corridor to knock on Martha's door.

"My dear Diana, are you quite well?" her companion asked.
"You look ill. Do come in and have a seat by the window, it is quite a lovely view."

Diana sat in the chair opposite Martha, and on the small table between them stood a China tea set.

"Here my dear, have some warm tea," Martha said as she passed Diana a dainty China cup and saucer.

Diana passed the letter to her and watched her face as she read it.

"Whatever does it mean?" Martha asked, looking up in shock.
"What does that little toad mean by *loosening his tongue*? About what?"

“I have been such a fool, Martha,” Diana admitted, leaning back into her chair and raising her chin to look up at the ceiling as she fretted.

“Tell me everything that is happened,” Martha said, encouraging her to talk. “And then we will resolve it between us.”

Diana reached over to take Martha’s hand. “Once again I say, whatever would I do without you in my life?”

“I am waiting...” Martha said, raising her brows.

“It all happened at the ball last night,” Diana began her confession. This was the one person who she knew she could trust with her story, and she went on to reveal all that had passed.

“And that dirty, good-for-nothing nephew was there to witness the whole thing?” Martha asked, even though she knew the answer. “I never liked him; he should have been drowned at birth if you ask me.”

Diana smiled half-heartedly as she rubbed her eyes with the stress.

“For now, you can do nothing but comply,” Martha advised. “But have the delivery arranged through your family solicitor’s office. You must not deal with this alone, Diana. The more who are aware of any exchange of money, the better.”

Diana nodded her head in agreement. “That sounds like good advice. He has me trapped for now, but I need to think of some way to put an end to this blackmail.”

“Such a dirty word, do not you think? Blackmail?” Martha noted as she poured another cup of tea for herself.

“The word scandal is even worse,” Diana said with a heavy heart. “Henrietta cannot know how her sister behaved at the ball. She’s unlikely to be aware of the gossip circulating, so I am hopeful that she will not find out. But even more, Celeste’s father cannot know of his daughter’s conduct. He would most certainly blame me and force them both to leave my home.”

“Shall I come on the errand to the solicitors with you?” Martha asked.

Diana shook her head. “No, for now, I will deal with this alone. It is enough that you give me council. I was desperate to share this terrible dilemma and I know I can trust you to be discreet.”

“I only wish I could think of a way out of it immediately,” Martha said, sounding angry. “But rest assured, I will think of something to end that man’s run of luck.”

“And of Francis, promise me you will say nothing?” Diana asked, changing the subject to another of her problems.

Martha did not reply straight away, and Diana could sense that her companion was thinking over the details she had given her.

“I am of the opinion that his father chose purposely not to inform you of his delay. Your family would not have been to his liking,” Martha said, not blunting the blow in any way. “I do believe Francis’ version of events, and it seems to me that the whole relationship was something of a tragedy.”

“If only I had known at the time, Martha,” Diana said with a pleading tone. “How things would have been so very different.”

“I am a great believer in fate, and it was meant to be, or it would not have happened,” Martha told her.

“What I find most worrying now, Martha, is that Celeste is being forced into a loveless marriage,” Diana stressed. “I know that eventually, she will learn to love the Duke, but it will break her heart to be torn apart from Arthur forever. True love never dies.”

Martha sighed and said, “Not forgetting the fact that the Duke is still in love with you. He should tell poor Celeste that he will not be announcing the engagement. You must speak with him, my dear. If not for yourself, then at least for Celeste’s happiness.”

* * *

Diana entered the solicitor’s office to speak with a representative of her solicitor back in Sheffield. She knew it was safe to carry out the transaction for now, but her own solicitor was not here to ask her any questions. He would be sure to visit her once she returned to the estate because he would learn of the large withdrawal.

Mr Jessop had been a very good friend of her late husband’s, and he was very protective towards her because of this. She was fond of the old man too and often invited him over to dinner. He had never married because he had been dedicated to his work. Although he never admitted it, she often thought him lonely, which was a shame for he was a very kind character.

She explained to the clerk exactly what she wanted, and he nodded as he wrote all the details down.

“Can you come in the office tomorrow to sign the agreement for the withdrawal of such a large sum of money, Lady Diana?” the young clerk asked of her.

“Of course, but do not delay the delivery. It must arrive at the club for noon exactly, that is a most crucial detail,” she stressed to the young man.

“We should not really send out the money without your signature, Lady Diana, but I tell you what I will do,” he said with a smile. “I know that the Earl’s family are long-serving customers of this company, so I will arrange for the delivery of the money myself. I will also arrange for the papers to be delivered to your home for signing. That way you need not trouble yourself with a trip to this office again.”

“That would be most helpful, thank you,” Diana said, standing up and ready to leave the office.

“We are here only to serve our clients, and you, Lady Diana, are a most respected one,” he smiled as he went to open the door for her.

Leaving the building she was met by a chilly rainfall. She had not come to the solicitor’s office in her own carriage as she did not want anyone to know she had gone there. And in the rain, it would be hard to call out for a hire carriage. As she stood getting wet, someone tapped her on the shoulder, and she turned around sharply, dreading who it might be.

“This is a most fortunate meeting,” Francis said as he looked at her with a huge, lopsided grin. “What are you doing out in this weather?”

“I...I had an errand to run and did not bring my carriage,” she replied as water dripped from her bonnet.

“Come, I have mine,” he said, turning her around to face an open carriage door. “At least let me save you from this dreary weather.”

Without giving it much thought, she entered the carriage, her main aim was to get out of the cold, wet rain.

Francis did not get inside with her, to begin with; he went to speak with his driver. As he climbed into the carriage moments later, he explained to Diana that he had ordered his driver to park the carriage up in a secluded spot. He wanted but a moment of her time so that they could talk in private.

Diana was shocked at this but said nothing as she shook the rain from the bonnet she had taken off.

“I doubt we have that much to say to one another, Your Grace,” she said, concerned they might be seen alone. “Do please cancel your order with your driver.”

“We must talk in private, Diana,” he pleaded with her. “I cannot marry the young Miss Celeste knowing that you are single too.”

“You must keep to your promise, Your Grace,” she said in shock at his revelation. “Do you know how embarrassing it will be for poor Miss Celeste?”

“See, this is why we need to talk. We will wait until the carriage stops and then we will have all the privacy we need.” He shrugged back at her.

Diana knew he was right, they did need to talk, and she could not allow him to do what he was threatening. Her troubles were getting more serious with every passing hour.

Chapter 29

Neither Diana nor Francis spoke a word to one another while the carriage rocked them in a rhythmic motion. As the vehicle came to a stop, Francis got out and thanked his driver for finding a pleasant place by the riverside. He instructed his driver to walk back into town and return in a couple of hours, paying him a handful of coins so he could enjoy the unexpected break.

Climbing back into the carriage, he spoke with a soft voice, “We now have privacy to talk this thing out,” he said, sitting down opposite Diana.

She nodded in agreement, saying, “This is the last time we can meet, Francis. I must make that clear to you.”

He said nothing, but he could see the pain on her face as her voice quivered. She was trying to hold back her tears and he admired her for that.

“I have thought about the last time we spoke,” he said, speaking with gentleness in his voice. All he wanted to do was protect her and take away her pain. “Truly, Diana, I had no idea that my father had not come to you to explain my delay.”

“What does it matter now, Francis?” Diana replied, taking off her gloves. “We cannot change what has already happened. But I will tell you that it broke my heart when I heard nothing. I did love you, Francis, but it was not meant to be.”

“Then why does my heart still pine for you?” he asked, leaning over, and taking hold of her hand.

It pleased him that she did not pull away, but she would not relax as she spoke. “You are committed to Miss Celeste, and we must not hold on to memories that no longer mean anything.”

Holding her hand in both of his, he stroked at her delicate fingers and then kissed them. “How I have longed to touch you, Diana.”

With that remark, she pulled away, “There is no room for our love anymore. For the sake of your estate and poor Miss Celeste’s honour, we will never meet alone again.”

“But when I am with you, I am whole again,” he pleaded, hoping she might feel the same way.

Yet she resisted him, so it could only mean that she did not feel the same, and why should she? The truth was that she had bedded another man for years, easily putting any memories of him aside.

Unexpectedly, he felt her other hand stroke his cheek and he turned his face to kiss it. “I cannot lose you again, my sweet Diana. Please tell me that you feel the same?”

They stared into one another’s eyes, and he knew there and then that her love for him was still strong.

“I am so very sorry for the pain I cause you now,” she said, her eyes glistening in the semi-darkness of the curtained carriage. “I too felt that pain, when you did not return. I felt betrayed, that you had used my body for your pleasure and then cast me aside.”

“No, no! I would never do that to you, Diana, never!” he said with urgency, taking both her hands in his.

“I would not have married the Earl, but my father worried I might be with child. He forced me to marry straight away,” she explained. “I was not with child, but I had no fight left in me when I thought you had rejected me.”

“I would never reject you, my love,” Francis spoke the truth. “I want nothing more than to take you for my wife and drop this silly charade with the young Miss Celeste.”

“You cannot do that, Francis, it would cause her more harm than good,” Diana said as she gave him a small smile.

“It breaks my heart into little pieces, the thought of you being forced into a marriage,” he said, moving to kneel on the floor in front of her.

“The Earl was a good husband, and I was happy for a while,” she answered, her lips quivering as she spoke.

It was difficult to resist her, he could smell her familiar perfume, and it was exactly the same as when she had slept by his side all those years ago. Placing his hand on the back of her head, he could no longer stop himself as he leaned in to kiss her.

His lips met hers and he felt a warmth that reminded him how much he loved this woman. She responded, instead of pushing him away; and he felt a deep satisfaction that, at last, he had her in his arms where she belonged.

The kiss did not last long before she gave him a gentle push. “No, Francis, we cannot do this,” she panted.

He wanted to ask her why not but as he looked upon her soft face, he lost all control of his desires. Taking her head in his hands again, he pulled her towards him for a more lustful kiss. This time he had to taste her, probing his tongue into her mouth. At the same time, his hands roamed freely over her dress, pressing on her breasts, and squeezing her shoulders to pull her ever closer.

“I will not let you go, Diana,” it was his turn to pant as he forced himself to pull away from her. “I need you. I will always need you. I beg you, please do not push me away.”

“But Miss Celeste and—”

“You know perfectly well that neither of us wants to commit to that marriage,” he said, still holding her face and staring into her shimmering eyes.

“And I want you too, Francis. I thought it only a dream that I would ever be with you again,” she said with such sadness in her eyes that he could take no more of it. Leaning in, he tasted her yet again with another kiss.

His hands roamed all over her dress, and he could feel the heat of her shapely legs underneath the fabric. It was easy from his kneeling position, to slide his hand up the bottom of her dress and feel that warmth on her silky thighs. Oh, what magic was underneath that dress!

What delights he wanted to play with, and how wonderful she responded. Francis could not resist grabbing the heated mound between her legs in the palm of his hand. It felt so plump and hot, he had to have more of it.

Slipping his fingers underneath the hem of her underclothes, his fingers were soon entangled in the soft hairs of her quim. There, he was met with the wetness of her womanhood, and he slipped a finger into the delicate, wet folds. She wriggled underneath his weight as he leaned over her body, but she remained laying on the cushioned bench seat.

Francis pressed his face into the fabric of her dress. He inhaled her perfumed breasts, wishing he could get at them and bury his face in their soft plumpness. She moaned as his deft fingers danced in the mound between her legs. His fingers soon found her nodule, and he knew he could delight her if he rubbed at it.

He wanted to savour the moment when she was at his mercy. With one hand working at her pussy, his other worked on the buttons of her overcoat. All the while, he relished the taste of her tongue and lips as he nibbled at her mouth.

He felt her ragged breath on his face as she whimpered again, sending a wildness through him that caused him to lose all sense of control. How he would love to rip off her clothes and bury his aching dick inside her wet folds so he could ride her hard, but that was impossible in a carriage.

Instead, he would take what he could, and his mouth found her throat. Licking at her exposed skin, his fingers now probed into her vagina, it was wet and lush with the sweet nectar of a woman.

“Oh, Francis, you must stop—” she panted, but he could not stop, he wanted her, all of her, or part of her, whatever he

could take.

As he pushed a couple of fingers into her wet quim, her thighs rose to meet his hand and he began the regular rhythm of sex. It was clear to Francis that she was loving it. Diana made love to his fingers as her hand squeezed his manhood through his trousers. His thumb brushed over her clitoris, causing her to cry out with a passion, while his teeth nibbled at any naked skin he could find along her breasts.

She began to grind down on his fingers and he slipped another one into her wetness. It was not exactly how he wanted it to go, but she was turning him wild with her passions. His first love had returned to his arms and accepted his desires for her. He would bring her body to a climatic crescendo if it was the last thing he ever did with her.

Francis matched the rhythm of her hips with his hand. His fingers slid through the welcome folds of her quim. Splaying three fingers, he hoped she might feel as if she was full with his prick. Her moans increased with the speed that he thrust his rigid fingers inside of her. At last, she shuddered with a climax, and he bit down on her breast as she cried out.

“Take me, Francis, please, take me!” she cried out, and he could feel her muscles spasm inside her.

She was there, reaching the orgasm that he had wanted to give her. All he ever wanted was to pleasure this woman, who he loved with his every being.

Her body slumped and she went quiet as he pulled out his fingers. First from the heat of her sticky wetness, and then from her petticoat. Finally, his hands came out of the bottom of the dress that he had dared to lift so that he could enter her womanly parts.

All the while, he gave her soft kisses on her delicate throat, so that she would know of his love.

“You are mine, my love,” he whispered. “I want no one but you.”

She pressed her lips onto his and they enjoyed the last of a parting kiss. But as she sat up, she would not look at him.

“How very different things would have been for us had my father carried out his promise to speak with you,” he told her. Then he returned to the seat opposite her, while she straightened out her clothes.

“But we cannot be together, Francis, you must accept this,” she replied, finally looking at him. “We must promise never to do anything like that ever again.

“I cannot make that promise, Diana,” he said, and she sighed as she leaned back and closed her eyes.

“I cannot resist the temptation you put before me, so you must promise to stay away from me,” she said, making a point of not looking him in the eye. “Promise me, Francis?”

“I promise that I will not do anything immediately with regard to Miss Celeste. But I cannot promise that I will not desire to touch you,” he said, taking her hand once again. “I love you, Diana, I always have. Why do you think I went to sea? It was the only way to push all thoughts of you aside. But the moment I saw you again, it was like we had never parted.”

“This is no longer about us, Francis,” she snapped, now looking at him with determination. “It is about family and honour.”

“As I said,” he stopped to kiss the back of her hand. “I promise not to do anything rash, but only because I want to give you time to think about us. And I need time to come up with a solution to our problem.”

“You cannot know what pain I go through in trying to resist you, Francis,” she admitted, and he could see the worry in the lines on her face.

“I will find a way for us to be together—” he began.

“No, Francis, this is over. Do you understand? It will never happen again,” she said, her eyes fixated on the floor. “Now please, find your driver and take me home.”

Chapter 30

Celeste saw Lady Diana leaving the house in the afternoon and took it as a perfect opportunity to get away herself. She snuck out of a back door and made her way through the garden, rather than walking up the long driveway where she might be seen. It surprised her when she passed through the large gates only to spot Lady Diana getting into a hire carriage; why was she not using her own?

Thinking no more of it, for she had more important things on her mind, and soon waved down a hire carriage for herself. Once she knew Lady Diana had gone, she felt certain no one would learn of her absence. Her carriage was to take her to a poorer part of the London district, where she would then make a visit to a very special man.

It pulled outside a tall row of London townhouses, owned mainly by merchants and respectable people, but it was not the wealthy area she was used to. Not that it bothered Celeste, she only wanted to be with her man. Paying the driver, she ran up some stone steps of one of the houses, wanting to get into it as fast as her legs would take her.

The house she had chosen belonged to Mrs Woodkirk, who was the landlady of a respectful bed and breakfast establishment.

Celeste knocked on the front door and did not have long to wait before Mrs Woodkirk answered. The old lady recognised her straight away, giving her a smile.

“Ah, Miss Celeste, come in my dear,” she greeted her. “Arthur’s up in his room, take yourself up there and give him a well needed break from his paintings.”

“Thank you, Mrs Woodkirk, this is a surprise visit for him, so I was praying that he was in,” Celeste said excitedly as she scrambled up the stairs.

“Oh my...the wonders of young love,” she heard the old lady laugh as she made her way back into her own room on the ground level.

When Celeste tapped on Arthur's door, it opened up and she was pleased to see his face light up as he saw her. Grabbing her into his arms, he swung her around as she entered his room.

"This is a wonderful surprise, how on Earth did you manage to escape?" he asked, giving her a welcoming kiss.

"When I saw Lady Diana going out, I took my chances that I will not be missed, and here I am," she sang out, spreading out her arms to emphasise her presence.

"And glad I am to see you, my love," Arthur said, carrying her to lay her onto the unmade bed.

He did not have a large room, so the bed was always the best place to sit anyway. Most of the other space was taken up with his trestles of artwork.

“What are you working on today?” she asked him, seeing his hands covered in paint, which was not unusual.

“I have received a rather unexpected invitation to submit one of my pieces to an art gallery in Bath,” he informed her.

“Oh, Arthur, that is wonderful,” Celeste said in surprise, kissing him again to celebrate such good news. She was well aware that he had been trying to get an art gallery interested in his work for years.

“Do not get too excited, they have not accepted to showcase my piece yet,” he warned her as he returned her kiss.

“But they will, I know it.” She giggled. “Shall we do a little more on our own art piece?” she continued to laugh as she started to strip off her clothes.

“Can we not have fun first?” Arthur asked, helping her to undress. “And then we can get down to business later.”

“What will you do with my nude painting?” she asked.

“Well, I can hardly showcase it, can I?” he said, kissing the bare skin on her throat and breasts. “What if one of your parents were to see it hanging in a gallery?”

“Then they would know that their daughter is a free thinker,” she replied. Arthur’s tongue licked at her breasts, and she let out a moan at all the lavish attention.

“You are a sweet little liar. You know that you would never want anything like that to happen, so now I am going to have to punish you.” He grinned as he took her nipple between his teeth. Though he did it with gentleness.

“Stop that, it tickles.”

She giggled but he ignored her pleas. Instead, he used his knee to force her legs apart. Without further ado, he quickly entered her already moist quim, and was soon thrusting in and out as they both savoured the sensations. Celeste's giggling was soon to be replaced by her wanton whimpering as her lover fucked her relentlessly. It did not take long before they both reached a mutual climax as their bodies writhed around on the bed.

Within a couple of hours of arriving, Celeste was lying across the bed naked, while Arthur painted her. It was something the couple had been doing for a while now. The painting would join Arthur's private portfolio, along with all the other paintings he had done of her.

“Have you thought any more about my suggestion yet?” Arthur asked her as used his brush to stroke the canvas with colour.

“Hmmm...I want to do it, and a part of me says it will work,” she replied. “But if I approach the Duke and tell him that I do not wish to marry him, he may tell my parents, and then where would I be? Besides, I do like him you know.”

“And so you should,” Arthur said, not showing the least bit of jealousy for he was truly, madly, and deeply in love with the woman he was painting. “I hear that he’s a very decent kind of chap.”

“Yes, I do believe that he is. What worries me is where will it get us if we elope. We have no money,” Celeste complained.

“Which is why I told you to tell the Duke the truth, that you are in love with another man, and that you wish to elope with him. When he knows, he might offer his help,” Arthur said, but his model had started to get too fidgety to continue his painting. “How many times do I have to tell you, keep still while I am painting you.”

“We cannot accept any financial help from him, Arthur. It would not be right,” she said, jumping up from the bed and grabbing for her underwear.

“Why not? He has plenty of wealth and we have none,” Arthur said, and Celeste could see that he was annoyed with her. They often had this same argument, and they could never agree on an end to it.

“How would we ever pay him back?” she asked, continuing to put the rest of her clothes back on again.

“I’ve told you. I have a piece of art that I am sure the gallery will display in Bath. It will not take long to sell it, not in such a distinguished place,” Arthur insisted.

“But I do not wish to borrow money, not from the man I am about to refuse to marry,” she argued.

“It seems to me that your pride is more important than our love,” Arthur accused, slamming down his artist’s palette. “I thought you wanted us to marry?”

“I do, Arthur, but can we not wait until the painting sells first?” she pleaded.

“No, Celeste, because it means that you will still have to keep pretending to the Duke,” Arthur yelled, for the whole situation upset him. “Do you know what all this is doing to me? Knowing that he thinks you will be his wife. You must tell him before he announces the engagement.”

“It is not you who has to tell him, and I have told you that I am afraid to, in case he goes to my parents,” Celeste snapped back.

“If you are not willing to do it, Celeste, then I suggest that we stop seeing each other like this,” he said, giving her an ultimatum.

“What are you saying? How dare you threaten me in this way!” Celeste cried out, not meaning to speak with a loud voice but he was forcing her to do something that she feared to carry out.

“I do not think that I can take this much longer...in fact, I cannot and will not!” Arthur cried out to her, his voice even louder than hers.

“Very well!” she called back as she rushed to the door. “Then you will never see me at your door ever again!” With that, she slammed the door shut behind herself, and ran down the steep steps.

At the bottom of the stairs, Mrs Woodkirk was standing, looking up them. “Whatever is all that noise?” she asked.

“I apologise, Mrs Woodkirk, but do not worry, you will never see me again.” With those words, Celeste let herself out of the house and ran down the stone steps to wave down a hire carriage. The sooner she got away from there, the better.

The whole relationship was fraught with danger, and she too had had enough of it. She was angry and disappointed with her lover. He was meant to love her...well...if he did, he would not be giving her ultimatums.

Sitting in the carriage, she felt her eyes welling up with tears. She was devastated at how such a wonderful visit could end so badly. All she wanted was to marry the man she loved, but no one would let her.

Soon, the carriage pulled into the gates of Lady Diana's home, and Celeste did not care if she was seen returning.

"How could he make such demands of me?" she mumbled to herself, feeling lost that she might never see him again.

The carriage pulled up outside the main door and she jumped out and paid the driver. No one was around, but she supposed someone might have seen her through a window. No matter, she did not care.

Holding onto her tears, she had only one destination in mind, and that was to go and visit her sister. It was time to ask if they could return to their home in Sheffield. She had had enough of London, and she wanted to get away so very desperately. She might even tell Henrietta why she wanted to leave.

It would not be easy admitting that she had been visiting Arthur all this time, but it should please their parents. By leaving Arthur behind, it would at least mean that she was free to marry the Duke now.

Not that she wanted to marry the Duke, with or without Arthur, but she was so very confused. Arthur had never shouted at her before. He was always such a gentle person and a most kindly lover. What had got into him today, she did not know.

It had taken its toll on him, ever since she had told him about marrying the Duke. He had been distraught by the news and had promised he would find the money for them to elope. But an artist did not get paid for his work, not until he had sold it, or if he gained a commission.

What will I do? she cried out in her mind as she entered the big house. Finally, she threw the bedroom door open of her sister's room and ran to throw herself on the bed. Henrietta embraced her into her bed and squeezed her tightly.

“Whatever has happened to you, Celeste?” Henrietta asked, shocked to see her little sister in such a shattered state.

“Please, Henrietta, can we go home? I hate London, I hate it so very much...”

Chapter 31

What a fool I am for allowing that to happen, Diana fretted as she paced her room the next morning. The lovemaking session with Francis had thrown her off balance, and the guilt weighed heavy on her shoulders. *I had better go to breakfast or they might begin to suspect that I am not my normal self.*

She had not slept well that night, knowing how easily she had allowed Francis to slip back into her life. It was a terrible conundrum, and she dare not even admit her loose behaviour to Martha. Though she knew her companion would pick up on her demeanour and no doubt she would confess all to her sooner or later.

“For now, I must act as if nothing has happened,” she told herself, but she was not too convinced she could do it much longer. “Concentrate on being a good hostess to your friends, Diana, and all will be well...or at least I hope it will be.”

Diana made an effort to go down to the dining room for breakfast. There, she found Martha and Miss Celeste, but she

was also in for a surprise. As she entered the room, she spotted Henrietta seated at the table too.

“Ah, Diana, at last,” Henrietta greeted her from the table. “You sleep longer than I do, and you have no excuse.”

Diana paused for a moment, feeling as if everyone around the table knew her dirty little secret. As she pulled her thoughts together, she went to the buffet-style breakfast and filled a plate with eggs and fresh bread.

“Goodness, had I known you were up and about, I would have come down sooner,” Diana remarked with a smile. She also leaned in to kiss Henrietta’s cheek in greeting. “You look positively radiant, and it is so good to see you eating once again.”

“I do feel wonderful,” Henrietta said as she spread jam over a chunk of bread. “It is all thanks to you, for taking the reins of my responsibilities, and hosting us so graciously. I am positively famished and cannot stop eating now that I have started. That wonderful doctor tells me that my body is getting ready to give me strength for the birth.”

Diana looked over at Trevor who also wore a large grin. “Are you two in cahoots over something?” Diana asked, taking a forkful of scrambled eggs.

“Indeed, we are,” Henrietta announced, throwing her hands up in the air. “You have found us out, for we are planning to return to Sheffield for the birth of this little one,” she announced, rubbing at the bump in her belly.

Diana was a little shocked at the revelation, she had not given much thought to where the baby would be born. “Are you sure that you are up to such a long journey?”

“I asked the same question,” Trevor spoke up, attempting to hide his concerns. “But you, more than anyone, know my wife and her mysterious ways. She is determined to have the baby where she too was born.”

Diana then glanced at Miss Celeste, who was being very quiet over the odd announcement. “And you, Celeste, what will you do?”

“I want to be with my sister when the baby is born,” Celeste was next to speak up, though she seemed to be avoiding Diana’s eyes. “It is only right that the child’s aunt is present.”

Diana happened to glance Martha’s way, and her companion raised her eyebrows back at her. She then went on to suggest, “It might be a good idea for us to return home too, do you not agree, Diana?”

Diana lowered her chin in intrigue, raising her brows back at Martha because she was sure her companion suspected something.

“Ah, a conspiracy is afoot, is it?” she said with a seriousness that had the others around the table looking worried. “We will not return home yet, Martha. We will travel to Sheffield for the birth, for I cannot miss it.” She laughed. Seeing the surprised look on Martha’s face, she clapped her hands together in joy at the thought of running away from the messy business of London.

Diana's home was no longer in Sheffield as the Earl had lived in Kent. This would make her a guest of Henrietta's, but she too wanted to be present at the birth of her friend's child.

"Excellent! Then it is agreed that you and Martha will come to stay with us. We can repay your kindness for hosting us in London," Henrietta said with a huge grin because that was exactly what she had wanted. "I want all my loved ones around me, to greet our baby into the world."

"Then we had better not waste much more time because we do not have time on our side," Trevor said as he stood up. "Might I also suggest that we set off tomorrow? Can everyone be ready so soon?"

As far as Diana was concerned, the sooner the better and she agree that she and Martha would indeed be ready to travel. There was much-excited chatter around the breakfast table that morning with everyone excited for the events before them. By the afternoon, Diana and Martha were once again organising the packing of their clothes.

“It will give you a little light relief, Diana,” Martha commented as they were alone in Martha’s room. Diana had left her lady’s maid to finish off her packing. “Because you have the look of mischief about you. I do not know what you have been up to, but I can guess it involves Lord Francis. Anyway, how did the solicitor’s meeting go?”

It always surprised Diana how Martha seemed to know her every move. But now was not the right time to be sharing her darkest secrets. “Everything went well. I received the documents this morning to authorise the withdrawal of money,” Diana informed her.

“Though I do not wish to think about William and his crude antics at this happiest of times. I will seek better advice when we return home, but for now, I wish to enjoy the birth of a baby and nothing else.”

* * *

The journey was a long and tedious one, but luckily for the three coaches they had hired between them, the roads were dry and clear. Each day a fresh set of horses took them around thirty miles by midday. Once all three carriages had swapped horses, they all continued for another thirty miles.

Trevor had instructed the carriages not to rush the journey, due to his wife's condition. Of the five days that it took them to complete the journey, one of the days was spent resting around halfway, with friends of Diana's at Skeffington Hall.

When finally, they arrived at Woodberry Hall in Sheffield, Henrietta and Celeste's home, everyone was exhausted. Diana took it upon herself to visit Henrietta who had taken to her room. When she knocked on the door and entered, she found Henrietta in her bed.

"The journey was too much for you," Diana said as she held Henrietta's hand.

"No, I wanted to do it, and I am glad that we did," Henrietta replied. "A little sleep and I will soon be up again."

“What of your parents, are they still in London?” Diana asked, knowing they would not wish to miss the birth of their first grandchild.

“Trevor sent word before we set off. They should only be a few days behind us.” Henrietta smiled. “I will have everyone around me, I am determined for it to be that way.”

“And so, you shall, I am sure of it,” Diana said reassuringly, knowing that her friend had a reputation for making things happen. “You have arranged it all well. If that baby stays where it should be until your expected time, we will all be here.”

For a moment they were silent while Henrietta rested her eyes, and then she opened them to ask, “Will you visit Rose Cottage?”

The thought of visiting her father had not occurred to Diana, and she pondered on her answer. “I will give it some thought, but I do not wish to dampen this happy occasion.”

“You should visit your father, Diana, he is a lonely man,” Henrietta advised as she squeezed her friend’s hand in encouragement. “This visit to your hometown does not have to be all about my baby. Take the time to collect your thoughts before Lord Steele arrives to see my sister.”

“Ah...he is to visit here, is he?” Diana asked, though she was unsure why she felt so surprised at the news.

“If he did not make the effort to do so, my father would be suspecting something was amiss,” Henrietta explained.

“And we cannot have that because there is so much to sort out in the long run. My sister is adamant she will not marry him, but I have asked her to keep that quiet until my baby is born. Nor shall we let Lord Steele know of this little problem. I need to be stronger before I can confront the messy business of my sister’s love life.”

“That sounds very wise,” Diana agreed, patting the back of her friend’s hand as she stood up to leave the room. “I will support Celeste all I can in the meanwhile.”

“Diana,” Henrietta called her friend back. “Celeste is not aware of you and...well your...liaison with...What I am trying to say is that she has no idea that there was ever anything between the two of you. I would prefer to keep it that way for a while, do you mind?”

Diana walked back towards the bed. “Get your rest, Henrietta, and stop all this fretting. That little baby does not need to suffer, so stop over-worrying yourself. We shall all play our part in this, and then you and your sister can decide what to do when you are ready to help her.”

“Thank you, Diana, I knew you would understand.” Henrietta sighed as she closed her tired eyes. “We will let my parents and Lord Steele believe all is well, for now. And you should go and visit your father before you turn into an embittered old woman.”

Diana looked down at Henrietta with a wide-eyed stare. “If you were not in your bed resting with a baby in your belly, I

would be chasing you around the bed for that remark,” she said in jest.

“Oh my...the thought of running sets my heart a flutter.” Henrietta smiled, but Diana noted that her friend did not even open her eyes as she spoke.

“Rest for now,” Diana said with a softness in her voice. “There will be time enough for everything to sort itself out yet.”

She left the room as she ruminated about all that was stirring in the background of their lives. For the most part, it was not her concern who Miss Celeste married. She had enough of her other problems such as deciding whether to go see her father or not. On top of that, she was waiting for William to pounce out of the bushes once again, for she knew she had not seen the last of him.

Chapter 32

Two days after they arrived at Woodberry Hall, Henrietta's parents arrived home too. They were in high spirits, relieved their grandchild had not been born before they got back, and their good mood resonated with everyone else. Even Diana felt cheery, putting aside her worries, for a short while at least.

But while she walked in the garden, her pleasant mood was soon dispelled as she spotted Francis' carriage coming up the driveway,

“Oh, Lord, that dampened my spirit,” she mumbled, frowning as she hid behind a tree. “Well, I am not going back to the house until I positively have to,” she added, walking in the opposite direction to the manor house.

At least a long walk gave her a chance to think things through. She had mulled over whether to go and visit her father or not. Was it time to put her past animosity toward him behind her, and make an effort to repair their damaged relationship?

Martha was forever advising her to go and see him. She wished now that she had invited Martha on her stroll too. Then she could seek her advice, but then again, Martha was not one to walk long distances these days, what with her knees giving her such pains.

Returning to thoughts of her father, she wondered if he was still a drunkard. The only time she could recall him being sober since the death of her mother, was when he had been busy organising her life and forcing her to marry the Earl. What would have happened if she had refused? Would she have become a spinster, or would she have been there when Francis returned?

“Bah!” she cried out. “I must not allow that man to get inside my head ever again.”

But then, do I mean Father or Francis? As much as I hate to admit it, I do believe I love them both, she thought.

Deciding to return to the house, she began her return walk through the woodlands that surrounded Woodberry Manor. The ground underfoot was hardened soil because there had not been much rain of late. She tread with care between the fallen tree branches.

Above her, birds twittered and squawked, but when she looked for them, she could never find them. They remained well hidden in the dense tree canopy. Though the odd raven and magpie made an appearance, along with plenty of wood pigeons cooing as they stood guarding their territory.

It appeared that Francis' visit had not lasted long because as she arrived back on the periphery of the woodlands, she saw him leaving. With him, she could see his sister too, and she observed the two of them saying their farewells to Lord Trevor.

“I wonder where Celeste has got herself to?” she asked herself, wondering why the young woman was not there.

Waiting until the carriage pulled away, she stepped out of the treeline. Lord Trevor spotted her and waited for her as she headed towards the front door.

“Thank goodness you have returned,” he said with a look of worry. “Celeste is feigning illness and refusing to spend time with Lord Steele. Can you speak with her because I have not told Henrietta? She has enough to contend with right now.”

With reluctance, she agreed and headed straight to the young woman’s bedroom. But a talk with Celeste only served to prove the girl’s lack of enthusiasm. She was no doubt that the girl would continue to refuse to see Francis whenever he called.

It seemed that Miss Celeste was worried he would announce their engagement, something she was fearing very much. It was a terrible conundrum, but she hoped the young woman would come to her senses. If she did not, her parents would become suspicious. Luckily for Celeste, they were busy concentrating their efforts on Henrietta, with her due date on the horizon.

* * *

The next day, Diana decided to take a horse ride, feeling a need to get away yet again. She could not visit with Henrietta much because her mother hovered over her all the time. Nor did she wish to spend too much time with the brooding Celeste, who was utterly miserable at the thought of her pending engagement.

And Martha was resting because her energy waned very easily these days. So, Diana took herself out on a trip alone, once again.

This time she was more adventurous, and she rode as far as the church where she and Francis used to meet in secret. What she had never told him was that her mother and little brother were buried in that very same graveyard, and so she went to their gravestones. It surprised her to see fresh flowers on both plots. *Has Father placed them here?* she pondered.

As she stood wondering over this notion, she heard a horse approaching. The hooves thudded on the hard ground that surrounded the church. Turning to see if it was perhaps her father, she was soon in for a shock; to her utter surprise, it was Francis.

Diana had been sitting on the grass between the two graves, but she went to stand up as the horse approached her.

“I hoped that I might find you here one day, and now my wish has come true,” Francis panted out as he dismounted. “I visited with Miss Celeste yesterday, but I was told that you were out on a walk.”

Diana did not reply because her head spun around with her thoughts. *We should not be seen here together.*

“Shall we stroll over to the riverside, as we used to do?” Francis suggested, giving her a smile that lit up his handsome features.

“Yes...yes...that might be best,” she replied, setting off on a stroll to the riverside as Francis left his horse to graze with hers.

“Are you avoiding me?” Francis asked as they arrived under the old willow tree that had once been their hiding place.

“I am not afraid to admit that I am,” she snapped at him, starting to feel annoyed that he had sought her out in this way. “We cannot let others know of our past liaison, Francis. You know that I respect Henrietta’s family and I will not be the cause of disruption for them.”

“I am making an effort, Diana,” Francis pleaded, accepting that Diana did not wish to stand close to him. “You must know that I even took my sister yesterday, to try and make some form of bond with Miss Celeste.”

Diana nodded, but still she kept her distance from the man who was standing before her. The same man who she longed to embrace and be with, but whom she had forced herself to avoid at all costs. Yet here he was, coming out of his way to find her. What was she to do?

“I am only here to visit the graves of my mother and brother, and not out of any girlish memories from our time here,” she attempted to explain.

“You never told me that...I apologise if I have disturbed your grieving—”

Diana raised her hand to stop him because she knew that she was misleading him. “I...I cannot lie to you, Francis. Part of the reason for my being here is because it holds such cherished memories of our past together.”

“You are?” he questioned, his face looking surprised at her confession. “So do you think—”

“No, Francis, we cannot be together, not ever again,” she stopped him before he had the chance to persuade her otherwise. “I am also considering visiting my father and thought this was the place to ponder on my thoughts.”

“I never got to know him, did I?” Francis said as he started to relax. “It is sad that both our fathers worked to keep us apart, do not you agree?”

Diana smiled as she left the shade of the willow tree and went to sit on a large, old tree trunk that lay on the ground where it had fallen. Francis followed her, but he did not sit with her.

“I never forgave my father for forcing my hand in marriage,” Diana began. “But out of respect for my husband, I am considering that Father’s interference was well intended.”

“It pleases me that at least you were happy in your marriage,” Francis said, though she could see the pain on his face. “I would hate to think of you being unhappy over the years that have passed us by.”

Francis finally came to sit on the tree trunk, but he left a respectful distance between them. And so, the two of them chatted over things they had done while their lives had been apart. Each of them treading with care, only bringing up pleasantries.

“I do not mind admitting that it took me a long time to find my sea legs,” Francis reminisced about his adventures out at sea. “And when I returned to land, it took me a while for my land legs to come back.”

“Of course, I never told you that I was sorry for the loss of your father,” Diana said, recalling why he would have returned to land.

“It was not a great loss for me, so do not reproach yourself over it,” Francis cut her off. “We had long since been estranged over other things. He did not approve of my going to sea, but then I was not aware that he was the cause of my broken heart.”

“We cannot spend our present lives with such regrets, Francis,” Diana said with a half-smile. She wanted to reach out and touch his arm, but she fought off the urge. Once they went down that path again, there may be no going back. “Promise me that you will try with Miss Celeste? It is not her fault that our paths once crossed, and she could do with a wise man to guide her.”

“I cannot agree that I have wisdom.” He grinned at the very idea. “Though, for your sake, I will attempt to make the marriage work. But it is not what I want.”

Diana stood up so that he could say no more. “I must be on my way now, for I have been gone longer than was meant,” she told him, turning, and walking towards the horses.

Once mounted on their horses, they both knew that their moment was over. Diana was the one to say farewell, and she rode her horse away at a canter to get away from him. Too much time in his company only weakened her resolve, the sooner he announced his engagement to Celeste, the better.

She quickly led her horse into a gallop, allowing the wind to blow away the tears that she knew were shedding from her eyes. *How can I still love him so much? Why, oh why, is fate so cruel?*

Slowing down the horse, she entered the driveway of Woodberry Manor. But before she arrived at the courtyard, she spotted a man approaching her from the tree line. Dismounting, she recognised him and felt that familiar feeling of dread that she always got upon seeing William.

“Where the hell have you been?” he cried out to her, his face red with anger. “When I went to the house, they told me you were out, so I waited, but you have been an age. This is not the way I want things to be, do you hear me?”

Diana led him away from the horse, as a groom arrived to take the horse to the stable. “Calm down, William, I was only out on a horse ride. I cannot be at your beck and call whenever you want.”

She led him towards the rose garden, it seemed only fitting to walk with him among the thorny shrubs.

“All you need to do is send word of where you would like to meet,” she said, hooking his arm to make the visit seem as normal as possible should anyone see them. “You are my nephew, so it is not unacceptable for us to be seen together, so please, calm yourself.”

She could feel that William was shaking, whether it was anger or something else she did not know.

“Are you going to explain this visit to me?” she asked him in a calm voice, hoping it might help him to still his temper.

“I need money,” he said, and she thought for a moment that she detected a sound of shame in his voice.

“Very well, I will see my solicitor and arrange a transfer in a few days—”

“No!” William screamed out at her as he stopped walking and turned to grab at both of her arms. The action forced her to face his rage.

“Unhand me, William,” she said, keeping her tone gentle, even though she feared him. “Stop behaving like a madman.”

He let her go and they continued with their stroll, but they remained apart. Diana did not wish to be close to him again, in case he lost control of his very being.

“I need it now, today!” he growled at her.

She had taken him on a circle around the rose garden and they now arrived back at the courtyard, in front of the manor house.

“I do not carry money around on my person, but you can have this,” she said as she slipped a diamond ring from her finger. “It is more yours than mine anyway, so here, take it. It belonged to some past relative of your uncle’s.”

William did not hesitate to take it from her, and he inspected the delicate diamond. “Yes, you hold a lot that is rightfully mine,” he rumbled, but at least he kept his voice low. “I will have this, but I will be back for more,” he said as he turned to march off, almost at a run.

She watched him flee as if a fire burned at his back. *What kind of trouble have you brought upon yourself now?* she wondered as she turned to climb the stone steps that would lead her to the front door.

Chapter 33

Celeste was doing everything she could to avoid spending any more time with Lord Francis. Of course, she felt bad because she could see that he was a very kind and considerate person. He was handsome too, and if she had not already fallen in love with Arthur, she would have been honoured to be the Duke's wife. But her only true love was Arthur Pincher, even if she had recently fallen out with him.

Only yesterday, when she had taken herself to her bedchamber to be alone, had she spotted the Duke's carriage arriving at Woodberry Hall, and it had caused her to panic. The last thing she wanted to do then was spend time pretending to be nice to the Duke. Even worse, as she watched him alighting from the carriage, she had seen that he had brought his sister along with him.

Not that she had anything against his sister. Lady Sarah was a lovely person. But carrying out this farce of a courtship was becoming unbearable. Celeste was beginning to regret fleeing from London. When she had begged Henrietta to return to their home, she had not thought they would leave so soon.

Putting the thought of the Duke's visit yesterday behind her, she recalled the day she had given herself to Arthur, in his room. Never, not for one moment, had she thought that they could argue so easily. How could he expect her to go to the Duke and ask for money?

Then, at the same time, inform him that she did not wish to marry him? Arthur was being so unreasonable expecting her to do such a thing, and she had told him so, in no uncertain terms, before she had walked out of him.

She had then led herself to believe that if they left London, the problem of the Duke would go away. What she had not planned on was the Duke returning to his hometown too, which was about an hour's ride from her home.

"Why could you not have stayed in London to see the season out?" she growled as recalled the Duke and his sister walking towards the entrance of her home. She had quickly come up with a plan to be ill.

Jumping into her bed, after stripping off her dress, she had huddled underneath the blankets. It gave her a smile thinking on how clever she had been. When the servant arrived to

knock on her door, she had feigned the illness, saying that it would be unfair of her to pass anything nasty onto her visitors.

How crafty she had been, and unbelievably, her trick had worked. After that, she vowed that she had come up with more excuses in the future. It would be worth lying so that she would not have to meet with the Duke. The last thing she wanted was for him to announce their engagement. While ever he had not done that, she felt that there was a glimmer of hope.

Of course, she blamed her father for the mess that she now found herself in. If he would only accept Arthur as her intended, none of this would be happening. Then again, if only Henrietta was not bedbound so much. Her sister could always make their father see her ways. She would have been a great ally to have and would likely be able to talk her father out of the engagement with the Duke.

But her father would not listen to her version of events. She had pleaded that Arthur was a professional painter and would one day be famous. Even then, her father utterly refused to discuss the matter. His argument had been so feeble, saying that the third son of a viscount was not good enough for her and that she deserved a much better match. Yet how could any match be better than the man she was in love with?

Laying on her bed, she remembered how she had heard the Duke's carriage pulling away and she had jumped out of her bed to peek through the window. It had relieved her to see the back end of the Duke's carriage, for it meant that she could make a quick recovery. Though, after spending an hour in her bed, she had not been able to understand how her sister could remain bedbound for so long, it was a most boring affair.

Celeste went to sit in the seat at her bedroom window and gazed out of it. Again, she recalled how yesterday she had spotted Lady Diana returning to the manor house from a stroll. As she had observed her, Lord Trevor had appeared and spoken with her. That was when she had seen Lady Diana look up toward her bedroom window. Worried they were discussing her, she had cleverly jumped back into her bed.

As it turned out, it was just as well that she had gone back to her bed, as ten minutes later, Lady Diana came into her room for a visit. She had decided to come clean with her because she liked the Lady very much. Plus, she suspected that Lady Diana was more than a little fond of Lord Francis.

Lady Diana had taken a seat by the side of her bed, and Celeste had admitted that she was going to keep out of the way

whenever the Duke visited.

Oh dear, Celeste remembered, then I lost my temper and thumped my pillow in frustration at my situation.

She had dared to ask Lady Diana if she would help her, and the conversation played out in her head.

Can you not meet with the Duke for me, whenever he calls? Can you not tell him that I love another? I am sure that the Duke likes you, he is always pleasant with you, Lady Diana. It means that he is unlikely to speak to you with any harshness when you break the news to him that I do not wish to marry him.

And Lady Diana's answer had not been very positive, she recalled.

I most certainly will not, Celeste! You must speak with your father if you are so sure that you cannot marry the Duke. We

cannot go around telling him that you love another. Think of your reputation, Celeste. Your mother would be utterly shocked.

For a moment or two, Celeste felt a little cross with Lady Diana's attitude yesterday. She had wanted to tell her that she did not care what others thought of her, but she had stopped herself.

Celeste sighed as she admitted to herself that it would be the entire family that would suffer from any scandalous gossip. If Lady Diana was unwilling to help her, there was no one else but her sister, and she was about to have a baby.

Celeste had been so very honest yesterday, when she had told Lady Diana that she wanted to marry for love, and not for the convenience of her father. She had asked her if she had loved your husband, but she had only replied that she had *learned to love her husband*.

Celeste could not imagine such an independent woman as Lady Diana, being forced into a marriage. But had looked sad as she had tried to convince Celeste that she had married a good man, and that they had cared for one another.

The whole conversation was playing out in Celeste's mind as she sat gazing through her bedroom window.

I asked her if she had ever felt true love, Celeste pondered on the question with Lady Diana yesterday. The kind of love makes you feel ill, and yet it makes you feel happy too, all at the same time. And then you told me that you had. Only to tell me that you thought true love brought about nothing but heartache.

Celeste looked down at hands as she spoke to herself, "I am sorry, Lady Diana, I did not mean to cause you sorrow. But that is how I am feeling for Arthur—he is my true love. I ask myself over and over if it is worth all the pain I feel. But when I am with him, I truly feel a joy like no other. He makes my whole world light up, and my body yearns for him."

As she had been expressing to herself her love for Arthur, she wrapped her arms around herself. It felt as if she was in Arthur's embrace.

“I cannot know if true love is worth fighting for,” she said out loud. “Especially when it causes pain for everyone involved.”

She wondered who it was that had caused Lady Diana so much pain. With that, she decided that she must get out of her bedroom, and she left her room to go and find a book in the library.

Once in the library, she tried to find a romantic book to cheer herself up. As she browsed, she thought of going to visit her sister, but how could she when she looked so pale? Then she remembered Henrietta mentioning a book worth reading, by a female author. It was a tragic romantic tale that happened in the North of England. Though she decided that a tragedy might only make her feel worse.

Pondering on another book, she heard a horse arriving in the courtyard. Worrying it might be the Duke again, it caused her to look out of the window. Instead, she saw that Lady Diana returning from a horse ride. As she was about to turn away, a man appeared, coming out from the trees.

What is he doing on our grounds? Celeste mused. Mesmerised by the scene, she continued to watch him, thinking that she recognised him, but then she was not too sure.

Celeste moved her eyes toward Lady Diana who was now dismounting from her horse, which was led away by a stable boy. It appeared that Lady Diana knew the man because she hooked her arm into his elbow, and they walked towards the rose garden. Celeste, being a curious young woman, dashed to the other side of the house where she knew she might be able to see them if they were indeed in the rose garden.

As she arrived at the upstairs hallway window, she was in time to see what looked like a heated debate between them. Celeste could not believe her eyes when Lady Diana took off a ring and handed it over to the man, to which he laughed, but still accepted the ring.

“Surely that is not the man that is her true love, is he?” she whispered to herself. “He seems too young, but one never knows. Could she be returning his love ring to him?”

“What are you doing there, my girl?” her father’s voice cried out, distracting her away from the window.

She did not want her father poking his nose around in Lady Diana's business, so she walked away from the window. "I thought I spotted a robin, which is my favourite of all birds."

"Hmmm... and are you feeling better now?" he asked as he walked up the stairs toward her. "It was frightfully inconvenient for Lord Steele to come all this way and not see you. Make more of an effort next time, will you, my dear?"

With that order, her father marched off in the direction of his study, not waiting for his daughter to answer the question. Celeste did not peer out of the window again, in case her father came back, instead she returned to the library. Although she was fast becoming intrigued by the affairs of Lady Diana, she would say nothing about it to anyone, not yet anyway.

Chapter 34

“It seems that I am the one who has been sent to apologise to you this time, Your Grace,” Diana said as she entered the parlour where the house butler had left Lord Steele.

Francis had been standing at the window as he awaited the arrival of Celeste. “Are you to tell me that Miss Celeste is still ailing?”

She stood looking at him, and he sensed her hesitation to approach him. Would it only stir unwelcome emotions if she allowed herself to relax in his presence? Always, she seemed to be on guard when he was near to her. It frustrated him no end that she hid her true feelings for him.

“I suppose one could say that. Please, Your Grace, let me offer you tea so that you can refresh yourself before your return journey,” she said. He could see that behind her, a maid had followed her into the room with a tray full of China cups.

He guessed that she did not wish to have tea with him, and a part of her might even hope that he would refuse and get on his way. But when he went to sit down, showing that he accepted her invitation, he was sure that he saw a flicker of joy in her smile. It meant they could stay a few moments longer in each other's company, but he could also see that the conflict in her mind weighed heavy on her shoulders.

As he sat down, she went sit in the opposite chair to him, with a small table between them. The maid laid out the tea service and asked, "Shall I pour, my Lady?"

"No, Smithson." Diana smiled back at her. "We can take things from here, thank you."

Ah, so you trust yourself to be alone with me do you, my love, he mused, before he spoke. "Well...Diana," he remarked as the maid disappeared from the room. "You cannot accuse me of not trying."

"I know, Your Grace, and we must thank you for your patience," she replied as she avoided his eyes and poured hot

liquid from a bright pink, floral teapot.

“Are we to be alone for tea?” he dared to tease her, giving her one of his typical lopsided half-smiles.

She did not reply as his eyes drilled into her. Instead, her eyes concentrated on the simple task of pouring tea, and as she passed him a teacup and saucer, he thought she looked pleased to be in her company.

“Might I make a suggestion, Your Grace?” she began as he raised a single eyebrow back at her, waiting for her to continue. “It would be a good idea that you speak with her father. You could insist on his presence when you next visit Miss Celeste,” Diana suggested, her voice formal as she showed no sign of weakening.

Taking a sip of his tea, he now looked at her with seriousness in his eyes. “And might I also make a suggestion, Lady Diana,” he said, though he kept his voice low. “And that is that we end this charade of a courtship, and you face the truth about us.”

Diana's face flushed, it seemed that she had not expected him to be so honest. He knew that he risked too much by speaking of such matters out loud, but he would never stop trying.

For a few moments, there was a silence between them. On his part, he would love nothing more than have her agree with him, but things like this were never that simple, were they?

"I am very much enjoying this visit with my lifelong friend, as we await the arrival of her baby," she said to him and paused again. He could not help but wonder where this conversation was going. "You are well aware that this is a respectable family, Your Grace. I would not do anything that might jeopardise my relationship with them. They are extremely important to me."

Francis watched Diana as she spoke, his mind becoming filled with the confusion of it all. He had already determined that he would find a way to get out of the courtship with Miss Celeste, without causing any grief to the family. But others watched him closely, and if he ended the courtship now then gossip would be rife about the young Miss Celeste.

He knew that was what Diana referred to, and he did not wish for that to happen. Yet he had to end the ridiculous courtship as soon as possible. His conflicting emotions for Diana, and the disinterest shown by Miss Celeste, were more than adequate enough reasons. Why could she not admit to herself how much he still loved her?

“Do you understand the situation, Your Grace?” Diana cut through his thoughts, and for a moment he stumbled to find an answer.

“Yes, of course, I do,” he replied, taking a sip from the delicate little China cup he held in his hand. Worried that he might break it, he quickly placed the cup and saucer on the table between them. “Scandals are never a pleasant affair, not for those concerned anyway.”

“Precisely, and so I would ask that you call upon Miss Celeste again tomorrow. I will take it upon myself to do all I can to ensure her presence,” Diana said with a false smile. He could see this was not easy for her either, so he stood up to leave.

“I will take my leave for now and do as you advise, Lady Diana,” he said with a respectful bow of his head. “Do please convey my respects to Miss Celeste.”

Before he walked away from her, he caught her dark eyes and recalled how long her dark lashes were, always making her eyes appear mysterious. When she realised that he was staring at her, she looked away and began to walk towards the door.

“Thank you for calling to Woodberry Manor, Your Grace,” she said, returning to her formal tone with him, which he hated. “All that is required in this situation is a little patience,” she added, giving him that false smile once again.

He was not glad to leave Woodberry Manor, for he was having to leave behind that of which he longed to hold. Mounting onto his horse, he decided that tomorrow he would return and see if Diana was as good as her promise. Shaking the reins, he led the horse into a gallop, or he might barge back into Diana’s life and demand she goes with him.

He welcomed the cold wind on his face; it was sharp and invigorating. Francis always enjoyed the speed of a horse as they moved along. The sound of the thumping rhythm of the

horse's hooves beating upon the hard ground was like the drum of his heartbeat, fast and strong.

Riding at speed was always a good way of burning off his agitation. Patience indeed, he told himself, recalling Diana's words. "That girl needs a kick up the backside!" he shouted out, laughing as his hair blew into his face.

Horse and rider soon reached a lake, and he stopped the horse so that he could dismount. As he did so, he noticed for the first time that his body was shaking with frustration.

"Why can you not see, Diana, it is you who I want and not some flip of a girl!" he mumbled, hoping to talk some sense into his mind. "I cannot...no...I will not marry the girl!" he shouted as he slapped the trunk of a tree hard with the palm of his hand.

If the violent motion of his hand on a hard surface had hurt him, then he did not feel it, for his entire body was shaking with adrenalin.

“Aye, I am a patient man, Lady Diana,” he said, lowering his voice as he came to his senses. “But I will figure out a way to end this ludicrous courtship. And I will find a way to gain your trust, forever this time.”

With that last statement, he used his foot and kicked out at the tree, the frustration of testosterone gushing through his body. He wanted to hit someone or something, but the tree had proved to be rock hard surface for his hand. Using his foot was easier, and so he gave the tree trunk a second kick as if it might help to ease his anger.

“Bah!” he growled. “I will play your games, Diana.” He nodded his head up and down, uncaring whether anyone was around to see him acting like a madman. “I am a madman!” he shouted out, wanting the world to know of his anger.

“Yes, my frustrations have turned into anger. Anger at my father for not informing my love that I had gone abroad,” he said, now turning to speak with his grazing horse. “Anger at her father for forcing her to marry another.”

The horse lifted his head and nickered at him, then returned to his grazing.

“Are you to ignore me too?” he asked the horse, though he was careful not to scare it. “And why not? Everyone else does.”

Finally, he mounted the horse and took the rest of the ride at a slow pace. His love for Diana was so strong that he would do whatever she wanted of him. She was never going to be his, so, who was he fooling anyway?

* * *

The next day he returned to Woodberry Manor, only to take tea with Lady Diana once again, which suited him well. But he hated to see her so uncomfortable—and yet what could he do?

It surprised him when the door opened and in walked Celeste. She curtsied and sat down near Diana. The conversation with

her was strained, with him asking her questions and she giving him only one-word replies.

“We are all excited about the baby’s arrival at the moment,” Diana interjected when there was a long, silent pause in the room.

Celeste surprised him when her eyes lit up with joy at that notion.

“The strain of her sister’s suffering has weighed heavily on Miss Celeste’s shoulders, Your Grace,” Diana added. But he knew she was only making up excuses for the girl’s behaviour.

“Yes, yes, it has,” Celeste enthusiastically agreed.

But what Celeste did not know was that he did not care whether she turned up or not. In fact, when she did not turn up, at least he got to be in the company of his true love, Lady Diana.

“Tomorrow, I would like to invite you on a horse ride with us,” Diana informed him. “Lord Trevor has agreed to join us. He says that it will make a refreshing change for him, and Henrietta insists on him going.”

“Very well, then,” Francis said as he stood up to leave. “Until tomorrow then, which I very much look forward to,” he added as he bowed his head, and once again caught Diana’s dark eyes. At the same, she looked away, refusing to lock into his stare.

The door to the parlour room opened and the butler entered, ready to see him to the front door.

Francis was fast becoming agitated with the whole affair. As he left Woodberry Manor he felt in a foul mood, fed up with all the lame excuses for the girl’s ignorance. Somehow, he would end this courtship, whether Diana wanted him to or not. For now, though, he would use the excuse of visiting Celeste as a way of seeing the real woman he loved.

At least something good is coming out of all this mess, he thought as he rode home. "I get to be in your company, my love, even if it seems that you would rather be elsewhere."

Shaking the reins, he spurred the horse into a gallop, enjoying the vigorous ride, for it was a way to release his frustrations.

Chapter 35

Henrietta had not enjoyed the final weeks of her pregnancy, having spent most of the time in bed on the orders of her doctor. Though she was thankful that her baby was well inside her belly, she could not wait for the birth because she felt so huge and uncomfortable.

The only walking she could manage was a waddle around her bedchamber. Even her husband had taken to sleeping elsewhere because she tossed and turned so much during the night.

Laying in her bed during the daylight hours, she heard voices outside and picked up on the deep resonant sound of her husband's voice. Getting up, she approached her window to wave to them, as they had all returned from a horse ride out together. Henrietta had begged Trevor to go with them because all her sister's troubles were falling onto Diana's shoulders.

She did not want their parents to know that Celeste was trying her utmost to avoid Lord Steele. Only yesterday, her mother had brought up the topic. She had wondered why Lord Steele

had not yet announced their engagement. Henrietta had suggested that he was most likely waiting for the baby to be born. That explanation seemed to satisfy her mother as she then remarked that it was most gracious of him.

As she peeked through the white lace curtain, she happened to glance at Lord Steele. He was indeed a fine figure and a handsome catch with his sandy blonde hair and broad shoulders.

Something drew her to keep watching him and she noted that he was looking adoringly at someone. Her eyes followed his line of sight and at first, she thought he was smiling at Celeste. What she did not expect was that his eyes were not on her sister, but on her friend Diana.

“Oh dear, it seems that the Duke still loves her,” she whispered to herself. “Why has she not told me of this?”

Diana was being assisted from her horse by one of the grooms. She was totally unaware that Lord Steele was gazing at her with the longing eyes of a lover. Her husband was also dismounting, and he then went to help her sister down from her horse. All the while, Lord Steele watched Diana. It was a

wonder no one else noticed, but they were all busy with their horses.

An ache twinged in her side, it was deep and throbbed as if her entire belly had tightened up. Letting go of the curtain, she made her way back into her bed, laying underneath the blankets to ride out the pain. But it was getting stronger, and it seemed to pass through her body in waves, causing her to scream out.

Her mother had placed a handbell on her bedside table, and she reached out to ring it as hard as she could. Within moments, a maid came dashing into the room and swiftly dashed back out again to go and get help.

Henrietta lay back down, willing the throbbing ache to pass over. “At last, my little one,” she panted out to herself. “You have decided that you would like to join us, have you?”

Her mother soon entered with panic written in her eyes. Following her was Trevor, and behind them were Diana and Celeste.

“It has started, everyone!” she cried out, laughing at the joy she felt inside. “My goodness, Trevor, I have never seen you look so pale,” she added as she looked over at her husband.

For an hour or so, there was much fussing and dashing around. The doctor was sent for, and when he arrived, he inspected her, informing them they were all still in for a long wait. It was agreed that the doctor would sit with the menfolk, and someone would stay with Henrietta at all times. Diana volunteered to take the first sitting.

Soon, the room was emptied of visiting people, and Henrietta breathed out a sigh of relief at the peace that was left behind.

“I am glad that we have the opportunity to be alone together,” Henrietta said to Diana, as her friend sat in the chair by her bedside.

“You need to concentrate on your contractions and not making small talk with me,” Diana said, looking concerned for Henrietta.

“They are not regular enough yet, so we have time yet to have a natter, you and I,” Henrietta said as a smaller aching wave began to build up. “Give me one moment while...I...argh...” she puffed a few times, holding onto her belly. “Phew, I thought that was going to be a small one, but they are getting stronger. Nonetheless, Diana, I must talk with you while we are alone.”

“Of course, but know that your sister went along on the ride today, so our plan worked,” Diana smiled, pleased that she had thought it up.

“Yes, and I am grateful for your persistence,” she said, watching for Diana’s reaction to her next set of words. “I do believe that Lord Steele does not care whether my sister joins him or not. Why did you not tell me that he is still in love with you?”

Diana’s eyes went wide, and her cheeks flushed.

“Oh Henrietta, it has all been so confusing,” Diana told her as she glanced at the floor.

“I have spoken with him and begged him to look to his future with Miss Celeste. But then she goes off and does her own thing, making things most awkward. She wants nothing to do with him and I have tried so hard to bring them together. Things have been so difficult, what with your father around every corner.”

Henrietta reached out her hand to take Diana’s because she could see how it all upset her. “You are such a good friend, Diana, you should have told me that you two were still in love.”

“I could not do that to you,” Diana replied. “And now, you are about to have your baby, so we should discuss this matter some other time.”

Henrietta was about to reply when another tiresome, pulsating wave of pain overcame her. “I do think that you might be right, Diana,” she agreed as she rode the pain through. But then another one came almost straight away, and she could not

hold back vocalising over the pain as it swept through her lower body.

Diana did not need to rush out of the room for the doctor, it was he who opened the door, saying that he needed to check Henrietta's progress.

"I am afraid we still have a while to go yet," he informed a very disappointed Henrietta. "But not as long as the last time I said it." He smiled.

Henrietta's mother dashed into the bedroom and insisted that she was staying with her daughter. With that, Celeste then said that she was staying too. Soon, it was agreed that all the ladies would stay with Henrietta and lend her their support. Each of them insisted that she needed them with her in these early stages of labour.

They each left the room in turns so that they could eat a light supper. And each one also returned, not wanting to be away from Henrietta. Trevor visited on and off, but for the most part, he stayed with his father-in-law drinking brandy.

Darkness began to fall outside, and still, there was no sign of their baby being born yet. And then midnight struck, and the doctor assured everyone it should not be much longer. Henrietta was tiring, what with all the constant contractions, but each of her helpers lent her their support, which gave her strength.

The entire household was up and awake, all waiting for the cry of a newborn babe, or at least news that all was well.

“How is my husband?” Henrietta asked as sweat dripped from her brow.

“Your father and the doctor keep him company,” Diana told her as she dabbed a cool, damp cloth on her friend’s forehead. “He and your father are both pacing around the drawing room,” Diana added with a chuckle.

Diana got up to go and sit in an armchair, while Henrietta’s mother took over her daughter’s care, dabbing at her forehead

to keep her cool. Henrietta noticed that Diana had soon nodded off in the chair, and it pleased her that her friend was resting.

Everyone was by her side, and it was clear that was where they all intended on staying. She felt very loved.

And then it happened...the biggest of all pains began, and the wave increased as she started to feel the urge to push, and she could not hold back. Somewhere in the distance of her mind, she could hear her mother's voice.

“My darling, the doctor says to do lots of little pants and not push until he says so.” And so that was exactly what she did because she did not want to risk anything going wrong. her baby was coming and that was all she wanted to do. To hold her child in her arms.

Glory be, this is going to kill me, she thought as she panted, desperately wanting to follow the urge to push.

“You can push now, Henrietta,” she heard the doctor say, and she began to let all her senses go as she pushed down hard on her body.

But still, the baby would not come.

“I cannot possibly do that anymore,” she cried out, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Please, Doctor, I am exhausted.”

The doctor talked to her calmly, explaining that it would all happen again very soon. At that point, she told him that she had had enough and that did not want to do it anymore. Her doctor was an old man, but he had delivered many a baby into the world. His patience and understanding were wonderful as he told her that she would find strength from inside herself when the time was right, so she was not to worry.

Sure enough, as the moon came out at night, and the sun in the day, it all began to happen again. She pushed, and she screamed, and she pushed again. And so, it went on and on, and Henrietta convinced herself that she was going to die, so painful was her labour.

But then, finally, something popped, and the pain began to subside. It was not gone altogether, but at least now she no longer felt as if her body might split in two. Suddenly, there was a cry of a newborn baby which filled the room, and Henrietta soon forgot all about the past few torturous hours.

“You have yourself a beautiful little girl, Henrietta,” the doctor’s voice cried out as he handed the baby to his nurse.

Henrietta had no idea what was going on with her body because she felt like she had lost all control and feeling of it. But those words were all she needed to keep her calm.

“I have a daughter!” She laughed as her mother soon handed her a little bundle wrapped in a white blanket.

“Here she is, my darling, your very own daughter has finally arrived,” her mother said, smiling and crying all at the same time.

Henrietta spotted Diana looking down at her and her baby, and her face was a happy one. The door opened and in walked her husband along with her grinning father. Everyone was smiling with the joy of this little bundle of love, wrapped up in a pure white blanket. As she handed her daughter over to her husband, Henrietta looked around the room for her sister.

“Celeste?” she cried out. “Where is my baby’s auntie?”

But Celeste was not in the room, and straight away Henrietta knew that something was wrong. Her sister had hung on for the birth of her little niece, and now she was gone.

“Are you not happy with our daughter, my love?” Trevor asked her, looking puzzled at Henrietta’s worried face.

“Of course, I am, she is adorable,” she replied, saying nothing of her worries about her absent sister. “But I am exhausted, husband, that is all.”

Chapter 36

The entire household at Woodberry Manor was in a state of confusion. At last, the baby had been born, and she was a healthy little girl that brought cheer to everyone's heart. But the event had been marred by Celeste's mysterious disappearance. Everyone recalled her being present as Henriette was giving birth. Then the birth of the baby took over and no one could remember when Celeste left the room.

Diana thought it a family affair and decided to take herself outdoors. She felt that the family would want to discuss what to do with their wayward daughter, without her listening in. She had been wanting to take the walk that she had often trodden in her youth. The back route that took her from the manor house to Rose Cottage, where she had lived with her father.

Though now she wished that Martha had not gone home early, to Kent. Her companion had been unwell, and so Diana had insisted that she return to their home and rest. As she walked the familiar pathways through the woodlands, she began to feel uncomfortable, yet this was a place that she knew very well. Not that she had been on it in a few years, so that was most likely why it felt so odd. Then again, she was also fretting whether or not to go the whole way, and visit with her father, so that could be bothering her too.

Diana had already decided that the time had come for her to begin planning her own trip back to Kent. With the baby born, she did not wish to stay on much longer. Which was why she was now contemplating that long-needed visit to her childhood home.

The walk to Rose Cottage went smooth enough, and now she was standing looking down at the house where she had spent most of her life. It had been a happy home once, when her mother and little brother still lived. It was not until after their deaths that her father had given up on life, and on her too.

He had taken to drinking large quantities of alcohol, and not caring about his business dealings. This led to them becoming poorer and poorer, but never destitute.

Then, she spotted him from her vantage point. *What is he doing, digging in the garden?* she wondered because he was never fond of such a pastime. Out of curiosity, she found herself closing in on the house. Before she knew it, she was standing at the garden gate calling out her greetings to her father.

He turned around and she could see that it pleased him when he saw her, as he gave her a lovely broad grin.

“I had heard that you were visiting yonder,” he said as he dug his spade into the earth and leaned upon the long handle. “Do you wish to come in for tea?”

“Tea?” Diana asked, unsure she had heard him correctly. “You drink tea?” she added, hesitating on whether to accept his invitation.

“That I do, and I make a fine brew if I say so myself,” he answered, lending her a smile and opening up his arms to lead her indoors.

“Has the baby been born yet?” he asked as she took a seat in the warm, familiar kitchen which smelled of freshly baked bread.

“Yes, yes...a baby girl, and she is most beautiful,” Diana replied, pleased to see how well her father was doing.

Over the next hour, she asked him many questions and discovered how he no longer touched alcohol at all. He had himself a healthy routine, rising early to for the chickens. Then he tended to his vegetable plot and nowadays he kept pigs too. He also had one servant who did just about everything he needed, including the cooking.

They laughed together as they spoke, enjoying one another’s company. By the time Diana left Rose Cottage, she was feeling filled with much happiness. There was something of her father’s old character back again, and he had even asked after Martha.

With an agreement that they would write more often and also make arrangements for future visits, she left her childhood home. Diana was feeling elated.

Setting off on the same route back to Woodberry Manor, she hoped that Celeste might have come to her senses and returned

home. Dawdling to collect some wildflowers in the woodland for Henrietta, she came over with a sudden sensation that she was not alone. Stopping in her tracks, she heard a loud crack behind her and swiftly turned around. Approaching her was someone she did not expect to see in the middle of a woodland.

“William?” she questioned as she watched him approaching her. “What on Earth are you doing out here?”

He did not answer until he was standing before her. “Following you, of course,” he replied as if it was perfectly acceptable for him to do so.

“Yes, but why?” she asked, still surprised at his sudden appearance.

“Why do you think?” he snapped, scowling back at her. “It is time to give me some more of the money that I am owed.”

Diana did not reply, for she could not believe that he was calling on her in such a way. “I hardly think a walk in the countryside is a fitting place for me to be carrying around large sums of cash upon my person, do you?”

“When you return to Kent, I will no longer feel the need to sneak around looking for you,” he said with a harshness in his tone. She noted his rough appearance. “I have been more than respectful in going out of my way to find you alone. That, at the very least, you should be thankful for.”

Diana started to walk again, feeling uncomfortable at being alone, in the middle of the woodland, with a man who was known to be violent. Nor did it help when he stopped to take out a flask and tip the contents down his throat.

“I would prefer it if we could arrange a better meeting place,” she said, her footsteps going faster to get her out into an open area of fields.

He trailed after her, and all the while she mulled over her situation. With Henrietta aware of her love for Francis, and Miss Celeste running away, William’s blackmail was no longer

a threat. She wanted to tell him so to his face too, but not while she felt he was a danger to her.

“Slow down, Diana, why are you rushing?” he asked as he grabbed her arm to stop her in her tracks.

“I promised that I would visit my friend’s baby, and so she is expecting me,” Diana replied, shaking off his arm so that she could continue on her way. “You are making me late.”

She managed to get a few more steps ahead of him but he soon grabbed her arm again, preventing her from moving on.

“You will not go to the manor house yet,” he said as he looked down at her. She was suddenly aware of how much taller he was than her. “You and I will go into the local town to see your solicitor. I want a thousand pounds today, do you hear,” he said, shaking her so that she fell to the ground.

This angered Diana, and for a fleeting moment, she felt more annoyed with him than she felt scared. "I will not give you a penny more, do you hear!" she yelled as she attempted to get up again.

But William pushed her to the ground again, "Is that what you think, is it?" he growled, his face red with anger.

Becoming more aware of how vulnerable she was, she made to free herself of his grasp, but he knelt beside her.

"You will do as I tell you," he said, his eyes wide and wild. "What's more, I will take what you give away freely to that Duke, because he has no need of you anymore."

With the last word, he grabbed at the back of her head and pulled her face towards his. His lips pressed hard into her mouth, and she attempted to scream. As he pulled her head away, he slapped her face with the back of his hand. It caused her to fall flat out, and as she lay on the fallen leaves and hard earth, she felt dizzy from the attack.

William went to stand up. He was panting as he looked down at her. “I have put up with you long enough!” he yelled, pointing his finger at her as he lost all sense of respectability.

Diana wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, only to see a small blood stain from her stinging lip. She attempted to get back up again, but he pushed her back down.

“You are going nowhere, you bitch!” he barked, pushing her back to the ground again. “I knew when my uncle married you, that you were a tart.”

Diana was shaking, unsure what to do or what to say. Surely, William would stop this lunacy soon. He would come to his senses and allow her to go on her way.

“You open your legs for a wealthy Duke, do not you, you whore!” he yelled again, and she stayed where she was on the ground, her body shaking as she remained silent.

“What belonged to my uncle, is now my property,” he spat. Her hands were shaking so much that she tried to hide them from him. “And that includes you, do you hear me?”

There was a silence in the woodlands, even the birds had stopped chirping, and Diana felt as if the whole world had deserted her in her hour of need.

“What is it that you want of me, William?” she dared to ask in the hope that he might be reasoned with.

“Hah! What do I want of you?” he mimicked and then moved closer to her prone body. “Let me show you, shall I, and this is only the beginning—”

William threw himself on top of her. With his cold hands, he started to pull at the bust line of her dress. Diana could not believe what his intentions were, and she lifted her knee between his legs so that it might buy her some time to run.

He screamed out in agony and rolled away from her. She saw the moment as an opportunity to escape and wriggled backward to get away from him. She had to get up and run. As she turned around, she tried to crawl away, but then felt an agonising jolt around her ankle. He had managed to grab her leg and was now pulling her back towards him.

On her knees, she pulled at her leg and looked back to see if he was still weakened by her kick. But no, he wore a sinister smile on his lips as he pulled her back, and her body slithered through the leaves and dirt. She knew that once he managed to get her body underneath his own, he would overcome her.

A real panic set into Diana's mind and she screamed out as loud as her lungs could manage. He slapped her again, causing her sight to go dark for but a moment. Still, she could feel him dragging her body underneath his. Soon, very soon, he would have her, and there was nothing she could do to stop him from hurting her.

Chapter 37

Arriving at Woodberry Manor, Francis spoke to the groom that had come out to collect his horse, to take it to the stables.

“Do you happen to know if Lady Plough is home?” he asked the young man, hoping to seek her out on this visit.

“As it happens, Your Grace, I saw her set off on a walk a couple of hours ago,” the groom replied, bowing his head before taking the horse away.

For a moment, Francis stayed where he was, deciding whether he would go and find Diana first, before attempting to see if Miss Celeste would see him. “She cannot be in the gardens if she’s been gone a couple of hours,” he mumbled to himself, debating on what to do.

It could be that she has gone to visit her father, he debated. Francis recalled how she was quite capable of following the

route to her childhood home, on foot.

That was his deciding conclusion, and he set off on the route to Rose Cottage, remembering it well from the days that he walked it by her side. It pleased him that she was not in the manor house because it meant he could speak with her alone.

This was to be the day, or so he had convinced himself, when he would resolve the ridiculous situation with Miss Celeste. But first, he wanted to warn Diana because he was going to declare his love for her, whether she agreed to it or not.

He hoped that none of the family members of the Manor House had seen him yet. Francis did not want to do anything until he had spoken with Diana first. But resolve this situation he would, for he no longer cared about any but Diana. One way or another, he was ending the farce of a courtship with Miss Celeste.

Hoping that he could remember all the twists and turns to the route, he first entered the small woodland surrounding Woodberry Manor. He knew that it should take him through to the cattle fields, and then into the forest on the edge of the

estate. If she had been gone as long as the groom had thought, it could be that they would meet as she returned.

Francis had awoken that day with much confusion whirring about his head, and that had catapulted his need to resolve everything. One thing he was sure of was that he would not leave until he had Diana in his arms. A part of him felt excited at the prospect. Trudging between the dense trees, he took his time as he looked out for her so he would not miss her.

Yes...excitement was his main emotion, and he could feel the tremor in his heart at the thought of winning over Diana by the end of the day. *At last, we can be open and honest that we love one another and end this farcical nonsense,* he declared in his mind as he jumped over a fallen tree trunk. The going was rough, and his boot caught in many a tree root, causing him to wonder how Diana managed the walk in a dress. Then again, Diana had never been one to let anything stand in her way.

“Hmph! Other than trying to marry me off to Celeste,” he said out loud, admitting that she was more than willing to allow that to happen.

He would forgive her for that error, for he knew how highly she thought of her friend Henrietta's family. That was why she was willing to forgo her love for him, but no longer would he allow that, no matter the consequences.

A woodpecker hammered on a tree somewhere off in the distance, and finally, he arrived at the cow fields. Careful not to put his foot in any pools of stinking cow pat, he made his way through the damp fields. This time of year, the cows would be with their calves, so he kept his distance from the herds.

One or two of the mother cows *mooed* over at him, but he knew a thing or two about the animals, from his experience with the farmers on his own estate.

He was about halfway when he entered the forest, recalling how much Diana loved this walk. In his opinion, he could not see why; it was treacherous underfoot and he had far rather travel on the roads. They might be muddier but at least they were not mangled in tree roots and prickly bushes.

Francis was pleased with the headway he had made, and he would soon be arriving at Rose Cottage. The thought cheered

him, and he found himself humming a merry tune. That was when he heard it; the sound of a woman's screams, and it sounded horrifying.

"By the Gods, was that Diana?" he said, instantly worried that she was in trouble.

Turning his course, he headed toward the direction of the scream, but now that it had stopped, he was unsure exactly how to locate her. Standing still to listen out for it again, instead, he heard voices, a male and a female were arguing. And yes, the female was in trouble, he could tell by the way she cried out.

The noise gave him a better sense of direction, and he soon came out into a glade. Over in a far corner, there were two people, and they were on the ground. The man was atop the woman, and she was doing all she could to push him off. Catching a glimpse of golden hair, he knew that it was Diana.

Francis shouted out as he ran to her aid, a sense of urgency spurring him on. He did not recognise the young man, but he had seen him before. Wasting no time, he grabbed for the man's jacket and yanked at his body to pull him away from

Diana. Francis wasted no time and was quick to lash out with his fist, bloodying the face of the man he held in his hands.

He threw the man to the ground and was about to beat him some more when he heard Diana scream out for him to stop. Turning, he could see that she was still prone on the ground, her dress torn, and her hair fallen loose.

“My love!” he cried out as he dashed over to help her.

Pulling her up, he took her into a tight embrace. “Do not worry a moment longer. I promise I will not allow that cretin to ever harm you again,” he panted, stroking the back of her head as she cried on his shoulder. Her entire body trembled, and all his focus was on her, making him unaware that the man he had beaten had run away.

“Come, you are safe now,” he said in an attempt to soothe her from the shock of what had happened to her. “Has he injured you in any way,” Francis asked as he move her away to check on her, but still he kept her in his arms.

She shook her head. “No...no,” she managed to say. “But he was going to...he threatened to...” and she burst into tears again, for she could not say those dreadful words.

“Never!” Francis growled. “I will never allow that man near you again,” he promised as he held her tight once again.

There they stood for a while, Francis allowing her to cry as he stroked her silky, fair hair. Inside he was seething at whoever the man was. He knew that he would have beaten him almost to the point of death had he hung around, so it was good that he had fled.

“Will you take me back to Rose Cottage?” Diana asked, her voice still quivering. “I...I cannot go to Woodberry Manor, not like this. They will ask too many questions,” she added.

Keeping an arm around her waist, he slowly led her toward her father’s home, with neither of them speaking. Before long, Diana stopped in her tracks and held her head, “I... I am dizzy...” she said as her body began to sway.

As she was about to collapse to the ground, Francis was quicker and soon held her in his arms once again. Taking her face in his hand, he could see that her eyes had closed.

“My poor Diana,” he said, scooping her up and continuing the walk toward her father’s home.

As they arrived at the back of Rose Cottage, he could see a man in the garden, and the man looked up at them. Francis did not need to shout out for help, the man ran to them without hesitation.

“Bring her into the house,” the old man instructed, running to open the gate.

He led Francis up the stairs to Diana’s old room. The bed was made up and her father rushed to pull back the blankets. There, he draped Diana’s prone form, and her father pulled the blankets back over her body. For the first time, Francis could see her lip was bloodied; that bastard had hit her.

“I will go and fetch my servant, she will know what to do,” the old man said, attempting to pull on Francis’ arm to lead him out of the room.

Francis was reluctant, for he did not want to leave her side, but her father was right, she needed the attention of a woman to see to any wounds. Following the old man back down the stairs, he watched as her father gave instructions to a shocked-looking old woman. All the while his temper was bubbling to a rage; when he got his hands on that cretin, he would beat him to a pulp.

He felt hands leading him into a parlour, and the old man gave him a glass of brandy. Drinking the amber liquid, he felt the burning sensation slither down his throat, but at least it brought him to his senses.

“What happened to my daughter?” her father asked, also sipping on a glass of brandy.

“I found a man attacking her,” Francis replied, taking another swig of the warming liquid, for he did not wish to recall the image.

“She will need to stay here this night,” her father said. “In my care.”

Francis nodded his agreement; it made sense not to move her in her weakened state.

“Yes, I will return to the manor house and inform them,” he said. “May I return to see her later, sir?”

Her father nodded his head in agreement., with a half-smile on his lips. Of course, he would know all about their past love affair. But Francis did not care, he had much to do so that he and Diana could be together once again.

“I will leave now, but, with your permission, I will return to check on her,” he said, standing up to make his return journey

to Woodberry Manor.

“Do not you be a worrying now, she’s in good hands,” her father assured him, and Francis nodded his thanks.

Knowing his Diana was being cared for, Francis decided that he would go ahead and set his plan in motion. If all went well, by tomorrow he and Diana would finally be together again, and this time it would be forever.

Chapter 38

When Diana finally awoke, she felt as if she had been transported back in time. She was laying on the bed of her childhood home. Seated on a chair in the room was her father, and he greeted her with a beautiful smile.

“Why am I here?” she asked, feeling confused at the scene that she was looking upon.

Her father stood up and approached the bed, stroking her hair affectionately, he looked down at her.

“All is well,” he said with a soft, deep voice. “Lord Steele, or should I say, Francis brought you here. He carried you from the forest, where you were attacked.”

“William!” she cried out as the memory returned to her head.
“He...he...”

“Sshh...my dear, you are safe now. You must rest here for the night, from your terrible ordeal,” her father hushed her with comforting words.

“Francis?” she questioned, only vaguely able to recall what happened.

“Yes, he saved you,” her father explained. “I do not doubt that he will be back later. But for now, you should sleep.”

Diana nodded as she closed her eyes again, she felt drained of any energy, William’s distorted face playing out in her mind. He had every intention of hurting her. “He was going to force me...to...” she whispered, recalling how he was going to ravage her in the middle of the forest.

“All is well, now, my dear,” her father’s voice came to her again, but her head was light, and it felt as if she was in a

dream world. “You are in shock and must rest to get your strength back.”

His voice faded and her world became dark as she drifted off into sleep once again.

* * *

Diana could hear a vague tapping sound in the back of her mind, but she could not understand where it was coming from. Ignoring it, she drifted off back into her dream, but there it was again. This time, she opened her eyes, remembering where she was.

“Diana,” a male voice cried out as the tapping sounded out again, and it was getting louder with each attempt. “May I enter?”

She lifted her head and looked around the dimmed room. A candle flickered in a glass lamp, but it did not give off much

light. The tapping sounded out again as she was trying to grasp the reality of her situation.

“Yes,” she cried out, if only to stop the rapping noise, for it kept going on and on.

She could sense the door opening, but still, her brain was fogged over with weariness. There was someone else in the room, and soon she felt a warmth emanate from whoever it was that lay by her side, on top of the bed. The motion brought her to her senses, and she jolted upright, into a seated position.

“Calm yourself,” the soft voice said to her as strong arms wrapped around her in a gentle embrace. “I am here now. I have returned to be with you.”

“Francis?” she questioned in the semi-darkness, as the man hugged her.

“Yes, my love, it is me,” he replied, and she felt a sensation of calmness in her mind.

His gentle arms helped her to lay back down again, and she snuggled up to his warm body. All the while, her mind fought between a dreamy world and reality.

“Am I awake now?” she asked, unsure why her mind was so fuzzy.

“You are, indeed, and I am returned to your side to keep you safe,” Francis told her, but still she could not understand exactly where she was.

“Francis, is it really you?” she asked, again attempting to decipher if she was in a dream or not.

“Yes, it is, and it is my intention never to leave your side again, of that, I promise,” he told her as he leaned in and took her face in his hands to stroke her cheek.

Allowing him to caress her, for it felt so loving and soothing, she felt blissfully happy. She was in the protective arms of Francis, and she wanted more.

With her inhibitions relaxed, she welcomed his gentle kiss on her lips. At first, it was a simple, warm, touching of soft lips, but soon the passion built up as he pressed his firm lips upon hers. Diana relished his fervour; she felt the same way as she was coming around to what was happening.

“Stay right where you are, my love,” he whispered in her ear. “While I undress so that I can join you in bed.”

As she lay back eagerly awaiting his return waiting to her bed, she recognised the moment for what it was. The memory of the past day flooded back in her mind; Francis had saved her from William’s ravages.

The man she loved more than anything was soon by her side once again, and he was now undressing her from her nightclothes. Not that she had much to take off, but it was not long before she could feel their nakedness touching. Her body quivered with anticipation of what was to come.

His fervent kisses pecked all over her naked breasts, and as he took the sensitive buds into his wet mouth, giving her a tingle that ran from head to toe. Every muscle in her body jolted as she writhed underneath the muscled body of the man she loved. Their tongues danced together as lust overcame her. Returning his attention, she kissed his chest and felt the wiry hairs on her lips as her whole body quivered again and again.

A deep manly growl emanated from his throat, and she squealed in delight as he thrust his thick shaft deep inside of her. They wasted no time in exploring anymore, they both knew what it was they needed, and both were willing to take it. Opening her legs wider to accept his thrusts, she quietly moaned for more.

This could never be a slow dance of love, for they had been apart far too long. With every stabbing lunge of his dick, she felt a burning sensation as he bit at her bare breasts with heated lust. He squeezed at her mounds with a firm grip, a sensation of light pain pushing her further into the realms of lust; she cried out begging for more.

“Deeper, deeper, oh...please thrust deeper, I beg of you,” she whispered into his ear, uncaring that a burning passion had overtaken her. She had lost complete control as she behaved brazenly with the man she loved. Her words spurred him on, their rhythm fast, and the wetness between her legs felt hot and sticky.

She was soon hit by a sudden wave of euphoria. It felt as if every nerve in her body was tightening and relaxing, and her mind exploded with the exhilaration of her climax. But there was no time to rest when the feeling dissipated, still inside of her was Francis’ rock-hard shaft, pumping her with speed.

Francis grunted like a wild beast, and she moved her hand down to trace the merging of his cock between her legs. With her hands, she massaged his hairy balls, loving how they felt in her fingers.

With an almighty growl, Francis pinned her to the bed, and she let go of his sensitive parts. Thrusting up her hips, she took him, every part of his cock embedded inside of her, and again she relished the rippling shudder through her body. Together,

they cried out, each of them trembling with their climactic finish.

Panting, they came to a stop and Francis fell on top of her. He was soon apologising and moved to lay by her side, using the last remaining strength in his arms to place her head on his chest.

“You have no idea how I have longed to be with you again,” he said, yet her emotions were still confused, and she said nothing in reply.

How could she have let this happen? Her mind churned with guilt as she lay there. It was not long before she heard his rhythmic breathing, and his chest rose and fell as he slept.

Oh goodness, what have I done? I cannot stay here now! Tangled thoughts buffeted around in her head. I cannot bear to see him with Celeste after this. I must leave, and straight away.

Lifting her head, she moved her body so that she was no longer entangled in his arms. *How will I ever live with myself knowing that this is what he will be doing with Celeste? I have to go; this is more than I can bear.*

She felt her cheeks dampen as tears rolled freely from her eyes. It was difficult to keep her sobs quiet while she dressed, but she knew that must not risk awakening him. Diana did not wish to be the one who came between Celeste and Francis, all because of what had happened in her bed that night.

When Celeste returned, they could continue to build on their courtship. That was how it should be. In time, the girl would come around to loving Francis. But that could never happen if she knew what Diana had been up to with her intended.

Opening the door to the room with the greatest of care, Diana knew every squeaky floorboard in the house, and she tread with care, making her way outside. It was early enough to return to Woodberry Manor and collect a few belongings before she departed.

How did my life ever become such a mess? Was only one of the many questions whirring around in her head. I should not have allowed that to happen, but I was so confused. How bloody stupid of me, she chided herself as left the house.

Darkness descended all around her and she knew it would not be easy walking back to Woodberry Manor. But she needed to do it and do it at speed before anyone awoke for the coming day.

She knew her way well enough as she had travelled this path many times in the past, and she moved with the best speed she could manage in the darkness. An owl cried out from somewhere in the trees, and she heard the fluttering wings of bats, but they did not concern her.

The fear she had the most was of people, not of the woodland creatures. The cows mooed at her as she plodded through the open fields, but the moonlight lent her some vision so that she could tread the path with relative ease.

At Woodberry Hall, she went to enter through the kitchen at the back. The scullery maid let her in, looking at her in confusion until she told the girl to go about her business. By

the break of dawn, Diana was walking to the nearest town. There, she would procure a coach to take her where she needed to go. She knew that she must look a state, and indeed, her mind was a terrible jumble of a mess.

I must not be around when everyone awakens, she mused, rushing along with a bag that held only a few of her belongings. I cannot face speaking with any of my loved ones. I must be gone and leave Francis and Celeste to develop their relationship without my interference.

I cannot bear the thought of it, but that is how it must be. Henrietta is my friend, and I will not come between Francis and his intended; never!

With a final reprimand to herself, she arrived on the outskirts of the local town of Osmay. She asked the residents who were up and about their busy lives, where she could catch the mail coach. When she approached the driver, she was pleased to obtain a seat on the inside, for she could not endure a journey balancing on the outside of the vehicle.

Never having travelled by mail coach before, she had heard how terrible the journey would be. But she would endure it; if

only to get away as fast as possible.

The coach set off and Diana watched through the window as it pulled away, taking her away from this place at speed. Jumbled thoughts continued to pour into her head, and she was unable to stop herself from fretting over what she had done.

Poor Francis, he will think I do not love him, but I do all this out of love, she told herself. I cannot stand between you and your intended a moment longer. Things will work out much better without my intruding presence.

She knew that after what they had done in her bed, leaving was the only solution. She had to step aside so that Francis and Henrietta's family could get on with arranging the engagement. No longer would she be a distraction; but the thought of him making love to another invaded her head yet again.

Never will I marry again, she chided herself. For being in love is far too painful, she promised as she rocked from side to side with the speeding coach, oblivious of its passengers. Diana was aware that a mail coach had only one mission, and

the people it carried were insignificant compared to the delivery of their mailbags.

Yes...that is quite fitting, she decided, as she questioned her very existence. I am not worthy of any kind of friendship, and will I ensure that none from Sheffield will ever hear from me again.

Chapter 39

Henrietta felt a sense of annoyance at her sister. In her ever-dramatic way, she had disappeared, taking away the happy shine from the birth of her daughter. Instead of feeling joyous at the new birth, Henrietta had spent the whole day yesterday worrying over Celeste. Where could she have gone to?

Though she was thankful that it had been her who met with the Duke of Ashbrook, Lord Francis Steele, yesterday. Luckily, she had been around when he came visiting, and she had intercepted him, even though he was asking to speak with her father.

His news was not good, but it came as no surprise when he informed her that he was calling off the courtship with her sister. Henrietta had asked him to keep it to himself for now, or at least until they found Celeste, and in the end, he had agreed. Then, he went on to tell her that Diana was staying with her father that evening, and that had cheered her heart.

It was good that her friend was mending the fences with her father, at long last. Fathers could be such stubborn creatures,

she should know all about that, but she was also aware that Diana had always loved her father in her heart. Thanking Lord Francis for his visit, and his cooperation, he had left with a spring in his step.

It gave her a small cause for concern, for he did look as if a heavy weight had been lifted from his shoulders. And she could not blame him, for Celeste had made no effort to seal her engagement with him.

Henrietta decided that for now, no one else needed to know of his visit or the reasons for it. It was fortunate that everyone was out when he called, all searching various avenues to find Celeste.

* * *

When the butler announced the arrival of Lord Francis again the next morning, it had surprised Henrietta that he was back so soon. Had he changed his mind, and was now to demand an audience with her parents?

As it happened, her father was out with her husband, continuing the lines of enquiry in their search for her sister. And so, once again, she suggested that the butler bring him to meet with her in the parlour.

She had not long since fed her child, and the nanny had taken her to the crib in the nursery. Knowing that her child was tucked up asleep, she took the opportunity to see Lord Steele in private, and determine the reason for his visit so soon.

Preparing herself for a long discussion, she could not allow Lord Steele to speak of his change of heart to her father yet. As much as her sister had annoyed and worried her, she wanted Celeste to have her say too.

It alarmed her though when she noticed the stricken look on Lord Steele's face.

“Is Diana here?” he asked, his question abrupt and to the point.

“No, Your Grace,” she replied, confused at his question. “You told me only yesterday that she was staying at her father’s house.”

“Yes, and she did. But she has disappeared without any goodbyes to her father or anyone else for that matter,” he explained, and she was not sure if he was annoyed or worried. “She left in the very early hours of the morning, and I assumed she must have returned here.”

“What? You mean she was out alone in the dark, walking through the forest?” Henrietta asked though it was more of a statement than a question. “I... I do not understand how she could have done that. Her clothes are still in her room, as I passed it by only an hour ago.”

“Then you are not hiding her from me?” he asked, looking at her with a most accusing glare.

“Of course, I am not. I am as worried about her absence as much as you are,” Henrietta spat, wondering if poor Diana had run away too. “This is all such a messy business. We have no

idea where Celeste is, and now Diana has gone as well. I have no explanation other than to say that neither of them was very happy.”

Henrietta had taken a seat on a green, velvet sofa with a rosewood frame, as she watched Lord Steele pace the room. She was about to ask him to take a seat when the door to the parlour room burst open and in dashed her sister.

“Celeste?” Henrietta cried out as stood up in shock at noticing that her sister was not alone.

“We have done it, sister,” Celeste said, laughing as she took hold of Arthur’s hand and pulled him forward.

“Celeste, where on earth have you been?” Henrietta asked as she went to hug her sister with a feeling of great relief. “We have all been so very worried, and everyone is out searching for you.”

“Well, they need not be. I am pleased to see that you are here too, Lord Francis,” Celeste said as Henrietta released her embrace. “You see, I cannot marry you because I am now already married to Arthur here. I am now Mrs Celeste Pincher,” she announced, showing off the ring on her finger.

“I had already arranged to meet with Arthur at Gretna Green, and we married there yesterday. Is it not so romantic, sister? We hurried back because I knew that it would cause a frightful stir.”

“Gracious me, Celeste!” Henrietta cried out, staring at the wedding band on her sister’s finger.

“It was the best decision I have made in my life, sister,” Celeste insisted. “Father can disown me if it pleases him, but at least I will be with Arthur for the rest of my life.”

No sooner had Celeste dropped her bombshell, than the butler entered the room. All eyes turned to him as he was suddenly pushed out of the way by a man attempting to get by him.

“Where is she?” William cried out, acting more than a little drunk. “Do not come anywhere near me, you beast!”

he shouted out as he pointed an arm at Lord Steele. “That man is a madman, and my blackened eye is proof of it. What is more, he is having a sordid affair with my aunt, Lady Diana Plough. All the while pretending to court the young Miss Celeste Graham.”

Henrietta watched on in utter shock as Lord Steele moved with a speed unexpected of such a large man. Before their very eyes, he dropped William to the floor with a single punch. Celeste was the first to react and she ran to Lord Steele, pulling him away so that he would react no more.

“Take no notice of his words, Lord Francis,” she said, urgently encouraging him away from the man on the floor, who was now suffering from a bloodied nose. “What he says can never harm you or Lady Diana. How can it? Neither of you obliged to anyone anymore, for I am married.”

No one moved to help William from the floor, but he clambered back up again and glared over at Celeste with venom in his eyes.

“My sister speaks the truth,” Henrietta came to stand in front of their unwanted visitor. She turned to glare at him with a look of disgust as she spoke to Lord Steele. “It is clear to all who know you, Your Grace, that you and Lady Diana are meant to be together.”

The butler returned into the room, a few stewards following close behind him. Between them, they went to grab William, who had not uttered another word since the attack.

Lord Steele could not contain his anger and he moved in to grab William by the scruff of his jacket. “You ever go anywhere near Lady Diana ever again, and I will not even offer you a duel. Instead, I will kill you outright. Do you understand? You poor excuse of a man!”

It was Arthur who stepped in, to part Lord Steele from the other man. He did not feel comfortable with his new wife going anywhere near such violence. The servants were quick to manhandle William and drag him from the room.

* * *

“Unhand me at once!” William screamed out in indignation as two men dragged him from the room and towards the front door of the manor house.

He had expected Diana to be there so that he could publicly humiliate her. But she was not, and it seemed that he had played his trump card and lost. Not sure why his announcement had not shocked everyone, he could only assume that the courtship of her lover had been called off.

William felt furious at the lord who kept beating him. *How dare he treat me in such a way!* Yet there was nothing he could do to save himself. In the end, he was the one to be humiliated. It meant that he now had no hold on his so-called aunt. Even worse, and most foreboding, he would have no access to the money that, in his opinion, was rightfully his.

William had spent the night sleeping rough in a local barn, after spending the last of his coin on a bottle of gin. He could not return to London because his life was in too much danger. If his creditors were to find him, they would give him more than a mere beating. They had already told him so, and it was all that bitch's fault. She had no right to his money!

Walking along the roadside, he dabbed a handkerchief at his bloodied nose, wishing he had been the one to land the punch. But he knew deep down he was too cowardly to do anything like that. He hated confrontations, they frightened him more than was acceptable for a man.

Had he known that Steele was in that room, he would never have gone into it. Where the hell was Diana? How was he going to get any money out of her now that Steele was hanging around her all the time?

“Liverpool, that is where I will go,” he grumbled to himself as he staggered along, trying to put his nose back in place. “That idiot broke my nose, I am sure of it.”

He did not want anyone to see him on the road, so he took to the woodland at his side, but he needed to keep moving. He

owed out a hell of a lot of money, and he would not put it past his creditors to send someone after him.

“It is only about eighty miles. If I steal a horse I can be there by tomorrow,” he mumbled. “North America...I will get passage there and start again. They will never find me there...”

He had already sold the ring that Diana had given him, and now had little left to sell. Perhaps his boots might bring him some coin. Yes, and the fine clothes upon his back. Plus, he had to sell the stolen horse and that should be enough to set sail to another country. If he stayed in England, he had only live in constant fear for his life.

Chapter 40

Francis was relieved that the stewards had taken William out of the room. It had taken all his willpower to stop himself from beating the man to a pulp. If ever he came across him again, he very well might kill him for what he tried to do to Diana.

Celeste led him to a sofa, and he sat down as Arthur offered him a glass of brandy.

“That should help to settle the soul,” Arthur assured him with a friendly smile. “I understand Lord Steele, that you were to marry my Celeste, and I do not bear you any ill will over it. But she felt sure that you loved another anyway, so it should come as a relief that she is off your hands.”

Francis half smiled. “While I do think very highly of your new wife, I must confess that her instincts were quite right, I do love another.”

“It is Lady Diana, is it not?” Celeste asked, and he could see that she was more than a little curious to know the answer. “I suspected it all along, that was why I kept sending her to greet you.”

“Again, you are quite right. Alas, I know not where My Lady is,” he admitted, worried that she had not returned to her friend’s home. He had even started to suspect that William might have hurt her, but the man had clearly been expecting her to be at Woodberry Manor.

“Have you thought of the possibility that she might have returned to her home in Kent?” Henrietta asked, looking sure of her suggestion.

“Of course,” Francis said as he gulped down the amber liquid. It burned at his throat, giving him a welcome buzz in his head. “I have no idea why I did not think of the obvious. I must be leaving straight away.”

“Have you brought a carriage with you, Your Grace?” Henrietta asked.

“No, I came on horseback, but I can go home and—”

“Nonsense,” Henrietta cried out, raising her palm towards him to stop him from leaving. “I will arrange a carriage for you. Return it when your mission is complete.”

“You have my eternal gratitude, Lady Waverley,” Francis thanked her. “I must admit it will be quicker than returning to my home, and I do not wish to waste any more time.”

He sat back down again as Lady Waverley called for the butler to make all the arrangements.

Within the hour, Francis was heading off in the direction of Kent in a private carriage. Henrietta had given him two drivers and explained they would take it in turns to drive non-stop. They also had places where they could change for fresh horses. It would take a few stops to do the journey in one, but still, it would be quicker than the public coach.

Seven times they stopped to change for fresh horses. Francis even took a turn in driving the carriage while both drivers rested. Finally, a day later, they entered Canterbury, Diana's hometown. He gave the drivers a generous sum of money for their troubles. As well as paying for them to overnight in an inn of their choice, ever grateful for their speed and understanding.

He knew he should be tired, but adrenalin pumped through his veins keeping him alert, for very soon he would be with his love.

Hiring a local carriage, it drove him to Chesterfield Manor, and there he prayed that Diana would be home. Of course, he knew there was no guarantee. It had been guesswork that she had run home without saying goodbye to anyone, not even Henrietta, but it did seem the most likely outcome.

The butler opened the door and Francis wasted no time. "Is Lady Diana home?"

“As far as I am aware, the lady of the house is not expecting visitors,” the butler told him, and he could see he was going to need to be more insistent.

Then he heard a familiar voice from behind the servant, “Your Grace,” a lady had cried out, and as she appeared he could see it was Martha.

“Miss Martha, how lovely it is to see you again,” Francis greeted her with a warm smile.

“Come on in, please do,” Martha insisted as the butler moved out of her way. “You have no idea how pleased I am to see you, I can tell you that much,” she said, waiting for the butler to take his jacket and hat.

“I must ask you, Miss Martha, is Lady Diana home?” he asked, wishing someone would put his mind at ease and answer his question.

“She is indeed, but she was in a terrible state when she arrived back,” Martha said, leading him to a parlour room. “I will get to that shortly, but first, I must speak with you, Your Grace, if you would be so kind.”

“Now that I know that Lady Diana is safe, I do not mind at all,” he said, relieved to know he would be with her soon enough. “What is it that you wish to discuss?”

“Diana left Sheffield in a hurry, for the sake of her friends,” Martha went on to tell him.

“She did not think it conducive for her to stay around and stop the engagement of yourself to Miss Celeste. I am not so sure it is a good idea for to you speak with her yet. She is very fragile at the moment. You might be the last person she wishes to see, as much as she is fond of you.”

“I know that you are like a mother to Diana, Martha, and you have been with her through many tragedies,” Francis said. “But on this occasion, I do need to speak with Diana. There are things I need to tell her that have happened in her absence. As always, she will need you there, I am sure. But let me assure you, I only have her best interests in my heart.”

“I know you do, Your Grace,” Martha replied and he could see that was unsure what to do for the best. “I do believe you, but that horrible man who was blackmailing her has done much harm to her mind.”

“Do you mean William Plough, her husband’s nephew?” Francis asked, shocked at the revelation of what William had been doing.

“I do, Your Grace, and he is a nasty piece of work, I can tell you that much about him,” Martha said with anger in her tone.

“Well, she will never have to see him again—”

“I will never have to see who again?” Diana’s voice sounded out as she entered the room. “And what are you doing here, Francis?”

Francis stood up and moved towards her, but she quickly moved away from him.

“You will never see William Plough again,” Francis told her, wishing she would let him touch her. For now, though, he must accept her wishes and he stepped away.

“He will never come anywhere near you, ever again, I can promise you that. But you had everyone in such a worry over your disappearance, why did you leave in such a manner?”

“What... because, Your Grace, what we did was wrong,” she said, refusing to look at him as she made her way past him, to sit with Martha. “I could not risk anything like that ever happening again. It is better that I live a life of solitude than interfere in yours, and Miss Celeste’s, engagement.”

He could see that she looked tired, and his tiredness was starting to kick in too, but he fought it off.

“You need not worry over Miss Celeste,” he said, going over to take a seat on an armchair not far from her.

“What do you mean? What have you done?” Diana asked, looking fretful.

“I had better leave you two alone,” Martha said as she went to stand up.

“No, no, Martha, please stay with me,” Diana pleaded. “I know I am to be blamed for many bad things, but still, I need you by my side if you are willing.”

“You are to be blamed for nothing,” Francis spoke up, wanting to explain all the good things that had happened in her absence. “You have nothing to fear, Diana, for all I have to tell is joyous news that will gladden your heart.”

“I doubt that Your Grace, but please feel free to go ahead and explain what has happened,” she offered.

“The pleasure is all mine. You will recall that Miss Celeste had gone missing after the birth of the baby?” he reminded her, wanting to take her back a few days.

“Yes, of course, I do,” Diana said, her eyes now looking his way. “We all worried over her sudden absence.”

“I am pleased to let you know that she has returned to her home, with a new husband,” he told her. A part of him assumed that Diana might already know who it was that Celeste was in love with. “And now, it is our turn; for we are both of us free to love whomever we wish.”

“Are you telling me that Celeste ran away to Arthur?” Diana asked, looking somewhat amused. “So, she did it then? She dared to go against her father.”

“Returning to that cretin of a nephew of yours. There is a good reason why I say he will never bother you again. It is because I intend on being by your side for just about every single moment of your life,” he told her, hoping she would find his suggestion agreeable.

Diana let out a gasp, and then she looked at him with tears trailing down her face. “Is this true?” she asked as if she could not grasp the reality of what it all meant.

Francis, with a solemn look on his face, knelt in front of Diana and took one of her hands in his. “Of course, it is true, my love,” he said, squeezing her hand. With his other hand, he wiped away a tear from her cheek. “This is not a time for tears, my love, not unless they are happy ones.”

“You meant that we...we can be together, you and I, without causing heartbreak for anyone?” she questioned, still looking unsure if what he said was true.

“That is exactly what I mean. What’s more, all the way here I have been planning our wedding. Perhaps that was a little presumptuous of me, as I have yet to ask for your hand in

marriage,” he said. “So, Lady Diana, will you agree to marry me?”

“Oh, my goodness, Francis, that is all I have ever dreamed of,” she laughed, and swung her arms around his shoulders, hugging him with joy.

“Can I take that as a yes, then?” He too laughed as he held her close.

Diana nodded her head as tears still trickled down her cheeks, only they were tears of joy. A joy she never thought she would feel again “Yes, yes, and yes,” she replied, unable to stop her crying.

“Come now, and dry away those tears. We will both fulfil what was always meant to be, you and I together forever,” he said, wiping her cheeks dry.

“My heart is fit to bursting point with all the joy I feel, Francis,” she smiled back at him. “I could not have wished for a happier ending. To be your wife is all I have longed for, right from the day I met you.”

“And so, it shall be. Though, I promised your friend, Henrietta, that we would return to her in Sheffield. For she wishes to help organise our wedding in Sheffield,” he said. “Also, my sister will never forgive me if I marry without her presence. So, we will rest for tonight, and then we will travel to Sheffield where we can finally become man and wife.”

Epilogue

A month later...

For both Francis and Diana, the journey back to Sheffield was much pleasanter than it had been heading towards Kent. Though they did not return until some weeks later when their Banns were complete in the parish church of Osmay.

The very same church where they had begun their romantic tryst, all those years ago. And also, the same church where her mother and little brother lay in their graves.

Diana had written to Henrietta, and her father too, sending her sincere apologies for how she had left without any explanation. All invitations were sent for those she wished to attend their wedding, and then on to the breakfast feast held at the home of Lord Francis Steele.

Henrietta had insisted on them staying at Woodberry Hall on the eve of their wedding so that they could catch up with each other's news. Diana had thanked her for the kind offer but explained that they were to stay with her father at Rose Cottage. It was a time of reconciliation, and on the morning of her wedding, Diana was pleased with her choice of accommodation.

Her father would be attending the wedding, but he did not like to travel in his elderly years so would not be at the breakfast feast. Diana could easily forgive him because now she could see that he had loved her all along. The death of her mother had been more than he could take at the time, for she had been the love of his life.

Now that Diana was in love, she more than understood what he had gone through. She was only too pleased he had come through his grief and was now living a happier life.

While waiting to return to Sheffield, Diana bought a new dress for her wedding. It was a sensible cream, lacy gown, with a few more appliqués and frills than what she would normally wear. She had indulged because she knew that there would be many an occasion afterward to wear it. Francis had refused a new outfit, saying he had plenty of formal wear already.

They had placed an announcement in a local Sheffield newspaper. It was time to tell the world that the Duke of Ashbrook, Lord Frances Steele, and the Dowager Countess, Lady Diana Plough, were joining in matrimony. There were many congratulations sent their way, for the Duke's family was popular among the Ton.

On the big day, Diana's father walked her down the aisle of the church and proudly handed her over to her husband-to-be. She had been glad for her father's arm, for she was suffering a terrible bout of nerves on the day, her body trembling, but with happiness and not fear.

Francis greeted her with a soft smile, and her heart melted at the sight of him. He looked so handsome in his best of clothes, and she choked back a gasp of delight at the handsome man before her.

Never before had her words been truer than the day when she got to speak her vows, though her voice trembled, and her hands shook. The ceremony seemed to be over all too quickly. The vicar led them through to the vestry to sign the Parish Register and confirm to the church that they were now man and wife.

Taking her father back to Rose Cottage, she left him with a tear in her eye. He wished her all the happiness in the world, and she promised she would return to visit him, within a few weeks.

And all the while there had been no sign of the villainous William Plough. No one seemed to know what had happened to him, and very few cared.

The breakfast feast at her new home was magnificent. With twenty guests around the breakfast table, she could not believe that at last, she had married for love. Miss Celeste attended with her husband, Arthur, who was fast becoming a famed artist, having sold many paintings at the gallery in Bath.

What Diana had not divulged to Arthur, or his wife, was that she had arranged for his work to be displayed at the gallery that her late husband had owned. That was a secret she would keep to herself forever. She believed that Arthur was a talented artist who was making his way on his own merit. He had only needed a little help, and she was happy that she had been able to provide that for him.

By the afternoon all the guests had departed, and Diana retired to her bedchamber to take a short rest. Moments after she had undressed and collapsed on the bed, she felt the warmth of her husband's body by her side.

"I see that you are ready for me," Francis whispered in her ear. She knew, that despite her tiredness, she was unable to resist the advances of her wonderful husband. "You feel soft and silky," he told her, breathing heavily in her ear.

"And you feel warm and strong," she said, turning around so they faced each other in their embrace.

No longer feeling tired, she raked her nails over the skin of his shoulders, for he was laying next to her completely naked. Although it had surprised her how quickly he had undressed, she too was quick to take off the rest of her underclothes. It was not long before their lips pressed together, and Francis wasted no time in taking his wife on their marital bed.

There was nothing slow about their lovemaking on this occasion, for each of them wanted the other with a powerful lust filled with urgent desire. Francis lay on top of his woman, thrusting his manhood deep inside of her.

Diana raked at the bare skin of his back, panting, and moaning, and begging for more. Their rhythm reached a frantic crescendo as Diana bucked her hips upwards, and Francis plunged his manhood in and out of her warm, wet quim.

Francis had always been a patient lover, and he waited until Diana cried out as her orgasm approached. Her body was soon shuddering with the exquisite delights of her climax. In return, he pounded her hard and fast, until his seed flowed inside of her. Grunting like a giant bear, his lust was now satiated and his mind at peace with the world.

They lay naked, side by side, neither wanting to leave their marital bed. And there they stayed until the following evening, making love until their bodies were tired and their minds slept peacefully.

When finally, they bathed and dressed, and went downstairs to share dinner at the table with his sister, Sarah. Diana welcomed a new friend into her life.#

THE END

Can't get enough of Diana and Lucas? Then make sure to check out the [Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...

How will Diana's life change after selling her previous properties to move with Francis?

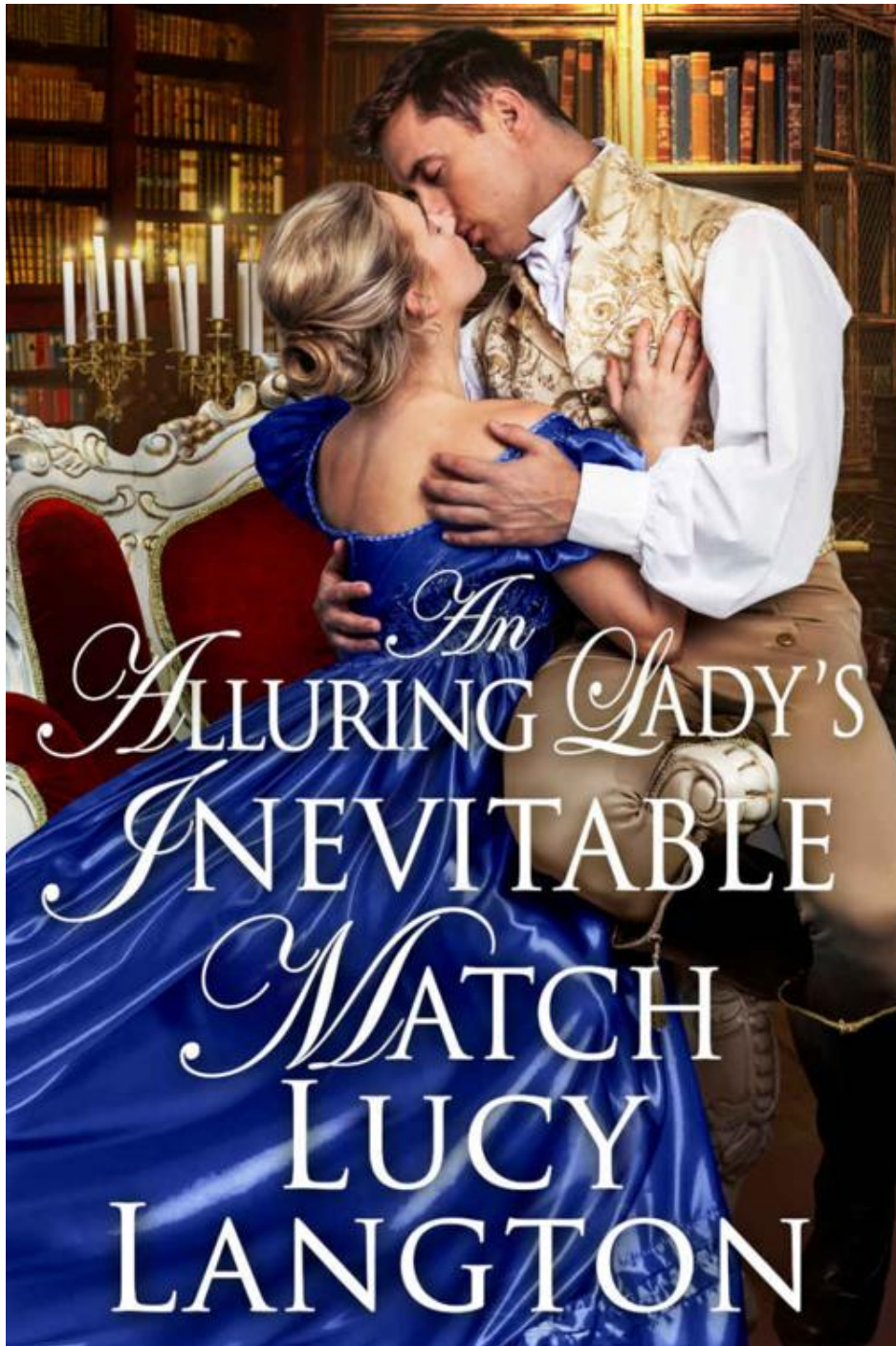
How will they celebrate Francis's birthday and who will their guests be?

What will Diana's unexpected revelation to Francis be and how will he react to the exciting news?

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://lucylangton.com/francis>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read
the first chapters from “**An Alluring Lady’s Inevitable
Match**”, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*



An
ALLURING LADY'S
INEVITABLE
MATCH
LUCY
LANGTON

An Alluring Lady's Inevitable Match

Introduction

The enthralling Dorothy Napier is finally allowed to choose the one she wants to marry. Being upset but relieved at the same time about her broken engagement with someone she has never met, she is ready to welcome the new Season. Yet, fate's perilous games will conspire to turn her holidays into a scandalous coincidence. While attending a soirée, Dorothy encounters a wicked, tempting stranger and passion instantly flares between them.

If she only knew he was her former betrothed...

After Lucas Dashwood denied a forced marriage and broke his engagement, he promised his father to find a wife this Season. He was not really searching for a match, until a social gathering brought him close to the most captivating woman he has ever met, Dorothy. When he realises that she is the one he was about to marry, he finds himself trapped in his own poor decisions. As his burning passion for her becomes unbearable, he wishes he could turn back time.

Is this Lady destined to set his soul on fire?

The more Dorothy and Lucas intertwine with each other, the more temptation breeds desire. As their sizzling romance starts growing, rumours about Luca's roguish past and other eligible rivals fighting for their hands will risk destroying it forever. Can Lucas battle the obstacles and reach Dorothy's fiery heart? Or will their unforeseen affair prove to be as vain as it began?

Chapter 1

“Oh, I can’t wait for this!” Frederica squealed, bouncing up and down on the cushions.

Sitting across from her, Dorothy couldn’t help laughing at her friend’s excitement.

“You need to be careful, Frederica. The carriage will lurch again, and you’ll end up on the floor.”

“No, I won’t!”

“The last time happened ten minutes ago! You were complaining about your knee hitting the edge of the seat.”

Frederica Colt shrugged.

“The pain is overshadowed by the excitement of knowing we’re going to a house party!”

“Isn’t overshadowed a bad word?”

“No, not at all. The delight is bigger than the throbbing in my knee, even if I’m sure I’ll be limping for a while.” Frederica shook her head, still grinning. “Why aren’t you jumping around? You were just as excited as I am when I told you that Aunt Annabelle had invited both of us.”

“But I know how to behave myself, especially in a swaying carriage.”

Frederica stuck her tongue out at her, and Dorothy rolled her eyes.

“Now that isn’t very ladylike.”

“Nobody’s here to say anything. When you’re alone, nobody is going to know or care that you’re behaving in a conduct that is unbecoming.”

Her words became more flamboyant towards the end of the sentence, and Dorothy had no idea how she was supposed to maintain her composure when her friend was making her laugh and groan all the time. She was far too amusing for her own good.

She leaned over and took Frederica’s hand.

“Well, you’d better take a deep breath and calm down before we get there. While your Aunt is a lovely lady, I do not think she would appreciate her niece practically bouncing off the walls.”

“Oh, Aunt Annabelle knows what I’m like.” Frederica giggled.
“She tolerates me better than my own parents. You know that.”

“But she’s gotten married again. She’s going to want you to behave, isn’t she?”

“I’ve met my new uncle. He’s probably the nicest man you’ve ever going to meet.” Frederica winked. “I have a feeling he and I are going to get along very well.”

Dorothy didn’t doubt it. Her friend of nearly twenty years could make friends with anyone. She was warm, outgoing, and fun. Of course, she stayed within the confines of what society dictated for women, but it still seeped out. It would be no surprise that her aunt’s new husband would be charmed by her as well.

She settled back and looked out of the window. The Derbyshire countryside rushed by, looking lush and green. All she could see were hills, a lot of them. Having lived in Bedford all her life, Dorothy wasn’t used to so many rolling hills. According to Frederica, they were higher than where

they lived. It might explain why she was feeling a little light-headed.

Even with the dizziness, Dorothy was looking forward to this. After the disaster that had been last Season, she had wanted to have some freedom. Unfortunately, while the freedom was revitalising, it also brought some frustration. It hadn't been as successful as she wanted it to be. London had failed her in more ways than one.

It would do her good to get away from all this for a while. A week in her friend's aunt's new home in the Peak District would be just what she needed to make herself feel better. Annabelle Samuels, formerly Annabelle Carter, had found love again after losing her husband when she was young. Dorothy was pleased for her; she was fond of the older woman.

And it felt like an honour to be invited to her new home so everyone could meet the new couple who couldn't go to the wedding. Then again, they had eloped to Gretna Green, so that would be pretty much everyone.

“Dorothy?”

“Hmm?”

Frederica was dusting down her skirts with a brisk gesture that made Dorothy wonder if she would tug her skirt off completely.

“What are you thinking about? You have that pensive look on your face.”

“Oh.” Dorothy hadn’t realised. She smiled at her friend. “It’s nothing. I’m just getting used to the change in the air.”

“I know. It’s a lot fresher up here, isn’t it? Better than the smell of the factory that drifts in our direction from over a mile away.” Frederica sat forward and took a deep sniff. Then she made a face. “Although maybe not right now. We must be passing a farm.”

“It’s not as bad as the factory fumes.” Dorothy paused. “Or the tannery.”

“Oh, God, that thing!” Frederica shuddered. “That is probably the most disgusting thing I’ve ever had go up my nose! Who thought it was a good idea to heat up dog dung and chicken dung to soften cow hides?”

“It makes really good leather, so it must be effective.”

“It’s still disgusting! If those men are married, I’m surprised the wives are still around.”

Dorothy chuckled.

“I’m sure they’re used to it by now.”

“They’re stronger than I am, then.” Frederica sat back. “I wonder how long it’ll be until we get there. Mother did say it would take a few hours to get there, and the hills weren’t going to be letting us off lightly.”

“I saw a sign for Wirksworth a short while ago. We must be nearly there.”

“I hope so. My rear end is getting really sore.”

“We only stopped half an hour ago,” Dorothy reminded her.

“And? I don’t like long journeys.”

Dorothy knew about that. Frederica had been complaining since they had reached Leicester. They had stopped quite a few times as part of the journey, but it didn’t seem to stop the whining. Dorothy loved her friend, but this was beginning to get on her nerves.

At least it would stop when they finally got there.

The sun was a little lower in the sky, indicating that it was later in the afternoon by the time they turned through the gate and went up a sweeping drive. Dorothy stuck her head out the window, and her mouth dropped at the house.

It was beautiful, a huge structure that looked like it had been perfectly carved. She couldn't see the garden behind it properly because it had sloped down out of sight, almost like it was on the edge of a sheer cliff in the middle of the valley.

This looked like a stunning place to live. Dorothy could only hope she had something like it when she got married.

If she ever got married, that was.

“Here we are!” Frederica squealed and started jumping up and down again. This time she fell over and landed on Dorothy. Dorothy cried out as elbows dug into her stomach.

“Frederica, calm down! We’re here now!”

“I know! I just can’t wait to get out.” Frederica scrambled for the door handle. “I’m going to get out now. I don’t want to wait any longer.”

“Frederica ...”

But her friend was already out, jumping onto the gravel drive and running up towards the house. Dorothy grabbed the door as it swung back again, pulling it closed. Then she leaned out and watched as her friend rushed past the carriage and up towards the front terrace, her long dark hair flowing out behind her.

They had both unpinned their hair during the journey, the long travelling and the heat hurting their heads. Both of them looked a little unkempt, but it didn't seem to matter much, seeing as it was just the two of them.

Dorothy couldn't help smiling at Frederica's excitement. She was like a little girl at times. It was somewhat adorable, although seeing it up close and personal was sometimes frightening.

She watched as a tall, statuesque woman with dark hair and a red dress came out onto the terrace. She stood there and waited for Frederica to join her. Even at a distance, Dorothy could see her smile. Then Frederica had thrown herself on the other woman, both of them embracing. She could feel the warmth even where she was.

Finally, the carriage pulled up outside the house, and Dorothy waited for a servant to open the door for her. She got up and walked over to where Frederica and her aunt were talking. Her aunt turned to Dorothy with a big smile.

“Dorothy, darling.”

“Aunt Annabelle.” Dorothy then remembered and dropped into a curtsy. “I mean, Lady Derbyshire.”

Lady Derbyshire laughed.

“You can still call me Aunt Annabelle. I’ve known you since you were crawling.”

“But you’re a marchioness now.”

“That doesn’t mean we have to stand on ceremony all the time.” Lady Derbyshire approached her and held out her arms. “Come here. Let me look at you.”

Dorothy smiled and walked over, embracing the woman she had seen as family since she was a little girl. Then she stepped

back, and the new marchioness looked her up and down.

“You look just as beautiful as ever. If not better.” She tapped Dorothy’s nose with her finger. “Far better than last Season. There’s a sparkle in you now.”

“I don’t know about that.” Dorothy shrugged. “But last Season was a pain if you recall.”

“I can imagine. I’m glad I’m at an age where arranged matches don’t happen for me anymore. Not that I need it anymore.” Lady Derbyshire put an arm around Dorothy, beckoning Frederica over. “Come along, you two. I’ll show you to your rooms. Everyone else is arriving tomorrow, so you’ve got plenty of time to explore and make yourselves at home before the rest of the guests invade the house.”

“Invade?” Frederica giggled. “You make it sound like a chore when you’re the one who wanted the house party.”

“I know. I do it because it’s only to be expected that the new marquess and marchioness host once they’re married. The others are dear friends, but it’s a little too much for me. You two?” Lady Derbyshire squeezed their shoulders. “I would happily have you two living with me if I were allowed. You two have an open invitation to visit whenever you want.”

“Is your husband alright with that?” Dorothy asked.

“He will be once I talk to him. Let’s go inside. We’re going to have tea now. Then I’ll show you where you’ll be staying this week.” The older woman looked really happy. “I’m so glad you two could come.”

Dorothy was glad they could come as well.

#

“Oh, I love the view!” Dorothy ran to the window and looked out. “This is just exquisite!”

The garden really did slope down. A vast display of flowers edging the enormous lawn stretched out below towards a water feature Dorothy didn't think was possible on a hill. She didn't know where the boundary of the garden ended and the rest of the countryside began. And the valley below was simply stunning.

It looked like a painting.

"I thought you would like it." Lady Derbyshire laughed. "Frederica said you would appreciate the view more than the bedchamber."

Dorothy giggled and turned back to the older woman.

"Thank you so much for inviting me. I'm so glad you asked me along."

“Of course, I would. I adore both you and Frederica. You two are practically joined at the hip, anyway. I can’t have one without the other.” Lady Derbyshire gestured towards the clock on the mantel. “Dinner will be at eight. You can do what you want until then. Will that be alright for you?”

“That’s alright.”

“Then I’ll see you later. I’m sure my niece will be here shortly.”

The marchioness left, and Dorothy turned back to the window. She undid the latch and opened it, leaning out and breathing the fresh air. The smell of the farm they had passed a short while ago wasn’t there anymore. The air smelled crisp and clean. The breeze was beautifully cool, just what she needed after being in the stifling carriage all day.

At least they could explore before all the other guests arrived. Frederica would want to explore every inch of the estate.

Dorothy was looking forward to that.

“You’re going to fall out if you lean any further forward.”

Dorothy looked over her shoulder. Frederica was coming into the room, smiling at Dorothy.

“I won’t.” Dorothy pulled back and slipped off the window seat, leaving the window open. “I just wanted to look closer at the marvellous view.”

“So, you tried to do it without squashing your face up against the glass?”

“Something like that.”

Frederica laughed. She went to the bed and practically jumped onto it, giggling as she bounced.

“I’m sure these mattresses are softer than the ones we have at home.”

“Well, your Uncle Mark is a marquess, while your father is a viscount. He would be able to afford something better.” Dorothy approached the bed. “How’s your room?”

“Just incredible. I love it.” Frederica lay on her back. “Oh, Aunt Annabelle said she was giving us two maids to help with dressing and whatnot. I’ve got Alyssa, and you’ve got Teresa.”

“That’s fine. Although we could have brought up our own maids.”

“No, we couldn’t. Our parents gave them time off while we were here, and your maid is making the most of it to go on the honeymoon she and her husband had to put off.”

Dorothy had to concede that. Clarice had married just after Christmas, but they wanted to save up for a small honeymoon later on. Dorothy being in Derbyshire meant this was the perfect opportunity for them to go to Hunstanton and see the sea for the first time.

She sighed.

“That was a big one,” Frederica commented. “What was that for?”

“I suppose it’s just wondering about how my life has been right now.” Dorothy sat on the bed, curling her legs under her. “Everyone around me, even my maid, is getting married, and then there’s me.”

“Oh, Dorothy.” Frederica took her hand. “It’s going to happen soon. And you’ve been given a chance to choose for yourself. It’s not going to happen immediately.”

“I know. I just feel like I’m going backwards.”

“That’s not true. It takes time to find love and happiness. You might not even know it’s happening. It will just jump out at you like that.” Frederica clicked her fingers. “Just be patient. It’s going to come along.”

Dorothy hoped that was the case. She liked the fact that, for the first time since she came out three years ago, she could look for a husband on her own. She had the freedom to choose who she wanted to court her, and who she wanted to be around. There was nobody telling her to do one thing when she wanted to do something else, making her meet people Dorothy wanted nothing to do with.

And no getting let down by an arrangement she hadn’t wanted in the first place.

“Things could have been different,” Dorothy said quietly. “I could be married by now to that Lucas Dashwood. I’d be Lady Dashwood.”

“And you’d probably have at least one child by now or about to have one.”

“God, not that!” Dorothy shuddered. “I don’t think I want to contemplate children!”

“It’s perfectly natural.”

“It’s positively terrifying! Didn’t you hear the horror stories those ladies were telling about their births back in London? I felt nauseous hearing it all.”

Frederica laughed.

“Childbirth is not meant to be easy. And you don’t need to be scared about it.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Dorothy grumbled.

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that for a while. Otherwise, you’d be preparing for a little Dashwood.”

Dorothy rolled her eyes. Having the child of someone she would have met for the first time at the altar did not appeal to her at all. Neither did marrying someone she had never met. Dorothy only knew that he was the son of an earl and was a little older than her, but she didn’t know how old.

For all she knew, he could be ten years older; his parents were far older than hers. And it was happening so fast that Dorothy didn’t get much time to object. She knew she didn’t have much say over it, but nobody would listen. She was simply dismissed when she expressed her concerns.

Then the engagement had ended. Dashwood's father, the Earl of Letchworth, had met with Dorothy's father, and they both declared that the engagement was off. That left Dorothy feeling annoyed and relieved.

Annoyed that she had wasted a whole Season unable to do as she wanted because of this impending marriage that never happened, and relieved that she didn't end up becoming the wife to someone she had never even met. Even though she had met the earl and his wife, she had never met the son.

And she doubted that she would now.

"I don't know what my parents were thinking of," she said, picking at a thread on the eiderdown. "They were so intent on getting me married that they rushed to the wedding part without taking part in the formalities. I didn't even get to meet him."

"That is normal, Dorothy. I recall a distant cousin getting married to someone she had never met when she was nineteen.

They've been married for twenty years and have four children.”

“It might have worked for them, but it wouldn't have worked for me. My parents had to know that.”

“They did, but they still went through with it.”

“Are they still embarrassed by the failure of the engagement?”

Dorothy nodded. It was often brought up in conversation, to the point where it made Dorothy grit her teeth. She really didn't want to discuss it at all.

“Well, that's their own fault. They shouldn't have done that.” Dorothy squeezed her hand. “Now you can do what you want with finding your own husband. You can do it at your pace and have the freedom of choice. That's what you've always wanted, isn't it?”

“It is, but ...” Dorothy grimaced. “I wish it hadn’t come at the expense of a failed engagement. And I wish that wasn’t my only target in life. I mean, I know I need to get married and where I stand in society, but I still wish I could do something different. Even with the freedom of choice, I still feel like I’m stuck in boundaries that I’m not allowed to cross.”

“I know. My parents have been saying the same thing for a while as well.” Frederica winked. “At least they know me well enough not to do that same thing to me. I’m probably harder to tame, though, so it might have been in their best interests to marry me off to someone who doesn’t know me.”

“Don’t say that out loud too much, or you’re going to end up getting into trouble, and it will happen.”

“I’m not about to say that in front of Father. He certainly would do that without my knowledge.” Frederica rolled onto her side. “We’ve got some time until dinner, and it’s still light and warm outside. Shall we go exploring?”

Dorothy laughed.

“Exploring? You make us sound like little girls.”

“We might as well be. This is our first time here, so why shouldn’t we explore? Especially while it’s quiet right now.” Frederica sat up and tugged her hand. “Come on, let’s go and see what is out there. I’m eager to see that water feature I spied out of the window.”

Dorothy liked the sound of this. She nodded.

“Alright. Let’s go exploring.”

Although they had to momentarily stop when they tried to get off the bed holding hands, and the bedpost got in the way. They let go of each other and then joined hands again, giggling as they went towards the door.

Chapter 2

Lucas winced as the carriage bounced, causing him to get jostled and hit the side of the carriage. Pain shot through his shoulder, and the impact made his teeth rattle.

“That was a nasty one,” the young man sitting across from him commented. He straightened up and picked up his hat from the floor. “I swear the holes underfoot are becoming more frequent since we left the main road.”

“I thought this was a main road.”

“So did I.” Pierce Cowper made a face. “Somebody was lying.”

Lucas grunted and rubbed his shoulder. It was going to be a little tender now. So much for starting this week in a good mood and relatively good health.

Lucas had been curious when one of his father's friends, the Marquess of Derbyshire, invited the family to Wirksworth to his country estate to introduce his new wife to everyone. He had heard how Lord Derbyshire had suddenly disappeared across the Scottish border to marry a woman out of nowhere.

The secrecy around his courtship had been very strong. But, from what Lucas' father had said, the marquess was very happy, and he was looking forward to being married after being a bachelor for many years.

Lucas had planned on going to Wales with Pierce for a little excursion, but then his father told him to go and visit for the week. Lucas' mother wasn't very well, and with his father reluctant to leave her side, Lucas had been nudged into making a very long detour.

He had tried to get out of it, but if Lucas were honest, he wanted to see the marquess. It had been a while. And, of course, his house in the Peak District was gorgeous. You couldn't have a better place to spend time.

Even if it meant sharing it with many other people.

“I’m glad you invited me along as well,” Pierce said as he sat back. “Lord Derbyshire is a real gentleman.”

“He was certainly one of my favourite guests when I was a child.” Lucas smiled. “He would always bring me sweets and chocolate, and I would hide them in my room as my nanny wouldn’t let me have them except on special occasions, which wasn’t often. I would end up with an upset stomach and getting scolded for hiding sweets, but I didn’t care.”

Pierce laughed.

“And he still kept getting you treats?”

“He just slipped me the chocolate, winked, and walked away. Or we would eat it together when we were alone.”

“You had a sweet tooth back then, didn’t you? I remember you being rather pudgy.”

“Hey!” Lucas leaned forward and prodded his friend in the ribs. “Less of the pudgy statement. I’m certainly not that anymore.”

“I know. You’re healthier than I am.” Pierce gestured at Lucas’ body. “You certainly don’t look like you ate your weight in chocolate as a child.”

Lucas swatted Pierce’s knee, which caused his friend to laugh. Then he settled back and stared out the window. It was getting into the late afternoon, and the sun was very slowly creeping down the sky. The shadows were changing, somehow changing the scenery in front of him. All the colours looked a lot crisper to his eyes. Lord Derbyshire’s family had certainly chosen a perfect place to put their country house.

“Do you think we’re going to meet any interesting people?”
Pierce asked, waggling his eyebrows. “And when I mean
people, I mean women.”

“Pierce, we’re not here to look for any women.”

“Well, maybe I’m not, but you are.”

“I’m not!”

“Your father is going to be mad if you don’t have a wife by the
end of the Season,” Pierce pointed out. “He might let you off
with being in a courtship when it comes to a close, but if you
haven’t got anyone in sight ...”

Lucas scowled.

“Father wouldn’t force me into another engagement without my consent. He knows what happened last time.”

“I remember as well. You kicked up such a fuss like a toddler having a tantrum.”

“I wouldn’t take it that far.”

“I would. You were ranting and raving about it the whole time.”

Lucas huffed.

“Come on, Pierce, how would you feel if your father suddenly told you that you were going to marry someone you’ve never met?”

“It’s a common practice nowadays.”

“Not for me.”

When Lucas heard that he was meant to marry Lady Dorothy Napier, he had been furious. He had never met the girl, and he was expected to go along with it without any arguments. For most of the Season, he had fought with his father about it, refusing to have anything to do with the engagement.

He would be absent whenever he had to go and see Lady Dorothy, and he outright refused to attend any social engagement on the off-chance that she was there. Why his parents thought he would go along with it, he had no idea.

It had taken almost the whole Season of him fighting it before his father realised he was not budging and that this was heading for disaster. It had taken far too long for the old man to see sense and call off the engagement, as per Lucas’ request.

After that, he was given his freedom back. Somewhat. The only way he could get out of it was to promise that he would look for a wife on his own the Season after. Lucas knew his father wanted to see his son married before he died, and there was a part of Lucas that could understand that.

But he didn't like being forced into something he didn't want. As far as Lucas was concerned, he would be fine if he didn't marry. Things were far more interesting as a bachelor. He would have to give up a lot if he got himself a wife, and Lucas didn't want to do that.

“Look,” Pierce sighed. “You’re supposed to be looking for a wife, and the Season is coming to an end soon.”

“I’ve got a couple of months left.”

“And you’re leaving it until the last minute. I would have thought you would find a woman to marry early on, so you didn’t want to have to think about it.”

Lucas shook his head.

“You know my thoughts on it. There’s nobody I want to marry. And I can’t believe you’re on Father’s side.”

“He said he would disinherit you, didn’t he?”

“He won’t. He’s too soft for that.”

“Do you want to push him to find out?” Pierce demanded.

Lucas harrumphed and scowled out the window. Now the scenery didn’t look as good as it did a moment ago. Talking about the pressure of finding a wife he didn’t want was enough to put him into a bad mood. Why did Pierce have to mention it? His closest and oldest friend was one of the few people

who knew the real Lucas Dashwood, and even he was pushing him to get married.

At the very least, he should pretend to be trying, but Lucas just couldn't be bothered to follow through. Hopefully, he could spin a tale about not being able to find anyone suitable, and his father would accept that. Otherwise, he could end up with an engagement he couldn't get out of again or be disinherited. Or both; Lucas knew his father would follow through on it if he could.

Hopefully, his father wouldn't have said anything about it to Lord Derbyshire; otherwise, the marquess would be doing his own matchmaking.

They finally entered the grounds and pulled up outside the house. Pierce jumped out first, whistling as he looked past the house.

“Now that is one view I could get used to. Where's the garden?”

“It slopes down. The house was built practically into the side of the valley.”

“How has the house not slipped into the gorge?”

“Good architecture, I suppose.” Lucas smiled when he saw a familiar figure leave the house behind a servant. “There’s the marquess.”

Lord Derbyshire was a remarkable figure, a handsome man at the age of fifty. Tall and broadly built, his iron-grey hair was immaculate. He had a strong nose, a strong jaw, and the warmest brown eyes Lucas had ever seen. His father’s friend had spent most of his life just doing what he wanted, and he chose when to settle down. It had worked out well for him to go at his own pace.

Lucas wanted that for himself as well. Why couldn’t he be more like Derbyshire.

He approached the older man and bowed.

“My Lord.”

“Lucas, my boy.” Derbyshire grinned and clasped Lucas’ hand. “I’m glad you could come. How is your mother?”

“She’s still a little under the weather, but I’m sure she’ll be better soon.”

“I hope she will recover. I’d like to have your parents here someday.”

“I’ll let them know.” Lucas turned and beckoned Pierce over. “This is my friend, Pierce Cowper, son of Sir Frances Cowper.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of the Cowper family.” Derbyshire stuck his hand out towards Pierce. “Welcome, Mr Cowper.”

“My Lord.” Pierce looked unsure whether to bow or shake the man’s hand. He chose the latter. “Thank you for allowing me to come along as well.”

“Well, it’s only fair that Lucas had a friend with him. And we have plenty of room. The more, the merrier, my wife said.”

“And where is Lady Derbyshire?” Lucas asked. “Are we going to meet her before dinner tonight?”

“I’m sure you will. She’s helping her niece and her friend get settled in.” Derbyshire signalled at a nearby footman. “Your luggage will be taken to your rooms. Let’s go inside and have something to drink. It’s a long journey from Milton Keynes.”

Lucas couldn't agree more with that. And he was dying for a drink.

They entered the house, Pierce's mouth still open as he looked around, almost forgetting to give his coat and hat to the butler. Lucas smiled at his friend's awe. It was certainly a magnificent place.

Then he spied someone in the drawing room, sitting on the settee and seeming to be talking to someone out of sight. She was petite and slight, with black hair pinned up on her head to reveal a delicately-shaped neck and smooth, pale skin. With that smile of hers, she did look very attractive. Definitely pleasant to look at.

Maybe this would be a good place to find a wife, after all. If not, then he could certainly have a bit of fun. The woman he could see certainly looked like she could have a lot of fun.

"Let's go and have a drink in my study," Derbyshire declared, leading the way down the hall. "We can talk without having to censure what we say around the ladies. Then you've got time until dinner. Does eight sound good to you?"

“Absolutely fine.” Lucas followed him. “We’ll be looking forward to it.”

Pierce made a slight noise, and when Lucas looked at him he seemed to be holding back a grin. From the knowing look his friend shot at him, Pierce had seen the pretty raven-haired woman as well.

Lucas rolled his eyes and nudged his friend. They would talk about that later.

#

“How do I look?” Dorothy asked as she checked herself in the mirror. “Do I look presentable enough?”

Frederica laughed.

“That’s the fourth time you’ve said it since I’ve entered the room, Dorothy? You look absolutely fine. Doesn’t she, Teresa?”

She turned to the maid assigned to her friend. Teresa simply smiled and nodded. Dorothy frowned and leaned a little towards the mirror.

“I’m not too sure,” she murmured. “Things don’t seem right ...”

“You’re just looking for an excuse not to go downstairs.” Frederica tugged her friend’s arm. “Stop stalling and come on. Everyone will be downstairs by now, and dinner will start soon.”

Dorothy knew that. She just wanted to make a good first impression. Most of the guests she wouldn’t have met before,

so she would be entering a room of strangers. Dorothy could cope with interacting with others, but the first few minutes of going into a new environment left her with a big flutter of nerves. It made her want to bolt.

“Oh, Dorothy ...” Frederica turned her around. “Take a few deep breaths and focus. You’re going to be fine. Once we’re in there, and you’re going with the flow, you’ll be absolutely fine. And I’ll be there as well. Plus, if you need a moment in private to breathe, just let Aunt Annabelle know.”

Dorothy listened to her friend’s calming words, which had a surprising effect. Frederica was the one who would jump out of a carriage without a second thought, but she was also helpful in calming Dorothy’s fears. She was a good influence, and Dorothy knew she wouldn’t be able to cope as well if her closest friend wasn’t here.

She was going to struggle if they were finally separated.

“Better now?” Frederica smiled. “Come on. Let’s go downstairs. I’m starving.”

“Alright.” Dorothy took a deep breath. “Let’s do this.”

They left the bedchamber and were almost at the top of the stairs when they saw a familiar figure coming the other way. A tall, fair-haired young man close to their age, looking splendid in dark green. Dorothy found herself smiling when she recognised him. It had been a while since she had seen him.

“Gabriel?”

Gabriel Burville stopped, staring at them for a moment. Then he seemed to realise who he was looking at and gave Dorothy a warm smile.

“Dorothy!” He approached them, clasping Dorothy’s fingers and kissing her knuckles as he bowed. His eyes twinkled as he looked up at her. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here. I didn’t think you knew the marquess and marchioness.”

“I knew Lady Derbyshire before her marriage.” Dorothy gestured at Frederica. “She is Frederica’s aunt, after all.”

“Oh, of course.” Gabriel kissed Frederica’s outstretched hand. “Forgive me for forgetting about that.”

“You’ll always be forgiven, Gabriel.” Frederica laughed. “So, you’re here because of my Uncle Mark?”

“Hmm? Oh, Lord Derbyshire. His townhouse in London is on the same street as my family’s house. He came over to dinner quite a few times.” Gabriel shrugged. “I must say, my parents were surprised about his marriage. And my aunt Cassandra. I believe she had some ... well, she felt something towards him. She wasn’t too happy.”

Dorothy could believe that. Gabriel’s matronly aunt was one of those people who seemed to live in her own world. When she set her sights on something, she wanted it, and it just made everyone around her uncomfortable. She had certainly felt something a bit off about the woman when she was younger.

“I’m glad to see you here, Dorothy,” Gabriel said, offering his arm. “May I escort you to dinner? I’d like to catch up on you and see how things are going.”

Dorothy smiled and took his arm.

“I would like that as well. It’s been a while.”

Frederica pouted.

“Aren’t you going to escort me, or will I have to trail along behind you two?”

Gabriel chuckled and offered his other arm.

“I’m not likely to forget you, Frederica. Just be careful going down the stairs. I don’t want us all to take a tumble.”

Frederica took his arm, and they made their way down the stairs. They were a little wide, so they almost took up the entire staircase. Dorothy was walking down the narrowest part of the stairs as they followed the sweeping curve, so she had to grip tightly onto the bannister to stop herself from slipping. It made for a slower journey down to flatter ground.

“Are you alright, Dorothy?” Gabriel asked as they reached the bottom. “You looked rather uncomfortable there.”

“I’m fine.” Dorothy kicked at her skirts. “I can’t see anything with these in the way.”

“You could always take it off.”

Frederica gasped and swatted Gabriel’s arm.

“Gabriel! Don’t talk like that. What if someone overheard just a comment?”

“There’s nobody around. And Dorothy knows I’m teasing.”
Gabriel winked. “Don’t you?”

Dorothy rolled her eyes.

“Your sense of humour is as flat as ever, Gabriel.”

“But you and I are still friends.”

“Sometimes, I wonder why.”

Gabriel laughed, and Dorothy couldn't help smiling. She and Gabriel had practically grown up together. His family lived in Kempston, not far from the house in Bedford that Dorothy had grown up in. They had spent a lot of time as children, and Dorothy saw him as a brother to her.

She had only ever had a sister, and she had wanted a brother. Gabriel filled that part for her and seemed willing to play the role. It had been some time since they had seen each other, Gabriel having spent most of his time following his father around and learning about the family business, so this was refreshing.

Maybe the evening wouldn't be as unnerving as she was thinking.

"Well, let's go into the drawing room." Gabriel squeezed her arm. "I hope they serve dinner soon. It's almost eight, and I'm really hungry."

"You're always hungry," Frederica teased as they walked across the foyer. "I'm surprised you didn't end up so fat with

the amount of food you eat.”

“You’re still the charmer, aren’t you, Frederica?”

Frederica gave him a sweet smile, which just had Dorothy laughing more. That laughter faded as the drawing room door opened and a petite, raven-haired beauty wearing a gorgeous dark blue dress emerged. She stopped when she saw them, looking Dorothy up and down with a slight sneer. Dorothy bristled at such a brazen expression from someone she had never met before.

Then the woman’s eyes landed on Gabriel.

“Lord Burville.”

“Lady Marcia,” Gabriel said smoothly. “I didn’t realise you would be here as well.”

“I’m a friend of Lord Derbyshire’s niece. Of course I would be here.” Lady Marcia arched an eyebrow, looking from Dorothy to Frederica and back again. “Nice to see you’re still having women eating out of the palm of your hand. You certainly know how to make them fall at your feet.”

Frederica cleared her throat.

“I take it you two know each other?”

Gabriel sighed.

“This is Lady Marcia Bamfield, daughter to the Earl of Reading. Lady Frederica Colt and Lady Dorothy ...Napier.”

His voice faded away as Lady Marcia walked away, her head held high as she turned her back on them. Dorothy didn’t

know whether to be bemused or annoyed at the blatant disrespect.

“How on earth do you know a woman like that?”

“I met her in London. Let’s just say she’s a very ... flirtatious woman. And she didn’t like that she didn’t have me eating out of her palm.”

“With her attitude, I’m not surprised,” Dorothy grunted.

Gabriel chuckled.

“Just ignore her. If the gentlemen around her aren’t paying her their full attention, she isn’t interested. She thinks having a strop like that has men running after her.”

“And you’re not?” Frederica asked.

“Why would I? I don’t like her. Now, shall we? I’m sure your aunt will be wondering where you two are.”

Dorothy hoped that not all the other guests were like Lady Marcia, who didn’t seem like a nice woman. She squared her shoulders.

“Let’s go in.”

Gabriel shook his head with a smile.

“You don’t need to look so scared, Dorothy. I know most of the people the marquess has invited, and they’re really nice. It’s only Lady Marcia Bamfield you’ve got to worry about, and I know you’re capable of handling yourself around her.”

“Do you think she’s going to cause trouble?” Frederica enquired.

“Let’s hope not. But I’m sure your aunt will be able to keep her in line.”

Dorothy hoped that as well. She didn’t want the week ruined because of one young woman who had already decided to dislike her.

Chapter 3

Lucas felt very satisfied once dinner was over. The food they had been served was delicious, very succulent. And very filling. If it were possible, they would all be fat in no time. Thank goodness that wasn't possible after just one meal.

He made his way slowly back to the drawing room. The ladies had already been led away to go and do whatever they did when they were on their own. That was a shame; Lucas had been keen to talk to a few of them. There were some pretty unmarried ladies. Maybe he could find someone he could court and get his father's pestering to go away.

Although Lucas didn't know what his father would say if he knew that Lady Marcia Bamfield was present and was one of the unmarried ladies. Lucas liked the look of her, and she was a good conversationalist for the little time they did talk, but she was rather flirtatious. A little too much with which to be comfortable.

Normally, Lucas didn't mind that, and he would often flirt back just as outrageously. But he was in his father's friend's

house and didn't want to be disrespectful. He needed to behave himself.

Besides, he had heard quite a few things about Lady Marcia. She hadn't been involved in any major scandal, but her name had been mentioned a few times. She was headstrong and knew what she wanted.

The problem was she didn't seem to know when to stop, only pulling back when everything was on the cusp of exploding. Lucas had heard himself about the last time she had been mentioned; she had been flirting with a married man, and the wife found out about it. To say the fallout hadn't been pleasant was an understatement.

While that was enough to make her interesting, and Lucas might have had some fun with her himself, that wasn't really something he was looking for in a wife. They appeared to get along, but he couldn't see it going any further. Lady Marcia was just a distraction for him.

It felt a little warm in the house, and Lucas touched Pierce's arm as his friend passed.

“I’m going to take a breath of air on the terrace,” he said. “Let Lord Derbyshire know that I’ll be along shortly.”

“I will.” Pierce peered at him. “Are you alright? You look a little green.”

“I think I might have eaten a bit too much, and the house is rather warm.”

“I’m not surprised you ate too much. The food was delicious.” Pierce tapped his fist on Lucas’ shoulder. “You go and breathe. Take your time.”

Lucas gave him a grateful nod and headed through the house, looking for a way to the outside. It had been some years since he had been at the marquess’ home, and it had taken him a while to get used to the maze. Now he was having to go through it again.

Finally, he found the outside door and stepped out into the night air. Darkness had fallen, and he couldn't see anything beyond the light coming from the windows except for a few tiny lights dotted here and there in the distance. It was a little unnerving that it was this dark, and Lucas could remember feeling scared by it when he was younger. And he had been a little frightened at how quiet it was in the middle of the night. It had felt like he had gone deaf.

But it was somehow beautiful, even if he couldn't see anything. Lucas stood on the edge of the terrace, just in the light, and took a deep breath. The air was fresh and clean. Surprisingly, the smell that would have come from the farm they passed at the bottom of the hill couldn't be detected. It didn't waft past his nose.

This week was going to be what he needed before he and Pierce moved on to Wales. They weren't going to give up on heading to Cardiff and the coast. It was beautiful at this time of year. And it would give him time to think about if there was anyone who might pass his father's inspection if he did choose to court a woman here.

If there were, then it would work out. If there weren't, that wouldn't be his fault. Lucas was just going to carry on as normal.

Hopefully. From how Lady Marcia had been looking at him across the table during dinner, she obviously had some designs on him. As the son of an earl, Lucas was in high demand. Eventually becoming the Countess of Milton Keynes would be perfect for her. Somehow, Lucas couldn't see that happening. She was fun for a flirty encounter, but that was it.

It was a shame because she was very beautiful. Outwardly, she would be perfect. Inwardly was another matter.

Then his thoughts drifted to the tall, slender woman he had seen enter the room on one arm of Viscount Constable's son. Lucas had tried not to stare at her with his mouth open. Her light red hair was pinned up, but it didn't hide the curls that escaped, framing an oval face that suggested she spent time out in the sun without a parasol. She had looked a little nervous to begin with, but she slowly came out of her shell, and Lucas saw her smile.

Now she would be more interesting. Lucas wanted to get to know her to find out more, but he hadn't had a chance to talk to her. She had sat at the far end of the table near the marchioness, and Lucas didn't think it would be polite to shout down the table towards her. He didn't even know what her name was.

Maybe he should find out more about her. As he had found with Lady Marcia, beauty only went so far if you couldn't back it up with a good personality and disposition.

“Oh!”

Lucas turned, almost doing a double-take, when he saw the redhead he had been thinking about standing on the terrace staring at him. It was like someone had conjured her up for him as he thought about her. He gave her a smile and bowed.

“My Lady. Were you hoping for a moment alone?”

“I ... well ...” Her cheeks darkened a little as she bit her lip and looked around. “I was hoping for a moment outside before I went back and joined the ladies. I didn’t mean to bother you.”

“It’s fine. You’re not bothering me at all.” Lucas tilted his head to one side. “You and I can share the terrace together, can’t we?”

“That isn’t really proper if we have no chaperone.”

“You can stay where you are, and I’ll stay here.” He held up his hands. “I won’t do anything untoward, I promise.”

She looked a little dubious. But she nodded and moved to lean against the wall by the window. The light from the candles inside landed on her, making her hair look like fire crackling in the hearth. Very attractive.

Lucas cleared his throat.

“How do you know our hosts? I assume you’re acquainted with one of them.”

“My friend is Lady Derbyshire’s niece. She invited me to come along with her for the week. And you?”

“My father is a friend of the marquess. He was unable to come himself, so I’m here in his place.”

“You’re a friend of Lord Derbyshire.” She looked him up and down in an unabashed way. “So, you know him quite well, then.”

“Pretty much. I haven’t seen him for a couple of years, though.”

“What is he like?”

“Warm, generous, kind.” Lucas couldn’t help smiling. “Has a penchant for chocolate.”

She giggled. It was a surprisingly nice sound. Lucas didn’t care for giggling, but coming from her, it was different. He wanted to hear more of it.

Wait, what was happening to him?

“Sounds like the marquess and marchioness are kindred spirits. She was always giving us chocolate as treats when we were children. And a lot of it.”

“Did you have to hide it away and eat it when you thought nobody would be paying attention?”

She grinned.

“Is that what you did?”

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