



Cobalt Fairy
PUBLISHING



— THE —
HEARTLESS DUKE'S
BRIDE

TIFFANY BATON

THE HEARTLESS DUKE'S BRIDE

A HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE

TIFFANY BATON



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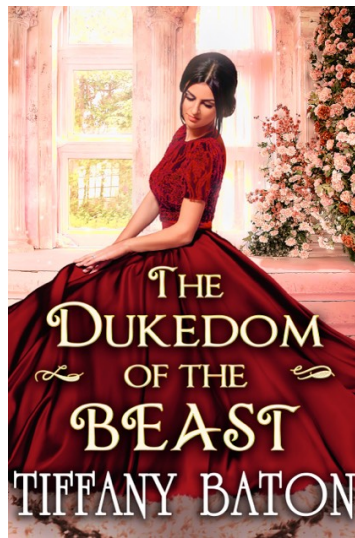
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ABOUT THE BOOK

“Nothing could have prepared me for the storm that is called my wife...”

Cold and emotionless, Duke Edward had no intention of marrying. Until his failing business leaves him no other choice. He must find a wife immediately!

Lydia was raised to be the perfect lady. But after being rejected by her suitor, her parents decide to take matters into their own hands. And marry her off to a heartless Duke...

While Edward builds his icy walls to keep his new wife away, Lydia is determined to melt them all down. Forcing him to face a newfound emotion: affection. Yet a well-kept secret threatens to take away the only thing Edward never knew he needed... Her.

CHAPTER ONE

“Lydia, I’m in love with someone else.”

Lydia stared at Michael, unable to believe what she was hearing. He had been courting her for months now. She had begun to believe that their marriage was written in the stars. She had been certain that his proposal would come any day now. Her father, the Viscount of Haddington, had certainly been expecting it, and though Lydia knew the Earl of Worley would not have been his first choice, he seemed to have made his peace with it. He was ready for his only daughter to marry, and he wasn’t going to be particular about her choice.

But now, apparently, she wasn’t going to have a choice. Not when it came to Michael.

She must be hearing him incorrectly. It was the only explanation she could think of.

“What do you mean?” she demanded. “How can you be in love with someone else when you’re courting *me*?”

“We met at the Rivington Ball.”

“That was just last week.”

“I know when it was.”

“You don’t need to be so cold about this. I don’t understand,” she mumbled. “I thought you were in love with me. I thought you and I—”

“Whatever you thought about the two of us, I’m afraid you were wrong,” he said. “I did think I would try after Rivington. I didn’t want to simply give up on you. I wanted to give us a chance. But now that I see you again, I simply don’t see any way this can work. We’re going to have to end it. When I look at you, all I can think about is the fact that you aren’t her.”

“But who is she?” Lydia demanded.

“Does that really matter?”

And, of course, it didn’t. What mattered was that Lydia had been rejected. She had thought of Michael as her future. But now they were standing in the middle of the dance floor—he had ended things with her *in the middle of a dance*—and she felt as if everyone in the room was staring at her.

She wanted nothing more than to get away.

“Please, excuse me,” she said, pulling out of his arms. And even though the music was still playing, and the dance hadn’t ended, he didn’t try to stop her. He let her go.

That was the moment she truly understood how little he cared. He really was in love with someone else if he could just let her walk away like that.

Well, that was fine with Lydia. Let him court someone else. Let him marry someone else. Let *her* always have to wonder whether her husband's affections for her might blow away in a strong breeze!

I'm lucky. I was able to get away from him before he could hurt me too badly. At least I know I won't be stuck with him in ten years, wasting away in a loveless marriage!

At least, not that specific loveless marriage.

She made her way through the crowd, looking for her mother and wondering how she was going to break the news of this latest disappointment. The Viscountess was very interested in seeing her daughter married—perhaps only Lydia's father wanted it more—and Lydia knew that both of her parents would be disappointed about what Michael had done and that they would blame her.

She was relieved to see her friend Nancy standing with her mother. At least that meant the conversation might not be about Lydia right away. She could delay the inevitable. Maybe she wouldn't have to tell her mother the news until they'd left the ball—maybe it would be easier to do it at home.

Nancy lit up when she saw Lydia. She held out her arms, and the ladies embraced one another.

“I feel as if it’s been forever!” Nancy exclaimed.

“Yes, you weren’t at the Rivington ball,” Lydia said. “I thought I would see you there.”

“Well, Colin didn’t want to attend,” Nancy explained. “And I didn’t feel right going without him, not with us so recently married.”

“That’s quite understandable,” Lydia’s mother said. “Tell us, Nancy—or should I say, *Lady Hunter*—how has married life been?”

“Oh, it’s wonderful,” Nancy replied. “It’s hard to believe that I only met Colin last Season. I feel as if I’ve known him forever. I was so lucky to meet someone in my very first Season who I could see myself with for the rest of my life.”

Lydia was grateful for the distraction, for something other than her own affairs to focus on. “Do you think you’ll start a family soon?” she asked.

It was a rather personal question, but it was the sort of thing she and Nancy had often discussed last Season when they had been single together and when Lydia hadn’t been on her own.

Nancy smiled. “I certainly hope so,” she said. “I’d love to have children. Colin and I have only discussed it a few times, but I believe he feels the same way I do. It’s a very exciting time.”

“Yes, it must be,” Lydia agreed warmly, feeling happy for her friend.

“Well, Lydia knows all about it, as a matter of fact,” the Viscountess interjected. “Haven’t you told Lady Hunter your news yet, Lydia?”

“Mother, there’s really no need for this.”

If her mother raised the subject, Lydia knew, there would simply be no avoiding the conversation—they’d be forced to talk about it.

Her mother ignored her. “Lydia is being courted by the Earl of Worley,” she announced. “I expect him to propose to her any day now!”

“Oh, Lydia!” Nancy exclaimed “Why didn’t you say anything about this? How lovely! We’ll both be married. We can host parties and come to call on one another at each other’s manors, and maybe our children will even be born near the same time—wouldn’t that be something?”

Lydia’s heart sank. She didn’t want to discuss what had just happened between Michael and herself, but there seemed to be no avoiding it now. It would be cruel to let Nancy go on like this.

“Actually,” she said, “I won’t be marrying Lord Worley.”

It felt strange to refer to him so formally, given that he had asked her weeks ago to call him *Michael*, but there was a sense of relief in it too. Already, she could feel the distance between the pair of them beginning to grow. Soon, she would have forgotten all about him.

“I don’t understand,” the Viscountess said rather sharply. “What have you done?”

Of course, she thinks it’s something I did.

“I didn’t do anything, Mother,” Lydia replied, doing her best to be patient. “It’s him. He’s fallen in love with someone else.”

Her mother gasped. “But he can’t have! He’s courting *you!*”

“He’s ended our courtship.”

There really was nothing like her mother’s flair for the dramatic to make moments like this seem less serious, Lydia thought. The Viscountess was behaving as though someone had died, and in the face of that reaction, it was a bit difficult for Lydia to consider this a serious problem at all.

“I’m sorry, Lydia,” Nancy said sympathetically. “He ended things just now?”

“While we were dancing,” Lydia scoffed.

“Well, that’s very cold-hearted!” Nancy exclaimed. “You would think he would do it somewhere private.”

“I agree,” Lydia said. “I’d say I’m well rid of a gentleman who would do something like that. He won’t be missed.”

The Viscountess still wasn’t listening. She flung her arms around Lydia. “Oh, darling,” she reassured. “Please, try not to worry. We’ll find someone for you. I know how hopeful you were that this would be the one, but I don’t want you to despair. There are so many more gentlemen, and you’re such a lovely young lady—we’ll have you married by the end of the Season, I promise.”

“I’m not worried,” Lydia said, her voice muffled by her mother’s shoulder against her face. “It’s for the best, Mother. I didn’t love him anyway.”

“Having your heart broken is such a painful thing,” her mother lamented.

Lydia gave up. Her mother wasn’t going to hear her. Idly, she wondered what it would be like if her heart was ever *truly* broken. Would her mother’s hysterics be a comfort to her in a situation like that, or would they just make everything feel worse?

“At least we’re at a ball,” Nancy pointed out. “You can find plenty of people to dance with and forget your troubles.”

“Yes,” the Viscountess agreed firmly. “And I’m sure you’ll have a new suitor by the end of the night, Lydia.”

Her tone made it clear what she really meant—*you'd better find someone by the end of the night.*

Lydia, though, was sure she wouldn't. It wasn't that she didn't wish to marry, exactly, but the way her mother pushed her to find someone as quickly as possible wasn't helping. It was the pressure from her parents that had led to her ending up in a loveless courtship with Michael in the first place, and although she'd been offended and shocked by his ending it, she was glad it was over and that she wouldn't be marrying him.

Who knew what sort of gentleman her parents might choose for her next?

No, a break from courtship was definitely in order.

“Come, Nancy,” she urged. “Let's go and find some drinks. I'm a bit warm.”

“Lydia, are you sure you don't want me to go with you?” the Viscountess asked. “I know you must be feeling anxious now that your courtship has ended.”

Lydia was feeling nothing of the sort. The only thing that might have awakened any anxiety in her at the moment was the way her mother was behaving, which she felt more than capable of dealing with—but it would be better to have some distance.

“I'll be all right,” she said. “Nancy will see to me.”

The two young ladies hurried away.

“She’s a bit much, isn’t she?” Lydia asked as they made their way over to the table where drinks were being served.

“She’s only trying to protect your interests,” Nancy replied. “She wants to see you married. I think it’s quite understandable.”

“I *do* understand. But it’s almost as if she would be happier if I was distraught over the loss of Lord Worley. The truth is, he was a bit of a nightmare, and I’m much better off without him. I’m glad he’s gone. My only concern is what sort of gentleman I’ll be matched with next.”

“Do you have your eye on anyone?” Nancy asked.

“No one,” Lydia said. “I just want something like what you and Colin have. I want someone I can actually feel something for. That would be amazing.”

“You should tell your parents that love is the most important thing to you,” Nancy suggested. “I’m sure they’d listen.”

“Oh, no, they wouldn’t,” Lydia said. “They want me to marry quickly. They want me to marry a wealthy gentleman in good social standing. The least important thing to them is love. They would mock me, and probably scold me, for caring about it, and they certainly wouldn’t take it into account when making decisions about my future. The best thing I can do is keep on the lookout for any gentlemen I might be able to form

such a connection with—and, in the meantime, do my best to stay away from any I know I'll never have feelings for.”

“That sounds like a lot of work,” Nancy observed.

“You're very lucky to have met a gentleman you love,” Lydia murmured. “For most of us, it simply isn't like that. I'm happy for you, Nancy, and I'm glad your life is going so well, but mine won't be that simple.”

“I wish it could be,” Nancy said sadly. “You're one of my closest friends. I want the very best for you.”

“I know you do.” Lydia smiled. “And at least I have you, Nancy. That's enough for me, for now.”

CHAPTER TWO

“Edward!”

Edward turned away from the door, allowing his brother to follow him inside but not returning his greeting. This visit wasn't exactly unwelcome, but it was inconvenient. He had set aside the whole day today for work, and now, that wasn't going to be able to happen because he was going to have to entertain Colin.

And Colin was someone who required a lot of entertainment.

Edward liked his younger brother quite a lot, of course, but the two did not share the same outlook on life. Edward lived for fun and merriment, and he was always looking for new sources of enjoyment. And though Edward did not disapprove of his brother's recent marriage to his wife, Nancy, it was hardly the sort of thing he would have chosen for himself.

There was no practical value in such an arrangement. Colin was clever enough to realize that, but he didn't seem to care.

“How was your honeymoon?” Edward asked his brother as they sat down in the library, mostly because he knew the

question was expected. Colin would want to talk about his recent trip with his wife.

“It was lovely,” Colin replied. “We saw all sorts of fine things. You really must try to go to Paris, Edward.”

“You know I don’t have time for that sort of thing,” Edward said. “My work keeps me far too busy.”

“You could take a bit of time for yourself,” Colin protested. “I feel as if the only thing you do is work.”

“It takes hard work to be successful,” Edward said.

“You seem very troubled,” Colin observed. “More so than usual. Has something happened, Edward?”

Edward sighed. “One of my business arrangements has fallen through,” he replied. “It’s happening more and more lately, and it’s a very difficult matter to deal with. I may have to find new people to work with, but of course, the more people choose not to do business with me, the more word spreads. It’s maddening because I’ve done absolutely nothing wrong. These people have no valid reason for failing to trust me, and yet they do.”

“But they must have *some* reason,” Colin urged. “Even if their reasons aren’t valid, they must be able to point to something that drives them not to trust you.”

“Oh, they can, but it’s foolish.”

“Even so, knowing what the problem is might help you to solve it for them,” Colin suggested reasonably. “If you know what it is they don’t like, you can make a change, can’t you? Make yourself more pleasant for them to work with.”

“Hardly.” Edward snorted. “There’s nothing the matter with the way I run my business. My books are unimpeachable. Anyone can see it. What they don’t like about me is something personal.”

“But what is it?”

“They say that I’m *intimidating*.”

“Well,” Colin said apologetically, “you are, a little bit.”

“You’re intimidated by me?”

“I’m not. But you’re my brother. It would be senseless for me to feel that way because I know you too well. I do understand why others might find you intimidating, though. I know Nancy did when she first met you.”

Edward grumbled, “She doesn’t feel like that now.”

“No, she doesn’t. She knows you better.”

“And, anyway, she’s a lady. Of course, the way she feels about me is different from the way my business associates do. It’s

not at all the same thing.”

“I’m not saying it’s exactly the same,” Colin said. “But I am saying I can imagine someone finding you intimidating. It doesn’t shock me to hear what you’re saying. That’s all.”

“It’s more than that,” Edward continued. “It isn’t just my demeanor. If it was, I suppose I could try to be... softer. Even though I shouldn’t have to do that, and it’s a foolish and needy thing for anyone to ask for.”

“All right, then what’s the other problem?”

“It’s so foolish that I’m almost embarrassed to say it aloud,” Edward admitted. “But the truth is that it bothers them that I’m not married.”

“Well, that *is* rather silly,” Colin agreed.

“Didn’t I tell you it was?”

“You did. But are you telling me that they’re only willing to do business with people who are married? I can’t understand what difference that makes.”

“Apparently, they don’t like what it says about me,” Edward explained.

“What does it say about you?”

“That there’s something wrong with me, according to the men I work with,” Edward said. “They look at my personality—my *intimidating* personality—and they look at the fact that I’m over thirty years old, and between those two facts, they put together a picture of a man who can’t be trusted. A man who is so fundamentally flawed that, in spite of his being a duke, no lady will give him the time of day.”

“That’s not true at all,” Colin argued. “You’re not married because you’re so dedicated to your work. It has nothing to do with ladies not taking an interest in you. I can vouch for that.”

“I know that,” Edward agreed. “Of course, I know that. But what can I do? I can’t sit in business meetings, explaining that I’ve chosen not to marry because the institution holds no interest for me. Why would anyone believe that? Besides, I shouldn’t be forced to have such a strange conversation over and over. It’s no way to do business, and it prevents me from being able to talk about the things that are really important.”

“I see your problem,” Colin said. “But what are you going to do about it?”

“I know of only one thing I can do,” Edward replied. “Little though I like the idea, it’s time for me to think seriously about marrying.”

“Do you mean that?”

“I see no other option! If I’m to continue my business uninterrupted by this foolishness, I’m going to have to find myself a wife.”

“I always hoped you would come to that conclusion eventually,” Colin admitted. “But I never thought it would look like this—marrying for the sake of business! I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. If there was anything that would ever motivate you to take an action—*any* action—business would be that thing. That’s all you really love.”

He didn’t say it critically. His tone was matter-of-fact, and Edward took no offense.

It was perhaps a harsh way to communicate the point, but Colin was not wrong. Business was the most important thing to Edward, more important than anything else he did, and it *was* the motivating factor behind all of his decisions. Of course, it would be the thing that drove him to consider marriage, at last.

“But you’re going to have to learn to love more than just your work if you want to marry,” Colin said sagely.

“You act as if you’ve been married all your life instead of just a few months,” Edward teased.

“I’ve been married a few months longer than you have,” Colin argued. “You’ve always been the older brother, Edward. You’ve always given good advice, and I’ve always considered myself lucky to have you to listen to. But now, for the first time in our lives, we’re facing something that I have more experience with. For the first time, I can advise you. I know it’s not what we’re accustomed to, but you would do well to listen to me here, Edward, because I can help you.”

“Perhaps you could if I was interested in finding love,” Edward said. “But I don’t want that. Trying to fall in love... that’s too much work, too much effort. I don’t need something like what you and Nancy have. I need a woman I can point to and say, ‘this is my wife.’”

“It’s not a wife you’re looking for,” Colin observed. “A duchess, maybe, but not a wife.”

“Well, Margaret will be happy.”

Margaret was their stepmother, and she had talked of little else besides Edward’s marriage since their father’s death. But Edward couldn’t help feeling that however much Margaret might push for his marriage, her heart must not truly be in it. If she really wanted to see him married, surely she could find more promising matches than the ladies she had recommended over the past few years.

“I won’t tell her until I’ve made all the arrangements,” Edward decided. “And I’ll very much appreciate it if you don’t say anything to her either.”

“You’re too hard on Margaret,” Colin said. “She’s not as bad as you seem to think she is. And she did really care about Father.”

“I don’t know that she did. Their relationship was always very tumultuous. They argued constantly.”

“I know, but...”

“You didn’t like her either. What changed?”

“I don’t know. I suppose I’ve come to feel some empathy toward her. She did lose a child. That must have been difficult. You remember how sad it made her.”

Edward nodded.

His stepmother’s miscarriage was the one thing about her that did have the power to stir his sympathy. He knew it had been painful for her, that she had always longed to be a mother. Being a stepmother was different. He and Colin weren’t hers. There was no resentment between them over that fact—Edward didn’t think of her as his mother any more than Margaret thought of him as her child.

It was just that he didn’t like her very much. She had been a drain on his father and on their family. Things would have been better if they had never known each other.

“I’ll let her know eventually,” Edward told his brother. “But I don’t want to hear her opinion of what I’m doing until the wheels have already been set in motion. If she knows I’m looking for a wife, she may try to help me find one, and I’m certainly not interested in her help in finding someone to marry.”

“Very well,” Colin agreed. “But I think you are going to need *some* help, Edward. You want to find a lady who wishes to be a duchess but who has no interest in love, and you want to do it quickly. That’s going to be difficult, especially since you don’t want to find yourself married to someone who’s only interested in taking advantage of you financially.”

Edward sighed. “This is going to be impossible.”

“Not impossible,” his brother corrected him. “Complicated, yes. But I think it can be done.”

“You sound as if you have an idea.”

“I do. I’m going to speak to Nancy about it.”

“That’s your answer for everything these days.”

“Well, it’s not a terrible answer to have,” Colin said. “Part of being married is knowing that someone is always on your side, as you’ll discover for yourself soon enough.”

Edward struggled not to roll his eyes. He was happy for Colin’s happiness, but it was also a bit tiring to have to keep hearing him talk like this. As if he knew everything and there was nothing left that anyone could tell him. It was ridiculous.

But even so... maybe Colin did have a point.

“Do you think Nancy would be able to help?”

“I think Nancy might know someone who would fit the description of what you’re looking for,” Colin suggested. “You mustn’t forget that she has friends who are unmarried ladies. And she would be able to tell us which of them are worthy contenders to be your wife. We should ask her.”

“Perhaps that is a good idea,” Edward said grudgingly. “Very well, you have my blessing to discuss it with her. But let me know what she says, please, before you approach any young ladies.”

“Of course, I will,” Colin agreed. “You needn’t worry, Edward. We’re going to find the solution to this problem. And I’ll make certain it’s a solution that will make both you and the lady in question happy.”

CHAPTER THREE

“What do you mean, you’ve made an arrangement for me to marry?” Lydia cried.

Her father raised an eyebrow. “Lydia, this can’t possibly come as a surprise to you. You knew that this was going to happen. Why are you reacting this way? You haven’t even met the gentleman.”

“That’s just it,” Lydia said. “How can you have arranged my marriage to someone I haven’t even met? What if I don’t like him?”

“You don’t seem to like anyone,” Lord Haddington pointed out.

He was much cannier and more aware of Lydia’s desires than her mother was, but that canniness had never manifested in any desire to give Lydia the things she wanted. If anything, he was simply cleverer at finding ways to manipulate her into the things she *didn’t* want.

So, I suppose he’s right, in a way. I should have seen this coming. I should have expected my father to do exactly what

he wanted to do without even considering how I might feel about it—without thinking of that as something that matters. That's what he's always done, and it's what he always will do.

“You look all right,” Lord Haddington observed, gazing at her with a critical eye.

“What do you mean?”

“I want you to make a good first impression on your future husband. He's on his way here now.”

“And this is how I'm finding out? Father!”

“You'll do fine,” Lord Haddington said. “Make sure you're polite to him, that's all.”

If only she could get away with being *impolite*!

But Lydia knew better than to hope such a ploy would work. Her father would know at once what she was doing, and he would reveal her scheme. And once her *future husband*—just thinking the words made her feel rather ill—understood the motivation behind the rudeness, he would ignore it completely.

It wouldn't work. Men decided everything.

“Who is this gentleman?” Lydia asked.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe he would be a decent gentleman—someone she could find a way to love. That was what she wanted, after all—a match with someone she could love.

“Now there, you're in luck,” her father replied. “The gentleman happens to be the Duke of Westfrey.”

“The Duke of Westfrey?”

She was startled. She didn't know the Duke, but she certainly knew *of* him—his brother Colin was Nancy's husband!

“Can you believe it?” Lord Haddington asked, not understanding the true reason behind her shock. “A marriage to a duke is more than I dared to dream of, and now it seems to be what's happening—just as long as today's meeting goes well and he doesn't change his mind.” He gave her a firm stare. “You'll do nothing to ruin this, I hope.”

She wasn't sure whether her father was expressing a lack of faith in her or a lack of trust. If it was the former, she was bothered. Her experience with Michael hadn't shaken her confidence—she knew she could keep a gentleman's interest if she really wanted to. But she had to admit that if her father didn't trust her to try to engage the Duke, he was right to have doubts. If she could think of any way to run him off, she would do it.

There was a knock at the door.

“Go into the sitting room,” Lord Haddington ordered. “I’ll bring His Grace in momentarily.”

Seeing nothing to do except obey, Lydia went into the sitting room and took a seat. A moment later, her father returned, a tall, dark-haired gentleman following behind him.

Lydia was startled at the gentleman’s appearance. He was tall, broad-shouldered, with bold facial features that commanded attention. She thought he might have been handsome, but it was difficult to say for certain because the expression he wore was so harsh. He looked as if he was examining their sitting room for dirt.

Lydia wondered whether he saw dirt when he looked at her.

This is why he’s not married. This is why Father was able to make a match like this for me. It’s not because I’ve done anything to make myself worthy of a duke. It’s because no one else wants to marry him because he’s so fearsome.

Well, she wasn’t afraid of him. If fear was something he had grown used to encountering, she would take him by surprise.

She rose to her feet. “Your Grace,” she said. “Thank you so much for coming today.”

She saw her father raise his eyebrows. He didn’t say anything, of course. There was nothing he *could* say. But she knew he was wondering about what she was doing. He hadn’t expected this from her—that she would cooperate like this. He wasn’t used to that, and she supposed he didn’t know what to think.

Good. She liked confounding him. She liked knowing that he didn't know what she was up to. Because she most certainly was up to something. She might not be able to get rid of the Duke by being rude to him, but there was another way—one her father might not be savvy enough to understand until it was too late for him to stop her.

“I hear good things about you, Miss Lydia,” the Duke said, and Lydia wondered if that could be true.

It was difficult to imagine her father praising her to someone, although she supposed he must have done so in order to convince the Duke that he wanted to marry her.

“What have you heard?” she asked flirtatiously, because she knew that her father would never answer that question.

“That you were lovely,” the Duke replied. “And it's turned out to be the truth. I'm very pleased.”

With her blonde hair, blue eyes, and slender frame, Lydia knew that she was what men liked. It didn't surprise her to hear that he found her looks favorable. But she had yet to meet a gentleman who looked beyond that, who cared about who she was as a person.

The fact that looks were the first thing the Duke had mentioned about her strengthened her resolve to push him away. If she'd learned that her father had said something else to entice him, something that mattered more, she might have felt differently. But she couldn't trust a man who put such stock in what a lady looked like.

Looks were only temporary, for one thing—who was to say how he would feel several years from now when she was no longer beautiful? That wasn't a chance she was willing to take. He couldn't be trusted.

So, she smiled at him alluringly. "I'm just happy that Father was able to bring home a duke for me!" she enthused. "I'm so excited at the prospect of becoming a duchess, Your Grace. That sounds wonderful."

Let them make what they could of that.

She was showing enthusiasm. Her father might understand what was wrong with the way she was doing it, but would he be bold enough to stop her with the Duke sitting right in front of them?

He glowered at her—apparently, he meant to make the attempt, at least. "Lydia," he hissed, "don't be disrespectful."

Lydia could tell by her father's demeanor that he was as intimidated by the Duke's commanding presence as she herself had been when he'd first come in, but her father didn't seem to be recovering himself as quickly as Lydia had.

"I mean no disrespect at all!" she argued. "If anything, Father, it's just the opposite. I think it will be lovely to be a duchess! I can hardly wait for the opportunity to begin my new life. It's the kind of thing every little girl dreams of."

“Do you mean to say,” the uke asked, his brow furrowed, “that your main interest is in my title? That you aren’t perturbed by the fact that you and I don’t know one another?”

“We’ll get to know one another,” Lydia said dismissively. “It doesn’t matter all that much, does it?”

That ought to do the trick!

Surely a comment like that would be enough to make him see that she wasn’t what he wanted. Surely he would tell her father that the arrangement had been a mistake and would run for the door. She sat back in her chair in satisfaction, waiting for her work to have the desired effect.

“I’m so sorry, Your Grace,” her father apologized. “She’s a bit over-excited, as you can see—she doesn’t really mean the things she’s saying. She doesn’t mean to say that your title matters more to her than your character.”

What a silly thing to leave Father’s mouth when we both know that he cares far more about the Duke’s title than about his character!

Lydia could hardly believe her father was sitting there acting as if it would be strange to have such priorities—but, of course, he was trying to ensure that the Duke wouldn’t be offended and decide to end their arrangement.

But the Duke just smiled. “Never fear, Lord Haddington,” he said. “I’m glad Miss Lydia is so eager at the prospect of becoming a duchess. After all, that will be her life once we

marry, and I do want her to be happy in it. It's never my desire to cause anyone distress."

Lydia blinked, stunned. That wasn't the way she'd expected him to react. He was supposed to be angry that all she cared about was the title she was going to gain. He wasn't supposed to *like* it.

"Of course, it isn't," Lord Haddington agreed. "And I'm sure the two of you will come to know one another—and love one another—in due course. That kind of thing comes with time. I thank you for your patience with my daughter."

"Your daughter has said nothing that worries me," the Duke assured him. "In fact, I'm more certain of the wisdom of this match than ever."

How could this have happened? Was he lying? But she saw no reason for him to. There was no motive—he had to be telling the truth, little though she liked to believe it. Somehow, in trying to drive him away, she had made him want her more! How had that happened?

Lydia was furious, both with herself and with the Duke. She could hardly speak for the rest of the time he was there. Fortunately, they didn't seem to need her to say anything. The Duke and her father discussed the terms of the marriage without including her in the conversation at all. After a while, she stopped listening to them altogether.

What difference did it make? Nothing she had said had affected the outcome of this meeting. Nothing she could say would change anyone's mind. She was to be married to the

Duke, and the reality of that sank in slowly, like a weight in her gut.

She didn't want to marry him.

Did she?

She was sure the answer was no until the moment they all stood to say farewell. He held out his hand, and when she gave him hers, he bent to kiss it.

It was the gentlest brush of lips against skin, but it made her feel as if she had been struck by lightning. The shock that traveled through her body was so powerful that she froze where she stood.

What was this? Why was she reacting so intensely to this standard expression of farewell? She hadn't even *liked* the Duke. He had frustrated her immensely. Why should she be so affected by his touch?

She didn't know. She only knew that she was.

He looked up at her, a small smile on his face, and she thought he looked as if he knew a secret. "Farewell, Miss Lydia," he murmured. "I'll see you again soon."

I won't be able to forget about this.

And then, he was gone, leaving her in a state of shock, wondering what had just happened and how she could have allowed it.

She didn't want to like him. She didn't trust him.

But the way he had smiled at her...

Maybe she had judged him too quickly. Maybe there was something here that was worth exploring.

There was only one thing she could say with certainty, and that was that she had enjoyed the touch of his lips on her skin. He had driven her mad with his behavior, but at the same time, she couldn't forget her enjoyment of that touch. It had made her feel alive in a way that no other man had ever made her feel before, and she knew that she wanted to experience that feeling again as soon as she could.

CHAPTER FOUR

“**W**hat did you think of Edward?” Nancy asked keenly.

Lydia sipped her tea. Two days had passed since the Duke’s visit, and she had been unable to stop thinking about it. “I’m amazed you call him Edward,” she admitted.

“That’s his name,” Nancy pointed out.

“I know it is,” Lydia said. “But he’s so... imposing. I can’t imagine ever calling him by his first name. It’s difficult to picture his own mother doing that.”

“His mother died many years ago,” Nancy replied. “But I know that his stepmother calls him by his name. She doesn’t seem intimidated. And so does Colin, and so do I. He’s really not as bad as he seems the first time you meet him, I promise. He’s harmless.”

Lydia thought again about that kiss he’d given her on the back of her hand and wondered whether he could possibly be thought of as *harmless*. She didn’t think so. She thought he was dangerous.

“But did you like him?” Nancy pressed. “That’s what I really want to know, whether the two of you got along.”

“Well, he didn’t strike me as the sort of man who makes much of an effort to *get along* with people,” Lydia observed. “My impression of him was that he didn’t care what I thought.”

“I suppose that’s right,” Nancy said “Though he’s better once you get to know him. And I’m sure he’ll be perfectly lovely to you, Lydia. After all, you’re going to be his wife!”

Lydia groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

“You don’t want to marry him?”

“Not like this,” Lydia argued. “Not with my father forcing me into it, never bothering to ask me what I want to do. It’s dreadful. I wanted something like what you had with Colin. I wanted to meet a gentleman at a party and discover that I had feelings for him. I wanted him to court me because he loved me, not because he had made an arrangement with my father. I want *love*, Nancy, not just a marriage of convenience. And with every passing day, it becomes clearer to me that I’ll never have something like that. My parents will never allow it.”

“Don’t give up,” Nancy urged. “I know Edward seems cold and standoffish, but he really does open up to people. I was frightened of him at first, and now, he’s a brother to me.”

“Do you mean he treats you warmly?”

“Well, maybe not *warmly*. But he’s kind. Respectful. I know that he likes me. That has to count for something.”

“I suppose,” Lydia replied, but she was agreeing more out of a desire to be a good friend than because she actually thought Nancy was right.

It wasn’t enough to be respected. Not when you wanted to be loved.

“I know he doesn’t seem the type for it,” Nancy said. “But I believe it’s possible. You could grow to love one another. After all, how could anyone fail to love you?”

Lydia laughed. “You have to say that because you’re my best friend.”

“Not at all,” Nancy countered. “I don’t have to be your best friend, do I? I choose to because I find you to be a lovely person. Eventually, Edward will come to see what I’ve known all this time. He’ll find you every bit as lovable as I do.”

“I think that’s very optimistic of you,” Lydia said. “But I do appreciate your optimism, truly.”

“Thank you.”

“Tell me more about him. I want to know what he’s like so that I can be ready for this marriage.”

“Well, to be perfectly honest, what I know isn’t that much,” Nancy admitted. “He may be my brother-in-law, and I suppose I see him more frequently than most people do, but it still isn’t that frequent. He’s not very social. We have dinner together sometimes.”

“What is he like at those dinners?”

“Very quiet. Almost absent, much of the time, as if he’s there in body, but his mind is far away. I don’t know what to make of it sometimes. His manners are always impeccable. He’s never been rude. But it’s as if he has things going on in his head that are much more important to him.”

“Well, that’s exactly how I felt when we were together,” Lydia agreed. “It was as if he couldn’t be bothered to speak to me. I felt beneath his notice. Or—no, that’s not quite right. I did feel as if he noticed me, but I felt that he was spending the whole time deciding what he thought of me without ever worrying about what I might think of him. As if he had no interest in my opinion.”

“That sounds right,” Nancy said. “He’s a businessman. His business is everything to him. I’ve lost count of the number of times Colin has said that to me. *Edward only cares about business*. And I suppose that attitude is the way a man of business would approach a lady he was thinking of courting, isn’t it? He would evaluate everything about her. He wouldn’t be trying to make her think highly of *him*. I’m sure it’s a habit for him by now to focus on the bottom line and not think so much about the opinions of others.”

“Well, I find it frustrating,” Lydia huffed. “And it offends me as well. It’s as if he thinks his opinion is the only one that

matters—that he doesn't have to bother with making a good impression on me.”

“I'm sure he doesn't really think that,” Nancy argued. “It's just his way to be a bit self-centered. He'll be better once the two of you have gotten to know one another. I'm sure of it.”

“I certainly hope so,” Lydia murmured.

“You know, at least there's one thing we can say with confidence,” Nancy said.

“And what's that?”

“Well, Edward has never expressed any interest in marriage before now,” Nancy pointed out. “The fact that he's taking an interest for the first time tells me that he's ready to think about an heir to the dukedom. Which means you'll be a mother soon, Lydia!”

Lydia thought about that. Of course, it was an inherent part of getting married, so what her friend was saying didn't come as a surprise, exactly. But still, it was something she hadn't given much thought to yet. She had been too distracted by the mere fact of her marriage. Now she thought about it, though—what it would be like to be a mother, to have a child. What it would be like to enter that part of her life.

It did sound lovely. And for the first time, Lydia felt some excitement about what lay ahead.

“He must have liked you,” Nancy enthused. “Think about it. He chose you to be the mother of his child—of the heir to the dukedom! He wouldn’t give that duty to just anyone. This was more than a simple arrangement with your father, even if it hasn’t gone exactly according to your hopes so far.”

“No, you’re right,” Lydia agreed. “And that also explains why he was looking at me the way he was, doesn’t it? Sizing me up. He wanted to make sure I would be a good choice to be the mother to his heir. I should have realized it was something like that rather than being sensitive about it.”

“It makes sense that you would struggle,” Nancy said sympathetically. “I can’t imagine what it’s like to be marrying a duke! That’s so much more responsibility than I faced at the time of my marriage. As the younger son, Colin has more freedom to do whatever he likes without worrying about the implications.”

“So, of course, the two of you could pay more attention to something like love right away,” Lydia observed, feeling better by the moment. “That makes so much sense. I was far too hard on the Duke. I regret it now.”

“I’m sure you’ll have plenty of opportunity to tell him that,” Nancy assured. “But don’t forget, he didn’t make it easy on you either. The two of you will simply have to find a way to talk to one another.”

“You’re quite right,” Lydia agreed. “And I’m sure that’s something we’ll be able to find a way to do. Thank you, Nancy. You’ve really made me feel so much better about everything.”

“In the meantime,” Nancy said, “marriage to a busy gentleman might have its upsides. He’s so busy with his work all the time that you’ll have quite a lot of freedom. You’ll be able to do whatever you like. You and I can call on one another frequently—I’ll look forward to that.”

“Oh, that would be nice,” Lydia replied. “And I’ll be able to devote time to reading and going on rides early in the morning, the way I’ve always loved, because he’ll have no need of me during those hours. He’ll be occupied with his business!”

“It will be very much *like* courting at first, I would think,” Nancy said. “You’ll dine together and spend your evenings together, but the rest of your days will likely be your own. In a way, I almost wish Colin and I could have done it like this. Don’t mistake me, I’m very happy with my marriage, but I do think it would have been pleasant to ease into it slowly, the way you’ll be doing. It would have made the adjustment feel a bit more natural. And perhaps you *will* fall in love in the end.”

Lydia smiled. “You have a way of making everything feel much simpler than it seems, Nancy,” she enthused. “You’re such a good friend to me. I’m so grateful to you for being here, for coming over today, and for talking me through all this. I do feel much more prepared to face what lies ahead now that I know with more certainty what it’s going to be like.”

“I’m so glad,” Nancy said. “And just think, Lydia, once you’re married, the two of us won’t just be good friends. We’ll be family! You’ll be my sister! It will mean holidays and dinners and parties together for the rest of our lives. It will mean that our children will be cousins and will grow up playing together. Doesn’t that all sound lovely?”

“That all sounds like a dream, actually,” Lydia admitted. “Oh, Nancy, I wish you had been here when I’d learned of this arrangement! I wish you had said all these things to me that day. I would have been much happier if you had.”

“I wish I could have been here!” Nancy said. “I wish I could have been around to help you through all this.”

“But you’re helping me now,” Lydia assured her friend. “And it means the world to me to know that you’ll be by my side as I go through it all. I don’t know what I would do without you, Nancy, truly I don’t.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. Whatever is in store, the two of us will get through it together,” Nancy promised. “And I’m confident that the future holds nothing but great things for us—you as the wife of the Duke of Westfrey and me married to his brother. I couldn’t have planned it any better, really.”

“You’re right,” Lydia said. “I was worried over nothing. Everything really is shaping up very well. I’m sure we’re going to be all right.”

And much to her relief, she found that her fears were, indeed, alleviated. Of course, the prospect of marriage had made her anxious. That was only to be expected. But if she had to marry, her parents could have made a much less fortuitous choice for her.

From this moment on, Lydia vowed to stop worrying and embrace what was to come.

CHAPTER FIVE

“**W**hat have you done, Edward?”

The voice rang out through the massive space of the foyer and startled Edward.

Edward loathed being startled, as he thought it made him look weak. Certainly, it made him feel weak. So, he was already in a bit of a temper when he turned around and saw his stepmother standing there like a sentinel, staring at him and tapping her foot.

“Margaret, for goodness’ sake...what’s all this about?” he demanded.

“Where have you been?”

“I’ve been meeting with someone.” It had been a business meeting, and it had left him feeling exhausted, so he was in no mood for his stepmother’s ill humor at the moment. “Excuse me, please.”

“Not until I’ve had my say,” she said.

Edward, who hadn't even taken off his riding cloak yet, stared at his stepmother. "Margaret, what are you doing here?" he demanded. "Standing around in the foyer with nothing else to do. Are you just waiting for me to come home?"

"If I don't wait for you to come home, I don't see you," Margaret said. "When was the last time you and I had a conversation?"

"We haven't had a conversation recently because I haven't wanted one," Edward replied. "Don't forget, this is my house."

"You may be the Duke, but I was your father's wife. It's my home too, and you ought not to act as if I have no right to be here. You always behave that way, and I've never understood what makes you think you have the right. What do you think your father would say if he could see the way you treat me?"

"I won't have you speculating on what my father would say to me if he was here," Edward said sharply. "That's not your place. You may have married him, but I'm his firstborn son and heir. I know what he would say to me because he spent my whole life saying it to me. I know what he would want me to do. He would say that this house is your home and that you ought to be welcome here. But he would not expect me to listen to everything you have to say or to restrict myself from my own library because you've chosen to haunt my foyer like some sort of ghost. I'll ask you again to remove yourself from my path so I can go."

"I needed to speak with you," Margaret insisted unrepentantly. "And I know exactly what you do, Edward. If you aren't

stopped coming in the door, you'll hide away in your library for the rest of the evening, and I'll never see you."

That was true, but Edward felt it was justified. He didn't want to spend the evening in conversation with his stepmother, who always had critical and judgmental things to say to him. He didn't want to hear her opinions. And he especially didn't want to hear them right now, when he had just fixed his engagement to Miss Lydia.

But it seemed that there would be no avoiding this conversation, no matter how much he might have liked to. "Let's go into the sitting room," he suggested. "Then you can say whatever you'd like. I'll hear you out."

"You'll do more than that, Edward," Margaret said, but there was a tremor in her voice, as if she found it deeply frightening to speak the way she was.

Edward closed his eyes briefly. He knew enough to know that his stepmother was afraid of him. It was just the same as what Colin had told him—he intimidated people. People didn't feel as if they could be themselves around him. It was the reason he had been losing business and the reason he needed to take a wife in the first place. So, it wasn't a surprise to encounter this reaction from Margaret. It was just unpleasant.

He could handle things being unpleasant.

He did wonder, though, what she was so frightened of. What was it she thought he was going to do? She couldn't possibly believe that he would hurt her physically—he had never done

anything of the sort, and she must know him well enough to know that.

Perhaps she was just afraid that he would send her away from the house. Technically, it was in his power to do something like that, and he couldn't pretend he had never been tempted. But at the same time, he knew he never would. It would be too cruel. Where else did she have to go? Besides, Colin would be angry with him, and he didn't want that.

Though Colin should have her live with him if he's so determined that she belongs among our family!

He knew how wrong-headed that was, of course. Margaret was the Dowager Duchess, and she had every right to live in this house. It would be scandalous of him to have her removed from it. He would never do that. He just wished she would oblige his desire to stay away from her. It was a big house, and it was perfectly possible for the two of them to live here and never see one another.

But Margaret was obviously not open to living that way.

He led her into the sitting room, and the pair of them sat down. Margaret looked nervous but determined. A part of Edward truly wanted to give her more reason to feel nervous, to be as ominous as he could be in hope that she would give up on this and leave. Maybe if he could find a way to increase her discomfort around him, she would give him his space.

But she stayed.

“Shall we have tea brought in?” she asked. “Perhaps this conversation would be a bit more pleasant with some refreshments.”

“I don’t plan on staying that long,” he told her curtly. “Say what it is you want to say, and let’s be done with it.”

She sighed. “Why do you despise me so, Edward?”

“I don’t despise you.”

That was the truth, he thought—she was using very strong language. He didn’t despise her. He would have preferred not to have to interact with her, but that was because of the way she always tried to be a mother to him. He didn’t consider her a mother and never would, but the same could have been said of any lady.

What bothered him about Margaret was that she was always around—always in his house, always in his space, never leaving him alone. If she were someone he only had to see occasionally, he would have had no quarrel with her.

“You treat me very poorly,” she said. “I can tell that you don’t like me.”

“If you don’t like the way I treat you, you have every right to simply stay away from me,” he told her.

“I know that’s what you would prefer.”

“I’m a man who likes my solitude, Margaret. It’s not my fault I’d prefer to be alone.”

“Well, I’ll let you go back to your solitude once you’ve heard what I have to say.”

“Say it, then.”

“I can’t believe that you would make arrangements to marry without discussing it with me,” she said.

Edward sighed. “I might have known it would be that,” he replied. “I’m surprised it took you this long to bring the subject up, frankly. I’ve been expecting it from the moment I made the arrangement.”

“You mean to say that you knew it would bother me, and you did it anyway? How could you do such a thing?”

“How could I do what? Choose my own wife? I have the authority to make that decision, Margaret. I’m a grown man, *and* I am the Duke. Of course, I made the decision for myself.”

“This affects the whole family, Edward. Did you really think you were the only one who ought to have a say in the decision?”

“It *is* my decision in the end,” he told her. “I could go through a show of pretending to seek counsel from the rest of the family, but what would be the use? We all know that I’m going to be the one to decide eventually, and that’s as it should be. I

don't need to gain approval from anyone else in order to marry, and you know that."

"This is a serious matter," Margaret argued. "It's not right that you should make the decision on your own. You should have consulted me. You might be the Duke, as you say, but I am the Dowager Duchess, and that does carry some weight around here, whether you like it to or not."

"There's no reason I should have done that. You're my father's wife, Margaret. You're not my mother."

"You're very cruel to me, always bringing that up. Throwing it in my face just to hurt me. I've done my best to be a good mother to you. I've always given you everything I could."

"I'm not blaming you for our circumstances," Edward argued. "But you must realize that you and I have never been close, Margaret. I know that you've gotten closer with Colin over the years—"

"And I know you have *never* approved of my relationship with your brother," Margaret said. "I gave up a long time ago on winning you over, Edward, but I would have thought you could at least be happy about the fact that I learned how to relate to Colin. Don't you see that that's a good thing for both of us? He doesn't have a mother, apart from me. Don't you want that for him?"

Edward wanted very much to bite back at her, to say, "*you're not his mother no matter how much you might wish you were, and you're not mine either.*" He managed to restrain himself, but only just.

“Colin can do what he likes,” he replied. “Colin can be close with you if that’s what he wants to do. I’ve done nothing to discourage him or to prevent that relationship. That doesn’t mean I’m going to do the same, and it certainly doesn’t mean you’re going to have a say in my marriage. And besides, what have you got to complain about? What’s the matter with the choice I made?”

“I don’t even know this Miss Lydia,” Margaret huffed. “How can I be sure she’s the right choice for you?”

“You don’t care about that. You’ve never cared about what’s best for me. I don’t know why you’re putting on a show about it now.”

“How can you say that?” she asked. “Of course, I care. And with your father gone, you know, I find it very important—more important than ever before—to stand in as a parent for you and your brother. It falls to me to safeguard the dukedom.”

“That is *not* your responsibility,” Edward said sharply. “It’s mine. And this conversation is over.”

He stood up to leave.

“Never forget,” Margaret called, “I should have been the one deciding on who the heir would be after you. That should have been my right.”

Edward was at a loss.

He didn't want to argue with her about this. He didn't want to tell her that she was wrong, that the child she had lost would never have come into the title.

Perhaps it would have. He had never meant to marry, and if Colin hadn't wanted the title, who was to say what could have happened? What that baby would have eventually had if it had been born?

He didn't like Margaret, but he couldn't be cruel to her about the loss she had suffered.

"I'll see you at dinner," he told her shortly, deciding on the spot that this would be one of the rare nights he would join her at the table, and he walked away before she could say another word.

CHAPTER SIX

“The Dowager Duchess is coming to pay you a visit today,” Lady Haddington said to Lydia over breakfast. “And I expect you to be on your very best behavior, Lydia. This is your first chance to make a good impression on her.”

“She’ll be on her best behavior,” Lord Haddington said, a note of warning in his voice.

It was enough to make Lydia wonder what he would do if she were to step out of line, but she didn’t wonder enough to actually try it. There was no need to seek trouble. And besides, after her conversation with Nancy, she thought she might actually like being married to the Duke, and she was willing to cooperate.

“Father’s right,” she told her mother. “You have nothing to worry about from me.”

“That’s good,” Lord Haddington said. “I’m pleased to hear that you’re accepting your future so well. I wasn’t sure whether or not you could be counted upon. Thank you for not disappointing me.”

Lydia closed her eyes briefly. It was so very like her parents to talk about the idea of her being a disappointment even when she had done nothing at all to let them down. They couldn't even pay her a compliment without baking an insult into it.

Well, that was fine. Today was not about them—it was about her budding relationship with the Dowager Duchess. Lydia did want to impress her. She had to admit that she wasn't entirely sure what kind of impression she had left the Duke with, and if there had been any trouble on that score, today's encounter should go a long way toward fixing it.

She waited for the Dowager Duchess in the sitting room after breakfast, too nervous to do much of anything. She considered picking up a book, but decided against that—what if she chose the wrong one? What if the Dowager Duchess saw her reading something and found fault with the selection? Worse yet, what if she turned out to be the type of lady who felt that reading was a pursuit for gentlemen only?

Lydia certainly hoped that wouldn't happen. It would be awful to have to hide her reading from the people she was living with. Stopping, of course, was not an option. If the Duke and the Dowager Duchess couldn't abide the idea of a duchess who read books, that would be a problem, but she wasn't going to become the sort of lady who abandoned the things she loved to appease her husband. She did want to make a good impression and to make the pair of them happy, but there were limits to how far she would go.

Thus, it was that she was sitting unoccupied and gazing out the window when her guest arrived. She got to her feet quickly. "Your Grace," she said. "Thank you for coming to meet me. It's an honor and a privilege to have you here."

“So it is,” the Dowager Duchess said imperiously. “Do sit back down, Miss Lydia. I don’t have all day, and the two of us have plenty of things to discuss.”

Lydia was surprised by how abrupt the Dowager Duchess had been, but she found to her surprise that she actually appreciated it. Better to have someone who wasn’t going to make her go to the effort of acting like the pair of them were friends or like they were seeing one another for social reasons. It sounded as if the Dowager Duchess wanted to get down to business, and that suited Lydia just fine.

“First of all,” the Dowager Duchess started, “I’d like you to call me Margaret.”

“You would?” Lydia asked, surprised. “I don’t know that my mother will like that very much.”

“I take it you’re worried that your mother would prefer we speak more formally to one another?”

“Well, I don’t think she’ll mind how you speak to *me*,” Lydia said, deciding to be frank, since that was what her guest seemed to want from her. “But she’ll think I’m being rude if I call you by your first name.”

“I quite understand,” the Dowager Duchess replied. “But you need to get used to that sort of thing if you’re to be the next Duchess.”

“What sort of thing? People thinking I’m rude or displeasing my mother?”

“Both, really,” the Dowager Duchess said. “Or—neither one, necessarily, but you must be aware of the fact that you’re going to be put in social situations in which *you* will set the tone. It’s not only your right as Duchess to do this, but it’s your responsibility. Some people will agree with the choices you’ll make, and some won’t, but you need to recognize the title you’re going to hold and the role that gives you in every social situation.

“To apply that standard to this situation, you and I should decide how we’re going to relate to one another, how we’re going to refer to each other, without worrying about the input of someone we both outrank. I know you don’t outrank your mother yet, and I know this is a challenge because she’s your mother, but you must remember that you’ll be a duchess soon, and this sort of thing is for you to determine.”

Lydia nodded. She could understand what the Dowager Duchess—no, *Margaret*, she should begin thinking of her as Margaret—was saying. And she thought she would be able to comply with it as well. It was just going to take some practice.

“All right, Margaret,” she said. “And you had better just call me Lydia.”

“Of course. I always meant to,” Margaret agreed. “If you’re going to marry my stepson, as he claims, there will be no need for formality between us—we’re going to be family.”

Lydia’s first impression of this encounter surprised her. She felt overwhelmingly as if Margaret respected her. Perhaps she didn’t like her yet, but that would come with time. For now,

respect was enough—it was more than she had anticipated this early on in their knowing one another.

“Now, then,” Margaret went on. “As the Duchess, there are several more things that will be expected of you, and the reason I’ve come to see you today is to prepare you for that responsibility. I’m sure it’s a dream come true for a young lady like yourself to marry a duke.”

“It is rather nice,” Lydia agreed. “But of course, there’s more to it than just the title.”

She regretted the way she’d behaved when the Duke had come to meet with her and her father, and she was hoping that Margaret might carry word back to him that she wasn’t really the way she’d seemed that day—that she wasn’t so single-minded and cared about more than simply becoming a duchess. She wanted the Duke to know that the relationship between the two of them was something that was important to her.

But Margaret waved the subject off. “Yes, yes,” she said. “There are plenty of things to think about, to be sure. But for the sake of our time together, what matters is your role as Duchess and how well you adapt to it. Are you ready to learn about what must be done?”

“It sounds as if you’re saying that what I’ll need to do is to be bold,” Lydia said. “You don’t know me well, Margaret, but I can assure you, it won’t be a problem.”

Margaret eyed her shrewdly. “I can see that you’re a confident young lady,” she praised. “That’s for the best. I like that about

you.”

“Thank you.”

“But you also need to know that there’s a time and a place for your boldness. Yes, it’s appropriate—necessary—for you to take a stand on certain things and to be unafraid of the viewpoints of others. And you mustn’t allow yourself to be easily intimidated either.”

“Do I seem as though I would be?”

“My stepson can be very intimidating.”

That did match Lydia’s experience with the Duke. But she wouldn’t be cowed by him, and she knew it.

“Trust me,” she said, “I can hold my own.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Do you also know how to give in when the time is right? Do you know how to judge a situation to decide whether having your own way or appeasing someone else is more important? And can you concede to doing something that wouldn’t have been your preference because it’s what’s best for everyone involved?”

“Yes, I can.”

Growing up with parents like hers had made this sort of thing second nature to Lydia. She knew how to choose her battles

with care, and she knew that she would never be the kind of person who stubbornly clung to an argument just because she needed to feel as if she was in the right.

“As a duchess, you’ll need to learn how to prioritize what other people think of you,” Margaret added.

“You just told me I *shouldn’t* prioritize that,” Lydia argued.

“Ah. But it’s a delicate balance. You must be constantly aware of people’s perceptions, but you must also be capable of setting that aside when it serves the greater good. You must always dress in the latest fashions and display impeccable manners, but you must be unafraid to be outspoken when an occasion calls for it.”

Lydia nodded. She appreciated what Margaret was telling her, but it was beginning to seem more complicated than she had originally thought it might be.

“How will I know when I should take a stand and when I shouldn’t? Is this something I can rely on the Duke to help me with?”

“Between you and me,” Margaret confided, “I wouldn’t rely on him for much of anything.”

That was surprising. “Why not?”

“He thinks of himself first and others rarely at all,” Margaret explained. “Now, I know I shouldn’t speak poorly of him—I

don't mean to—but it's my duty to prepare you for the things you'll face as a duchess, and you need to know the nature of the man you'll be marrying.”

“Are you saying he's cruel?”

“Not cruel. But not warm. You shouldn't expect him to guide you, that's what I'm saying. Fortunately, you'll have me for that. I'll be by your side every step of the way.”

Lydia nodded. She hadn't been sure about Margaret at first, but she was beginning to feel deeply grateful to have such a strong role model as she headed into her new life.

“I have to thank you for that,” she said. “Your presence means the world to me, and I feel much more secure about all this knowing that I'll have assistance from someone who has been through it herself.”

“Yes,” Margaret agreed. “It was just the same for me when I married my husband—and I had his mother to help me through that process. I've gotten permission from your parents to take you shopping this afternoon to make sure that you have some suitable things to wear to the events you'll be attending in the near future.”

Lydia might have been offended—Margaret hadn't even seen her clothes, so how could she say that she had nothing suitable?—but all she felt was gratitude.

“Thank you,” she said. “That's most helpful.”

“Anything I can do to make this easier, I will,” Margaret replied graciously.

Lydia smiled, but even as she did, she was left to wonder about the way Margaret had spoken about the Duke.

It almost sounds as if she doesn't like him very much—as if there's something wrong with their relationship.

Could that be true?

Margaret was the Duke's stepmother, not his birth mother. Perhaps that was why she sounded as if she didn't feel very close to him. Maybe that was why she felt all right speaking about him the way she had.

It was something Lydia knew she would keep her eye on in the days to come.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“**Y**our wedding gown has already been selected,” Margaret said as they walked down the city street. “So, that’s one thing we won’t need to worry about today.”

“I’m not to have a choice about my own wedding gown?” Lydia asked.

“This is one of those times when you’re best served if you set aside what you might want and do as you’re instructed,” Margaret told her.

Lydia couldn’t help wondering whether those times would always occur when the thing she wanted was in contradiction to the thing Margaret wanted.

“Tell me about this gown,” she requested, determined not to set a precedent of giving in too quickly.

“It was made by the finest shop in London,” Margaret explained. “It’s not even available for most ladies to buy yet, but for the Duchess, of course, things are different. An arrangement was made for you to be married in the very first

version of this gown to leave the shop—no one will even have seen the style yet, and you'll be sure to catch everyone's eye."

"I suppose that's a good thing," Lydia said. "Still, I *would* like to see it before I agree to it."

"That can be arranged," Margaret relented. "But you should also know that, in this instance, the decision has been made and can't be unmade. This is the gown you will wear. For one thing, there's simply no time to choose another. And for a second thing, you and I will be picking all the accessories today, and they must be chosen with that gown in mind to make sure that everything looks good together."

"It really would help if I'd seen it," Lydia argued.

"Fortunately for you, I have seen it," Margaret said. "I'll be able to help you determine what is and isn't appropriate."

"Then am I to stand here and be dressed up as if I were a doll with no say at all in what I wear to my own wedding?"

Margaret stopped and turned to face her. "That's incredibly bold of you to say," she scolded. "Especially knowing as you do that everything you'll need for this wedding will be supplied—paid for—by the dukedom. Are you so spoiled as to disregard that fact?"

"I'm not disregarding it," Lydia said, forcing herself to keep her cool. "And I *am* grateful, Margaret."

“You don’t seem particularly grateful.”

“Truly, I am. But I also have to wonder why it’s so important that I keep my mouth shut,” Lydia said. “Even if the dress has been chosen, wouldn’t you want to have my help in the selection of the accessories? Wouldn’t you want to think I was wearing things that pleased me? I think that if I had a child getting married, I would want to believe that child was happy.”

Margaret eyed her shrewdly. “All right,” she agreed. “You’ve made your point, and I hear what you’re saying. I’m willing to allow you some freedom in choosing your own accessories, but everything you select will be subject to my final approval. After all, I have been a duchess for many years, and I have experience on my side telling me what’s appropriate. Does that seem like a fair compromise to you?”

“More than fair,” replied Lydia, knowing that it was the best she was likely to get.

Besides, it *did* seem fair to her—she wasn’t trying to turn down Margaret’s help, but she recognized that a power struggle was taking place between the Dowager Duchess and herself, and she needed to make sure that she asserted herself well enough to guarantee that she would be able to make her voice heard in the future.

On the subject of jewelry, it didn’t much matter what was decided, but she needed Margaret to listen to her. And it seemed as though that was happening. Lydia felt satisfied.

They went into a shop to search for a necklace. “Diamonds or sapphires would suit best,” Margaret suggested. “Do you have

a preference between the two?”

“Perhaps something with both?” Lydia suggested. “I think that would be pretty, and eye-catching as well. Do you think that’s appropriate?”

Now that she’d made sure her voice would be heard, she wanted to show Margaret that she was willing to be cooperative as well.

It worked.

Margaret smiled. “That sounds lovely.” She turned to the shopkeeper. “Do you have anything that matches that description?”

The shopkeeper brought out a few items for them to look at. Lydia had no special favorite among the available options, so she sat back and allowed Margaret to take the lead. Whatever was chosen would suit her tastes just fine.

Margaret picked up one of the necklaces and held it up to Lydia. “This one really brings out your eyes,” she pointed out. “And the stones are bold, but not *too* big—I think this one here would distract attention from your face because it’s so dramatic, don’t you think so?”

“I trust your judgment on that,” Lydia agreed mildly.

“I appreciate that,” Margaret told her. “You know, I’ve always wanted to do this—pick out jewelry for my daughter. I realize

I'm not your mother, and that you have a mother of your own—I hope you don't feel as if I'm overstepping my bounds.”

Lydia hadn't expected Margaret to speak to her like this. She seemed, now, as if she actually cared about what Lydia thought of her—as if she was trying as hard as Lydia was to make sure the two of them had a good relationship.

Maybe she admires the fact that I stood up for myself. Maybe she likes that I'm not the sort to let myself be pushed around. She did tell me that was important, after all.

“I don't feel that way at all,” Lydia said. “I'm very grateful to have your help, Margaret. And I'm flattered that you would think of me as a member of the family.”

“You will be one soon enough,” Margaret replied. “The daughter I never had.”

“But you were blessed to have two sons,” Lydia observed. “I don't know either of them very well yet, but the Duke seems like an honorable gentleman, and I know his brother makes my friend Nancy very happy—he seems to be a good husband.”

Margaret nodded. “He is,” she agreed. “You've assessed both of them very well. But all the same, they're not my children. Not really.”

“I know you're their stepmother,” Lydia said.

She was unsure of exactly what this meant in terms of their relationships. Margaret was certainly acting motherly enough, so it was surprising to hear her describe herself as not a real mother.

“That’s right,” Margaret agreed. “Only their stepmother. Their father married me because he wanted them to have a lady in their lives—a replacement for his first wife, their true mother. I’ve tried to be that for them, but I would have liked to have a child of my own.”

“Your husband wasn’t interested?”

“He told me that he’d already had his children,” Margaret lamented. “He didn’t want another.”

She looked far away, as if she was remembering something that had happened a long time ago, and Lydia had the sudden feeling that she wasn’t being told everything.

And that was all right. She didn’t need to know everything about Margaret’s past, about her relationship with her late husband. It was surprising enough that Margaret had told her anything at all, to be honest. She hadn’t expected the two of them to be able to speak anywhere near this openly, and it was a shock—a shock in the best way, but a shock, nonetheless. She certainly wasn’t going to push for more details of something that was none of her business.

So, she simply said, “I’m sorry to hear that. I imagine it must have been very hard to hope for something like that and then realize you wouldn’t get it.”

“But at least you will,” Margaret replied. “I suppose you’ll be willing to have children? After all, Edward will need an heir.”

“I’ve taken that into consideration.”

If Margaret was going to keep secrets, Lydia would feel free to do the same. That was only fair. She wasn’t ready to open up about the fact that having a child was one of the things that excited her most about the prospect of marriage. After all, she hadn’t even told the Duke that yet. She didn’t need to say it to his stepmother.

“I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about the dukedom having an heir,” Margaret said. “It’s what my late husband would have wanted, of course, and I do consider myself to have a bit of a responsibility to see his desires through. Edward loves to remind me of the fact that I’m not his mother.

“I’d hoped he would come to feel differently about me in time, as his brother has, but that hasn’t happened yet. Perhaps having you in his life will help to bring about that change, make him soften toward me. But he doesn’t listen to me the way I wish he would. He doesn’t take my advice about what would be best for the dukedom or what his father would want him to do. Even though I’ve long known that it’s time for him to begin planning for his future, he hasn’t pursued marriage until now.”

“Not at all?” Lydia asked.

This matched what Nancy had told her, but she was interested in finding out more if she could. What had kept the Duke from looking for a wife for so long, and what had changed his

mind? It wasn't that he had seen her and fallen in love as his brother had with Nancy—their arrangement had been made before the two of them had met for the first time.

Why had he agreed to marry her, sight unseen, after having no interest in marriage previously?

“I suppose he must have realized the time was right,” Margaret suggested. “It wasn't something he could delay forever, after all. He must have understood that he needed to move forward with finding a wife and marrying, or he would risk not having an heir at all.” She smiled slightly. “It's better than I'd hoped. I worried I would have to force him into it, and he wouldn't take that well at all, coming from me.

“He wouldn't like me trying to tell him what he should do, even if he knew perfectly well that I was right about it. I'm glad he came to this realization on his own, and in his own time. And, Lydia, I must tell you, I wasn't certain about you at first, but having spent some time with you, I think this is going to be a good match. I'm happy with his choice.”

Lydia felt warm at the knowledge that she had succeeded in pleasing the Dowager Duchess. She couldn't relax, of course—she would have to make sure that the impression she had made continued in the days to come. But Margaret liked her. That was a very promising start.

“I like this one,” she said, pointing to the necklace Margaret had picked out. “I think it'll be beautiful for the wedding—if you like it?”

“I love it,” Margaret agreed, smiling at her, and Lydia beamed. Things couldn’t be going any better.

And maybe Margaret was right. Maybe Lydia’s presence in the Duke’s life would help him soften toward his stepmother. Maybe she would be able to help heal their family from the wounds they’d been carrying all this time. And she would provide the heir they needed, and everyone would be happy about that.

The future had never looked brighter than it did today, standing here, looking at necklaces with Margaret and planning for her wedding day. And though she still felt nervous about a few of the details, Lydia was filled with confidence that everything would work itself out for the best.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The day of the wedding, there was a chill in the air. To Lydia, it felt something like an omen.

She tried to push away her trepidation. Nothing was wrong, she told herself. It was normal to be a bit anxious on her wedding day. And besides, everything had felt so right lately. She had been so confident that this was the right thing for her, that it was going to work out perfectly. She was only nervous today because it was actually happening. But once it was over, she would go back to feeling sure of herself.

Still, the day was full of odd moments. Her room had to be packed up so that her possessions could be sent over to Westfrey. This had been in process for several days, but it wasn't until today that she stood looking at the bare wardrobe of the room that had belonged to her all her life. It wasn't until today that she found herself truly facing the fact that she was leaving here and wouldn't be coming back.

It was an intense feeling. It frightened her a little bit. She had thought about the future plenty of times, of course, but she had to admit now that she had never really thought about the fact that she was giving up her past.

Well, what difference does it make, really? It's not as if I was especially happy here. And living at Westfrey will be exciting, and it will mean that no one will bother me about the way they think I ought to behave. No one will trouble me about the importance of finding a husband because I'll already have one.

That thought put her mind at ease a bit. It would certainly be a relief to be finished with thinking about the necessity of finding herself a husband.

Reassured, she turned her attention to her wedding gown, which had been brought in that morning.

She liked it quite a lot. It was pale blue and ivory in color, and as far as the style, it was unlike anything she had ever seen before. Her lady's maid helped her dress, and Lydia watched in the looking glass as she was transformed into a bride. It was a strange sight to see, since she had never really thought of herself in that way, but she'd never thought of herself as a duchess, either. After today, everything was going to be very different.

She went downstairs to meet her parents, who looked at her with a critical eye. Even her father seemed to be able to find nothing to say, and Lydia felt a strange surge of pride. Had she finally succeeded in making him happy with her?

More likely, he's just pleased to know that I won't be his problem any longer when today is done. But even so, that's good news for me too. I'm ready to move on from this.

So, it was by the time they boarded the carriage that would take them to the church that Lydia's trepidation about the day had been dispelled. She was sure of herself and confident about what she was doing. This marriage would be a good thing, both for her and for the Duke, and the future once again looked bright.

That feeling lasted until she found herself face to face with him at the altar.

There had been no real courtship to speak of, of course, and as such, Lydia wasn't surprised by the fact that there was no bond between the Duke and herself. Still, she might have expected a bit of warmth from him today, given the fact that this was their wedding day. She would have thought that he would smile at her and tell her he liked her gown, at least.

But she got nothing from him. He hardly looked at her. He didn't take her arm. There was certainly no smile to be had. And as the two of them went through the motions of reciting their vows, Lydia couldn't help wondering whether this moment meant anything to him at all. It didn't seem to.

The whole business left her with a hollow sort of dread in the pit of her stomach. She didn't understand exactly why, but she couldn't help feeling that something was deeply wrong. She couldn't help feeling like she might have misunderstood something about their arrangement.

But I can't have. What could I have gotten wrong? It's happening. He's standing here marrying me. I haven't misunderstood it.

That thought was nowhere near as reassuring as it should have been, unfortunately, and her state of mind wasn't helped by the ride from the church to Westfrey. Now, she was in a carriage alone with the Duke—her husband—and he still wasn't looking at her. Lydia longed to ask him to, to ask him what he thought of her gown, but she felt too anxious to say anything at all to him. It was too difficult to break the silence he had imposed between them.

And then, they were at the ball.

Margaret captured Lydia almost at once. “You did well at the wedding ceremony,” she told her. “You looked beautiful. You still do. Everyone is talking about it—how lovely the new Duchess is. It's exactly what we would have wanted.”

Lydia nodded, grateful to have Margaret's approval—grateful, in fact, just to have someone speaking to her at all. “I'm so pleased you like the way the gown looks,” she said, and she reached up to touch the necklace the two of them had chosen together. “Thank you again for this. It really does go very well with the gown.”

“You're a vision,” Margaret assured her. “And you haven't put a foot wrong yet.”

That made Lydia feel more anxious rather than less. It seemed as if Margaret was telling her she hadn't made any mistakes so far, but that she still might make one at any moment. Lydia was sure that was true. It seemed only a matter of time until she did something that called attention to her in an unwanted way.

But maybe that would be better than no attention at all.

“Do you know where the Duke is?” she asked.

“I haven’t seen him,” Margaret said. “But, you know, the two of you have your separate responsibilities to tend to during this party.”

“We don’t have the same responsibilities?”

“Not at the moment. It’s important for both of you to socialize, but you’ve got to be meeting new people. People are going to want to introduce themselves to the duchess! And for Edward, it’s more important to spend the day focusing on his business interactions.”

“Business? On his wedding day?”

Could that really be right?

“One thing you’ll have to come to understand about Edward is that business is more important than anything else in the world to him,” Margaret explained. “It might not feel natural to a young lady such as yourself, but you’ll have to learn to accommodate that fact about him if you’re to be a good wife.”

She spotted someone she knew across across the room—or perhaps she was merely pretending to see someone in order to end the conversation. Either way, she bustled off, and Lydia was left on her own again.

For a moment, Lydia just stood there, unsure of what she ought to do. There were no easy answers in a moment like this. If it had been a different kind of ball, she might have sought out her mother to have someone to talk to, or she might have escaped out into the garden, counting on the hope that no one would notice she was gone.

But that wouldn't work here. She was the bride. She was the new Duchess. If she left the party, everyone would know it in moments, and she would be the subject of gossip—maybe even ridicule. All the hard work she had done to try to win Margaret over would be undone by such an action. There was no possible defense for something like fleeing your own wedding. No one would understand something like that.

Then, she saw Nancy, and hope bloomed within her. Of course, Nancy was here. Nancy was someone she could talk to without raising any eyebrows. They were as good as sisters now that the wedding was complete.

Nancy saw her coming and held out her arms. “Oh, Lydia,” she said. “You look radiant. What a beautiful gown! Everyone is talking about it.”

“At least that's given them *something* to talk about,” Lydia grumbled, surprised at the sudden onset of her own bitterness.

“What do you mean?” Nancy questioned her. “You know as well as I that gossips never have any trouble coming up with things to talk about. They hardly need your assistance with *that*.”

“I suppose they don’t,” Lydia replied. “But I wish I could give them something positive to say.”

“I’ve heard no one say anything negative about you all day. How could they?”

“Then you don’t think they’ve noticed the fact that my husband is all but ignoring me?” Lydia asked. “I don’t think he’s spoken a word to me yet! He said his vows at the wedding, I suppose, but even then, it didn’t feel like he was having a conversation with me. It was a recitation, nothing more. And the whole ride here in the carriage—nothing! I don’t even know where he is!”

The words came rushing out of her so fast that it was hard to believe she had held them back all this time—it was obvious to her that she’d been yearning to say these things.

Nancy put a hand on her arm as if to soothe her, but her eyes had gone wide. “He hasn’t spoken to you at all?” she asked.

“Not in any meaningful way. I’ve tried to let that go because today has been stressful for me too, and I understand—but it’s our wedding day. He should be trying harder, shouldn’t he?”

“Yes, he should,” Nancy agreed, frowning. “I don’t understand that at all.”

“Colin wasn’t like this on your wedding day, then?”

“Not remotely. I’m sorry. I know that probably isn’t what you were hoping to hear.”

“I just want to hear that I’m not being crazy or expecting too much.”

“Not in my opinion. If it were me, I would want to speak to him about this, to find out what he meant by it. But I suppose you’re going to have to wait until tomorrow to do that.”

Perhaps it was providence, but just as Nancy said those words, the crowd separated a bit, and Lydia saw her husband across the room, deep in conversation with a gentleman she didn’t know.

“Maybe I don’t have to wait,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Nancy asked.

But Lydia didn’t want to discuss her plan with her friend for fear of being told that she was making a mistake. She was resolved. Before she could change her mind, she squared her shoulders and marched across the room.

The Duke and his companion looked up at her approach.

“Ah,” the unfamiliar gentleman observed, “the Duchess is here.”

“Good evening,” Lydia told him. “Thank you for joining us tonight.” She turned to the Duke. “I’d like to dance.”

The Duke raised his eyebrows. “You can see that I’m in the middle of a conversation.”

“Well, I don’t mind a bit,” the gentleman said. “I’ll find you later, Your Grace. Go and dance with your wife. You only get one wedding ball, after all.”

He walked away.

The Duke stared at Lydia, and for a moment, she thought he was about to refuse her.

But then, he held out his arm. “I don’t think much of your tactics,” he complained, “but I suppose he’s right. If you want to dance, we had better go and do it.”

CHAPTER NINE

“You don’t think much of my *tactics*?” Lydia asked as he led her onto the dance floor. “Would you like to elaborate on that, Your Grace?”

“You can call me by my name,” Edward told her. “You are my wife now, after all, Lydia.”

It was the first time he had called her properly by her name, and he found himself wondering how she would react—whether she might blush or go quiet. But she seemed to take it in stride.

“All right,” she said. “Edward, then. What did you mean by my tactics?”

“Walking right up to me and demanding that I dance with you when you could see that I was in conversation with another guest.”

The truth was that he hadn’t wanted to dance with her at all. The fact that he’d been in conversation had nothing to do with it. He had sworn to himself that he wouldn’t dance with her tonight—that he wouldn’t dance with anyone ever again, in

fact. But that oath would be too difficult to explain right now. He had been prepared for the fact that this might happen. He would allow it to happen.

“There are several things I’d take issue with in that,” Lydia said.

“Go on.” He was curious in spite of himself.

“First of all, you said *another* guest. I assume you meant to imply that you think of me as a guest, and I’m not one. It’s as you just said yourself. I’m your wife. You are my husband. It’s ridiculous to imply that I share the same status as any guest in *our* home.”

“You’re very bold.”

“But I assume Margaret will have told you that about me by now.”

He couldn’t help smiling. “She might have mentioned it.”

“I don’t know if I’m bold or not. What I do know is that I would rather speak the truth than dance around it. This home *does* belong to the both of us, does it not?”

“It does.”

“Then I’ll refer to it as ours, unless you have some quarrel with that.”

“No quarrel. But you said you took issue with more than one thing I’d said.”

“That’s right,” she agreed. “You also complained about the fact that I demanded that you dance with me. That’s not what happened. I made no demands of you at all. I told you that I wanted to dance, which was true. How could you be expected to know that if you weren’t told?”

“Perhaps in the future you ought to wait for me to approach you.”

“Why?” she asked bluntly. “Why should I wait for you to come to me? You didn’t seem as if you planned on doing it. If I hadn’t known better, I would have said you had forgotten I was there at all. If I hadn’t come over to you, I doubt whether you and I would have spoken at all tonight.”

Edward had to admit that she had a point. He hadn’t done a good job of acknowledging her presence, and it made sense that she would be frustrated by that. After all, this was her wedding day as much as it was his.

But even so...

“I can’t have you interrupting my conversations,” he told her. “That was important. That was Lord Hartford, and he’s a business associate of mine.

She laughed. He couldn’t believe it.

“Is something funny?” he demanded.

“Perhaps not *funny*,” she said. “But I just can’t believe what I’m hearing you say. This is our wedding day. I knew you were too carried away with your work, of course. Nancy’s told me that, and so has Margaret.”

His mood darkened. “Margaret said that to you? That I’m too carried away with my work? Were those her words?”

“I don’t remember her exact words. But what she told me matches what I know from Nancy, which is that your work is the most important thing to you. Do you say different? Was I misinformed?”

“You weren’t misinformed,” he told her coldly. “But my work is important. It’s how I keep this manor running. This is your home now, so you ought to understand that there’s no point in complaining to me about that.”

“I haven’t complained,” Lydia objected.

“Your complaint was implied. You said that I was *too carried away* with my work. That suggests to me that you want me to spend less time working. I suppose you don’t like having fine things.”

“Maybe fine things don’t matter as much to me as they do to you,” she shot back. “Maybe I’m less interested in that sort of thing than you are. What would you say to that?”

“I’d say you’re arguing for the sake of argument. I’ve never known a lady who wasn’t interested in finery.”

“You’ve never known me. This is one of the first conversations you and I have ever had,” she pointed out. “So, it would be foolish to act as if you know all about me. Perhaps, instead of doing that, you ought to take the time to get to know me.”

“We have all the time in the world to get to know one another,” he protested. “We’re married to each other. Was this really so urgent that you had to interrupt my conversation?”

“I wanted to dance with my husband on my wedding night,” she said. “If you’re honest with yourself, you have to admit that it’s not an unreasonable request. Any lady would want the same thing. The unreasonable thing is that I had to ask for it at all. You shouldn’t have been working.”

“I just told you—”

“I know what you told me, but I stand by what I said. I don’t have any expectations of being more important to you than your work very much of the time. I know that’s an impractical thing to hope for—I understand you well enough to feel sure of that. But I also know that tonight is the one night of our lives when you *should* prioritize me above all else.

“You have a wife. You have a duchess. And I’m to be the mother of the heir to the dukedom. You should want to share those things with everyone you’ve invited here tonight—and frankly, everyone here should appreciate those things. They

should understand that, for one night, something is going to be more important to you than your work. Your friend there seemed to understand well enough.”

“Lord Hartford is not a *friend*, Lydia. I told you this already. He’s a business associate.”

“All right, yes, you told me. He’s a business associate. Be that as it may, he didn’t seem surprised or bothered to discover that you were going to suspend your conversation and spend a bit of time with your wife. If it doesn’t bother him, why does it bother you?”

He looked at her, exasperated. “Are you saying these things deliberately to try to aggravate me?”

“Why would I want to aggravate you?”

“I don’t know. I can’t figure out what you’re trying to do.”

“Well, it really isn’t that complicated,” she said. “I wanted to dance on my wedding day. You treated me as if I was being unreasonable—even inappropriate—for wanting that. And now I’m telling you why I think you shouldn’t have acted that way.” She hesitated. “I think I see the problem here.”

“Go on.”

“You thought I would be easily controlled,” she observed. “You thought you could bring me here from my father’s house and do whatever you wished with me—including ignoring me

—and I'd never have anything to say about it. Maybe you thought I would be too timid to ever speak up. Is that it?"

Edward wanted to argue, but he couldn't. If he was honest with himself—something he always strove to be—she had a point. He had thought it would be easy having her here. He hadn't considered the fact that she would have a mind of her own and might not bend easily to his will.

Everyone always bent to his will in the end. Edward was quite used to having his own way. And she would come to see that, given time.

"I like a challenge," he said.

"And is that what I am to you? A challenge?"

Edward smiled.

It amazed him.

He hadn't expected to smile today. He had assumed the whole thing would be nothing but drudgery. That was how it should have felt. Here he was, being forced into this marriage he'd never wanted at the risk of losing his business associates. Here he was, in the middle of a room full of people, trying to prove that he was something he knew he wasn't—the kind of man who could be compromised by matters of the heart.

It made no sense to him that anyone would want this. Why would a gentleman be considered more trustworthy, more

capable, if he was the sort who could lose his head at the sight of a beautiful lady? It wasn't sensible.

But if that was what people needed to see in order to trust him, he could comply. He could play that role and show them that character.

That was what today was supposed to be about.

He hadn't honestly given much thought to Lydia as a person. She had a role to play here just as he did, but he hadn't thought about what it would be like to do this with her by his side. He hadn't considered the question of whether they would like one another.

Now, he realized that he did like her.

She was funny. Her wit was quick and sharp, and she never acted as if she felt any need to placate or appease him. She wasn't frightened of him, and he liked that about her.

She seemed to know what she wanted, and she was unafraid to ask for it. To Edward's intense surprise, he liked that about her too. It made things interesting.

For a moment, he allowed himself to imagine what it might be like if this was a different kind of marriage—if he really was the character he was pretending to be.

He would spend the next few weeks and months getting to know her, just as she had suggested. He would learn more and

more interesting things about her as time went on, and he was willing to believe that each new piece of information he learned would make him like her more. Perhaps he would fall in love with her, and she with him. That was something that could happen if you weren't being careful to avoid it.

What would it be like to spend every day with someone you loved? What would it be like if he wanted that kind of future, the kind Colin had with his wife?

Edward knew his brother would be happy if he ever discovered Edward had fallen in love. Love meant the world to Colin. He wasn't capable of understanding that not everyone wanted what he had.

"I don't want it," Edward told himself. But there was a part of him that nearly did.

He knew that he needed to remember the reason he had gotten himself into this in the first place. It had never been out of any desire for love or the usual trappings of marriage. That wasn't something he wanted. This was a business arrangement. The only point to it, the only reason he had done it, was to help get his affairs back in order. With Lydia in his home and on his arm, that would be seen to.

It didn't change anything that she made him laugh.

It didn't matter that she was beautiful, with her sleek blonde hair and light freckles like a constellation dusted across her nose.

It didn't matter that he had more fun with her out here on the dance floor at their wedding than he could ever remember having with anyone at any social function in his life, in spite of the vow he had made to himself.

None of that changed anything.

The only thing that mattered was that now he had a wife. He could return to doing business, and no one would question him about this ridiculous matter anymore. The problem was solved.

And he wasn't going to allow himself to fall in love. He had just fixed one weakness. He wasn't about to allow himself to develop another one.

CHAPTER TEN

As the wedding ball began to wind down, Lydia's anxiety increased.

The guests left the house, slowly at first, then more and more rapidly. Margaret commented that she was ready to retire and disappeared upstairs. The last two people to leave were Colin and Nancy, and when the crowd had diminished to just the four of them, Lydia knew that the moment when she would be left alone with her new husband was at hand.

She had promised herself that she wouldn't be nervous when it happened. But now that the time had come, she found she couldn't help it. Her nerves were getting the best of her.

"You'll be all right," Nancy said. The two of them were standing in a corner by themselves, separated from the two gentlemen, who seemed to be having an intense conversation of their own. "I know the wedding night is frightening, but really, it's not as bad as you think it's going to be. In fact, it doesn't have to be bad at all! Colin and I had a lovely time." She gave a soft, secret smile, and Lydia couldn't help feeling hopeful.

Maybe her friend was right. Maybe this was going to be a pleasant experience, after all.

Nancy squeezed her hand. "We'll have tea very soon," she suggested. "I'm so glad that we're family now, Lydia. This is all so exciting."

Lydia nodded. "I feel the same way," she assured her friend. "I don't know what the future has in store for us, but I'm sure it's going to be wonderful."

Colin came over. He had a curiously dark expression on his face. "We had better be off, Nancy," he urged. "The party is clearly over."

Nancy frowned. "Is everything all right?" she asked. "What were you and Edward just discussing?"

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with," Colin said. "Come on. The carriage will be waiting for us, and it's very late. I want to get you home."

Nancy nodded, a frown etched across her face, and she allowed Colin to lead her to the door.

Lydia watched them go, worry beginning to grow in her mind. She hoped everything was all right. Colin seemed to be upset about something, and while it was impossible to imagine him ever taking his feelings out on Nancy, it didn't look like the two of them were in for a particularly enjoyable evening.

She sighed, then turned to find Edward finishing his drink a few feet behind her. She went over to join him.

“It was a very good party, wasn’t it?” she asked, smiling up at him, hoping the expression would conceal her nerves.

She knew she had done a good job of showing him confidence so far today, and she wanted to keep that going. He didn’t need to know how anxious she was feeling about what came next.

He glanced at her. “It served us well,” he said dismissively.

“Are you ready for bed, then? Or perhaps we should have some tea first?”

She found herself hoping he would take her up on the suggestion of tea. It might help to have a conversation with one another, to relax a bit in each other’s presence now that their guests were gone.

But he shook his head. “My staff will take you to your room,” he said. “*Our* staff, if you prefer it. Your lady’s maid is already up there. Violet, I believe?”

“Violet is right,” she replied.

“If you want tea, speak to Violet. She’s had an introductory training in the ways of the house already, and she’ll know what to do to provide for your needs.”

“Well... I thought you might like to have tea *with* me,” she suggested.

“It’s very late, Lydia,” Edward said.

“I know that. It doesn’t have to be tea. It just seemed like a good idea to help us relax from the excitement of the day,” she explained.

What was she doing wrong? It was clear that something about this conversation was affecting him in a way she hadn’t intended, but she couldn’t put her finger on the problem.

“I don’t need tea,” she tried again. “I’m very happy to do whatever you’d like right now, Edward.”

“You’ll be shown to your room by my staff,” he said. “I’ll see you in the morning for breakfast if you’d like to come down.”

“Do you mean...” She hesitated. “Are you saying you won’t be joining me in my room tonight?”

She felt ashamed to be so forward, but at the same time, the question had to be asked because she wasn’t sure she understood him. She needed the answer.

He nodded. “I have business to take care of,” he said. “If you should need anything, I’ll be in my study. I don’t like to be disturbed there, and the room will be off-limits to you—it’s the one place in the house I’ll ask you not to go. But if your need is dire, you may speak with Violet, and she will know how to

get a message to me there. Though I prefer not to be interrupted, I do understand that this is your first night at Westfrey, and that you might need to speak to me about some things. Don't hesitate to send a message should anything arise."

Lydia frowned. "You really have to work tonight of all nights?"

"We've already had this conversation," he reminded her. "Business doesn't stop just because I happen to have gotten married. I took the time to dance with you while our guests were here because I saw that was something that mattered to you, but now everyone has gone home, and I expect you to retire and give me my space."

"It's our wedding night. I understand you might not have time for me every night, but tonight of all nights, I would have thought..."

Edward sighed. "Lydia, I think I've been unclear with you about something."

"What do you mean?"

"I won't be joining you in your room. Not tonight or any other night."

Lydia's heart sank. He couldn't mean what she thought he did. "I don't understand," she managed.

“I married you because I needed a wife,” he explained. “More specifically, I needed the *appearance* of having a wife. I need society to see me as a married gentleman. Married gentlemen have more success in business, apparently, though I can’t begin to fathom why that might be, and I can’t compromise my chances at success, so I needed to marry. That’s why you’re here. That’s the purpose of our arrangement.”

Lydia stared at him. “Is this some sort of joke?”

“Excuse me?”

“You brought me here for the sake of appearance only? Did you even consider what I would want before deciding to play games with my life, Edward? Did you even think to ask me?”

“I didn’t need to ask you, did I?” he countered. “You were very clear with me on the first day of our knowing one another. You told me that what mattered most to you was having the opportunity to become a duchess—didn’t you say that?”

She opened her mouth and then closed it again.

He was right, of course. She had said exactly that.

Much as she would have liked to deny it now or protest that she had never meant it, there was nothing she could really say. He was perfectly right. She’d told him that the only thing she cared about was his title, so why *shouldn’t* he marry her for appearance alone? Why shouldn’t he treat her as a means to an end when she had given every impression of treating him in

that very way? He must have thought he'd discovered a diamond when he'd realized the lady he was there to discuss marriage with wanted the very same thing he did—a loveless marriage that meant nothing at all.

“What if I hadn't said that?” she asked him. “What if I'd said something different? What if I had told you I wished to marry for love?”

“But you didn't say that,” he pointed out. “What's the point in exploring things that are untrue? A practical gentleman such as myself would never waste time on such pursuits, and that's something you ought to understand about me right away. It doesn't matter to me what *would* have happened if things had been different. Things aren't different. They are as they are. You wanted a duke, and I am one. I wanted a lady to be my wife, and you are that. In that way, we can make one another perfectly happy. There is no need for us to pretend that this is something other than what it is. There's no need for shared beds or children or a pretense at love.”

“But don't you want an heir?” she asked. “Doesn't the dukedom need an heir?”

It was her last grasp at turning the situation in her favor. If she gave him a child, perhaps he would eventually come to see things differently. Perhaps, given time...

“I have a younger brother,” he said, his tone disinterested. “And he plans on producing children, so there won't be any need for me to do that. The dukedom will have an heir regardless of my actions. But you needn't worry about your place in the hierarchy, Lydia. You'll enjoy all the privileges of a duchess. You'll be free to do whatever you'd like, to move about the house and use your title as you please. You'll have

access to all the financial resources of the dukedom, and you'll be free to throw parties and make use of the staff however you see fit. It will be everything you wanted it to be."

It would be nothing she had wanted it to be. But what could she say? How could she tell him now that it had all been a lie, that his title had never been the thing she cared about? How could she be angry with him, feel deceived by him, when he had just pointed out her own deception? There was nothing to be done. He was perfectly right, and now, she had gotten herself stuck.

She was miserable. If only they had been permitted even a short courtship! If they had, she could have learned these things about him. She would have fought harder to stop this marriage from taking place. She had convinced herself that the idea of love was enough to make her want to marry, but now, all hope of that was gone.

She saw her life stretched out in front of her, and it was bleak and empty. She would never have a child to raise alongside Nancy and her child. She would never have love in her life. Yes, she and Nancy would be family to one another, but it would look nothing like what she had anticipated. How could she possibly be happy with this turn of events?

Edward led her into the foyer, where the housekeeper was waiting to show her up to her room. He handed her off and walked away without a word. Bleakly, Lydia followed the housekeeper up the stairs and to the bedroom that would be hers. Already, she was longing for her bedroom at home and for the night before, when her future had still seemed bright and full of promise. Everything had gone so wrong so fast.

“If you need anything, you may inform your lady’s maid,” the housekeeper said. “The staff is all here to provide for you, Your Grace.”

Your Grace. It was the first time she had been addressed as if she was a duchess—which, of course, she was. It was the first time she had been honored with the title she had married into.

She no longer wanted it. She would give it back, she thought bitterly, if only it meant that she could reclaim a chance at having love in her life.

But that chance was gone forever.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Violet was waiting for Lydia in her bedroom as promised, and the sight of a familiar face from her past life was at once so comforting and heartbreaking that Lydia was hard-pressed not to fling herself into the arms of her lady's maid and burst into tears.

"You look unhappy," Violet noted sympathetically. "Was the wedding not what you hoped it would be, Your Grace?"

"The wedding was absolutely nothing like what I hoped it would be." Truer words had never been spoken. "Nothing about any of this is what I hoped it would be, Violet."

"Well, let's get you out of that gown," the lady's maid sympathized. "Then you can tell me all about it."

Lydia stood in front of the looking glass, staring at her reflection as Violet helped her undress. It was odd. She had seen herself every day in the looking glass at home, but even that familiar sight felt strange—almost unknown—to her now that she was here. She didn't recognize the young lady she was looking at. In the space of a single day, all the hopes and plans she'd had for her life had been stripped away, leaving her with nothing but empty spaces.

What would tomorrow look like? What would the world look like five years from now, or ten? It was impossible to imagine now that she was married to a gentleman who had told her he could never love her and would never try. She didn't know what to think.

When she was dressed for bed, she went over to the window seat and sat down. It was too dark outside to see what her view might be like, and she found she didn't have a lot of curiosity about it anyway. Whatever was out there, she would see it in the morning. It would be very fine, no doubt. This whole manor was very fine. But it didn't matter.

“Can I bring you something, Your Grace?” Violet asked. “I’ve been instructed on how to fetch anything you might need from the kitchen. And it’s been made clear to me that, as the lady of the house, you’re to have whatever you want.” She smiled. “That’s lovely, isn’t it? You could ask for anything, and it would be arranged for you. It must be wonderful to be a duchess.”

“I’d rather be back at home with my parents than to stay here and be a duchess,” Lydia said darkly.

“But you were so unhappy there,” Violet protested. “We weren’t to talk about it, but everyone knew how unhappy you were, Your Grace.”

“I was,” Lydia agreed. “But at least the future held promise and possibility. Now that I’m here, this is all my life will ever be, Violet. I’ll never escape to anything more than this. I’ll never have anything better.”

“But aren’t things lovely for you here?” Violet asked. “I don’t understand what more you could possibly need. You can have whatever you want.”

Lydia shook her head. “Maybe I can eat whatever I’d like and make use of the kitchen at any time of day, but that’s a far cry from having whatever I want, Violet. This isn’t the marriage I dreamed of. It’s nowhere close.”

“What’s the problem with it?”

Lydia sighed. “I suppose I sound spoiled. After all, I *am* a duchess, and maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s not appropriate for me to find things to complain about.”

“You’re allowed to complain to me, Your Grace,” Violet said. “I’m here for whatever you need. You know that. I’m here to listen to complaints if that’s what you need me to do. Anything you need me to do.”

“It’s just that... well, my husband doesn’t love me.”

It sounded a bit silly to say it aloud.

“I know that must be an intimidating. thing,” Violet said sympathetically. “I’m sure it makes you feel as if you’re on your own. But, Your Grace, the two of you did just meet one another, after all. Of course he doesn’t love you yet. Do you love *him*?”

“No, I don’t,” Lydia replied.

“So, you see? It’s only natural. These things take time to grow,” Violet assured. “I’m sure that if you just have patience, before long you’ll find—”

“No, I won’t,” Lydia interjected. “I won’t find anything, Violet. He’s made that abundantly clear. He just told me, downstairs, that he wouldn’t have me to his bed tonight or any other night. That he has no interest in finding love with me or even in producing an heir. All he wants is someone to appear in public as his wife, for the sake of his business interests. He wants a duchess, but he doesn’t want love. The two of us will never be anything more than we are today.”

“You can’t know that for sure,” Violet said gently. “No one knows what the future holds.”

“But I know what he *wants*. He’s been very clear about it. He doesn’t want us to love one another. It won’t happen if he doesn’t want it. Don’t you see, Violet? He isn’t going to have anything to do with me. I’ll spend my days in his house like a piece of furniture, the lady he married so he would have someone to point to when he’s asked about his wife. That’s all I am and all I’ll ever be. And it’s devastating because it means that any hope of love in my life is gone now.

“I can’t dream of finding a gentleman who will love me. I can’t fantasize about enjoying the feeling of love myself or about the embrace of a child. I’ll never know any of those things. My life might as well be over because it will never include anything more than what I already have!”

“Oh, Your Grace, don’t say such things,” Violet said. “I understand that this must have come as a shock to you, and I’m sorry it’s happened, but at the same time, you really *can’t* know what to expect from the future, you know. All right, so things aren’t going to look the way you hoped they would. That’s a disappointment, and I understand that you’re having a hard time adjusting to this new reality. Of course it would be difficult to face. I’d expect nothing else. But that doesn’t mean that no good things will come your way in life. You don’t know what might happen. You might encounter wonderful blessings that it never even occurred to you to want! Your life might be rich and lovely and full—but full of things you never dreamed of.”

“You’re just trying to make me feel better.”

“I am,” Violet agreed. “But that doesn’t mean what I’m saying is untrue, Your Grace.”

“All I wanted was to fall in love,” Lydia said. “Perhaps to become a mother someday. So many times, I thought about what it would be like. And I was always able to tell myself that that future lay ahead for me. I would think about it at night as I was falling asleep, and I’d fall asleep with a smile on my face and hope in my heart. Now, that hope is gone. It’s impossible to imagine feeling cheerful about anything, knowing that the one great hope I had for my life has been snatched from me.”

“Perhaps you should get to bed,” Violet suggested. “I know this has been a shock, Your Grace. Things will certainly look brighter in the morning.”

But Lydia wasn’t sure they would. She knew she was being dramatic tonight, focusing on the very worst of her situation.

Violet was right. There would be good things about being a duchess. Perhaps she should try to be thankful for those things. And then, also, there was the fact that no situation had ever been improved by moaning about it. Surely it made more sense to try to *do* something to improve her lot than it did to sit around lamenting what had happened.

Pull it together. What's done is done.

No, things wouldn't automatically get better in the morning. But the only one who had the power to improve things at all was Lydia herself, and it wouldn't be done by sitting around and complaining.

The best thing, then, was to get herself a good night's sleep and then to see what she could do in the morning. This was her life now, for good or ill, and she did have choices left. She could lament what she had lost, or she could focus on what she had gained and try to make the best of a bad situation.

She was out of her parents' house. That was a good thing.

She might be trapped in a loveless marriage, a marriage with no future, but at least her husband wasn't going to be brutal or unkind. She had been so intimidated by him when she had first met him, but now, she wasn't frightened of him at all. Angry, yes, but not frightened. He had done nothing to harm her, nor would he—apart from the theft of her future, that was.

Violet turned down the bedcovers, allowing her to get in. "Can I get you anything?" she asked. "Something to eat or drink, perhaps?"

Lydia was on the verge of saying no—she wasn't hungry or thirsty, and she was ready to be alone with her thoughts. But then, she changed her mind.

"I'd like a pastry," she said.

"A pastry, Your Grace?"

"That's right. And some hot chocolate."

After all, the story was that she could have anything she liked. It was time to put that to the test. She intended to discover just how much power a duchess really had, and this would be an easy way to start. Could she really have anything she wanted sent up to her room at any time, day or night, without turning any heads? Would no one so much as comment on it?

Certainly, Violet wouldn't. She nodded and moved toward the door. "I'll fetch that for you at once, Your Grace," she said. "And would you like the lamp to remain lit for now?"

"Yes, thank you," Lydia replied. "I might stay up for a while and do some reading."

"Whatever you'd like, Madam."

Violet left the room to fetch Lydia the late night food and drink she had asked for, leaving Lydia to reflect that, if nothing else, she had gained more freedom in her life. She would never have dared to ask for chocolate late at night while living in her father's house—he wouldn't have liked it. She

wouldn't even have wanted to risk keeping the lamp lit late so she could read by it. Back at home, that would have led to complaints about wasting resources and admonitions to focus on getting more sleep.

But I'm not just my father's daughter anymore. I'm a duchess now. I can do whatever pleases me.

She settled into her bed. It wasn't the future she had always dreamed of, far from it. And she had no idea whether it would be able to make her happy in the long run. But, for now, she would try to feel happy about the hand she'd been dealt. It was better than being miserable, so she knew she had to embrace it as best she could.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lydia couldn't count on seeing her husband at meals—she learned that very quickly over the course of the first month. Margaret almost always joined her for dinner, but she was usually on her own at breakfast time. It was very rare to have Edward sit down with her, and when he did, it was usually with a look of extreme preoccupation, as if they happened to be in the same place at the same time but only by coincidence. Usually, he said nothing to her.

It bothered her at first. For the first week or so, she took it personally. After that, it began to feel like a challenge. Could she get him to react to her if their paths crossed? How determined was he to ignore her? How far out of his way would he go to avoid having to exchange a word?

“The new stallions are arriving today,” she told him one morning, a month into their marriage.

He had been seated at the breakfast table when she arrived in the dining room, his attention already fixed on some papers, and she knew perfectly well that he wouldn't so much as look up from them unless she said something.

She was excited about the new stallions. She'd always loved horses, and the stable at Westfrey had struck her as rather small from the moment she'd arrived. So, today was a big day, regardless of how Edward felt about it. But at the same time, she did recognize an opportunity to provoke some kind of response from him here. As far as she was aware, he hadn't known that new stallions were coming. She'd had no opportunity before today to let him know about this latest purchase.

Maybe this will be the thing that finally breaks the tension between us. Maybe this will be the day he tells me I'm taking advantage of my role as Duchess, and I've got to stop.

She had to admit, a part of her was longing for that moment. She *wanted* him to get angry. She wanted him to tell her that she was overstepping, that she had no right to do the things she was doing. It wasn't that she enjoyed being yelled at, but it would be preferable to being ignored.

He lowered his papers and looked up at her. "Stallions?"

Her heart beat faster. She had done it—she had finally gotten his attention!

"That's right," she said, struggling to keep her voice even.

"What stallions are we talking about?"

"I purchased three of them. There was room for three additional horses in the stables, and I thought we ought to have some nice ones."

“And who’s going to take care of these horses?” Edward asked. “I only have one stable hand. Three new horses will double his work. Will he be able to keep it up?”

“I’ve hired him an apprentice,” she replied.

“You have, haven’t you?”

“Well,” she amended, “I allowed him to hire his own apprentice because I thought he would know better than I what skills were needed, and he would make a more informed choice.”

Surely this would anger Edward, that she had dared to hire someone without so much as talking to him beforehand about it.

“The young man has been in the position for a week now, preparing for the arrival of the new horses and learning all about how things are done here.”

“Who is this fellow?” Edward asked, his brow furrowed. “You can’t simply hire anyone off the street to come and work at Westfrey, you know. It’s a distinguished position, serving in this house.”

“I know that being a part of this household is a distinguished position,” she said. “I *am* the Duchess, after all, even if this is the first real conversation you and I have had since I assumed that role.”

He was unprovoked. “The new hire?”

Lydia nodded. “The new stablehand is the son of one of the maids,” she said. “Ginger.”

“Oh, Ginger’s boy?” Edward relaxed. “That’s all right, then.”

“So... you don’t mind?”

“No, of course not. Ginger can be trusted. She’s served my family since I was a child. And I’m sure her son is just as trustworthy as she is. I hope he’ll do well in the new position. And you were wise to keep the hiring within the family. Very good.”

He turned his attention back to his papers.

Lydia frowned. Was that really it? He had nothing else to say about the audacity she’d shown? He wasn’t going to admonish her for making such a major purchase without speaking to him first? He didn’t mind that she had hired somebody?

She had expected a response at the beginning when she had redecorated the sitting room. It had been the first big thing she’d dared to do—the first act she had performed as a duchess. She was pleased with how it had turned out, but it had also been a very big project. She’d gotten rid of some of the old furnishings and had the walls repainted. She had replaced the rug.

It looked like a different room now. And while Lydia felt strongly that her version was both more modern and more beautiful, she had also spent the entire time expecting him to stop her one day, to tell her she had no right to make such major changes to the house.

He had said absolutely nothing. He hadn't even given an opinion on the updated room when it was finished. It was as if he simply didn't realize that his sitting room had been redone. He didn't seem to care at all.

Lydia wondered just how far she would have to go to get a reaction out of him.

“Well, the stallions should arrive this afternoon,” she said. “If you'd like to come out and see them—they're wonderful horses.”

“I'm sure they're fine,” he murmured, and Lydia could tell that she only had half of his attention if that. “I won't be able to get out there today. I have a lot of work to do.”

So saying, he gathered his papers and rose from the table, leaving her on her own once more.

Lydia found herself unable to muster any enthusiasm for her breakfast after that. She had to admit that she had been holding out quite a lot of hope for what would happen when Edward learned about the stallions, and now that the plan had fallen short, she was left feeling dismal and disappointed. It was hard to imagine anything she could do that she hadn't already tried to get his attention. Redecorating the house hadn't done it. Extravagant purchases hadn't done it. Even hiring additional

staff didn't seem to pull his head away from his work. It felt like a constant, ongoing challenge at which she was perpetually failing.

Maybe I ought to stop trying. I'm only driving myself crazy trying to accomplish something I might never succeed at.

She got up from the table and wandered off. The stallions would be arriving at any moment—maybe they were already being delivered—but she would go down and see them in the afternoon. She didn't want to get in the way while the stable hands were trying to get them settled into their new stalls. Lydia enjoyed riding, and she was looking forward to taking one of the new horses out, but it was difficult to focus on the enthusiasm she felt for that while at the same time feeling so disappointed by Edward's response to the whole thing.

She was just going to have to try to find another way to get his attention, that was all. Even though her instincts were telling her to give it up, she was going to have to keep trying until something was successful.

She went out to the garden, which had become her habit after breakfast, and found Violet there waiting for her.

“I trust breakfast was satisfying?” Violet asked.

“Not exactly.”

“Shall I have something else brought out for you?”

“The food was fine,” Lydia said. “It isn’t that. But I’ve failed to attract my husband’s attention yet again. I just don’t know what I’m going to do anymore, Violet. It’s beginning to feel as though I could burn the house down, and he still wouldn’t pay me the slightest bit of attention.”

“His Grace does possess a rather unusual amount of focus,” Violet agreed. “It seems unlikely that he would ever turn his gaze away from what he’s doing. I don’t think it’s a flaw in you.”

“No, I don’t think it is either, I suppose,” Lydia agreed. “It’s the way he is. But it’s maddening. I feel as if I’m turning into a ghost, and I would do almost anything to have him acknowledge that I am a real person. I just want to feel as though my actions have meaning, Violet. It’s not enough to be free to do whatever I’d like. I want to feel like when I do something, that thing matters to someone. Even having him get angry with me would be better than feeling ignored like this, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Don’t try too hard to do too much,” Violet advised. “You don’t want to do something unwise out of the desire to gain his attention, after all. Just continue to do the things you would have done anyway, and eventually, something will attract his attention.”

“I’m not so sure,” Lydia said darkly. “I really thought the stallions were going to do it. Purchasing three new horses—I thought he would *have* to take notice. But I don’t know whether he even truly registered what I was telling him. If he expressed shock later at the fact that we have these horses, I wouldn’t be surprised!”

She set off walking along the garden path with Violet at her side.

“Perhaps you should abandon the idea for now,” Violet suggested gently. “I think you may have done all you could do, and it might serve you better to focus on your own happiness rather than on his attention. If he’s going to notice you, it will happen in due course, right?”

“But what am I supposed to do?” Lydia asked. “You don’t understand, Violet. This is one thing that will never happen to you because your role as my lady’s maid makes you very important. You know that I will always see you, always notice the things you do for me.”

“My role is certainly not more important than the role of a duchess!” Violet proclaimed. “Nor is it more visible.”

“Not broadly, but you can feel assured that I’m going to see the things you do for me each day and feel grateful for them.”

“That’s because I’m lucky in my employment,” Violet said. “Not every lady’s maid can claim the same. But you’re right, Your Grace. I do feel as though the things I do matter. I know that my actions have meaning. I imagine it must be very difficult to feel as if you’re constantly trying to prove that fact.”

“I know what I’m going to do,” Lydia said.

“What do you mean?”

“To get Edward’s attention. One more idea. And I’m sure this one will work. If it doesn’t, nothing will.”

Violet eyed her warily. “You aren’t *really* thinking about burning the house down, are you?”

“Oh, goodness, Violet! Of course, I’d never do that. You know that. I was only speaking dramatically when I said that. I wouldn’t destroy Westfrey Manor! I’m not a criminal. No, it’s something I was thinking of building, not destroying.”

“What are you planning to build?”

“I think Westfrey would be enhanced by having an orangery,” Lydia explained. “I always wished we had one back at my father’s house. Well, now I’m a duchess, and I can do whatever I like, so I’m going to create an orangery. And as an added benefit, Edward will be unable to ignore a project of such scope. He’ll have to say something about it this time.”

Violet nodded. “I must admit,” she agreed, “I think you’re probably right.”

Lydia beamed. Finally, it seemed, she had the answer she had been looking for.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“How good to see you again, Your Grace.”

Edward smiled up at Lord Hartford. “Thank you for making the time to sit down with me today,” he said. “It’s a pleasure, as always.”

“We haven’t seen one another since your wedding,” Lord Hartford observed. “How has the marriage been going? Are you and your bride still as enamored of one another as you were on that happy occasion?”

It was probably a test, Edward thought. He maintained his smile. “I’ve never been happier,” he assured Lord Hartford. “I’d have married much sooner if I had known what joy it would bring me to have a lady about the place.”

“I can only imagine how her influence must be softening you.”

“Maybe in some regards,” Edward agreed. “But I can assure you, Lord Hartford, that when it comes to business, I am the man I always was. You will find me just as easy and reliable to conduct business with.”

“In fact, I feel as if I can rely on you even more now that I see you able to embrace a serious commitment like marriage,” Lord Hartford said. “But I don’t think it was any secret that there were those of us who had concerns about your ability to be serious.”

“I hope those concerns have now been put to rest.”

“For my part, they certainly have,” Lord Hartford assured.

“Have you had a chance to look over the contracts I drew up and had sent to you?”

“I have, and everything looks good to me,” Lord Hartford said. “I’m ready to sign now.”

“Wonderful. In that case, why don’t we get the business out of the way and order some drinks?”

In truth, Edward had no interest in staying for drinks and socializing with a business associate. Once the papers were signed, he felt the only sensible thing was to wrap matters up and return home. They weren’t friends. But he had begun to gain an understanding of the sort of man Lord Hartford was, and he knew that some socialization was called for here. The important thing was that Lord Hartford was even now affixing his name to those documents. The business deal was going to go through. If they needed to put on a show of being friends for a little while afterward, then so be it.

He waited until Lord Hartford was finished signing and then put the papers away. “What are you in the mood for?” he

asked.

“Scotch,” Lord Hartford said promptly. “A moment like this calls for scotch.”

“I’ll visit the bar.”

“Never mind that.” Lord Hartford put his hand up, and a moment later, a waiter had joined them.

Lord Hartford ordered two drinks with the easy confidence of a gentleman who did this sort of thing all the time, and the waiter nodded and disappeared.

“So,” Lord Hartford said, “tell me all about your wife.”

Inwardly, Edward groaned. He might have guessed that things were heading in this direction. “What do you want to know about my wife?”

“You married after a very short courtship, didn’t you?”

No courtship at all if I’m being honest.

“That’s right.”

“You must have gotten to know one another quite a bit better over the last few weeks,” Lord Hartford observed. “What do

you think of her now that the two of you are better acquainted.”

“Oh, well, you saw her for yourself,” Edward replied. “She’s beautiful.”

“Certainly,” Lord Hartford agreed. “But that’s not what I meant. You knew she was beautiful on the very first day. I’m talking about her personality. What has it been like getting to know her? I’m sure you two must spend long hours together every day since your relationship is still so new. What is she like?”

“Oh.” Edward felt a bit awkward.

What was he supposed to say? He didn’t spend much time with Lydia, and it was by design. He had nothing he wanted to say to her, and the two of them had nothing in common. Was he supposed to be forcing himself to build a relationship with someone who didn’t matter to him just because technically the two of them happened to be married to one another?

“She’s very excited to be a duchess,” he said, after thinking about it for a few moments. After all, that was one thing he could say for certain about her.

“What do you mean?” Lord Hartford asked.

“She’s been making all kinds of changes around the house. Redecorating. Making the place her own. Actually, she recently purchased three new stallions for our stables. She hasn’t been hesitant at all to make changes.”

“Well, that’s good!” Lord Hartford said. “There’s nothing like a lady who knows her own mind and has the confidence to go after what she wants, is there? I’d say you’re very lucky to have found someone like that. It’s certainly what you want in a duchess.”

Though perhaps I wouldn’t have wanted someone who spends my money so freely.

But Edward didn’t say that part out loud. “I suppose you’re right.”

Let Lord Hartford think that this marriage was a perfect one.

“And when are you planning to bring her out to a ball and show her off?”

“You know I’ve never been much for balls and parties.”

“But that will have to change now,” Lord Hartford said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “You have a lady to care for, and she’ll want to have a social life. You won’t be able to stay locked up in your manor any longer. Having a wife will force you to come out and be a part of the world.”

He laughed as he said it, and Edward glowered. He didn’t enjoy the judgment he heard in Lord Hartford’s tone, and he very much would have liked to tell the other gentleman to shut his mouth. But at least he knew Lord Hartford was wrong.

There was nothing in his arrangement with Lydia that would compel him to go to parties with her. She was having plenty of fun redecorating his home. He didn't need to take her out to socialize on top of that.

The important thing was that he had gotten his papers signed, he reminded himself as he rode home after concluding the meeting. That was what mattered. He and Lord Hartford would be in business together, which was what he had been aiming for all along.

By the time the carriage pulled up in front of Westfrey, he was in a good mood again, thinking of nothing but retiring to his study and perhaps smoking a cigar to celebrate his accomplishment. But when he stepped out of the carriage, he was met by a shocking sight.

The grounds were full of people he didn't know—people who didn't work for him—rushing around as if they were on a mission. He stared, wondering if he was being robbed by the world's most audacious burglars. Would any burglar be so bold as to carry out the act in plain sight like this?

He saw his butler standing off to one side and watching the proceedings, and he hurried over. "Bradford! What's going on here?"

Mr. Bradford looked at him warily. "I was worried you might not have been aware of this," he said. "The staff just found out today, for the most part."

"Found out what? I don't understand what's happening here."

“Her Grace has arranged to have an orangery built.”

“She’s done *what?*”

“You can see for yourself.” Mr. Bradford pointed. “Your Grace, please believe me when I say I had no knowledge of this. If I had, I would of course have told you at once.”

“I believe you,” Edward said.

He hurried around the side of the house in the direction Mr. Bradford had indicated, and the butler followed after him. Sure enough, a large building was in the process of being erected there.

Edward could hardly believe that the work was being done so quickly. There had been nothing here just this morning. He hadn’t been with Lord Hartford for that long. He hurried forward and stopped one of the men who was involved in the construction.

“Who’s in charge here?” he asked.

“I think this property belongs to the Duke of Westfrey,” the man replied.

“Yes, it most certainly does! I am the Duke of Westfrey! What I’m asking you is, who is in charge of your project? To whom do you answer?”

The man looked a bit shaken. “Norris there is our foreman,” he said. “I can get him for you.”

“Never mind, I’ll get him myself.” Edward marched over to the foreman. “Excuse me.”

Norris seemed a bit more aware than the last man he had spoken to. “Your Grace, I take it?”

“Yes, that’s right. On whose authority are you and your men building on these grounds?”

“Why, we were told by the Duchess of Westfrey that this was where the orangery was to be constructed. Was there some mistake?”

Edward had half a mind to tell the man to disassemble everything he had done and take it all away, but he took a breath and steadied himself. It might be nice to have an orangery here—his biggest objection was the fact that he hadn’t been consulted. And, after all, he had given Lydia no reason to believe she needed to consult him on things like this. She had always been free to do whatever she liked.

Of course, there *was* the matter of the expense. He’d looked the other way on the purchase of the stallions and the hiring of the new stable hand, but a new building on the property would be the most expensive thing Lydia had done so far by quite a bit.

She needs to know that she’s gone too far this time. I’ll let this happen, but the next time she wants to do something so

extreme, she is going to have to discuss it with me.

“There’s no mistake,” he told Norris. “You may proceed. But from now on, you’re to communicate with me directly, not with the Duchess. And if she tries to give you any further instructions about this project, you may tell her that you’ve been forbidden to follow her orders, and that if she wants something done, she must also go through me.”

“I understand, Your Grace,” Norris agreed. “I’ll make sure my men all get that message as well.”

“Thank you,” Edward said. “And now, I must go and speak to my wife. I don’t suppose you know where she is?”

“I’m afraid not. I saw her a few hours ago, when we started to build the orangery, but not since then.”

“That’s all right. I’m sure I’ll be able to find her in the house. Thank you.”

He went inside, thinking about everything he had just been witness to.

Lydia had grown very bold.

And perhaps, Edward thought, he should have seen it coming. But the fact of the matter was that he hadn’t. With every move she’d made, he should have seen that she was building toward something like this, but somehow, he had convinced himself that everything she tried would be her last impetuous action.

She would run out of rooms to decorate. She didn't need any *more* stallions.

Never in a million years had he envisioned something like this.

And it occurred to him that he had almost no idea how to talk to her about it. The two of them had rarely had a conversation in all the time they had been married, and the conversations they did have were stilted and awkward. How was he supposed to talk to her now? How could he make her see sense?

What if she refused to listen?

He didn't want to make her unhappy, to take away the freedoms he had given her and the power she had as Duchess. But if she wouldn't be reasonable, he told himself firmly, that was a step he would simply have to consider, for the sake of the dukedom and for his own financial well-being.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The door to Lydia's bedroom was closed, but Edward could see the light of a lantern shining under the crack, and he knew she must be inside.

He paused. He hadn't been into this room since she had moved in. He had told himself, very firmly, that this would be the one place in the manor that was hers alone. It would be a sanctuary for her, and he wouldn't violate it.

But he needed to speak to her.

He cleared his throat and knocked on the door three times.

"Come in," she said, her voice high and clear.

She sounded so different from the way she usually did when they spoke, he thought, and he wondered why that was—and then it occurred to him that the usual tension was gone from her voice. This was what she sounded like when she was at ease.

She must not realize it's me out here, or she probably wouldn't be so relaxed.

He opened the door.

She was sitting in the armchair with a book open in her lap, the light hitting her perfectly. For a moment, he forgot he was angry. He was so taken aback by the fact that this beautiful lady was a part of his home and his daily life now that he forgot he had come here to scold her.

Then, he caught sight of the orangery out the window behind her, and he was reminded.

He saw the moment she realized he was the one outside the door. Her whole body tensed up, and her facial expression became guarded.

Strange. He found himself feeling sad about that, wishing that she didn't feel so tense around him. That wasn't something he had realized he'd wanted. And who was there to blame but himself? He hadn't spent any time around her since she'd come to live here. Of course she felt awkward at the sight of him.

"May I come in?" he asked her.

"It's your house," she pointed out.

"But this is your room. You say who comes and goes in this room."

“You can come in,” Lydia said.

He nodded and came inside. “I suppose you know why I’m here.”

“I think I can guess,” she said cautiously. “The orangery?”

“You knew that it was going to upset me, having that built.”

“I didn’t know anything of the sort,” she said evenly.

“If you didn’t know it would bother me, why did you keep it a secret?”

“What on earth makes you say that I kept it a secret?” she asked.

“You didn’t tell me about it. Don’t try to act like you don’t understand what I mean. You and I both know you were being underhanded, keeping things to yourself—you could have told me you were planning this, but you didn’t. You chose to keep it a secret, and you know it.”

“And when do you imagine I would have told you?” she asked. “During one of our many long, heartwarming conversations? When was the last time you and I did more than exchange pleasantries? Do you know *anything* about me? How can you act as though I’m being secretive when the truth of the matter is that you haven’t taken the time to find out what I’m doing in any way at all? If you wanted to know what

plans I had for Westfrey Manor, you had only to ask—but you don't ask me things. You never ask me anything.”

“Now I have to ask you each day whether you're planning to commit massive amounts of our finances to the construction of new buildings we don't need?” he demanded. “I didn't know that was something you needed to be asked, Lydia. How could I have known? How could I have guessed that you were planning something like this? You should have told me without waiting to be asked.”

But she stood her ground. “I hardly *see* you,” she said. “I haven't seen you since I decided to do this. When was I going to have a conversation with you about it? We don't have our meals together, Edward. You're always at work, for heaven's sake. There wasn't anything I could have done.”

“Then perhaps you shouldn't have built an orangery at all!” he exclaimed. “Really, I've been very tolerant with you, until now. I've allowed you the freedom to redecorate the house. I've let you buy horses and even hire new members of staff. There are plenty of gentlemen who would have put a stop to all this a long time ago.”

“Well, you told me the night I arrived that I would have all the rights and freedoms of a duchess,” she said. “You made it clear that I was to do whatever I liked. Are you telling me now that you didn't mean that?”

“I was thinking about things like... like inviting your friends over for tea. Ordering the food you wanted to be served at dinner. Things of that nature.”

“Oh, I see,” Lydia said. “You wanted me to have the role of a duchess as long as it didn’t inconvenience you.”

“Why on earth would I want to be inconvenienced?”

“You wouldn’t. I know that well enough,” she said scathingly. “You’ve made it abundantly clear. You wanted a wife, but only in name. You never cared about having a true marriage. That’s not something you want. That’s something that would be an inconvenience to you, and you’re not going to put up with it.” She laughed. “Although I must say, you’re reversing your position on all kinds of things today, not just the idea that I should be free to do whatever I want to do.”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“You said that you would never join me in my bedroom.”

The comment caught him off guard. He stood staring at her for a moment. She kept her gaze on his face, not breaking eye contact, clearly unintimidated by the weight of what she had just said to him.

“Is that what this is about?” he asked. “Did you do this to try to take revenge on me?”

Now their eye contact broke.

“I don’t need revenge on you,” she said. “You’ve done nothing to hurt me.”

But there was pain in her voice, and suddenly, Edward found himself wondering whether, in fact, he *had* hurt her.

“You can’t spend money so recklessly,” he protested.

“I don’t see why not,” Lydia countered. “You spend every hour of every day at work, so what’s the harm in it? It’s not as if you don’t have the money. Working as much as you do, you have plenty, and you and I both know that the reason your business ventures are as successful as they are is that you have me to point to. I *should* be able to take a free hand when it comes to making purchases.”

“Well, the orangery was too much. Perhaps we should make a rule that you have to get my approval for larger purchases.”

“Ridiculous,” she scoffed. “I couldn’t so much as get a good morning from you all week, and now, you want me to get your approval? I’ll never be able to do anything if I am to wait for your permission first. It’ll be impossible.”

“What do you want from me, Lydia?” he demanded. “There must be something you and I can agree upon in this because it just won’t do for you to go on spending money as you have been. I’ll be bankrupt if you do that.”

“Well, I don’t believe you will,” she said. “I believe your finances are in perfect order, and this is about controlling me, not stopping my spending. But if that’s what you want, it’s possible. You’ll just have to arrange to spend more time with me so that we can actually talk.”

“We should schedule business meetings?” he asked. “Perhaps once a week?”

“For heaven’s sake, no. Of course not. I’m not going to schedule a business meeting with my own husband.” She laughed. “I know you don’t want to have a real marriage, Edward, and I’m going to have to accept that. But couldn’t we at least be friends?”

“Friends?” he repeated. “What would that look like?”

“It would look like not avoiding one another all the time,” she suggested. “Having meals together. Perhaps going so far as to actually get to know one another. Come, Edward, you must have had a friend before in your life. You know what it means to be a friend.”

He hesitated. She was mocking him, he thought, but he wasn’t sure exactly what the joke was, so he wasn’t sure how to respond. In the end he decided to say nothing about it at all.

“You want to be my friend?” he asked. “Why would you want such a thing?”

“Because I’m alone all the time,” she explained simply. “And it’s not what I thought marriage was going to be like. I thought I would be gaining companionship. Well, I understand that you don’t really want a wife, and I can’t be angry with you about that. You have to pursue the life you want, though I do wish I had known going in what this was going to be like.”

“You wouldn’t have wanted to do it if you had known,” he said. “Is that true?”

“I don’t know what I would have wanted,” she admitted. “I don’t know what I would have done. But I wish I hadn’t entered into this marriage with so much hope. That’s the worst part—losing the hope I had for a future in which I might be able to fall in love. I’m not one to sit around feeling sad about the things I can’t have. If this is what my life is going to be, then the best thing I can do is to embrace that fact. But I see no reason you and I can’t at least be friends. So, yes, Edward, I do want that.”

“What do you want, specifically?” he asked her. “When you say you want me to be your friend, what do you actually want me to do? How do you intend to build this friendship?”

She looked confused for a moment, and he thought he had her—she clearly hadn’t thought this all the way through, and she had no idea what she was asking for.

Then, her expression cleared. “Meals,” she decided.

“Meals?”

“Breakfast and dinner. It’ll be no great hardship because we both eat breakfast and dinner every day as it is. We might as well do it together. We can use that time to get to know one another and to find out what we have in common. We can build a real friendship that way.”

“This is what you want?” he asked. “You want to have breakfast with me.”

“And dinner, yes.”

“If that was all you wanted, why didn’t you just ask for it right away?”

“I think you would have told me no,” she said. “You were so committed to the idea that nothing about your life should change. You wanted me to move in and be someone you could ignore. I think if you could have hired a maid to present herself as your wife, you would have done that—it would have been easier for you.”

Edward had to admit, that idea did hold appeal. He probably would have done just that if he could have gotten away with it.

Still, what she was asking for really wasn’t that much, all things considered. And if it would compel her to control her spending and to communicate her plans to him moving forward, it was a small price to pay.

“All right,” he agreed. “We’ll try it your way. Breakfast and dinner together every day, and we’ll tell each other a few things about what happened in each of our days. We’ll get to know each other. I still think this idea of us being friends is a bit misguided, but we’ll see what happens. Never let it be said that I didn’t give it a chance.”

“That’s all I ask,” Lydia said. “And thank you, Edward.”

He nodded. "Anything else?"

"Not if you don't need anything."

He permitted himself one last look at her. She really was beautiful. There was a part of him that just plain enjoyed the fact that she was living in his house and that he could look at her whenever he liked.

But that was the weak part of him, and it couldn't be indulged. The two of them weren't going to have that kind of relationship.

Lydia had already picked up her book again, and Edward left the room without another word.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Edward dragged his feet on his way down to breakfast the next morning.

He knew what time Lydia would be there. She was always prompt. He had discovered that early on when the two of them had inadvertently crossed paths at the table. So, he couldn't very well pretend now that he didn't know her habits. He couldn't come to the table at the wrong time and claim that was when he had expected her.

Besides, I agreed to this arrangement, and I meant it. I had every intention of following through.

It was just that he would miss the solitude of his usual meals. He liked eating breakfast alone. It was a nice way to start the day. Edward wasn't fond of having company. Most of his business associates were like Lord Hartford—after the important things were finished, they wanted to socialize or have drinks. Edward would have happily skipped that part. And he would have skipped that part of being married, too, if he could.

Why did they need to sit down each day and have conversations? Who was actually being helped by that?

When he could put off his promise no longer, he went down to the dining room. Perhaps Lydia would have gotten tired of waiting. Maybe she would have left.

But no, she was still there, waiting in front of an empty plate.

She looked up at him and smiled. "I was beginning to think you weren't coming," she said. "But don't worry, I waited for you."

"You could have started." He felt half annoyed and half guilty. Was there no avoiding this?

"I wouldn't do that," she said. "I understand how busy you are, Edward. I appreciate you taking the time to sit down with me. Of course, I'm more than happy to wait for you if you can't be here promptly. It's not any trouble for me."

"That's very understanding of you." He took his seat at the head of the table.

"Well, I know I was the one who pushed for us to take our meals together," she acknowledged. "The least I can do is be understanding about your schedule. What have you been doing this morning?"

He frowned. "Do you really care about that?"

"I want us to be friends," she said. "I told you that."

“I know you did, but—”

“Friends care about one another’s lives,” she explained. “Of course, I want to know what you’ve been doing lately.”

“Well, all right,” he said dubiously, unable to imagine that she would have any real interest in what he had to tell her. “I got up early this morning to go over the paperwork I signed with Lord Hartford the other day.”

“Lord Hartford,” she repeated, cutting her eggs. “He’s the gentleman I met at the wedding.”

“Yes, that’s right. I’m surprised you remember. The two of you didn’t exchange many words.”

“I have a knack for names,” she told him. “What are the two of you working on together?”

“I have a tip on a reliable investment fund,” he explained. “I’ve been trying to convince Lord Hartford and some other gentlemen to invest with me. I manage their funds for them and receive a share of their profits in return.”

“What if the funds aren’t profitable?”

“They will be,” Edward said confidently. “I have great faith in this particular fund. I know it’s going to pay out very well.”

“Well, that’s good,” Lydia replied. “I suppose Lord Hartford must feel very lucky to have someone like you to help him with this.”

“I think he trusts me, at least, which is about as much as I can ask for,” Edward said. “And he’ll trust me that much more when he sees his profit.”

Lydia beamed at him. “It all sounds very exciting,” she said. “I’m glad to know about it.”

“Are you really?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, I didn’t imagine you’d care very much,” Edward admitted. “After all, it has nothing to do with you. And I’ve never met a lady who cares about investments.”

“But it’s what my husband does,” Lydia pointed out. “Oh, I know I’m not supposed to think about you that way, and I don’t, not really. But at the same time, you married me so that you would be able to call someone your wife, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“Well, I enjoy being able to call someone my husband,” she said. “Even if we don’t have the relationship of a husband and wife. And I enjoy the fact that my husband is so skilled at his business. It makes me feel proud to be married to you. I know I’d be able to describe what you just told me to a friend, and

that my friend would feel impressed. That's something I enjoy."

He smiled. "I never expected you to feel that way about it," he admitted. "It never occurred to me that you might take such an interest in what I do. But I'm glad to know it, Lydia. I would have told you about it sooner if I had realized you would care."

"You have a nice smile," she commented. "I don't think I've ever seen you smile before."

"Oh, really?"

That surprised him. Had he truly never smiled in her presence before? It was hard to believe, and yet, now that he was thinking about it, he couldn't remember when he might have done it. He knew he smiled only rarely.

It made him sad to realize that she wouldn't have seen him smile on their wedding day. And it was a bit of a shock to him that he felt that way about it. On the day of the wedding, he had been thinking only about the practicalities—about what he would be gaining and about how it was going to help him, going forward. He hadn't considered the fact that a wedding was an occasion that would bring out happiness in a lot of people. He'd known about that, of course, but he hadn't been thinking about it.

But now, it occurred to him that, of course, Lydia would have been thinking about it. She would have expected her wedding to be a happy occasion, even knowing as little about him as

she had. She would have been disappointed when that hadn't happened.

How odd that today was the first time she could recall seeing him smile. How odd, and how sad.

And he found himself wanting to make it up to her.

"You know," he said, "Lord Hartford is having a ball in a week."

"Is he?" Lydia didn't react.

"Well, I wondered whether you might like to attend. If you would have any interest in such a thing."

"Just me, alone?"

"No, I would accompany you, of course," he said.

Now she looked up. "I wouldn't have thought you would be interested in that sort of thing," she replied. "You didn't take any interest in our wedding ball. I got the impression you didn't care for balls generally."

"Well, I don't," he said, because there was no point in lying about it. "Not usually. But I do feel you were shortchanged at the wedding ball. I think you were hoping for something a bit more exciting than what happened. Perhaps the best way to atone for that is to attend another ball."

“You really wouldn’t mind?”

“It would be good for me, since Lord Hartford and I are going into business together.” That much was certainly true. “I think it would mean a lot to him to see me at his home and to know that I was taking the event seriously. I think it offends him that I don’t come out to social events. I know some of my other business partners are bothered by that fact. So, yes, it would be a good idea for me to attend this ball. And if it would make you happy, I would be pleased to do it.”

She hesitated. “If you’re sure,” she decided, “I would like to go. But I don’t want to feel as if I’m a drain on you.”

“You’re nothing of the sort,” he reassured. “It will only be one evening, after all, and I think we’ll have a good time.”

“Very well, then,” she agreed. “Thank you. I’d like to go.”

“I’ll arrange for Margaret to take you into town for a new gown,” he said.

“She won’t mind?”

“It’s her duty as Dowager Duchess. And besides, she never got to do these sorts of things with Nancy.”

“Why not?”

“Because Nancy isn’t a duchess,” Edward explained. “The way she presents herself in public isn’t as important as it is for you. She can wear what she likes, but you’ve got to project an acceptable image. Margaret will be able to help you make sure you’re giving off the correct impression.”

Lydia nodded. “I suppose that’s fair,” she agreed. “All right. I would appreciate the opportunity to go shopping with Margaret.”

“Wonderful. I’ll let her know.”

He turned his attention to his food, surprised to find that he was actually rather excited about the prospect of attending Lord Hartford’s ball. It wasn’t something he would have imagined himself wanting to do, but knowing what it would mean to Lydia made him feel differently about it.

And that in itself was a surprise. When had he started caring so much about what would make her happy?

It was the way her face had changed when she had commented about his smile. It was the way she had seemed, so clearly, as though she was seeing something she’d never expected to see. Something she considered herself fortunate to see.

What surprised him most of all, he realized, was the knowledge that Lydia *cared* whether or not he was smiling. The implication was that she wanted him to be happy, and when was the last time anyone other than Colin had cared about *that*? When was the last time Edward himself had cared for his own happiness? He’d told himself day in and day out that happiness wasn’t something that mattered, that what was

really important was success. And he was successful, so what did he have to complain about?

But now, this lady—his wife, yes, but ultimately someone who hardly knew him—was telling him that she wanted him to be happy. That she cared how he was feeling.

It made him want to go out of his way to make *her* happy. It made him wonder what he could do to make her life richer and more fulfilled.

This ball would be the first thing, but it wouldn't be the last. He knew that already. He would be on the lookout for more ways of making sure she was satisfied with their life together.

“I can't stay at the table for very long this morning,” he apologized. “Maybe only about fifteen more minutes.”

When he had come to breakfast, that had felt like a good thing—a reprieve, an excuse to leave early—but he no longer felt that way. Now, he wished he'd cleared his schedule a bit so that he could stay here with her longer.

But she was still smiling. “It's all right,” she said. “I'll see you at dinner, after all.”

“That's right,” he agreed. “And we'll have opportunities to speak to each other at every meal, going forward. I'm starting to think this was a good idea, us having our meals together. We should have been doing this from the start.”

“I’m so glad you feel that way,” she said. “That’s exactly how I feel too.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The breakfast was going even better than Lydia had hoped it would. It did not trouble her that Edward had said he would be unable to stay for long—that wasn't a problem. The point was that he had come when he had promised to come, and he was spending time with her as he'd promised to do. It was the best outcome she could have hoped for.

And now, he was going to take her to a ball! That was something she hadn't dared to dream of, knowing the kind of man he was. She had assumed that her social opportunities would be limited to what Nancy could provide for her. She had begun to imagine the possibility of accompanying her friend and Colin to parties, but those fantasies were always a bit cold and sad. Would she really be able to enjoy herself, going to a ball on her own like that? Who would she dance with?

Would Edward dance with her at the Hartford ball? That was still a bit difficult to imagine. She wondered if dancing was something he ever did. If they'd had a real courtship, she would know, but as it was, she was left to wonder.

I suppose I'll find out at Hartford Manor!

Now, the door to the dining room opened, and Margaret came in. She carried herself regally, as she always did, and swept over to her usual seat at the table. “Good morning, Lydia,” she said. “And, Edward! It’s wonderful to see you joining us today, I must say.”

There was something pointed in her tone that Lydia didn’t recognize or understand, but it didn’t alarm her—not understanding Margaret was something she had grown used to. It was difficult to figure out the Dowager Duchess’s motives sometimes, and Lydia supposed that was because she had been a duchess far longer than Lydia herself. She had grown used to life in these circumstances, and she did things without having to think about them. Lydia was still learning to be the kind of lady Margaret already was.

“Good morning, Margaret,” Lydia returned. “It’s a pleasure to see you, as always.”

“You look lovely,” Margaret told her. “But then, you always do. Hasn’t Lydia done a marvelous job presenting herself since she’s become your duchess, Edward?”

“Very good,” Edward agreed.

His shoulders had tensed, and he wasn’t looking at Margaret. Lydia frowned, wondering what the problem was. What had made him so unhappy all of a sudden?

“What were you two talking about?” Margaret asked, helping herself to some bread.

Lydia glanced at Edward, but he didn't appear to be interested in responding, so she spoke, "Edward was just saying that the two of us ought to attend the Hartford ball next week."

"Was he! Well, isn't that a marvelous idea? We'll all go," Margaret replied briskly. "It's been so long since I was able to attend any balls. I'm so glad you came up with that idea, Edward."

"I'll need you to take Lydia into town so that she can get a gown," Edward requested.

"Of course, I will," Margaret agreed. "That's not only my duty as Dowager Duchess, but it's also my privilege. And a gentleman could hardly be counted on to help his wife choose the right gown, could he? No, that's a task that requires the hand of a lady. You'll need me, and I'll be happy to help."

"Good, then," Edward said shortly. "You can take her into town sometime in the next few days. And, Margaret, do make sure you choose something *appropriate*. I know how you like to show off, but we want to portray Lydia modestly for her first outing as Duchess."

"Edward, don't be so negative," Margaret scolded. "You would have her in a plain brown gown with nothing to draw the eye if it was up to you, but she *should* catch people's attention. They'll be paying attention to the new Duchess anyway. They should see her outfitted in something lavish and fashionable. *That* is what's appropriate in this situation, not modesty."

Edward rose to his feet. “You two make whatever arrangements you deem fit,” he said. “I’ve got to go.”

“Where are you going?” Margaret demanded. “Breakfast isn’t over, Edward.”

“I have work to do,” Edward said. “You know I can’t sit here at the table all day, talking about parties.”

A sadness swept through Lydia. She didn’t understand quite what had gone wrong. The two of them had been enjoying their conversation. Yes, she had known that Edward wouldn’t be staying at the table for very long, but even so, the energy between the two of them had been good. They had been having a good time talking together. She’d thought he had seemed a bit regretful at the notion that he would have to leave quickly. That had changed when Margaret had come in. Now, it was as if he couldn’t get away fast enough.

He left the dining room, and the door slammed shut behind him as if to punctuate the fact that he was ready to go and didn’t want to be with them a moment longer than he had to.

“Well, *really*,” Margaret huffed, turning her attention back to her plate. “I don’t know why he’s always like that. It’s quite unfathomable—and unpleasant, too, isn’t it! But you mustn’t worry, Lydia, darling. It has nothing to do with you. He’s always been that way. He’s simply not a sociable fellow. I must say, I do hope you’ll be able to bring out another side in him.”

“Do you think that’s even possible?”

Lydia felt despair building up in her heart. It seemed such a big thing to ask—that she would be able to change Edward if this was the way he had always been. How could she?

“He’s different already if he’s willing to take you to a ball,” Margaret assured. “I never could have imagined such a thing. If he had been asked a month before your marriage to attend a ball—well, he wouldn’t even have laughed at the idea. He would have mocked it. He would have told the person who dared to ask him that he was far too busy for such frivolities. And now you ask him to attend—”

“Oh, I didn’t ask,” Lydia said. “It was his idea.”

“His idea?” Margaret’s eyebrows shot up. “Was it, really?”

“Well, I think he felt sorry about the way the wedding went,” Lydia observed, wondering why this was so surprising to Margaret.

It was a surprise, to be sure, that Edward would be willing to attend a ball. But was it that much less shocking that he would say yes to one than it was that he would suggest it himself? Lydia didn’t think so. To her way of thinking, it made perfect sense that he would be the one to come up with it. He might not like parties very much, but he *did* like being in control, and Lydia found it easy to believe that he would be the one to make a suggestion like that.

“What was wrong with the wedding?” Margaret asked. “I thought the wedding was perfect. Everyone had good things to say about it.”

“Oh, there wasn’t anything wrong with it,” Lydia said quickly. “That’s not what I mean. I wasn’t trying to be critical of that event. I know how hard you worked.”

“Then what do you mean?” Margaret asked. “What is it about the wedding that leads you to feel you need to attend a ball to make up for it?”

“All I meant was that—well, Edward and I didn’t really spend that much time together on our wedding day,” Lydia explained. “He knows I was a bit let down about that, and I think he wanted to provide an opportunity for us to spend a bit of time together at a party as compensation. That’s all it is.”

“Well, I suppose I can’t complain,” Margaret said. “The important thing is that you’re getting him out of the house. You know, I care deeply for both of my late husband’s children, but they have both given me reason to worry about them from time to time, and the biggest concern I have about Edward comes from his inability to socialize.

“I thought for a long time that he might never marry at all—when would he ever put his books down and meet a lady who would have a chance at holding his interest? And then, you came along, and I knew that I didn’t have to worry about that anymore. And now, you’ve convinced him to attend a ball—even if you didn’t ask him to go yourself, he is doing it for you, and that makes it your achievement. You ought to be very proud of yourself, Lydia. I know I’m very happy with what you’ve accomplished already as Duchess.”

Lydia beamed. It felt wonderful to know that Margaret was so pleased with her. “Thank you,” she said. “And I’m very glad you’ll be joining us for the ball. It will be wonderful to attend as a family. Do you think Colin and Nancy will be there too?”

“I’m sure they will,” Margaret replied. “Colin is very different from Edward, as you may have gathered by now. He enjoys attending parties. He never misses one. And Nancy—well, she would never have been fit to be a duchess, of course. She’s not like you. But she’s a pleasant, happy young lady, and she does well at parties.”

“What do you mean when you say she’s not like me?” Lydia asked.

“Not as dignified,” Margaret explained. “Not as alert to the responsibilities of a high-ranking lady. It’s all right. I’m not criticizing her. She has no need to be. She’s married into the perfect position for her. And so have you, whether you realize it or not. You’re very well suited to be a duchess because it’s clear to me how well you understand your responsibilities.”

“How can you tell?”

“The improvements you’ve made to Westfrey since you came to live here have shown me all I need to see,” Margaret replied. “All the new things you’ve brought into the manor—you’ve made this place beautiful. It’s fit for company again in a way it simply hasn’t been since Edward’s father died.” She sighed. “It’s been difficult, Lydia. Very difficult. I love Edward like he is my own son, but at the same time, I’ve mourned the death of my late husband. I’ve had to think about how he would feel about the way Edward is managing the dukedom.”

“You don’t think he would approve?”

“Sometimes I do, and sometimes I don’t,” Margaret said. “The way Edward manages his business interests is difficult to argue with, but there’s more to life than just business. Having a lady’s touch around here is something I think his father would have liked to see. And I don’t mean just me, of course. Edward seems to find it very easy to say no to me, but it’s obvious that he’s more inclined to say yes to you. That’s a very good thing, Lydia. That’s something we can use.”

Lydia pondered that. *Something we can use.* She wasn’t sure she liked the sound of what Margaret was saying. Did she mean that the two of them would work together against Edward? And if so, to what end?

Lydia had meant it when she’d said she wanted to build a friendship with Edward. If they couldn’t be true husband and wife, the way she had always dreamed of, she wanted a real friendship. She wanted it badly. It might be the only good thing that could possibly come of this marriage.

Edward had made it clear by his demeanor that there was something about Margaret he found off-putting. And now, Margaret was sitting here, being critical of him—even if she was doing it with love.

Lydia did not want to find herself caught between the two of them.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“How do I look?” Lydia asked.

Edward made no response. He couldn't. He didn't think he had ever seen anyone look so lovely in all his life.

As tiresome as he found Margaret, and as suspicious as he felt of her motives in befriending Lydia as closely as she had, he had to admit that she had done a magnificent job of choosing a gown. It was pale pink with lace on the bodice, ruffled sleeves, and a flowing skirt. Lydia's blonde hair had been pinned up fashionably, and Edward had to admit that she would look absolutely wonderful walking into Hartford Manor. He was honored that he got to be the one to bring her to the ball.

“You look very nice,” he managed.

“That's it?” Margaret sputtered. “*Very nice* is the best you can do? She looks beautiful, Edward, and you know it.”

“Yes, she does.”

Edward couldn't help feeling a bit irritated. He hadn't taken the trouble to point out how beautiful Lydia was, and perhaps he should have, but now, he felt as if he couldn't because Margaret had done it for him.

He so often felt that way—as if she was stealing his place in the dukedom, or striving to do so—edging him out of his own life, somehow. A part of him had believed that it wouldn't happen anymore once he was married, but of course it would. She would never change. And the fact that she was such close friends with Lydia already was just proof of that fact.

Even now, while I'm trying to establish a friendship with her, she is already closer to my stepmother.

It was maddening. He hadn't *wanted* to get close with Lydia. He hadn't hoped for that friendship. But now that it felt so out of reach, he found himself wanting it, after all.

“We need to go,” he said. “I don't want to be late for the ball and make a bad impression on everyone. Are you both ready?”

“Of course,, we're ready,” Margaret replied imperiously. “Are *you* ready?”

“More than ready. And the carriage is waiting outside.”

He offered his arm to Lydia, knowing that it was a bit of a power move. Now, he was the one edging Margaret out, and she could hardly argue with his choice to do so—of course he would give his arm to his wife. It made perfect sense for him to do that.

He escorted Lydia out to the carriage and helped her in. Then, he gave his hand to Margaret to help her up as well. Once they were all inside and settled, the carriage pulled away in the direction of Hartford Manor.

No one spoke during the ride. Lydia spent most of the time looking out the window of the carriage, and Edward could tell she was excited about the evening ahead. As for Margaret and himself, they avoided making direct eye contact with one another.

Edward was sure that Margaret was just as irritated by him as he was by her. A part of him wanted to demand to know what the problem was, but another part of him had no intention of giving her the satisfaction of asking. She was the one who had insisted that she should come along to this ball. She had no right to complain about anything now.

Of course, I'm sure that isn't going to stop her.

They pulled up to Hartford Manor and got out of the carriage. Almost at once, Margaret was distracted by some friends of hers, and Edward was glad. They were going to get a reprieve from her, even if it was destined to be a short one.

He spotted Lord Kennilworth just inside the front door. "Come," he said to Lydia. "There's someone I'd like you to meet."

Lydia looked a bit uneasy, but she also looked eager. "All right," she agreed. "Who is it?"

They had reached the door. "This is Lord Kennilworth," he said. "He's one of my business associates. Lord Kennilworth, you remember my wife, I believe, the new Duchess of Westfrey?"

"Ah, yes," Lord Kennilworth said. "It's a pleasure to meet you in person, Your Grace. You looked lovely on your wedding day, but we didn't get to have a conversation."

"Yes, it's a pity," Lydia agreed. "But I'm glad we're having the chance to get to know one another a little bit better now."

"And this is my wife, Lady Kennilworth," Lord Kennilworth said.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance." Lady Kennilworth beamed.

"I must say, we wouldn't have expected to see the two of you here," Lord Kennilworth said.

"I'm getting that impression!" Lydia laughed. "Tell me, does my husband *ever* attend parties?"

"Only very rarely," Lord Kennilworth replied. "But you must bring it out in him, I suppose. Well done, Your Grace. Everyone's wondered for a long time whether there was anything that might compel the Duke to leave his isolation and mingle with Society, and I suppose now we've finally found that thing. He was seeking the approval of a lady all this time."

“I was doing no such thing,” Edward objected.

“Oh, Your Grace, don’t be shy about it,” Lady Kennilworth said. “To long for the approval of your wife is an admirable thing. And what’s more, it’s obvious by the expression on her face that you’ve earned it. The two of you make a wonderful pair. And you’re a delight,” she added to Lydia. “I won’t try to take up too much of your time just now, but I look forward to spending more time with the both of you later.” She took her husband’s arm. “Let’s mingle.”

“That seemed to go well,” Lydia said as Lord and Lady Kennilworth walked away. “Did you think so?”

“They certainly liked you,” Edward agreed.

“And that was what you were hoping for when we got married,” she pointed out. “That you would be able to bring me in front of your business associates, and that they would like me.”

“It does help to see them find favor with you,” Edward admitted. “I may need to start bringing you along when I travel for business.”

“Do you mean that?”

“If it’s going to serve my interests, of course I mean it,” Edward said. “You know that this is the most important thing to me.”

“I do know,” Lydia agreed. “And it’s exciting. I always dreamed of traveling.”

“Did you, really? You never told me that.”

“I’ve never told you much at all,” she said. “We hardly know one another.”

“Well, I’m glad to know this about you now,” Edward replied. “I do think we’ll be able to be friends. It seems we share a common interest.”

“You like to travel?”

“That surprises you?”

“I didn’t think you liked anything as much as you liked work.”

He laughed. “You ought to be careful,” he said. “Teasing me like that.”

“Being careful has never been my strength.”

“And what about dancing?”

“You like dancing as well? Perhaps *you* are the one who ought to take care, Edward, or I might have to revise my opinion of

you completely.”

He held out a hand to her. “Dance with me,” he suggested, hardly able to believe what he was doing—after all, he had sworn he wouldn’t do this. “And then you can decide whether to revise your opinion or not.”

He wondered for a moment whether she would accept—she did seem to hesitate—but then, she nodded and took his hand. “Are you sure it’s something you want to do in front of all these people?” she asked. “You know they’re bound to talk.”

“And say what? That I danced with my wife?” He laughed and shook his head. “Truly, the scandal of the Season.”

“Maybe not that, but they’re bound to have something to say about the fact that you danced *at all*,” she pointed out. “Already, Lord Kennilworth has reacted with surprise to the fact that you’re even here—and that’s not to mention Margaret’s reaction.”

“Oh, don’t talk to me about Margaret,” he said.

“You and she don’t get along, do you?”

“You noticed that?” he asked dryly.

“What’s the problem between you?”

“It’s nothing I want you to worry about. Let’s just dance, all right?”

Lydia turned out to be an impressive dancer. He hadn’t noticed it on their wedding night, perhaps because he had been so frustrated at the fact that they’d had to dance at all, but here, it was hard to miss.

Edward led her through the steps, but she was able to keep up with him easily, and by the time the first number ended and the second one began, both of them were smiling broadly, and Edward had begun to wonder why it was that he had sworn not to do this. If he had known from the start that dancing could be this enjoyable, perhaps he wouldn’t have gone so far out of his way to avoid it all these years.

Then again, I’m sure it wouldn’t be anywhere near as enjoyable without the right partner. I’m sure if I was dancing with someone else, I wouldn’t be having the good time I am having now.

And that was a frightening idea because the last thing he wanted was to get himself romantically attached to Lydia.

Friendship was all right. He was willing to meet her there. The two of them could be friends with each other. But they couldn’t be anything more—not ever. That was the way of weakness. He had seen all too well what marriage had done to his brother. Of course, Colin had never been the most focused of men, so it wasn’t exactly shocking to see him distracted the way he had been since getting married. In fact, if anything, Colin seemed happy with the way things were going for him, and Edward supported that for his brother.

But it wasn't what he wanted for himself. He couldn't live the life Colin was living. He couldn't start putting marriage and romance ahead of everything else. The only reason he'd married at all was to enhance his business prospects, and he could never allow himself to forget that.

And then, there was the matter of his vow.

How could he have forgotten the promise he'd made to himself? He hadn't thought of it at all in the days leading up to this ball, and that was incredibly strange. How long had it been since he had gone such a long time without giving thought to that promise? Now, in the face of a new marriage, he had forgotten about it entirely. He could hardly believe what he had done.

"Is something wrong?" Lydia asked.

She looked confused, as well as she should. After all, he was the one who had suggested bringing her here. He was the one who had asked her to dance. And he knew, now that they were here, that he was the one who was acting strangely toward her as if she had done something to provoke his ire.

She hadn't. She'd done nothing wrong. But he couldn't stay here and act as though everything was fine.

"Will you excuse me?" he said. "I think a bit of night air might clear my head."

"What's wrong?" she asked. "I thought the two of us were having a good time, and now... something's changed, but I

can't understand what it is. Won't you tell me what I did?"

"You did nothing wrong." He had to get away. He had to escape this conversation. "I'll be back shortly. Why don't you go get a drink in the meantime?"

He pulled away from her and hurried toward the garden door, which stood open to admit the breeze. A moment later, he was outside.

If Margaret had seen him leave, he would have to answer for his choice later. But he would deal with that if it came. For now, he was just relieved that he had managed to get away from that dance—that conversation. It had all been far too intimate.

He had known that marriage would involve taking his new wife places and showing her off to people. He hadn't been prepared for what it would feel like to let his guard down, to relax and have a good time with her.

He was going to have to be very careful. He couldn't afford to let that sort of thing happen again, or he'd find himself attached to her.

If there was one thing Edward knew he couldn't do, it was to let himself fall in love.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Lydia!”

Lydia turned, relieved, toward the sound of a friendly voice. Nancy was rushing over to her, Colin following behind at some distance. She held out her arms and embraced her friend. “Nancy, it’s so good to see you,” she said. “I didn’t know if our paths would cross tonight.”

“Oh, Colin and I never miss a ball,” Nancy said as Colin came walking up to join them. “Isn’t that right, darling?”

“Never miss one,” Colin agreed. “Nancy here is quite passionate about them, of course. You knew that already, though, Lydia.”

“I’m not sure I did know,” Lydia admitted. “We met at a ball, of course, and we’ve attended so many of them together, but I don’t think I realized they were a true passion of yours, Nancy.”

“Everything about them is a joy,” Nancy said with a smile. “Choosing a new gown is one of my favorite parts. It’s rare that I’m able to afford anything as fine as what you’re wearing

tonight, of course—it's so beautiful, and the very latest in fashion! But Colin always ensures that I'm able to have something new to me, even if it isn't necessarily new to Society."

Lydia could see what her friend meant. The gown Nancy was wearing resembled a style Lydia herself already had in her closet, and there were several other ladies at the ball dressed in similar things. Lydia's gown, meanwhile, stood out in the crowd—Lydia thought she might have been the only one here to be wearing something like it. It was one of a kind. And yet, Nancy looked radiant. It was something about the obvious joy she had at the fact of being placed in the gown she was wearing. She felt beautiful, so she was beautiful. It was that simple.

And Lydia enjoyed her friend's happiness.

"The gown is wonderful," she told Nancy. "And I'm so glad the two of us are here together."

"Oh, I am too," Nancy said. "I thought you might not come."

"It seems everyone thought we might not come," Lydia remarked.

"How on earth did you talk him into it?" Colin asked.

"I didn't talk him into anything," Lydia said. "He's the one who asked me if I wanted to come."

“You’re kidding. He offered to bring you to the ball?”

“I know,” Lydia said. “I know it’s shocking. It seems to be the only thing anyone wants to say to me today—how shocking it is that my husband would bring me to a ball.”

“Well, that’s rude,” Colin commented.

Lydia turned to look at him. It hadn’t occurred to her that it was a rude thing to say. “What do you mean?” she asked him.

“It’s not very kind of people to act as though it’s shocking that your husband would want to take you to a ball,” Colin explained. “Of course, I know they don’t mean it as a slight against you. No one means to suggest it’s a surprise that a gentleman would want to bring a lady such as yourself to a ball. Of course not. You’re lovely.”

Lydia darted a glance at Nancy to see whether she was troubled that her husband had made that comment, but Nancy smiled and nodded, a clear indication that nothing was wrong. “Colin is right,” she said. “You are lovely, Lydia. Any gentleman would be lucky to have you on his arm tonight.”

“Still,” Colin went on, “it’s simply not very polite for them to say that it’s surprising for Edward to be here with you. I think, if I were in your shoes, that would make me feel as if people thought I wasn’t exciting enough, or beautiful enough, to make my husband want to come to a ball with me. Obviously, that’s not what they mean, but I just hope you haven’t been made to feel that way.”

The expression on his face was so genuine that Lydia couldn't help smiling at him. "It's so kind of you to ask," she said. "There's nothing to worry about. No one has made me feel bad."

"I'm pleased to hear it," Colin replied. "And, as you know, Nancy and I are both extremely happy to have you here. Any friend of my wife's is a good friend of mine, and it's made her so happy to know that she has a close friend here."

Lydia beamed at Nancy. "I'm glad we get to do this together too," she said. "I don't think I would be having nearly as much fun as I am if not for you."

"I imagine you wouldn't," Nancy agreed, an expression of concern crossing her face. "What's happened to Edward? He was just here, and now, he's gone. I know Colin was looking forward to having the opportunity to speak with him."

"Yes, I imagine he'll be back very soon," Lydia said, feeling a bit uncomfortable about having to make excuses for her husband's absence. "He wanted a bit of fresh air."

"And, of course, he didn't take you with him," Colin remarked, rolling his eyes. "Because how could a man possibly walk out in the garden with his wife on his arm? That's classic Edward. I'm sure he didn't mean to offend you, Lydia. He just doesn't think about what he's doing."

"I wasn't offended." Lydia assured them.

But now that she thought about it, she *did* feel ever so slightly offended. She and Edward had been dancing together, and then, he had just left her with hardly any explanation. What was she to make of that? Why *hadn't* he brought her along if all he had wanted was a quick walk in the garden? She would have enjoyed such an excursion, and it would have given the pair of them an opportunity to continue getting to know one another—to continue the good time they had been having so far.

At least, she *thought* it had been a good time.

“We were getting along so well,” she said. “He had even asked me to dance. I never expected him to do that.”

“Yes,” Colin agreed. “I’d say that’s the most surprising part of all—that he asked you to dance. If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I would never have believed that it had happened.”

“Well, she *does* look beautiful,” Nancy pointed out. “It’s not so hard to believe that he might have wanted to hold her in his arms, seeing her looking the way she does today.”

“That has nothing to do with it,” Colin countered. “I never would have expected to see my brother dance with *any* lady, no matter how lovely she was.”

“But why not?” Lydia asked. “I mean, I can tell it’s not something he enjoys particularly, but he is a very good dancer. He must have practiced.”

She was surprised by how comfortable she already felt opening up to Colin, how easy it was to discuss things with him. She had to suppose that it was because of how easygoing and sociable he was, and while she didn't feel jealous, she was very happy for Nancy that she'd married someone so accommodating. It must be much easier to be married to someone like Colin than it was to be married to someone like Edward.

And yet, Lydia realized, she wouldn't have wanted to trade. She had come to enjoy the challenge Edward posed. She liked him and liked the way she had to work for his friendship. The challenge was exciting. She wouldn't have wanted it to come too easily, the way it did with Colin. She could tell that Nancy was happy with her marriage, and she was happy for her friend—but it wasn't what she would have wanted for herself.

And besides, although she liked Colin and was comfortable with him, she didn't feel about him the way she was already beginning to feel about Edward. Her feelings for Edward had taken her by surprise, and they worried her more than a little, but she couldn't deny them.

Colin shook his head. "I shouldn't discuss it," he said.

"But you already have," Lydia pointed out. "You've already mentioned how surprising you find it that Edward would dance with me. You might as well tell me why that is."

"It isn't you," Colin said. "But Edward swore he would never dance with a lady. Even on the occasion of his wedding, he took a vow that he would never do it."

“So, that’s why he didn’t want us to dance together that day. I thought it was just that he wasn’t interested in me.”

“No, there’s more to it than that. He never planned on dancing—not with you or any other lady. He would be in violation of his oath if he did.”

“But why swear such an oath?” Nancy asked, confused. “It’s only dancing. And it isn’t as though he meant to remain a bachelor all his life.”

“Well, actually, he probably did mean to do that,” Colin countered. “This arrangement with Lydia took us all by surprise. But you’re right to say that the motivation isn’t the same. He wasn’t going to marry because he simply had no interest in marriage. When he changed his mind and married you, Lydia, it was not in violation of any oath.”

“And yet, he *did* swear never to dance?” Lydia repeated. “Why swear such a thing? What could possibly be the point of it?”

“Is it just that he wishes to avoid the touch of a lady?” Nancy asked. “But—no, that can’t be it because if it was, he wouldn’t have married!”

Lydia said nothing. She hadn’t told her friend of the strange marriage she’d found herself in, and though she didn’t intend to keep it a secret forever—she wanted to be able to confide in Nancy—she certainly wasn’t ready to talk about it here and now, in front of Colin. She liked Colin and was learning to trust him, but that was different from being ready to open up to him about something so personal. It would be difficult even opening up to Nancy about this.

“No, that isn’t it,” Colin said.

“You sound as if you know what it is,” Nancy pressed.

“I do, but it’s his business to tell or not tell as he sees fit,” Colin said.

“But Lydia is his wife!” Nancy argued. “You ought to at least tell her, even if you don’t want to tell me. Doesn’t she have a right to know why her husband has sworn not to dance with her?”

Colin looked disturbed. “I think I assumed he would have told you,” he said to Lydia.

“He’s said nothing to me on the subject,” Lydia replied. “This is the first I’m hearing of it.”

“Well, you ought to know,” Colin said. “But I can’t be the one to tell you, I’m afraid. As I said, it’s his business, not mine, so you’ll have to hear it from him or not at all. But I advise you to be careful if you do speak to him about it. He guards his secrets jealously, and this isn’t something he’s accustomed to opening up to people about. I’ll be surprised if he’s willing to talk to you about it, but I do think it’s something you ought to know about, so I wish you luck, Lydia. Truly.”

Lydia turned toward the door that led out to the garden.

She was going to need to seek an answer to this new question.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The dark solitude of the garden was a disappointment—not the soothing experience Edward had hoped for when he had left the ballroom. He prowled the paths, wondering if anything would make him feel better, suspecting that it wouldn't. It had been a mistake to come out tonight. It had been a mistake to ask Lydia to dance. And it had been a mistake to dance with her on the night of their wedding, too.

How could he have neglected the fact that he had sworn never to dance with anyone again? How could that thought have slipped his mind so casually, as if it simply didn't matter? It *did* matter. More than almost anything, that mattered, and it made him feel both pained and furious to think that he could have lost track of something so important to him, so integral to his identity.

If Mother could see me now...

He shook off the thought. That was wrong, and he knew it—it wasn't to his mother that he had made his vow. The promise had been to himself, and no one had been betrayed. Still, he felt a deep sense of guilt over what he had done. It made him feel as if the vow had never meant anything at all—as if the value he'd placed in it had always been worthless.

How could he have forgotten just because of a beautiful lady?
How could that be enough to turn his head?

I always knew this would happen. I always knew that marriage made people weak. And sure enough, that's exactly what it's doing—it's making me weak. I should be ashamed. I am ashamed.

“Your Grace,” a lady said, interrupting his thoughts. “May I ask what brings you out here?”

He paused to assess the situation. The lady was with a friend, so there would be no scandal if he stopped to speak to her. Still, he could tell by the flirtatious look on her face that she had inappropriate thoughts in her mind.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he replied, “I’m just out for a walk.”

“But I couldn’t help noticing that the Duchess isn’t with you,” the lady observed.

He was disgusted by her advances. Could she possibly think that there was any chance at winning him away from his wife so soon after their wedding?

“She’s just inside.” He began to walk away.

The lady followed. “You know,” she said, “many of us have wondered about what drove you to marry so suddenly, Your Grace. You looked as if you were bound to be single for the rest of your days, and suddenly, you were saying your vows. If

there was some sort of scandal—if you found yourself regretting your position and wanting a way out—well, I’ve always admired you, Your Grace, and of course, it would be an honor to find myself attached to a duke in whatever regard he might desire me.”

“What kind of offer is this?” He shook his head and turned to her friend. “You had better get this young lady inside before she makes these advances on someone indiscriminate enough to accept,” he said. “This is how ladies get themselves into trouble, and I want no part of it.”

He pushed his way down the path, away from everyone else who had had the idea to come outside, needing to be alone. It took a considerable amount of time to get away from the crowd. The night air was warm and pleasant, and many of the partygoers had had the same idea as Edward, so the garden path was full of people. But Edward persisted, and after a while, he came to a part of the garden that was completely devoid of guests.

He sat down on a marble bench and let out a sigh.

He should never have married. It had been a mistake from the start. He had allowed himself to be pushed into this arrangement he’d never wanted by people who had insisted he needed it to succeed in business—well, what did they know? He had never allowed anyone else to tell him how to be successful before. Why had he listened this time? It was such a mistake.

A long shadow appeared on the ground beside him. He looked up and swallowed a groan. It was Lydia. She’d followed him out here.

“How did you find me?” he asked.

He knew he had come a long way from the manor, and unless she'd been following him right from the start—which he knew she hadn't—it didn't make sense.

“People are talking about you along the path,” she said. “A young lady called Lady Charlotte has a lot to say about you. Apparently, you were making improper advances on her.”

Now he groaned aloud. “Of course I wasn't.”

“I know you weren't,” Lydia said, and he knew a moment's gratitude for the fact that Lydia was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt in this way. “Aside from anything else, there was the way she was talking about it. She wasn't upset. It sounded more like she was showing off.”

“Did anyone believe her?”

“No, I don't think so,” Lydia replied. “She had a friend with her, and her friend was exposing her as a liar, saying she had seen the whole thing. And another gentleman said that Lady Charlotte had told a similar lie about him at a ball last month. This seems to be a regular thing she does.”

“Well, that's horrible.”

“I know, but it's not your problem,” Lydia said. “However, they were able to tell me which way you'd gone. And that's

how I followed you. I needed to speak with you.”

“What is it?” he asked her.

Maybe she had only come wanting to speak to him about something—maybe she would go away.

But she walked over to him and stood beside the bench. “May I join you?”

“I was hoping to be alone,” he said. But if he was honest with himself, he was glad to have her company.

“Please.”

“Don’t you have somewhere else you need to be?” he asked. “Wouldn’t you like to be socializing with Nancy right now? Or Margaret—the two of you have hardly spent any time together since we arrived here, and I know she was looking forward to being able to bring you to the ball. This means a lot to her. You should go and find her.”

“No,” Lydia said. “No, I want to sit here with you, Edward. Please.”

He sighed. He wanted to tell her no yet again, but he didn’t feel as if he could. After all, she *was* his wife. He got to his feet and made a space for her to sit down beside him.

She sat. “You left in an awful hurry,” she told him.

“It’s like I said, I needed some air.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe? Are you saying you think I’m lying about it?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “You seemed disturbed when we danced together, and that does make me wonder whether something might have happened to upset you. Were you wishing we hadn’t danced?”

Yes.

“It’s fine that we shared a dance,” he replied, although it wasn’t. “I had a good time,” he added, and that part was true.

“Then why? Why did you run off? They were going to play another song. We could have danced again.”

“One was enough,” he said. “More than enough.”

“And what if one wasn’t enough for me?”

He looked up at her. “You’re very demanding,” he said. “Has anyone ever mentioned to you how demanding you are?”

“They’ve told me that I insist too much on having my own way,” she replied, clearly unbothered by the accusation. “But I don’t think I’ve done that to you, Edward. In all the time we’ve been married, everything has been your way.”

“Has it? Was it my idea to build an orangery behind the house?”

“Perhaps not, but was it *my* idea to be part of a loveless marriage? To never have a family or know my husband’s touch?”

He looked down at his feet. “I told you this wasn’t negotiable.”

“You did, and I let it go, but now I want you to dance with me,” she said gently. “Will you deny me that too?”

He shook his head. “I can’t,” he replied. “I can’t do what you’re asking of me. I’m sorry.”

“I know you can’t,” she said. “I knew you wouldn’t. You’ve made some sort of vow, isn’t that right? You’ve promised not to dance with a lady. Not even me, your wife, even though I long for it. I don’t understand how you can have made this promise before we even knew one another, but apparently you did.”

He stared. “How do you know about that?”

“Edward. Whatever this is, you can confide in me about it. You can tell me the truth.”

“No. Tell me. At once.” His blood was beginning to boil. “Have you been spying on me?”

“Of course, I haven’t. I would never invade your privacy that way. That isn’t the sort of lady I am, Edward.”

“Tell me how you found out about my vow, then.”

“Colin,” she said. “Colin told me. But he wouldn’t tell me why. He told me he was shocked to see us dancing together because he had never expected to see you dance with anyone because of your vow. But he couldn’t explain what was behind that vow—or rather he seemed as though he could have if he had wanted to, but he didn’t want to. He seemed to be telling me that it wasn’t his place and that he didn’t want to share your secrets.”

“He’s shared enough of my secrets for someone who doesn’t want to do that,” Edward grumbled. “I can’t believe he told you about the vow. That’s a very personal thing, and I don’t know if I wish to discuss it with you at all.”

“But I’m your wife,” Lydia protested. “And if what he says is true, if you’re really never going to dance with me in all our time together, don’t you think I have a right to know why? Don’t you think that’s my business as well as your own? I’m only asking you to explain the reason for your vow, after all. You can surely do that much for me, Edward.”

“This isn’t something I talk about,” he said firmly. “Not to anyone. Not ever.”

“But I care about you. Whatever this is, perhaps talking to me would be helpful.”

“It would not be helpful.”

“How do you know until you try? Edward, we might not be in love, but we are still partners, aren’t we? We’re together through all of life’s trials. You should be able to confide in me about something like this.”

“A man has to have some things that are his alone. You don’t understand this.”

“Because I’m a lady, I don’t understand the need for privacy? I understand more than you think, Edward, and I’m asking you to tell me what’s behind all this.”

“And why should I do that?”

“If it’s not enough for you to imagine that it might be helpful to open up to someone, how about this? If I know the truth, I won’t ask you to dance again. I’ll support you in your vow. I only ask in exchange that you let me know *why*.”

It really was a very fair thing to ask when she put it that way. He didn’t want to open up to Lydia about this, but perhaps she was right when she said that she had a right to the information.

“Very well,” he said. “You’ve convinced me. I’ll tell you the reason I vowed never to dance.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“It all began with my mother,” Edward said.

“You never talk about her,” Lydia noted.

“I find it very difficult to talk about her.” Edward’s voice was tight.

“Were the two of you close?”

“We were very close. I was fairly close with both of my parents during their lives, but my mother especially. She truly cared for me and for Colin as well. When she died, we grieved very intensely.”

“I’m so sorry,” Lydia said. “I can only imagine what that must have been like for you.”

“Awful. Purely awful. But I have so many fond memories of her during her life,” Edward explained. “I was lucky to have her as long as I did.”

“How does the story begin with her?” Lydia asked.

“Because she’s the one who taught me to dance in the first place,” Edward replied. “She did it with both of us—me and Colin—when we were young. Every weekend, she would take us to the conservatory, and we would practice dancing. She said it was to prepare us for when we were older, when it was time for us to dance with young ladies at balls. But for me, it was the time I spent with my mother. I never thought about balls or romance during those afternoons. I only thought about how wonderful it was to have my mother’s full attention, to laugh with my brother, and to forget the stresses of the dukedom and have a good time with the people I loved best.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Lydia said. “I never had anything like that with anyone in my family.”

“Of course, it was all gone after she died,” Edward lamented. “I couldn’t set foot in the conservatory for years after that. I never even mentioned those afternoons to Colin.”

“But Colin knows,” Lydia said. “He knows that’s the reason you don’t want to dance anymore. He even knows that you made a vow about it. How could he know all that if you never so much as mentioned it to him?”

“My brother is very observant,” Edward explained. “He noticed that I stopped wanting anything to do with dance or music, and one day, he asked me about it. I tried to deny that he had noticed anything at all, of course, but he pressed me, and I was forced to admit the truth.” He sighed. “He’s been nothing but respectful and always kept my secret for me. He knows how embarrassed I would be if it ever got out that I had promised myself I would never dance again simply because doing so makes me too sad, and I can’t bear it.”

“But that’s nothing to be embarrassed of,” Lydia argued. “Of course it would make you sad, Edward. That was something very special that you shared with your mother, and when she died, it was taken away. That would make anybody sad. I don’t think you have anything to be ashamed of.”

“You’re very kind,” Edward said quietly.

“Is that why you didn’t want to tell me?” Lydia asked. “Did you imagine I would think less of you for this?”

“Perhaps.”

“I wouldn’t. Of course I wouldn’t. If anything, it helps me to know a bit better the kind of man you are. I’m glad to know you better, Edward. I’m glad you trusted me with this. And we don’t have to dance together. Not ever, if you don’t want to.”

“You would put up with that?”

“You’re my husband,” she said simply.

He sighed. “I don’t think I’ve been a very good husband to you.”

“What makes you say that?”

“It hasn’t been what you expected, this marriage. I know that. You dreamed of a marriage of love, and I haven’t been able to

provide that. You wanted children, and I can't give them to you."

"I'm trying to understand," she said. "I accept that this is what our life is, Edward."

"But you shouldn't have to. And now this. Dancing is such a simple thing, and the fact that I can't even offer you that..."

She was anxious to distract him from his unhappiness.

"Tell me this," she began. "I understand why you couldn't face the idea of dancing after what happened to your mother. I understand why that hurt too much. But when did it become a vow? I can imagine you avoiding the conservatory and making excuses every time the idea of dancing came up, but at some point, it must have grown bigger than simple avoidance. What happened?"

"Margaret happened." A new bitterness crept into his tone.

"Margaret? What did she do?" Lydia asked.

"I'm not sure if I ought to tell you. The two of you are such great friends."

Now, there was no mistaking it. He was definitely irritated about something, and Lydia was beginning to understand what it might be.

“You and Margaret don’t get along,” she observed.

“You noticed that?”

“It’s hard to miss. Your demeanor changes whenever she enters a room. It’s as if you’re always angry with her. What happened? What did she do to upset you so much?”

“Again, I worry that it might be a bad idea to tell you about it,” Edward said. “Little though I like her, I see that your relationship with her has been a good thing for you. It’s helped you to have her to look up to as you’ve gotten used to this life. I don’t want to take that away from you or risk changing the way you feel about her. So, maybe I should keep it to myself.”

“Of course you should tell me what happened,” Lydia corrected him. “Margaret has been a very good mentor to me, I won’t argue that. But you’re my husband. Whatever she is to me, you mean much more, and my relationship with you is the most important one in my life.”

“Even though I haven’t been the sort of husband you were hoping for?”

“You’re my husband,” Lydia repeated. “I might have been wrong about what that would look like, but I haven’t been wrong about the kind of wife I want to try to be. I will always be on your side.”

He looked at her. “I think I’ve underestimated you.”

“You wouldn’t be the first person in my life to do that,” she said evenly. “So, what happened with Margaret?”

“When she married my father, it was immediately obvious to me and to Colin that she was trying to replace our mother,” Edward explained.

“It must have been hard for her to come into an existing family the way she did and to see you all still grieving such a loss,” Lydia suggested. “I’m not sure what I would have done if it had been me.”

“You’re very gracious,” Edward said. “You make it sound very benevolent. Maybe it does sound benevolent to someone who wasn’t there—as if she was trying to make up for something two young boys had lost. But it wasn’t like that at all. She contradicted things my mother would have wanted. Colin and I would try to explain to her—we were allowed to play by the creek, and it was all right if we came inside with muddy knees. And Margaret would disagree.

“We were the sons of the Duke, she’d say, and perhaps we had been raised with no manners up until now, but that wasn’t going to be allowed to continue now that she had come into the house. She was going to set us right.”

“In other words, she was going to fix what your mother had done wrong.” Lydia was shocked, but perhaps she shouldn’t have been. Margaret had always been a forceful personality. She had always been certain of what she wanted from people and unafraid to demand it. “What did your father say about it all?”

“Father was grieving,” Edward said. “I think he forgot he had sons for a few years. By the time his attention returned to his family, he wasn’t the man I remembered. It was as if both my parents had been lost, and I was left with only Margaret.” He shook his head. “One day, she tried to teach Colin and me how to dance. Colin went along with it. He had always warmed to her a bit more easily than I ever could. But I’d had enough.”

“And that was the day you made your vow?”

“I shouted at her. I warned her never to try to force me to dance. She told me I would need it one day, and—this haunts me still—she told me my mother would have wanted me to do it.”

“She had no right to say so,” Lydia said.

“You don’t think so?”

“Had she ever met your mother?”

“No.”

“And she should have seen at that moment that the loss of your mother was what was hurting you most of all—that it had nothing to do with dancing,” Lydia said. “She should have avoided trying to tell you what your mother would want for you. You’re the person who would know best about that. You don’t need to listen to anyone else’s opinions on the matter.”

“That’s a very generous thing to say.”

“What happened next?”

“I told Colin I wasn’t going to have anything more to do with her, that he could continue the relationship he was building with her, but that I wouldn’t have any involvement. I never did trust her. Ever since the day she married my father, she’s been trying to convince him to invest in her father’s business—it belongs to her brother now. She’s never let up.”

“What about after your father died?”

“She started trying to persuade me. This is why we don’t get along to this day. She persists in asking me for money. I’ve never given her any, and I never will, and she resents it because my father did, apparently. That’s something I didn’t know until after his death.”

“It all sounds so complicated.”

“It is. Do you see now why I don’t like to speak about this to anybody? It’s simpler to just tell people I don’t want to dance.”

“We don’t have to dance,” she said.

He nodded. “I appreciate your understanding. And we can still attend balls together if you don’t mind the questions. The attention that we’ll attract by never taking to the dance floor.”

Lydia laughed. She couldn't help it. "I think we'll attract attention no matter what we do," she observed. "Today has proven that. All we had to do was walk into the room to get people talking, and now, they're likely talking about us because we're not there. Poor Lady Charlotte can't stop talking about the fact that you *didn't* make an improper advance on her. I don't think there's any way we can stop people from looking at us, so we might as well do what we want to do and let them say whatever they like."

"You really don't mind gossip?"

"Do you?"

"No, I don't. But I suppose living with Margaret has given me the idea that there are no ladies who are capable of setting aside the fear of gossip."

"I don't fear it," Lydia said. "And if what you've told me tonight about Margaret is true, I don't think she and I have as much in common as I would have once believed we did."

"No," Edward agreed, his voice low in a way that ensured Lydia had to lean close in order to hear him. "I wouldn't say the two of you have very much in common at all."

Lydia shivered. It felt like the highest compliment he had paid her so far in all their time knowing one another, and it made her feel happy—but uneasy at the same time.

She hadn't expected this. She hadn't imagined that tonight would involve the two of them sharing such an intimate

moment.

Where would they go from here?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Tell me about your family,” Edward suggested.

The two of them had been sitting in silence for a while in the wake of the compliment he had paid her.

Edward didn't believe that, before today, Lydia would have understood that his telling her she wasn't anything like Margaret *was* a compliment. She had been doing her very best to be like Margaret. But things had changed tonight. She understood him better than she ever had and knew why he was so resistant to everything Margaret said and did. And though he did feel guilty about it—it was sad that he had had to come between Lydia and Margaret like that—he was satisfied with the fact that Lydia seemed to have taken his side in it all. That pleased him.

“What do you want to know?” Lydia asked him.

“I hardly know anything about them,” Edward said. “I only met your father the one time, apart from the wedding when we had no time to talk at all. What are they like?”

“Well, they’re very strict,” Lydia started. “I was their only daughter—you know that much—I was their only *child*, in fact. So, all their hopes were always pinned on me, and it was always my duty to see to it that I behaved in ways that would ensure the future they wanted for our family.”

“I can relate to that,” Edward noted. “I was always groomed to take over as Duke, so I know what it’s like to have a family that has a purpose in mind for you all your life. But what did that look like for you? What was your purpose?”

“I was to marry a wealthy gentleman, a gentleman of good standing, and bring honor and privilege to our family,” Lydia explained.

“Well, you’ve certainly done that.”

“Yes, I think my parents are very happy with this match,” Lydia agreed. “But I think they would have accepted almost anything. You know that I was to be married to Lord Worley, I suppose?”

“I didn’t know that,” Edward said.

She looked at him. “Does it bother you? That I had a relationship with another gentleman before you?”

“It doesn’t bother me a bit,” he told her.

But it was strange—it *did* bother him. He knew who Lord Worley was. He’d seen him around. Lord Worley was a rake

who cared not at all for the feelings of the ladies he romanced. The idea that such a man could have been intended for Lydia bothered him.

Also, he felt jealous. He had seen the way ladies threw themselves at Lord Worley.

“Why didn’t you marry him?” Edward asked.

“He broke our courtship,” Lydia said. “He told me he had fallen in love with someone else.”

“And were you heartbroken?”

She laughed. “Hardly,” she replied. “If anything, I was relieved. I didn’t care about him. I didn’t like him. I was happy to be rid of him. But my parents didn’t think much of it at all, and I think that’s why they married me to you as quickly as they did. They thought they had resolved my affairs, you see, and then everything fell apart right in front of them. After that, they would have taken anything.”

“So, I’m *just anything*?”

“Of course, you aren’t—they couldn’t believe their luck when they were able to make an arrangement with the Duke of Westfrey! But I don’t know what you’re angry about,” she added. “You would have taken anyone too. You didn’t marry me out of any desire for *me*. You just wanted to have a wife. You’ve told me that countless times.”

It was true. And he knew he was out of line to feel angry. He forced himself to calm down.

“Lord Worley doesn’t know anything,” he said. “He was a fool to turn you down.”

“Well, perhaps he was. My mother would say that it was my fault. She would find some reason I failed to charm him sufficiently. But as I said, she’s very strict. It’s been the same all my life. I can’t remember a time before she was preparing me for marriage.”

“What was it like when you were a child, going through those preparations?”

“Constant practice,” Lydia said. “She would make me come to the table an hour before dinner so that I could practice folding and unfolding my napkin correctly and using the right silverware. When the meal was served, I had to do everything right. If I made a mistake, I was immediately dismissed from the table and sent to my room.”

“You weren’t allowed to finish eating?”

“Sometimes my governess would take pity on me and sneak some food upstairs, but she didn’t want to risk getting into trouble. So, no, usually I wasn’t able to finish. The idea was that hunger would teach me, and that I wouldn’t make the same mistake again. It did work, it made me very careful. For a time, I wouldn’t pick up a fork or spoon without stopping to think twice about whether I’d chosen the correct one. Eventually, table manners became second nature—it’s impossible to imagine now that I would make a mistake when

it comes to dinner etiquette. I know it as well as I know my own name.”

“But—forgive me—you don’t strike me as particularly obedient,” he noted. “I would have thought that someone raised in such conditions would be afraid to be defiant, but that doesn’t describe you at all.”

“When I grew a little older, I came to realize that my parents’ authority was not absolute,” Lydia explained. “They could dismiss me from the table, but they couldn’t prevent me from going to the kitchen and finding food for myself later. The staff wouldn’t help me, but they wouldn’t act to stop me either—they couldn’t put their hands on me. Understanding that allowed me to rebel. From that moment on, I didn’t fear my parents. There was nothing they could do to me.”

“And that’s how you became the bold, audacious lady I know today,” Edward surmised.

Lydia laughed. “Is that how you would describe me? Bold and audacious?”

“If you’re being truthful, that’s how you would have to describe yourself, isn’t it?”

“Well, I suppose so,” she agreed. “You have a good point. I do insist on going after the things I want.”

“And I like that about you. So, tell me, once you felt free to defy your parents, what did you do? It’s hard to imagine you using that freedom to do things like act up at the dinner table.”

“No, not that,” Lydia said with a smile. “But I always liked to spend time outside. I wasn’t afraid of getting dirty. My mother didn’t think things like that were suitable for young ladies, so she would forbid me from going out of the house unless we had an appropriate activity, such as a picnic or a stroll, planned. But those weren’t the things I wanted to do. I preferred to go down to the stables and spend time with the horses.”

“Well, that isn’t very surprising,” Edward replied. “That’s the reason you chose to buy stallions, I suppose.”

“I have to thank you for accepting that,” she said. “You could easily have had them sent back.”

“I saw that they made you happy. There was no reason to send them back, knowing that. They weren’t making me *unhappy*.”

“Nevertheless, thank you,” she insisted. “It really does mean a lot to me. I worried you might think I had only gotten them to provoke you, but that’s not the case.”

“I don’t think that.”

“Well, yes, I defied my parents mostly by spending time out of the house,” Lydia explained. “And, as I got older, I made sure they were aware of my feelings about marriage.”

“They didn’t like those feelings, I take it?”

“It’s as I told you—they wanted me to marry for wealth and status. But I always wanted to marry for love,” Lydia said. “When the match with Lord Worley was arranged, I told them I didn’t care for it. When he ended things between us, I made no secret of the fact that that didn’t matter to me. That angered them. They felt I would have kept his attention on me, where it was supposed to be, if I had shown proper interest. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t pretend to be interested in a man who never loved me and never could.”

Edward didn’t answer. But he had to admit that it felt, at the moment, as if she was talking about him.

A man who didn’t love me and never could...

But did that description truly fit him? He was no longer sure. He felt as if he *could* love her if he tried.

I wouldn’t even have to try. It would be as easy as relaxing and allowing it to happen, but I can’t do that. I can’t allow myself to weaken. It’s a terrible idea.

To keep his mind off of that, he questioned her further.

“So, you told them you wanted to marry for love,” he said. “They weren’t willing to indulge that?”

“I don’t think it would have bothered them especially if I’d loved my husband, of course,” Lydia observed. “But they were unwilling to wait for that to happen. Having it done quickly was more important than getting what I wanted out of it. They got angry when I resisted the pressure to marry. They didn’t

like that. In their eyes, the most important thing was that I marry right away, and any waiting around I did—for love or any other reason—was misguided and a form of self-sabotage. Not that they truly cared about me sabotaging myself. They didn't want me to sabotage their ambitions. But it was what I dreamed of—I wanted the chance to find the future I wanted for myself.”

“I'm sorry you weren't able to find it,” he said quietly, regretting the situation he had put her in.

He had been so eager for marriage—to put the whole matter of his not having a wife to rest—that he hadn't stopped to think about the impact he was having on her. If he had thought about it—if he had known all this—would he have decided differently?

Perhaps I would have. Perhaps I would have waited to marry someone who actually wanted to be married to me, who could be content with what I'm able to offer.

But he couldn't wish away his marriage to her. Even knowing what he did—perhaps *especially* knowing what he did—it was too difficult to convince himself that their marriage was anything but for the best. He was happy to be married to Lydia, and for his own part, he wouldn't have changed it. Not for anything.

“It's all right,” she said. “I'll find my happiness in other ways.”

“But it won't be what you always dreamed of.”

“Not exactly. But it will be something. You mentioned that you might take me traveling with you. One thing I imagined for myself was a honeymoon in an exciting destination. I know that if we travel together, it won’t be romantic. There won’t be moonlit strolls along rivers in Bath. But at least I might get the chance to *see* Bath, and that’s still something.”

“You’ll get to see Bath,” he promised her. “I’m going in a few weeks. I’ll bring you along.”

“Will you really?”

“And I see no reason why the two of us couldn’t go for a stroll beside a river one evening while we’re there,” he added, knowing even as the words left his mouth what danger he was exposing himself to.

She lit up and flung her arms around him.

And her embrace was so welcome and warm that, even though Edward knew better, knew that this was the last thing he should be doing, he couldn’t bring himself to let go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“So, these are your stallions, aren’t they?” Edward strode up and down in front of the stables, inspecting the horses.

“Our stallions,” Lydia said, doing her best to keep her nerve. “I bought them for both of us, Edward.”

He raised his eyebrows. “And what do I want with three stallions?”

“You’re teasing me,” she said.

She knew it was true. After all, they had already had this conversation many times. And sure enough, he smiled at her.

“All right,” he relented. “So, you bought them for the pair of us. Did you want to go riding together?”

“I wouldn’t oppose the idea.”

He nodded. “I’ll have the stable hands get them ready to go out,” he said. “It won’t take too long, now that we have a pair

of them.”

Sure enough, the horses were saddled and ready to go within minutes.

“Where do we ride?” Lydia asked, once she had been helped up onto the back of one of them.

“Around the grounds, for now,” Edward said. “Are you adept on horseback?”

“Not as much as I’d like to be. My parents didn’t like me to ride,” she explained. “They thought it wasn’t a suitable pastime for a young lady.”

“Well, that’s overstating things a bit, isn’t it? There are plenty of ladies who ride, after all, and plenty of gentlemen who enjoy riding *with* their ladies.”

“I suppose that’s true, but I think they assumed I would be able to get by without having that particular skill,” Lydia said. “Any gentleman who wanted me to ride with him could easily teach me himself.”

“I suppose that’s what I’ll have to do,” Edward replied.

She looked over at him. “Are you saying you want me to go out riding with you?”

“I’m saying I can see that *you* want to spend your time riding, and I won’t have you doing that without knowing how to do it safely and properly. You’ll have to have the skills if you’re going to be riding stallions.” He looked her up and down. “You’re all right, but I can tell you’re not quite comfortable on horseback, and you’re going to have to improve your abilities if you’re going to be riding.”

“Meaning you’re going to teach me?”

“I don’t trust anyone else to do it,” he said. “First of all, you’re not holding the reins correctly. You need a much looser grip. You’re going to worry the horse by holding him that tightly.”

“I don’t want him to run off.”

The idea of riding excited her, but all the same, Lydia couldn’t pretend she wasn’t nervous.

“He won’t run. Loosen your grip. That’s right.” Edward rode over to her and took hold of the reins with her. “I’ll start him walking, and you can pull the reins left or right to steer him in the direction you want him to go, but he ought to follow behind my horse.”

“Do you think he’s smart enough to do that?”

“Yes. I’ve been watching him since we brought him out, and he seems to understand what he’s supposed to be doing. Let’s get moving.”

He started the horses walking. Sure enough, Lydia's horse fell into step alongside Edward's. Edward set a slow pace for them so they could ride side by side and still carry on a conversation with one another.

"Did you enjoy the ball the other night?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said. "More than I thought I would, as a matter of fact."

"That surprises me. A lot of things seemed to go wrong, didn't they?"

"Well, if you mean to refer to the interference of your family, I don't know. Personally, I was glad Colin told me the truth about your feelings about dancing, even though I know that was something you didn't intend to tell me yet. Maybe you never meant to tell me at all."

"If things had gone the way I meant them to," he confessed, "it would never have come up at all."

She nodded. "But I'm glad it did. I'm glad you and I had the chance to get to know a little bit more about one another. I do feel as if I know you better now, and I'm glad. For that reason, if for no other, going to the ball was a good thing for the both of us."

"I see what you mean," Edward said. "And I agree. I think I would have found it difficult to open up to you, but because we spent the time together that we did, it does feel as if you and I have grown closer."

“As if we’re friends?” Lydia asked.

He laughed. “You’ve been waiting to say that.”

“I have, but I mean it! I think we’re on the road to a real friendship, and what happened at the ball only made me feel more certain about that.”

“I’m glad,” he admitted. “And I’ve noticed that you’ve been settling in at Westfrey.”

“When you say *settling in*—”

“No, I’m not just talking about the fact that you had an orangery built.” He chuckled. “Though I don’t suppose you would have done that if you weren’t feeling at least somewhat at ease.”

“Well, I’d have to say you’re right about that,” she agreed. “I’ve found myself very comfortable. But tell me what you mean when you say I’m settling in.”

“I’ve noticed that you seem to feel at home in small ways,” he said. “Your lady’s maid has tea brought to your room every evening, which tells me that you haven’t felt too shy to ask for it.”

“Well, no,” Lydia said. “Both you and she made it clear that I was to consider myself the lady of the house—”

“And so you should. I’m glad you’ve felt as if you can ask for the things you want.”

Lydia nodded. “If you ever do feel I’ve overstepped my boundaries, I trust you’ll let me know.”

“I will, but you don’t need to worry about it. After the purchase of these horses and the construction of an orangery, it’s difficult to imagine that anything at all could shock me.”

Lydia laughed. “I suppose that’s fair,” she said.

“I noticed you’ve been visiting the library.”

“You noticed that?”

She thought she’d been careful, that she had left no trace of her comings and goings in the library.

“It’s all right,” he assured her. “That isn’t something you have to hide. Remember, this is your home now. All the books in the library are yours as much as they are mine.”

She nodded—she’d understood that. Still, it made her feel shy to be caught. The choice of reading material was something that felt strangely intimate.

But he is my husband, and I’m the one who’s been pushing for the two of us to know one another better. Maybe I should do

my part by opening up to him about this.

“Yes,” she said, “I’ve been to the library.”

“And did you find anything you liked there?”

“Many things,” Lydia confessed, warming to the topic. “I feel as if I could spend all day in your library.”

“Our library,” he corrected her. “And, you know, you could if you wanted to. There’s nothing to stop you, no reason you should feel compelled to leave the place if you’re enjoying yourself there.”

“It’s just that it’s a freedom I’ve never had before,” she explained. “I’ve never been able to read as much as I liked. In the past, I have always had to do my reading in secret because my parents didn’t like it.”

“Let me guess, not something a proper young lady would do with her time?”

“Not remotely,” Lydia confirmed. “They felt a gentleman wouldn’t care if I could ride a horse or not, but they were sure he would actively dislike it if I had the ability to read a book.”

“Nonsense,” Edward scoffed. “I like that you can read, Lydia. It means we can talk to one another about ideas and about stories. It means that if I have a book I love, I can give it to you to read, and you and I can talk about it when you’ve finished. That’s a very rare and special thing and not

something I've ever had with someone before. I'm very pleased that you enjoy reading."

"I'm so glad," Lydia said. "Really, Edward, you don't know how happy that makes me. I think it would be a hindrance to our ever becoming friends if you wanted me to stop reading books. The fact that you're all right with it means that we can go on being close to one another."

"Do you mean to say you wouldn't have given up reading if I'd told you I didn't care for it?"

What was to be gained by lying to him here?

"I would have gone on doing it behind your back," she told him, feeling brazen in her confession.

He laughed. "I love that," he said. "But you won't have to. In fact, if there's anything you feel the library could use more of, just tell me. I can always have more books purchased."

"Oh, I don't think there's any need for *more* books," Lydia assured him, feeling a surge of pride at having made him laugh. "Maybe someday, that is, but not now. I feel as if it would take me a lifetime to get through what's already up there!"

"What sorts of things do you like to read? Romance stories?"

"Well, sometimes," Lydia replied. "But most often, I like to read..." She hesitated. "I think you may laugh at me."

“It’s all right if I do. You’ve always been confident enough to withstand someone laughing at you.”

“Yes, but...”

She wasn’t sure why that felt different to her now. Was she worried about the possibility of him laughing at her because the subject of what she was reading felt so personal? Or was there more to it? Maybe she didn’t want him to laugh because it was *Edward*. Maybe that was what would make it so much worse—her desire for his respect.

But she had already decided to tell him about her reading.

“The truth is, my favorite books are the ones about herbs,” she explained. “You have a couple of wonderful books on that subject.”

“Do I, really? I’ve never read them.”

“Oh, yes! I’ll have to show them to you. I’m very interested in the properties of herbs, particularly those used to create medicines.”

“I had no idea that was a subject that held interest for you,” he said.

“To tell you the truth, I didn’t know it either, until I picked up these books. Now, I can’t put them down. It’s enough to make

me wish I could apprentice myself to a physician, though of course such a thing would be impossible for a lady.”

“You’re unlike any lady I’ve ever met, Lydia,” Edward mused. “I’m very glad you’re the one I married. I find you captivating.”

She smiled. “Maybe I’ll bring one of my books to dinner and tell you what I’ve been reading in a bit more detail,” she suggested.

“Please do. I would love to hear about it.”

They rode on, continuing their conversation as they went. Lydia was hardly able to believe her good fortune. She would never have expected the first day out with the stallions to go as well as this one was. She had assumed Edward would find a way to be unhappy or unpleasant, and that he would make them go back home quickly after setting out. Instead, much to her surprise and pleasure, he actually seemed to be enjoying himself. It was a wonderful treat to find that the two of them could have such a good time together.

I was right all along. We really are going to be able to be friends.

And she was just going to have to set aside the fact that she was no longer sure if friendship was enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“**S**hall we head back?” Lydia asked some time later.

“Are you ready to?”

Edward had been careful not to call a halt to the proceedings too quickly—he didn’t want her to feel as if he wasn’t enjoying himself. Besides, he hadn’t felt the desire to go back yet. He *was* enjoying himself, and he didn’t want the day they were sharing to end.

But Lydia pointed at the sky above them. “It looks as if it might rain,” she observed.

He looked up. She was right, there were some ominous-looking clouds passing overhead.

“Perhaps we should get back,” he agreed. “I think that storm is still a few hours away, but it would be best to make sure the horses are in the stables before it breaks.”

Lydia nodded. “I’ve had a marvelous time, though,” she said. “I feel much more confident on horseback than I did when we

started!”

“Well, you’re doing a wonderful job.”

“Can we do it again tomorrow?”

“Not tomorrow,” he said. “I have some important meetings with some of my biggest business partners tomorrow. I can’t afford to be away from home.”

Lydia frowned. “Oh.”

He wanted to say something, to tell her that he was sorry and that he would rather spend the day with her than worry about his clients. But it concerned him that he was having those feelings in the first place. Work was supposed to be his priority. It always had been. How could he possibly be feeling regret that he had to work?

I’m not being careful. I’m letting my feelings for her get the better of me again.

This was so unwise, and he knew better than to let it go as far as it was going, yet he couldn’t seem to stop himself.

Lydia nodded. “I suppose I forgot how busy you are,” she said. “But, of course, you have to work, especially after taking so much time away today to spend with me. I completely understand.”

In a way, he almost wished she *didn't* understand. This would be easier if only she would be unreasonable about it. Then, he could tell himself there was no making her happy, and he would be able to excuse the choice he was making to spend the day with his business partners instead of devoting his time to his wife—his new friend.

“We can go riding again on Sunday,” he offered.

It was going to be a difficult promise to keep, for he had a meeting scheduled for Sunday afternoon, but he would work around it, or else he would clear his schedule some other way. He would find a way to make it work.

Lydia beamed at him, and the smile on her face made it all feel worthwhile. “Are you sure?” she asked. “Truly, Edward, I do understand how busy you are. If you’re not able to get away, I won’t be angry with you.”

“I know you won’t be angry,” he said. “But you’re my wife, Lydia. People will understand that I need to spend time with my new duchess. And this gentleman—Lord Cotter—is one of those who so ardently wished to see me prove myself with a marriage, so he can hardly complain when that marriage comes with some new responsibilities that I didn’t have before. If he wanted me to have limitless free time, he should not have encouraged me to take a wife in the first place!”

Lydia laughed. “I suppose you have a point there,” she said. “Still, I don’t want to become an inconvenience to you, Edward. Nothing could ruin a new friendship more quickly than that.”

“You aren’t an inconvenience,” he assured her. “I’m more than happy to give you some of my extra time. I’m more than happy to *make* extra time for you. You haven’t overstepped at all, Lydia, so please don’t fret about it. It’s my responsibility to balance these things, not yours.”

“I suppose you’re right,” she agreed. “All right, Edward. I’ll trust that you’re handling it. And I’ll look forward to riding with you again on Sunday. Perhaps we’ll take out the third horse.”

“I don’t know about that,” Edward said. “I got a look at that horse, Lydia, and he doesn’t seem to be quite as tame as these two. He might need some work before he’s ready for a peaceful ride with a lady on his back.”

“What should we do?”

“I’ll speak to our stable hands about working with him. Hopefully, they will be able to get him ready to ride soon enough.” He patted the neck of his horse he was on. “Meanwhile, these two need names.”

“This one is Star,” she said promptly.

“You’ve named him already?”

“I’ve named them all. Star is for the pattern on his nose, do you see?”

“Yes. I like it. And what about mine?”

“You’re riding Caramel.”

“That’s a pretty name. What about the one we left back at the stable?”

“His name is Dart.”

“Dart?”

“Because he looks sharp. And a bit like he’s planning to run away if he ever gets the opportunity.”

Edward laughed. “He does look like that,” he agreed. “All right. Star, Caramel, and Dart. So they shall be, and a wonderful trio they make.”

They reached the stables. Edward climbed down from his horse and went over to help Lydia down from hers. She slid gracefully down into his arms, allowing him to catch her and set her gently on her feet.

“That was fun,” she told him, smiling. “Thank you again, Edward, this was such a wonderful day.”

“I enjoyed it too,” he said, and he meant it.

It had been a very pleasant day—much more so than he had anticipated. But every moment he spent with Lydia seemed to

be better than he would have expected it to be. She never failed to take him by surprise when they were together.

“Shall we go back up to the house? It must be nearly time for dinner, and I wouldn’t want to get caught in that rainstorm, either.”

He held out his arm to her. She looked surprised for a moment, but he could think of no reason why she should be. Things weren’t romantic between them, but that didn’t mean he was incapable of behaving like a gentleman.

She took his arm and smiled. “All right,” she said. “Let’s go. Do you know what’s being served for dinner?”

“Pheasant, I believe. Does that suit you?”

“I like pheasant,” she said. “We had it often at home, although my parents didn’t like to see me express a preference for any one food over another.”

“What!” He could hardly believe what he was hearing. “You know, some of their rules seem strict to me, but this one just seems *silly*, Lydia. What’s the harm in you saying you prefer certain foods? Are young ladies not supposed to have preferences?”

“Well, no!” Lydia laughed. “It never occurred to me how strange this was until very recently, but that’s exactly it. They didn’t want me to have any food preferences because if I preferred something that was in opposition to the preferences of the gentleman I married...”

“I see. They were concerned that you might like pheasant, but I *wouldn't* like pheasant, and it would lead to me feeling as though I had to serve a dish I didn't like if I wanted to please my wife.”

“Something like that.”

“Is that how it is between them? Your mother never lets anything be known about herself for fear that it might inconvenience your father?”

“No, that's not the way they are,” Lydia said. “My mother is unafraid to be herself. But the two of them had an arrangement from the time they were very young. They always knew they would grow up to be married to one another, so they never had to worry about it.”

“I see. Did they think that no one would wish to marry you if they didn't make you into someone as unobjectionable as possible?”

“Perhaps they thought that,” Lydia said. “I think their main concern was simply a desire to make it easy. They knew that it *might* be difficult to find me a match—not necessarily because of anything about me, any flaw in me, but just because such things can be difficult sometimes. They wanted to make it easy.”

“But don't they understand that they were making it harder for themselves by removing everything that makes you unique?” Edward asked. He felt frustrated by the whole thing. Everything he was hearing felt wrong. “My favorite things

about you have nothing to do with how easy and convenient you are. To tell you the truth, if that was their goal, they failed because I don't find you very easy or convenient at all."

Lydia nodded. "They wouldn't be happy to hear that," she said. "But I don't think they would be very surprised, either. They've known for a long time that they failed to control my more rebellious side."

"I suppose that's true," Edward said. "But wouldn't they be glad to know that you were able to settle into a successful marriage anyway? That your rebellious tendencies were no hindrance to your securing the life they wanted you to have?"

"I don't know," Lydia said. "I think they would say that I was running the risk of losing you by making myself a burden. They wouldn't be happy with my behavior since I've been at Westfrey, I can tell you that for certain."

They'd reached the manor.

"Do you want to change before dinner?" Edward asked.

"I think that would be a good idea," Lydia said with a smile. "I'm sure I must smell of horse!"

Edward laughed. "Are you saying I smell of horse?"

"You do, a bit."

The two smiled at one another, and Edward was surprised anew by how much fun he was having with her. If he had known it would be like this, he might not have had such reservations about marrying in the first place.

They went up to their rooms. Edward changed quickly and came back down, knowing he would be ahead of Lydia and hoping that would give him the chance to speak to the kitchen staff and to let them know that pheasant was a dish they ought to try to serve with regularity if they could. Now that he knew Lydia liked it, he was eager to make it a standard offering.

But when he got back down to the foyer, he was intercepted by the butler.

“Your Grace,” Mr. Bradford said anxiously, “we weren’t sure what to do. I know they aren’t expected, but they insisted on staying for dinner...”

“Who?” Edward asked with a frown, for no one *was* expected today. “Who’s here?”

“The Duchess’s parents, Your Grace,” Mr. Bradford replied. “Lord and Lady Haddington. They’re waiting in the doorway.”

Edward looked over his butler’s shoulder. Sure enough, his wife’s parents stood there, looking every bit as if they belonged.

He closed his eyes. Having just finished hearing all the things Lydia had had to say about them, he was sure she would prefer a dinner without their company. But how could he turn them

away? It didn't seem a decent thing to do after marrying their daughter.

"I'll speak to them," he muttered. "Thank you, Bradford."

He went over to the doorway to greet his guests. "Lord Haddington," he said. "Lady Haddington. What brings you here today?"

"We were visiting my wife's sister and happened to be passing by Westfrey," Lord Haddington explained. "We thought it only appropriate to stop by and see how our daughter was doing, Your Grace."

"Of course," Edward said. "Do come in. Lydia and I were just about to sit down to dinner. You can join us before you set off for home."

Lord and Lady Haddington came inside. Edward closed his eyes briefly.

He just hoped this visit wouldn't be too taxing on all of them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

When Lydia came back down the stairs, the look of shock that crossed her face was enough to make Edward want to send her parents off straight away.

But she composed herself quickly.

“Mother,” she said. “Father. What a surprise to see the two of you here.”

“We were visiting your aunt Gertrude,” Lady Haddington explained. “Did you know that Westfrey is on the way home from her house?”

“It isn’t, really, is it?” Lydia asked. “I mean, it’s several miles to the west of the path you would ordinarily take.”

“Lydia, don’t be difficult,” her father scolded her. “Your mother wished to see you.”

Lydia inclined her head. “I apologize, Father,” she said. “I’m glad the two of you were able to stop by. Will you be staying for dinner?”

Edward was hard pressed not to stare at her. After the conversation they had just had about her rebellious nature, this was hardly the response he had expected from her upon her parents' arrival. But she looked completely tamed, as if the wind had been removed from her sails.

"They're staying," he interjected. "I do wish we had known ahead of time that they were coming because I would have arranged something a bit nicer for our dinner!"

"I'm sure whatever you're serving will be just fine," Lady Haddington said. "We truly only wanted to see the two of you. Even if there was no dinner at all, we would be more than happy."

Edward recognized what he was hearing. They were doing their best to be accommodating. They didn't want to give the impression that Lydia had demanding parents. He was going to have to let them know that that wasn't a concern.

"Why don't we all go in and sit down?" he suggested. "The staff will be serving our meal shortly."

He took Lydia by the arm, noticing how much more tense she was than she had been just a few moments ago. The arrival of her parents had altered her whole demeanor. He gave her arm a brief squeeze, hoping to give her some comfort and reassurance, and she looked up at him and said nothing.

I need to get them out of here as quickly as possible. It's so obvious that being around them upsets her. It isn't right that she should have to put up with this.

They all took seats around the table.

“We’re having pheasant tonight,” Edward said. “I know that’s a particular favorite of Lydia’s.”

He knew the comment would sound provocative, but he felt her parents needed to be provoked in this way.

“Lydia has always been happy with everything,” Lord Haddington pointed out. “She’s never been served a meal she didn’t like.”

“Which isn’t to say that she eats an unladylike amount, of course,” Lady Haddington added quickly. “Lydia does everything in perfect moderation, but I’m sure you’ve had ample opportunity to observe that since the two of you got married.”

“I’ve found nothing about Lydia’s behavior to displease me,” Edward declared.

Perhaps he had been wrong to try to provoke her parents. Lydia was staring at her hands in her lap. She was like a different person. What was happening? Where was the rebellious lady he knew?

The servants brought out the food and set it on the table. Lydia sat up a little straighter at the sight of the pheasant, clearly pleased to see her favorite meal. Edward was glad. At least, if she had to go through the ordeal of this dinner, she could do it

while eating something she liked. Things could certainly be worse.

They were all quiet for a moment as they filled their plates. It was Lydia who broke the silence.

“How is Aunt Gertrude, Mother? I was disappointed that she wasn’t able to attend the wedding, but I know her health is a problem for her.”

“That’s right,” Lady Haddington agreed. “But she’s doing all right these days. We were able to sit in the garden for tea. She asked after you, of course. She wanted to know how things were progressing with you and your new husband.”

“Progressing?” Lydia frowned. “We’re already married. What progress is there to be made?”

“Well, you know, marriage is not the only goal in a relationship such as yours,” Lady Haddington hinted.

“If you’re referring to the time we’ve spent getting to know one another,” Edward interjected, “it’s been going very well, Lady Haddington. Just today, the two of us were out for a ride, and I found Lydia to be a very adept riding companion. She has a natural ability on horseback. It’s a shame it wasn’t developed sooner.”

“Well, we thought you might be thinking a bit further ahead than simply getting to know one another,” Lady Haddington hinted. “After all, you must know each other fairly well by

now! It's been a few weeks since the wedding—how much time do two people really need?”

“Stop it, Mother,” Lydia said suddenly.

It was a relief to Edward to hear her speak up, even though he wasn't certain what was happening. At least, he knew that she had the strength to advocate for herself. He had been sitting here wondering whether she intended to let her parents simply walk all over her. Apparently, she wasn't going to do that, and he was glad.

Both Lord and Lady Haddington looked irritated at Lydia's outburst.

“Lydia,” Lord Haddington said sharply, “there's no need for you to speak that way at the Duke's table.”

“Have you forgotten, Father?” Lydia asked. “I would have thought it would be easy for you to remember, since you were the one who arranged for this marriage. I would have thought you'd have come here with the idea in your mind that I am the Duchess of Westfrey now. This is my table every bit as much as it is his. What's said here is for me to determine just as much as it is for him.”

“She really isn't usually like this, Your Grace,” Lady Haddington said rather desperately. “She's usually quite even-tempered and well-behaved.”

Edward had to laugh. “No, she isn't,” he replied. “She's outspoken and stands up for the things she wants. Perhaps

you're right that we've already spent enough time getting to know one another because it seems to me that I know your daughter better than you do! Do you really perceive her to be *even-tempered*? That's not the way I see her at all. She's hot-headed."

"Oh, Lydia!" Lady Haddington exclaimed. "What have you done to give His Grace such a bad impression of you already?"

"Did I say I had a bad impression of her? I find her most enjoyable. What I don't enjoy is having to defend my wife at her own dinner table," Edward said. "If you have nothing to say other than to criticize her behavior, perhaps you ought to be on your way. She's done nothing that deserves reprimand."

"Forgive us, Your Grace," Lord Haddington apologized quickly. "It's difficult when your children grow up and go out into the world on their own, you see. We're used to caring for Lydia. We're used to teaching her proper behavior and decorum. Of course, you're right to point out that that isn't our job any longer. Of course, that's right." He looked at his wife. "We'll restrain ourselves. It's just a bit difficult to stop acting in the role of parent."

"And I'm sure that's something you'll discover for yourselves soon enough," Lady Haddington added, a small smile returning to her face.

"*Mother!*" Lydia exclaimed.

"Oh, Lydia, really, we *are* still your parents. And even if you haven't announced anything formally yet—"

“What is this?” Edward interjected.

“She’s trying to find out whether or not I’m with child,” Lydia explained, shaking her head. “Mother, if that was information we wanted to share with people, we would do so, but until I come to you and *tell* you a child is expected, you are to assume one isn’t.”

“Of course, of course,” her mother replied quickly. “I only wondered whether... well, we wouldn’t *tell* anyone, Lydia. It could remain a secret between you and me. I am your mother, after all. I’ve looked forward to sharing this moment with you all your life. Couldn’t you just give me a hint? Something to let me know if it’s happening?”

Edward stood up. He couldn’t bear to see his wife spoken to this way. It was too much. “I think we’re going to call an end to this dinner,” he asserted. “These questions are far too rude and invasive.”

“Edward—no, that really isn’t necessary,” Lydia said.

“It’s as they just finished telling us,” Edward explained. “This is my house. This is my table. I’m not going to have my wife spoken to this way under my own roof. Absolutely not.”

“Well, I do think we have a right to know if our daughter is going to be a mother,” Lady Haddington pressed.

“And if not,” Lord Haddington added, “the two of you really should have taken care of that by now. I wouldn’t like to think that you’re neglecting your duties to the dukedom.”

Edward couldn't believe their audacity, but since they really wanted to know—

“Lydia and I have decided against having any children for the time being,” he said.

Lady Haddington gasped.

“What do you mean?” Lord Haddington demanded. “You mean you're planning on waiting? But how long can you wait for something like that? You know, people are going to start to talk, Your Grace, if there is no child. People are going to question my daughter. We don't want that.”

“Well, I wish to enjoy a few years alone with my wife before we move into the responsibilities of parenthood and grooming an heir to take over my dukedom,” Edward explained. “Surely that's something the two of you can understand.”

“No one is going to understand this,” Lord Haddington snapped. “People are going to talk. This is very irresponsible behavior. I think you're inviting trouble, Your Grace.”

“Frankly, what you think is not my concern. I'm at liberty to make this decision for myself.”

“Is it because of Lydia? Has she done something to make you turn away from her?” Lord Haddington turned to Lydia. “You know that your duty is to your husband now, Lydia. You must abandon your rebellious ways! If you've done something to compel him to decide against having a child with you—”

“I won’t have you coming to my home uninvited and saying these things to me and my wife!” Edward declared. “You may see yourselves out.”

“Lydia,” Lady Haddington implored.

Lydia stood firm. “My husband is the lord of this house,” she said. “His word is law here. I’ll come and visit you in a few days, perhaps, but our meeting tonight is at an end.”

Lord Haddington rose to his feet. “The hospitality of your house leaves a fair bit to be desired,” he commented bitinglly.

Edward said nothing.

“Come,” Lord Haddington said to his wife. “They’ve made it clear we’re not wanted here.”

Lord and Lady Haddington swept out of the dining room. As they disappeared into the foyer, the tension seemed to leave Lydia’s body.

Edward went to her and held out a hand. “Are you all right?” he murmured.

She took his hand and allowed him to help her to her feet. “That was awful,” she murmured as the door closed, signaling the departure of her parents. “I’m so sorry, Edward. I’m used to them speaking to me that way, but I never dreamed they

would be so rude to you. I can't imagine what they were thinking."

"To tell you the truth," Edward said, "nothing about what I saw from them came as a surprise to me."

"You can't mean that. They were awful."

"But they were exactly as you've always described them. They weren't trying to be cruel. They're just so worried about appearances that it makes it impossible for them to set that concern aside and pay attention to the needs of their daughter. They were probably here because your aunt was asking questions about whether or not you were with child yet, and it made them think that if *she* was asking, *other* people would start asking."

"Do you think that's what it was?"

"They did say your aunt was curious about how things were *progressing* between us. That's what this was all about."

Lydia sighed and leaned into Edward's chest.

Without thinking, he put his arms around her, wishing only to give her comfort.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Are you all right?” Edward murmured.

“I’m fine,” Lydia replied, even though she was badly shaken.

“I could tell how upset you were,” he said softly. “You know, we’ve been talking all day about the fact that you taught yourself to rebel against them. But it seemed so hard for you to do that tonight. What happened? What was different?”

“Don’t be upset,” she warned.

“I’m already upset. I don’t like the way they treated you. But I won’t be upset with *you*, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

She nodded. “It was different because you were here,” she said. “I didn’t want you to see me argue with them. And I didn’t want you to see them trying to put me in my place. They like to make me feel small—they think that’s the way to get me to obey. If I tried to resist, they would speak to me like a child. I didn’t want you to see me like that.”

“Oh, I could never see you as a child,” Edward assured. “Your fierce independence is something I admire—something I look up to, really. I know how difficult it must have been for you to earn it. You don’t need to worry about the way other people speak to you in front of me. It will never change the way I look at you. It never could.”

Lydia nodded.

“You’re trembling,” he observed.

“Am I?” She hadn’t noticed.

“Let’s go into my study,” he suggested. “We can have a glass of wine there and relax—recover from this encounter. I think it will help us both calm our nerves a little.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Lydia agreed.

He kept his arm around her shoulders as they made their way up to the study. She leaned against him, taking comfort from his embrace. It felt wonderful to be supported like this in the wake of her parents’ visit, to know that Edward had declared definitively that he was on her side. The fact that he had ordered her parents out of the house for daring to speak disrespectfully to her... she’d never dreamed that anyone would do such a thing for her. It was beyond her wildest imagination.

How odd. The things I did dream of seem impossible now. Love and family—those things will never happen. But I’ve found other things with Edward, things I might value nearly as

much as I would have valued the things I originally dreamed about.

“Have a seat,” he told her when they had reached the study, and she sank into a chair beside the fire. He pulled out a bottle of red wine and two glasses and uncorked the bottle. “I’ve been saving this for a special occasion,” he told her.

“Is this a special occasion?”

“It’s not a happy one, but I’d say it’s a special one, nonetheless,” he said. “After everything you and I have been through tonight, we deserve a little something special.”

He handed her the glass he was holding and picked up the other one. Lydia took a long drink and let the wine warm her.

“I want to thank you,” she said.

“For what?”

“For lying to my parents.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think if you’d told them tonight that we didn’t mean to have a child at all, the shock might have destroyed them,” she said. “It was much better to tell them that we’re just waiting a few years, so I appreciate your willingness to bend the truth. They’ll have to know eventually, of course, but we’ll let them

find out slowly, gradually, over time. We don't need to make an announcement about it."

"I feel the same way," Edward told her. "Not that it's any of their business in the first place. I really don't know what made them feel as if they had the right to come to my house uninvited and ask such personal questions. I find it shocking."

"Especially given the way they've always told me not to make a nuisance of myself," Lydia agreed. "I can't believe they don't see the hypocrisy. But I suppose they thought they were prying into my life, not yours. I suppose they saw that as a perfectly fine thing to do."

"I don't think it is," Edward argued. "You're *not* just their daughter anymore, no matter how much they might protest that they can't stop looking at you that way. You're also the Duchess of Westfrey. Respect is owed to your position in society, even if they are your parents. That's a lesson they're going to have to learn."

Lydia nodded. "I'm so unused to having someone support me when it comes to things like this."

"Well, you have someone now," he said firmly. "Now and for the rest of your life. Our marriage may not be all you hoped it would be, Lydia, but you may rest assured I will always be on your side, and I'll always do whatever I can to show you support."

"Thank you," she told him. "You don't know how much that means to me."

“Furthermore,” he added, “you’re going to make your own choices. You’re going to live the way you want to live, not the way they make you feel that you should. I don’t know exactly what that might look like. I don’t know what you want out of your life or what’s going to make you happy. But I do know that I’m going to protect your freedom to make your own choices and that if your parents try to express any sort of disapproval, I won’t let them near you. They’ve had their say throughout your life so far. Now, it’s your turn.”

Lydia beamed. “Do you really mean that?”

“Of course, I mean it. Why wouldn’t I?”

“It’s just that no one has ever said anything like that to me before. No one has ever made me feel as if I have the right to make my own choices. And I’m just so honored by that. And so grateful.”

“You’re important to me,” he told her, easing into the seat beside hers. “You mean more to me than I would have ever thought possible, Lydia. I didn’t expect to care about you at all when this journey began, and now, I know I wouldn’t be the same without you. So, whatever it takes to make you happy is what I’m going to do, and I won’t abide anyone who stands in the way of that.”

She sighed. “We are going to have to see them again soon, you know,” she said. “Especially since you sent them off today. We’re going to have to make things right with them. I can only imagine what they’re saying about us even now.”

“But don’t worry about that,” Edward reassured. “Worry about the two of us, here. Are you happy?”

Lydia swirled her wine glass and smiled. “I am happy,” she replied. “I was so miserable at that dinner table. It’s hard to believe that things could have turned around for me so quickly. But they really have. And it’s all thanks to you.”

She hesitated, feeling the urge to reach out and take his hand. She wanted to do it badly. But she shouldn’t. She knew that. Hadn’t he made it clear that that wasn’t the relationship he wanted with her?

But things are different now. He’s just been saying how what’s between us is nothing like what he expected. I should act as if a window has opened, because one has. Hasn’t it?

She couldn’t be sure. Did she dare?

And then—breathtakingly, unbelievably—Edward reached out and took *her* hand.

Lydia’s heart beat double-time. Could this really be happening? She looked into his eyes.

His gaze was softer than she’d ever seen it. He usually had such walls up. He acted as if he didn’t want anyone to see to the core of him. But now, looking into his eyes, she almost felt as if she could see right into his heart. She was seeing more of him than she ever had before.

I love him.

The moment she thought the words, she could feel that they were true—and they terrified her. She couldn't allow herself to be in love with this man. As much as he had come to mean to her—and he did mean a great deal to her, she wasn't ashamed to admit that—love was far too dangerous to allow. He would never love her back.

But he did say things were different now. And to judge by the way he's looking at me, could anyone really look at me that way if there wasn't love behind it?

As one, the two of them rose to their feet. Lydia had never felt more connected to anyone in all her life—she was sure their thoughts were in tandem. They didn't break eye contact with each other as they stepped into one another's arms.

She knew, beyond doubt, what was about to happen. It was as if she could see ten seconds into the future somehow. She could see him pulling her close, wrapping his arms around her, lowering his lips to hers. And when it all happened exactly that way, when he finally kissed her, it wasn't a surprise at all. It felt as if it was happening just as fate had intended.

And she kissed him back, letting her arms wrap around his neck, letting herself forget about the way her parents had spoken to her, abandoning all her worries and losing herself in this moment of passion. It felt as if birds had come to life and were singing inside of her. It was real—it was actually happening. They were falling in love. He'd sworn it was impossible, that it would never happen, and she had guarded her heart against it, but in spite of all of that, her dreams had come true.

They pulled apart.

She searched his eyes. “I love you,” she breathed. “I love you, Edward, truly.”

And she was sure he would repeat the words back to her and kiss her again.

But he didn't.

Instead, he stepped back, letting his hands fall to his sides.

“We shouldn't have done that,” he murmured. “That was a mistake.”

Her heart dropped. “Does it have to be a mistake?”

“It was one,” he said. “It wasn't a good idea for us to give in like that. Nothing has changed, Lydia.”

“But you said that things had changed,” she protested. “You said it yourself, just now. You told me things between us weren't what you imagined they would be, that I had come to mean more to you than you'd anticipated—”

“And that's true,” he said. “You wanted a friendship, Lydia. That's what you've been telling me. And I think that's what we've built. I care for you very deeply, but as my *friend*. I want the best for you as my friend, and as *your* friend, I'll do

all I can to provide for you. That doesn't mean that my feelings have changed about anything else."

"You kissed me." she pointed out, feeling pathetic and humiliated.

"You're a beautiful young lady. Of course, I was tempted. But I shouldn't have given in."

"But, Edward," she said, "if you have those feelings for me, if you see me that way, we *don't* have to be only friends. Don't you see that? I do love you. I meant it. And I think you love me too, but you're afraid to admit it. You shouldn't be. The two of us share something special. The way you defended me today—Edward, I know you love me. If you'll only let your guard down and allow yourself to feel it, you'll see it too."

She held her breath, waiting for his response, hoping against hope that he would tell her what she so desperately wanted to hear.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Edward could hardly bear to see the hope in Lydia's eyes. It was crushing.

She really meant it. She really did love him, and she genuinely hoped that something real could be forged between the two of them. It was so obvious to him that her feelings were completely genuine. She was baring her soul.

And he was going to have to break her heart.

How could he do it? How could he look her in the eye and tell her that he didn't love her when—when it wasn't the truth?

He had to admit that to himself now. He *did* love her. That kiss, it hadn't been for nothing. He really did care about her. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her again. He wanted to take her up to his bedroom and spend the night with her. The idea entranced him.

But he couldn't. He couldn't let himself have that.

This was supposed to be a business arrangement, nothing more. He had allowed it to go much too far.

He stepped back from her, putting even more space between the two of them. “Don’t ask me that,” he said, doing his best to remove all emotion from his voice, hoping that he sounded cold and dispassionate.

She stared at him. “Edward...”

“You know better than to ask me that,” he told her firmly. “How many times, Lydia? How many times must we discuss this? Do you think I enjoy breaking your heart? Do you think it’s fun for me to have these conversations over and over?”

“You just told me that things had changed,” she protested. “It would be foolish of me not to try to discover what that change encompasses.”

“Well, I can tell you right now what it doesn’t encompass,” he said. “You and I will *never* be anything more than friends. Even friendship was a lot to ask for, but you pushed. You had to have more than what I was willing to give. I indulged you, and that was a mistake.”

“You can’t say everything was a mistake!” she protested. “I know it wasn’t. You and I have enjoyed getting to know one another, Edward. That much has been real.”

“The fact that we’ve been enjoying ourselves doesn’t mean we weren’t making mistakes,” he said, looking away from her. He couldn’t face the heartbreak in her expression. “Lydia, I told

you from the start. You knew all along what this marriage was and what it could never be. Please, don't make me feel now as if you were misled, because you weren't. You always knew."

"But you could change your mind," she protested. "We could both change, Edward. It really doesn't have to be like that. You can't tell me that you don't feel anything for me. I can tell you do. No one could kiss me like that if they just didn't care at all. I know you care."

"Of course I care." He wouldn't lie to her about that. "I care about you as a friend and a member of my household. And I only want good things for you. That much is true. That doesn't mean I'm in love. I will never be in love."

"But we had such a good day," she argued, her eyes filling with tears. "Out on the horses, learning more about one another—was none of that real?"

"It was all real. But it was nothing I couldn't have shared with a brother or a business acquaintance. Only this kiss, and it was a mistake. I shouldn't have done it, but I got carried away by being in the presence of such a beautiful lady. You should take it as a compliment, Lydia, that I found you so impossible to resist despite my best efforts."

"You don't have to resist me," she whispered. "You can have me. You can have all of me—whatever you want. We can be husband and wife to one another, *truly*."

He had to put a stop to this. It was too awful. The hope in her eyes was so persistent, and he needed it to be extinguished because the longer it stayed alive there, the harder it would be

when she finally accepted that nothing was going to happen between the two of them.

“Enough,” he snapped, tightening his expression and stepping even further away from her. “I’m not going to go on indulging this, Lydia. I have been very understanding with you since all this began, you know. You wanted a friendship—something I never planned on—and I did my best to accommodate that.”

“I thought you wanted it too,” she whispered, and he hated that he was hurting her.

“I don’t want it if it’s going to lead to this kind of confusion,” he said. “I don’t want to have to explain to you every couple of days that we’re not going to have a romantic relationship. If that’s not something you can keep track of on your own, we need to take a step back from one another.”

“Edward, why are you resisting this?” she asked. “You can’t tell me now that you only mean us to be friends. A friend would not have kissed me the way you just did. Tell me the truth. You want more.”

“I don’t want it,” he argued. “I’ve never wanted it. And I have always been perfectly honest with you about that, Lydia. It’s not my fault if you’re confused now. I’m sorry you feel that way, but you must understand I can’t take responsibility for it.”

She shook her head. “Maybe we *should* take a step back from one another,” she suggested, and her voice was dark. “Maybe I was wrong about you.”

That shouldn't have hurt as much as it did.

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“Meaning that I thought you were a different sort of man. I understood that it was hard for you to let me in. I respected that about you. I knew it was going to take time. But I thought that, given that time, we might find a way to one another. I didn't know exactly what it would look like, and I was willing to put in the work to find out. Now, I think you always intended to do all you could to keep us apart.”

“Have I ever said otherwise?” he asked.

“No,” she said sadly. “I suppose you haven't. But I did want to believe you were... different.”

“I'm not different,” he told her. “I am the man I've always told you I was. You shouldn't believe anything else of me, even if you would prefer to.”

“Then you're right,” she said. “We ought to keep our distance from one another.”

“Did you only ask to befriend me in hopes it might turn into something more?”

“No,” she mumbled. “I wasn't hoping for that. I wasn't even thinking of that. I believed you when I said friendship was all we would ever have.”

“But now it’s not enough for you?”

“It was never real at all,” she said. “You were never my friend.”

That was gutting, but he reminded himself that it was a good thing. He wanted her to be questioning what she’d felt between them. She needed to know that it was over. The fact that she was pulling away—it might hurt him now, but it was for the best, and if he could just convince himself to bear through it, they would both be better off.

“Maybe I wasn’t,” he agreed.

She looked away. “I trusted you. I can’t understand why you kissed me if it meant nothing at all to you.”

“I told you—”

“I know what you told me. I’m beautiful, and you got carried away. But I don’t believe you, Edward. I’ve seen you around beautiful women before. You don’t just go around kissing them without a care for propriety or what their feelings might be about it. You may be selfish—you *are* selfish—but you’re not that cold. You wouldn’t have kissed me without at least thinking about the fact that it might mean something more to me.”

“You’re going to have to find a way to make peace with this,” he said. “I shouldn’t have done it. I admit that. But it’s happened—I’m sorry, but it has—and now we both have to deal with the repercussions.”

“I don’t want you to be sorry! Didn’t you at least enjoy the kiss?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I can tell you’re not being honest with me about something. I want honesty from my husband. Is that really so much to ask for?”

He couldn’t take any more of this. He couldn’t stand in this room and watch her suffer, knowing that he was the cause of it.

“You had better take that wine back to your room,” he said. “I don’t think it was a good idea for us to come up here together.”

“It was *your* idea.”

“And it’s compelled me to give in to a temptation that I should never have allowed to touch my heart.”

He turned away from her.

He could sense her lingering in the room, perhaps hoping that he was going to change his mind or say something else, but he knew he wouldn’t. It had been difficult enough to say what he’d needed to say, but he had finally gotten it all out. Now, he was going to keep his back to her and trust that she had the sense to leave while she could.

A moment later, he heard the door open and close, and he relaxed at last.

How stupid could he possibly be? Kissing her like that when he had known how disappointed she'd been that they weren't going to have a real romance. And doing it right after her parents had tried to make her feel ashamed of the life the two of them were leading!

It was shameful of him. He couldn't face himself right now. He had to do something to help himself forget about the mistake he had made.

He locked the door to the study so she wouldn't come in, and he poured himself another glass of wine. Then, he went over and sat down at his desk. He took out his books and spread them out in front of him.

He should have stayed inside and focused on his work today. He shouldn't have allowed himself to be distracted. Going out and riding with Lydia had always been ill-advised. He should never have even given in to her request to form a friendship—really, what could he have been thinking when he'd accepted that idea? He had always been so clear with himself that this relationship was for business purposes only. He was with her because he needed to show the world he had a wife. That was all it was and all it would ever be.

He closed his eyes and allowed his feelings to settle, forcing himself not to think about what she might be feeling at this moment—rejected, hurt, unfairly dismissed. He was sure he had hurt her feelings, but he was equally sure that he had been honest with her from the very start about what potential the

two of them had—and about what could never be between them.

We're not going to fall in love. And if she thinks she's fallen in love already, she's wrong. She'll come to realize that in time. She's strong, and she'll have the wisdom to choose self-preservation over this love for me that she thinks she feels. She'll do the right thing to prevent herself from getting hurt any more than she already has.

He hoped so, anyway.

He flipped open the book in front of him and devoted his attention to facts and figures, which were easy to understand and to bend to his will. It made for a welcome respite from thinking about affairs of the heart, which felt impossible to navigate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Lydia found it difficult to maintain any desire to see Edward at all over the days that followed. Every time she caught a glimpse of him in passing, she turned and fled, wanting to be away from him, not wanting to risk a face-to-face confrontation. Being near one another was excruciating.

Sometimes, it was unavoidable. Once, she was in the library—hiding, though she wouldn't have admitted to herself that that was what she was doing—when he came in looking for a book. The two of them both froze, taken aback at being forced into close proximity, and for a moment, Edward seemed as if he might turn away and come back later. But he seemed to decide it was best to see his business through. He strode over to the bookcase, where he seemed to grab a book at random. Lydia was tempted to ask whether that was truly the one he had come in to get—he had found it so quickly—but he turned and was gone before she could say anything at all.

She had ceased having meals with him altogether. It was easily avoided because she knew what times he ate. She had begun having her breakfasts brought to her in her room so their paths wouldn't cross. It was safe to emerge by ten o'clock, when he would have taken to his study to spend the day working—he was in there even more lately than he had ever been before. Lunch and tea could be brought to the library or the conservatory. She suspected that Edward was eating in his

study. As for dinner, she usually ate at least an hour earlier than his ordinary time and then retreated to her room.

For Edward's part, he seemed to be trying just as hard to avoid her as she was to avoid him, and that made the whole thing somewhat easier. Given the fact that neither one of them wanted to be around the other, it was very rare, indeed, that their paths crossed incidentally.

But it did happen one day, about a week and a half after their unfortunate kiss and the argument that had followed.

Lydia had made arrangements to spend the day with Nancy. She was looking forward to the opportunity to get out of the house and was treating it as a bit of a special occasion. She'd spent longer than usual on her attire that morning, until at last Violet had intervened.

"You're having tea with your friend, Your Grace," Violet had reminded Lydia very gently. "I'm sure whatever you wear will be just fine."

"I know that," Lydia had mumbled. "And yet... I don't know when the next time I'll be able to leave the house is going to be."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when am I going to go anywhere? Now that Edward and I aren't getting along, it's not as if I can count on him to take me to a ball or to the park. I'll be cooped up in Westfrey for the rest of my days."

“Your Grace, I think you’re borrowing trouble. You’ll have plenty of opportunities to socialize. You’re going out today, aren’t you?”

“Well, yes, but only to Nancy’s house. And even that feels like such an ordeal! I just don’t know how to relax and enjoy myself anymore, I’m afraid. Everything seems so important, as if it’s a vital moment that I must capitalize on or risk losing forever.”

“I wish I could understand why you feel that way,” Violet had lamented.

Lydia couldn’t explain it. She hadn’t told her lady’s maid about the kiss she and Edward had shared. She could imagine a world in which she would have wanted to talk about that—if the moments after the kiss had been filled with love and joy, and the story had been a happy one. But as things stood, it was too tragic to talk about. She couldn’t bear to see her own hope and sadness play themselves out again on Violet’s face as she related that tale.

But the kiss was the reason she was feeling so haunted lately. It felt as if that moment, stolen between them in Edward’s study, had been laden with import and significance. It felt as if their entire relationship had turned at that moment. And if that could happen—so suddenly, without her realizing that she was even in the middle of a life-altering moment—surely any other moment could be important like that too. It made it difficult to decide on anything.

She knew she needed to shake that feeling off. It was important to find a way to move forward without allowing the

feelings she now knew she had for Edward to dominate her every thought. Today would be a good start. She would be able to get out of this house and have some fun with Nancy, and for a little while, she could forget all about everything that had been on her mind.

She turned away from the looking glass, deciding not to worry any more about what she was wearing. “Will you go let the footman know that I’m on my way down, please?”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

Violet hurried out of the room, and Lydia felt glad that her lady’s maid was accompanying her on this visit. It was good to have someone around her that she could consider a friend.

She went out into the hall, but there, she stopped.

Edward was standing there, only a few feet from her doorway. He almost looked as if he had been waiting for her, and yet she didn’t think he had if the startled expression on his face was anything to go by.

“Were you looking for me?” she asked him.

“No,” he said. “I didn’t know that you were in your room. You’ve usually left it already by this point in the day.”

Lydia hadn’t realized he tracked her movements that closely. She had assumed he was simply doing his best to ignore her.

“I’m going out,” she explained. “I was dressing.”

“You look very nice,” he said stiffly as if he was saying it because he thought he ought to, not as if he actually cared about how she looked.

“Thank you,” she replied, like him, speaking because she knew it was the right thing to say at the moment, not because she felt any particular gratitude for his comment.

“You said you’re going out,” he said. “Where are you going?”

“I’m having tea with Nancy,” Lydia told him.

Surprise registered on his face. At first, Lydia didn’t understand, but then, she thought perhaps she did.

Nancy was married to Edward’s brother. In another life, one where the two of them were friends—or more—they would have made this visit together. They would have had dinners with Nancy and Colin, and the four of them would have socialized together regularly.

It was hard to imagine that happening now. Lydia thought it would likely be more comfortable for her to spend time in Colin’s company than with her own husband. At least there was no tension there. She and Colin got along with one another and didn’t have to worry about any complications. With Edward, she never knew what to think.

“Well, I hope you have a pleasant afternoon,” Edward said after a moment. “Do you know what time you’ll be returning home?”

“I imagine I’ll be back before dark.”

“Please, let Bradford know when you get in so that I won’t worry about you.”

As if you would.

“All right,” she agreed. “I’ll make sure Bradford is informed.”

“Thank you,” he said.

He made no move to walk past her. He seemed as if he was waiting for her to leave first. And after a moment, she did just that, turning her back on him and heading for the stairs.

What an uncomfortable encounter that was.

But it was always like that with Edward these days. It was clear that neither one of them really loved being in the other’s presence—they were both doing all they could to avoid it. When their paths did inadvertently cross, it almost felt like a race to see who could get away first.

She found Violet waiting outside next to the carriage that had been prepared for their journey.

“Are you all right, Your Grace?” Violet asked her, frowning.
“You’re very pale.”

“I’m all right,” Lydia assured her.

She knew that Violet had observed the differences in the way she and Edward had been acting toward one another lately, but Violet was too well-behaved to ask without being invited, and Lydia didn’t want to talk about it. Not yet, anyway.

Although I wonder if Nancy will bring it out of me. She’s always been so easy to confide in, and I know she’s aware of the struggles I’ve had with this marriage. Besides, she is married to Edward’s brother. Maybe she’ll have some insights—something to say that might be able to help me work through all this.

She and Violet were helped into the carriage by the driver. A moment later, it pulled away.

“Look,” Violet said as they rolled down the path. “His Grace is standing in the doorway. Is he calling us back?”

Lydia looked out the window of the carriage. Sure enough, Edward was standing there staring out at them, seemingly watching them go.

“No,” she said. “I don’t think he wants us to come back.”

“What do you suppose he’s doing?”

“I can’t imagine.”

A part of her wished he would hurry after them and try to call her back. Maybe he would realize that he had left something unsaid. Maybe he’d want to come along. She could imagine sitting with him here in the carriage, sharing this confined space, being so close together that they would almost *have* to touch each other. And if he was here because he wanted to be, it would be so wonderful. The air would be charged and magical. She would lean into him as the carriage bumped along the road. Perhaps he would take her hand as he had once before, and this time she wouldn’t press him for answers about a change in their relationship. This time she wouldn’t try to tell him that she loved him. She had learned how little he liked hearing it.

I can still love him. I can do it quietly and keep it to myself. He has plenty of things going on in his life that he says are none of my business, after all. My love for him might be none of his business.

And for a moment, she really believed he might lift a hand and hail them, call them back home, and that all of that might come to pass.

But it didn’t, of course. Instead, Edward turned and went back into the house without so much as a movement in their direction.

Lydia sighed and relaxed back into her seat. “Whatever he came out for, I’m sure it had nothing at all to do with me,” she said. After all, so few of his choices had anything to do with her. “We’d better be on our way. Nancy will be waiting for us.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Lydia!” Nancy gripped Lydia’s hands excitedly. “I’m so glad you were able to be here today. It absolutely means the world to me to have you come by.”

“I’m happy to be invited,” Lydia said, looking around. The manor was quiet, and it had an empty feel to it. “Is Colin not at home today?”

“No, he’s out, I’m afraid,” Nancy explained. “He likes to go to the gentlemen’s club on Saturdays. It does get a bit lonely around the house without him at home, but I don’t really mind, of course. He ought to have at least one day to himself.”

“I suppose you’re right about that,” Lydia said, feeling gloomy.

Colin took one day out of the week to be by himself, and it made Nancy feel lonely! What a pleasant marriage they must have the rest of the time!

“You look so sad,” Nancy noted, leading her into the sitting room. “Tell me everything. Would your lady’s maid like tea?”

“Violet?” Lydia asked.

Violet shook her head. Even though Lydia outranked Nancy, Violet’s shyness was much more apparent in front of someone she didn’t see often. She said nothing at all.

“She’s very quiet,” Nancy observed.

“She’s all right,” Lydia said. “Thank you for offering the tea. But I’ll take some.”

They sat down, and one of Nancy’s maids poured cups for the both of them.

When they’d each had a few sips and were suitably relaxed, Nancy prodded, “Tell me what’s been troubling you. I can see that you aren’t yourself.”

“I don’t know, Nancy. I’m afraid that I *am* myself. I’m afraid this... shadow of the lady I once hoped to be might now be all that’s left of me.”

“But how can that have happened? When I saw you at the Hartford ball, you seemed happy enough.”

“I was happy. But... Nancy, you say it’s difficult for you to be apart from Colin even for one day out of the week. You tell me that while he’s away at the gentlemen’s club, you miss him.”

“Yes, I do.” Nancy seemed mystified. “Is that it? Do you miss Edward, being here with me?”

“Not exactly. I feel lonely all the time,” Lydia confided. “I never feel close to Edward.”

“But you two danced together at the ball! You seemed as if you were getting along so well!”

“I thought so too! But things have changed since then. We can’t even be around one another without feeling strange and awkward.”

Lydia hadn’t planned to talk about all this, but now that she was here, the words were pouring out of her. It felt good to open up, she realized. She had been keeping these things to herself for far too long, and it was a relief to confide in a friend.

“But how could everything have changed so quickly?” Nancy asked. “Did something happen?”

“Oh, something happened, all right,” Lydia said. “Something I never expected.”

“What?”

“He kissed me.”



“You kissed her?” Colin asked incredulously.

Edward sighed and took a long drink of his whiskey. “You don’t have to make it sound like that.”

“Like what?”

“That tone—you sound as if I just told you I slapped her or something. I didn’t hurt her.”

“Of course you hurt her,” Colin replied. “Letting her think all this time that you couldn’t possibly love her—well, I always knew that you’d find your way to it in the end, Edward. I think congratulations are due. I’m happy for you, Brother.” There was no happiness in his tone.

Edward shook his head. “You don’t understand,” he said. “I kissed her, but nothing has changed between us.”

“Dare I ask why not?” Colin demanded. “And I can only hope that it’s because she didn’t want to put up with your foolishness after everything you’ve put her through.”

“You know that isn’t the reason.”

“You rejected her.”

“I had to, Colin.”

“You most certainly did not have to. I don’t know what you’re thinking sometimes. Why on earth would you kiss her if your feelings for her haven’t changed?”

“I don’t know what my feelings are,” Edward admitted. “Maybe they have changed. I think about her all the time these days. She’s never out of my mind.”

“But you pushed her away after you kissed her? Why, Edward? If you’re thinking about her all the time, and you felt compelled to kiss her, what more sign do you need that this is the path you ought to pursue?”

“I have my work to focus on,” Edward said firmly. “I don’t have room in my life for weakness. You know that, Colin.”

“How many times must I tell you that love is not a weakness? Thanks to my relationship with Nancy, I feel stronger than I ever have in my life.”

“Colin, you and I are very different people, and we always have been,” Edward said. “You were never going to be a man of business. Your strength lies in your heart. I won’t take that away from you. But I’m not like you. My strength is in my mind and in my mastery of financial affairs. Trying to prioritize the desires of a lady and the demands of family would only serve to take away from my ability to do my job. It can’t be allowed.”

“So, even though you would have *liked* to give in to her and kiss her again, you refuse to.”

“It’s not sensible.”

“It’s *exactly* as if you slapped her. That poor young lady. She must feel so betrayed. And how are things between the two of you now?”

“Not very good,” Edward admitted. “We see little of one another. We agreed it would be best to avoid each other—she’s stopped joining me for meals.”

“Oh, Edward. When was the last time you spoke to your wife?”

“We spoke today,” Edward defended himself. “But not for very long. We crossed paths as we were each on our way out.”

“And did you say anything to her?”

“I told her she looked nice.”



“*Nice?* That’s all he said? Just *you look nice?*”

“Well, he did say very nice,” Lydia amended.

“I can’t believe that’s the best he could do,” Nancy said indignantly. “What did his stepmother have to say?”

“Oh, I never see her anymore. She keeps to her part of the house. She has a suite of rooms. I assume she comes out for meals with Edward, but I haven’t been going to those, so our paths don’t cross lately.”

“Well, my goodness, no wonder you’re so lonely. No one in the whole house is taking the time to talk to you? You would think she’d socialize with you at the very least.”

“I think Edward might have told her to give me space.” Lydia sighed. “It’s not their fault if that’s what happened. I did tell him I wanted space.”

“But you don’t want that anymore?”

“No, but what can I say to him?” She groaned. “He kissed me, and then he rejected me, and... somehow the two of us decided that we shouldn’t even be friends. I don’t want that. I *do* want us to be friends. I just don’t want it to hurt like it did at that moment when I wasn’t sure of his feelings for me, when I told him that I loved him, and he didn’t say it back. I don’t ever want to feel like *that* again.”

“Of course you don’t,” Nancy said sympathetically. “Nobody would. He should never have put you in that position. If he didn’t have feelings for you, he shouldn’t have kissed you! That was irresponsible, and frankly, I think it was cruel. I know Colin will tell him the same thing.”

“What do you mean, *will tell him*? You’re not going to tell Colin about this, are you?”

“I won’t tell him, but Edward probably will. I’m sure they’re together at the gentlemen’s club right now.”

“Oh, no. Do you really think so?”

“Well, Colin did tell me he was hoping to see his brother there today—Edward didn’t mention this to you?”

“Edward tells me nothing,” Lydia lamented. “There was a brief moment when the two of us actually opened up to one another and had real conversations, but ever since that kiss, it’s as if we’re strangers. That’s why he was so distant toward me in the hall today when we passed each other. You think it’s surprising that he would only say I looked nice and nothing more, but trust me, given the way things have been between the two of us, he practically composed a sonnet.”

“Oh, Lydia, I had no idea it was so bad.”

“What makes it even worse is that it was almost so good,” Lydia said. “We really were doing well. I didn’t imagine it. In the days leading up to that kiss, we were very close, and it didn’t come out of nowhere. I don’t know how to explain his behavior since then, but I think his feelings for me are real.”



“Your feelings for her are real,” Colin said. “I can tell, Edward. I’ve known you all my life, don’t forget. You try to be cold, but I know when you’re feeling something, and you’re feeling something now.”

Edward wiped a hand across his brow. “I can’t,” he argued. “I can’t allow myself to feel anything. Not like that.”

“And why not?” Colin demanded. “Admit it to yourself. You’re only doing this because you learned it at Father’s knee.”

“What? This has nothing to do with Father.”

“Of course it does. It has everything to do with him—do you think I don’t see it? When you try to succeed in your business ventures, you do it by emulating what worked for him. Father was successful, but he was always cold. He didn’t allow himself to care too much about our family. He didn’t get too close to Mother before she died, and afterward—well, we both know about the way he treated Margaret.”

“This *definitely* has nothing to do with Margaret.”

“You know she wanted a child of her own. And Father wouldn’t give her that. She had to make do with us. He always said he had his heir, and that nothing else mattered after that. He said his business was more important than whatever might be going on at home.”

“I know he said that, but that doesn’t mean—”

“And you’re doing the same thing,” Colin interrupted. “You think the only way you can be successful is by ignoring love. But it isn’t true. Even if it was true for Father, which I don’t necessarily grant, it doesn’t have to be true for you. You and he are not the same person any more than you and I are. You

have genuine feelings for your wife, and you're ignoring them—worse, you're pushing them aside—because you think you need to live the way Father did. But you don't have to do that, Edward. Your choices don't have to be the same as his were. You can do this however you want to do it.”

“Even if you're right,” Edward said, “I wouldn't know what to do about it. After everything that's happened, how am I supposed to talk to her about this? How am I supposed to tell her she was right about me all along?”

“So, you do admit that she was right.”

Colin smiled. Edward wished he wouldn't. This moment must be very vindicating for his brother, but for Edward, it was agony. The idea of saying these things out loud to Lydia was terrifying—he could hardly stand to admit them even to himself.

I have feelings for her.

I'm in love with her.

Could that really be true, after all the time and effort he had put into trying to prevent it? Could he have fallen in love in spite of his best intentions?

It seemed that he had. And he had no idea what he was going to do about it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The trip to Bath, Edward decided, would be the perfect opportunity to get his thoughts in order. And he had decided to bring Colin along with him on the journey.

He knew that represented a fundamental change in his plans. He knew that he had originally promised Lydia that she could accompany him to Bath. But she was just going to have to understand. He needed this time with his brother right now. He needed to work through all the complicated things that were going through his mind. It was exactly the wrong time for a journey alone with his wife, whom he believed he might be falling in love with. He needed to focus on himself.

“I’m still not sure it’s a good idea, you know,” Colin said.

The two of them were sitting together in Edward’s study while the footmen loaded their things into the carriage that would take them to Bath.

“Nonsense,” Edward argued. “It’s the perfect idea. It’s exactly what I need right now. Are you saying you’re not willing to come along with me?”

“You know I’ll always be there for you, whatever you need,” Colin replied. “I don’t even mind the fact that it means I have to leave Nancy, though you know I don’t enjoy doing that. But for you, I’m willing to. I just wish I understood why it was *so* difficult for you to move forward with this relationship, Edward. I can see it in the way Lydia looks at you. She really does love you, and you ought to accept her love.”

“I just don’t know if it’s the right thing to do,” Edward explained. “I rushed into that kiss because I wanted it, because it felt right to me at that moment, but now that I’ve had time to reflect, I *know* that was a mistake. I should never have kissed her before I was certain of my intentions. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I would,” Colin admitted.

“Well, this is much the same. I can’t exactly confess my love to her until I’m certain it’s real. I need to be sure of my feelings, and the best way for me to do that is to spend some time away from her. If we go to Bath together right now, that city will convince me that I’m in love, but that doesn’t mean it’ll be true. And then, we’ll come home, and who knows what the consequences might be? No, I need to do my best to work through this logically and not let my heart get involved.”

“In matters of love, you have to let your heart get involved,” Colin argued. “There is no other way, Edward.”

“We’ll see,” Edward said. “For now, I want a week where I can focus on work, and I want my brother by my side to help me talk through these complicated ideas.”

“Well, you have that,” Colin assured him. “I’ll be beside you no matter what. But what did Lydia say when you told her she wouldn’t be coming with you on the trip? I know she was looking forward to going to Bath—she’s mentioned it to Nancy.”

Edward groaned inwardly. Though it was probably a good thing that his wife and his brother’s wife were friends with one another, it could be difficult sometimes the way they knew everything about one another’s lives.

“I haven’t mentioned it to her yet,” he admitted.

“Edward! We’re leaving this afternoon! She still thinks she’s coming with you? You have to speak to her about it at once.”

“I suppose I do,” Edward agreed. “I just don’t know what I’m going to say.”

“Well, you have to say something. Poor Lydia! I can’t believe you haven’t told her. You know, with the way you’ve treated her thus far, you really are very lucky she even *likes* you, never mind love you.”

“That’s not a very nice thing to say.”

“Well, it’s the truth. I’m your brother, Edward, and you know I’ll always be on your side, but I can’t believe the way you treat her sometimes. I’m sure it must hurt her feelings. You really ought to be more careful if you even want to have a chance at deserving her love, you know.”

“I’d better go let her know that I don’t plan on taking her to Bath.” Edward got to his feet. “And you should finish that drink and go down to the carriage. We’ll be leaving soon. I don’t want to get a late start.”

“Yes, all right,” Colin agreed. He stood up too and set his drink down. “Be kind to her, will you?”

“I’m never unkind to her.”

“You’re cold. You’re thoughtless. I’m sure it does feel like unkindness to her. You need to remember that being told she’s not going on this trip is probably going to be hurtful to her, so you should deliver the news gently.”

“And where are you going?”

“I’m going to let Margaret know that you’ll be taking me on this trip instead of Lydia. She ought to be aware of that fact, and I don’t suppose you’ve told her.”

“What am I supposed to do? Tell Margaret that now, after everything, I think I might actually be having feelings for my wife?”

“I don’t know why that’s so difficult for you to admit out loud, but yes, that’s what I’m going to tell her.”

“I don’t want her to tell Lydia. I don’t want her to get Lydia’s hopes up.”

“I’ll make sure she doesn’t.”

“You can’t be sure what she’ll do.”

“I trust Margaret.”

Edward sighed. “Just go, Colin.”

This was difficult enough without the feeling that his brother was judging him at every turn.

He left the study and went to the conservatory, where he knew Lydia would be at this time of day. Sure enough, she was sitting there looking out of one of the large windows, a book in her lap. She had her finger on the pages as if she had just been reading but had set the book down to think about something.

Not for the first time, he was taken aback by her casual beauty. She was extraordinarily lovely, especially in the sunlight—it made her hair look golden. He recalled the way it had felt to abandon all his worries and to simply kiss her, and he wished he could just do that again. This would all be so much easier if he didn’t have to be sensible about it!

But Colin was right. The way he had thrown caution to the wind had been hurtful to Lydia. He wouldn’t allow that to happen again. He would proceed very carefully and make sure he knew what he was doing before he kissed her again—if he ever did.

He hoped he would.

“Lydia,” he said.

She turned and offered him a small smile. He realized that it had been a long time since he had seen her smile, and that realization made his heart ache. Things had been wrong between the two of them for such a long time now. Would this make matters even worse?

“You know I’m leaving for my trip to Bath today,” he said.

She nodded slowly. Her expression was immediately guarded, and Edward could see that she already knew something was amiss.

“I’ve packed my things,” she replied.

“I’ve decided that you’ll be better off remaining behind this time,” he told her, thinking it would be best to simply say what he had to say quickly and not leave her wondering.

She closed her eyes. “I thought you were probably going to say that.”

That did make it a bit easier.

“I supposed you probably guessed I’d be feeling that way, given the way things have been between us.”

“But you promised,” she reminded him. “You knew that I dreamed of going to Bath, and you promised that we would go together. I know things have been different between us lately, but I did think you would keep your word.”

“I’m going to be very busy working,” he told her. “I won’t have time to show you around the city.”

“Just bring me along with you,” she pleaded. “You don’t need to show me around.”

“I could hardly permit you to wander in a strange city unchaperoned,” he said. “It would be inappropriate and irresponsible.”

“I’d stay indoors,” she offered.

“You don’t want to go all the way to Bath just to stay indoors.”

“I’m going to be sitting around the house here,” she pointed out. “As long as that’s all I’m doing, I might as well do it in Bath.”

“We haven’t been getting along at all,” he said, and she nodded in agreement. “How long has it been since we even spent time in the same room as one another? It would be pure torment to travel all the way to Bath together, with no one but each other for company, because we wouldn’t know what to say to one another. We wouldn’t be able to carry on a conversation. And once we were there... we wouldn’t have space, Lydia, like we do here.

“You wouldn’t be able to get away from me when you were tired of me like you can at home. We would be together much of the time, and the rest of the time, I would be busy working, and you would be cooped up. I’m sorry you felt as if I had promised you this. I didn’t mean to break my word. But the fact of the matter is that it’s not a good idea for either one of us to take this trip together right now. It will be much better for you to remain at home. Perhaps things will be different in the future.”

“Perhaps,” she agreed sadly.

She looked as if she might cry, and Edward hated the fact that he had hurt her so badly. But he was sure he was doing the right thing. After all, he did have to go to Bath, and it would be the perfect time to sort through his feelings. Maybe when he got back, he would feel a bit more certainty about what the future ought to look like.

“You take care while I’m away,” he said, hoping she would hear the genuine affection in his voice, but doubting that she would.

She turned away and said nothing.

He left the room.

Colin was waiting by the front door. “I suppose you told her?” he asked quietly.

Edward nodded wordlessly.

“How did she take it?”

“I don’t think she’s very pleased with me. But it was the right thing to do,” Edward said. “She can’t come with me. Not this time.”

He expected Colin to disagree, but his brother nodded. “I think you’re doing the right thing,” he agreed. “I think you can use this trip to figure out what you want. And I hope that by the time you return, you’ll be able to answer that question—both for her sake and for your own. You’ve both suffered enough over this, and I think it’s high past time for resolution.”

“You think you know what I’m going to decide, don’t you?” Edward asked.

“No,” Colin said. “I have no idea what you will do, Edward. All I can say is that I hope for what your answer will be.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Lydia watched the carriage leave from the conservatory window, feeling positively gutted. She hadn't realized the extent to which she had been counting on this Bath trip. Not only had she looked forward to seeing a new city, but she had also imagined that this would be the moment she and Edward would be able to heal the rift that had been growing between them.

Traveling together would mean they would *have* to talk to one another, and even if they couldn't manage to forge a friendship like the one she had once imagined, at least they might be able to be cordial with one another.

She didn't even think about love with him anymore. That possibility had been effectively ruled out, and she knew it only made sense for her to move on from it in her mind—even if she couldn't yet let go of it in her heart.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. She wasn't sure how much time had gone by when she eventually left the conservatory and went down to the dining room. The only thought in her mind was that it didn't really matter what time it was. She had been avoiding the possibility of meeting Edward at dinner, but he wouldn't be there now, so she could eat her meals whenever she liked.

It was scant comfort.

She was taken utterly by surprise when she walked into the dining room and saw Margaret sitting at the table.

It had been so long since Lydia and the Dowager Duchess had crossed paths that Lydia had half forgotten Margaret was even a part of this household.

Now, she offered a smile. At least her isolation wouldn't be as total as she had feared. "Good evening, Margaret."

"Lydia. How wonderful to see you. I feel as if it's been a very long time," Margaret said. "I was beginning to think you didn't want my company anymore."

"That isn't true. I'm very happy to see you. I've just been preoccupied."

Lydia wasn't about to explain everything Edward had told her about his tumultuous relationship with his stepmother and the way it had made her feel about her friendship with Margaret. Even though they weren't getting along, her loyalty to Edward wouldn't permit her to share that.

"Are you joining me for dinner?" Margaret asked.

"I'd be happy to," Lydia replied, taking a seat. It would certainly be preferable to eating alone.

“That’s wonderful,” Margaret said. “I was worried about what I might do for company while Edward was away. Of course, he would never consider bringing me along on a trip to Bath.”

“Would you have wanted to go?” Lydia asked, surprised.

“Oh, I feel the same way I imagine you do about it,” Margaret said. “It would be awkward for me to spend that much time with Edward—don’t look surprised, I’ve noticed the way you two have been avoiding each other—but it would be an opportunity to travel and see the city. I’m surprised you didn’t go.”

“I wanted to,” Lydia admitted. “We had talked about it. But in the end, he decided against taking me.”

“Don’t take it too much to heart,” Margaret said sympathetically. “He’s like his father in that way.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was always impossible for me to win my way into my husband’s affections,” Margaret explained. “I was in love with him. I wanted a child with him. I wanted us to have the kind of marriage young girls dream about. But he never wanted any of that. He married me for the sake of appearances—and, of course, so that someone would be around to fill the role of mother to Edward and Colin.”

Lydia recalled Edward saying that Margaret had tried to act as if she was his mother. Edward had resented it, but Margaret

made it sound as if her husband had asked her to take on that responsibility. Hearing her side of the story made it seem more complicated, and Lydia found that she could sympathize.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That sounds like a lot to have to take on.”

“Well, it’s really no more difficult than what you’ve faced by marrying into this family,” Margaret replied.

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I didn’t have to present myself as a mother figure to anyone.”

“No, but at least that made me feel as if I had a purpose here. I’ve seen the way you are, walking around this house as if you don’t know what you’re doing here. At first, I thought perhaps you were going to have an easy time settling in—it certainly seemed that way when you had the orangery built! It seemed as if you had warmed to your role as Duchess and your place in this house. But since then, you’ve become so quiet and reserved. I’m afraid I don’t quite know what to make of you these days, Lydia. But I can see that you’re not happy.”

“I’ll be all right,” Lydia said. “I wouldn’t want anyone to worry about me. It’s just been a bit difficult trying to understand what Edward wants from me. That’s all.”

“All the men in this family are the same,” Margaret pointed out. “They always have been. My husband got it from his father, and he passed it along to Edward, and I always knew that if Edward had a son, it would mean another generation of the same thing. They don’t love anyone but themselves. They don’t care about anything but their work. My husband’s first

wife, Edward's mother, would have experienced the very same thing. So, you really mustn't think it's about you, Lydia. It's no flaw in you that makes him behave the way he does. It's just what he was raised to do. It's what he's always thought of as the only way to organize his life."

"You say all the men in the family are like this," Lydia said.

"That's right."

"But Colin isn't. Colin and Nancy are truly in love."

Margaret smiled fondly. "Colin was the one I was able to change," she said. "When I couldn't have a child of my own, I poured my heart into Edward and Colin, and Colin was the one who was receptive. I think that's the reason he is the way he is—so much more open and loving than any of the other men in his family. I'm sure it's my influence."

"But you say that his father had none of that in him?"

"His father was even worse than Edward," Margaret said darkly. "When I married him, he knew that my family was struggling financially. My father's business was on the verge of collapse. As my husband, I thought he would want to help, but he never cared. I had to beg him, over and over, to invest anything at all in my father's business. He could have done so much more than he did—and he could have done it without making me beg him for it—but that just wasn't his way. He was more concerned about himself and the money he could earn than he was about how it affected me to have to watch my father struggle so much. It was awful."

“I’m so sorry,” Lydia replied, and she meant it. “That does sound awful. It’s hard to imagine Edward refusing to intervene if I was in a similar situation.”

She thought about the way he’d spoken up for her when she had been chastised by her parents at dinner. He was on her side, even if he wasn’t in love with her and refused to consider the possibility that he ever could be. That much had been made abundantly clear.

“I’m sure Edward would help your family if they needed it,” Margaret agreed. “He is a good man, even if he’s not a warm-hearted one. But I have to warn you not to count on anything. It’s like I told you, all the men in this family are the same. They all have priorities that don’t involve their wives. So, even though I do think Edward would always help you, I don’t want to see you depend on that idea and have to be disappointed when it doesn’t work out.”

“I don’t think it’s something that will come up,” Lydia said.

But she was thinking, now, about the other ways Edward had let her down. The way he had paid her so little attention at their wedding. The fact that he had married her without bothering to explain to her what their marriage was going to look like. The way he’d kissed her without thinking about the fact that it might actually mean something to her to be kissed, and then he had acted as if she was the one who’d done something shocking when she had told him she loved him.

Perhaps Margaret was right to point out that the men in this family didn’t care about their wives—that being let down this way was part of being married to them.

If that was true, then Nancy had gotten very lucky, indeed, that her husband was the only one who actually cared.

I can't believe I thought he might love me. What made me think such a thing? A kiss?

Edward had told Lydia from the very start that there was no love in this marriage, that it was only based on convenience and his own need to show that he was able to make a respectable match so that the men he did business with wouldn't look down on him. He had never wanted anything else. And everything else they'd ever had was a manifestation of her own wishes—nothing he had ever wanted. Nothing he had ever tried to make happen on his own.

It made Lydia sad to think about it. But at the same time, it was nice, somehow, knowing that someone else had been where she was. Knowing that Margaret had felt this way too, and that she had gotten through it.

“Trust me,” Margaret said briskly, buttering her bread. “There will be plenty of things for you to be happy about in this life, Lydia. There will be plenty of reasons for you to feel joy. Don't let Edward have control of your happiness, because he'll only disappoint you, the way his father disappointed me. Discover what's going to make you happy and seek it out for yourself. That's the best thing you can do.”

Lydia nodded. “Thank you,” she replied. “I appreciate your advice, Margaret, as always.”

“Perhaps you and I can spend a bit more time together while Edward is away,” Margaret suggested. “I've missed your

company.”

“I’d like that,” Lydia agreed, smiling.

It no longer seemed so bad that Edward had gone to Bath without her and left her on her own. It would provide Lydia with an opportunity she might not have had otherwise—a chance to reconnect with Margaret. And she found she was glad to have that chance.

But at the same time, she was overwhelmed by a crushing sadness stemming from the fact that Edward would never be able to love her. She had never felt the truth of that more than she did at that moment, hearing from Margaret how his father had been just the same.

She had to admit now that there was a part of her that had clung to the hope that he might change—but he wouldn’t. He was his father’s son, after all, and he had been raised with the values his father had instilled in him. That was the reason he prized business above all else and could never see the importance of love.

He simply wasn’t capable of it.

And meanwhile, she’d allowed herself to fall in love with him.

It had been bad enough knowing that she would never have love in her life. But now, Lydia was going to have to spend her life loving someone who would never return her love, and it felt like the worst fate imaginable.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“L ydia?”

Lydia looked up from the book she had been reading and smiled at the sight of Margaret standing in the library doorway. “Good afternoon,” she said. “I’m afraid I can’t stay away from these books.”

“Nor should you if you have an interest in them! But I wondered if you might like to step away for a little while you have tea with me in the garden. It’s such a lovely day outside.”

It was two days since Edward had departed for Bath, and Lydia and Margaret had settled into an easy routine. Meals together, tea in the afternoon, and plenty of warm conversation.

Lydia set down her book and rose to her feet at once. “Tea in the garden sounds lovely,” she agreed. “Thank you for coming to find me.”

“Well, you weren’t difficult to find,” Margaret said with a smile. “I knew you would be in the library. That’s where you always are.”

“I’ll say one thing for Edward,” Lydia admitted. “He’s been very generous with his books. I think I may even have taken that generosity for granted from time to time. It’s not just any gentleman who would allow a lady full access to anything she wanted in his library, even if she was his wife.”

“He is generous,” Margaret said. “I’d never try to claim that he has no virtues, and that’s one of them. He’s very generous with his things. It’s only his time and his affection that he hoards jealously. He never had any for me either.”

“You’ve been very forthcoming with me as of late,” Lydia observed.

“I’ve always tried to be honest with you,” Margaret said. “That’s the kind of relationship I want us to have, Lydia. I want you to feel as though you can confide in me, and I think the best way to make you feel safe to do that is by confiding in you. And it’s also my personality. I don’t like to keep my thoughts to myself. I want to be free to say what’s on my mind at all times. I think I see the same quality in you.”

“I like to feel as if I can speak my mind,” Lydia agreed. “And it does help me to know that you’re the same way. It feels like a more acceptable thing to do, somehow, knowing that someone I look up to feels the same way I do about it.”

“You should always feel free to express yourself in your own home and with your own family,” Margaret said. “And that is what Edward and I are. No matter how difficult things are for you right now, I don’t want you to forget that we *are* your family. I care about you very much.”

“Thank you,” Lydia said quietly.

“Believe me, Lydia,” Margaret said as they sat down. “I’ve been where you are right now, and I know how it feels. I know what it’s like to find yourself married to someone who only wants you for what you can do for him. In my case, it was helping to raise his children. In yours, it’s that he wants to impress the men he does business with. But either way, it means they don’t see us for what we really are. They don’t see the potential for love. It’s enough to make a lady feel as though she’s wasting her life.”

“Was that how you felt?”

It was a thought Lydia had had in her darker moments, though she didn’t like to say it out loud.

“I’ve felt that way many times,” Margaret admitted. “Even now, I feel sometimes as though my life was a waste. I was never able to have a child of my own. My husband never really loved me. I could had had more if I had married someone else.”

“But it’s too late now,” Lydia observed. “Yes, I know just how you feel.”

“I’m sure there are times you wish you could end your marriage to Edward,” Margaret said, watching Lydia closely.

“Oh, no,” Lydia replied. “That isn’t how I feel at all, actually. It’s hard, and it’s not what I hoped it would be, but... I do care

for him. And I could hardly claim to care for him in one breath and wish I wasn't married to him in the next."

"It's all right if your feelings are complicated," Margaret said. She poured Lydia some tea and handed her the cup.

Lydia noticed that Margaret hadn't taken any for herself—the tea must be a gesture to show that she understood Lydia was feeling anxious and wanted to help her calm down.

Lydia accepted it gratefully.

"My feelings are very complicated," she said, breathing in the steam from the tea. It was still a bit too warm for her to drink, but just holding the hot cup was soothing to her. "But that isn't the same thing as having regrets about my marriage. I know for certain how I feel about that. I suppose I wish I had known more before the wedding day. I wish I had more power to change the way things are going. But now that I'm here, I can't regret the choices that brought me here. And I wouldn't leave Edward even if I could. It wouldn't feel right to do that."

"Well, you're a very kind-hearted lady," Margaret said. "Of course, I knew that about you already. But I wonder if Edward knows what he has. My feeling is that he probably doesn't. I wonder if he would treat you differently if he knew just how wonderful you are."

"Oh, I don't think anything I did would make any difference," Lydia said. "Not after what you told me about the men in this family and the way they treat their wives. It doesn't seem to matter what kind of person a lady is. It's about him, not me."

He's the one who is the way he is, and nothing I could do would make him change."

"That's right," Margaret agreed. "I'm so glad you understand that. You should drink that tea before it gets cold, by the way. I wouldn't want the servants to have to take it away and make a fresh pot."

Lydia nodded. The tea was still a little warm for her liking, but she didn't want to seem ungrateful. She swallowed it so quickly that she didn't have a chance to savor the taste, the way she would have ordinarily. It scalded her throat a bit as she swallowed, but Margaret smiled in satisfaction, and that made Lydia feel good. She did want to please Margaret.

"I'll tell you what," Margaret said. "I've just had a wonderful idea. You and I should go away to my country house until Edward returns."

"I didn't know you had a country house."

"Well, I do, and it's truly lovely. Sometimes I stay there for months at a time. I know Edward wishes I would just move out there permanently, but I couldn't bear to be that far away from the family, and besides, the London social scene is too wonderful to pass up. But sometimes, a lady has to get away."

"I understand completely, and I'd love to see it," Lydia said. Her heart was racing. She hadn't realized the idea of a getaway would excite her like this, but there was no denying that it had. "You don't think Edward will mind?"

“If he does, there’s precious little he can do about it while he’s away in Bath,” Margaret replied. “And if he does dislike it, I’ll take responsibility when he returns. Come, Lydia. You know you deserve a getaway.”

“Well, all right,” Lydia agreed. “It sounds wonderful, actually.”

“Why don’t you go up to your room and have your lady’s maid help you pack a few things?”

“What will I need?”

“Nothing special. I imagine we’ll be gone for about a week. It will be all walks in the countryside and quiet evenings at home—very pleasant and placid. You won’t need to wear anything fine. Everyday gowns will suit.”

Lydia nodded. “I won’t need very long to pack,” she said. “Thank you so much, Margaret. This sounds wonderful, and I can’t wait. Sitting around this house has been so unpleasant, and I’ve been thinking a lot about the fact that I believed I was going to get to see Bath. But now, thanks to you, I *will* have an adventure, even if it isn’t quite the one I originally had in mind.”

“That’s the spirit,” Margaret said happily. “You go and pack. I’ll just be down here making sure the staff knows we’re leaving. Do you think you can be ready in an hour?”

“Easily.”

Lydia was so excited that she knew it wouldn't take her anywhere near that long to get ready. The challenge was going to be slowing herself down enough that she didn't embarrass herself by appearing overeager.

"Very good, then," Margaret said with a smile that Lydia wasn't sure she had ever seen before. There was something secretive about it.

She must be excited to show off her country house, Lydia thought, and the idea pleased her. It was wonderful to think that Margaret might be just as excited about this little trip as she was.

When she reached her bedroom, Violet wasn't there. That was all right. Lydia knew her lady's maid would be along shortly, since Margaret was going to let the staff know about the trip. Violet would come straight to her when she found out about it. And although she probably should have waited and let her lady's maid do her packing for her, Lydia felt too excited not to get started.

She opened her trunk, went to her wardrobe, and began to survey her gowns, wondering which ones she ought to bring with her.

A wave of dizziness washed over her.

She shook it off—it was probably nothing, just the excitement of the day—but then a second, fiercer dizzy spell came along, and she staggered, seeing spots before her eyes.

What's going on?

Her stomach turned. She grabbed at the back of the chair beside her, but she missed and stumbled again. This time she couldn't catch her balance, and she fell to the floor, gasping as if she had just run a mile.

She struggled to sit up, but her limbs were as heavy as if they were made of marble. Her vision was blurry.

Something's very wrong.

She blinked, trying to clear her vision, trying to make the spots go away, but things were only getting worse. She was no longer even certain how long she had been lying here. She tried again to sit up, but to no avail. She was far too weak.

This had come on so quickly. What kind of illness struck suddenly like this?

She tried to call out for help—she called Margaret's name, and Violet's—but her voice was barely audible, and she knew there was no chance of her being heard. Violet would come eventually—she would have to—but would that be soon enough?

It would have to be soon enough. She couldn't get up. She couldn't help herself, so she would have to depend on the hope that others would come and help her...

She blinked. She had drifted from consciousness for a moment. She knew she ought to try to stay awake until help arrived, but that was getting difficult...

Edward.

If only Edward was here right now. Not just because she needed someone to find her, but because she craved his company. In her weakened state, she could admit it to herself. She longed for him. If he was here, she would feel safe.

But he was miles and miles away, and there was no calling him back.

It was the last thought she had as the darkness closed in.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“All right,” Edward said, setting his fork down on the table.
“Enough is enough, Colin.”

Colin looked up. “What are you talking about?”

“I didn’t bring you along on this trip so that we could sit in silence, saying nothing to one another,” Edward said. “I know I’ve been busy, but I assumed that you and I would speak to one another over meals, at the very least.”

“Yes, I assumed that too,” Colin agreed. “In fact, I thought you brought me to Bath so that you would have a chance to talk to me about the feelings you have for your wife. That’s what you told me we were doing. And yet, it hasn’t happened at all since we’ve been here. When you *do* talk, it’s only to discuss practicalities. You haven’t had one thing to say about what’s going on in your heart.”

“That’s why you’re not speaking to me?”

“You make it sound as if I’m refusing to speak to you. If anything, it’s the other way around, Edward. I’m keeping quiet so you’ll have room to talk about what’s been going on with

you. I keep hoping that if I wait long enough, eventually you'll say something. But you haven't, and I'm beginning to doubt whether you will. You know, I left my wife at home in order to be here with you."

"You think I'm ungrateful."

"I don't know what to think," Colin said. "I know that I'm here, ready to listen to your thoughts about Lydia, but you won't share them. Why? I expected that you'd start talking the moment we pulled away from Westfrey, but you haven't spoken a word about her."

Edward had no answer to his brother's questions. If he was honest with himself, he had to admit that Colin was quite right to ask him these things. He *had* asked his brother to come to Bath so that he would have someone to speak to about his feelings for Lydia. He'd wanted to talk to Colin about it. But now that they were here, it wasn't so easy. It was challenging to start that conversation. Not only did he find it hard to make himself vulnerable, but he also had no idea where to begin.

Now, he was heartily wishing he had just allowed Colin to sit in silence—that he hadn't instigated this discussion at all. But it was too late to take back what he had said, and Colin was staring at him expectantly, waiting for an explanation.

"You're right," Edward admitted. "I did want to talk about Lydia. About my feelings for her."

"Then what on earth is stopping you? We're here. The opportunity is perfect—you're really not going to get a better

chance than this to open up about the things you're feeling. You might as well be honest."

"I'm not trying to be dishonest," Edward explained. "It's just that I don't *know* what I'm feeling. I've never experienced anything like this before, Colin. Father always said—"

"I know what Father said," Colin interjected. "He always said those things in front of me, you know, even if he never said them *to* me."

Edward was surprised by the bitterness in his brother's tone. "Why do you sound angry?" he asked. "You surely aren't wishing that Father had raised you the way he did me—to think of love as nothing but a weakness? I know how happy you are with Nancy. You don't wish you'd been unable to find that happiness."

"No," Colin agreed. "I don't wish that. But you can't imagine what it was like, Edward. Growing up, knowing that my future didn't matter to our father. He drilled it into you that to love was to be weak, but it was his way of telling you that, at the very least, it *mattered* what you did. He didn't care whether I was weak or not. In the end, he was wrong about it all. Love has given me strength and joy, and you're the one who's been robbed of happiness by the things he tried to teach you. But at the same time, I do wish he had wanted the things for me that he wanted for you."

Edward nodded slowly. His brother's words made sense. "You know that I want those things for you," he said. "Whatever Father may or may not have wanted, I want to see you happy. I want to know that you're living the life you want."

“I know that,” Colin replied. “That’s how I know you’re not the same man our father was. You care about other people. You care about me—you always have—even though I’m not your firstborn heir. Father never had any attention to spare for me because I wasn’t going to take over the dukedom, but you, you’ve always loved me as your brother and never cared what potential I had or didn’t have.”

“That’s true,” Edward agreed. “Though I do think Father loved you just as much, in his way.”

“Father loved people more for what they could do for him than for who they were. He was the same way with Margaret.”

“Oh, Colin. That’s hardly fair.”

“And I’m sure he was the same way with Mother.”

Edward felt tense. “I don’t want to talk about Mother.”

Colin nodded sympathetically. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I know that’s difficult for you.”

Edward said nothing. It was difficult, knowing that his brother had so few memories of their mother. He knew that was what had made it easier for Colin to embrace Margaret than it had ever been for him. Their father had intended that Margaret should be a replacement for their mother, and Edward had never felt able to welcome that into his life. He didn’t want his mother to be replaced. It didn’t help matters that Margaret had been arrogant about it and had always acted as if she belonged when Edward felt strongly that she didn’t. But even if she had

been the most respectful lady in all the world, Edward wouldn't have wanted her there.

For Colin, it was different. Colin was ready to open himself up to someone new in the role of mother.

But perhaps this was just another example of the ways in which Edward had closed himself off to love. Maybe this was an instance of Colin being able to allow himself something that Edward thought of as a weakness.

Maybe I should have tried harder with Margaret.

Maybe I can try harder with Lydia. It's not too late.

"I'll tell you what I think if you don't know what to think yourself," Colin suggested.

"Please," Edward said. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't need you to do that for me."

"But you do, because you've never been able to process your feelings," Colin explained. "You've never known what's going on in your own heart, Edward. You've been head over heels in love with this lady for weeks now, and you don't even know it."

"How can you be so sure?"

“You’re sitting here in Bath, and you’re not even able to carry on a conversation because she’s all you can think about,” Colin said. “Am I wrong?”

Edward couldn’t say anything in his own defense. Colin wasn’t wrong.

“If you weren’t in love with her, you would have stopped thinking about her when you were far away from her,” Colin continued. “Out of sight, out of mind. But you haven’t. You might think I don’t see it because you haven’t said anything about it, but you’re my brother, Edward, and I can see how preoccupied you are. I can tell that you’re incapable of turning your mind away from Lydia.”

“I suppose I am.” Edward sighed. “And you think that means I’m in love with her?”

“I’ve been in love myself, you know,” Colin reminded him. “I know what it’s like. It’s obvious to me that you’re in love. And I care for you too much to allow you to simply let it slip away. You have to reach out and take hold of it, Edward, because it’s what you want for yourself. She is what you want. Don’t let yourself miss out on love because of the things you learned from Father. Don’t tell yourself that love will make you weak because it isn’t the truth. You need to reach out and take hold of what’s in front of you. It’s what you deserve.”

“You’re far too kind to me,” Edward said. “I don’t think I’ve done anything to deserve this.”

“She loves you, doesn’t she?”

“She says she does. At least, she did say that. I’ve put her through so much that I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s changed her mind by now.”

“Don’t borrow trouble. She may still have those feelings. Love doesn’t just disappear, even when it’s difficult to find.”

“You can’t know that. It was never difficult for you and Nancy.”

“It’s true that we never struggled the way you are,” Colin relented. “In some ways, I wish we had. I think I would be more helpful to you if I had a story like that to tell. But I have no doubt that the pair of you can find your way to one another, even though it must seem nearly impossible right now. Remember, you love her, and she loves you, and that’s the most important thing. Everything else can be figured out along the way.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“No, not easy. But it’s not as hard as you’re making it seem either,” Colin said. “I just hope you know that. This is something you can manage.”

“What should I do?”

“Do you really need me to tell you?”

“I think I do, yes.”

“You should go home and tell her the truth,” Colin stated. “It really is that simple, Edward. Go back home and tell her that you love her.”

“And what if I’ve missed my chance? What if she no longer loves me, after everything I’ve put her through?”

Edward couldn’t deny that the thought had plagued him. He wanted to believe that he still had a chance to be with Lydia—that he could still be worthy of her love—but it was a difficult thing to accept. Now that he looked at it from a distance, he could see how hard on her he had been, and he wouldn’t have been surprised at all to find that she had had enough.

“If you’ve missed your chance, then you have,” Colin said bluntly. “There isn’t anything to be done about it if she’s tired of waiting for you.”

“I thought you would say... something different,” Edward admitted.

“You thought I would say that of course you still had a chance with her. That she would wait forever for you. Is that it?”

“Well, yes.”

“I would say that to you if I thought it would be helpful. The truth is that I don’t know, and I don’t want to lie. At least you know that she loved you once. That’s more than most gentlemen know when they have to declare themselves to the ladies they admire. I think your chances are as good as you

could ask for. But if you don't have the courage to tell her how you feel, you'll never know."

"It's not courage that I lack," Edward protested.

"Oh, yes, it is," his brother countered. "That's always been what you've lacked. You're afraid that if you let yourself love someone else, you'll lose the man you're trying to be. But I'm telling you, you know yourself well enough that it won't happen. You can do this, Edward. You're ready to experience real love, and I know you're going to find a way to have it in your life. And the two of you are going to be happier than you've ever imagined."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

All night, Edward lay awake, thinking about what his brother had said. Trying to figure out what to think about it. Trying to decide what he should do.

It was clear to him now, more than it ever had been before, that he needed to confess the truth to Lydia. He had to let her know the way he felt about her, even though it was going to be difficult. All that remained was figuring out what he was going to say and mustering up the courage to say it.

By morning, he had established one fact very clearly.

He wasn't going to be able to focus on the meetings he was supposed to be taking today. Not with all this on his mind.

For a moment, that fact gave him pause.

Wasn't this what he'd always worried about? Hadn't he been afraid from the start that if he let himself be distracted by love, he would lose the ability to focus on his work? And now, that very thing was happening. It was almost enough to make him question the affection he felt for Lydia.

But no. That was wrong, and he knew it. He wasn't distracted by love. He was distracted by the fact that he didn't know how the story was going to end. He would feel better, be more focused, after he'd had the opportunity to talk to her. But until then, he wouldn't feel right, and he knew it.

There was no point in staying here in Bath any longer. He wouldn't be able to get anything done while this was unresolved. The only thing that made sense was to go home and confront it. Speak to Lydia. Find out if she could forgive him for being so slow to see the truth and tell her that she had been right all along. They did have potential, and he did want to be with her.

He'd barely slept at all that night, and when he went to breakfast, he found Colin had beaten him there. His brother was sipping coffee and skimming the pages of a novel, but he set the book down when he saw Edward.

"You're up early," Colin commented. "I wasn't expecting to see you for at least another hour." He was the early riser of the pair of them—it was unusual for Edward to be up with the sun like this.

"I couldn't sleep," Edward explained. "I've had a lot on my mind."

"Well, that doesn't surprise me," Colin said.

"I think I need to go back to London."

"You mean, now? Today?"

“Right now,” Edward said. “I think I’m going to have a horse prepared so that I can set off at once.”

“Wait a moment.” Colin frowned. “You’re not even going to take the carriage?”

“The carriage will be too slow. I want to get back as quickly as I possibly can,” Edward explained. “I think riding is the only way I’ll be satisfied.”

“What about all your things?”

“I’ll have to ask you to bring them back for me. You’ll still come back by carriage, won’t you? And I’ll leave the footmen behind, of course, so they can help you. You’ll be all right.”

“Edward, I don’t know if this is a good idea,” Colin said. “Riding all the way back to London on your own is a massive undertaking. You should wait, and we’ll pack up the carriage and go together.”

“I can’t wait,” Edward argued. “I know it would be a little safer, but it will be much faster if I just go on my own, and I don’t want to delay. I want to get to her as quickly as I can. I feel as if I can’t breathe, and I won’t be able to until I see her face again. I won’t be able to relax until I get some kind of resolution here.”

Colin shook his head. “I’ve never seen you like this,” he said. “What’s gotten into you?”

“It’s what you said,” Edward replied. “I’m in love with her. It’s all I can think about. And I believe you that I’ll still be the kind of man who’s able to focus on business, but I can’t do that until I have this matter settled. I can’t think about anything but Lydia and what she might be thinking about *me*.”

“I’m afraid my words might have had too powerful an impact on you!” Colin said. “I did mean for you to go back to Lydia and settle things, but I never thought you would go right away. You have a meeting today, don’t you?”

“Yes, but I won’t be able to think about what I’m doing under these conditions,” Edward explained. “Colin, I’m going to need you to go to that meeting for me.”

“Wait—what? You’ve never asked me to do anything like that before.”

“I know I haven’t. And I know it’s not the kind of thing you’re prepared to deal with. I’m very sorry. I wish I didn’t have to ask it of you—”

“Well, I’m more than willing to help,” Colin assured. “Anything I can do, I’m happy to offer. I’m just surprised that you would trust me with such a thing. It never seemed like you would be willing to allow anyone but yourself to take care of business like this. I always assumed you would want me to stay far away from it.”

“I’m not Father,” Edward said. “Isn’t that what you told me?”

“That’s what I told you.”

“Father might have believed only one of us was capable of handling these sorts of things, but I know that’s wrong,” Edward said. “If I’m capable of love, you are capable of conducting a business deal. All you’ve got to do is take my books with you—I know you know how to interpret the numbers inside. You’ll be able to discuss the finances with the gentleman you’re meeting today. Please apologize for my absence—you can represent yourself as my business partner.”

“But I’m not your business partner,” Colin argued.

“Perhaps you should be.”

“You’ve never shown any interest in having a partner before.”

“I’ve never believed I needed one. But if there’s one thing this trip has taught me, it’s that you know a great deal more than I do about some matters, Colin. I would value your help in all aspects of my life. Will you consider being my partner? You don’t have to decide today.”

“I’ll consider it,” Colin agreed. “And for today, I’m more than happy to help you. Just promise me that you’ll get home safely. I don’t love the idea of you alone on the roads all the way back to London.”

“I’ll be all right,” Edward said. “I mean to travel quickly. I feel as if I have to be by her side as soon as I possibly can. It’s almost as if I can feel her calling to me across the distance.

I'm sure I'm just imagining that, and yet it feels impossible to ignore—is this what love feels like?”

“It may be,” Colin considered. “I’ve never thought about it in quite those terms, but there is a part of me that longs to be at home with Nancy whenever I’m away. I do look forward to the moment I’m back in her arms. Perhaps that’s what you’re feeling right now.”

“Maybe it is,” Edward said. “All I know is that I’ve never felt more compelled to be anywhere in all my life. I’ve got to go right away.”

“If you’ve got to go, you’ve got to go,” Colin urged. “And you may as well set off as soon as possible. There’s no reason to delay.”

Edward smiled. He was grateful to have his brother’s support in this. “I’ll see you soon,” he said. “When you arrive at home. And I know you’ll handle the affairs here wonderfully, Colin. I have no worries at all about how this meeting will be conducted in my absence.”

“Just make sure you tell Lydia everything this time,” Colin said. “Let her know exactly how you feel. I don’t think you’ll get another chance with her if you fail to give her the full and honest truth this time.”

“She’ll get the truth,” Edward promised.

He didn’t think he would be capable of keeping it to himself when he saw her. He was sure that the sight of her face would

be enough to bring all of his thoughts and feelings right to the surface.

He went back to his room and gave orders, as quickly as he could, for all of his things to be packed and transferred into his brother's custody. He also requested that a horse be made ready for immediate departure, and by the time he had changed into attire appropriate for riding and gone back downstairs, the horse was ready.

It would be a long journey, he knew, but when he finally reached Lydia's side, it would all be worth it. He would be able to confess his love to her, at last.

He felt mad. How could he have possibly missed the fact that he felt this way for so long? How could he not have noticed? He was used to being clever, to having a keen eye for detail—it was bizarre to him that he could have overlooked something so obvious and important.

But then, maybe it was understandable. He had never been in love before. He hadn't been prepared for the way it was going to feel.

And he hadn't wanted to feel it. But now that it was happening, he couldn't imagine wanting anything more. He was desperately grateful that he had discovered his feelings for Lydia, and that—he hoped—it wasn't too late to convince her to return them.

What will I do if it is too late? How will I handle that?

He couldn't think about it. He wouldn't borrow trouble—not until he knew for certain, one way or the other. All he had to think about right now was getting home to her and confessing the truth about his feelings. She would return them, or she wouldn't. And Colin was right. He was lucky to know that there had been a time, and not so long ago, when she had loved him.

If she had loved him once, she might love him still. It was a thing worth hoping for, and Edward would hope.

The journey home took several days. Every night, Edward stopped at an inn and lay awake for much of the night, wishing that he could somehow have remained on the road. It was unsafe to go on riding after dark, he knew, and it would be wrong to try to push his horse that hard. It would ultimately end in disaster. And yet, every moment that wasn't spent drawing closer to Lydia felt like a moment catastrophically wasted. He needed to be on the road. He needed to be riding to her.

I should never have left her behind! I can't believe what a fool I've been. I thought I was so much smarter than this.

The final day was the most torturous. He drew close to London, knowing that he would be with her by the time the sun went down and that at last he would have her answer. Either the two of them would declare their love for one another, or else he would discover that he had made a fatal error and waited too long to understand the depths of his own feelings.

If it was the second outcome... he didn't think he could bear it. It would crush him. But all he could do was get there as

quickly as possible, with all the hope he held in his heart, and ask her the question that was on his mind.

With that thought in mind, he crossed the last of the distance and rode back up to Westfrey, feeling more nervous and uncertain than he ever had in his life.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

For a moment, after he stepped through the front door, Edward didn't understand what he was seeing.

The house was in complete turmoil. Members of staff were running around as if it was the first day they had ever had their jobs, as if they had no idea what their responsibilities were. They seemed frantic, and for a moment, Edward wasn't sure how to inject himself into the proceedings to find out what was going on. It seemed impossible to get them to stop what they were doing.

Finally, he caught sight of Mr. Bradford. The butler was hurrying toward the staff quarters, but Edward caught him by the arm. "Bradford, what on earth is going on? What's the meaning of all this excitement?"

"Your Grace!" Bradford started. "You weren't expected home for another week! We sent a letter, but we didn't know whether it would reach you before you left Bath. But it can't have gotten to you already."

"I didn't receive a letter," Edward said uneasily. "Is something the matter?"

“It’s the Duchess, Your Grace,” Mr. Bradford explained. “She’s fallen ill. The physician is expected later today. We’ve done our best to care for her in the meantime. As you can see, the house is a bit... disordered. I apologize for the state of things.”

“Never mind the state of things,” Edward replied. “What’s the matter with Lydia?”

“We don’t know, I’m afraid,” Mr. Bradford said. “She became suddenly ill a few days ago. As far as anyone knows, she was fine before that.”

“Days?” Edward repeated. “Lydia has been ill for days, and you’re only now contacting a physician?”

“Well, we wanted to do it right away, Your Grace, but she ordered us not to,” Mr. Bradford said helplessly. “She said that she needed to sleep, and if she could do that, she would be all right. She made us promise not to write to you or to send for the physician. But when she wasn’t any better the next day, she agreed that we could write to you. It was only last night that she gave her permission for the physician to be sent for.”

“I can’t believe this,” Edward breathed. “I can’t believe she was listened to under such circumstances! The physician should have been sent for at once! What was anyone thinking?”

“We had to do as she instructed us, Your Grace,” Mr. Bradford said. “She is the Duchess, and in your absence, she was in charge of the household. I agree with you that help should have been summoned sooner, but she told us over and over

that she wouldn't permit it. There was discussion among the staff of doing it anyway, but in the end, we decided the only thing to do was to listen to her and do as we were told."

It pained Edward to think that help would have come sooner if he had been home. Of course, he would have insisted that the physician be sent for right away if he had been here. But even so, it should never have come to this.

"What about Margaret?" he demanded. "She has the authority to summon a physician. Didn't anyone think to ask her what she thought of all this?"

"Of course, we thought of it, Your Grace, and that's exactly what we would have done if not for the fact that she isn't here."

"Not here?" Edward frowned. "What do you mean, not here? Where is she?"

"She's gone to her country house."

"While Lydia was ill? She wouldn't do that, surely."

"She left on the same afternoon the Duchess fell ill. We've been assuming that she didn't realize how unwell the Duchess was—if she had, I'm sure she would have stayed."

Still, it was odd that Margaret would leave Lydia alone at all. That wasn't something that had been discussed with Edward. He had assumed that while he was away in Bath, Lydia would

be looked after. He wouldn't have left her alone if he had known this.

Or would I have? After all, the staff is here. And I did want to go without her. Perhaps I would have justified it to myself, even if I had known that Margaret wouldn't be here with her. Maybe I would have told myself that it was all right to leave Lydia behind.

He was consumed by guilt. Lydia should have been with him. He should have been with her. She was his wife, and although he hadn't realized it until now, he was in love with her. In spite of all of that, he had left her alone, and now she was ill, and no one was taking proper care of her. And that was entirely his fault.

"Where is she?" Edward asked. "Up in her room?"

"Yes, that's right. She's resting."

"I'm going up to see her," he said. "You're to let me know at once when the physician arrives. Find a way to get him here sooner if you can. Don't delay."

"Of course, Your Grace," Mr. Bradford replied.

Edward hurried up the stairs and down the hall to Lydia's bedroom. It seemed providential now that he had felt so compelled to rush home to her. It was almost as if he had known, somehow, that she would need him—even though there was no way he could have known it.

He paused outside her bedroom door, feeling anxious and unsettled, wondering just how ill she would be. It was deeply troubling that this had all happened while he had been away. He wasn't sure if he would be able to bring himself to leave her ever again. This was the punishment he deserved, he thought, for taking such a long time to understand his feelings for her. If only he had figured it out sooner, he would have been with her when this happened. And if that had been the case, it wouldn't have taken so long for her to get the help she needed.

He knocked on the door, wondering whether or not he would hear her voice asking him to come in.

But the door was answered by her lady's maid, Violet.

Violet had dark circles under her eyes—she looked as if she hadn't slept in days. She gasped at the sight of Edward. "Your Grace! I didn't know you were home!" she said, her voice just above a whisper.

"I heard that Lydia was ill. May I come in?"

"Of course." She stood back to admit him.

Lydia lay on her back in bed, her eyes closed, her hands folded. She looked peaceful, but there was something unhealthy about her appearance. She was pale, all the usual color gone from her cheeks, and Edward thought she looked a bit thinner than usual. Her chest rose and fell only very slightly as she breathed, and it made him feel deeply uneasy.

“What’s wrong with her?” he asked anxiously.

“We don’t know,” Violet replied.

“Tell me what happened.”

“All we know is that she collapsed after tea one day,” Violet explained. “She came up to her room—we don’t know why, we can only assume that she was beginning to feel a bit unwell, and she intended to lie down. But when I found her, she was on the floor. She must have collapsed. She was unconscious, and I had to call for help to get her into bed.”

“Has she been awake since then?”

“Here and there, but not for very long,” Violet said. “When she wakes, we try to get her to eat, or to drink tea, but she hasn’t had much of an appetite. And she doesn’t stay awake for very long—usually only a few minutes, and then she drifts off again.” Tears filled her eyes. “Your Grace, I wanted to call the physician, but everyone said we should wait, and she insisted that she didn’t want me to do it.”

“It’s all right, Violet,” Edward assured, even though nothing felt remotely all right at the moment. “This isn’t your fault. Have you had any sleep?”

“I didn’t want to leave her side, Your Grace.”

“Well, I thank you for that. I’m very glad she had you with her while I was away. But now, I think you ought to go and get

some rest since I'm home. I'll stay with her."

Violet nodded. "Yes, Your Grace," she said. "But, please, don't hesitate to summon me if you need anything, or if she asks for me. I'll be back at a moment's notice if she wants me."

"I don't doubt that you will," Edward said. "For now, get some sleep."

Violet nodded and left the room, leaving Edward alone with his wife.

He sank into a chair beside the bed—someone must have pulled it close so they would be able to sit by Lydia's side while she lay unconscious—and regarded her pale face. He had never seen her look like this. It hadn't occurred to him before how bright and full of life she always was, but now that he saw her like this, he wondered how he could ever have failed to notice it. She was a shadow of her former self.

All the way home, he had imagined telling her about his feelings for her. Now he wondered—would he ever get the chance to say the words that had been turning around and around in his mind?

Was he too late?

The idea broke his heart. It couldn't be too late. This couldn't be the way things ended. Oh, why hadn't the physician been called sooner? Why did she have to be so stubborn? Why on earth wasn't Margaret here? He had depended on her to look after Lydia while he was away! He had trusted her!

“Lydia,” he said, hoping that, somehow, his wife might be able to hear him, and that she might be inspired to open her eyes. “I’m so sorry I left you. None of this would have happened if only I had been here for you. But I’m home now, and I promise I’ll never leave you on your own like that again.”

It occurred to him that she might not believe him, even if she could hear his words. She had no reason to believe what he was saying. She’d made it clear before he had left for Bath that she had considered his offer to take her along on that journey to be a promise. And he had failed to keep that promise. Of course, she wouldn’t believe him if she could hear him now—he had already shown her that he wasn’t good for his word.

But then, her eyelids fluttered open.

“Edward?” Lydia whispered. “You’re home?”

“Lydia. Oh—oh my goodness. I’m home.” He moved closer to her and took her hand between both of his. “What happened?”

“I’m all right.”

“Don’t be so foolish! You should have let them send for the physician straightaway! Why did you have to be so proud?”

“I just can’t believe you’re home.”

“I never should have left,” he said. “I was such a fool. Can you ever forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” she assured.

“Of course, there is. How hard did you try to show me how things ought to be between us? And I never listened to you. I should have listened from the start. I see now that I do have feelings for you. I love you, Lydia. I’ve loved you for the longest time, and I just have to hope that you haven’t given up on me. It took me far too long to realize how I felt about you. I’m so sorry I made you wait so long. But I’m here now, and I’ll never let you go.”

Her eyes closed, and for a moment, he thought she’d fallen asleep again. But then, a smile spread across her face.

“Will you take me dancing?” she asked.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Edward was here.

The haze of fear that had gripped Lydia since the beginning of her illness seemed to fade away to nothing at all. Suddenly, it seemed as though everything was going to be all right.

He bent over her and kissed her forehead gently, and she allowed her eyes to flutter closed.

He loves me.

Could it possibly be true? After everything they had been through, it was very difficult to believe. It would have been easier to hold onto the idea that there was nothing between them and never would be. It frightened her to try to accept what he was saying, to believe that he really did love her. She almost didn't even want to believe it. She was setting herself up to get her heart broken all over again.

But when she opened her eyes and looked into his, there could be no mistaking what she saw there. The expression on his face was more open and vulnerable than any she had ever seen before, and she couldn't question it. What he was saying was

true. It had to be—there was no other possibility. He did love her.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“No. Stop. Why are you apologizing, Lydia? I’m the one who ought to be sorry. I’m the one who left you here all on your own when you made it clear that the only thing you wanted was to come to Bath with me. I could have taken you if I hadn’t been so stubborn and serious. I should have relaxed and allowed for the possibility that you and I might simply have a good time together, even if I wasn’t yet ready to declare my feelings for you.”

“If Bath made you ready to admit how you feel, it was worth it for you to go alone,” she murmured.

“No,” he said firmly. “It wasn’t worth it, Lydia, not if the result was that you fell ill like this, and there was no one here to care for you.”

“The staff—”

“The staff listened to you when you told them not to call a physician. If I had been here, I would never have heeded a request like that. And Margaret—she went to her country house?”

“I don’t know what happened,” Lydia replied softly. “I wasn’t expecting her to leave.”

“I want you to start from the beginning and tell me everything,” Edward said firmly.

“I’m not sure I know everything.”

“Tell me everything you know. What happened the day you fell ill?”

“It began like any other day.”

“Were you feeling unwell when you got up?”

“No. I was feeling... sad, I suppose. I had been a bit sad since the day you left for Bath.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.”

“I feel as if I could spend the rest of my life apologizing to you for this.”

“Please don’t,” she said anxiously.

It would be too painful, she thought, to watch him cope with that kind of guilt when he bore no blame for what had happened to her. He needed to understand as soon as possible that none of this was his fault.

“Your departure made me sad, Edward, but it didn’t make me ill. The two are not the same thing.”

“But how am I to know that your illness was not caused by your sadness? That sort of thing can happen.”

“You can know because I’m not sad at all now,” she pointed out. “I feel happier than I have in a very long time—but I still feel unwell. I know that isn’t happy news, but if my sadness was causing me to feel ill, your return and declaration of love would have cured me, and it hasn’t.”

Edward sighed. “I would rather think that the whole thing *was* my fault if only it meant I had the power to make you well again!”

“But at least you see that it isn’t your fault,” she said. “So, you don’t have to apologize, and you don’t have to feel guilty.”

He nodded. “I see it,” he agreed. “I wish it wasn’t so.”

“I was having a very nice day,” she said. “Perhaps the most pleasant I had enjoyed since your departure.”

“What made it such a good day?”

“I’m worried you’ll be upset if I tell you.”

“Nothing you say will upset me,” he assured her. “I just want you to tell me what happened. I want to understand everything about the day leading up to your illness so that I can help solve the mystery of what caused it.”

“Well, I don’t think this will help,” Lydia said, “but what made my day better than usual was the fact that I was spending time with Margaret.”

“This would be before she left for her country house, then.”

“Yes, and...” Lydia frowned, trying to remember. “That’s part of what’s confusing to me. I thought she had intended for us to go together. What I remember is that she invited me to accompany her to the country house. Of course, I must have it wrong. If that was what she wanted, she wouldn’t have left without me. And when she discovered I was ill, she certainly wouldn’t have gone. But I must have misunderstood her. She must have said that she was going to go without me, and she must have left when I came up to my room without ever realizing that I was unwell.”

Edward frowned. “Do you think so? That doesn’t sound like something you could very easily misunderstand.”

“Well, I did *think* I knew what she wanted. I was so excited about the prospect of getting out of the house. And, you know, I thought she said something about that too. I asked her if you would be upset about it, and she said she would take responsibility if you were. So, how could I have misunderstood what she meant? And yet, I *must* have misunderstood because she did leave without me, so she must have always meant to.”

“So, you were getting ready to go when you became ill?”

“I had come upstairs to get my things ready for the journey,” Lydia said. “Now I remember. She was going to tell the members of the household staff that we were leaving. Or, I suppose, that *she* was leaving if I’m mistaken in my memory. I just don’t know.”

“What were the two of you doing when she mentioned going to the country house in the first place?” Edward asked.

There was a dark shadow across his face that Lydia didn’t quite understand. It made her feel nervous.

“We were having tea,” she replied. “She asked me to tea out in the garden.”

“She gave you tea?”

“Now that you mention it, she did pour the tea. I suppose it seemed strange because ordinarily, a servant might have done it, but she seemed so eager to care for me that I took it as a gesture of kindness. And she so eagerly encouraged me to drink it.”

“Did she?”

“She didn’t even seem to want me to wait for it to cool,” Lydia remembered. “I scalded my mouth a bit. It felt to me as if she wanted to care for me—she had seen how sad I was, and she wanted to make me feel better.”

“Maybe,” Edward murmured. “Maybe that’s what she wanted.”

“Well, what else?”

“Did she drink any tea herself?”

“I don’t recall,” Lydia admitted. “We weren’t in the garden for long because the idea about the country house came to her so quickly, so it’s possible she never had the chance. But, Edward, I don’t think I understand why you’re asking these questions. What difference does it make how much tea we had?”

The expression on his face was frightening. It made her shiver to look at him. But when he spoke, his voice was shockingly even. “So, you drank tea,” he clarified, “but perhaps she didn’t drink any tea. Is that right?”

“That might be right. I really don’t remember—Edward, is this important? You sound as if it’s very dire, but I don’t understand...”

He forced a smile onto his face, but she could tell it wasn’t genuine. It didn’t reach his eyes.

“Of course not,” he said. “I’m trying to understand what the day looked like for you. That’s all it is. I think I’ve got the picture now.”

A thought entered her mind—a possibility as to why he might be as upset as he clearly was.

“Is this about the fact that I was spending time with Margaret?” she asked anxiously. “Are you angry with me?”

His features softened. “Lydia, of course I’m not angry with you. How could I be angry with you? You did nothing wrong.”

“I don’t know,” she said helplessly. “I know you never asked me not to associate with Margaret, but you also confided in me how you felt about her. I thought perhaps it might upset you that I was spending time in her company. You know, I’ve tried to put some distance between the two of us ever since you told me how you felt about her growing up. I wanted you to know that my loyalty was to you, not to her. But I do feel bad for her, Edward. I can’t quite help it. It must have been so difficult, being married to someone who would never love her —”

“It’s not as if she loved him either,” Edward replied, raising his eyebrows.

“What do you mean?”

“Is that what she told you? That she was heartbroken because my father didn’t love her?” Edward shook his head. “She didn’t love him either. She married him for his money, and she never made any particular secret about it. She only wanted to marry into our family because she hoped my father would help *her* father’s business out of debt. I don’t think Father knew that on their wedding day, but she’s certainly said it plenty of times since then.”

Lydia wasn't sure what to think. That did make sense. Margaret had even admitted that she'd wanted more for her father's business. And if that had been the reason for their marriage, it made it a lot more difficult to sympathize with her over the fact that she'd never had love.

"Listen to me," Edward said, "making you think about things like that right now when you should be focusing on getting well... you're barely keeping your eyes open. You're so weak. I want you to go to sleep at once, Lydia, and when the physician arrives, you're to let him examine you and do everything he tells you to do. Is that clear?"

"Clear," Lydia murmured. She was grateful to him, if she was honest, for sending her to sleep. She already felt herself drifting off. "Will you be here when I wake up?"

"I won't be far," he assured her. "I'm home from Bath now—home to stay. I won't leave you like that again, I promise."

He squeezed her hand, and she squeezed back. Even though he had promised not to leave her once before, she found that she had no trouble believing he was telling the truth. He had come all the way home to tell her that he loved her. She knew he meant it.

She was so grateful for the fact that she had gotten to see him again. And she hoped that she was on the road to recovery. But if things didn't go well—if her health took a turn for the worse—at least she would know that her husband was here with her. At least she would know that she was loved.

Right now, it felt like more than she had ever dared to hope for.

She closed her eyes and allowed herself to drift off, secure in the knowledge that Edward was by her side, and that he would be here for her no matter what came now.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Edward sat still, watching Lydia sleep.

Something about all this felt deeply disturbing, and the more he turned it around in his mind, the more his thoughts returned to Margaret.

Why would she leave?

Could Lydia have truly been mistaken? Could Margaret have always intended to leave the house? Maybe she had already been gone by the time Lydia's illness had struck.

Maybe.

But it all seemed so coincidental. The timing was too perfect. Margaret had given Lydia tea without taking any herself, and then she had disappeared, and Lydia had become desperately ill? How could that be?

It sounds like a case of poisoning... but surely, Margaret couldn't be capable of such a thing. I've never liked her, but I

just can't think of her as a killer! She wouldn't do that... would she?

He released Lydia's hand gently, rose to his feet, and let himself out of her room. Little though he wanted to leave her side, he had to find the answer to this question. He wouldn't be able to rest until he knew for sure. And he wouldn't be able to find out unless he went directly to the source.

Ten minutes later, he was on horseback again, riding hard in the direction of Margaret's country home.

At least this was a much shorter journey than the trip home from Bath had been. And the anger that fueled him was powerful enough to keep him from noticing any difficulty. Even if she'd done absolutely nothing to harm Lydia, she should never have left.

What did she mean by it, going off to her country house and leaving Lydia by herself? It was a cruel thing to do.

He knocked vigorously on the front door. A moment later, Margaret answered, looking bemused and somewhat irritated. "Edward?" she said. "You're supposed to be in Bath."

"And you're supposed to be at home. What are you doing here?"

"A lady can't take a little time to herself? You've never minded when I left Westfey before." She sniffed. "Actually, I rather thought you preferred it. I know you don't care for my company."

“Don’t do that. Are you aware that Lydia is ill?”

“Oh, dear,” Margaret replied, her eyes widening. “Is she all right?”

“You can’t expect me to believe you’re surprised. According to everyone at the house, she fell ill at almost the very moment you decided to leave. Lydia says she thought she was supposed to come with you, but then you left her behind. What happened?”

“Oh, I never dreamed she would want to come!” Margaret said. “You know how she’s been lately. She’s kept to herself so much. She doesn’t want to socialize with anyone. Why would she want to spend time with me? I thought she would be happy to have me out of the house.”

“You don’t actually think she would be happy to be alone in that big house,” Edward said darkly.

But he was no longer sure. Was he really about to accuse his stepmother of slipping Lydia poison? Now that he stood face to face with her, it felt like such a wild accusation. And once he spoke the words, he’d never be able to take them back.

But on the other hand...

If Lydia had consumed poison, he had to know. The physician needed to know so that he could treat her properly. It wouldn’t be good enough to suggest that he suspected something like

that might have happened. He needed to know exactly what had been done so he could be sure she was properly cared for.

Colin would be angry at him for accusing Margaret if she turned out to be innocent. But Colin would have to live with that, and Edward would have to bear his brother's wrath. It was a chance he was unwilling to take—that Lydia might have been poisoned, and Margaret might be responsible. If there was even a possibility that it was true, he had to find out.

“I think you came here to hide,” he told her.

“Hide from what?” Margaret demanded. “From you? I thought you were in Bath. And besides, Edward, you're hardly a frightening figure to me.”

“I think you poisoned Lydia,” he said quickly, before he could stop himself. “I think she's sick because you put something in her drink to make her sick, and then you fled the house.”

For a moment, the two of them just stood there, staring at one another in silence.

“How can you accuse me of that?” Margaret breathed.

“Is it true?”

Edward did his best to keep his expression stoic. He couldn't lose his nerve now that the accusation was out there.

“Of course it isn’t true,” Margaret denied, and to Edward’s surprise and dismay, tears came to her eyes. “Edward, Lydia is like a daughter to me—like the daughter I always longed for but was never able to have. You know how it destroyed me when your father refused to give me a child of my own. I had Colin, of course, but you always withheld your affections from me. Even now, your wife is ill, and instead of coming to me for comfort, as a son should with his mother, you’re here to accuse me of having a hand in it! I just can’t believe you’d think me capable of such a thing when I have only ever done my best to be a loving parent to you.”

“Well, I’m only trying to figure out what happened to her,” Edward said. “And she told me her last memory is of drinking tea with you and of you inviting her to this place. The next thing she knew, she was too weak to move, and you were leaving without her. Is she lying?”

“I don’t think she’s *lying*,” Margaret replied. “But the poor thing is obviously very confused. She must think I said I meant to bring her here with me, when in fact what I told her was that I intended to go away myself for a few days. She’s still getting adjusted to her new life. She doesn’t quite know what she’s saying or what others are saying to her. She can be forgiven for making a mistake like that. It could happen to anyone.”

“I don’t think she did make a mistake,” Edward said sharply. “Lydia’s not a naive young lady. She may be new to the dukedom, but she’s always had a keen awareness of what’s going on around her.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Margaret argued. “Remember, the poor thing thought you were in love with her when both you and I know you’re incapable of any such emotion.”

“But she was right,” Edward said. “And she knew before I did.”

“Do you mean to say you *are* in love with her?”

“That’s the reason I came back.”

Margaret shook her head. “This isn’t you, Edward. Did something happen in Bath? Nothing you’re saying sounds like you. These wild accusations toward me, first of all, and now you’re telling me that you’re in love? Where is Colin? He’ll help us sort all this out.”

“You’re going to stay away from Colin from now on. I don’t think much of the influence you’ve had on him, and I don’t trust you with him. He thinks you’ve always cared for him, but I think he’s been nothing more than a tool to you—something you could use to convince yourself that Father and I were wrong for the way we dealt with you, perhaps, because if Colin could grow to love you, you must be innocent of wrongdoing. But Colin was only a child when he met you—a little boy in need of a mother. He was the most vulnerable of any of us, and you preyed on that weakness the way you’re preying on Lydia now.”

“Edward, I did *nothing* to Lydia! I’m sorry to hear that she’s ill, and of course, I’ll come back to the house with you and sit by her bedside until she’s recovered. But for you to blame me—well, it’s just ridiculous. I thought you were better than that.”

“I know you poisoned her,” Edward stated. “There’s no point in lying to me about it, Margaret. I know you did.”

“You can’t possibly know any such thing.”

He took a breath. “I know because she’s been seen to by a physician, and he told me she had been given poison. She’s on the road to recovery now. But she and the other members of the household all say the same thing—you’re the only one who could have done it. You served her the tea that made her ill, so it had to have been you.”

The smile faded slowly from Margaret’s face.

Edward waited.

He had taken an awful risk here because, of course, no physician had told him anything at all about Lydia. He was lying to Margaret, hoping to provoke her into a confession. But there was no doubt that if she discovered what he was doing, she would be angry with him.

And, indeed, she was scowling. “What you’re saying is impossible,” she said. “I know it to be untrue.”

“You can’t know anything of the kind. You’ve been here all this time. You don’t know what’s happened back home.”

“But I do know that there are poisons that aren’t recognized by physicians,” she argued. “If Lydia was truly poisoned, as you

say she was, a physician shouldn't have been able to identify what happened to her."

"What do you mean? There are plenty of poisons that can be identified."

"Yes, but some can't. And I know that for certain! After all, no one was able to identify what I did the last time, so why would they be able to this time?"

Edward stared at her.

Margaret clapped a hand over her mouth as if suddenly horrified.

"Last time?" Edward demanded. "What do you mean by *last time*? Who else have you done this to, Margaret?"

Margaret turned away.

Edward felt a strong urge to go after her and grab her. He knew now that his instinct had been right. She *was* responsible for what had happened to Lydia. And it wasn't the first time she had done it. Only someone with experience could speak about poisons as knowledgeably as she had. And what that had to mean was...

"My father," he choked. "You did this to my father. We never knew what was responsible for his death... but it was you, wasn't it? You killed him. And all this time, you've been living in my house, underneath my roof, as a part of my

family, accepting Colin's love. He thinks of you as the closest thing to a mother. What would he say if he knew you had done this?"

"Colin would understand," Margaret whispered. "Colin knows how miserable I always was in that house. He would know that I had to do what I did."

"Don't be ridiculous," Edward snapped. "He'll never forgive you when he finds out. And neither will I."

"No one will believe you..."

"I'm the Duke of Westfrey. Do you think people are going to take your word over mine? They'll believe me, Margaret, and I'm going to summon the constables right away. I'll send a member of your staff to bring them. And then, you and I are going to sit here and wait for them."

His only regret, and it stabbed at him painfully, was that he couldn't rush back to Lydia's side just yet. But he knew the physician was on his way to her. She would be in good hands until he could get back home—and, he swore to himself, he would never allow Margaret near her again, as long as any of them lived.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“Tell me everything,” Edward demanded.

Margaret was practically shaking with fury. “I can’t think why I should say anything to you at all,” she said. “Storming in here, invading my home—you’ve always treated me as if I hardly mattered at all to you, Edward. You’ve never welcomed me, never made me feel as if I could be a part of your family. Don’t you know that’s all I ever wanted? A family that would make me feel loved?”

“You never cared about that.”

Edward felt his fists clenching and unclenching, and he had to remind himself over and over that he couldn’t put his hands on her. There was no excuse for physical violence against a lady, even one who had confessed to doing the dreadful things Margaret had done. He would keep himself under control until the authorities arrived.

“You don’t know what I cared about,” Margaret argued. “You’ve never known me, Edward. You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know that you’re exactly the person I always imagined you to be. You’re cruel and selfish, and you have no compunctions about hurting other people in the service of getting what you want. Lydia could have been killed! You *wanted* her to be killed! And now, you truly expect me to feel sorry for you?”

“If you’d been capable of any sort of empathy for me, we would never have reached this point in the first place,” Margaret retorted.

“I won’t allow you to blame this on me, Margaret. I’ve done nothing wrong here. You’re the one who tried to kill my wife! You’re the one who killed my father. You’re not going to make me believe that the whole thing was my fault all along when you and I both know it wasn’t.”

“You really think there was nothing that could have been done to prevent this outcome?” Margaret asked. “Do you think I entered into my marriage with your father planning that things would go the way they did? It was never my intention, Edward. Surely you can see that.”

“Then why? Why would you do the things you did? You weren’t happy in your life with my father, and you were never pleased with me, but how could that mean that anyone deserved death? And Lydia in particular—she never did *anything* to you! She’s only ever been kind and gracious to you. And you repay her kindness by doing this. It’s shameful! You’re a monster!”

“You have no idea,” Margaret said. “You have no idea what it’s like to go through life knowing you’re nothing more than an object to someone—that the person you care about the most only wants you to satisfy his own ambitions.”

“What are you talking about?”

Edward couldn't be sure whether she was talking nonsense, or if it was that he was too angry to comprehend her words. He began to pace back and forth, hoping to release some of the energy that was building up in his body, thinking that the constables had better arrive soon before he did something he would regret. He couldn't bear to listen to Margaret talking as if the things she'd done had been warranted, as if his father had somehow *deserved* his untimely death.

“Your father only married me so that I could act as mother to you and Colin,” Margaret said. “Not that *you* were ever grateful for what I did for you.”

“But you only married him for his money,” Edward pointed out. “It was an arrangement for mutual benefit. It wasn't as if he had a purpose in mind for you and you were in love with him. You never cared for him any more than he cared for you, so don't try to convince me that this was unfair to you.”

“It was unfair to me,” Margaret said. “I may not have been in love with your father, but I did have things I wanted from our marriage. I wanted a child of my own, and he denied me that.”

“He didn't deny you,” Edward argued. “It was unfortunate that you lost your pregnancy, but that's hardly my father's fault. He didn't do anything to harm you. Only you ever acted to harm anyone!”

“You can tell yourself whatever you'd like about it,” Margaret said. “The truth is that when he discovered I was pregnant, he

insisted that the child couldn't possibly be his and accused me of indiscretions of which I was not guilty. He said our child would never hold a title or a place in Society. He said he already had his heir."

Edward had never heard any of this before.

"Did you truly think your child might replace me as heir?"

"One never knows what might happen."

"Even if something had happened to me, Colin would have been the next in line... unless... My God."

"I would never have done anything to you or to Colin."

"You can't say that when you've just confessed to killing our father. I can't believe anything you say, Margaret! How am I to know that if your child had been born, if my father had accepted it as his own, you wouldn't have resorted to violence to ensure that it was your child who inherited the dukedom?"

"I never cared about the dukedom," Margaret snapped. "I wanted my family to be taken care of—I don't think that's so very unreasonable—and your father was unwilling to provide. And I wanted my child to have a place in the dukedom, a title and a place in Society, and for his father to claim him as his own. And your father wouldn't give me that either. He found it easier to believe that I had broken the vows of our marriage. I hadn't done any such thing. He was the one who was disloyal to me by making an accusation like that."

In spite of himself, Edward couldn't help feeling some pity for her. If what she was saying was true—and he didn't think she had any reason to make it up all these years after the fact—then it was tragic. His father hadn't deserved to be poisoned over it, but all the same, it was hard to believe that his father could be capable of such a thing.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, his voice tight. His anger was still there, beneath his pity. "He shouldn't have made an accusation like that."

"The accusation was the reason I lost the baby," Margaret said. "I couldn't possibly go on with the pregnancy after that. I was too lost in my shame and grief—my own husband, denying that my child was his, suggesting that I had been with another man. I couldn't even get out of bed. I couldn't eat or sleep, I was so worried about it. And the physician was not at all surprised by the baby's death. He said it was a wonder I'd lasted as long as I had because I was so unhealthy. It was entirely your father's fault."

Edward, thinking back, could remember Margaret taking to her bed around that time. It fit with his memory of events to think that she'd had an illness that had caused the death of her baby. But he never could have imagined that her illness would have come from his father's treatment of her.

"If what you say is true," he said stiffly, "then I regret the way you were treated. I'm sorry that happened to you. You didn't deserve that from my father. He should have respected you. But it's still no justification for what you did! You're still a murderer."

"My baby died because of what your father did," Margaret hissed. "All he had to do was acknowledge our child, but he

couldn't give me that. Not even something as simple as that. It was all I wanted in the world, and it would have cost him nothing, but he refused me. After that, I knew the sole purpose of my life would be to ensure that *his* purpose was destroyed. I promised myself I would destroy him, and not only him but his legacy."

"Everyone thought Father died of heart failure," Edward recalled, feeling chilled to the bone. He remembered Margaret standing there and crying over his father's death. All that time, she had known she was to blame for it. "It was you all along. You're a beast!"

"He's the monster. At least when I brought harm upon someone, it was my husband and not my *own* child. I'll never regret what I did to your father, Edward. No matter what happens to me now, he *did* deserve it, and I'm *glad* I was able to get my revenge on him!"

"You're insane," Edward breathed. He had never seen anyone look so mad. Her eyes were frighteningly wide, and if he hadn't been as much larger than her as he was, he might have felt frightened for his own safety. She seemed as if she might lose her grip at any moment. "It's a good thing the authorities are coming to take you away because you're not just a danger to those around you. I think you're a danger to yourself."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"And why did you have to attack Lydia? You could have killed her. She could *still* be in mortal danger, and I'm forced to be here with you. What crime could she possibly have committed to convince you to treat her the way you did?"

“She did nothing,” Margaret admitted.

“So, you attacked her for *nothing*? You poisoned her for nothing? Do you just enjoy doing it now, is that what it is?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not the one at risk of being ridiculous, Margaret. Tell me why you did what you did to my wife.”

“I had to!” Margaret exclaimed. “I didn’t want to do it. I do like Lydia. I didn’t want you to marry her at first because I wanted your father’s line and legacy to end with you. I didn’t want him to have anything left behind. Even though he’s dead and gone, I wanted to destroy everything he tried to create, and that would mean ensuring that the heir he groomed couldn’t possibly produce an heir of his own. And you were so cooperative, Edward. You never wanted to marry. I was so sure you never would and that we’d avoid this dilemma altogether. For a while, I thought of finding you a wife who couldn’t bear you a child, but you showed no interest in anyone I found for you.”

“So, that’s why you were so interested in choosing a match for me. I thought you were controlling, but I had no idea the depths of your depravity.”

“And then, when you did marry, you were so determined not to be a true husband to Lydia—well, I was sure the whole problem was going to go away. I discovered that I genuinely liked Lydia, and I was glad that you showed no interest in her.”

“Because you knew you would have to kill her if I did?”

Edward’s rage came back in full force. He gripped the back of a chair to keep himself from lashing out at her.

“I didn’t want to do it, Edward, but I couldn’t just forget about the way your father treated me. What your father did to me. I couldn’t let go of my anger at him. I couldn’t allow his plan for the future to come to fruition. He had to be punished fully, even if he wasn’t around to see it, and that meant never allowing you to have an heir.”

“Even at the expense of Lydia’s life. Even though she had done nothing to deserve it. Even now, she could die, Margaret. If she does, I’ll spend the rest of my life making sure you suffer for your crimes. If Lydia lives, I’ll simply have you locked away. But if she dies, you’re going to wish you’d never seen my face.”

Margaret looked away from him. “There’s nothing you can do to me now, Edward,” she said. “Your father already destroyed everything I ever cared about. I don’t care what happens to me. Not anymore.”

And though it didn’t change the way he felt about her crimes a single bit, Edward found that he actually believed her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

“**T**here’s one thing you can do to earn mercy from me,” Edward suggested. “And I’ll give you the chance before the constables arrive.”

She looked up at him. The deadness in her eyes frightened him. He had never seen her look like this—he’d never seen anyone look like this.

“I don’t care what happens to me,” she repeated.

“Well, you might care when they’re locking you in a cell, so I’m going to give you a chance,” he said. “The antidote.”

“What?”

“To the poison you used. You’re not a stupid woman, Margaret, and you’re not careless. If you were dealing in poisons, I believe you must have kept an antidote on hand in case something went wrong. And when you fled Westfrey, you would have taken it with you so that it wouldn’t be found. I think you have it here, and I want you to give it to me at once. If you do that, I’ll ask the constables not to be too hard on you.”

“Why do you want me to do that?”

“Are you joking? You must know. If you give me the antidote, I’ll be able to save Lydia.”

“You don’t care about Lydia. I don’t think you ever did. You proved that when you went off to Bath and left her behind.”

“If you really believed that, you wouldn’t have found it necessary to poison her. You must have understood what I was beginning to realize—that I was falling in love with her. That I have been for some time.”

“Even if you believe you’re in love with her, she deserves much better than you,” Margaret argued.

“Is *death* what she deserves?” So far, he had refrained from shouting, but now, at last, he raised his voice. “Do you think the prospect of a life with me is so terrible that she would be better off dead?”

Margaret didn’t flinch. “Perhaps she would,” she said. “Perhaps I would have been better off dead than spending all these years with your horrible father, raising ungrateful children and losing the only one who could ever have been my own. My life has been nothing but a joke. I should have died at a young age—it’s better than living through all this. Perhaps it’s better that Lydia be released from your terrible company now than to go through all the things I did.”

“I’m not my father,” Edward said sharply. “I’m sorry he was cruel to you, Margaret, but I would never treat Lydia in the ways you’re describing. I care too much for her.”

“You think you love her now, but that’s only because she’s convenient.”

“That’s not true. Nothing about this has been remotely convenient. And what’s more, Margaret, even if I wasn’t in love with her, I still wouldn’t want her to die. I still wouldn’t want her to live an unhappy life. That’s not the sort of person I am. It was always my intention to do all I could to make her happy.”

“But you were never going to give her everything *she* wanted.”

“You’re insane if you truly think she would choose death rather than a life without love and children. Lydia is a vivacious, clear-eyed lady with a heart full of enjoyment for the world around her. She might have been disappointed by a marriage to me, but she would never want to give up on the rest of her life. Now, give me the antidote.”

“You can’t make me do anything,” Margaret scoffed. “You promised me mercy, but there’s no mercy left for me, Edward. All the worst moments in my life have already happened. Nothing matters to me now. So, take me away. Lock me up. Spend the rest of my days trying to torment me if you think that will help you heal from your pain. You’ll never hurt me as badly as your father did—and I’m rescuing your wife from a life spent suffering the way I did.”

Edward turned and walked away from her as fast as he could. He had to. The anger within him was so powerful now that he knew he wouldn't be able to keep his hands off her if he had to so much as go on looking at her smug face. Instead, he slammed the open palm of his hand against the wall so hard that it stung—at least, he thought it probably did. The fire coursing through him numbed him to the sensation.

There was a knock at the front door.

“That will be the constables,” he said in a low voice. “This is your last chance, Margaret.”

She didn't speak.

A moment later, he heard voices at the door—the butler was speaking to the constables, who were then shown into the sitting room.

“Your Grace,” said the man in charge, bowing to Edward. “My name is Brockhurst. What seems to be the trouble here?”

“My stepmother has just confessed to the murder of my father, the late Duke of Westfrey, and to the poisoning of my wife, the Duchess of Westfrey,” Edward relayed, speaking quickly before Margaret could tell her own story. “She shows no remorse for her actions, and I feel sure that, if left unchecked, she would commit similar crimes again.”

“This is most disturbing,” Brockhurst said, turning to Margaret. “What do you have to say about this affair, Your Grace? Do you deny it?”

“The only thing I deny is that my actions were unwarranted,” Margaret said hotly. “Any lady in my situation would have done the same thing I did.”

“I was under the impression that the former Duke had died of a heart defect,” the second constable spoke up.

“That was what the physician concluded at the time,” Edward agreed. “But only because there wasn’t enough evidence to draw any other conclusions, and we simply didn’t know what else could be behind his sudden illness and death. Now, though—now, it all makes sense. It was Margaret all along. The two of them never got along with one another. In fact, I think it’s fair to say that she hated him.”

“I did hate him,” Margaret said unflinchingly. “I will hate him for the rest of my life, and I’ll only rest easy after my death if I know that the future of his line has been destroyed.”

“Which is why she poisoned my wife,” Edward explained.

“If your wife was killed, your brother would inherit the title in the event of your demise,” Brockhurst pointed out. “How would that help to destroy your father’s line?”

“She favors my brother. He’s the only one in the family who ever cared for her, and as a consequence, he’s the only one she cares about. To an extent, it’s understandable. I’m sure she’s never thought of doing him harm.”

“And yet, she wants your father’s line destroyed?”

“You hear the way she speaks. She’s mad.”

“Colin is mine,” Margaret spoke up. “He’s always been loyal to me. If he comes into the title, I’ll be able to bend him to my will. He’ll be the kind of gentleman who ought to run things—not someone his father would have wanted, but someone *I* can mold. As if I had a child of my own.”

“She needs to be locked up,” Edward said, staring at her. “Colin may have had respect for you, Margaret, and I understand that you don’t want to see us treat ladies the way you were treated. But he is not your child, and you cannot manipulate him in the way you’re describing.”

Brockhurst nodded. “Leave it to us, Your Grace. You’ve done well to keep her contained until we could arrive.”

“Do you have anything to say?” Edward demanded. “This might be the last time you and I see one another, Margaret.”

Margaret looked away.

“Not even final words for Colin? You and I both know he’s the one you truly cared about, after all.”

At that, she looked up. “I suppose you’re going to tell him everything.”

“You killed his father,” Edward said. “I’m not going to keep that from him for the sake of protecting his opinion of you. If

you were worried about keeping his love, you shouldn't have done that to him.”

“By doing what I did, I spared him from a much worse fate,” Margaret countered. “I was supposed to be a mother to Colin. No one else was protecting him.”

“Protecting him from what?”

“From the way your father destroys everything he touches. If your father was allowed to have his way, Edward, Colin would have one day become just like you. He only escaped your father's influence as long as he did because your father focused his attention on you—his firstborn. But I'm sure he wouldn't have escaped it forever. If your father had still been around when Colin was ready to marry, he would have made it known how he felt ladies ought to be treated, and Colin wouldn't have the happy, loving marriage he has now. He would be just another copy of his horrible father, like you.”

“And you mean to claim that by killing our father, you would spare Colin the terrible fate of becoming like me.”

Edward turned away. He felt as if his heart had turned to stone. All this would hurt later, he knew, but right now, it was as if the pain was so intense that he couldn't allow himself to feel it. He couldn't let himself feel anything.

“The thing you can't admit to yourself, Margaret, is that I'm the one who came rushing here hoping to save Lydia's life. I'm the one who was willing to do anything, even show you mercy, if you would only give me the antidote. And you're the one who's willing to let her die. So, don't tell me that I'm

cruel and heartless, and you had to protect Colin from becoming the kind of man my father made me. If Colin is very lucky, he'll be more like me than you—and I know he will be because my brother could never be as heartless as you've proven to be.”

He walked over to the window and stared out. He didn't want to look at her any longer.

“Wait,” she called.

Edward didn't turn around. She was the constables' problem now.

“Edward, wait,” she called again.

“I'm not going to send them away,” he said. “You don't deserve leniency after what you've done.”

“I'm not going to ask you for anything,” she replied. “But... the antidote.”

Now he turned as if drawn magnetically. “What about it?”

“It's in the little drawer under the clock on the mantel.”

He strode over, pulled open the drawer, and withdrew a vial. “How can I trust you?” he demanded. “How can I know this isn't going to make her worse?”

“You can give it to her or not,” Margaret said. “But I thought you deserved to have it. For what it’s worth, I believe you. You do love her.”

“I never needed you to believe me.” But he clutched the vial tightly, hoping against hope that it was what she claimed it was.

The hour was growing late, and as soon as the constables had her out of the house, Edward ran to his horse and mounted. He wanted nothing more than to get back home and to Lydia’s side as quickly as he could. He had to know whether or not she was all right. And as he took to the road, he felt as if he was leaving the shock and horror of what he had discovered behind him.

It couldn’t hurt him that badly—not as long as he kept moving.

Eventually, he would have to stop, of course, and the pain would catch up with him. But for now, he simply rode as fast as he could, anxious to get home and to be at Lydia’s side once more, and desperate to believe that Margaret had had a single moment of decency and that the vial in his pocket truly contained an antidote to her poison.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“Lydia. Lydia? Can you hear me?”

The fog surrounding Lydia was thick and oppressive. The voice seemed to penetrate it from a great distance—she knew someone was calling to her, and she wanted to respond because she cared for the person who was speaking, but they were so far away. It would be so much easier to simply keep her eyes closed and drift off again, not to worry about whoever wanted her attention. They could wait until she felt a bit stronger...

“Are you sure she’s going to be all right?” the voice asked anxiously.

“Now that we’ve gotten the antidote down her throat, she should be, Your Grace. Though I must say, it was very lucky, indeed, that you were able to acquire it. I’ve seen this toxin used before, and most people don’t survive it. And you say the culprit was your stepmother? The Dowager Duchess?”

“I can’t quite believe it either,” the first voice said. “But she confessed to the crimes. Are you *sure* Lydia will be all right? Shouldn’t she be awake by now?”

“She’s been through an ordeal, Your Grace. It may take time for her to feel strong enough—ah, but look, her eyes are opening now!”

Lydia looked around. She couldn’t quite make out what was going on at first. Everything was blurry. Then, a familiar face swam into view.

“Edward?” she murmured.

She hadn’t realized how tense his expression was until his face relaxed.

“Lydia. You’re awake. How are you feeling?”

“Exhausted.”

“I’ll bet you are. I’m going to let the physician examine you.”

She clutched at his hand. “Don’t go.”

It felt as if, if she were to release him, she might not get him back. She was suddenly frightened of that possibility.

“I won’t go far,” Edward promised. “Just over to the chair. You’ll be able to see me the whole time.”

She nodded, ashamed of her own weakness. She ought to be able to tolerate him stepping away from her for a moment.

“You’re all right,” he said quietly. “You’re fine. You’re going to be well. And it makes sense that you would be upset, Lydia. You’ve been very sick. You were near death when I got back with the antidote.”

“The antidote?”

“Yes... you were poisoned, Lydia.”

“But I couldn’t have been poisoned.”

“It was Margaret.” His voice tightened, and she could see the anger on his face, though she knew he was trying to hide it from her. “She put poison in your tea.”

“There has to be some mistake. Margaret wouldn’t do that.” Lydia struggled to sit up.

“Now, really,” the physician said. “You must lie still, Your Grace. You’re still very weak.”

“Lie down, Lydia,” Edward said quietly. “Please.”

She couldn’t bear to argue with him, so she did as she had been asked. “But, Edward, Margaret wouldn’t have done that. You’ve made a mistake.”

“I wish I had. I suspected something was wrong when I realized she’d offered to take you to her country house and

then gone without you. And when I went to speak to her about it, it was remarkably easy to get her to confess. I suspect her sanity must have been slipping for some time.”

“I can’t believe this,” Lydia breathed. “I thought Margaret and I were friends. I thought she cared for me. Why would she do such a thing? What did I do wrong?”

“It was no fault of yours, Lydia,” Edward assured her. “She has some strange ideas about how to love and care for people—I believe she honestly thought she was doing something good for you, taking you away from me.”

“That could never be good for me,” Lydia said, seeing the pain in his eyes. “Nothing that takes us away from each other could be good for me, Edward. I don’t know what we are to one another, but—”

“You do know,” Edward countered, and as the physician backed away, he rushed forward. He fell to his knees beside her bed and took her hand in his. “You do know, Lydia. You know exactly how I feel for you. I love you. Do you remember me telling you that when I got home from Bath?”

She did remember, but...

“I wasn’t sure if you meant it,” she said, her eyes filling with tears.

“You don’t need to cry.” He sounded desperate. He reached up and wiped her tears away with his thumbs.

“It’s natural that she might be a little tearful right now,” the physician spoke up. “The toxin is still leaving her body, and it can have that effect.”

“That isn’t why,” Lydia countered. “I’m just... I wanted it to be true, Edward. I wanted it so badly. And every time the thought came into my head while you were away, it made me sad because I was sure it would never be true. Then, you came home and told me you’d realized that you *did* love me, and it was such a dream come true for me that I found it hard to believe. I thought perhaps I had misunderstood or maybe even hallucinated. After all, I thought Margaret had told me she was taking me to the country.”

“She did tell you that,” Edward said. “You didn’t misunderstand that situation either. She lied to you, probably to get you to go upstairs and begin packing your things so that she could slip out of the house unnoticed. If she’d had her way, you likely would have been dead before anyone discovered you. But luckily, Violet happened to come to your room and found you on the floor. She saved your life.”

“I have to remember to thank her,” Lydia whispered.

“I’ve thanked her many times already,” Edward assured her. “She knows she and all her family members will have a place in my household for the rest of my life. If not for her devotion, I might have lost you.”

“I still can’t believe Margaret could really be behind it all. What’s going to happen to her?”

“I don’t want you to worry about that,” Edward said. “Not tonight.”

But Lydia shook her head. “I can’t help worrying about it,” she argued. “I grew to think of Margaret as family. I need to know what’s going to happen to her.”

“She’s being arrested,” Edward said. “She’s in the custody of the constables right now. I couldn’t very well let her walk free, Lydia. She’s responsible for my father’s death.”

“What?” Lydia’s head reeled. “Do you mean to say she poisoned him as well?”

“Yes. Apparently, she’s been making a bit of a habit out of it. So, you see, I had to make sure she wasn’t going to continue to be a danger to people. It was hard to see her carried off, but it’s for the best.”

“I suppose it is,” Lydia murmured. “I just can’t bear to think of it—her locked away like that. But I also can’t imagine her putting poison in my tea—the whole thing is so unthinkable.” Fresh tears came to her eyes.

“Don’t think about it,” Edward urged. “There’s no need to think about any of that right now, Lydia. Tell me how you’re feeling. I’ve been so worried about you.”

“How long was I asleep?”

“Not very long. It’s only been about a day since I returned from Bath. The physician says you’ll need time and bed rest before you’re feeling like yourself again, though.”

“Where has he gone?”

“I sent him out because he was finished examining you.” Worry crossed Edward’s face. “Do you want me to call him back?”

“No, there’s no need,” she assured him quickly. “I’m quite all right. I just wondered where he had gone—and what he thought of my health after finishing his examination.”

“He thinks you’re going to be just fine,” Edward said. “He never would have left if he didn’t think so. He just wants you to rest, and I want the same.”

His hand loosened around hers, and Lydia worried he was about to let go. She gripped him tighter. “Don’t leave, Edward.”

“I want you to sleep,” he said gently, brushing a hand across her forehead. His fingers were warm and reassuring. “I’m worried you won’t get any rest if I stay.”

“I’ll rest. I’ll get more rest if you’re here. I know I shouldn’t indulge this, but I feel ill at ease without you.”

“I can hardly criticize you for that, seeing as I came all the way back from Bath because I felt so ill at ease without you,”

he admitted. “But at least we’re together now. And if it’s what you want, I’ll stay here with you as long as you’d like—as long as you promise to relax and try to sleep.”

“I’ll rest.” She couldn’t promise sleep. Not right now. There was simply too much going on. “Do Colin and Nancy know about Margaret?”

“To be honest with you, I don’t know what they know. I should send them a letter—I’ll dispatch a footman later this afternoon when I’ve had a chance to write one. As far as I’m aware, they don’t even know you’re ill, though it’s possible the staff thought to write to them. But if they did, no one has mentioned it to me.”

“I’m sure everyone was doing the best they could,” Lydia murmured.

She didn’t want to think that Edward might be getting angry with the servants for the way they had handled any aspect of this situation. She knew perfectly well that she wouldn’t be alive if things had gone even a little bit differently.

“You don’t need to worry, Edward. Everything is all right now.”

“You’re right, of course,” Edward said, leaning close to her. “I’m just so glad to be here with you. I’m so glad I came home when I did. If I hadn’t... I don’t know what might have happened. Without the antidote—”

“Yes, you mentioned an antidote...”

“Margaret gave it to me,” Edward explained. “She wasn’t going to, but in the end, I talked her into it.” He sighed. “I really thought I was going to kill her. I couldn’t believe she’d done what she had. And to think I could have lost you, just as I had finally realized what you meant to me. It makes me ashamed to think I took such a long time to realize it. If only I had discovered my feelings for you sooner, Lydia!”

“It’s all right,” Lydia said softly. “We know now.”

“I love you,” he said ardently. “I’ll never leave you in doubt about that again, I promise you that. I’ll be right by your side for the rest of our days. And I want to be a proper husband to you as well. I want us to have children. I want us to have everything.”

It was a thought that made Lydia feel as if a candle had been lit within her. But even so—

“Not yet,” she whispered.

“No?”

“Someday. Someday not too long from now. I’d like that. But first... I want us to have more time together, Edward. We never had a proper courtship, and the early days of our marriage were so fraught. I want us to spend time getting to know one another before we start our family. Would you be willing to do that?”

“I’ll do anything for you,” Edward told her. “We’ll take as much time as you deem necessary, Lydia. I’m just happy to be doing this with you—however long it takes.”

Lydia was sinking into unconsciousness again despite herself. She didn’t know when she had ever felt so happy. “Stay with me,” she breathed, squeezing his hand.

And as she drifted off to sleep, she felt him squeeze her hand in return.

“Always.”

EPILOGUE

“It was so kind of your parents to include us tonight, Lydia,” Nancy said happily as the four of them approached the front door of Haddington Manor. “I know they didn’t have to do that.”

“I think they were just so happy that Edward and I were coming over that they would have agreed to anything I wanted,” Lydia replied.

“They must have been worried while you were ill,” Nancy agreed. “Colin and I certainly were.”

Though a month had passed since Margaret’s arrest, tonight marked the first time the brothers and their wives were getting together since Lydia’s illness. Edward had insisted that she take her time recovering and make sure that she had her full strength back before attempting anything remotely strenuous—and according to him, that included seeing visitors of any kind.

“Well, I think they’re relieved about that,” Lydia agreed. “But I think they’re also relieved that we’re willing to see them at all. After all, the last time we all got together, there was a bit of a quarrel.”

It had been easy enough to allow herself to forget about that in the wake of everything that had come after—the kiss, the Bath trip, and then the poisoning. During her recovery, thoughts of the quarrel she'd had with her parents had been far away, and it wasn't until quite recently that she had remembered what had happened and written to them, hoping for the chance to make things right.

She was pleased that they had taken her up on the idea. Clearly, the discord between them hadn't suited them any better than it had her, and Lydia was hopeful that they would all be able to get back to normal after tonight. Still, she was glad to have Nancy and Colin along for support. Things would be much easier with a few more people in her corner.

Her parents greeted them at the door, and her mother embraced her. "I heard that you were ill, Lydia," she said. "Your husband wrote to me. I'm so pleased to see that you're doing better."

"I'm just fine, thank you."

They had decided against telling Lydia's parents about the poisoning. Lydia didn't quite trust her mother and father not to spread gossip, and besides, there was no need to alarm them unnecessarily. The family was still hopeful that Margaret's disappearance from Society and into a sanatorium could be kept relatively quiet and that no one ever need know about the crimes she had committed. It would be best for everyone, they all agreed, if they could keep that business to themselves.

"Do come in," Lord Haddington urged. "We've been looking forward to seeing all of you tonight. Lord Hunter, Lady

Hunter, welcome to our home.”

“Thank you so much for including us,” Colin said. “It’s always a delight to get out of the house with Nancy, and I’m ever so happy to spend time with Lydia’s family. We’ve come to treasure her, as I’m sure you can imagine.”

“Well, come into the dining room.” Lady Haddington beamed. “We’re having pheasant tonight, Lydia. I know how much you like pheasant.”

It was a peace offering, Lydia thought. But she was ready to accept it. “That sounds lovely,” she said. “Thank you for arranging for that, Mother.”

“Of course, of course,” Lady Haddington agreed. “You know we only want you to be happy.”

Lydia noticed that Edward hadn’t said much. No doubt the memory of their last dinner together was still fresh in his mind, but she’d warned him that she wanted this to be a clean start for all of them. She wanted to feel as if things were good between herself and her parents, and there was no way that could happen if there was unresolved tension between her parents and Edward. Tonight should be a perfect opportunity to set things right.

At the same time, however, she no longer felt as ill at ease as she knew she once would have, knowing that she didn’t have their full approval. It hadn’t been clear to her until very recently how uncomfortable that knowledge had always made her. For years, she would have said she didn’t care what they thought. It was only now that she had truly been released from

her worries about their opinions that she understood how much she had once cared, and how freeing it was to have that burden lifted.

They sat down at the dinner table, and the wine was poured.

“Well, Lydia,” Lord Haddington said, “now that you’ve recovered from your illness, I suppose the time may be ripe to discuss the future.”

“The future?” Lydia repeated.

“We said we wouldn’t do this until after dinner,” Lady Haddington hissed.

“Do what?” Lydia asked.

“I was ill as well, for a time, when you were going to be born,” her mother said. “Your father and I would like you to know that if that’s what’s behind your illness—”

“Are you asking me *again* if I’m going to have a child?” Lydia could hardly believe what she was hearing. “Mother, don’t you realize that’s what we just finished arguing over?”

“But you must have seen sense,” her mother reasoned. “We left you to your own devices long enough that you must have reached the correct conclusion about the whole affair by this time.”

“What conclusion should I have reached?”

“Your role in the Duke’s household is to produce an heir for him,” Lord Haddington explained. “Of course, your husband knows that, and it’s unwise of you to keep him waiting.”

“Do you know—I think Nancy and I ought to step out and see the garden,” Colin said, his voice rather loud.

“You don’t need to go anywhere,” Lydia replied. She was embarrassed, but she was also angry. “We aren’t going to be having this discussion. Edward and I are not having a child yet, Father. We have no plans to do so—not for a while.”

“You can’t keep putting your duties on hold like this, Lydia,” her mother scolded her.

“That’s enough,” Edward said. “I thought I made this very clear last time. If you can’t manage to avoid this topic, Lord and Lady Haddington, I will take my family and go home right now. Nobody wants to have this conversation apart from you, and it’s not going to happen.”

“Your Grace, please,” Lady Haddington said. “You can’t understand the way I feel about this because you don’t have a child yourself. I promise you, it isn’t about social climbing. I’m not just worried about her reputation. I want my daughter to have every happiness in the world. You can understand that, can’t you? I want her to know the joy that comes with being a mother, and I look forward to hearing that that day is on its way. I’m sorry. I know you don’t like me to ask these questions. I know you’d prefer that we stopped. It’s just that—if there is good news, I want to be told.”

Lydia felt sympathy for her mother. She no longer seemed as if she was prying for information. It felt as if she genuinely cared.

“I understand,” Lydia relented. “You must trust us, Mother. You must trust that everything will happen when it’s meant to happen. Edward and I had no courtship. We had no chance to get to know one another, to spend time together and grow our relationship. It’s hard, knowing we missed out on something so important. We’re going to take this first part of our marriage to replace the courtship we never had.”

“That’s right,” Edward agreed. “In fact, I was going to save this for later, Lydia, but I may as well tell you now. I’m planning on taking you to Italy next month.”

“Italy! Really?”

“If you’d like to go,” he said. “I’d like to make up for the trip to Bath that we never took together. I don’t know if Rome is an acceptable substitute.”

“I would *love* to go,” Lydia said eagerly. “That sounds wonderful.”

And, of course, they couldn’t have made the journey if they’d had a newborn baby to look after. Lydia would have wanted to be at home with the child, and she couldn’t have expected to bring a child on a trip like that. It was validation that she had done the right thing by asking to postpone parenthood a little longer.

Dinner was served, and after some initial awkwardness, the family managed to settle into an easy and pleasant conversation. Colin, always a jovial presence, was particularly helpful in putting everyone at ease. But being at the table with Colin was harder than Lydia had anticipated. Of everyone here, she knew that he was the only one who had been close with Margaret, and it was difficult not to feel pangs of sympathy.

Margaret's misdeeds had been horrific, but even so, Colin had lost a mother figure for the second time in his life, and he didn't deserve that.

The subject was still on her mind when dinner drew to a close, and Lydia and Edward walked out into the garden for a brief respite from her parents before coffee and dessert.

"Are you all right?" Edward asked her. "You look a bit distracted."

"I was thinking about Margaret," she admitted.

"You're not frightened, are you? I promise you, you're perfectly safe from her now. She's going to stand trial in a week's time, and seeing as she's already confessed to her crimes, there's no chance she won't be found guilty and sentenced. She'll be locked away for the rest of her life. The only concern I have is whether we can manage to keep the whole business quiet. I really don't want anyone to know about it, mostly for Colin's sake. He shouldn't have to worry about being confronted with questions about her every time he leaves the house. I want him to be able to put all this behind him."

“That’s very caring of you,” Lydia said. “I’ll be glad when it’s all over too.”

“And you’re really not frightened?”

“No, she doesn’t frighten me now. She can’t hurt anyone anymore. In fact, I’ve been doing some reading about the herb she used and the kinds of antidotes that work against it.”

“You have?” He stared at her. “Are you expecting to be poisoned again?”

Lydia laughed. “No,” she said, “but I am interested in plants. You know that. And it is an opportunity to learn.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have expected you to view all this as an opportunity,” Edward replied. He put an arm around her. “But you do surprise me at every turn, so perhaps I should have expected something like this. Perhaps I should have known that you would make the most of a bad situation. It’s one of the things I love best about you, after all—you never allow anything to hold you back or bring you down. Most ladies would be diminished by everything you’ve gone through, but you’ve only been made stronger by it. I’m so proud of you, Lydia, and so thankful to call you my wife.”

Lydia felt herself begin to blush under the moonlight. “I’m thankful too,” she said. “I love you, Edward.”

It felt wonderful to simply say those words and not to have to feel fearful that her sentiment wouldn’t be returned. She knew

what his feelings for her were. She had no more reason to doubt.

And sure enough, he smiled at her and traced her cheek with his fingertips. “I love you, Lydia,” he said softly. “You’ve changed my life in every possible way.”

Warmth spread through her. She leaned into him, and it felt like coming home. For all the times she’d dreamed of having a marriage based on love, she had never imagined that it would feel like this. She had never guessed how wonderful it could be.

And his kiss, even now that it was expected, still felt like a surprise with the way it had the power to captivate her and make her whole body feel alive.

She kissed him back and allowed everything else to float away.

At long last, she had the love she had always dreamed of, and it had been so very worth waiting for.

The End?

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

Would you like to know how **Lydia and Edward's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this free complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple!

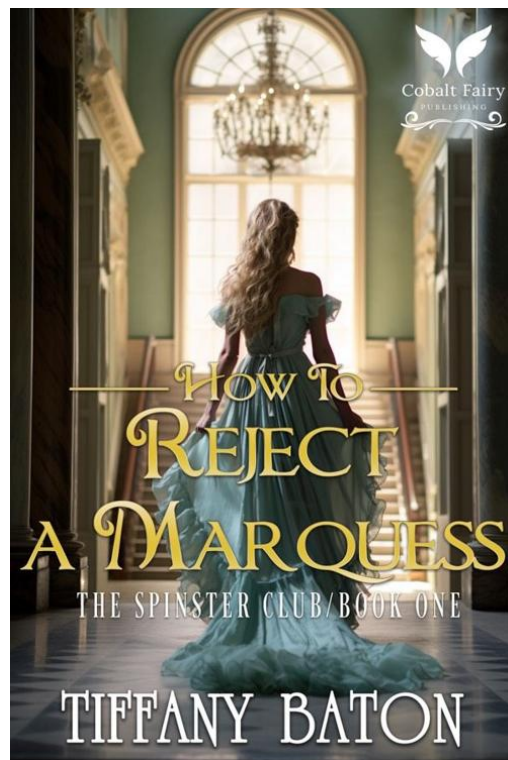
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PREVIEW: HOW TO REJECT A MARQUESS

Turn on to the next page to read the first chapters of *How to Reject a Marquess* one of my best stories so far!



CHAPTER ONE

“I will not do it! I will not!” Olivia Agarn hissed to herself as she hurried through the endless hallways of Lord Jodrell’s manor house, cursing the dead-ends and wrong turns that made her feel as if she was trapped in a labyrinth.

“Watch where you are going!” a young lady snarled as Olivia passed by, almost knocking the woman over.

Olivia ignored the young lady, pressing onward as if ravenous hounds were on her tail. *This cannot be permitted. I shall not do it. My friends will have the answer—they will know how to pry me out of this mess.*

“Careful, Miss Agarn!” A gentleman leaped out of her path, his hand shooting out to try and catch her, but she twisted out of his reach, hurtling on with panic throbbing in her veins.

At length, she reached the refreshments room, scouring the elegant dining hall for any sign of her dearest friends. She had left them in the hallway just outside the refreshments room when her mother and father had summoned her away, but it seemed they had vanished, and at such an inopportune moment, she needed them desperately.

Spying a different gaggle of young ladies beside the punch bowl, Olivia took a breath and made her breathless approach, ignoring the haughty looks and turned-up noses.

“Have any of you seen my friends?” Breathlessly, Olivia began to name those dear friends, only to be rudely interrupted by one of the ladies, a rude, superior sort of creature.

“As if we do not know who your friends are,” the woman, Miss Patton, remarked with a snort. “Everyone knows ‘The Spinsters Club’ all too well.”

“Is that what you call us?” Olivia mustered a grin, for the unkind names changed with every season, and it had become a joke between her and her friends to guess what they would become next season. “How quaint.”

“We have not seen them,” said another of the ladies sharply, glancing around the room as if she might somehow become a spinster by association alone. “You should find them yourself.”

Olivia arched an eyebrow. “Do you not think that is what I am attempting to do? Why else would I have intruded upon your little... gossipmongers’ meeting, if I was not desperate?”

“You ought to be grateful that we are speaking to you at all,” remarked Miss Patton, pulling a face so sour that Olivia wondered if there was an excess of lemon in her punch. “You are a disgrace to young ladies everywhere.”

Olivia waved a dismissive hand. “Yes, yes, I am aware; I have been told often enough. It is *exceptionally* awful that a lady should want more from life than to be a wife and mother. Atrocious notion, really.” She took a moment to bask in their horror, though her satisfaction did not last long, her words reminding her of why she needed to find her friends immediately. “So, you have not seen the rest of the proud spinsters?”

“Certainly not,” Miss Patton muttered.

Olivia shrugged. “Then, enjoy your evening. Perhaps, this will be the night that you finally ensnare that longed-for husband, so you may be happily shackled to the institution of marriage for the rest of your days, turning a blind eye to the infidelities and betrayals that will surely come.”

She walked off to an explosion of appalled gasps but could take no pleasure in them. *Where is everyone? Where have they wandered off to?*

Making her way down another endless hallway, lined with closed doors that, ordinarily, she would have been tempted to peek inside, she searched helplessly for her friends. With every minute that passed without them, her heart raced faster, her skull pulsing with the pressure of the fear that swelled within her. Her legs trembled, her gait shaky, as reality began to crush her.

“In here!” A hand shot out from one of the doorways, seizing her around the wrist and pulling her into the dusty gloom of a library. Two lanterns had been lit, casting an eerie glow upon the old bookshelves and the antique reading desk that looked as if it had been stolen from a medieval king. And lounging on the creaky leather armchairs, sipping cups of punch, were Olivia’s friends at last: Leah Bolton, Phoebe Wilson, Matilda Elkins, and Anna Dennis.

It was Matilda who had pulled her into the room, and the relief could not have been more powerful as it swept through Olivia’s jittering nerves, soothing them. Being the oldest and wisest of their friendship group at four-and-twenty, Matilda’s very presence was always calming.

“Do not tell us that you must leave,” Leah spoke first, fluttering her bare feet; her legs draped over the armrest of what appeared to be Lord Jodrell’s personal armchair, given the wear of the leather. “Has your mother tired of the ball already? You *must* insist upon staying, for we cannot be without you.”

Olivia shook her head solemnly, clasping a hand to her chest. “I wish it were something so simple.”

“Do not keep us in suspense, dearest Olivia. Tell us what has happened in your brief absence,” Matilda encouraged, taking Olivia by the hand and leading her to one of the brocaded footstools, sitting her down upon it. It was a double relief for Olivia to take the weight off her shaky legs, fearing she might faint.

Phoebe raised an eyebrow. “You are not to have a belated sibling, are you?”

“Again, nothing so simple,” Olivia replied, her voice catching in her throat.

To everyone’s surprise, it was Anna who discovered the answer first, drawing the attention of the room toward her as she said, “It is a gentleman. There has been a message of interest.” Her blue eyes glittered, a faraway smile etched upon her face, for though she was loyal to the supposed ‘Spinsters Club,’ it was not for a lack of hoping and daydreaming to be the very opposite.

“Worse than that,” Olivia murmured, staring down into her interlaced hands.

“Worse?” Matilda sat down on the footstool, nudging in beside Olivia.

Olivia nodded. “Or, rather, beyond that. Perhaps, there was an initial message of interest, but no one thought it important to make me privy to that knowledge. You know what being a young lady is like—we are good for nothing but bartering with and forging connections for gentlemen’s benefit.” She shook her head, fighting for her courage. “My father has... arranged a match. I am to visit my future husband and reside at the estate of his aunt for a week or more, so that “introductions” can be made. Although, considering this is already signed and sealed, it seems rather too late for introductions.”

A ripple of horrified gasps erupted from her quartet of confidantes. Phoebe and Anna leaned forward in their chairs, while Leah swiveled around in hers; the conversation was too important for lounging.

“You certainly shall not do any of that,” Matilda insisted defiantly, seizing hold of Olivia’s clammy hands. “We shall steal you away and hide you between our residences. Why, now that I think of it, there is a cottage in the woods near my home that has been unoccupied for years; it will be the perfect sanctuary!”

Olivia mustered a weary smile. “I believe my father has already considered the possibility of my fleeing without delay.” She huffed out a breath. “We are to leave for this

dowager's residence as soon as the ball is finished. I suspect that is why I was informed tonight."

"But... your mother—why did she not say anything?" Leah jumped in, aghast. "Why did she not forewarn you?"

Matilda pressed a finger to her lips. "Dear Leah, before we consider who is at fault, let us first discuss the specifics. Indeed, to understand how we might resolve this, we must first understand our enemy, so to speak." She drew in a breath. "Who is this gentleman? Is he old? What manner of gentleman is he? What is the cause of this union—fortune, station, connections, a desire for an heir?"

"Of course, we must!" Leah agreed. "Is he a rogue in need of reforming? Has this been demanded by a despairing parent?"

Olivia chuckled tightly. "If you include my father, then yes."

It was not clear, not even to Olivia, which question she was answering.

"He is the Marquess of Bridfield, wherever that is," she continued, rocking slightly to dull the sharp edges of her dread. "And that, my darling girls, is all I know."

Phoebe steeped her fingers and rested her chin upon their points. "Well, it stands to reason that he cannot be terribly old, otherwise he would not have an aunt living."

"Unless *she* is terribly old," Leah interjected.

Phoebe tilted her head from side to side. "I had not thought of that." She paused. "But why is that name so familiar? The Marquess of Bridfield... No, I cannot place it. Give me a while and it shall come to me, I am sure."

"As you are the only daughter of a Viscount and he is a Marquess," Matilda mused aloud, "we can rule out a pursuit of station. So, we have fortune—possible, as so many of these dynasties are crumbling after centuries of frittering. Connections—even more plausible, considering none of us can place this fellow. Or, there is the desire for an heir to consider, and that needs no explanation."

Olivia shuddered. “I would rather consider none of those notions.”

“Quite right,” Matilda said, softening the teacherly tone of her voice. “All *will* be well, Olivia. If we cannot smuggle you out of here this evening, then we shall simply have to kidnap you on another occasion. If we put all of our minds together, I know we can concoct a believable scene; a robbery gone awry, that sort of thing.”

Olivia had to laugh. “I should relish seeing that and then, once the fellow has found another involuntary soul to marry him, I shall make a grand entrance at the finest ball of the next season, resurrected from the dead. Oh, I can already hear the screams of terror!”

“Or, you could simply make yourself so unpleasant and repulsive that he decides he does not wish to marry you,” Leah suggested with a shrug.

Phoebe nodded eagerly. “If anyone can convince him that you are not a good prospect, it is you. Do you remember your debut, when that Earl’s son tried to woo you?”

The girls snickered, knowing the story well.

“I promise, I did not employ the services of those wasps after my lemon ice “spilled” upon him—that was fate itself,” Olivia insisted, warmed by the company of her friends and the history they shared. “To this day, he calls me a witch, convinced that I somehow summoned those wasps to swarm and sting him.”

“Or you might fall in love with him,” Anna said dreamily, sipping from her cup of punch as if she was already toasting to the nuptials.

The other four women stared at her. She blinked, her cheeks flushing red, and immediately dropped her chin to her chest, falling silent. It was no secret that Anna was only part of the never-marrying side of the “club” because she had not yet found a gentleman to rival those she read and dreamed about, but even if she did find such a man, she would still be their friend. Always.

“What I mean to say is,” Anna mumbled, keeping her gaze down, “it *could* be a success. Not all gentlemen are destined to behave as your father did, Olivia. Indeed, society’s gentlemen are rather like a... a... basket of fruit—there will be some rotten berries at the bottom, but there are plenty of shiny, sweet apples and plums to be found with time and patience.”

Matilda clicked her tongue. “But one cannot always know if a fruit is rotten until you have already bitten into it. In this instance, that bite means marriage for our dear Olivia, and she will be trapped if she finds that it is moldy within.”

“It is best to never make it that far. Best to never so much as look at the basket of fruit, for it is all assuredly sour,” Leah agreed, her eyes darkening as she turned her face away. Olivia’s heart ached for her poor friend, remembering how she had suffered. If anyone knew the pitfalls of engagements and betrothals and weddings, it was Leah.

Phoebe shrugged. “I have never much liked fruit. It is too... inconsistent. Some summer afternoons, you can enjoy the finest strawberry of your life, so sweet and fragrant and perfect it makes you want to cry. Then, you search for a strawberry like that again, and you cannot find it, and you feel disappointed for ever having tasted such a tremendous strawberry for it has ruined all other strawberries for you.” She paused. “Apologies. I forgot we were not talking of *actual* strawberries, though I imagine there is a metaphor in there somewhere.”

Olivia did not want to be the one to dampen Anna’s still-burning hopes for love and marriage, but nor could she tolerate the fantasy. “All gentlemen are the same. If there is one thing I know about marriage, it is that infidelity is as much a part of it as making vows, declaring false promises, someone drinking too much, and picking through an obscene amount of dinner courses that always end with a posset of some kind.”

“That is *all* you know of marriage,” Anna corrected shyly. “Your mother and father are but one example, and if this were an experiment, you would need more than one pair of subjects for investigation. It is not evidence of marriage’s absolute failure, but evidence of *one* way in which it can turn.”

Olivia nodded slowly. “Perhaps, but if you were handed a box of twenty sugared almonds and informed that one of them was, instead, a sugared cockroach made to resemble an almond, you would likely refuse to eat any of them.”

“An astute observation,” Matilda remarked, but Anna seemed undeterred.

“Maybe, in that analogy, it merely shows that courage is required for marriage,” Anna said, taking a large gulp of her punch. “Nine-and-ten sugared almonds versus one cockroach seems like rather good odds to me.”

Olivia appreciated her unyielding enthusiasm, but she could not share it. *If you had witnessed your own mother’s heartbreak, Anna, you would not be able to hold so tightly to your candle of hope.* She would not say that out loud, though she felt it keenly.

“Well, I cannot take the risk,” she said instead. “I do not know this man, I do not want to know him, and I refuse to indulge even the slightest chance of having a cockroach marriage like that of my parents, even if nine-and-ten sugared almonds are precisely what they appear to be. I am a founding member of our Spinsters Club, and that is how I should like to remain.”

A plan was already beginning to form in her mind, taking inspiration from the words of her dearest friends: she would make this unknown Marquess hate her and reject her, by any means necessary. Even if she could not summon a nest of wasps precisely when she needed to, she would create a sting of her own that would send him running.

Anna pulled a face. “Do not call us that, I beg of you.”

“Darling Anna, that is what others call us,” Leah interjected. “We must embrace it so they cannot use it as a weapon against us.”

Matilda nodded. “Quite right.”

Just then, Phoebe sat poker straight in her chair and her hand shot into the air as if she were in the midst of a lesson with her governess. “I remember where I have heard that name before!”

she yelped, blanching. “Of course, the Marquess of Bridfield —why did it not come to me sooner!”

Olivia stared at her friend. “Where have you heard it?”

“Everywhere, all of last season *and* the season before!” Phoebe spluttered.

Olivia swallowed. “You are certain? In what regard?”

“The very *worst* regard. You see, I was making enquiries about suitable gentlemen for my sisters and investigating who to avoid... goodness, I cannot believe I forgot him!” Phoebe replied, softening her voice to a worried whisper. “Why, if I am not mistaken, his name was in the mouths of every gossipmonger just a fortnight ago, at the very beginning of the season. He is... he is...”

“Tell us, or I shall burst!” Leah urged.

Olivia needed. “No matter what it is, I must know. Indeed, if it is terrible, it may yet help me.”

Phoebe took a shaky breath. “My dearest Olivia, he is one of the most notorious rakes in all of England.”

CHAPTER TWO

“Are you going to pursue me through every hallway until I listen to what you have to say, we argue peaceably, and you finally surrender? How many times must we repeat this charade, Aunt?” Evan Thorne, the Marquess of Bridfield, turned sharply on his way to the kitchens, where he had hoped to pilfer some bread and cheese to take with him on his afternoon walk.

Indeed, he turned so quickly that his Aunt Amelia did not realize he had halted until she barreled right into him. She knocked into his chest and stumbled backward, but he caught her before she could fall.

“I was not pursuing you,” she protested, wincing as she rubbed her chin, where she had struck his broad chest. “But we do need to discuss this. I have been asking for weeks if you will sit down with me so we can talk civilly, but you keep making up excuses.”

Evan raised an eyebrow. “So, you were chasing me down?”

“You do not have to phrase it so... distastefully,” she grumbled, resting her hands upon her hips. “Nevertheless, now that I have your undivided attention, let us speak of it. This cannot be avoided or postponed any longer, dear nephew.”

Evan chuckled stiffly. “The discussion or the marriage you believe I should bind myself to?”

“Both,” she replied, her dark green eyes—so like his own—hardening as she caught her breath. “Marriage is not only your duty as Marquess, but a way to find happiness in life.

Companionship, at the very least, and let me tell you—I would have been lost without the companionship of my sweet Lionel. We would both have been lost without him. You know it is what he would have wanted for you, and what I want for you.”

Evan grimaced, closing his eyes. “You would guilt me with the wishes of a man who is no longer with us, so I cannot verify his hopes for me?”

He still could not put into words how much he missed his Uncle Lionel; a man who had been like a father to him. The sort of father he should have had since birth, instead of the one that fate gave him. In truth, if Lionel had still been living, and had been standing there at his wife’s side in a duo of determination, Evan knew he likely would have given up and accepted whatever they desired for him. Even now, he could not reject his Aunt Amelia outright; he loved her too much for that.

“He told you himself,” Amelia reminded him.

Evan dropped his chin to his chest, remembering his uncle’s last words. “*Find someone, my boy. It is a long life, but it will be an empty one if you choose to be alone.*”

“I do not know what you want me to say, Aunt,” he insisted with a sigh. “I *would* marry in the blink of an eye, but what am I to do when no suitable lady will have me? My reputation precedes me and, often, these young ladies are running before I can even be introduced.”

Amelia tilted her head to one side. “How mysteriously convenient.”

“Mysterious, yes. Convenient, no.” He cleared his throat. “I must have upset someone terribly for them to do this to me, dragging my name through the muck of the scandal sheets. I once thought I might try to investigate and reprimand the culprit, but it proved too difficult. It is likely a disgruntled friend from school or university—you know how such grudges refuse to die.”

Amelia tutted under her breath. “Then, it is fortunate that you have me—a withered old prune with nothing to do but seek a

match for her favorite nephew.”

“I am your only nephew.”

“Precisely.” Amelia’s sudden grin alarmed him. “And, because you are my favorite and only nephew, I have remedied the situation on your behalf. You would have known sooner if you did not insist on scurrying away with your feeble means of avoiding me trailing behind you.”

A sick feeling churned in Evan’s stomach, his blood running cold. “You have... remedied it? How, might I ask, have you done such an impossible thing?”

“There is to be a dinner at the house tomorrow evening. There, you are to meet your future wife, who will be residing here. A party has been arranged too, but I shall speak more of that in due course,” Amelia replied, with a sly smile that further tightened the invisible noose around his neck. “Indeed, your bride ought to be arriving this afternoon, and from what I hear, she is quite the delight. I took great pains to select the perfect match for you, and though I am certain you will be shocked for a short while, you will have plenty of time to become acquainted during her stay here.”

Shocked was more than an understatement. Evan could not move, his legs leaden, his innards twisting into knots, while his heart raced violently in his chest, threatening to break a rib as it tried to burst free of his body. It was a devilish move from his aunt, and they both knew it as they looked at one another, neither wanting to be the first to glance away.

“I could not bring such disdain upon a young lady,” he began to protest, finding his voice though it sounded strangled. “Why drag her through the mire with me, Aunt? It would be unjust—nay, unkind.”

Amelia continued to smile her irreverent smile. “Because her reputation is in need of as much improvement as yours,” she said. “So, cease whatever protest is forming upon your tongue, and do me this one favor. I do not ask for much, my dear boy. Please, do this, for me.”

After raising him for four-and-ten years, Amelia knew him far too well. She knew he would not be able to reject her plea, for she was the only mother figure he had ever known. He would have done anything for her. Almost anything... and that line was on the verge of being overstepped.

“Is she... wayward?” Evan asked, still seeking a way out.

Amelia shook her head. “Not in the manner you are thinking. She is a renowned spinster, that is all, and her father is eager to see her wed.”

“So, she is old?” Evan tried not to grimace, envisioning someone of his aunt’s nine-and-forty years. Amelia still looked exceptionally beautiful for her age, but that did not mean he wished to marry someone two decades older. Indeed, he did not wish to marry at all.

Amelia shook her head again. “Not yet a true spinster. She is two-and-twenty. A rather fair age to wed, I should think.”

“I... will attend the party,” Evan said, after a moment or two. “I will meet with her, but... I cannot promise she will not resist a union, once she inevitably learns of my reputation.”

He thought it best to lay the blame of a failed engagement upon this mysterious woman pre-emptively, for he would certainly try his best to ensure a match did not proceed beyond the party.

Amelia shrugged. “You might be surprised.” She paused. “Of course, I shall have to inform your father of what I have arranged, though I cannot imagine he will have any complaints. I thought it best to tell you first, seeing as it pertains to you. Perhaps, you might prefer to be the one to write to him?”

Evan’s dread at the prospect of meeting a bride he neither knew or wanted transformed into cold, icy serpents that slithered up from his abdomen and bit deep into his lungs, pouring venom into his chest that burned up his throat, leaving it with no place to go but out of his mouth. “Speak of that man again in my presence, and I will do you no favors, no matter how much I adore you.”

Balling his hands into fists, digging his fingernails into his palms to ease the spike of rage that buffeted his insides, he strode away without another word. Amelia could scheme and plot whatever she liked, testing his graciousness, but bringing his father into the conversation was one thing he would not, could not, would never tolerate.



“Tell me again why we could not rest at home for a few days?” Olivia felt every hour of the lengthy journey they had taken from Lord Jodrell’s ball, just outside London. She did not even know what part of the country she and her mother, sitting at her side, were in.

Her mother, Laura, continued to stare out of the carriage window, as she had been doing for the past few hours like a child seeing the countryside for the first time. “Oh, how can you complain when it is such a beautiful day, and such a beautiful part of the world?”

“Because I am in last night’s gown and I look as if I have been dragged through every one of these hedgerows backward,” Olivia replied. “One might suspect you do not actually wish for me to make a good impression upon this marquess.”

This scoundrel, rather, she grumbled inwardly.

Her mother turned sharply. “That is certainly not my wish!” she enthused. “You must make a good impression, my darling. Your father has told me such wonderful things about this gentleman. Why, I feel as giddy as if I were the one being introduced to my betrothed!”

Olivia wondered if her mother was quite well, only to realize that her father might not have told the entire truth to his wife. Indeed, Olivia doubted her mother would be quite so “giddy” if she understood that they were on their way to meet a notorious rogue.

“Remind me why Father is not joining us when this is, apparently, of great importance to him?” Olivia prodded a little, wondering if she ought to inform her mother of the

marquess's infamous nature. Perhaps, that was why Olivia's father had matched her with such a man, taking pity on a similarly wretched creature.

Laura shrugged. "He has business to attend to that could not wait. He has given you his apologies, Olivia—do not make this a quarrel that it does not need to be. He will join us when he can."

"Business, you say?" Olivia's words were barbed, but if her mother noticed, she did not show it as she resumed her observation of the countryside.

"Mm, yes. Something pertaining to copper mines. I was not listening properly."

In case you heard the truth? Olivia held her tongue, aware that it was unfair to upset her mother over something beyond her control. Laura Agarn was bound to a marriage that had never served her, and, as Olivia had learned, it was easier for Laura to find bliss in feigned ignorance than to struggle through the painful reality.

"Did he tell you when his business would conclude?" Olivia watched her mother's face for any indication of secret knowledge.

Laura glanced back at her daughter. "When it is done," she said firmly. "Please, might we just enjoy this pleasant journey?"

"As long as I can bathe as soon as we reach this dowager's residence, I shall not say another word."

Laura smiled. "An excellent trade."

Olivia sat back, entirely convinced that her father was lying and indulging in another affair, but there was no use in dredging up such a thing. After all, Olivia's mother would be the first to notice if her husband had gone astray again, and she would be the first to pretend she did not know. When it came to matters of her broken heart, Laura's lips were sealed shut, her mind an impenetrable vault that needed to stay locked in order to ensure her survival.

And that is why I will not be marrying anyone, Mama, Olivia vowed silently. I will not pretend to look the other way while I am disrespected by a man. I will not let anyone break this heart of mine. By the time their visit came to an end, the marquess would not even be able to be in the same room as Olivia; she was counting on it.

“It *is* a little bit exciting,” she half-lied, stung with a jab of guilt as her mother looked back at her with a smile so wide and hopeful.

“It is! I told you!” her mother cried, taking hold of Olivia’s hand and squeezing it tight.

But the only excitement Olivia truly felt was anticipation for the plan she intended to execute. It demanded discretion, of course, for if her father caught wind of what she meant to do, he would marry her off to this stranger without delay... and that could not be permitted, under any circumstances.

Marquess, I hope you are ready to welcome me, for I will ensure that I am impossible to forget. A smile turned up the corners of Olivia’s lips as she squeezed her mother’s hand in return, swallowing down an explosion of laughter as she envisioned what was to come. The marquess might have thought he knew women intimately, but she was about to show him that he had no idea what they were truly capable of.

CHAPTER THREE

“They are here!” Amelia yelled, tugging on Evan’s arm as he stood by the drawing room window, staring out at the long gravel drive.

“I have eyes, Aunt. I can see they are here.” His stomach clenched, his discomfort rising.

Amelia tutted at him. “Adjust your cravat, make yourself presentable and, above all, be nice!”

“I am always nice,” he replied, already imagining his “betrothed’s” face when she realized who he was. If she was the sheltered sort who never touched the scandal sheets or deigned to enjoy a ball or gathering where gossip prevailed, he would just have to leave the evidence where she would be left in no doubt.

Amelia hurried toward the door, turning back on the threshold. “Are you not coming?”

“I will wait in the adjoining room until you have given your welcome speech,” he replied. “Indeed, I thought it best to allow you and the ladies to adjust before making my entrance.”

Amelia rolled her eyes. “Very well, but do not think you can make a sly escape. I have the groundskeepers watching every possible exit.”

“I would not dream of it.” He put on a smile, wishing he did not adore her so much. If he liked her just a little bit less, perhaps he would have found the nerve to flee back to his own estate before his betrothed could be shoved into his path.



“It is my great pleasure to welcome you to my humble abode,” an older woman announced, waiting at the bottom of the steps as Olivia and her mother alighted from the carriage. The Dowager Countess, presumably.

Olivia mustered a weary smile. “I hardly think you can call such a residence “humble.” I cannot imagine a hermit or a cleric living a modest life within such walls.” Her mother flashed her a warning look, prompting Olivia to add, “What I mean to say, rather clumsily, is that it is a beautiful house, and we are so very grateful to be welcomed.”

Olivia was surprised by the earnest note in her voice, entirely fabricated.

The Dowager Countess chuckled. “You must be nervous,” she said, “but there is no need to be. I am certain we shall enjoy ourselves during your stay. Why, it is always a delight to breathe new vigor into these hallways.”

“You are too kind, My Lady,” Olivia replied, dipping into a curtsy.

“Indeed, we are so very happy to be here,” Olivia’s mother agreed, weaving her arm through Olivia’s.

The Dowager gestured toward the house. “If you will follow me, I thought we might take tea in the drawing room so that you can rest yourselves, and then I shall show you everything there is to see at my admittedly not-so humble abode.” She flashed a wink at Olivia, who had the slightest inkling that she might come to like the Dowager.

With that, Olivia and her mother followed the Dowager into the pretty sandstone manor—smaller than Olivia’s residence of Canrave Hall, yet somehow more striking with its porticoed entrance and cloistered front terrace that resembled an ancient temple of some kind.

Soon enough, the three women were comfortably situated in a grand drawing room, sharing a pot of tea as birds squabbled

for crumbs out on that beautiful, cloistered terrace.

“We must apologize for our untidy appearance,” Olivia’s mother said, sipping her tea as if she had drunk nothing for a week. “Our departure from Canrave was somewhat chaotic, and we thought it best not to pause on our journey to seek rest at one of the charming countryside inns that we passed on our way.”

The Dowager batted a dismissive hand. “Not at all, dear Viscountess. You both look lovely.”

We look as if we have just come from a ball, dragged behind the horses instead of sitting in the carriage, Olivia desperately wanted to quip, but she held her tongue, remembering that her entire performance over the next week or so would rely upon her gentility and pleasantness, at least, toward her mother and the Dowager.

Olivia was about to take a refreshing sip of her own tea when a side-door suddenly screeched open and a figure strode inside, halting her with her lips upon the hot rim of the teacup. Her eyes widened, her hand still tipping the cup until it was too late, and steaming tea spilled down her chin. In a clumsy rush, she set down her cup and wiped her mouth upon the back of her gown’s sleeve, forgetting that there was a perfectly good napkin on the table in front of her.

Goodness, a sly voice in her mind whispered as she did anything she could not to stare at the gentleman who had just entered the room again.

The Marquess of Bridfield certainly had the appearance to make his reputation believable. Heroically tall, mythologically broad in the shoulders and chest, with a rod-straight posture that practically forced her eyes to admire him from head to toe. His garments were exquisitely tailored, his tailcoat a dark, forest green that strained against the muscle of powerful arms, and light-colored trousers that suffered the same struggle in containing mighty thighs. Hessian boots completed the image of a gentleman who understood just how pleasing he was to the eye.

Goodness, her mind whispered again, as a haze of sunlight caught the golden-blond of his hair, and made his eyes—the same dark, forest green as his tailcoat—glitter as he caught her eye for just a moment, before she quickly dropped her gaze.

Since departing the ball the previous night, she had wondered what the marquess might look like, for though she had attended countless balls throughout every season since her debut, she could not recall a Marquess of Bridfield at all. Now that he was standing in the same room as her, she was certain she would have remembered ever seeing such a man.

Yet, because you are a Marquess and you are unjustly handsome, you are not cast from society as a woman in your position would be, she grumbled inwardly to distract herself, deciding in that moment that it would not be difficult to hate him as long as she kept thoughts like that at the forefront of her mind. Her father had been infuriatingly handsome in his youth, according to her mother, so it seemed that her father and her “betrothed” had even more in common.

Of course, you would choose such a man for me, Father, Olivia let her anger replace her shock. *I imagine you think it is fitting to punish me with someone like you, so I will be doomed to repeat my mother’s life.*

“Good afternoon, ladies.” The Marquess bowed, his curly blond hair falling over his face as he did so. As he stood back up to his full, tremendous height, he swept a hand through his hair and, for a moment, Olivia could have sworn that time slowed. “I am Evan Thorne, the Marquess of Bridfield. And while I would relish the opportunity to stay and sip tea and chatter about the weather and how dainty the lemon tarts are, I thought a walk in the gardens might be less... intense for a first meeting.” His enchanting eyes fixed upon Olivia. “Miss Agarn, would you care to join me?”

Olivia blinked. “I... should like that very much,” she replied, reminding herself to be nice.

“A fine idea!” the Dowager agreed, though Olivia’s mother looked like she wanted to curl up on the comfortable settee and fall asleep. The Dowager seemed to notice, offering a fond

smile. “Viscountess Agarn, it might be better for you to oversee the arrangement of your respective belongings. I shall have the housekeeper show you to your chambers, and then I shall accompany these two on their walk.”

Olivia’s mother expelled a subtle sigh of relief. “Certainly, My Lady. That is a most thoughtful notion.”

“In that case, I shall await you outside,” Evan said, bowing once more before leaving through the door where he had entered.

So, he has manners, Olivia pondered, frowning at the now-closed door. She had assumed that a notorious rake would seize upon an opportunity to be alone with a woman, particularly one he was betrothed to. Then again, perhaps a rake with manners and charm was a far more dangerous creature than an opportunist.

As she was left alone in the drawing room, she began to feel, for the first time, like she was in great peril indeed.



“Is that silk from the Orient?” Evan asked, folding his arms behind his back as he walked at his future bride’s side, through the ornamental garden to the west of the Dowager House.

Miss Agarn glanced down at her gown. “I could not tell you. It was not my choice of gown.”

“Was it a gift?”

She shrugged. “More of a demand.” She shook her head as if a fly had buzzed too close to her ear. “What I mean is, I was asked if I might like to wear it, and I am always prepared to do as I am asked. My father chose it while he was in London. It is rather pretty, is it not?”

“It becomes you well,” Evan lied, for the orange hue of the gown did nothing to complement her exceptional complexion, nor did such an elaborate gown suit the grounds of a countryside manor in the fiercest heat of a summer afternoon.

The glister upon her rosy-cheeked, angelically pale face was testament to that.

He had not shown it in the drawing room for obvious reasons, but Miss Olivia Agarn was undoubtedly one of the prettiest ladies he had ever beheld, with silky dark hair, the color of autumn chestnuts, and blue eyes that reminded him of dusk. Her lips were full and pink, matching the roses in her cheeks and filling him with a desire to know what she looked like when she smiled; but, thus far, she had not even managed the ghost of one.

“Thank you,” she replied, her gaze fixed forward.

He dipped his head. “It is my pleasure.” Fumbling for conversation, he continued, “Do you enjoy walks? I suppose I should have asked that before I invited you to join me in a turn around the gardens, but nevertheless...”

“I enjoy walks very much,” she said flatly, and Evan groaned inwardly.

She is beautiful, yes, but possesses only beauty. He supposed he should not have been surprised that she was like every other woman he had encountered in the *ton*. She was simply a young lady, edging toward spinsterhood, in search of a husband, exactly like the rest of them. After hearing his aunt mention that Olivia had a similarly controversial reputation to him, he had expected some liveliness or intrigue at least, but merits other than beauty seemed to be as absent as her ability to smile.

He tried again. “What else do you favor? Are you fond of poetry, music, literature? Do you... like to embroider?” He grimaced, wishing the gravel pathways and blooming flowerbeds would swallow him up.

Olivia looked back over her shoulder and Evan followed her gaze absently, noting that his aunt was farther behind them than he had realized, pretending to stop and admire some hydrangeas. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes, understanding that she was being mischievous again, giving them some privacy to converse.

“Forgive her,” Evan said. “She means well.”

Olivia peered up at him, transforming before his very eyes. Where she had been placid and somewhat dull a moment ago, there was now a fire in her gaze and a coldness in her expression, as if she had just happened upon something grotesque.

“What else do I favor? What sort of question is that?” she remarked curtly, in a hushed tone. “If you believe your usual charms and lures will work upon me, you are to be sorely mistaken. Of course, you can try, but it will be a tremendous waste of your breath, and rather akin to hitting your head against a wall.”

He blinked in surprise. “Pardon?”

“Do the ladies you ask that to usually cover their face and giggle behind a fan?” she went on, completely changed. “If I were to say poetry or literature, would you recite a passage or verse you have learned by heart because you know naïve ladies love such things? I imagine you feel awash with triumph when they swoon, do you not? Well, it is my pleasure to inform you that I am not the swooning kind. I tried once and hit my head, yet I do believe it made me impervious to ulterior charm, so I cannot curse the bruising too much.”

He stared at her as if he had woken from a nightmare and could see the monster right in front of him. “I... was merely asking a civil question,” he said, finding his voice. “I thought that might be more interesting than walking through these gardens in stony silence.”

“The statues seem to endure quite well in stony silence,” she remarked, and he laughed despite himself. Her eyes narrowed, and he immediately swallowed his amusement.

Clearing his throat, he put on his most polite voice. “Very well, what *would* you like to talk about? Perhaps, if you begin the conversation, you might feel more comfortable.”

“In your company, there is no comfort,” she shot back, pressing on into a walled area of the garden, where roses bloomed.

Somewhat rankled by her damning assertion, he followed her into the walled garden. “Have I said something to offend, Miss Agarn? I assure you, it is not my intention. Perhaps, you are simply nervous about this—”

“I am nervous of being left alone with you, but I am not nervous about this meeting,” she cut him off. “I know what manner of man you are, My Lord. Indeed, much like this hideous gown that my father demanded I wear, I am convinced that being matched with you is one of his wretched little jokes: an attempt to make me compliant by way of humiliation.”

Evan was stunned by the change in Olivia, uncertain of whether to leave the walled garden or stay where he was. After all, *he* was the one who had fueled the rumors of his rakish behavior. He only had himself to blame. Indeed, this was precisely what he had wanted, when he heard that he was to be married off without delay.

“With respect, Miss Agarn, you do not know me,” he said, wondering why his heart thudded with anger instead of relief and why his mind prickled with irritation when he should have been grateful that he would not have to leave fake letters and scandal sheets lying around.

Olivia smirked. “I know you by reputation, and that is all I need to know.”

“So, why are you here?” Evan sniffed, playing her at her own game.

“Excuse me?”

“Why are you here if you have already decided to detest me?” He paused, frowning. “Why have you not fled this entire arrangement if I am so reprehensible to you?”

Something like fear twitched her eyelids. “Because... I understand my duty as the only child of a good family. At least, as the only daughter of a beloved mother.”

“You despise me, but you still intend to marry me?” There was something in her tone he did not believe.

She shrugged. “Of course. There are plenty of husbands and wives who loathe one another.” She paused, averting her gaze.

“But if you are not interested in marrying me anymore, then there is nothing I can do. My mother will be disappointed, but she will recover... and I do not much care if my father is exasperated. He ought to be accustomed to the feeling by now.”

There it is... He swallowed the urge to smile at the surprising guile from her. *She wants me to break our engagement.* He might have been more pleased by the revelation if it had not been for the memory of his promise. A promise he had made to his aunt to at least endure the fortnight to come and to try and make this betrothal work.

Understanding dawned on a wave of frustration: to avoid breaking his aunt’s heart, he needed to make *Olivia* end the engagement. And though he was no true rogue or rake, he would need to play the part of one to send her away.

“I did not say I was not interested,” he said, taking a few steps toward *Olivia*.

Her eyes widened and she staggered back, bumping into the wall behind her. Her mouth opened and closed as if she meant to say something, but no words came out, just a wheeze of breath.

He edged closer until he was no more than half a step away from her. Desperately struggling to think of what a rake would do, he lifted his hand and pressed it against the wall she stood flush against. Leaning in until he was so close to her face that he could see a tiny mole beneath her right eye—a sole “blemish” upon the porcelain smoothness of her face—he mustered his most charming smile.

“In truth, you have aroused my intrigue, for I thought you a little dull until you transformed like that, showing me a glimpse of your true character,” he told her in what he hoped was a sultry voice, as he lightly pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “Now, I must say, I am very much looking forward to spending the next two weeks in your company.”

Olivia stared up at him like a panicked animal, her breath ragged, her chest rising and falling so fast he feared she might actually faint. Her mask had slipped once more, revealing a

real sliver of who she was beneath both the cold façade and the veneer of a tedious socialite.

Evan could not help but smirk, realizing that chasing her away might be easier than he thought. “What a pleasant walk, Miss Agarn,” he murmured. “Indeed, I find myself rather... exhilarated.”

Pushing off the wall, he flashed her a wink and walked away, his heart beating fast as he stepped out of the walled garden and into the wider world again. There, he took a breath and clasped his hands behind his back once more, his fingertips still tingling with the silky sensation of her hair against his bare skin.

“Evan?” his aunt called to him. “Where is Miss Agarn?”

Evan put on a smile. “She is admiring the roses, Aunt. I must tend to something; I trust you can keep the young lady amused?”

“Of course, but—” Amelia began to say, but he was already walking away, shocked to his core that playing the role of an infamous rake had come so naturally.

Two weeks, he told himself. Two weeks, and I will be free again.

But, considering both he and Olivia desired the same thing, it remained to be seen who had the fortitude to uphold the engagement and who would be the one to surrender, ending it first.

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Thank you very much!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Like all true romantics, Tiffany had always been fascinated by the great love stories of the past. The only child of two historians, she had always felt a pull towards British History and the epics that it spawned. But, instead of following in her parent's footsteps, Tiffany chose to express her love of history in her own way: by writing about her favorite era.

After obtaining a degree in English Literature, Tiffany decided to write her first book and never looked back. When she isn't writing, she enjoys spending time with her own Prince Charming, and their two beautiful children, enjoying Massachusetts' natural wonders.

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