

Emily Honeyfield



A Rogue
Duke's
Redemption

A Rogue Duke's Redemption

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

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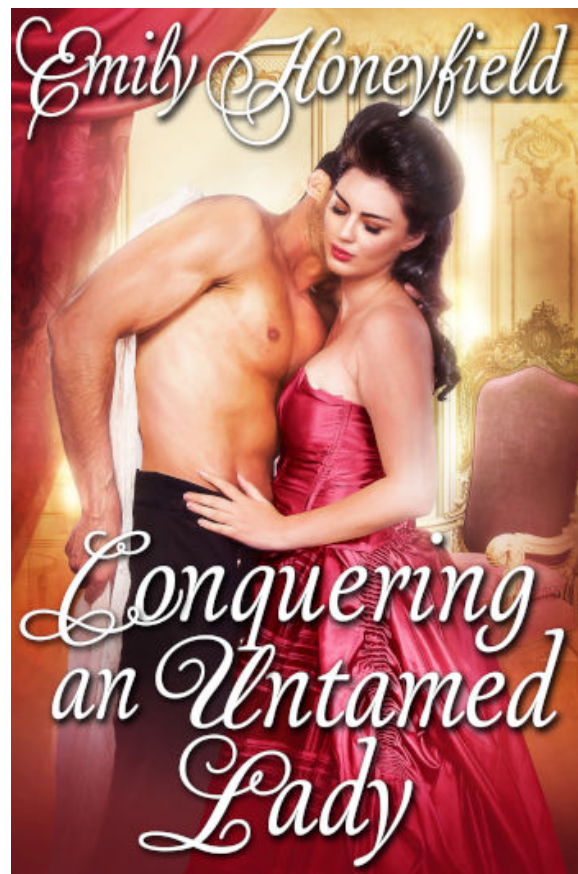
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Introduction

After her parents' death, Sylvia has been raised by the Duke of Northbridge. When he suddenly dies, she is left adrift and unsure of her future. That is until a seductive Duke arrives to take over the estate and introduce her to high society in hopes of finding her a husband. However, despite society's expectations of her as a well-bred lady, Sylvia finds herself unable to tame the passion that burns deep inside her for her new guardian...

Will Sylvia find the recipe to win the Duke's heart?

The tempting Ethan Colbert never dreamed of being a Duke. As a doctor, he was content with healing the sick and injured. However, when his distant relative, the Duke of Northbridge, passes away, Ethan is forced to take on a new role. As he struggles to keep the estate afloat, he finds himself drawn to the alluring Sylvia in ways he never expected. He knows that if his lustful passion is discovered, it can unleash a scandal that could destroy them both.

Can he afford to risk everything, including his newfound title, for the woman who has set his heart on fire?

As their passion ignites into an inferno, Sylvia and Ethan become lost in a dizzying whirlwind of desire, where every stolen kiss threatens to scandalise the ton. With their reputations and social status at stake, they must find a way to overcome all obstacles and make their two worlds one. Will their lust burn them both to the ground, or will they turn their sinful affair into a happily ever after?

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Chapter 1

The carriage bumped along, and Ethan somehow managed to keep his balance, stopping himself from getting thrown against the side. Across from him, the loud snoring stopped abruptly as Harry Pritcher was tipped off the seat and landed on the floor. Groaning, he slowly sat up and clutched at his head.

“God, that hurt. What hit me?”

“How can you sleep right now?” Ethan asked. “I don’t understand how you can do that when it’s not exactly the comfiest place to rest.”

“I can cope. It’s something I’m good at.” Harry shifted himself back onto the seat with a wince. “Besides, we were up quite late last night, and I didn’t get much sleep.”

Ethan grunted.

“You mean you were up quite late. I was in bed at a reasonable time. You chose to carry on drinking.”

Harry shrugged.

“Well, I’m not the one who’s now become a duke. I can be a bit more...reckless.”

“And that includes getting really drunk and then snoring away on a several-hour ride?” Ethan shot back.

“I wasn’t snoring!”

“Oh, you were. It was loud enough that the driver was asking if everything was all right because he could hear a strange noise coming from in here.”

Harry sighed and settled back, rubbing a hand over his rugged face. His blond hair was sticking up in different directions, and his eyes were bloodshot. Even though it had been a week since they had taken their last exam, Harry was still drinking in celebration. Then it was because his closest friend had inherited a dukedom, and he wouldn't have to worry about money again.

Ethan was more worried about Harry's liver at this point.

"How long do you think we've got to go now?" Harry asked, shifting about on the seat. "I need to stop shortly. I'm going to need to relieve myself."

"We stopped about an hour ago."

"Really? How did I not know about that?"

Ethan rolled his eyes.

“I did try to wake you, but you were dead to the world. I couldn’t wake you no matter what I did.”

Harry pouted.

“It wasn’t that bad, was it?”

“Do you want to argue that point with me?”

Ethan didn’t want to have an argument with Harry right now. They had been travelling since just before dawn, and while they had stopped regularly to have something to eat or change the horses over, most of the day had been inside the four shaking walls of the duke’s carriage. Ethan was getting fed up with it.

Of all the places he had to inherit, why did it have to be in Northumberland? It felt so far away from London. And it was. According to the letter from his uncle's solicitor, the Duke of Northbridge's ancestral home was on the outskirts of Wooler, not far away from the Scottish border.

It was a two-day carriage ride from the capital city, and Ethan wished that he had turned this journey down. He could have stayed in London and corresponded with Mr Tillbury by letter, surely?

Apparently, that couldn't happen. He had to come up to the manor house and take charge of the dukedom.

This wasn't how Ethan had thought his life would go. He had been orphaned at the age of ten, and his uncle, the late Duke of Northbridge, who wasn't really an uncle but Ethan's father's cousin, had taken him in.

Wooler had been somewhat isolating for Ethan, so he had been sent to Eton to be educated, with the duke funding the money.

It was because of the old man that he was able to go to medical school and become a doctor. He was able to get the experience to go for the multiple exams to become a surgeon and take part in operations.

And Ethan had been just a couple of exams away from becoming a qualified surgeon, something he had wanted to be for some years now. Now he had to go to the ancestral home in the middle of nowhere and become a duke. It felt surreal, and Ethan wasn't sure what to make of it.

He knew that his uncle had been unwell, and his health had deteriorated after the death of his wife, Ethan's aunt. However, he had refused to have any doctor look at him, and the last time Ethan saw him, the duke had said he didn't want any advice on how to live his life. Now he had passed away, and Ethan had been on the other side of the country.

It made him feel guilty that he hadn't been there to be at the bedside of the man who took him in when he didn't need to. The man who had turned him into the person he was today. Then again, knowing the old duke, he wouldn't have wanted that to happen. He would have wanted everyone to go about their day as normal, nobody to fuss over him. Uncle Francis had hated fuss.

Now he was gone. And Ethan felt a little hollow. Because he was the next male in the family, he was now the Duke of Northbridge. Instead of Doctor Colbert, a title Ethan had held with pride, he had become a duke.

This didn't feel real. Ethan didn't feel like he deserved this title. He had trained to be a regular person. Nobody had prepared Ethan to be Uncle Francis' heir. It was like they thought he would be able to handle it without any type of preparation.

Ethan would rather retake his last exam several times over than become the Duke of Northbridge. But it wasn't really something he could argue about for now. Certainly not when he was bumping around in the carriage.

“Do you think Simpson and Williams have gotten to the house by now?” Harry asked, stretching his legs before crossing them at the ankles.

“I should think so. They left a day before us, so they should have arrived already.”

“Good. I’m looking forward to a long, hot bath.”

Ethan smiled.

“You might want some hot water to steam the hangover you’re going to suffer from, certainly.”

“I don’t suffer like that after drinking. You know that.”

“And I know you’re the only one who thinks that,” Ethan chuckled. “You suffer worse than I do.”

Harry shrugged.

“At least I have some fun.”

“To the point you were sick for most of yesterday?”

“That was a temporary thing.”

Ethan sighed. His friend was certainly very stubborn. But he was supportive. He had offered to come along with Ethan to Wooler, even if he didn't need to. Ethan was grateful for Harry's presence; it would make him feel less lonely as he got used to things in his new home.

If he had a choice, he wouldn't have made the journey in the first place.

“What are you going to do when you get there?” Harry asked.
“Once we’re there, are you suddenly going to become the high and mighty duke?”

“You know it doesn’t work like that, Harry. And it’s not something you should jest about.”

“Well, you have to find it amusing, Doctor Colbert.” Harry chuckled, followed immediately by a loud belch. Ethan grimaced.

“Do you have to keep doing that?”

“Come on, Ethan. You know the gases get stuck when I’m drinking.”

“Maybe you should stop drinking so much.”

“And not have any fun? That would make life boring.”

Ethan loved Harry—they had been friends for twenty years—but he wished that he wouldn’t drink so much. It was like a tonic for him, and Harry got more and more belligerent when he’d had a few drinks.

Granted, he didn’t drink at all when he was working, and he made sure that he was sober around his patients, but when there were a few days when he wasn’t doing anything and didn’t need to see anyone sick, so he drank until he passed out. Ethan had asked why he did it, and Harry had just said he liked the taste.

How anyone could like the foul taste of spirits and beer, Ethan had no idea. It didn’t make him want to drink until he couldn’t remember what he was doing.

“Well?”

Ethan frowned.

“Well, what?”

“What are you going to do when you get to the house?” Harry prompted. “I thought I was the one who was meant to have memory problems.”

Ethan had almost forgotten what the question was. He dusted down his breeches.

“I’m not sure, really. I’m probably just going to have a look around and weigh up my options then.”

“What are your options?”

Ethan held up one finger.

“I let an estate manager take over and run everything while I go back to London to pursue my dreams of becoming a surgeon, or,” he held up another finger, “I sell everything, including the house.”

Harry blinked.

“What? You would sell an ancestral home and put everyone out of a job?”

“I wouldn’t leave them without a job. I’d make sure everyone was settled with something before I left.”

“But that home? It belonged to your family.”

Ethan shook his head.

“It belonged to my uncle’s family. He was the eldest son, and both of his brothers had already passed away. He had no children, so that meant it passed to me, a second cousin and the eldest male heir. I don’t want it.”

Harry didn’t look too happy about this.

“You do realise that you’re disrespecting the man who took you in and paid for your schooling from Eton, all the way through medical school. He even funded you to go to Paris to study there.”

“I know that, and I will always be grateful for it. But Uncle Francis was aware that I would be reluctant to take the title. He knew that it wasn’t something I wanted.”

“If that’s the case, why didn’t he make a will to pass it on to someone else?”

Ethan sighed.

“That’s because there isn’t anyone else. There is only me.”

Well, there were Ethan’s two sisters, but they couldn’t inherit the title due to their sex. And they were both happily married—one lived in Edinburgh, and the other had settled just outside Manchester—so moving to the wilderness of Northumberland wouldn’t have appealed to either of them.

With his job and what he loved doing in London, Ethan couldn’t really go back and forth so much. The only option would be to sell the northern estate because what was the point of having an ancestral home if he wasn’t around to live in it?

“It’s not just the servants you have to worry about, Ethan,” Harry said, bracing himself with a grimace as the carriage

bounced. “I hear that your uncle had a ward. A young woman. What’s going to happen to her?”

Ethan had forgotten about that. On his last visit a year ago, Uncle Francis had expressed regret that he wouldn’t be able to meet his late wife’s ward, who had travelled to Alnwick during Ethan’s visit to meet some friends. He thought they would get along. Ethan didn’t know about that; he wasn’t keen on getting to know a little girl who was probably a pain in the neck.

“I have no idea. She’ll probably have to go to an orphanage or someone will take her in.”

“You’re not going to do it?” Harry frowned. “That’s a bit cruel, Ethan.”

“I don’t know how to look after a child, Harry. She would end up neglected if she came with me.”

Harry snorted.

“I’d like you to try and use that excuse with your wife once you start having children.”

Ethan didn’t respond. He hadn’t discussed it with Harry in some time—marriage—but he hadn’t really cared about finding a wife. Of course, he would like to be married and have a family, but Ethan knew that, realistically, it wouldn’t happen as he wanted. His work was his life, and that would always come first.

Everyone needed a doctor, and he would end up neglecting his wife and children. It would have to take a very special woman for Ethan to take a step back and balance his life out.

Another reason he didn’t want the dukedom. It would just go to someone else within a few years—he was sure there was a distant relative in America who could take it—or, failing that, it would just stop with him. Ethan wasn’t exactly reliable in carrying on the dukedom for his family.

The old duke had to have known that. And yet he still did it.

Ethan wished that Uncle Francis was still alive. Then he would ask him why.

Sylvia moved aside the straw and found three eggs underneath. Picking them out, she put them carefully into her basket. Only to squeal when something hard pecked her hand. One of the hens had come into the chicken coop and wasn't happy that she was taking the eggs.

“Naughty!” Sylvia scolded the bird before standing up. “You shouldn't be so mean.”

She got an annoyed cluck in response, and the hen tried to peck at her legs through her skirts. Sylvia got out of the coop

and made her way through the other chickens, who were happily eating the food she had scattered for them.

She managed to get through the gate and shut it before the upset hen charged at her. That particular animal was like a grumpy old lady; it didn't like that Sylvia or the servants took its eggs. The other hens didn't care. It was just this one.

Sucking at the sore part of her hand, Sylvia waited until the disgruntled bird walked away, strutting with its head held high. She could imagine it being one of the high-society women in London, turning its nose up at everything while it strutted around like it ruled the roost. None of the other hens paid any attention, and the cockerel didn't seem to care, doing its own thing in the corner of the enclosure where the hens were kept.

At least she had managed to get all of the eggs. Mrs Andrews would be delighted to have this many; she was looking forward to making a cake for tea later. Sylvia could feel her mouth watering at the thought; she did love the cook's baking. In fact, any of her food was delicious.

Uncle Francis had always praised the middle-aged woman, saying she was worth her weight in gold.

Sylvia felt a pang of sadness as she thought about the man who had taken her in when she was a girl. Her parents had died within weeks of each other six years ago, and Sylvia didn't have any family. None that were close in location or relation, anyway. So the duke and duchess, the people her parents rented land from, had agreed to take her in and look after her.

Sylvia had been shocked about that; she never thought they would do anything like that. If they did, it was to put her to work as a maid to earn her keep. But they took her on as their own child. Sylvia didn't think she would ever be able to repay them, even though both of them had sadly passed away.

Now they were gone, and Sylvia felt lonely and scared. She had spent six years being a ward of the Duke of Northbridge, and now she didn't know what was going to happen. Did the guardianship pass onto the heir, or was she going to have to find something else? Mr Tillbury hadn't told her anything.

Sylvia felt like she was hanging over a steep drop, and she didn't know if she was going to be falling or be dragged back to safety.

“Lady Sylvia?”

Sylvia looked up. Cathy was coming across the yard, sidestepping the horse dung that hadn't been cleaned up and turning her nose up at the mess. Sylvia checked her hand. No wound, just a red mark. At least there was no blood.

“Yes, Cathy?”

“Aren't you going to get ready? The new duke is supposed to be here soon.” Cathy looked her up and down. “You can't greet him looking like this.”

Sylvia looked down at her dress.

“What’s wrong with what I’ve got on? It’s perfectly reasonable.”

“It’s dirty. You look like you’ve had a fight with a straw bale.” Cathy picked out a piece of straw from Sylvia’s hair. “What have you been doing?”

“I was just getting the eggs, that’s all.”

“You could have fooled me.”

Sylvia swatted Cathy’s hand away.

“Don’t fuss so, Cathy. I’m just helping Mrs Andrews and the kitchen staff with a few things. I’ve got to do something with my time.” She bit her lip. “If I don’t...well....”

Cathy's expression was sympathetic, and she squeezed Sylvia's hand.

"I know you're still grieving, Sylvia. But there's nothing we can do about it now. We're going to have to carry on and hope that the new duke isn't going to do anything that upends our lifestyle."

"Do you think he will?"

"I don't know, but from what I overheard when those two valets turned up to prepare for our guests, that could be a possibility."

Sylvia remembered the two gentlemen who had arrived the day before, laden with their masters' belongings. According to them, the new duke and his friend were coming to stay, and it was a rush to get more rooms ready. Mrs Goodpepper was still grumbling about the lack of notice and the little preparation they were given.

“Well, let’s hope that’s not going to happen.” Sylvia held up the basket of eggs. “I’ll take these to Mrs Andrews, and then I’ll go and get myself ready.”

“I’ll go on ahead and prepare a bath for you. You’re going to need to freshen up before the new duke comes. Otherwise, he’s going to get the wrong idea about you.”

Sylvia didn’t really know how she felt about that. She was in danger of losing her home, along with everyone else, and it left her feeling low.

“I’m not a proper lady, Cathy. I don’t think it will matter either way.”

Cathy snorted.

“His Grace took you on and gave you the title of lady so you could be part of Society without any problems. You had your

first Season because of him.”

“And look what happened there,” Sylvia muttered.

“He gave you the opportunity to become a lady, and you should make the most of it.”

Sylvia sighed. She didn't want to get into it again. Cathy was her friend as well as her personal maid, and the lines between her roles had become blurred. It felt good to have a confidant who made sure that her feet were still firmly on the ground. But she wished that Cathy would stop reminding them that Sylvia had only been a lady for the last six years; she still wasn't used to it.

“You go and run that bath, then, Cathy. I'll take these eggs to the kitchen. We've got plenty of time.”

Cathy snorted as she turned away.

“Given how suddenly those two valets turned up and made us aware that there were two gentlemen coming, and not one, I wouldn’t be surprised if they arrived ahead of time. We have to be on our toes.”

And with that, she hurried back across the yard, giving the horse dung a wide berth before going back into the house. Sylvia couldn’t help but smile. Cathy was like an older sister, always fussing about. Then again, Sylvia did need someone who could keep her in line when she needed it. It was why the Duchess of Northbridge had assigned the thirty-year-old widow as Sylvia’s maid; she knew what was needed in Society. Sylvia would always be grateful for that.

She just wished Cathy would relax a little bit.

Feeling a gentle breeze on her face, Sylvia crossed the yard and made her way into the kitchen. Mrs Andrews was at the big table in the middle of the room, kneading something in a big bowl. She beamed when she saw Sylvia.

“Thank you, Lady Sylvia! How many eggs today?”

“I’ve got fourteen. Will that be enough?”

“That should be plenty for the cake, and then for something else later.” Mrs Andrews nodded towards a table by the wall. “Can you put them there? Jeffrey will sort them out for me. I’m sure you’ve got things to do.”

“Oh, you mean the new duke’s arrival?”

“You’ve got to get ready to meet him, yes?”

“I’ve got plenty of time.” Sylvia put the basket down and dusted her hands on her dress. “Cathy’s preparing a bath for me, so I have plenty of time. Is there anything else you want me to do, Mrs Andrews?”

The buxom woman chuckled.

“Honestly, you really are your mother’s daughter. Off you go. Get yourself looking pretty for the new duke. Let us servants do the work.”

Sylvia wanted to point out that she was actually a lady by birth, but she was sure she would be told that it was not the case anymore. For the last six years, she had been a lady after being taken under the Duke of Northbridge’s guardianship. Uncle Francis and Auntie Glynnis had been caring, and they made sure that she had her training to be a proper member of the ton.

But Sylvia couldn’t help it; she had grown up working and looking after everything else. While her parents were relatively wealthy landowners, they were still hard-working people, and they made sure that their only child had the same ethics. Even when they were sick and barely able to move, her parents did what they could to work.

Sylvia felt a pang of sadness as she thought about her family. She missed them. While she appreciated what the duke and duchess had done for her over the years, Sylvia would give anything to have her mother and father back. Then maybe she wouldn't be here worrying if she was going to stay in her home or end up being sent elsewhere, either to the workhouse or somewhere to work.

As she made her way through the huge house, Sylvia wondered what the new duke was going to be like. According to Mr Tillbury, he was a distant relative of the duke's. A cousin, did he say, or a nephew? Sylvia couldn't remember. The family solicitor spoke in a tone that made people strain their ears to hear him. Sylvia had heard of being softly spoken, but Mr Tillbury took it to another level. Even his son complained about it.

Did this new duke look like Uncle Francis? Was he an old man as well? Or was he younger? Sylvia wondered if she would be able to get on the new duke's good side if he was younger. Could she appeal to him to make sure she didn't lose her place in the home? Or would he ignore it all and tell Sylvia that she had to leave as he wasn't dealing with her?

Not knowing was really unnerving. Sylvia was getting a headache from it all.

Passing by the staircase, Sylvia opened the front door and stepped out onto the wide stone steps that stretched out both left and right. From the top, she could see across the landscape. The slope in front of the house gave way to the beautiful scenery. On a clear, blue-skied day, it looked as if she could see for miles. When it was winter, and there was snow, everything was white and looked like a Christmas painting.

Sylvia loved growing up in this part of the world. They were only fifteen miles from the coast, and not far away from Alnwick. Also, there was so much to do in terms of walking. Sylvia loved going out every day for a walk and exploring something new. Uncle Francis had told her to make the most of it and soak up everything, so she took him up on it.

Perhaps she would be able to go on a walk later before the new duke arrived. It would help her feel refreshed and prepared to meet someone who would end up turning her life upside-down. She needed her composure to face him.

As Sylvia went down the steps, she was aware of a carriage coming up the drive, the horses pulling hard to get to the top of the hill. She slowed and watched the arrival in confusion. Who was coming here now? It wasn't Mr Tillbury; he didn't

have that crest on the door. And they weren't having any visitors as far as she was aware.

Then the carriage got a little closer, and Sylvia realised that it was Uncle Francis' crest. It was then that it hit her. Jenson, the carriage driver, had been sent down to London to fetch the new duke back to the ancestral home. And it looked like they had arrived far sooner than anyone expected.

Sylvia began to panic. As far as she was aware, things weren't quite ready. The household staff were preparing for an afternoon arrival, not this early in the day.

She turned, but in her panic, she missed her foot on the step and got caught in her dress. She slipped, pain exploding in her leg as she hit her shin against the stone. Sylvia sprawled on the steps, unsure whether to scream or cry. Whoever was in the carriage had to have seen what happened.

Her heart sank as the carriage stopped right beside her, and the door opened.

Oh, no.

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Chapter 2

Ethan felt a wave of nostalgia as he saw the Northbridge manor looming up on the hill. Somehow, an architect thought it was a good idea to build a house on a slope, digging out part of the hill so that everything would be level. They had done a good job, but Ethan still questioned why anyone would build it here, aside from the views.

Being at the top, anyone could see for miles. Ethan found it fascinating. He remembered spending his holidays here exploring the countryside. There was nothing like this where he had grown up in Durham. Ethan hadn't realised that there was anything as beautiful as where the Northbridge estate was until he moved to live there.

He was a city person. He loved the bustle of London and everything going on. It was always busy, and Ethan thrived on it. But seeing Northbridge Manor like this, he remembered his childhood time here, and how it had given him a sense of calm.

Maybe he should spend a bit of time here before he made some decisions. He could take those exams eventually. Time to breathe and reminisce about his Uncle Francis would be good for a while.

“Oh, my,” Harry said as he looked out of the window at the house. “That is impressive.”

“It is the house of a duke, after all.”

“And now it’s yours.” Harry wobbled and tipped forward. “Wait, what’s going on?”

“Calm down!” Laughing, Ethan caught him and helped Harry sit down next to him. “The driveway is steep, so we’re going to be off-balance for a little bit.”

“A steep driveway?” Harry scowled. “This is not what I want with the headache I have.”

“That serves you right for drinking so much.”

“I’m a grown man. You’re not my father.” Harry rubbed at his temples. “I can’t recall, did you say this old duke was your uncle or cousin? You call him Uncle Francis, but you said your father didn’t have any brothers.”

“He’s my father’s cousin, but due to his age, it was easier to call him Uncle Francis. It sounds a little more formal than simply calling a second cousin Francis.” Ethan yawned loudly. “I forgot that it was such an exhausting journey.”

“It wouldn’t be exhausting if you hadn’t made us leave so early this morning. That hotel bed was very comfortable.”

“The sooner we get things done, the sooner we can go back to London.” Ethan clapped his hand on Harry’s knee. “And you get to experience the fresh air of the countryside. I can’t believe I’ve known you for twenty years, and you’ve never come out here.”

“Same here.” Harry peered out at the scenery. “I might appreciate this a bit more if I wasn’t suffering. Let me have some sleep where I’m not being knocked around, and I’ll be able to enjoy everything.”

Ethan chuckled.

“You’re going to end up sleeping the whole time you’re here if you’re left to your own devices.”

“Is there anything to do around here? I saw civilisation a while back, but that was further back in the journey.”

“Well, you could always go for a long walk. Just not while you’re drunk, or you’ll end up falling down a hill and breaking a leg.”

“Stuff that!” Harry snorted. “I’m not leaving the grounds. I’m not stupid enough to venture out when there are death traps surrounding us.”

Ethan found it amusing that his friend was behaving like this. Then again, Harry Pritcher had been raised his whole life in Cambridge. The countryside he was used to was incredibly flat. This was probably the most extreme he had ever seen when it came to hills and valleys.

Finally, the carriage levelled out, and they were upright again. Just as the carriage was slowing to a stop, Ethan heard a cry from outside. He looked out and saw a dark-haired girl in a grubby-looking dress sprawled on the stone steps. She then started to curl into herself, trying to gingerly get herself up. Had she just fallen over?

The carriage stopped just as Ethan got out, and he hurried over.

“Are you all right?”

The girl froze. For a moment, she didn't move, as if she was afraid to look at him. Then she turned and glanced over her shoulder at him. Ethan was struck by how pretty she was. She was young, barely past the age of twenty, if he had to guess, with a heart-shaped face and pale skin. Her eyes were blue, widening when she realised that he was standing over her. Her mouth fell open, and she looked scared.

Ethan held up his hands to show he was not holding anything.

“It's all right. I don't mean you any harm. Are you all right? Did you hurt yourself?”

“I...I...” She licked her lips, and then she bit her lower lip. “I think I hurt my leg.”

“Do you mind if I have a look?”

The words were barely out of Ethan's mouth before he knew what he was saying. She stared at him like he had gone mad.

“What?”

“I'm a doctor. Well, sort of. I mean....”

“What does ‘sort of’ mean?” Her eyes blinked before she narrowed them. “Are you a doctor or not?”

“I have my licence, but....”

Ethan didn't know how to explain it. He lowered himself to a crouch, keeping his eyes on her. She seemed to be rather skittish, and he didn't want to scare her.

“Do you mind if I make sure you’re not hurt?”

“But....” She shifted around until she was sitting on the step, adjusting her skirts around her legs. “You shouldn’t be looking at my legs.”

“If it’s your ankle, there shouldn’t....”

“It was my shin,” she cut in. “Even if you are a doctor, as you say, I don’t think it’s appropriate.”

Now he had a better look at her, Ethan could see her eyes a little more clearly. He had initially thought that her eyes were blue, but they looked more green. It was like the two colours were swirling with each other and couldn’t decide which colour was the more dominant one. Ethan couldn’t stop himself from staring. They were really beautiful eyes.

“Are you here for anyone in particular?” The girl asked, jerking Ethan out of his daydream. She was frowning at him.

“We were only expecting the new Duke of Northbridge to arrive, but we weren’t aware of any other visitors.”

“Oh. Right.” Clearing his throat, Ethan stood up. “Well, you don’t need to expect anymore. I’m here now.”

It took a moment for clarity to take hold, and her eyes widened.

“You’re the Duke of Northbridge.”

Ethan tried not to grimace.

“It’s not exactly something I’m used to, but yes, I’m the duke.”

She gasped and scrambled to her feet, almost falling flat on her face. Ethan caught her before she ended up in a heap, struck by how warm her body felt against his. Then she was pulling away from him, stumbling upright and dusting herself down. She kept her eyes looking at anything except at him.

“Forgive me, Your Grace. I didn’t mean to....”

“You haven’t done anything wrong. Except maybe forget how to climb stairs.” Ethan peered at her. “Are you sure you’re all right? You didn’t hurt yourself too badly?”

“I’m perfectly fine.”

Ethan didn’t quite believe that. He was aware of movement behind him, and he turned to see Harry getting out of the carriage. He was staring at the girl.

“This is Harry Pritcher, Viscount Richardson. He’s staying here with me for a while.”

“We discovered that when your valets arrived yesterday. Mrs Goodpepper wasn’t too impressed that she didn’t have more advance notice.”

“He didn’t decide to come until a couple of days ago.” Harry made a face at Ethan. “Now I’m beginning to regret it.”

Ethan waved him into silence and turned back to the girl, who was brushing down the apron around her waist. There was a piece of straw in her hair, almost like a decoration, and there was a smudge of dirt on her cheek. She probably worked in the kitchens or something. Ethan couldn’t see a girl like this working in any other part of the house.

“Will you tell the housekeeper that we’ve arrived? And make sure that our horses and carriage are dealt with?”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

She bobbed a curtsy and turned away, only to trip as she started up the steps. Gasping, she kept herself up with her hands, and then she was charging up the stone staircase, disappearing out of sight. Harry chuckled.

“You’ve put the fear of God into her, Ethan.”

“I hope not. I don’t want everyone to treat me like I’m going to do something bad.”

“They might just do that if you do decide to sell the estate.”

Ethan didn’t respond, knowing that Harry was right.

He was the new duke? Sylvia's head was spinning as she staggered into the foyer, almost knocking over the butler, Pearson. Mumbling an apology, she hurried to the stairs and went up, grabbing onto the balustrade, so she didn't fall over again.

The new duke was so young. Older than her—if Sylvia had to guess, he was older than thirty—but very handsome. And he seemed to be so kind and gentle, wanting to check that she was all right. Sylvia had momentarily been struck dumb when she first saw him. When he said that he was a doctor, she could believe it.

And from the way he talked to her, not asking after her name, that must mean....

Sylvia looked down at herself, at her grubby attire, and realised that he must have thought she was one of the servants. And an untidy, clumsy one, at that.

Her face burning with her embarrassment, Sylvia rushed to her bedchamber and barged in, slamming the door behind her. Cathy jumped with a gasp, spilling water she had been tipping into the bath from a tin bucket onto the floor.

“Lady Sylvia! What on earth...?”

“He’s here.”

“Here?”

“The Duke of Northbridge. He’s here.”

Cathy’s mouth dropped open.

“What? But he was supposed to be here this afternoon.”

“Well, he’s here right now, and he’s coming in.” Sylvia limped over to the bed. “He’s here with a viscount. Richardson, I think he said.”

“Why are you limping?” Putting the bucket down and wiping her hands on her apron, Cathy hurried over. “What have you done?”

“It’s nothing.” Sylvia pulled up her skirts to look at her shin. “It’s going to be a nice bruise, but it’s fine.”

Although the pain coming from her leg was making her want to cry a little. She was sure she could feel the dent in the bone. Cathy knelt before her and gently inspected the injury with her hand, which caused Sylvia to wince.

“Ouch!”

“You’ll live. You were able to walk in here without collapsing. I doubt it’s broken.” Cathy stood up and put her hands on her hips. “And how did you do that? You didn’t do anything silly, did you?”

“I...” Sylvia felt like her mother was scolding her. She looked at the floor. “I tripped up the front stairs in front of the new duke.”

Cathy snorted.

“At least you know how to make an impression.”

“I thought you were meant to be my maid. Stop treating me like a child, Cathy.”

“Well, if you will end up falling flat on your face and hurting yourself...” Cathy gestured at the bath. “Come along, your bath is ready. Once you’ve gotten washed and dressed, you

can go downstairs and introduce yourself properly to the duke.”

Sylvia didn't move. She found that she didn't want to approach the duke. Not yet, anyway. The memory of how she felt when she laid eyes on him for the first time was still giving her shivers. He was tall, but not too tall. His hair was more red than brown, and he had a beard growing on his jaw. It wasn't thick, more like he hadn't shaved in a few days. It made Sylvia wonder what it would feel like if she touched it. Her fingers were tingling to find out.

And he had been relatively kind to her. Was he actually kind, or was it just a momentary lapse? Sylvia had no idea if this was his true personality or not, and she didn't like the idea of being around him until she knew more about him.

“Lady Sylvia?” Cathy was watching her, now realising that Sylvia hadn't moved. “Are you all right?”

“I...I think so.” Sylvia licked her lips. “I might just stay in my rooms and take my meals here. Just to be sure.”

Cathy frowned.

“But you can’t stay here all day. Lord Northbridge is going to wonder where you are.”

“We can say that I’m unwell, and I’ll present myself when I’m better. But not yet.” Sylvia looked towards the door. “I need to know who the man is before we have a proper conversation.”

“What do you mean?”

Before Sylvia could answer, there was a knock at the door. Sylvia stiffened. Cathy gave her a curious glance before going over to the door and opening it. The short stature of the housekeeper swept in as soon as there was enough space for her to get through.

“There you are, Lady Sylvia!” Mrs Goodpepper approached Sylvia. “Come along, dear. You need to get ready. The Duke of Northbridge has arrived, and he’s settling in with his friend.”

“I know,” Sylvia murmured.

“Well, come on. We need to get you washed and dressed in a clean gown.” Mrs Goodpepper cast an eye over Sylvia’s current attire. “You’re going to give a wrong impression if the duke sees you like this. He’s going to think you’re one of the staff if you stay in that.”

“He already does.”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing.” An idea was forming in Sylvia’s mind. She glanced over at the door. “Actually, I might stay out of the way for a while.”

Mrs Goodpepper frowned.

“What are you talking about? He’s the old duke’s family. Your new guardian. It would be rude for you not to see him.”

“I have an idea.” Could this actually work? Sylvia hoped so. She looked from the matronly housekeeper to her no-nonsense maid. “I’m going to be a maid for a few days.”

Both women stared at her. Cathy was the first to speak.

“What did you say?”

“You keep saying that the duke will mistake me for a maid, and he already has. I might as well use that to my advantage.” Sylvia paused. “I’ll dress as a maid and pretend to be one for a few days. I won’t do it for too long....”

“You’re right about that,” Mrs Goodpepper snorted. “Why on earth would you do that, my lady? That’s not becoming of a lady.”

“He’s meant to be my new guardian, yes?” Sylvia leaned forward. “He might have been kind to me in the short interaction we had, but how do I know that he’s like that all the time? I want to know what he’s really like, and how else am I going to do that unless I’m one of the household staff? People don’t pay attention to the servants, do they?”

Both housekeeper and maid looked shocked. Sylvia knew what she was asking was outrageous, and she should have been scolded soundly for suggesting such a thing. She hurried on before the housekeeper could open her mouth.

“We don’t know what he’s like, do we? He could easily put on a show for us. Why don’t we find out? I can pretend to be a member of the household staff and find out if he’s as kind in private as he was this morning.”

“And you’re willing to do something scandalous to find out?”
Cathy demanded. “We could find out for you.”

“I want to know myself.” Sylvia clasped her hands together. “I promise I won’t do anything stupid. Can you please let me do this? I won’t ask for anything outlandish again.”

Mrs Goodpepper looked at Cathy, who was shaking her head. She was clearly against it, but Mrs Goodpepper was wavering. Finally, she sighed and rubbed a hand over her face.

“All right. You can work with Mary. She’s assigned to Lord Northbridge’s rooms. But if this goes on and he finds out, I’m going to plead ignorance.”

Sylvia didn’t reply. She wouldn’t blame the older woman if she did. Taking a deep breath, she stood up.

“Then how about that bath? I think I need one after my chores this morning.”

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Chapter 3

Ethan hadn't realised how exhausted he was by the journey. He had felt all right while they were going along, but as he entered his bedchamber, one of his many rooms in the suite in the east part of the house, he discovered that he was actually very tired.

It was just impossible to sleep in a carriage when there was snoring from Harry, and the journey not being very smooth. Ethan still had no idea how his friend had managed to sleep like that.

Simpson was there, laying out Ethan's evening attire over a chair. He bowed as his master came in.

"Your Grace. I trust your journey was uneventful."

"It was long, certainly." Ethan frowned. "And would you not call me 'Your Grace', Simpson? I know it's something I have

to get used to, but I don't feel comfortable hearing it from you."

Simpson's mouth twitched.

"It's something that I need to get used to as well. After all, you are a duke now."

"Don't remind me. I've been having all of the staff downstairs calling me 'Your Grace' and bobbing up and down like they're on a boat. It was making me seasick." Ethan looked around the room. "This is probably bigger than the shared communal room Harry and I share."

"Your suite of rooms is rather remarkable, I must say."

"I just need a bedchamber. Why do I need more than that?"

Simpson's smile now came into view, the scar on his cheek moving with the action.

"You're one of the highest members of the nobility now. You can do whatever you want and have whatever you want."

To Ethan, that sounded like a recipe for disaster. He felt a yawn coming, and he didn't bother to hold it back.

"I think I'm going to get some sleep, Simpson," he said, toeing off his shoes. "I've already told Mrs Goodpepper that I don't want any lunch, but I will take tea later if I'm awake."

"Very well, Your Grace." Simpson approached him. "Would you like any help, or do you want some peace?"

"You would do better to look after Lord Richardson. I think Williams is going to need help getting him properly into bed."

“Then I’ll do what I can.” Simpson bowed. “Sleep well, Your Grace. There’s a bell by the bed if you need anything.”

“Thank you, Simpson.”

This was going to be odd, having other people do things for him. Ethan was used to getting things for himself. Even when he had lived with Uncle Francis and Auntie Glynnis, he had felt uncomfortable having servants waiting on him. If he was to keep the dukedom, and he stayed here, it was going to be rather awkward for him.

Maybe he should get on with asking if there was an estate manager, then he could arrange for him to take charge. Ethan didn’t have an idea how to run an estate, and he certainly didn’t know how to look after a child.

It was no surprise that Uncle Francis took in a child when she was orphaned. After all, he had done it with Ethan. But Ethan

had no idea how to look after a child, especially a girl. He could handle a child as a patient because that was just a few minutes. Under the same roof for the foreseeable future? That was something else.

Ethan hoped that she wasn't a spoiled little brat. He hadn't gotten a chance to see her—Mrs Goodpepper had said that the girl was unwell and sleeping in her private rooms on the other side of the house. They would inevitably have to meet in the near future, and Ethan wasn't sure how to feel about that.

He could only hope that she was a polite, well-mannered girl. If she wasn't, Ethan would have no problem with sending her off somewhere, so he didn't have to deal with her.

Ethan had thought he would lie down on the bed and doze for a while. A short nap normally helped him when he needed sleep. But he could feel the pull as soon as he closed his eyes, and Ethan sank into the sleep that wrapped around him.

When he opened his eyes, the room was darker than he remembered. The shadows had moved across the room, and they seemed to be a little longer. Rubbing his eyes, Ethan

rolled over and searched for a clock. There had to be one somewhere.

There wasn't anything within reach. Sighing, Ethan grabbed onto the bellpull and gave it a tug. Then he slumped onto his back and stared at the ceiling. How long had he been asleep? It must have been quite a while. He hadn't gotten under the sheets, so he was feeling a little chilly. He hadn't even removed his jacket, and it was feeling uncomfortable on him.

At least the bed was comfortable. The mattress was very soft. Ethan could see himself getting several nights of good sleep here. That was an advantage.

He was sitting up slowly, feeling like he had a rock in his head, when the door opened, and Simpson came in. His valet bowed.

“Your Grace. Did you sleep well?”

“What time is it, Simpson?”

“It’s a little after four in the afternoon.”

“What?” Ethan made a quick calculation in his head. “I arrived here shortly before eleven...I’ve been asleep for five hours?”

“You must have needed it, Your Grace.”

“I suppose.” Ethan yawned and shuffled to the edge of the mattress. He grimaced when he felt his stomach shifting, and then a growling noise reached his ears. “I think I need something to eat as well. Can you get the kitchen to send something up?”

“You’re in luck. Mrs Andrews, the cook, has made a cake for tea. She’s also preparing sandwiches as we speak.”

“Did she guess that I was going to wake up soon?”

Simpson smiled.

“From the little I know about Mrs Andrews, she’s one step ahead of everyone.”

That sounded about right. Mrs Andrews had been employed to cook shortly before Ethan left for Paris, and Uncle Francis had nothing but praise for her cooking. Having sampled some of her food himself, Ethan felt the same.

“Tell Mrs Andrews I’d like to take it in my rooms.”

“Of course.”

“And where is Lord Richardson? Is he still asleep?”

“I’m not sure, but I can find out.”

“Do that, and make sure Mrs Andrews has plenty for both of us. We can take tea in the next room.” Ethan stood up and stretched. “What about this little ward? Have you seen a little girl running around?”

Simpson arched an eyebrow.

“No, I haven’t seen a child at all that wasn’t a member of the household staff.”

“I see. Thank you.”

Ethan wondered about the bemused expression his valet gave him. Did he know something Ethan didn't? Or was it something else? Simpson wasn't exactly known for being affectionate towards children. Ethan had wondered why, but his servant had never given him a response. It was probably not for him to know or understand.

Shrugging out of his jacket—Ethan made a mental note not to sleep in it again—he put his shoes on and went into the outer room. This one was more of a drawing room area, with two settees and a table set up to look like a male boudoir.

And the pink wallpaper...Ethan cringed. He understood that pink meant a strong, dominant colour for men, but it didn't sit well with him. He preferred less bold colours, something simple.

Would he be able to do something with decorating if he chose to keep the place?

There was a knock at the door, and it opened to let in the girl who had fallen over earlier. She was now dressed in a clean

gown and a fresh apron, wearing a white hat that covered her dark hair and kept it out of her face. She glanced up at him and then quickly looked at the floor, dropping into a low curtsy.

“Your Grace. Mrs Goodpepper asked me to come and light the fire for you.”

“The fire?” Ethan frowned at the empty grate. “It’s spring. Why would we need the fire?”

“It does get cold at this time of the evening during the spring. Especially your rooms, as you are on the east side of the house.”

Ethan hadn’t thought about it before. When he had lived here previously, he had slept on the west side of the house. His rooms had always been warm at this time of year. Sighing, he gestured at the fireplace.

“Go on, then. You’re not going to fall face-first into the fire, are you?”

Her head snapped up, and Ethan saw her eyes flash. Her lips pressed together, and a dark red brushed across her cheeks.

“I think I can manage, thank you, Your Grace,” she said icily.

Ethan watched her as she walked past him and approached the fireplace. Interesting. She did have some fire in her. Why did Ethan find that attractive?

What on earth are you doing? She’s a maid! You can’t be looking at her like she’s a potential lover.

But I can look. I don’t have to act on anything.

Ethan realised where his thoughts were going and pushed them away. No, he was not going to do this. He was not going to consider anything with anyone, especially not a member of his household staff. Ethan had had lovers before, but he was in a different position now. He would not take advantage of anyone in that capacity.

Even if the girl in question was quite pretty and intrigued him.

“Your tea, Your Grace.”

Ethan turned and saw that the portly housekeeper had brought up the tea tray. She gave him a nod and put the tray on the table.

“Thank you, Mrs Goodpepper. That was quick. I only told Simpson to fetch some tea up for me.”

“Simpson told me that you had fallen asleep and that when you rang, that would be our signal to bring up the tea tray.”

Mrs Goodpepper gave him a smile. “You need to keep your strength up, Your Grace. I’m sure you say that to all your patients.”

“That I do. And I find that, as a physician, I’m not very good at taking my own advice.” Ethan shrugged. “It’s normal, apparently.”

“I’m sure.”

Ethan was a little at a loss now. Mrs Goodpepper had come into Uncle Francis’ employ when Ethan was away in Paris, so he hadn’t had much interaction with her. The majority of the household staff were new to him. Servants came and went, and the old duke had a lot of ailing staff by the time Ethan had left for his studies.

He was glad that Uncle Francis had retired the old staff and brought in different people, but it did feel like he was more of a stranger in a house he had lived in for some years, albeit for holidays.

He should ingratiate himself with Mrs Goodpepper. Having the butler and housekeeper on his side would be a good idea. From what he knew about servant hierarchy, the butler was in charge of the men, and the housekeeper kept the maids in line.

The cook was sort of on her own, but she had a big job to do, and Ethan had a feeling Mrs Andrews wouldn't be impressed with the housekeeper telling her what to do beyond giving her a menu of what to make.

If he wanted the servants on his side, it would be a sensible thing to get into the good graces of the butler and housekeeper.

Ethan was about to say something when there was a scream from the girl. She had managed to light the fire, but she had also lit something else. She was tugging her apron off, and Ethan saw it was burning at the edges.

“Oh, my!” Mrs Goodpepper hurried forward and yanked the apron from the girl in one quick motion. “What on earth are you doing, child? Are you trying to burst into flames?”

Ethan hurried over to the burning apron and stomped on it until there was just a bit of acrid smoke. At least the room wouldn't be set on fire just a few hours after he arrived. Then he looked up at the girl, who looked ready to cry.

"I'm...I...forgive me, Mrs Goodpepper," she whimpered, sniffing before wiping her nose with her sleeve. "I didn't mean...I thought...."

"Oh, you silly thing." Mrs Goodpepper gave her a brisk hug before easing her back. "How many times have you seen me do it? You don't sit that close to the fire. You're lucky that it was just your apron and not your dress."

The girl mumbled something else, and Ethan felt a sudden urge to pull her into his arms to give her some comfort. Pushing that away, he approached the two women.

"Are you all right?" he asked, looking the girl over. "You're not hurt, are you?"

“I...no.” Her eyes turned to him, and he saw the unshed tears shimmering there. “I’m not hurt.”

“That’s something.” Ethan cleared his throat and stepped back. “Thank you for bringing the tea tray, Mrs Goodpepper. I think you should take this girl downstairs and give her a moment to calm down.”

“I plan to do that, Your Grace. Come along.” Mrs Goodpepper put an arm around the girl’s shoulders. “Let’s get you downstairs. That’s enough for now.”

They left the room. As they were about to move out of sight, the girl looked back, and her eyes met Ethan’s. She looked nervous. Ethan wanted to assure her that she didn’t need to be. Accidents did happen.

He was feeling a lot of concern for someone who worked for him, and he didn’t even know her name. What was wrong with

him?

“What’s going on?”

Ethan blinked. Harry had appeared in the doorway, leaning on the doorframe and watching him in bemusement. Sighing, Ethan beckoned him to come in.

“Sit down, and I’ll tell you.”

Sylvia had never felt so embarrassed before. How could she have gotten that wrong? She had lit a fire plenty of times before. It was something Sylvia could do in her sleep.

And she had managed to set herself on fire. It was nothing short of a miracle that it was just her apron that had caught fire. If it had been her dress, things could have been worse.

Like being in front of a handsome duke in just my undergarments after ripping the offending item off before I end up burning to death.

Sylvia pressed her hands to her warm cheeks. Two hours had passed since she had almost set herself alight, and she was still embarrassed. She wished that she hadn't made such a stupid mistake. But she had been so nervous about being around Lord Northbridge that she had not paid proper attention to what she was doing.

Mrs Goodpepper had already scolded her for doing such a thing, although from her expression, she was more scared than cross. She did try and persuade Sylvia not to carry on doing this, but Sylvia was adamant about doing it. If she was going to have this man as her guardian, the least she could do was to find out what he was like when he wasn't putting on a facade. She had to know the real man.

Her initial impressions were saying that he was a nice man and a kind person, but that could change once he found out who she was. Sylvia didn't want to think what Northbridge would say once he discovered who she was. He would more than likely call her foolish for doing it, and after what had just happened, Sylvia was inclined to agree.

She needed to distract herself before she ended up doing something even more embarrassing. Then again, what could be more humiliating than setting herself on fire?

Wanting to get out of the house, Sylvia slipped away and headed over to the little farm the estate had just beyond the kitchen garden. Uncle Francis had had a farm area for animals to slaughter for several years, long before Sylvia came here. He reasoned that it was easier to raise, fatten up and have meat this close to the house than go to the market several miles away several times a week to buy what was needed.

The estate was self-sufficient; they had pigs and chickens, sheep and cows, along with an orchard, an herb garden, and the farmer further down the hill gave them wheat and barley needed to make bread.

Sylvia had thought, due to being a duke, that things would have a bit more grandeur, but she was pleasantly surprised to find that it was not too far off from how she was raised by her parents. The only difference was that, due to being far wealthier, the old duke had a lot more.

Would the new duke keep this going? Sylvia's thoughts kept going back to what she heard from the downstairs maids in the laundry room. There was a possibility that the new duke would end up selling everything, and then they were going to be having to look for new jobs. He couldn't be doing that, surely? And what would happen to Sylvia?

She didn't want to think about it, as it was making her feel very uncomfortable. She didn't like having her future so uncertain, not again.

Heading into the farmyard, Sylvia went over to the pig pen. The pigs were awake and in a good mood, munching away at the food that they had been given. One of the pigs had decided having a mud bath was preferable to dinner, and it was wallowing away in the mud at the far end of the pen. Sylvia leaned on the fence and watched them. At least they were happy. They went about their lives not knowing what was to come.

If only she could do that herself.

“Aren’t you supposed to be working?”

Sylvia gasped and spun around, only to lose her balance and end up on the ground. Northbridge was walking towards her, striding across the yard like he had always been there. He quickened his pace and joined her as Sylvia tried to get up.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” Sylvia ignored the hand that was being offered to her, using the fence to pull herself upright. “You just surprised me, that’s all.”

Northbridge regarded her curiously.

“Are you normally so clumsy, miss?”

Sylvia flushed. She squared her shoulders.

“No, I’m not. I’m still...struggling with the loss of...the old duke.”

She almost said ‘Uncle Francis’, but then that would just result in more questions, and Sylvia didn’t want Northbridge to find out just yet. As it was, he nodded sagely.

“I understand. All of the household staff were fond of the cantankerous old man.”

“He wasn’t cantankerous.”

“Refusing to have a physician look at him doesn’t make him cantankerous?”

“No! He was simply set in his ways. And he didn’t want a physician.”

Northbridge grunted, running a hand through his hair.

“If only he had sent for me. I would have tended to him if he didn’t want anyone else.”

Sylvia remembered what he had said the day before. Absently dusting off the seat of her dress—she must have sat in some mud because it was starting to stick to her backside—she peered at him.

“Did you say earlier that you’re a doctor?”

“I am. I’ve been studying for it since I left Eton.”

“Why?”

Northbridge blinked.

“Why what?”

“Why did you want to become a doctor? You’re a member of the nobility, so I thought you would be set for life.”

He looked bewildered, as if he wasn’t expecting that question. He frowned and tilted his head to one side.

“My father is not as wealthy as the old duke. We had money, but it wasn’t something we could rely on. When he and Mother died, and I inherited what they had, I decided to make the most of what I had.”

“You always wanted to become a doctor?”

“Yes. I like to help people.”

He sounded so genuine about that. Sylvia could see it in his eyes. But she couldn’t soften to him; that would be a bad thing if she did that now, and he turned out to be a bad person. She put her hands behind her back.

“And what about now? What happens now that you’re the duke, Your Grace?”

“I guess I will have to give up my dreams.” He paused.
“Maybe. I’m not sure yet.”

That didn't help. Sylvia wanted something solid for the future, and that just made things more uncertain.

A loud snort and the banging of the fence behind her made Sylvia scream, and she stumbled forward, ending up on the ground again. She turned and glared at the pig that had decided to turn itself into a battering ram. The pig grunted, gave her a look, and then wandered off again.

“You know,” Northbridge said as he approached her, “if I didn't know any better, I'd say you were not meant to be a maid.”

Sylvia froze. He didn't know, did he?

“What...what makes you say that?”

“You can’t stay on your feet, and you like to sit a bit close to the fire, in a manner of speaking.” Northbridge smiled. “You weren’t meant to be in this profession, were you?”

He just thought she was a fool who couldn’t do anything. Sylvia scrambled to her feet and dusted herself down, grabbing onto her annoyance. She could do that, be annoyed at him.

“You make it sound like I had a choice about it, Your Grace,” she said coolly. “I had no choice.”

Northbridge didn’t say anything for a moment. He just tilted his head as he regarded her thoughtfully. Sylvia didn’t like how he seemed to be sizing her up. God, what was wrong with her? Having grown up with her childhood, it should have been easy enough to pull off pretending to be a maid. After all, she was always helping out around the house. So why couldn’t she do it now?

And why did Northbridge put her on the back foot? Sylvia didn’t like that at all.

“Uncle Francis must have seen something in you, then. I can’t see him keeping on someone who...well, who isn’t too efficient.”

“I am efficient!” Sylvia said hotly.

“What I’ve seen of you so far begs to differ.”

Sylvia was offended. How dare he say that? She folded her arms.

“He saw something in me that nobody else did. And I’m not normally clumsy.”

“Oh, really?”

“Really! Having someone new come here and threaten to turn everything upside-down is enough to make anyone behave as I have.”

He held up his hands.

“I’ll concede that point. I am coming here, and I am planning on doing things differently.”

“Like what?”

“That’s not for you to know. Not right now.”

Sylvia didn’t like that. It was annoying that he wouldn’t do anything to assure her that he wouldn’t be taking everyone’s

jobs away and leaving her unsure about her future. Why couldn't he be more forthright?

Because he thinks you're a servant. He's not about to tell everything to a member of the household staff.

Another loud squeal from the pig pen jerked Sylvia out of her frustration, and then there was a bang. Sylvia turned and saw that one of the pigs, still carrying on with its bumping into the fence, had attacked the gate. The gate was now swinging open, and the pigs were beginning to leave. Sylvia groaned. Mr Whistler was not going to be happy to find the boisterous animals roaming the yard.

“Oh, no, not again.”

“Is this a regular occurrence?” Northbridge asked.

“A couple of the pigs like to cause trouble. This isn't the first time they've escaped.”

“Maybe they know they’re going to become pork chops eventually.”

Sylvia didn’t appreciate the jest. She sighed.

“If you’ll excuse me, Your Grace? I need to herd these pigs back into their home.”

“On your own?”

Sylvia looked him up and down.

“A duke helping to herd pigs?”

“I’m also a man, and I’m not above getting my hands dirty.” He smiled and held up his hands. “It looks like you could do with some help.”

Sylvia had not expected any help from him, and she was trying not to think about how nice his smile was. She swallowed and turned away quickly.

“Just don’t get too close. They’re big, and they like to charge if they’re upset.”

Hopefully, he would end up getting knocked over and covered in mud as well. Then Sylvia would feel like they were even.

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Chapter 4

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come in with you?” Harry asked as he and Ethan headed down the steps to the waiting carriage.

“No, it’s fine. I won’t be long, anyway.” Ethan tugged on his gloves and put his hat on. “You do what you want for now. Mrs Goodpepper said she had two horses set aside for us to ride should we want to do so. Why don’t you go exploring the estate?”

“I might just do that. I haven’t got much else to do except flirt with the maids.”

“And I will not be happy if you start frolicking around with them,” Ethan reminded him. “I didn’t bring you here for that.”

“What else can I do up here? It’s boring.”

Ethan rolled his eyes and turned away, signalling to the driver, Jenson, who was sitting in his seat at the front of the carriage.

“Tillbury Solicitor’s, Jenson. You know that way?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Clapping Harry on the shoulder, Ethan got into the carriage. Harry leaned in before the door was shut.

“Enjoy yourself. Let me know if there’s anything of interest in town, and I’ll go exploring there later.”

“You really need to get out of the city, Harry. There’s plenty to do.”

“I don’t believe you.” Harry withdrew with a grin. “At least there’s a saving grace that you’ll be doing something more boring than I am.”

He shut the door before Ethan could respond, and the carriage started off. Ethan sat back and thought about how his friend was going to pass the time. Knowing him, he would go on a long ride, and then he would bother the maids.

He was handsome, and he already had a few of them blushing whenever he gave them a bit of attention. Ethan wondered if it had been a good idea to bring his closest friend along with him when he could see trouble on the horizon.

Hopefully, Harry would have more respect than that.

This visit to the solicitor needed to be done, and Ethan knew he had to get it sorted sooner rather than later. He needed to get things moving, as it was. Also, Ethan wanted a break from

the house and from that clumsy maid who had captured his attention.

What was so enticing about her that he couldn't keep away? He hadn't been seeking her out, but while walking around the estate and seeing if anything had changed, Ethan had encountered the girl at the pig pen. He should have told her to get back to her duties, and yet he found himself wanting to talk to her.

She was educated, that much was clear in the way she held herself and how she spoke. At some point, the maid had been given a good education. Did that mean she had been part of a wealthy family at some point, but they had fallen on hard times, so she had to find a position? It was one explanation. Ethan could see Uncle Francis doing that for his staff, although he hadn't seen it in practice.

It was surprising to hear a servant girl speak so eloquently and have an attitude that no regular servant would have. Nobody would dare speak to a nobleman in such a manner, and yet, she did it without any problem. Especially when she was annoyed, her eyes flashing fire at him. Ethan didn't think that would be an attractive trait in a member of staff.

He thought back to when they had to herd the pigs back into their pen. Had it only been yesterday that Ethan had become a shepherd for a short time? The animals were big, and they weren't happy about having to go back to their home. It had taken a while, and for a moment, Ethan thought that the pigs would charge him.

Finally, they had managed to pin them back into their pen, but just as Ethan was putting the latch on the gate, one of the pigs had charged and knocked against the gate. The girl had screamed and bumped into Ethan, which resulted in Ethan losing his footing and the two of them falling to the ground.

It knocked the air out of Ethan, and he lay there trying to get his bearings back. It was then that he realised he was still holding her, and she hadn't made a move to leave.

Ethan knew what had happened was just an accident. He didn't go around forcing himself on any kind of servants, but with this girl in his arms, he felt a sudden urge to hold her closer than he already was. She was pressed up against him, staring at him with a dazed look on her face.

Then clarity hit her first, and she had scrambled up, accidentally digging an elbow into his stomach as she got up. Mumbling, she had dusted herself down, trying to get rid of the streaks of mud on her skirt, and then had hurried away back to the house, leaving Ethan lying on the cobbles, wondering what had just happened.

He had never had a reaction like this to a woman before, certainly not such a woman who was different to the ladies he had taken as lovers. And Ethan didn't even know her name. Somehow, he had forgotten to ask.

He made a mental note to ask Mrs Goodpepper about the girl when he got back. Then see if he could get her situated elsewhere in the house. She was going to be too much of a distraction, especially if she was going to set herself on fire all the time.

It didn't take long to get to the nearest town, and very shortly after, Jenson had pulled the carriage up outside the office of Mr Tillbury, Uncle Francis' solicitor. Ethan looked out of the window at the nondescript building.

He had heard his uncle speak about the solicitor before. He was efficient, and he knew what he was doing, but he was incredibly shy and quiet. It hurt Uncle Francis' head to try and strain his ears so he could hear the man when he talked.

Ethan hoped he didn't need to wait around for long. He wanted to get his business in order and figure out what he was going to do.

Deciding that he wasn't going to get anything done staying in the carriage, Ethan alighted and turned to Jenson.

"I shouldn't be long."

"Very good, Your Grace." Jenson nodded at him. "I have some errands to do for Mrs Goodpepper, so I will take care of those while you're with Mr Tillbury."

"Is this something you normally do?"

“I’m the only one who regularly goes off the estate, so it makes sense.”

Ethan couldn’t remember that happening when he was staying at the manor house. He was beginning to realise how isolated the estate was compared to everyone else. That couldn’t be healthy, surely?

“Very well. There’s a coffeehouse across the road, so I’ll wait there until you return.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Jenson set off, the horses clattering away, and Ethan watched him go. He was still bemused by the entire household. There was something a little...quirky about them.

They were decent enough, and they were good at their jobs—save one obvious person—but there was something that Ethan couldn't quite figure out. Maybe it was because he was a newcomer, and the majority of the servants that had been there when he was younger were now gone. They were wary of him, having no idea what he was going to do.

Ethan couldn't blame them for that.

He was about to enter the solicitor's office when the door opened, and he almost walked into a tall, thin man with fair hair long enough that it touched his stiff collar. The two of them stared at each other for a moment before the fair-haired man's lips curled into a sneer.

“Excuse me.”

There was no question; it was an order. Ethan wasn't about to argue with the man, so he stepped aside. The other man left the doorway and strutted away, putting on a hat as he twirled a cane. One of Tillbury's clients, maybe? Probably one of the gentry, given the smart but somewhat shabby cut of his clothes. It looked like he had enough money to buy good cloth, but not enough to look after it properly.

Putting the rude man aside in his head, Ethan went into the office. There were four desks, two at each end of the room, and they were all occupied with men leaning over as they wrote. Nobody paid him any attention, focused on their own work. Ethan took off his hat and cleared his throat.

The man nearest him looked up.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m the Duke of Northbridge.” God, that was going to take a while to get used to. “I’ve come to see Mr Tillbury.”

It was a mere second later that clarity dawned, and the young man jumped to his feet.

“Forgive me, Your Grace.” He bowed. “Mr Tillbury said you would be visiting. I’ll let him know that you’re here.”

“Thank you.”

The young man hurried over to a door at the other end of the room, knocked three times and entered, only sticking his head around the door. A moment later, he was back and approaching Ethan. He bowed as he walked and tripped over his own feet. Ethan caught him before he landed face-first at his feet.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Your Grace. Just fine.” His face, now bright red, the young man cleared his throat. “Mr Tillbury said you were to go in immediately. Just knock and enter.”

Ethan approached the door, glancing back to see the man go back to his desk, slumping into his chair with a mixture of

relief and embarrassment. Turning back, he knocked on the door, entering just as he had been told to do. Mr Tillbury's office was slightly smaller than the outer room, but it had a lot more furniture.

Including the desk and chair, there were bookcases lining all of the walls, the only space being the large window behind the desk and the door. All of the bookcases were full, practically brimming over, with folders and papers.

Mr Tillbury was a short, slim man with thick blond hair and a trimmed beard. He was dressed smartly, but his cloth was of a sensible cut that was easier to take care of. There was something familiar about him, but Ethan couldn't put his finger on it.

"Your Grace." Mr Tillbury's voice was barely above a whisper as he stood up and bowed before coming around the desk. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you. I just wish it wasn't under such circumstances."

"Mr Tillbury." Ethan took the outstretched hand, noting the strong grip. "Thank you for seeing me. I've got a few things to discuss with you."

“I’m always at your disposal, Your Grace.” Mr Tillbury stepped back and gestured at the other chair in the room. “Please, be seated. I’ll answer whatever questions you have.”

“Thank you.”

It was a little tough to hear the solicitor properly, but Ethan didn’t doubt that he was not a soft man. From the handshake, he was not one to cower from anything. Mr Tillbury was a quiet force, and Ethan was sure he was someone to be reckoned with.

He was going to need someone like that when he made up his mind, and it went towards the selling of Northbridge Manor.

“I hope you are settling in well at the manor,” Mr Tillbury said. “The servants aren’t giving you any hassle, are they?”

“No, none at all. They’ve been very accommodating.”

“That’s good.” Mr Tillbury sat, sitting back in his chair. “And what about Lady Sylvia? She’s behaving herself, is she?”

Ethan frowned.

“Lady Sylvia?”

“Sylvia Hawthorne, the old duke’s ward. Well, I suppose we can call her your ward now. She was devastated about the old duke’s death, and I know she’s not happy about the changes going on around her.”

So that was her name. Ethan had been told about the young girl, but nobody had actually said her name, that he could recall.

“I’m afraid I haven’t seen her yet. She’s not made herself known to me.”

Mr Tillbury’s eyebrows rose.

“Has she not? I didn’t think she would hide from you.”

“Apparently, she’s not been very well, so she’s resting in her rooms.”

“Oh, really?”

Ethan felt like he was missing something. Was Mr Tillbury implying something? He placed his hat on the desk and sat back.

“I’m sure we’ll get along. I have some experience with children, although I’m not used to having a little girl under my feet all the time. Is she well-behaved?”

“She is.” Mr Tillbury’s mouth tugged into a smile. Was he amused? “Although I wouldn’t call Lady Sylvia a little girl. She says it’s insulting to a woman of her age.”

“Woman?” Ethan was confused. “I was under the impression that she was a child. I had thought she was about ten, or even younger.”

“Don’t let her hear you say that. She’s just had her first-and-twentieth birthday. Certainly not a girl anymore.”

She was a woman? Why had nobody said anything about it? Ethan began to wonder what else he hadn’t paid attention to if he didn’t realise that his ward was only eleven years his junior.

Being a guardian to a grown woman was going to be harder than if the ward was a child.

“Lady Sylvia?”

Sylvia looked up from her book. Mrs Goodpepper was in the doorway to her bedchamber, looking a little nervous. Closing her book, Sylvia slipped off the bed.

“Is something wrong, Mrs Goodpepper?”

“His Grace has just returned from Mr Tillbury’s office.” Mrs Goodpepper looked her up and down. “He wants to see you.”

“Me?”

“I think there was a misunderstanding. Now he wants to see you. As soon as possible.”

A misunderstanding? Sylvia couldn't think what could have been misunderstood. Was Northbridge upset over something? Now she didn't want to face him.

“When does he want to see me?”

“As soon as possible. He's in the library.” Mrs Goodpepper sighed. “I hope he's not going to be upset when he finds out what you've been up to.”

“It was my idea, and I'll take full responsibility for it.” Sylvia looked down at herself. “Do I look presentable enough to go to him now?”

“Close enough. I suppose it’ll do.”

“Mrs Goodpepper!”

The housekeeper huffed.

“Lady Sylvia, you’ve had me in a state of nerves since yesterday when you said you were going to pretend to be a maid. That wasn’t helped when you set your clothes on fire. I would rather you didn’t do something that would get yourself into trouble.”

Sylvia bit back the response that it was like fighting a losing battle with her. Between her housekeeper and her maid, they were trying hard to make Sylvia into a proper lady, but Sylvia just wanted to play her part in the house. It was nothing new, and she liked feeling useful. Dusting herself down, Sylvia hurried over to the dresser and checked her hair. It was in place, for the most part. It was passable.

The Duke of Northbridge would get what he was given. At least she was looking cleaner than before.

Following Mrs Goodpepper out of her room, Sylvia made her way downstairs, playing over what she was going to say in her head. She needed to know what Northbridge was going to do with the house, with the servants, and with her. If he had a clear plan of action that meant they were safe, Sylvia knew she would be able to work with him. But if he didn't....

She didn't want to think of the alternative.

Sylvia made her way to the library, her palms feeling sweaty and tingling. It had been bad enough with her reaction towards him while she was pretending to be a maid, but now she was more on the same level as him....

She had no idea what had happened to her. Something inside Sylvia's chest tightened, and she felt lightheaded as her heart

forgot how to beat properly, skittering with its beat. Her body was still throbbing from contact with Northbridge after they ended up in each other's arms at the farmyard. Their faces had been inches apart, and for a moment, Sylvia had thought that Northbridge was going to kiss her.

Why on earth would he do that? He barely knew her. Was he one of those men who seduced any women he came across? Sylvia wouldn't be surprised if that was the case. She didn't like men who were like that.

And she didn't like how her body had reacted to him. Like an attraction. Cathy had told her about attraction before and that people couldn't choose who they found attractive, saying that it was just a more basic instinct. Sylvia hadn't experienced it before until now, and she wasn't sure that she liked it.

She just hoped that she didn't end up doing something stupid in front of him now.

Taking a deep breath and composing herself—hopefully, it would be enough—Sylvia entered the library. Northbridge was at the far end of the room, running his fingers over the spines of the books displayed in the huge bookcase. His attention was

completely focused on what he was doing, especially when he got to the section that Sylvia knew to be medical books, which he peered at with interest.

Sylvia stood in the doorway and watched him. Even from where she was, she could see his long fingers tracing the words. What would those fingers feel like tracing her skin?

Wait, where did that thought come from?

Feeling like a fool standing there staring at him, Sylvia cleared her throat. Northbridge turned and did a double-take, his eyes widening when he saw her. Sylvia managed to curtsy without her wobbly legs giving way on her.

“You wished to see me, Your Grace?”

“But...what....” Northbridge spluttered, finally managing to get the words out. “What’s going on? Why are you here?”

“You wanted to speak to Lady Sylvia Hawthorne, yes?”

Sylvia watched as clarity dawned. Northbridge’s mouth fell open.

“Are...are you saying that you’re Sylvia Hawthorne?”

“I am.”

“But...you never said anything! I thought you were a servant!” Northbridge approached her, still looking stunned, as he moved his gaze up and down her body. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“It was merely something you assumed, and I didn’t want to give anything away, so I kept quiet.”

That sounded foolish, but it was the quick way of saying what she wanted to say. Northbridge grunted.

“At least it would explain why you were incapable of lighting a fire,” he commented.

Sylvia bristled.

“I can light a fire! I always help out around the estate where I can.”

“Then what happened?”

“I...I was nervous.” Sylvia gestured at him. “You’re Uncle Francis’ heir, and I have no idea what you want with the dukedom. I had to find out if your intentions were good or not.”

Northbridge folded his arms.

“So, you decided to pretend to be a servant to see me in a different capacity?”

“People show their true selves around those they don’t care about. Besides,” Sylvia bit her lip, “you already assumed I was a servant, and I didn’t want to embarrass you by saying I wasn’t.”

“You mean you didn’t want to be embarrassed by my assumption due to your attire?”

“That’s not....”

Northbridge held up a hand. He didn’t look happy.

“I don’t want to argue over this, Lady Sylvia. And I don’t appreciate everyone in the house hiding this from me, not telling me that my ward is actually a grown woman. That’s not showing that the household is very reliable, is it?”

“Don’t blame them for it, Your Grace. It was my idea and my doing. Don’t punish them because of me.”

They stared at each other. Sylvia could feel something in the air, and it was pressing down on her skin. It shouldn’t have been any warmer in here, but it was. And why did her gown feel tighter around the chest again? Northbridge was the first to look away, moving over to one of the settees with stiff strides.

“Take a seat, Lady Sylvia.” He gestured at the chair across from him. “We have quite a few things to discuss.”

Sylvia wasn't about to argue. She walked over and sat down, grateful that she hadn't tripped over anything as she thought would happen. Her legs were shaking, so sitting down made her feel relieved.

Northbridge sat across from her, sitting forward to lean his elbows on his knees. Sylvia couldn't take her eyes off his hands, fascinated by his long, slim fingers. He certainly had the hands of a medical professional. Was his touch light and gentle?

“Lady Sylvia?”

Sylvia snapped her eyes up. Northbridge was watching her. God, she had been caught. Swallowing, Sylvia smoothed her skirts down.

“So, Your Grace,” she was glad that her voice wasn't trembling, “what is it that you wanted to talk about?”

“I’ve got a lot of things to do regarding the estate and the household. That includes you.” Northbridge’s expression didn’t change as he stared at her. “I know you’re not comfortable with having someone new here, and I hope that we can cooperate.”

Sylvia licked her lips and straightened up.

“As long as what you call acceptable is truly acceptable, then I’m sure we can figure something out.”

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Chapter 5

Ethan was still reeling from the realisation that the servant girl he had been having lustful thoughts for was actually his ward. It couldn't be right. The woman standing before him in a beautiful silk gown and looking like she had been born to be a lady couldn't be the same girl who had nearly set herself on fire and almost gotten herself run over by a group of pigs. How was that possible?

Then again, it would make sense. When she was confident, there was a composure about her that a servant girl wouldn't have gained in her life of servitude. And she talked like a lady. She looked a lot more comfortable in this setting than she did as a maid.

She looks just as pretty, though. Just clean.

Ethan swiped this away from his thoughts. No, he couldn't think that way. This girl was his ward, albeit inherited. He should not be thinking of her in such a way.

He needed to concentrate. And he needed to figure out what he was going to do with his ward. Ethan had already managed to figure out a plan for a little girl, but finding out that Sylvia was far older had thrown that out of the window.

He rubbed his hands together, trying to look casual as he tried to stop the itching of his palms. Where had that come from?

“How long have you lived here, Sylvia?”

Sylvia frowned.

“Six years now, Your Grace.”

“And how did you come to be here? Uncle Francis and Auntie Glynnis took you in, didn’t they?”

Biting her lip, Sylvia nodded.

“My parents rented land from the duke and duchess. They had fields that grew wheat, fruit, and vegetables. Uncle Francis would buy our potatoes from us.”

“So your parents were farmers?”

“They called themselves landowners, but they needed something to help bring in some money just in case something happened, and they had to use something they called savings.” Sylvia shrugged. “They were always preparing and thinking ahead.”

Ethan could understand that. There was always something in life that threw everything off, and most people weren't prepared for it.

“What happened to them?” he asked quietly.

Sylvia chewed at her lower lip and looked down at her hands, which were twisting in her lap.

“It was one cold winter, and everyone was getting sick. I was unwell myself, but I recovered. Mother and Father were trying to keep going as they fell ill, not wanting to lose any money by not working. In the end, it was so bad that neither of them could get out of bed without help.” She swallowed.

“They had pneumonia, and working out in the snow didn’t help. Within a week of being confined to their beds, they weren’t strong enough to fight back to good health.”

Her voice broke a little, and Ethan waited. From the slight trembling of her shoulders and the way she was composing herself despite her obvious distress, it was clear that even though six years had gone by, she was still greatly affected by the deaths of her parents. How many hours had she been present, watching them waste away before they passed? Ethan couldn’t begin to imagine it.

“You have my condolences,” he murmured.

“Thank you.” Sylvia sniffed a little and raised her head, taking a deep breath. “But it’s been some years now. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

“You are allowed to be weak about it. Nobody can truly get over death like that.”

Sylvia didn’t respond. Ethan had seen many people like her suffering from grief after the death of someone close. Those were often the toughest moments for him, telling loved ones that they had just lost another. He waited as Sylvia regained herself.

“I’ve been here ever since,” Sylvia said finally, looking up at him. “The neighbouring farmer bought the land from my uncle and took over what my parents had been cultivating. I had no idea what to do myself, and he said he would look after everything.

He took on our workers for himself, and he would have taken me in as well if the duke hadn't said that I would be going with him. He brought me back here, and the duke and duchess said I had a home with them as long as I wished."

"Do you know why they did that?"

"I'm not really sure. I did ask once, but Auntie Glynnis simply said it was only fair that they did something to help. I don't think I've ever been given a proper answer."

Ethan smiled.

"It's just the nature of how they were. Uncle Francis and Auntie Glynnis always wanted to help, especially children who had no one else. You're the second one who's been taken on as a ward, though."

“The second one?” Sylvia frowned. “Who was the first one? You?”

“Yes. I was ten when my parents died. Uncle Francis was my father’s cousin, and my closest living relative. My mother’s family lives in Cornwall, and she hadn’t spoken to them in years, while my father’s family only had Uncle Francis. So I came to live with him.”

Ethan backtracked a little. “Actually, it was more like somewhere to stay during the holidays. Uncle Francis paid for me to go to Eton, and then on to medical school, so I just stayed here when I had a break.”

“How long ago did he take you in?”

“Twenty years ago.” Ethan peered at her. “Uncle Francis took you in about the same time I left for university in Paris.”

“And you’ve barely been back since,” Sylvia murmured. “I’m surprised you and I haven’t been introduced to each other before.”

“I had wondered the same thing. But we’re going through it now, which is better late than never, I suppose.”

Ethan paused, wondering what to say next. He had a better understanding of Sylvia, and he had some respect for her for doing what she did. If the roles were reversed, he would do what he could to find out something that couldn’t be done at face value. He hoped that he hadn’t left her with a bad impression.

It probably will turn into a bad impression if you decide to sell everything.

“What do you see in your future, Sylvia?” Ethan asked.

Sylvia frowned.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your future? Do you have any potential suitors? Any thoughts of getting married?”

“No, of course, I don’t.” Sylvia’s cheeks turned a beautiful dark pink. “Why would you say that?”

“You’re a pretty girl.” Ethan couldn’t believe he had just said that. “Don’t you have any young gentlemen calling? You must have thought about it.”

Sylvia’s mouth opened and closed. She looked really pretty when she was speechless. Ethan gritted his teeth and ignored the urge to reach out and pull her onto his lap. Whatever was happening to him was not good, and it was too intense too quickly. Ethan didn’t want to concentrate on that. He had to focus on getting Sylvia to be someone else’s problem.

He was not cut out to be a guardian, and Sylvia needed someone who could give her his full attention. It certainly wouldn't be him.

"I...I don't have a suitor," Sylvia said faintly. "I've never had a suitor."

"You mean you've not had a Season?" Ethan asked. "The duke and duchess never took you to London?"

"I went to London when I was eighteen. I had a Season."

"Really?"

"Auntie Glynnis took me, saying that it would do me good to meet and make friends. Marriage wasn't on anyone's mind." Sylvia frowned. "But then she got sick shortly after we

returned, and she passed away not long after. I didn't want to go back to London if she wasn't with me, and Uncle Francis didn't force me."

"And this was three years ago?"

Sylvia nodded. At least she had been introduced, so that was out of the way. But if three years had passed, it was going to make things tough. Ethan knew it was going to be a task to get Sylvia introduced into Society again, especially if Sylvia didn't want to go.

"What do you want out of life?"

"Your Grace?"

"What do you want for your life, Sylvia? Do you want to stay here forever? Or do you want a family?"

Sylvia licked her lips. Ethan wished she would stop doing that; he kept getting focused on her mouth, and it was distracting.

“I...I would like a family one day,” Sylvia said quietly. “And I would like a home of my own where I haven’t been taken in. I want to be secure in my future, not wondering who I’m going to be passed to next.”

“I see.”

That made Ethan want to squirm when she said that. It was like she knew what he was planning to do with her. After all, he couldn’t keep her as his ward, and he knew that he would have to find her a husband. But despite knowing he had to do it, and that he didn’t want to be a guardian, Ethan felt a little despicable doing it in this way.

However, it had to be done. There wasn’t much Ethan could do about it. Besides, if he did go through with selling the estate, he wanted to be sure that Sylvia had her own home to

go to. It was preferable to have her married before he sold anything.

Not that he was going to tell her that, though. Ethan didn't think it would take that long for Sylvia to find a husband. She was beautiful and still young enough to be considered ideal. The gentlemen would be queuing up for her attention.

Why did that not settle well with him?

"I have your attire ready for you, my lady," Cathy said.

Sylvia turned away from the window. Her maid had laid out her clothes on the bed in a specific order that made it easier to pick up the right garment to put on. Sighing, Sylvia approached the bed.

She had been distracted by the activity going on outside. Northbridge was out on the west terrace with his friend Viscount Richardson. Apparently, the viscount was also a doctor, and he had regaled Sylvia with stories about their time in medical school during dinner. Sylvia hadn't been able to do much except listen.

If she was being honest, it had been fascinating to listen to all of it and the antics Richardson and Northbridge got up to—much to Northbridge's obvious discomfort—and Sylvia had found herself wanting to find out more. She did love to learn, and this was something new to her.

She was grateful that the interaction with Northbridge had gone better than she anticipated. He did seem to be quite kind, although he seemed to be rather focused on if she had a suitor and if she wanted to have a family. It made her wonder what he had in mind that he needed her out of the way.

What did he have planned for Northbridge Manor? Sylvia could only hope that he wasn't planning to sell; that would be horrible. He couldn't sell Northbridge Manor, could he?

He could, and he has every right to.

But it's part of his family legacy. Why would he do that? Does he want to be a doctor so much that he would abdicate his title?

“Lady Sylvia?”

“Hmm?”

Cathy was holding some stays, waiting for her. Then Sylvia remembered that she was meant to be getting dressed, and she was still in her nightgown.

“Forgive me, Cathy.” She began to take off her night attire. “I was just...thinking.”

“Well, think when you’ve gotten yourself dressed. I’ve got things to get on with today.”

“Who is meant to be the lady here, Cathy?”

Cathy smiled.

“You are, although from the way you behave, it seems as if you forget about it.”

“Can you blame me? I’ve not been doing this for very long.”

“And if you focus, you will do far better. Now, let’s get you dressed.”

Sylvia did as she was told. She knew that her relationship with Cathy was not conventional, and they treated each other more like friends than mistress and servant, but there wasn't anyone around to tell them to do otherwise. Of course, Sylvia would behave differently if there were other people about, but when it was just the two of them, they were friends. Cathy was the voice of reason, although that reason hadn't penetrated Sylvia's skull recently.

If it had, Sylvia wouldn't have embarrassed herself in front of Northbridge.

Her new guardian. It felt odd that she had to call him that. He was far younger than she had expected, and far more complex. There was nothing simple about the new duke at all. It didn't help that he was incredibly handsome. That was certainly leaving her head spinning.

And strong. Sylvia had felt that strength when he put his arms around her, and they had ended up tangled up together. It made her wonder what it would feel like to be held by him when they weren't getting knocked over by a large pig.

Then she dismissed that as it was not a good idea to think about her guardian like that. Just because he was young and handsome didn't mean that she could throw herself on him all the time. Sylvia didn't think he would appreciate it. Richardson, from the way he had been grinning at her, might have liked it if she did that to him, but Sylvia would do no such thing. She didn't want to be seen as a woman with loose morals.

At least she would have some other people to talk to. Richardson, certainly, was fun, and he was good at spinning a tale. He could tell her a lot of stories about London that would make Sylvia wish to explore the city more than when she had when she'd been there three long years ago. He had certainly made her laugh a lot the evening before.

She wouldn't mind if he stayed around as company for his friend. At least his presence would help Sylvia remember that she was the new duke's ward, and she shouldn't think of him as anything else.

Given how he had plagued her dreams during the night, it was probably not a good idea to imagine him as someone more.

You really need to meet other gentlemen. One handsome man, and you're weak at the knees and making a fool of yourself.

"What are you going to do today, then?" Cathy asked as they finally finished dressing Sylvia, adjusting the sleeves on the dress. "I know Lord Northbridge and Viscount Richardson are on the west terrace for breakfast. You could join them."

"I might." Sylvia looked down at herself. "But I'm going out riding with Stewart first."

"What?"

"You remember, don't you? Stewart Tillbury and I go riding three times a week?"

"I haven't forgotten that." Cathy frowned. "But are you sure about that, my lady?"

“What do you mean?”

“Have you asked His Grace about going out?”

Sylvia blinked.

“You...I have to ask his permission? I never had to ask Uncle Francis before he passed away.”

“That’s because the old duke did things differently. Our new duke is going to do things by the book, and that includes you asking permission to go riding.” Cathy paused. “Especially without a chaperone.”

Sylvia couldn’t believe she was hearing this. Uncle Francis had allowed her to do as she pleased, saying that he trusted her and couldn’t expect to keep her under lock and key.

When they were talking the evening before, Northbridge hadn't said anything about it at all. And Sylvia knew she had told him what she did with her time on the estate. If he wanted her to come to him every time she stepped out of the house, he should have told her.

Although she wouldn't have listened to him, anyway. Sylvia wasn't about to let it stop her.

"I don't see why I should tell him. I should be allowed to go wherever I want and do what I please. I'm not doing anything that would be considered scandalous."

"Except go riding with a gentleman on your own?" Cathy countered.

Sylvia scowled.

“Stewart and I have known each other for years. We’re practically like brother and sister. And Uncle Francis never said anything about it.”

Cathy shook her head.

“You and Mr Stewart went about together as children. You’re both over the age of twenty, and that is considered inappropriate, especially given that Mr Stewart is of a lower social standing.”

Sylvia bristled at that. She turned to her maid.

“Cathy, if you’d forgotten, I’m also of the same social standing as Stewart. Just because I was taken in by a duke and given a Season doesn’t change anything. Anyway, I don’t care about that. He’s just a friend.”

“If you saw the way he looks at you, I’d say he doesn’t think the same.”

“What are you talking about?”

Cathy sighed and turned away, folding the nightgown.

“I’ll take this downstairs to have it laundered. Just remember to let His Grace know where you are going.” She carried on as Sylvia started to protest. “It’s not just your reputation that needs to remain safe, it’s your well-being. What if something happens and you get injured?”

“Stewart will help me.”

“And if something happens to the both of you?”

Sylvia blew air out of the corners of her mouth. God, she didn't want this argument. She wanted to go out and get ready for her regular ride. Cathy was fussing too much. There were times when her friend and maid took on the role of an older sister, and she went over the top at times. There was no point in arguing for now.

“All right, I'll go and tell him. But I'm still going out to ride. Nobody's going to stop me.”

Cathy wasn't looking at her, but Sylvia was sure that she was rolling her eyes. She left the room before Cathy could respond and hurried towards the stairs. Stewart would be arriving shortly, and Sylvia was eager to get going. She had been looking forward to this.

After the embarrassment of pretending to be a maid and making a fool of herself, she needed to get away from the house and clear her head. Riding would be perfect.

“Good morning, Lady Sylvia.”

Sylvia was nearly at the bottom of the stairs. She turned and saw Richardson walking into the foyer at a lazy pace. He gave her a smile, and Sylvia couldn't help but smile back. There was something about the viscount that made her feel good. It was probably how he calmed his patients.

“Good morning, Lord Richardson.”

“You're moving at a quick pace. Are you going somewhere?”

“A friend of mine and I are going out riding.” Sylvia hopped off the bottom step and headed over to the little cloakroom just off the foyer. “We go pretty regularly around the estate.”

“I see.” Richardson paused. “And this friend of yours is...?”

Why did it feel like he was fishing for something? Sylvia plucked out her coat—it was a nice day, but at this time of year, the weather could turn suddenly—putting her hat on

before closing the door. She turned back to see Richardson watching her curiously.

“He’s a childhood friend of mine. We do this all the time.”

Richardson’s eyebrows rose so high they almost disappeared into his hairline.

“You’re going gallivanting around with a man?”

“I’m not going gallivanting around with Stewart. We’ve known each other since we were small, before I became Uncle Francis’ ward.” Sylvia tied the ribbon for her hat under her chin. She didn’t want to chase it as it got blown away. “You’re not going to start giving me a lecture on what I should and shouldn’t do? My lord, I know you’re my guardian’s friend, but you are still a guest.”

“No, I...I’m just surprised.” Richardson rubbed the back of his neck. “I’d better let Northbridge know what’s going on.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t think he’ll be too happy.”

Sylvia put her hands on her hips, feeling her coat slip off her arm. She caught it and only put one hand on her hip, cradling the coat and hoping she didn’t look clumsy again.

“I have been doing this for years, and I have never done anything untoward. Now, you’re suddenly telling me that I have to ask for permission.”

“Did you ask the old duke?”

“No, because he knew Stewart. He knew he won’t cause any harm. Besides, I can take care of myself.”

Richardson sighed and shook his head. He wasn't looking so jovial now.

“Normally, I'm all for women having some independence, but given the current situation....”

“Listen, my lord, Stewart is going to be here soon. So I'm going to get my horse saddled up and ready to leave as soon as he gets here.” She turned and headed towards the door. “We'll be back soon. I'll be hungry then.”

She ducked outside before Richardson could answer and hurried down the steps. If she waited around, the viscount was going to go looking for Northbridge and tell him what she was up to. Sylvia wasn't about to wait around. Why should she have to change something she had been doing for years? It wasn't like anything bad could happen in this part of the world.

She was rebelling, Sylvia was aware of that, but she had few things in her life now that were the same and could remain the same. She wanted to cling to some sense of normality.

What was wrong with clinging onto something like this?

“Sylvia!”

Sylvia slowed as she heard the shout, followed by a clattering of horse’s hooves. She turned and saw the large black stallion trotting towards her, the fair-haired rider waving to her. Sylvia smiled and waved back.

“Good morning, Stewart. You’re right on time.”

“Thank goodness. I thought I was going to be late when I got held up at home.”

“Nothing bad, I hope.”

“No, it’s trivial.” Stewart Tillbury grinned at her as he leaned on the saddle. “How long before you’re ready to go? There is a hint of clouds on the horizon, so we will have to hurry if we don’t want to get caught in potential rainfall.”

Sylvia didn’t want that. The slopes turned to muddy sludge if the rain was bad, and then it would make it harder to get home. Turning and shielding her eyes against the sun, she saw the clouds far, far out.

“I think we’re going to be fine. It shouldn’t be a problem.” She turned back to Stewart. “I’ll get my horse saddled up, and then I’ll be ready.”

“Where do you think you’re going, Sylvia?”

Sylvia froze, her heart sinking as she turned to see Northbridge coming down the steps towards them. He looked like one of those wild animals she had read about, prowling towards her like she was something to pounce on. A shiver went down her spine at that comparison. Where had that come from? And why did she describe it to herself as him pouncing on her?

Northbridge's eyes were narrowed as he looked from her to Stewart.

“Do I know you, sir?”

“Stewart Tillbury.” Stewart jerked his head in a brisk nod.
“My father is your solicitor.”

“Ah, yes. You're the young man who barged out of your father's offices yesterday.”

Stewart sneered.

“And you’re the one who tried to push me out of the way like you owned the place.”

“I’m sure you and I have differing opinions about it.” Northbridge gestured at Sylvia. “Did you come to see Lady Sylvia?”

“I did. We’re going out riding.” Stewart nodded at Sylvia. “Come along, Sylvia. The sooner we start off, the sooner we can miss the bad weather should it decide to appear.”

“She’s not going anywhere with you!” Northbridge said sharply.

Sylvia stared at him in horror.

“What? You’re forbidding me from going out with a friend?”

“You’re going riding with a friend who’s a man?”

“What of it? Stewart has never been inappropriate.” Sylvia scowled. “You can’t force me to stay home. This is important to me.”

Northbridge turned and approached her. He ended up moving in so close very quickly that Sylvia didn’t have time to back away. She couldn’t help but stare at him as he towered over her. Sylvia wasn’t a short woman, and Northbridge wasn’t as tall as Stewart. Yet he seemed to be far bigger.

“You might not care about your reputation, Sylvia,” the duke murmured, his voice sounding like a rumble that tickled the skin on her arms, “but I do. There are rules when you’re of a certain age, and you need to remember that just because we’re as far away from London as you can get without leaving the country, it doesn’t mean the rules are different here.”

“But Stewart...” Sylvia began, but Northbridge cut her off.

“I’m not going to stop you from wanting to go for a ride every now and then. I’m not a tyrant. However, you are not to go alone. You are to have a chaperone.”

“Stewart can be my chaperone.”

Northbridge arched an eyebrow as he gave her a bemused look.

“You think that’s going to work? Viscount Richardson has offered to go with you to make sure you two don’t get into trouble.”

Sylvia’s mouth fell open. She couldn’t believe this.

“What? You would have another man follow Stewart and myself? How is that protecting my reputation?”

Northbridge leaned in. His face was inches from hers. Sylvia thought that he was going to kiss her, and she almost tilted her face up to him to receive it. Then her words threw cold water on that.

“Out of the two of them, I trust Viscount Richardson to keep you safe. Mr Tillbury can protest all he wants, but if I’m going to play the role of guardian, I have to look after your well-being.” He drew back a little and gave her a slight smile, a gleam in his eye. “If you refuse, you can always go back inside. Mr Tillbury is welcome to join you, but Viscount Richardson will be present. Of course, Mr Tillbury could go home....”

“Stop it!” Sylvia snapped. She gritted her teeth. “This is not fair.”

“Life is never fair, Sylvia. And you need to remember your reputation. Someone has to. Even if it makes me the bad person.” He stepped back. “Your choice. You can either go

riding or come inside and entertain Mr Tillbury there. But Richardson stays. It's up to you."

Sylvia hated that she had been put in this position. She just wanted something for herself, something that made her feel good after losing Uncle Francis.

If only he didn't care. It would make going about as normal easier to do.

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Chapter 6

Sylvia shot a glare over her shoulder. Viscount Richardson was still there, riding a little further behind, his horse going along at a pace that said he had all the time in the world. He didn't look like he was chaperoning two people who just wanted to go for a ride.

She was still seething. Northbridge had no right to tell her that she needed a chaperone. Stewart had never done anything inappropriate; the two of them were more like brother and sister. Sylvia trusted him. She didn't need someone to look out for her. After all, she had gotten to this position looking out for herself. Why didn't he trust her?

He has just met you, so he had no reason to trust you. Even then, he is right. Someone has to look out for you appropriately if you don't.

This isn't appropriate! Stewart has never been inappropriate. It's not fair.

“Sylvia?” Stewart had slowed his horse to a walk as he watched her. “Are you all right?”

“What? Oh.” Sylvia blew the breath heavily out of the corners of her mouth. “I’m fine. I’m just a little annoyed that we have to have someone following us as if we were naughty children.”

“I understand that it’s frustrating, and I don’t like it, either.” Stewart shook his head with an unhappy scowl. “But we’re going to have to grit our teeth. Unless you want to lose our ‘chaperone’. He doesn’t know the area, and we know the best places to hide.”

That was very tempting, but Sylvia knew that it wouldn’t be a good idea. Richardson would report back to Northbridge, and then she would be in trouble. While the viscount seemed to be one of those jovial, fun people who could have a good time, he would always be Northbridge’s friend and would be on his side.

Sylvia wouldn't be able to appeal to him to see her point of view. She didn't think talking to him about how unfair it was would go down well.

Why couldn't Northbridge be a guardian who didn't care about what she was doing? Then she would have been able to get along with what she had done before. It was all very frustrating.

"I must apologise for this, Stewart," Sylvia said grumpily as they headed towards the line of trees at the far end of the estate. "I didn't think that my new guardian would care about what was going on. He isn't exactly...well, he's not what I expected."

"There's nothing to apologise for," Stewart assured her, giving her a smile. "He's just trying to exert his authority now that he has some. Just ignore him."

"That's easier said than done. I'm sure he's going to be paying a lot of attention to me to make sure I'm behaving myself." Sylvia made a face. "God, I can't believe this. I thought he was actually going to be a nice person. He's young, and I

thought he would be sympathetic to me. That he would be like Uncle Francis with what he let me do. Instead....”

“Instead, he’s enforcing rules on you.”

“Exactly! I know there are rules for women, but we’re not in Society here. We’re not at a ball or an expensive dinner party.” Sylvia gestured at her surroundings. “It’s just...why can’t I be allowed a little bit of freedom? I know how to conduct myself in proper situations, and nobody is here who cares if I do something different.”

“Didn’t you just tell me that you pretended to be a maid to see what he was like?” Stewart reminded her. He chuckled. “I can’t believe you did that, and that the staff went along with it. That’s bold.”

Sylvia glared at him.

“I just wanted to be sure that he was the right person for this. How am I supposed to know what he’s like when he’s on his so-called best behaviour around me?”

“So you tried to set yourself on fire to get his attention?”

“That’s not funny, Stewart!”

Stewart grinned. He reached over and took her hand.

“I think it is very amusing. You know how to make things more interesting.” He kissed her fingers, his lips cold through her gloves. “That’s what I like about you.”

Sylvia managed a smile in return and withdrew her hand, glancing back at Richardson. He was still further back, his horse having stopped at the top of the slope as he looked out at his surroundings. It looked like he wasn’t watching them, but Sylvia didn’t want to try anything stupid to find out. It

appeared he could easily catch up to her if they suddenly bolted.

Also, he might get the wrong impression with Stewart kissing her hand. She didn't want to explain that it was simply something Stewart did with her all the time. He saw it as being playful, but anyone else might think that he was sweet on her. Sylvia knew that wasn't the case at all; Stewart had been her friend for years.

There had never been anything between them. He was certainly good-looking, and he could turn heads, but she didn't feel anything but sisterly affection for him. Stewart knew that as well.

Northbridge had to be mad to think the two of them would do anything untoward.

“So, what is he like?” Stewart asked as they started to move along the line of the trees, peering at her curiously. “Father said that he lived in London and that he used to live with the old duke when he was a child. But I don't remember him.”

“He is quite a bit older than us, Stewart,” Sylvia reminded him. “I think he’s over thirty.”

“Over thirty! God, that is really old.”

Sylvia rolled her eyes.

“Anyway, by the time I was taken in by Uncle Francis and Auntie Glynnis, he was long gone. Off to medical college, I think Auntie Glynnis said. I believe he studied in Paris as well.”

“He’s a doctor?”

“Yes. When we were having dinner, he said that he and Viscount Richardson were studying to become surgeons. They

are in high demand, and Northbridge and Richardson are keen to be part of that high-demand group.”

Stewart burst out laughing.

“Really? I never thought I’d hear of a doctor becoming a duke. I thought he didn’t look like a member of the nobility.”

“Don’t scoff, Stewart. Being a doctor is a respected position. And it would be helpful around here, seeing that our current doctor is stretched between several towns and parishes without any help. If they get bored with sorting out the estate, then they can make themselves useful in other ways.”

“Or completely neglect their proper duties altogether.”

Sylvia didn’t know what to say to that. She just remembered how both Northbridge and Richardson had talked about their work and studies while they were having dinner. There was a lot of enthusiasm in their discussion, telling Sylvia about all

the fascinating things they had learned and done during their time in medical school and then working in a hospital while helping the poor.

Sylvia wasn't able to speak much and contribute, but she did find it interesting to listen to them. She hadn't heard doctors talk like that, and it had drawn her in. Sylvia hadn't expected that.

They were dedicated to their profession. It was something they loved doing despite the groans and complaints. Sylvia had to think it must feel tough for the two of them to be away from what they loved doing because someone had new responsibilities.

She felt a little bad about that. Even though it wasn't her fault. She couldn't control what happened to Uncle Francis' health, and she couldn't control the fact that Northbridge now had a duty to his estate, and that included her. He didn't want any of this, and Sylvia suspected that he was going to find a way to get back to his previous life as a doctor.

While she would prefer that he did so—having him around made her uncomfortable—it did make Sylvia wonder what

would happen to her. Would she be provided for while he was at a distance? Or would he do something to get rid of her? Like forcing her into marriage?

Sylvia shuddered.

God, not that. Anything but that.

“Sylvia?” Stewart touched her arm. “You just shivered. Are you cold?”

“What? Oh, no.” Sylvia managed a small smile and gestured around her. “There was a brisk breeze just now, and it was a little too much for me.”

“Really? I didn’t notice....”

“Let’s circle around the estate,” Sylvia cut in before Stewart could go any further. “I’m getting hungry, and I’m sure Mrs Andrews has finished her baking.”

Stewart groaned.

“You really know how to speak to me, don’t you? And my stomach.”

Sylvia giggled.

“Do you not think about anything else except food, Stewart? I’m surprised you haven’t put on weight.”

“Me?” Stewart grinned and patted his stomach. “I will never get fat. Not a chance.”

“Be careful. You might have that happen when you don’t expect it.” Sylvia nudged her horse into motion. “Come on, then. I’m sure your stomach will be satisfied with whatever Mrs Andrews has made.”

They set off again at a brisk trot. Sylvia looked back and saw Richardson was beginning to follow them further up the slope. He looked like he was having no trouble controlling his horse, moving smoothly along the grass.

Sylvia was a little impressed and slightly annoyed at how good he was keeping up with them while keeping a distance. He hadn’t bothered them, as such. But knowing he was there was putting a damper on their ride. Sylvia wondered if she would be able to go out on her own after this.

Probably not, if things continued as they were right now.

Not for the first time, Sylvia wished that her uncle hadn’t died.

Ethan put away the latest report that his estate manager had just given to him. His scrawl was bad enough that he had to strain his eyes to read it; it was worse than most doctors he knew.

Even then, what he had read was not good.

“And this is the full extent of what needs to be done on the house?” he asked.

Kenneth Woodforde nodded, shuffling from foot to foot with his cap in his hands. He looked uncomfortable.

“It is. I’ve been over everything in the house and on the grounds. I tried not to miss anything, Your Grace.”

“I do appreciate that, Mr Woodforde. It’s just what I asked for.” Ethan gestured to the account books. “I’ve also had a look at the accounts. I was told there was a lot of debt, but I didn’t realise it was...that much.”

“The last duke was really trying to find ways to lessen the load, but the debt wasn’t going anywhere. It was giving him a lot of stress, Your Grace.”

If Ethan had been in that position, it would have caused him great stress as well. No wonder his uncle’s health had gone down if he was worrying about this so much. He laid a hand on the accounts book, not wanting to open them again. The numbers going the wrong way was painful to see.

“How did he end up in so much debt? I can’t understand. There was no debt that I was aware of when I was growing up here.”

Mr Woodforde sighed.

“I’m afraid it was from a series of business ventures where he put money into things, and they failed to thrive. He was too trusting and tried to invest with several people, including those who were only out to take his money.”

“He was that trusting with others?”

The estate manager nodded. He looked like he was ready for Ethan to explode in anger and take it out on him. Of course, Ethan was cross, but it wasn’t Mr Woodforde’s fault that this was happening. It was hard to believe that people had taken advantage of Uncle Francis.

He rubbed his hands over his face with a heavy sigh. The last few days had been spent going over the accounts to make sure they were correct, going out to inspect the estate and talking to the various tenants. People were getting by, and the tenants themselves were paying rent, showing how grateful they were by giving Ethan their spoils from the fields. It was like they knew food was needed without having to pay for it.

Ethan had never felt so embarrassed. He had seen the vegetable garden, the fruit plants, and the animals used for their meals, and thought it was quite self-sufficient. But to have his tenants give them food when he was meant to provide for them....

Sighing heavily, Ethan leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

“You can go now, Mr Woodforde.”

“Do you want me to do anything else, Your Grace?”

“Not right now. Just carry on with what you would do. If I need to do anything, just let me know.”

“Very well, Your Grace,” Mr Woodforde mumbled.

Ethan heard him leave and slumped further into his chair. God, he was exhausted after trying to learn about the estate. Whoever said this would be easy, and all he needed to do was dress well and get used to his new title, deserved to be shot.

“So?”

Ethan opened one eye. He had almost forgotten that Harry was there as well. His friend was standing by the window, the sunlight glinting through bright enough to make it hard to see him. Ethan groaned and closed his eye again.

“Could you come over here, Harry? It’s too painful to look at you like that.”

“Nice to know that I’m too ugly for you to look at,” Harry chuckled.

“That’s not what I mean.” Ethan waved at the report Mr Woodforde had just brought in. “Take a look at that. It’s going to make you wince.”

Harry crossed the room and picked up the paper, squinting as he looked it over.

“You’re right. It is painful. This is basically saying if the repairs to the house aren’t done, it’s going to fall down around us?”

“It’s holding together for now, but there are several rooms that need close attention.”

“When were the staff going to tell you about the hole in the floor in one of the downstairs rooms? Or the leaking ceiling in one of the guest rooms?”

“I don’t know. But that’s the least of our problems.”

“You mean about the roof?” Harry shuddered. “I saw the condition of it from a distance while I was out riding. I wouldn’t want to be the one who has to replace any of that, not with my fear of heights.”

“You would be pretty much useless to replace it, anyway,” Ethan grunted.

“But the house looked like it was in good condition when we first arrived. How did we not notice this?”

“Because everything looks fine from the front. At first glance, the house looks like it’s liveable.” Ethan pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. “While we can live here, it’s going to get increasingly uncomfortable. I don’t know how the staff have managed to live here like this, or Sylvia. She hasn’t made a complaint about the house at all.”

“Either she’s adapted to the situation, or she’s in denial that her home is falling down around her.”

Both sounded likely. Ethan had heard how Sylvia had spoken about her life since she had been brought to the house, and she had very fond memories. She showed a lot of gratitude for her guardians taking her in.

Even now, she was slightly shocked at how a duke and duchess said they would take her in and help raise her. Ethan wasn't really surprised that this had happened after he had left. Despite his social status, Uncle Francis would give the shirt off his back to help those in need.

“What are you going to do?” Harry asked. “Will you repair the house?”

“With the lack of money we have? That's not possible. Uncle Francis' debts need to be paid back, and that I cannot do with my money, even if I worked all the hours that are thrown at me. It would take years, and I would be destitute as a result.” Ethan gestured at their surroundings. “It would take more money than I can afford to repair everything to make it habitable.”

“You’re getting money from the tenants, aren’t you?”

“You think that’s going to help? It’s gotten to the point that the tenants are giving me food, not the other way around. That’s embarrassing, Harry.”

“Then what? How are you going to get out of this mess?”

Ethan knew what he would have to do. He would have to sell the estate. But the thought of leaving so many people unemployed, and Sylvia without a home, left him feeling uncomfortable. The best thing to do would be to sell some of the land that wasn’t being used to other tenants or their neighbours. He wouldn’t be able to put a high price on it, but it would help.

Maybe the farmers could make good use of the land he put up for sale. Then he would work his way in until the house had to be sold. By that time, the staff would have found other employment, and Sylvia could be moved to the townhouse in London.

Ethan was aware that it hadn't been used in a long time, but it was there, and the upkeep of that place would be far cheaper than looking after a big house in the country. That would be her new home, while Ethan went back to his lodgings. It would give her space, and he would have something familiar around him.

The house being sold was a last resort, but it would have to be done. Ethan knew people were going to be upset about him selling what rightly belonged to him. However, with everything going on, there wasn't much she could do about it. And if there was a chance that he could leave Sylvia retaining the life she was used to, he would let her have it.

The thought of his ward left Ethan feeling a bit uncomfortable. Mostly because he had neglected her, so he could focus on finding out what was the current status of the house and grounds, and also because he kept remembering how his heart had skipped a beat when he looked at her.

There was something about Sylvia's appearance and personality that drew him to her. Especially when she smiled,

and her eyes sparkled talking about something she was passionate about.

What was going on with him? Ethan wasn't sure he wanted to try and figure it out. She was now his ward, for goodness' sake. She wasn't a potential bride or anything, so Ethan shouldn't have been thinking about her as anything else. And yet he remembered how he felt when he saw Sylvia about to go riding with the solicitor's son alone.

Ethan didn't want the two of them around each other, especially not with the way Tillbury was looking at her. He couldn't believe Sylvia hadn't noticed it. It didn't matter what she had done before, but Ethan wasn't going to let her have free rein over the estate.

It wasn't Sylvia he didn't trust, though. And if it got out that he was allowing a man to take his unmarried ward out riding alone, people were going to talk. Ethan had enough to worry about without that.

“Ethan?”

Ethan looked up. Harry was frowning at him. Then he realised that he had wandered off in his own thoughts. He sat up.

“What was that?”

“I was asking what are you going to do about Lady Sylvia? If you’re going to do what I think you’re going to do, she’s going to need to be sorted. After all, she’s your responsibility now.”

Ethan scowled.

“Don’t remind me. If I’d known that I was going to be looking after a woman instead of a child....”

“I don’t think it’s any different. But what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m going to have to take her with me to London. Uncle Francis has that townhouse, and I can maintain that. She can live there instead.”

“So you would basically move her across the country to a place she doesn’t know?”

“If I have to sell the house, do you think I have any choice?”
Ethan shot back. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes.
“Besides, she needs to enter Society anyway. She has to have another Season so that she can find an appropriate suitor.”

Harry grunted.

“At least that’s one way to get rid of someone.”

“Harry....”

“I’m just making an observation. And I was talking to Mrs Goodpepper earlier, and she mentioned that it would do Sylvia some good to have another Season and start looking for someone who could provide for her, should the worst happen here. She was guilty about saying it, but she wanted the girl to be looked after.”

At least he and the housekeeper were on the same page. Ethan felt a little bad about trying to pass Sylvia onto someone else, but if it was the logical choice, then he would have to do it. Hopefully, Sylvia wouldn’t be too upset about it.

And it would, with any luck, ease the discomfort in his stomach about that part of the situation.

“I’ll discuss this with Sylvia at some point.”

“Better you than me. I doubt she’s going to like the fact that she’s going to have to permanently leave.”

“She won’t have a choice. This house is going to become uninhabitable eventually, and I won’t be able to repair anything. She needs to have a contingency plan.”

“Even if someone else is in charge of said contingency plan?”

Ethan didn’t know how to answer that. He just knew that Sylvia wasn’t going to like it.

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Chapter 7

Sylvia looked out of the window and saw Northbridge walking across the garden with Richardson. The two of them seemed to be in deep conversation, Northbridge frowning as Richardson said something that made him rub a hand over his face. Even when he was in some discomfort, he was good-looking.

Sighing, Sylvia turned away. There had to be something wrong with her if she found him attractive in that way. Being around him made her heart flutter, and Sylvia wasn't sure she liked it. It was really annoying.

She needed something to distract herself from this, otherwise, she was going to go mad. Maybe a ride on her horse around the estate would help. That was always good at clearing her head when she needed it.

Leaving the library, Sylvia passed by Mrs Goodpepper, who was heading into the laundry room with a pile of sheets in her arms.

“I’m going out riding, Mrs Goodpepper,” Sylvia said as she went past. “I won’t be long.”

“Have you told Lord Northbridge yet?” the housekeeper replied.

Sylvia groaned.

“Not this again....”

“It’s best that you tell him where you’re going. It would give him peace of mind.”

Sylvia wanted to ask about her peace of mind. She huffed.

“All right, I’ll tell him. Whether he says yes or no, I’m going out.”

Mrs Goodpepper didn’t look too impressed by that, but Sylvia ignored her as she headed through the house towards the nearest door to take her outside. The other woman might have to obey what her new employer said and expected her to do, but she didn’t have to do the same.

If Northbridge was going to argue, she would just ignore him. Sylvia wasn’t going to be kept locked up inside, especially when she was limited in the rooms she could use.

It was awful to say, especially when she loved this house, but the number of repairs needed was getting to the point that they couldn’t be ignored. Sylvia knew it needed to be worked on, and that was something they had to rely on Northbridge for.

Unfortunately, she had a feeling that he wouldn’t be able to afford everything. She didn’t know anything about her guardian’s finances, but she suspected that the situation wasn’t

good, otherwise, the repairs would have been done a long time ago.

She was sure that if she asked Northbridge about it, she wouldn't get a proper answer. These were things she shouldn't have to worry about as a lady. Sylvia knew she would lose her temper if she was treated like a child who didn't know how the world worked.

Heading out onto the terrace, Sylvia saw that Northbridge and Richardson had stopped at the edge of the vegetable garden, still in deep conversation. They didn't appear to have noticed that she was there yet.

As she was approaching them, Sylvia heard meowing from somewhere. It sounded like it was off the ground, and the animal was in distress. Sylvia groaned.

“Oh, Gigi. What have you done now?”

She followed the noise, wondering what trouble their elderly cat had gotten into. Then she found her up a tree, the black four-legged feline looking nervous on a branch above Sylvia's head. Sylvia put her hands on her hips.

“When are you going to stop this, you silly thing? You know you're too old to be climbing trees when you can't get down again.”

Gigi mewed in response. She was fourteen years of age and very stubborn. Most of her time was spent lying on the windowsill or in the sun sleeping. On the few occasions that she found herself running around exploring, she got into trouble.

Mostly it was from climbing her favourite tree, something she had always done as a younger cat. But Gigi kept forgetting that she was unable to get back down afterwards. Sylvia couldn't begin to count how many times she had gotten the cat down. Gigi didn't appreciate being manhandled, either, so Sylvia would get scratched a lot.

And she was going to get scratched again. Sighing, Sylvia approached the trunk and began to climb. It was a tree she had

climbed up so many times when she was younger, although her skirts were a little cumbersome. At least Gigi was on one of the lower branches, so it wouldn't be too difficult to grab her and get her down.

If she was lucky, she could get down and send Gigi back inside before Northbridge noticed what she was doing. Something for him to scold her about, surely.

Gigi meowed and shifted away from Sylvia as she reached for her.

“Come on, girl. Come here.”

Gigi ignored her, although she was looking nervously at the ground. Even at this height, she knew it would be likely to hurt if she jumped down. But she made no move to go to Sylvia for help.

Huffing, Sylvia leaned out further, reaching out.

“Come on, Gigi. Let’s get you down. Come here....”

Gigi hissed and swiped at her, her claws digging into the back of Sylvia’s hand. Sylvia gasped as the red-hot pain lanced through her hand, and she slipped. Then she was falling, seeing the ground rushing up to meet her.

Only to stop abruptly before she hit the ground, the sudden stop jarring her. Strong arms wrapped around her, and she was lifted upright. Sylvia was turned around, and she locked eyes with Northbridge. For a moment, she couldn’t breathe. So close, actually touching him, it was like all common sense was fleeing. She was pressed up against him, her hands on his chest, feeling his heartbeat racing under her fingers.

But he didn’t look too impressed. His mouth was hardened in a thin line, his eyes narrowed.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he demanded. “Aren’t you a little old to climb trees?”

Sylvia bristled.

“I was trying to get the cat down. She’s stuck.”

Richardson chuckled. Sylvia jumped; she had forgotten that he was there as well.

“You do realise that cats are fine with climbing trees, don’t you?”

“She’s old, and she’s always getting stuck up there. I was just trying to get her down.”

“Then you’d better leave it to the experts,” Richardson declared, taking off his coat with a flourish. “I’ll rescue your sweet little moggy.”

Sylvia didn’t know whether to laugh or roll her eyes at his antics. As Richardson climbed up the tree, making it look far easier when he wasn’t troubled by skirts, Northbridge’s voice brought Sylvia’s attention back to him.

“Do you normally do things you shouldn’t, Sylvia?”

Sylvia glared at him.

“Nobody who matters is around to care what I do.”

Northbridge’s mouth twitched.

“Glad to know you think I don’t care about what you do.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.” He released her, and Sylvia stopped herself from backing away immediately. “I had a feeling you were feral, and now you’ve confirmed it.”

“I’m not....”

Then Sylvia caught the glint in his eye and realised that he was teasing her. She glared at him.

“Don’t tease me. That’s not nice.”

“Would you rather I scold you for climbing a tree and almost hurting yourself?”

“I had it under control.”

“Right.” He folded his arms. “Your bleeding hand and the fact you were falling just as we got to you said you were in charge of the situation.”

“What?”

Sylvia looked down at her hand. She could see the scratches on the back of her hand, and they stung when she flexed her fingers. She sucked on the injured part, avoiding Northbridge’s stare; it was making her stomach behave in a way she wasn’t used to.

“There we go.” Richardson jumped down, Gigi in his arms. He beamed at Sylvia. “Nothing to it.”

“Be careful, my lord.” Sylvia showed her injured hand. “She’s not very affectionate in her old age.”

“I wouldn’t have thought so.” Richardson scratched Gigi under her chin, and Gigi started purring. “She’s a sweetheart.”

Sylvia hadn’t seen Gigi do this with any strangers before. She wasn’t even keen on those she knew. She glared at the cat, silently calling it a traitor. Gigi just looked back at her placidly, seemingly happy in Richardson’s arms.

“So, while my friend is dealing with his own little lady,” Northbridge’s voice made Sylvia jump. “Do you want anything? I presume you didn’t come out here purely to rescue a cat.”

“What makes you think I’m going to ask you for anything?”

Northbridge didn't respond. Sylvia thought about staring back, but his gaze was too intense. She backed down and sighed.

“I was going to go for a ride around the estate. Apparently, I have to ask you for permission to go, seeing as I'm going alone.”

“I see.”

He was silent for so long that Sylvia began to squirm. She gritted her teeth and waited impatiently. Was he enjoying making her uncomfortable?

Finally, Northbridge spoke.

“All right. You can go. But I'm coming with you.”

“What?”

“I’ll come along with you while you go riding. After all,” he tilted his head to one side, “I need to go and see the nearby village and the estate that I can’t get to by foot so easily. You know the place like the back of your hand, don’t you? You could be my guide.”

Sylvia faltered. She had thought that he was going to say he wanted to make sure she kept out of trouble. She didn’t think he would ask her for help. Over the last few days since he arrived, Northbridge had been concentrating on the estate and the house.

Part of her had wanted to spend time with him, just to see if she could get to know him more. If she could endear herself to him, maybe things would get better between them, and he would loosen up on being so strict.

Although that had only happened once. Since refusing her ride alone with Stewart, he had been so focused on everything else, he barely remembered that Sylvia existed. He was going back and forth, and Sylvia didn’t know what to think about it.

Was he making an effort? Or was this his way of keeping an eye on her? Her mind was spinning around and around.

Northbridge was still standing before her, and Sylvia realised that he was waiting for an answer. She didn't think she could get out of this, not without turning down going for a ride. Finally, she sighed.

“All right. I'll come with you.”

She hoped that she didn't regret it.

Ethan hadn't really expected Sylvia to agree to going with him. He thought that she would argue that she couldn't go out

alone, and she would refuse to join him. So to have her say she would come along with him was a surprise.

He couldn't help but feel pleased, though. Now he could actually spend time with his ward. While they had gotten to know each other at that dinner, there was still a lot he needed to know about her. Getting her to be his guide on his land would be a good start.

It didn't take long to saddle up the horses and leave the stables, and Ethan was getting used to being on the back of such a huge beast. He had ridden before, but it had been a long time since he had last done it. The height was something he needed to get used to.

“Are we not going to have a chaperone?” Sylvia asked as they headed down the driveway. “Don't you want Lord Richardson to join us?”

“You're with your guardian. I'd say I was your chaperone.”

Sylvia frowned.

“I don’t think that’s how it works. After you were so insistent about me not going with my friend alone, you’re going to be alone with me?”

“I haven’t been a guardian before, Sylvia, so you’d better go easy on me.” Ethan glanced at her, envious that she looked so serene as she rode her horse, making it appear so effortless. “And I don’t know your friend. I can’t trust him with you. But I can trust myself.”

Sylvia looked sceptical. Then she shook her head and looked away.

“I’ll never understand men,” she muttered.

Ethan smiled to himself.

“I know I’ve been ignoring you for my other duties, and I haven’t been completely clear with what you can and can’t do. Now I’ve got more time to get used to being a guardian.”

“There’s nothing to get used to. I know what I’m doing.”

“Are you sure about that? What do you think people would say if I let you turn into a wayward woman?”

Sylvia’s scowl snapped towards him.

“I’m not a wayward woman!”

“That’s what people would say. We may be miles away from everyone, but that doesn’t mean you can’t behave yourself.”
Ethan braced himself as the drive dipped a little before

levelling out again. “If you form bad habits in private, those will spill over into public where everyone can see you. But if you practise good habits away from everyone else....”

“Is this how you’re going to be my guardian? You’re going to preach to me about what I should and shouldn’t do?”

“Someone has to.”

Sylvia huffed and nudged her horse into a trot. Ethan watched her go. She was spritely, that much was certain. It was going to be interesting with her around now, and Ethan could give her more of his attention. From the way she was behaving, Sylvia didn’t think very highly of that.

As he started after her, Ethan saw that Sylvia had slowed at the gates. Then another horse came into view, a gentleman sitting astride. It took a moment for Ethan to realise that it was Tillbury again. And from what he could see, he was delighted to see Sylvia.

When they last encountered each other, Ethan had suspected that Tillbury had some sort of affection for Sylvia that went beyond the brother-sister bond Sylvia claimed that they had. The way he had been looking at her said a lot. But as he got closer now, Ethan could see that expression more clearly. It spoke volumes about his feelings towards Sylvia.

Ethan felt something clench in his stomach, and he couldn't shift it. Why did he feel like that looking at the two of them? It was uncomfortable, and Ethan didn't appreciate it. Tillbury might have feelings for Sylvia, but Sylvia wouldn't be able to marry him.

Ethan wouldn't allow it. Aside from the fact his gut was tightening at the two of them together, it was also saying that Tillbury was bad news. He was up to no good, and Ethan didn't want him anywhere near his ward.

You're getting a little too overprotective of her, and you barely know her. Wind back your jealousy a little. You're her guardian, not her lover.

I'm not jealous. Not one bit.

Ethan reached Sylvia just as Tillbury was handing her a bottle, pausing as his fingers brushed hers before pulling back.

“That should help Mrs Osmond. Hopefully, it will ease her discomfort.”

“I appreciate this, Stewart.” Sylvia gave him a smile that made Ethan want to growl. “Thank you.”

“What's this?” Ethan asked as he pulled up beside her. “I've heard of giving flowers to a lady, Mr Tillbury, but a bottle?”

Tillbury scowled.

“I’m just bringing Sylvia something for one of the tenants, Your Grace.”

“Oh?”

Sylvia went on to explain.

“Mrs Osmond is the wife of one of the tenants. Their farm is on the east side down the hill. She’s pregnant with her fifth child in seven years.”

“Her fifth?” Ethan whistled. “There are times when I’m glad I’m not a woman. I wouldn’t be able to cope with being pregnant that much.”

“Well, she’s been having a bit of discomfort regarding her pregnancy, and Stewart said he could get her a tonic from the apothecary to help ease her sickness and settle her stomach.”

“She’s been experiencing bad morning sickness, then?”

Ethan couldn’t help it, his doctor side was piqued with interest now.

Sylvia nodded.

“She likes to be independent and get on with things, but it’s gotten to the point that she’s practically bedridden.”

“How far along is she?”

“She’s got a couple of months left before the baby comes,” Tillbury responded. “I think she’s sworn off having more children after this one, though.”

Ethan wouldn't be surprised at that. He looked at the bottle in Sylvia's hand and then reached out.

"May I have a look at it?"

"Of course." Sylvia passed the bottle to him. "But why? It's just a tonic to put in her tea and to have before bed."

"Just humour the doctor in me, Sylvia."

Ethan took the cork out and sniffed. A familiar whiff filled his nostrils, and that shocked him. He stared at Tillbury.

"What did you say to the apothecary when you got it?"

“That a pregnant woman is suffering from sickness and needs something to settle her stomach. He said this was just what she would need.” Tillbury’s scowl darkened. “You’re not going to stop a pregnant woman from getting something to make her feel better?”

“I am when it’s more than likely going to harm the baby.”

Sylvia frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“This is chamomile. It can cause a miscarriage, or it can cause a woman to go into labour before the baby is ready.”

Sylvia’s face went pale. Tillbury scoffed.

“Of course, that doesn’t happen. It’s perfectly safe.”

“I can assure you that it isn’t. I’ve never given it to a patient, but at least three physicians I know gave it to pregnant women, and they either had a miscarriage or went into labour far too early. We began to realise the correlation, so we stopped giving it out as a medicine.”

Tillbury snorted.

“So what? That was London, where it’s filthy anyway. It could have been anything else.”

“You think because you’re in the country that things are going to be different?”

“Of course. We look after our own. Our apothecary wouldn’t hurt anyone, especially not a lovely lady like Mrs Osmond.” Tillbury leaned forward in his saddle. “How about you don’t

interfere in our business? I know the village here, and we know how to look after each other.”

Ethan leaned towards him in return.

“And Mrs Osmond is my tenant. Also, just because you’ve been here longer than I have doesn’t mean you know more than me. As a doctor, I’m saying that it would be medically dangerous to give chamomile to a pregnant woman. Unless you’re willing to gamble with Mrs Osmond’s unborn baby? Because I’m not about to do that.”

Tillbury’s lip curled in a snarl. Ethan wondered if anyone had ever stood up to him before. But before the young man could say anything, Sylvia cut in quickly.

“I think we should listen to His Grace, Stewart. He is a doctor, after all. We should pay attention.”

“What? But you....”

“Forgive me, Stewart.” Sylvia took the bottle from Ethan and held it out to him. “Take it back to the apothecary and apologise for the misunderstanding. I’m sure we’ll figure it out for Mrs Osmond.”

“I can suggest what you can swap it out for instead,” Ethan added. “There are going to be plenty of medicines that she can have instead.”

“Don’t bother,” Tillbury snapped. He didn’t take the bottle, waving his hand as he turned his horse around. “Keep it. Once her condition worsens, the one to blame will be you because of your high and mighty ways.”

Ethan watched him ride away. His sudden anger at being told no, shouldn’t have been surprising, but it was. Sylvia winced.

“I must apologise for Stewart’s behaviour, Your Grace. I don’t know what’s gotten into him.”

“And I don’t know what the apothecary was thinking. All of them should know about pregnant women and chamomile.”

“Maybe they made a mistake?”

“I don’t know.” Ethan looked at the bottle in his hand. “Why don’t we go and find out for ourselves? I can collect a tonic that is appropriate instead. Then we can deliver it to Mrs Osmond. Will you come with me?”

“Of course.” Sylvia nodded. “I’d be happy to do that. I just wish I knew what Stewart was thinking. He’s not normally that careless.”

Ethan didn’t respond. He didn’t want to try and figure it out.

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Chapter 8

“Thank you for reassuring Louisa,” Sylvia said as she and Northbridge rode back to the house. “She’s been nervous about this pregnancy for a while now.”

“Even though she’s had four children already?” Northbridge looked slightly amused. “I would have thought she would be taking it in her stride.”

“But this one has been tough on her physically and mentally. She’s more exhausted than I’ve ever seen her, and her husband has been concerned. She tries to brush it off, but we can all tell that she’s struggling.”

Sylvia had known Louisa Osmond since she was a little girl. The farmer’s wife was only a couple of years older than Sylvia, and they had played together as children. She had fallen for the older and rather sensible Joseph Osmond, and their marriage was almost expected as the two fell deeper in love. They had always talked about having a big family, but it was now taking its toll on Louisa. Sylvia wished she could do something more.

“Well, that tonic I gave her should ease her stomach troubles. It’s not going to cause any harm to her baby.” Northbridge shook his head. “I’m still shocked that the apothecary gave Tillbury chamomile.”

“I’m sure it was a mistake.”

Northbridge grunted. He didn’t believe it at all. Sylvia didn’t want to think that Stewart would harm Louisa. It had to be some sort of mistake. That had to be it. But Sylvia wouldn’t be able to see Stewart alone to find out, not if Northbridge was insisting on her going around with a chaperone.

She would need to talk to him soon. Hopefully, they could clear up the misunderstanding.

“Sylvia?” Northbridge was peering at her. “Are you all right?”

“What?”

“You looked a little distant there. What were you thinking?”

Sylvia sighed and rubbed a hand over her face. Riding was meant to clear her head, not make her feel exhausted.

“I’m just worried about Louisa, that’s all.”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine. She’s got another six weeks until she’s due. She just needs to rest and take that tonic that I suggested.”

“She will do. She knows when to listen.” Sylvia turned the conversation away, looking over at her guardian while trying not to admire how handsome his profile was and how good he looked on a horse. “So, what did you think of the village? It’s pretty, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Very quaint.”

“Quaint?”

“You make that sound like I’ve said something offensive.” Northbridge’s mouth twitched, glancing at her. “Are you prepared to see the bad in everything I say?”

“I don’t do that!” Sylvia protested.

Northbridge’s smile was wry, and Sylvia groaned. If he was teasing her, it was not helpful. She shifted in her saddle, feeling herself slip a little, so she adjusted herself in the saddle again.

“So, what did you think?”

“It’s a nice place. Not much has changed since I was younger.”
Northbridge paused. “But I’m afraid that won’t be enough.”

“Enough for what?”

“To stop me from selling the house and the grounds. And I’m leaning towards that being the only option.”

Sylvia thought she had misheard. Her stomach dropped as she heard the words she had been hoping never to hear. She stared at him.

“Are you serious about this? You’re going to sell?”

“I might have no option but to sell. The repairs to the house are enormous, and there is no money to cover any of it.”

“But...I thought Uncle Francis had left money!”

Northbridge snorted.

“Not for me. Whatever was left went to his creditors, and while that cleared some of his debt, it didn’t wipe out all of it. Of course, I have my own money, and I’m doing well with it, but it won’t be enough to cover what we need to fix the house.” He sighed and looked up at the house looming up on the hill in front of them.

“I’m going to have to sell some of the land further out to see if that brings in anything. I’ll hold off as long as I can, but I can’t see any way out of it.”

Sylvia felt nauseous. Her home for the last ten years was going to be gone. She would have nothing.

“But...what about the servants? The tenants? What will happen to them?”

“The tenants can take the land they’re on, and I’ll make sure everyone goes into proper employment.”

“And what about me? Are you going to abandon me as well?”

Northbridge frowned.

“You think I would do that to you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know you well enough to be sure.”

His jaw tightened, and Sylvia saw that his hands were tightening around the reins. He looked away.

“I won’t leave you out in the cold, Sylvia,” he said quietly.
“I’m just doing what needs to be done.”

“But you have a responsibility to those around the estate! Your tenants and household staff! Me! And you’re going to be throwing that away?”

“Do you have any idea how much it’s going to cost me to keep things going? I’m still trying to figure out where the money is coming from to pay the staff! If I find out that the money is from another loan....” Northbridge shook his head. “This is no way to live. It needs to be sorted out now, otherwise, the debt is just never going to go away. I’m not about to be saddled with something Uncle Francis left me.”

Sylvia knew that he was right about the debt—she didn’t want that hanging over her head, either—but to sell the place she called home for half of her life? She couldn’t imagine that. It left her cold, thinking that he could do that.

“Anyway, it’s not going to be a problem for you shortly,” Northbridge went on.

“What do you mean by that?”

“You’re going to be married and living with your husband. You won’t have to worry about anything here.”

Sylvia’s mouth dropped open.

“Is that what you think of me? Am I a piece of furniture to sell off?”

“I’m not selling you off, and of course, I don’t think like that. But you’re of an age that is right for getting married....”

“You just want me off your hands, don’t you?”

Northbridge didn’t look at her, but that was answer enough for Sylvia. She was floored that he would talk to her as if this was the most natural thing to do. She didn’t want to get married, and her uncle had understood that. He would let her do what she wanted. Why couldn’t his successor do the same?

“And if I say I don’t want to do it?”

“You won’t have a choice. At least you’ll be provided for properly with a husband. With the lack of funds, I wouldn’t be able to let you have the lifestyle that you deserve.” Northbridge grimaced. “After all, while I have my own money, it’s nothing compared to what you’re used to.”

“It’s not about the money!”

He didn’t respond immediately. Sylvia wanted to scream at him, say that this was all unfair and he couldn’t do this to her.

But she knew that doing that wouldn't help at all. She was going to have to go along with it, no matter how much she didn't want to.

“We'll be going back to London in two weeks,” Northbridge said, staring straight ahead. “You and I will be entering Society, and you'll be reintroduced to the ton. My aunt on my mother's side is going to help us with that. I've already written to her about you.”

Sylvia didn't answer. She could barely respond, with her throat clogging up and tears prickling at her eyes. This was just not fair.

She shifted in her saddle again, and she slipped when her hand lost its hold. Screaming, and felt herself coming out of the saddle, and she grabbed at it. The horse had been trained well enough to stop and wait, snorting as if she thought Sylvia was a very silly girl.

“Sylvia?”

“I’m all right,” Sylvia said through gritted teeth, her cheeks burning as she tried to pull herself up. But she was stuck, lying on her belly on the saddle while she tried to get a firmer hold, her legs dangling in the air. She was sure that her skirt had hiked up and her legs were on display. “I’m just...I’m fine.”

She heard Northbridge snort, and then the sound of him dismounting. She gasped when she felt large, warm hands on her waist.

“Let go. I’ve got you.”

Sylvia didn’t have much choice but to do as she was told. She let go of the saddle and slipped into Northbridge’s hold. He eased her to the ground, and Sylvia groaned when she felt a tug on her dress. The hem had gotten caught in the stirrup, and it was revealing a lot of stockinged leg.

As if this day couldn’t get any worse.

“Oh, for....”

“Hold onto me.”

One arm around her waist, Northbridge reached over and unhooked her skirt from the stirrup. Then he knelt before her and inspected the stitching.

“It’s not too bad. There’s a small hole, but it’s nothing that can’t be stitched up.”

“Well.” Sylvia cleared her throat. “That’s something, at least.”

It felt really odd having a gentleman kneeling before her, his fingers on her dress. It wouldn’t take much for him to touch her leg. Sylvia felt her heart stop at the thought of that happening.

Northbridge looked up at her, giving her a smile that left Sylvia feeling lightheaded.

“How’s your shin?”

“My shin?”

“You hurt it the other day, remember? You wouldn’t let me help you with that. Did you hurt your shin again?”

“Oh. That.” Sylvia swallowed. He hadn’t touched her inappropriately, but it didn’t stop her from feeling uncomfortable about this. “No, I didn’t. I’d almost forgotten about it.”

In reality, the scrape from her fall was burning, making her shin throb uncomfortably. But Sylvia wasn’t about to tell

Northbridge that. She wondered if he could hear how loud her heart was pounding. It felt like it was vibrating in her ears.

“That’s good.” Northbridge stood up, giving her a slight smile. “You really need to stop falling off things when I’m around. I’m beginning to think there’s something wrong.”

Sylvia didn’t know what to say to that. Then she stilled as Northbridge reached up and touched her jaw, her eyes inspecting her face.

“You’re looking pale, Sylvia. When was the last time you ate? Did you have any breakfast?”

“What?”

“Breakfast. You didn’t come down with Richardson and myself. Did you have breakfast in your room?”

“Oh.” Sylvia bit her lip. “I forgot. I don’t normally feel hungry in the morning.”

Northbridge frowned.

“That’s the most important meal of the day. You need to have some sustenance to keep you going.”

“I had some tea....”

“You need proper food. Then you wouldn’t look so pale.”

Sylvia frowned.

“I thought being pale was proper for Society.”

“Not the colour you are.” Northbridge brushed her hair behind her ear, his fingers tickling Sylvia’s skin. “Let’s get you back, and we’ll get Mrs Andrews to make something quick for you to get down. I don’t want you fainting on me.”

“I’m not going to....”

“Listen to the doctor, Sylvia. The doctor knows best.” He winked at her. “Now, do you want to walk back, or do you need help getting back on your horse?”

Sylvia knew she should ride back—it would make it quicker to return—but to get up there she would need help, and the thought of having Northbridge’s hands on her again when she was still reeling from his touch just now was probably not a good idea. She was probably going to have her heart giving out.

“I...I think I’ll walk back,” she mumbled, grabbing onto the reins. She was unable to meet his gaze. “I need the walk, and we’re not too far away.”

Northbridge didn’t look convinced. He moved closer to her, his eyes searching her face. Sylvia glanced up at him and looked away quickly, fiddling with the reins.

“Are you afraid of me, Sylvia?”

“What?”

“You go from fierce to shy in the blink of an eye, and your cheeks are still flushed.” Northbridge paused. “Do I make you nervous?”

Why was he talking like this to her? What was he trying to get her to say? Sylvia licked her lips, still unable to look at him.

“I’m not afraid of you,” she whispered.

She jumped when she felt his fingers brushing against her cheek. They were warm and very soft, so gentle against her skin. Sylvia couldn’t bring herself to look at him, shocked at what was happening. How could they go from squabbling to tender in such a short space of time?

“I’m not the enemy, Sylvia,” Northbridge said softly. “You may not like what is happening, but you know it’s the right thing to do. When I don’t have another choice.”

His fingers lingered on her jaw for a moment, and then they were gone, leaving a chill behind. Northbridge’s horse snorted, and Sylvia finally looked up to see her guardian tugging his horse forward by the reins.

“Let’s get back. I’m sure Mrs Andrews will be delighted to make something for you to eat. I’m certainly getting hungry myself.”

Sylvia watched him go, still feeling the imprint of his fingers on her cheek. Suddenly, she wanted him to keep touching her. It had felt nice.

And she felt like a fool for wanting something like that.

It was dusk when Sylvia was able to slip out without anyone noticing her. Northbridge had retreated to the study, and Richardson had gone for a walk down to the village. The two of them had certainly settled well enough into the house.

But it wouldn't be for long. They were going to head back to London in a couple of weeks, taking Sylvia with them. She would be taken into Society to find a husband. Once she was married, Northbridge wouldn't need to have anything to do with her again.

The thought of him discarding her like that smarted, but Sylvia wasn't going to let that trouble her. It was inevitable that it was going to happen to her. She just hadn't expected it to occur in such circumstances.

Then again, before she came to live with Uncle Francis and Aunt Glynnis, Sylvia wouldn't have expected to be a member of the ton. Her parents owned land, but they weren't wealthy enough to rub elbows with those who saw their wealth as disposable income.

Sylvia had been content with that, although a part of her had wondered what it would be like to enter Society and find herself love, someone who could care for her and look after her. Then she had almost had the opportunity for that to happen, before Aunt Glynnis passed away.

Now it was really going to happen, and Sylvia didn't feel happy about it. Her excitement just came up short, and she didn't know what to think about it. It was odd. Sylvia wished that she could be delighted that she would be able to find a husband, yet there was nothing.

Northbridge probably thought that she was feral, like he had said, and maybe she was. Sylvia had a feeling she wasn't going to truly fit in, even if she became someone she wasn't.

Glancing around to make sure that nobody could see her, Sylvia made her way down the slope towards the wood on the north side of the estate. When she was frustrated, and needed time alone, she would go to the woods and walk around.

There was a small stream that wound its way through the trees, and she could sit on the rocks to watch the water, listening to it as it trickled through the stones. It was a lovely sound, and it was relaxing. Sylvia needed that right now.

Northbridge wasn't going to be impressed when he found that she had gone, but in that moment, Sylvia didn't care.

It didn't take long to get to the stream, but Sylvia found that she wasn't alone. Stewart was already there, sitting cross-legged on a flat rock as he twisted a twig in his hands with a scowl on his face. He looked up when he realised that he wasn't alone and scrambled to his feet.

“Sylvia! I didn’t think you were going to come here.”

“Were you waiting for me, Stewart?”

“No, I...I just wanted time on my own.” Stewart gestured at their surroundings. “Much as I enjoy being in mixed company, nothing beats being in the peace and quiet.”

Sylvia wasn’t sure if she believed that. There was something in Stewart’s tone that didn’t sit well with her. But Sylvia pushed that aside. She was still upset from what Northbridge had told her, and it had been stewing inside her all day.

This wasn’t something she could share with Cathy; she would be shocked that Northbridge was going to sell the estate, and it would get around the other servants. Despite worrying about the people she considered friends, she knew that it wasn’t for certain that the estate and house would be sold. She didn’t want to worry everyone so much.

Besides, Cathy would tell her that it would be a good thing to go to London and find a charming gentleman. Sylvia was still unsure about it all. The feelings she had about it were rather odd.

“Are you all right, Sylvia?” Stewart jumped off the rock and tossed the twig aside. “You don’t look too happy. What’s going on?”

“It’s...well, it’s complicated.”

“How about we uncomplicate it?” Stewart suggested with a smile.

Sylvia knew he wasn’t going to like it. She took a deep breath.

“Lord Northbridge is going to take me to London.”

“London? Why?”

“I’m of age, and I will be attending another Season. I need to be introduced to the ton so I can find....” Sylvia swallowed. “So I can find a husband.”

Stewart’s eyes widened.

“What? He’s going to do that?”

“He can and he will. He says that I’m at the right age where I need to find someone to provide for me.”

“So, he wants to wash his hands of you?”

“I don’t think it’s like that....”

“That’s what it sounds like!” Stewart grabbed her hands. “You can’t leave here. This is your home. What about Wooler? What about me?”

“Oh, Stewart.” Sylvia squeezed his hands. “It’s not like I’m going to be away from Wooler permanently. I’ll still be coming back for visits.”

“But that’s not the same. What if you end up living far away? You know this area is not very populated, and your future husband is probably going to end up having a big house nearer the bigger cities.” Stewart sounded very bitter. “You’re never going to come back, I just know it.”

“Don’t be silly. Of course, I’m going to come back. And we can write to each other. It’s not going to be that bad.”

“It’s going to be very bad. Because I know that will never happen.”

Sylvia frowned. Stewart was reacting badly to this news. She had not expected that.

“Stewart, what’s wrong with you? You’re making me nervous.”

“I don’t mean to, but...” Stewart was staring at their joined hands. “I just can’t think of you leaving here. Leaving me.”

“I’m not leaving you.”

“You’re going to be leaving Wooler. I think it’s safe to say that you’ll be leaving me.”

Sylvia shook her head.

“I won’t...”

“Unless I have a reason for you to stay.” Stewart looked up, staring at her with bright eyes. “If there is a reason for you to stay here, would you take it?”

“What do you mean? You’re beginning to scare me.”

“I’m saying if I had a reason for you to stay with me, would you accept it?” Stewart drew her close, still clasping her hands in his. “I’m asking you to marry me, Sylvia. This isn’t exactly the way I wanted to do it, but if I can stop you from leaving... Sylvia, will you marry me?”

All of the words mixed up in Sylvia's head, and for a moment, she had no idea what he had just said. Then the words sank in, and she realised what he had just proposed to her. Her mouth fell open as she stared at him.

"You're proposing to me? But why?"

"Are you really asking me that? It's because I love you, Sylvia. I've wanted to ask you for a while now, but I thought asking so soon after your guardian's death was a bit tasteless." Stewart shook his head. "Now I'm going to be losing you, and I don't want to wait any longer."

That all came out in a rush, and Sylvia was still reeling. This couldn't be right. Her friend wasn't doing this right now, was he?

"Oh, Sylvia...." Stewart cupped her jaw in his hand and lowered his head.

But Sylvia pressed her hands on his chest, pushing him away.

“Stewart, let me go.”

It was like he didn't hear her properly, to begin with. Then she was able to push him away. Stewart stumbled, catching himself before he fell onto the rock behind him. He stared at her in bewilderment.

“Sylvia?”

“I...I can't, Stewart.”

“What?”

Sylvia threw her hands up in the air as she paced away.

“I can’t marry you. This can’t happen.”

She felt awful for telling the truth, but Sylvia knew she had to say it for it to sink in. Stewart frowned and pushed himself up.

“But...but why? I’ve got money, you know me, and you get to stay in Wooler.”

“I thought you said you loved me.”

“That’s a given. I’ve already said that I love you, and I always wanted you to be my wife.”

“Really?”

“Why do you think I proposed marriage? I’m not about to do that on a whim!” Stewart stared at her. “But why won’t you accept? Why won’t you say yes?”

“Because....” Sylvia braced herself. Stewart wasn’t going to like this, and she didn’t want to upset him. But she had to say it. “Because I don’t love you. If I am going to marry, I want it to be someone I love.”

Stewart looked devastated.

“You don’t love me?”

“As a friend, yes, but that’s not enough for marriage.”

“Is that because there is someone else?”

“What?”

Stewart’s expression was changing; his jaw tightened as his eyes narrowed. He pushed off the rock and approached her.

“Is there someone else you love? There has to be if you’re turning me down.”

“Of course, there isn’t! Who would I be meeting for that to happen?”

“It’s a possibility.”

Sylvia snorted.

“I’m not in love with anyone. I care for you as a friend, Stewart, and I appreciate that you care for me even more, but there isn’t anything I can do about it. I can’t marry you, even if it means I get to stay in Wooler. We would both be miserable, and you know it.”

Stewart looked like he was going to argue, but he thought better of it. Scowling, he ran a hand through his hair.

“I suppose I was asking for too much. I thought things were actually going to go differently.”

“Did you think that I would agree to your proposal?”

“I thought that you would. We’re good together, and I’ve loved you for a long time. Surely, you can see that is a good thing?”

Sylvia shook her head.

“Not if I can’t give you what you want. And we both know that I can’t.” She hesitated. “I want us to remain friends, Stewart. Can we please remain as we were before?”

Stewart didn’t respond. He just stared at her for a moment more, the anger barely contained in his eyes. Then he turned abruptly and started to walk away. Sylvia stopped herself from running after him.

“Stewart? Please....” Stewart stopped, but he didn’t turn around. “Will we remain friends? I certainly need a friend right now.”

Stewart didn’t respond. He was almost like a statue. Then he just walked away, heading through the trees and disappearing from sight.

Chapter 9

Sylvia didn't see Stewart for a while after that. She wanted to go into the village to find him, but Northbridge wouldn't let her leave without a chaperone, and Sylvia wasn't prepared to tell him or Viscount Richardson why she was looking for him. That would just result in her telling them what had happened, and how she had met Stewart alone. Northbridge certainly wouldn't be happy about it.

Maybe it was a good thing that she didn't see Stewart. Sylvia felt like she had been lying to him when he asked if there was someone else she loved. She had said no, and really believed it at the time.

But then she had entered the house a while after, and she literally bumped into Northbridge as he was coming out of the library. Being in his arms, even for a moment, had left her whole body feeling warm, and her heart stuttered when she looked up into his eyes.

It made her remember when Northbridge had helped her down from her horse after getting stuck. Sylvia hadn't thought it was

possible to feel safe in someone's arms. And with him? How did that happen?

She had come to the conclusion that she had some feelings for Northbridge. That left her feeling a little shaken. He was her guardian, nothing more. Sylvia knew that developing feelings of any romantic kind for him was rather a bad idea. Especially when she was aware of his intentions to sell everything in Wooler. Yes, the house was in disrepair in places, and there was virtually no money, but this was not what she wanted.

Unfortunately, she had no say in the matter.

“Sylvia?”

Sylvia jumped. Cathy was standing behind her, watching her curiously in the mirror. She had been helping Sylvia get dressed, and while she had been talking, Sylvia had been wandering off in her own thoughts. Feeling guilty for ignoring her friend, Sylvia gave her a tiny smile.

“My apologies, Cathy. I didn’t mean to ignore you.”

“You’ve been a bit despondent for the last week.” Cathy frowned at her. “Are you sure you’re all right? I know I keep asking....”

“I’m fine. I’m just thinking about going to London.” That was partly true, but not completely. Sylvia bit her lip. “I’m not looking forward to it. I know I have to do it, but I have misgivings about it.”

Cathy’s frown turned into a smile, and she squeezed Sylvia’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry too much about it. It’s perfectly normal to feel nervous about something new. And you are allowed to think that way.”

“I suppose....”

“Besides, you’ve never been to London in a few years. Make the most of this opportunity. And you’ll get a generous dowry, from what I’ve heard.”

“What?” Sylvia turned and stared at her. “How did you find out about that? Lord Northbridge only recently spoke to me about it.”

“Viscount Richardson told me. He said that it was coming out of Northbridge’s own money instead of the dukedom. Even he thought it was extremely generous.” Cathy shrugged. “It sounds like he’s looking out for you despite being almost a stranger.”

“I wouldn’t call us strangers...” Sylvia murmured. Then she realised what Cathy had just said. “Wait, Viscount Richardson told you about it? Why were you discussing something like that?”

Cathy didn't immediately respond, her cheeks going a little pink. Sylvia blinked.

“Are you and the viscount...are you...?”

“If you're about to imply something improper, the answer is no. I wouldn't do something like that.”

From the fast way Cathy spoke, Sylvia suspected that something had happened. She smiled.

“He's quite an attractive man, isn't he?”

“Sylvia!” Cathy gasped. “That's not appropriate!”

“You say that given our relationship? I think we’re the epitome of inappropriate.”

Cathy huffed.

“Anyway, Lord Richardson has been very respectful.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to see him in London,” Sylvia teased. “You’re coming with me, aren’t you? Lord Northbridge said that he would be content for me to bring you along as well for some familiarity.”

“Of course, I’m coming. I’ve never been to London, either, and I’m keen to see what it’s like.” Cathy grinned. “You wouldn’t be able to keep me away. You are stuck with me.”

Sylvia couldn’t help but laugh at that. She looked at the clock.

“Once we’ve had breakfast, I’m going to go and see Mrs Osmond and find out how she’s getting on with her pregnancy. Do you want to come with me? It’s a lovely day outside.”

“All right. I would like some fresh air.” Cathy’s eyes lit up.
“Maybe she’s already given birth!”

“Don’t be daft. She’s still got five weeks left before she gives birth. She’s going to have the baby while we’re in London.”

“It’s a shame. I do love newborn cuddles.”

Sylvia did as well. She adored holding babies. It was something that made her heart melt. She wondered if she would ever experience that herself. Would she have children that she would be able to cuddle all the time?

That would require getting a husband, though, and that left Sylvia feeling nervous. Would she be able to meet

expectations? Or would she be ignored and end up a spinster? Her head was making her think too much, and it was beginning to give her a headache.

After breakfast—which Sylvia had alone, as both Richardson and Northbridge had had breakfast early and gone into the study together—the two women left the house and headed over to the Osmond farm.

Sylvia thought about telling Northbridge where she was going, but she decided against it. She still remembered what had happened the day before, and it had left her flustered. What if Northbridge had seen her reaction before? She couldn't look him in the eye right now.

Besides, she had a chaperone in Cathy. And she was only going to visit a tenant. It wasn't like she was sneaking off for a clandestine meeting.

Osmond was in the yard feeding the pigs in their sty when Sylvia and Cathy arrived, along with his oldest child, Dolores. The five-year-old brightened and waved when she saw them. Osmond looked up when he realised his daughter's attention had been diverted.

“Good morning, Lady Sylvia. Cathy.”

“Morning, Joseph.” Sylvia approached the sty, trying not to wrinkle her nose at the smell. She had grown up around the stench of animals all her life, but she still hadn’t gotten used to it. “How’s your wife? Is Louisa all right?”

“She’s still not feeling too good. I thought it would be a good idea to send the children into the village to my brother’s for the day so she could get some rest.” Osmond shook his head. “I don’t know what’s wrong with this pregnancy, but it’s been really tough on her. We’ll all be glad when this is over.”

“Maybe you should stop having children,” Cathy suggested with a sly grin. Osmond gestured at the mud he was ankle-deep in.

“You make that comment again, and I’m going to cover you in mud, Cathy. Not your business.”

“Ignore her. She’s just teasing you.” Sylvia gestured towards the farmhouse. “Is Louisa up? Can we go and see her?”

“I’m sure she would like to see you. You’re heading off to London soon, right?”

Sylvia didn’t need to ask how he knew that; gossip spread around the tenants very fast. She nodded.

“Yes. And I wanted to see how she was before I left.”

“Don’t expect warm hospitality. Louisa isn’t in a state to be a good hostess, but I’m sure you understand.”

“We’re not after hospitality, Joseph. Don’t worry about it.” Sylvia took Cathy’s arm and tugged her away. “Come along,

Cathy. Before he decides that he's going to throw mud on you anyway."

"Why does he threaten to do something to me each time I'm here?" Cathy asked as she was led away. "I don't do anything to him."

Sylvia snorted.

"You like to goad him every time you're here. I swear you two squabble more than Louisa and Joseph do. Now let's get inside."

She pushed open the kitchen door to find Louisa sitting at the kitchen table. She was kneading dough, although the angle did look awkward. Sylvia saw the discomfort in her face as she tried to use her knuckles to mix the dough.

"Louisa?"

Louisa looked up, managing a smile when she saw them. Her face looked like she had lost a lot of colour.

“Lady Sylvia! Good morning. If I’d known you were coming....”

“We just came by to see how you were doing. I’m not going to be around when you give birth, you know.”

“I heard. London sounds like an adventure, though. You shouldn’t ignore that just because I’m having a baby.”

“I know.” Sylvia leaned on the table. “But you’re my friend, and a tenant. I want to make sure you’re going to be all right. And you look like you’re in a lot of discomfort.”

“I’ve been having a lot of cramps now and then. It’s nothing unusual, though,” Louisa went on hurriedly as Sylvia stared at her. “I got cramps like this with my other pregnancies. But these are a bit more intense, and...well, it’s hard to concentrate.”

That would explain why she was sitting down, especially when Louisa flinched and hunched over, one hand going to her swollen belly. Sylvia exchanged a glance with Cathy, who looked nervous.

Both of them had seen Louisa with her previous pregnancies, and she hadn’t been in this much pain at this point. She was a strong woman who had helped out on the farm until she was about to give birth. Louisa didn’t like lying around doing nothing. To see her doing it this time was worrying.

“Do you want us to do anything?” Cathy asked.

“What?” Louisa looked up. “Are you saying you’re going to help me out with my chores?”

“Why not? We want to make sure you’re comfortable and not in any discomfort.”

“But I couldn’t possibly let you do that!” Louisa shook her head. “It’s my responsibility to work around the house, not yours. I couldn’t let you do that!”

“Cathy’s right,” Sylvia said. “You need help, and we’re happy to do that while you rest.”

“But....”

“Your other children are with family today, aren’t they? Make the most of them not being here, and rest. You’re going to need plenty of it, especially if this one is difficult.”

Louisa looked like she was going to argue more, but another grimace passed across her face, and she winced.

“I think my body is telling me you’re right, although I’m still not happy about it.”

“You don’t have to be happy about it. Listen to what your body wants.” Sylvia came around the table and squeezed her friend’s shoulders. “Go and rest, Louisa. If you don’t want to lie down, sit in the rocking chair in the corner and tell us what to do. I’m sure you can still order us around.”

“Oh, I’m definitely going to do that.” Louisa started to stand up, only to sway and clutch at the table. “I...I need to wash my hands first. Then you can tell me what you need.”

Holding onto the table, she slowly made her way over to the sink in the corner, sinking her dough-covered hands into the already-used water. She was still swaying.

Then Sylvia saw the blood on the floor. It was in droplets across the cobbled floor, pooling on the bench where Louisa

had been sitting. There was also blood on the back of her dress as well. From Cathy's gasp, she had seen it as well.

"Louisa...you...."

"What?" Louisa turned, and then she saw the blood on the floor. "Oh. That explains a lot."

Sylvia saw her eyes rolling up into her head and darted forward, grabbing Louisa as she collapsed. Cathy gasped and joined her.

"What's happening?"

"She must have lost a lot of blood." Unable to hold Louisa up, Sylvia gently lowered her to the floor. "Go and tell Joseph. Then get back to the house and fetch Northbridge."

“Shouldn’t we get a doctor?”

“Don’t you remember that Northbridge and Richardson are both doctors? It’ll be faster to go to them.”

“I...all right.” Looking pale herself, Cathy stumbled towards the door. “Just...I....”

She disappeared. As she left, Sylvia grabbed a dishcloth and soaked it in the water before pressing it to Louisa’s head. She was feeling really warm. For the first time in a long time, Sylvia found herself panicking. She had no idea what to do. What was going to happen to Louisa and the baby? Would they be all right?

Sylvia hoped that Northbridge would get there soon.

Ethan heard the shouting, someone calling his name, as he was leaving the study. A woman was sounding hysterical. For a moment, his mind went to Sylvia. Had something happened to her?

Hurrying into the foyer as he followed the voices, he found Cathy and Mrs Goodpepper. Cathy was trying to talk around loud gasps as she tried to catch her breath.

“What’s going on?” Ethan joined them. “What’s happened?”

“I’m not sure,” Mrs Goodpepper said, her expression worried as she looked at him. “It’s something about Louisa Osmond, the farmer’s wife.”

Ethan recalled the name pretty quickly. That was the woman who was heavily pregnant, and Tillbury had tried to give Sylvia a chamomile tonic to give to Mrs Osmond. He got Cathy to turn to him.

“What’s happened to Mrs Osmond, Cathy? Tell me.”

“She...she’s bleeding,” Cathy gasped. “Sylvia and I went to see how she was doing and...she was in pain, having cramps, and then she got up and blood was everywhere....”

Ethan felt a cold shiver down his back. Bleeding when you were pregnant was not good, not to that extent. Something had to have happened for Mrs Osmond to end up in that state.

Tillbury hadn’t ignored what I said, had he? If he has....

He turned to Mrs Goodpepper.

“Go and tell the stables to saddle up two horses immediately. Viscount Richardson and I will go down there as soon as

they're ready." Then Ethan turned to Cathy as the housekeeper ran off. "The viscount is in the study. Go and tell him that we need our medical bags. He knows where they are."

"Will you be able to help Louisa?" Cathy asked. She had gotten most of her breath back, but she was pale and shaking. "I don't...I don't want to see her die...."

Ethan wanted to promise that she wouldn't die, but that would be an empty promise, and he didn't want to give her false hope. He squeezed the maid's shoulders.

"Just do as I ask, Cathy. The faster we get there, the faster we can help her. Is Lady Sylvia still at the farm?"

"She is. She stayed behind to look after Louisa."

"Then go and get Viscount Richardson."

As Cathy hurried off, stumbling off her feet, Ethan took the stairs two at a time, his heart racing. He hadn't thought that they would end up dealing with a medical emergency, but he wasn't about to argue. There was a pregnant woman and her unborn baby at risk, and he couldn't stand around waiting for people. He had to do something.

Ethan stripped off the coat he had been wearing and into one of simple tweed, the one he used when he was working at the hospital. It was a coarse material that was easy to wash if it got covered in blood and other bodily fluids. Doing that made him feel like he was back to how he used to be, that he had some semblance of control. Ethan felt like a doctor again.

Harry was in the foyer with their bags as Harry came back down the stairs. His expression was grim.

“How far along is the woman before she gives birth?”

“She must be at least a month away.”

“Sounds like she could be in premature labour. Cathy told me about the blood, and Louisa had been complaining about cramps.” Harry fell into step beside Ethan as they headed for the door. “Let’s hope we can do something. Do you think we can stop the labour?”

“Really, Harry? Have we managed to stop labour before?”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

Ethan knew that, but he wasn’t confident that it could be stopped, especially if there was so much blood. The baby was in distress, so if it wanted to be born, it was coming now.

He could only hope they could keep both mother and baby alive.

It felt like forever before their horses were ready, and Ethan had to cling to the reins tightly as they galloped down the steep slope, gritting his teeth until the ground levelled out. He was never going to get used to that, certainly not on such a big beast. Harry rode on ahead, seeming more sure of himself, so Ethan could only follow on behind.

They arrived at the farm, Ethan remembering the route from the week before, and both were dismounted before the horses came to a full stop. Osmond met them at the gate, hurrying out of the farmhouse. His face was grey.

“Lady Sylvia said you would be coming,” he croaked. “We managed to get my wife into the bedroom.”

“What happened?” Ethan took his arm and led him back into the house; the man looked to be in a daze. “How is Mrs Osmond?”

“Lady Sylvia said before that you were a doctor? Can you save my wife?”

“Talk to me, Mr Osmond. How is your wife?”

Osmond leaned heavily against the kitchen table.

“She has been experiencing cramps at irregular intervals for about five days now. We thought it was just the baby moving around, and the apothecary said it was normal. It was worse this morning, but she insisted on doing what she could. I didn’t realise she was bleeding until...she....”

He broke off with a strangled sob, covering his hand with his mouth. Ethan had seen this a few times with childbirth going wrong. Some men could not cope with hearing their loved one going through something so painful. The screams were enough to make any man blanch. He nodded at Harry.

“Stay with him. I’ll call you in if I need you. Mr Osmond, do you have a midwife in the area?”

“Larissa Latimer lives in the village. My daughter’s gone with one of my workers to fetch her. They’re going to take my daughter to my family before they come back here.”

“Send her in as soon as she gets here. I’ll be in with your wife.”

Exchanging a glance with Harry, who was already opening up his bag on the kitchen table, Ethan went through to the bedroom at the back of the house.

Mrs Osmond was on the bed, Sylvia sitting on the bed almost behind her, gripping her hand and pressing a wet cloth onto her forehead as the woman moaned and writhed on the bed, her body looking like it was contorting in an unnatural fashion. Ethan could see the blood on the sheets and how pale Mrs Osmond looked.

Sylvia looked up, relief in her expression when she saw him.

“The cramps have been getting worse and closer together,” she said grimly. “I think she’s gone into labour.”

“I’m going to need to do a few checks before I can agree with you.” Ethan put his bag on another bed in the corner, most likely for some of their children. “Mrs Osmond? Can you hear me?”

“Your...Your Grace....” Mrs Osmond had slumped on the bed, gasping for air. She opened her eyes and managed to find him. “It hurts. I’ve not had it this bad before.”

“Will you let me check on you and see what’s happening?”

The farmer’s wife swallowed, sweat making her skin glow in the dim lighting. The curtains were open, but there wasn’t any sunlight coming in. Ethan was unnerved at the sight of her, and he had been present at childbirth before. Mrs Osmond nodded.

“Just be quick. It won’t be long before it...happens again.”

Ethan was quick. As he checked her over, Sylvia sat at the head of the bed, still holding Mrs Osmond’s hand as she soaked the cloth to cool the woman down. Sylvia’s face was almost as pale, and she looked scared. Ethan wondered if she had been present at the other births as well or if this was because this woman was a friend.

Finishing up his observations, he looked up at Sylvia.

“She’s in labour. How far apart are the bursts of pain?”

“I don’t know, we haven’t got a clock, and I haven’t been counting.”

“But are they close together?”

Sylvia bit her lip.

“They feel like it.”

“How far apart they are tells me how close she is to actually giving birth.” Ethan reached for his bag and took out his pocket watch. “I’m going to count after the next contraction, and then we’ll have a definitive position.”

“But...surely it’s not possible?” Sylvia looked panicked. “She’s only eight months along. She can’t be in labour now!”

“She can go into labour at any point. The closer to the time the baby should arrive, the better.”

“Will the baby survive?”

Mrs Osmond managed a smile.

“I gave birth to my third child at eight months. She just wouldn’t stay, and the birth was quick. But the pain was nothing compared to this.”

“Is there a reason why you might be in labour early?” Ethan asked.

“I don’t know. I thought I was doing everything right. Maybe my body’s really stressed, and it’s upsetting the baby? That’s what Larissa said to me.”

She threw her head back, her teeth gritted, and let out a guttural cry that made Sylvia look like she was going to burst into tears. She definitely hadn’t experienced this before. Ethan wanted to put his arms around her and say it was going to be fine. He was already moments away from suggesting that she leave if this was too much for her, but Ethan knew that Sylvia wouldn’t leave.

She was scared, but she was tough.

“Ethan.”

Ethan turned. Harry was in the doorway, holding something in his hand. He beckoned for Ethan to join him. Knowing that his friend wouldn't bother him for a very good reason, he handed the watch to Sylvia.

“Take this and start timing as soon as the contraction ends. I want to know how far apart they are.”

Without waiting for a response, he got up and went into the hallway. Harry shut the door until it was barely open a crack. Even then, he lowered his voice.

“Mr Osmond just handed me this. It was on the shelf in the kitchen.”

He held up a bottle that was half-empty. It looked familiar. Ethan took it and took the cork out to give it a sniff. He stared at Harry.

“This is chamomile.”

“I asked Mr Osmond if his wife had taken something different recently that could cause a change, and he gave me this. Said that she had been taking it for the last week, and the pain started about five days ago.”

Ethan’s heart sank. God, she had taken something that was likely to induce labour. She had been through this plenty of times, so why would she take it now?

“Did he say who brought this around? And what happened to the tonic I recommended?”

“Mr Osmond said that he was sure this was the bottle you gave him when you came to visit last week.”

“I certainly didn’t give him chamomile!”

Ethan headed through the house, finding Mr Osmond sitting at the kitchen table, staring at his hands. It was then he saw the blood staining the farmer’s fingers, and his hands were shaking.

“Mr Osmond.” Ethan held up the bottle. “When I came here a week ago and gave you that tonic, I gave you a different tonic.”

“What?” Mr Osmond looked up and blinked. “But I thought that’s what it was. Louisa left it in the same place as when you brought it over. She always called it ‘the doctor’s medicine’.”

“Have you had any other visitors? Anyone who’s been inside the house?”

The farmer frowned, and Ethan could see him turning over everything despite the moans coming from the back bedroom.

“Stewart Tillbury was here a few days ago.”

Ethan froze.

“The solicitor’s son?”

“Yes. He came here to check up on Louisa. I thought it was odd because he wouldn’t bother coming to see us before. Louisa let him in and gave him a cup of tea. He left without saying farewell about ten minutes later. Didn’t even finish his tea.”

Ethan saw that Harry looked equally stunned. Not wanting to stress the man any further, Ethan squeezed Mr Osmond's shoulder.

“Wait for the midwife, Mr Osmond. Lord Richardson and I will look after your wife.”

“Will you be able to help her, Your Grace? Doctor?” The farmer swallowed. “I don't know what to call you. After all....”

“Let us focus on Mrs Osmond. You focus on waiting for Miss Latimer.” Ethan beckoned Harry to follow him. “Harry, come with me.”

They stopped again in the hall, Harry staring at Ethan.

“Is this related to what you told me the other day?” he whispered. “About how Tillbury tried to give Sylvia chamomile to give to Mrs Osmond?”

“It must be. I took the bottle away before and switched it for something that was safe for pregnant women.” Ethan held up the bottle. “He must have gone back and gotten another one. Then he came here and switched the bottles under a pretence.”

“Why would he switch them? What would he gain from doing that?”

“I think to prove a point to me that he knows what he’s doing. He’s trying to undermine my authority and my knowledge about medicine.” Ethan resisted the urge to throw the bottle against the wall. “All he’s done is put a woman into premature labour and put the baby in distress.”

“Surely, the apothecary would have known that was a bad idea. Didn’t you explain it to him?”

“I did. He apparently didn’t know about chamomile and pregnant women and said he wouldn’t sell it again to anyone with child. Tillbury must have gotten around him somehow, or he completely ignored me.”

“Either sounds plausible,” Harry grunted. “Do you want me to find out?”

“Not yet. Once the midwife gets here, I want you to go to the village and visit the apothecary. Ask him if he knew and what the hell he’s playing at. If he cared about people, he wouldn’t have put Louisa Osmond in danger.”

“Will you be able to manage on your own?”

They were interrupted by another cry coming from the bedroom that made Ethan flinch. Ethan took a deep breath.

“As long as I’ve got someone to back me up, I can.”

“Then I’m not going anywhere until the midwife is present. Or until I’m sure you are safe.” Harry grasped Ethan’s shoulder. “I’ve got your back. We’ve got time to speak to the apothecary. We don’t have time to save Mrs Osmond’s life a second time.”

He was right. And they were wasting time. Ethan opened the door to the bedroom and went in. Mrs Osmond had stopped screaming and was looking exhausted, Sylvia still holding her hand. She looked up as they entered.

“The contractions are three minutes apart. Is that good?”

“As long as they stay as they are for now. We need to keep Mrs Osmond as comfortable as possible.” Ethan signalled at Harry. “See if you can find some clean sheets and blankets for the baby.”

“Don’t you need hot water?” Sylvia asked. “I’ve heard that you always need hot water.”

Mrs Osmond gave a wry smile.

“That doesn’t do anything, Sylvia. People tell the men to do that to keep them busy.”

Ethan smiled.

“She’s right. We don’t need hot water, but it is useful to wash the mother and baby down after the birth.”

“Oh.” Sylvia looked a little embarrassed. “I see.”

Ethan leaned over and squeezed her hand.

“The midwife is coming, but I’m going to need your help. Will you stay?”

Sylvia barely hesitated before she nodded.

“I’ll stay. I’m not going anywhere.”

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Chapter 10

Sylvia was exhausted. She couldn't believe what had just happened. It had taken several hours of Louisa going through pain before she gave birth. She was exhausted by the time Northbridge had urged her to push, and Sylvia didn't think she would get through it all.

But she did. Louisa Osmond was tougher than Sylvia gave her credit for. And Northbridge was there the whole time. As they were getting ready for the baby to arrive, he shrugged off his jacket and threw it aside, working with Larissa to get the baby out.

Sylvia couldn't do much except sit at the top end of the bed, holding Louisa up as she began to push, her hand feeling like some of the bones had been crushed. She hadn't thought that a woman could be that strong, not even Louisa.

The most terrifying part of it was when the baby came out, and she could see something wrapped around its neck. There was nothing coming from the baby at all, not even a cry. Northbridge barely stopped to think, unwrapping the long cord

and rubbing the baby over with a blanket, clearing its mouth and nose before there was a little cry, and it started moving.

Sylvia had Louisa practically lying on her, breathing heavily and in tears as she waited to see if her baby had survived. She couldn't look away either, scared that she was going to witness a death.

But it didn't happen. And the baby, a boy, was taken away by the midwife once the cord had been cut. Then Northbridge talked to Louisa, keeping her calm as she pushed out the afterbirth. Sylvia didn't even know that happened; she thought it was just a baby, and that was it.

There was much more than just giving birth to a new life. Sylvia was still reeling from it all.

Eventually, Larissa came back in with the baby, now wrapped in a blanket and freshly cleaned. Louisa, now covered with fresh sheets and getting her breath back, refused to be washed until she held her son. As she held him to her chest, she couldn't stop staring in awe at her child. He looked a little small, but Northbridge had said this was normal, but at eight months, it should be all right if the baby was healthy.

It was then that she took her leave, moving into the kitchen. Joseph was there, pacing around the room. He turned as Sylvia entered.

“Is Louisa all right?”

“She’s fine. She’s exhausted, though.” Sylvia smiled and took Joseph’s hands. “Congratulations on your baby boy, Joseph. He’s beautiful.”

“Thank you.” Joseph swallowed. “I saw him when Larissa brought him in to be washed. He looked so small, and yet he had such a loud cry.”

“That’s babies for you. The tiniest ones are always the loudest.”

Joseph grunted. He glanced towards the door.

“God, I wish I could have been in there. I hate being out here and listening to the screaming. And if the kids were here as well to hear that....” He shuddered. “It’s enough to send a shiver down your spine. I can’t imagine how you did that being in the room with her.”

“I managed.” Sylvia flexed her hand. It was still sore. “Lord Northbridge did a really good job. He was so calm, even with the screaming. I didn’t think I would ever see him look so patient.”

“What luck did we have that our new duke is also a doctor? I feel like someone was looking down at us.”

Sylvia didn’t know what to say to that. A movement in the door had her turning, and she saw Northbridge step into the room. He was still in his shirtsleeves, which were rolled up to above his elbows, and he had blood on his arms as well as his shirt and waistcoat. Joseph flinched when he saw that.

“Your wife wants to see you, Mr Osmond. I think you should help Larissa clean her up and make her comfortable.”

“I...I’ll do that.” Joseph hesitated. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

“I’m glad I could help.” Northbridge gestured at himself. “Can I use your well to clean myself up?”

“What? Oh, right. The well is around the side.”

“Thank you.” Northbridge paused. “Congratulations on the birth of your son, Mr Osmond. I have a feeling he’s going to keep you busy.”

“More than the other children? I think this one will be easy compared to them.” Joseph took a deep breath. “And thank you again. I appreciate you helping my wife.”

He left the kitchen, absently patting Northbridge on the shoulder. As he left, Northbridge closed his eyes and rubbed a hand over his face. Sylvia saw the blood smudge across his cheek and forehead.

“You’re getting blood everywhere.”

“Hmm? Oh.” Northbridge lowered his hand and stared at it. “I forgot about that for a moment.”

He looked as exhausted as Sylvia felt. She took his hand and tugged him towards the door.

“Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Northbridge didn't respond or pull away as she led him out of the house and around the side to the well. Urging him to sit on the low stone wall, Sylvia lowered the bucket into the water and hauled it back up, straining to get the bucket back to the top. Careful not to spill any water, she brought it to Northbridge and placed it at his feet.

Realising that he didn't have anything to wash himself with, she hurried back into the kitchen and brought out a few cloths. When she came back, Northbridge was leaning over and washing his hands and arms in the bucket.

The blood was smudged and slowly coming off. Sylvia slowed to a stop and watched him. It was early evening, and the sun was still strong, making the water droplets glisten on his arms. She found herself staring at the sinewy muscles that flexed every time he moved.

There was nothing about him physically that said he was a member of nobility right now. And yet there was an aura that said he was more than just a regular person.

Suddenly, Northbridge looked up, and their eyes met.

“Are you all right?”

“What? Oh.” Sylvia shook herself and walked towards him. “I guess...my mind is not completely there.”

“I can understand.” Northbridge gave her a small smile as he took one of the cloths from her. “Childbirth can last for a very long time.”

“It felt like time was passing so slowly.” Sylvia wrapped her arms around her middle, feeling the heat of the sun on her back. After being stuck in one room for a long time, she could feel her dress sticking to her with sweat. It was uncomfortable, but the gentle breeze in the farmyard was welcoming. “Why does childbirth last that long?”

“I have no idea. Sometimes it’s very quick and can last minutes—but that’s been rare in my experience—or it can last for hours.”

“What’s the longest you’ve attended?”

“Harry attended a birth where it was almost thirty hours. He was practically dead on his feet when he got back.”

Sylvia stared.

“Thirty hours? How on earth did the mother have the strength to give birth after all that?”

“She did. Harry almost lost both mother and baby.” Northbridge paused. “The little girl is going to be two soon, and her mother is pregnant again.”

“She’s not been put off?”

“Apparently not.”

Sylvia didn't think she could get through one round of childbirth, never mind two, after experiencing a rough one the first time. She sat beside Northbridge, watching him as he splashed water on his face and cleaned off the blood. Part of her wanted to do that for him, but Sylvia stopped herself. That and her hands were still shaking from what had happened.

This was not how she had expected to spend her day.

“What did Lord Richardson want with you earlier?” she asked. “When you first arrived? I heard you say something, and you didn't sound happy.”

He gave her a rueful glance.

“You were listening, were you?”

“Not that I could hear anything over Louisa. What was it? Was it something to do with what happened?”

It looked like he was not going to tell her, regarding her in silence. Then he looked away and sighed, staring at his water-glistened hands.

“Osmond gave Harry a bottle. He said it was the tonic that I had given his wife for her sickness, and it was the only thing that was different with what she had taken. But it wasn’t the one I gave her. It was chamomile.”

Sylvia stared at him.

“What? You mean the stuff you said wasn’t safe for pregnant women?”

“Exactly.” Northbridge sounded grim. “It had been switched five days ago, which is when the pains started. I have no idea what happened to the tonic I gave her.”

Sylvia listened to this in shock. The tonics had been switched. Northbridge was sure that chamomile was the reason for this happening, and she wasn't about to doubt him. She was just stunned that it had happened.

“But how? Who would...?”

“Osmond said that Tillbury was here on the same day the pains started. And he didn't stay long, either.”

Sylvia let this sink in. Stewart had been by to see Louisa? He hadn't done that before, saying that he wouldn't dirty his boots entering the farmyard. She stared at the duke.

“Are you saying that Stewart came here and switched the bottles...to what end? What reason would he have for doing this?”

“Probably to prove a point that chamomile isn’t harmful. To undermine me.” Northbridge grunted. “I did humiliate him in front of you, after all, and he didn’t like that.”

“He didn’t need to feel humiliated.”

“A man’s pride means a lot, Sylvia. Especially when they’re around a pretty woman they’re trying to impress.”

“Don’t be....”

“He was trying to look good for you, and I said otherwise that would make him appear to be ignorant and foolish. He didn’t like that, so he did what he could to switch the bottles around to say that there’s nothing wrong with it.”

Sylvia couldn't believe what she was hearing. Stewart wouldn't do that. She shook her head.

"No, I don't believe it. Stewart wouldn't hurt Louisa to prove a point."

"Well, he's the only one who's been here who's different. I asked Mrs Osmond just now why she didn't notice the change in taste of the tonic, and she said that she has never had a sense of taste, so she didn't know anything different. And she's been suffering from a cold, so she couldn't smell anything out of the ordinary. Put the cold and the chamomile together, and that's asking for trouble."

Sylvia wanted to keep protesting. She didn't want to believe that Stewart would hurt anyone in such a selfish way. But there was too much against him, and Sylvia wasn't about to argue with a doctor who knew what he was talking about.

“What are you going to do? Are you going to confront him?”

“His father is my family solicitor. He’ll know how to talk his way out of this. But Harry’s gone to the apothecary to find out what happened. When I spoke to him last week, he promised not to sell chamomile to a pregnant woman again, so why did he do it now?”

“If Stewart did do this, he probably didn’t tell the truth about what he was going to do with it.”

“But asking for it again so soon after the last time? That would raise eyebrows.” Northbridge shook his head. “I don’t know what’s going to happen. I just know that this could have gone horribly wrong, and mother and baby could have died.”

Sylvia shuddered.

“Don’t say things like that. I don’t want to imagine it.”

“Forgive me, I didn’t mean to upset you.” Northbridge glanced at her. “But we have to be pragmatic about it. And know that this could have gone horribly wrong.”

Sylvia knew that, but it didn’t help the discomfort swirling around in her stomach. She didn’t want to think about Stewart in that way.

Then she noticed that Northbridge still had some blood on his forehead, smudged into his hair. Using the cloth in her hand, Sylvia put it into the bucket and squeezed it out as she stood up.

“You’ve still got blood on you. Stay still.”

“Sylvia....”

“Shut up.” Sylvia concentrated on wiping the blood off his face. “Honestly, you men don’t know how to look after yourselves. It’s as if you don’t care about your appearance.”

Northbridge stopped her, gently gripping her wrist. It was then that Sylvia realised that she was standing between his legs, leaning over him as she cleaned him. She was standing a little too close to him, and she could feel his breath tickling her neck.

Her heart racing, she could barely move as Northbridge stood, practically towering over her as he lowered her hand. His fingers were warm, and she was sure he could feel the pulse in her wrist. He didn’t move away, and Sylvia couldn’t move her feet. If anything, she wanted to lean into him.

“Sylvia....”

Northbridge looked like he wanted to say something, but he stopped himself in time. Then he leaned in and gently kissed her forehead. Sylvia was so surprised she didn’t move, stunned that he was actually kissing her. Staring up at him, she tried to comprehend what had just happened. He looked at her, and

there was something swirling in his eyes. She couldn't quite grasp what it was.

Was he leaning towards her again? It felt like it...

"Ethan!"

Northbridge jumped away from Sylvia so fast that Sylvia swayed and nearly stumbled. She caught herself before she ended up on the ground and turned to see Richardson coming towards them. Northbridge cleared his throat, wiping the water off his face.

"Harry. I was beginning to wonder where you were."

"I was trying to find Tillbury, but he's not in the village." Richardson scowled. "Apparently, he's gone to visit friends on the coast, and he won't be back for a few days. Something about dealing with a broken heart."

Broken heart?

Sylvia felt her face grow warm, knowing that this was in reference to her. Northbridge glanced at her with a frown before turning back to his friend.

“What about the apothecary? What did he have to say for himself?”

“He said that Tillbury came in and said that the bottle had broken and he would compensate him for it while he bought a new one. The man refused and cited what you told him, which Tillbury didn’t like. He did buy something, but when I got the apothecary to check his stock, there was a bottle of chamomile missing that he couldn’t account for.”

Northbridge frowned.

“I’m hoping that he mislaid it.”

Sylvia shook her head.

“He wouldn’t have done that. That man is very meticulous with his record-keeping.” She felt her heart sinking. “So you think Stewart stole a bottle of chamomile and brought it here?”

“How else would it have gotten into the bottle?” Richardson questioned. “I got him to check the contents of the one Mrs Osmond had been drinking from. It was the one you gave her, but chamomile had been slipped in as well to mix in.”

Sylvia didn’t know whether to cry or scream. Stewart was not a stupid man. Why would he do something like this when he would be putting someone’s life at risk? Or did he not think there was anything wrong with doing so?

She needed to talk to him, but if he had left, that was going to be easier said than done. Now she didn’t know what she was

supposed to do, or how she was supposed to feel. Stewart had to have known that this was a bad idea. His ego had gotten in the way.

“Sylvia.” Northbride put his hands on her shoulders. “I know you didn’t want to hear any of this.”

“Stewart wouldn’t have meant any harm,” Sylvia protested. “I know....”

“I’m sure he didn’t do it to harm anyone. That was not his intention. He just wanted to show that I was wrong.” The duke managed a small smile. “And Mrs Osmond is safe and well. As long as she doesn’t consume any more chamomile while she’s feeding her baby, things are going to be fine.”

Sylvia hoped that he was right.

“I’m going to retire now,” Harry said as he stood up. “Are you staying up?”

“Just a while longer.” Ethan held up his glass. “I need to finish this.”

“After the day we’ve had, I’m not surprised you need a large drink.” Harry yawned loudly, stretching his arms above his head. “I’m exhausted, and I wasn’t even in the same room for several hours. Chasing someone who’s not in the village was enough for me.”

Ethan didn’t answer that. He was glad that he hadn’t been the one to do it. He would have wrung Tillbury’s neck for doing something so stupid just to show that he knew better than Ethan. He understood the villagers and neighbours looked after each other, but to this extent, when it could have harmed someone? He wondered if Tillbury had thought that far.

“You’re going to give yourself a headache thinking too much, Ethan,” Harry said sombrely. “It’s not going to change

anything.”

“I know. I just keep thinking, what could have happened if we hadn’t been doctors, and if we hadn’t helped when we did?”

Harry’s expression softened. He reached over and squeezed his friend’s arm.

“Don’t think that way. Think of the positives. You helped a mother deliver her baby, and despite coming early he appears to be healthy. Everyone is alive and well, and you did a good job.”

“I’m not going to help with childbirth as a major career choice, Harry.”

“Maybe not, but at least I know you’re the one to trust.” Harry smiled and started towards the door. “Goodnight.”

He left, closing the door softly behind him. Ethan sipped at his whisky—it had to be his third one or was it his fourth?—staring into the fire that burned in the hearth. He was emotionally and physically exhausted after all that. It wasn't the first birth he had attended, but it was properly the toughest.

The fear that something could happen because of what Mrs Osmond inadvertently consumed was always at the back of his mind. Would it harm the baby? It had put the baby in enough distress when his mother's body started the childbirth before the little mite was ready. Ethan's heart had been his mouth after unwrapping the cord around the baby's neck and getting him to breathe. That would have been horrible.

But they'd had a good outcome. And mother and son were alive. It was all Ethan could have asked for.

He thought about Sylvia and felt a pang of guilt. She and Tillbury were close, and Ethan could tell that she cared for him as a good friend. She wanted to believe the good in him, and evidence otherwise said that Tillbury was responsible.

While Ethan was sure Tillbury was doing it to undermine the duke after being embarrassed in front of Sylvia, Ethan didn't think the other man had done it maliciously. He just wanted to stick it to Ethan and say that there was nothing wrong with chamomile. And it could have gone horribly wrong. Tillbury had to realise that.

Hopefully, he could come home soon and hear the news. Ethan would be able to forgive him if it had been a genuine accident and Tillbury came forward to talk, but until that happened....

Sighing, he pressed the glass to his forehead. This was more of a headache than anything, especially after spending several hours helping a woman in clear distress. Even after giving birth several times, this one was still a struggle for her. Ethan didn't want to go through that again.

“Your Grace?”

Ethan looked up. Sylvia was in the doorway, her eyes still a little bleary with sleep and her hair having escaped the many

pins that had been holding it up. It fell past her shoulders, curling around her face. Ethan sat up.

“I thought you would still be sleeping.”

“I was getting hungry, so I thought I’d get something to eat before I went back to my room.” Sylvia hesitated. “Do you mind if I sit with you for a while? I saw Lord Richardson on the way up the stairs, and I thought I’d come look for you.”

Ethan wanted to ask why, but he didn’t know if Sylvia would give him an honest answer. She had been a little jittery around him after he gave her that forehead kiss. Even with that, she didn’t argue when Ethan and Harry got her onto his horse in front of Ethan, leaning against him as they slowly made their way home.

Ethan had kept an arm around her to stop her from falling off, feeling a swelling of something in his chest when she leaned into him and didn’t object. He felt a little smug about it. Then he noticed that she had fallen asleep, and she was snoring softly.

Given what had happened that day and what Sylvia had gone through, it was no surprise that her body had given up on keeping her awake.

Not wanting her to leave, Ethan gestured toward the settee near him.

“Then come and take a seat. I’d offer you a drink, but I think Harry and I finished the last of the whisky.”

“I don’t like whisky, anyway.”

Sylvia crossed the room and sat on the edge of the cushions. She had changed out of her clothes, wearing a robe over her nightgown. She somehow looked even younger, more innocent. And Ethan found himself wanting to pull her into his arms and not let go.

He pushed that thought away, focusing on his drink instead.

“Today was quite...intense,” he commented.

“It was,” Sylvia murmured. She looked towards the window. It was dark outside, the night black beyond the glass. “I can’t believe I fell asleep for that long.”

“You’ve not been in a situation like that before, have you? It’s going to take a lot of your strength once you’re done.”

“Has that happened to you before?”

“All the time, when I was first at medical school. You get used to knowing your body better.”

“And that’s why you’re drinking?” Sylvia asked, nodding at the glass.

Ethan shrugged.

“Sometimes, nothing beats having a drink.”

“I see. And how many have you had?”

“Are you going to tell me I shouldn’t have anymore?”

Sylvia shrugged.

“Are you going to tell me what you’re going to do to Stewart?”

Ethan sighed and slumped back in his chair.

“I don’t know. I doubt he did this to hurt anyone. He just had a stubborn decision that he couldn’t be wrong. If he could come and talk to me, I won’t be too harsh. After all, I have to protect my tenants and make sure that they’re safe.”

“You mean while you still have tenants,” Sylvia responded acidly. “Because once you sell this place, you won’t have any tenants.”

“I’m also a doctor, Sylvia. I have a duty to make sure everyone’s safe and healthy. Any decent doctor would do that.”

Sylvia didn’t respond immediately. She glanced away and stared into the flames for a while. Ethan just watched her, seeing how the light flickered on her face, remembering how good it felt to hold her in his arms. He had felt her cuddle up to him as he carried her into the house and up to her bedchamber.

When he laid her on the bed, it was like Sylvia didn't want him to leave. Ethan hadn't wanted to leave her. If Cathy hadn't been there, hovering over her mistress, he would have stayed there holding Sylvia as she slept. There was something about doing that which made Ethan feel worthy as a person. He wanted to keep doing it, have Sylvia trusting him.

If she knew what had happened, would she be this close to him in such a comfortable manner? Or would she be avoiding him? It wasn't exactly appropriate to carry a woman as he had, but someone had needed to do it. Ethan was just glad he had been able to hold her like that.

“What's your main role, Your Grace?” Sylvia asked suddenly.

Ethan frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you prefer being a doctor or a duke?”

“Why are you asking?”

“Because since you came here, you’ve been throwing yourself into the role of duke and behaving as such. But then you were at the Osmond farm, and you became a doctor so flawlessly I barely noticed the change.” Sylvia looked at him. “Would you rather be a medical professional or a nobleman?”

“No question. I would rather be a doctor.” Ethan shrugged. “It’s something I’m used to. I wouldn’t be able to be fully comfortable as a duke.”

“So selling this place wouldn’t be a problem for you, would it?”

“Of course it would. I have fond memories of this house, and to know that it’s going to cost more than what I can afford to repair everything pains me. If I can find another alternative, I would.” Ethan closed his eyes, leaning his head back against his chair. “When I’m a doctor, the stakes are different. While they can be more intense, I know what I’m doing. It’s what I’ve been training for.”

“Like helping a woman give birth.”

“I don’t do that often, but I do know how to help with childbirth.”

Sylvia’s voice softened.

“And you did really well. I know we would have struggled if you weren’t there.”

“You might have coped without me.

“I don’t think so. I wouldn’t know what to do, and Joseph would have been panicking. We might not have thought to get Larissa there in time, and what if she had been late?”

Ethan opened his eyes and frowned at her.

“You can’t think about things like that, Sylvia. It’s not productive. Anyway, it’s done now, and things went well.”

“Stewart needs to explain himself, though.”

Ethan didn’t argue with that. He hoped that they could bring things to a solution, and that Tillbury would apologise for what happened. He would have to swallow his pride, but if he had some decency he would do that.

If Ethan had been in that position, he knew that he would. Especially if there was a life involved.

“You could do a lot of good for us, Your Grace,” Sylvia said.

“How so?”

“Well, being a doctor as well as a duke, that could benefit everyone, not just yourself.”

Ethan grunted.

“I don’t think I can do both roles. One of them is going to be neglected if I do manage to make it work.”

“But there’s a possibility you can be both, isn’t there?”

“Maybe. If I’m willing.”

He left that hanging in the air. Sylvia didn’t respond for a while, looking down at her hands in her lap. Her fingers seemed to be restless, linking and twisting together. Ethan wanted to reach over and touch her hands, to soothe her somehow. But he kept his hands to himself; after remembering how he felt after carrying her to her bedchamber, Ethan didn’t think it was a good idea to touch her.

The desire to kiss her was growing, and he had to remember that she was his ward. He wasn’t supposed to be kissing her. And yet....

“I suppose I’d better retire. Again.” Sylvia stood up, tightening the belt on her robe. “I’ll see if I can sleep some more.”

“I’m sure you will.” Ethan managed a smile. “Goodnight, Sylvia.”

Sylvia hesitated. Then she approached him and leaned over. Ethan couldn't move as she gently kissed his cheek, close to his mouth. Her lips were soft, brushing across his skin. Before Ethan could react, Sylvia had straightened up, giving him a shy smile.

“Goodnight, Ethan.”

Then she left the room, Ethan staring after her. He almost forgot that he was holding a glass until he felt it slip from his fingers. He caught it before it hit the rug, the remains of his drink splashing onto the floor and his hand.

Ethan sighed. He had had a feeling that things were not going to be simple when he came back to Wooler. He just didn't think it would be this complicated.

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Chapter 11

“Excuse me, Your Grace?”

Ethan looked up. Pearson was standing in front of the desk, waiting for him patiently. Ethan put his quill.

“How long have you been standing there, Pearson?”

“Just now, Your Grace.”

“Forgive me, I hadn’t realised you had come in.” Ethan gestured at the paperwork piled neatly beside him. “I am so close to getting everything sorted. I’m sure I’ll get it done by lunchtime.”

“It’s after lunch, Your Grace,” Pearson said without a flicker on his face.

“What? And nobody told me?”

“I knocked on your door earlier, and you told me that you were busy, so I thought I would leave you alone.”

That would explain why his stomach was growling. He had barely eaten any breakfast, either. Ethan rubbed his hands over his face.

“I apologise, Pearson. I guess I was too engrossed with my work. I hate all this paperwork.”

“It comes with the title, I’m afraid, Your Grace.”

“Someone should warn anyone who thinks a title means they can sit around and do nothing that it’s not that at all. Not for me, anyway.”

Pearson smiled at that.

“I think your uncle complained about the same thing as well.”

“I’m glad I’m not the only one, then,” Ethan grunted. “Is there something you wanted, Pearson?”

“Mr Stewart Tillbury is here to see you.”

“Mr Tillbury wants to see me? Are you sure about that?”

“I am. He said that he has some papers that he needs you to sign. Something about a deal from the last duke he wants to sort out.”

Ethan was confused. What papers could he be talking about? He had been through almost all of the bits and pieces his uncle had left behind, and there was nothing about Tillbury. His father’s name was mentioned, of course, but not the son’s. Was he trying to cause trouble again?

Ethan was still reeling from the Osmond birth the day before, and he had a few things to say to Tillbury. He couldn’t begin to comprehend how someone could do something that could kill a mother and child just to prove a point. Tillbury was lucky that he hadn’t had the law come after him, and the crisis was averted.

Perhaps he was actually there to apologise. That was a possibility. But, deep down, Ethan had a feeling that wasn’t going to happen.

“Send him in, Pearson. But stay close by. I don’t think I’ll have him here for long, and I want him to leave as soon as he’s finished.”

“Very well, Your Grace.”

And Ethan also didn't want Tillbury to have a chance to speak to Sylvia. She would more than likely be packing so they would be ready for their long journey to London. It was going to be tough being in a confined space with her for two or three days, but they would arrive in London. Then Ethan could see about entering Sylvia into Society so she could find a husband.

Then she would be off his hands. And he didn't feel as happy about it as he should have.

Ethan got up from his chair and went over to the window, staring out into the garden. Up on a hill, the angle from which he was looking made their estate look more vast than it was. The valleys were sudden drops, but he could see for miles. And today was a sunny day, so the countryside looked gorgeous.

He could see why everyone thought this would be a beautiful place to live, even if it was in the middle of nowhere. After spending time here, Ethan could see the attraction.

“Ethan.”

Ethan turned. Harry was coming into the room, shrugging into his jacket and buttoning up his waistcoat. Ethan raised an eyebrow.

“Have you just rolled out of bed?”

“Pretty much. I was just coming downstairs and saw Tillbury in the foyer asking to see you. I thought you might want a witness.”

Ethan hadn't thought about that. Tillbury was a slippery individual, and he could easily twist things around.

“I would appreciate that, Harry.” He leaned against the windowsill and folded his arms. “I don’t know what he’s planning, so I’m not sure what to expect.”

“Papers? He was holding a stack of them coming out of a folder, from what I saw. When he saw me looking, he held them behind his back.”

Now that was strange. What was Tillbury up to? Ethan’s curiosity was piqued now. He wanted to know what was going on.

The door opened again, and Pearson admitted Tillbury. The young man started towards the desk, as if he expected Ethan to be sitting there, only to realise that he was elsewhere in the room. Recovering quickly, he turned to Ethan with a stony expression and gave him a stiff bow.

“Your Grace.”

“Mr Tillbury. To what do I owe this visit?”

“I’ve got something here that I need your signature on.”

“My signature?” Ethan glanced at Harry, who looked equally confused. “What do you need it for?”

“Well....” Tillbury looked at Harry before turning away. “Do you mind if we speak in private, Your Grace?”

“Lord Richardson is staying here. Either you tell me now what you want, or I’ll have to ask you to leave.” Ethan looked at the folder, which seemed to be too small for the papers it held. “From the looks of it, this looks important.”

“It is.” Tillbury cleared his throat, focusing his attention on Ethan. “In fact, it’s a deed of sale.”

“And you need my signature because...?”

“Your uncle, the old duke, agreed to sell half of his land to me before his death.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in. Ethan and Harry exchanged looks before Ethan responded.

“My uncle agreed to sell half of his land to you? Are you really telling me that he did that?”

“He did. And I want to finalise the deal, especially if you’re going to be heading to London shortly.” Tillbury’s face twisted into a grimace. “I don’t want this to be delayed any longer than it has been already.”

“But your father never said anything about it. And you had plenty of opportunities to tell me about it, and all you’ve done is insult me and my intelligence. Why didn’t you say anything before?”

“There wasn’t an appropriate time to talk to you formally about it. And if you believe that I insulted your intelligence, I apologise.”

Ethan wanted to remind him about Mrs Osmond and what he gave to her that could have caused the death of her and the baby, but he didn’t think this was the time. Chances were Mr Osmond was going to find Tillbury and have a few words with him, anyway. It would probably come better from the man who almost became a widower.

So he let it go, and the fact Tillbury had just given him a weak apology. That could be dealt with later. Ethan was more concerned about the declaration Tillbury had just given him.

He didn’t believe that his uncle would have done this. But, then again, Uncle Francis was full of surprises.

“I don’t recall anything of the sort in the papers my uncle possessed. And I’m sure Mr Woodforde would have told me about it already.”

“It was done on the quiet, Your Grace. The old duke knew that he was in debt, and he wanted to sell off what he could without anyone knowing, to begin with.”

“You do realise that selling half of his land in one go is going to be noticed pretty much immediately,” Harry reminded him.

Tillbury shrugged.

“That’s what he said to me. I wasn’t going to question him on it.”

Very smooth. Spoken like a solicitor’s son.

“I haven’t thought about selling any of the property yet,” Ethan lied, pushing himself off the windowsill and crossing the room. “If I am going to do that, selling you more than reasonable is going to be out of the question.”

Tillbury frowned.

“That is not what your uncle said, Your Grace.”

“I’m not him, am I? And that seems rather much, in my eyes.” Ethan sighed. “However, I understand that things are in dire straits right now, and if I have no choice but to sell, I’ll honour as much of the transaction with you as I can.”

“But....”

“You’ll get a share if you express an interest, but I can’t promise half the land. Not until I’ve looked over everything.” Ethan held out a hand. “So, why don’t you leave the papers with me, and I’ll look over them. Should I have to go down that route, you’ll be the first to know.”

Tillbury looked a little nervous. He glanced over at Harry again so quickly that Ethan almost missed it.

“But can’t you just finalise our deal and sign the papers? We had all the paperwork drawn up and ready. The old duke was meant to sign, but he passed before that happened.”

“Like I said, I’m not the old duke. I want to make sure everything is above board.” Ethan plucked the folder from Tillbury’s hands before the man could react and snatch them back. “In the meantime, I’ll keep a hold of these. Then if I do need to sell anything, it saves you coming here with the papers. I can just sign them immediately.”

Tillbury looked like he was going to argue about it, but he backed down. He didn’t look too happy as he lowered his arms.

“Very well, Your Grace. Although....”

“What?”

“I was hoping that you would do this before you left for London.”

“All in good time.” Ethan fixed him with a hard stare. “There’s no rush, is there?”

“Well...no, I suppose not.”

There was a moment of silence. Ethan raised his eyebrows, glancing over Tillbury’s shoulder towards the door.

“Is that all, Mr Tillbury?”

“Oh. Right. That’s all.” Tillbury gave another tiny stiff bow.
“Your Grace.”

He left the room a little faster than Ethan expected. As the door closed behind him, Harry turned to his friend.

“Now, that was odd.”

“I agree.”

“Do you think he’s up to something?”

“Absolutely.” Ethan opened the folder and sifted through the papers. “I’m not really good at reading legal notes like this. None of this is really making any sense.”

“Let me have a look.” Harry crossed the room and took the folder, pacing away slowly with a frown. After a moment of silence, he looked up. “It’s really so that it doesn’t make sense. I don’t think even your uncle would have known what was written.”

“So it’s gibberish.”

“It looks like it. I don’t read the language solicitors write in for a living, but I can understand this part.” Harry tapped halfway down a page. “The amount your uncle allegedly agreed to sell the land for is only a tiny fraction of what it’s actually worth.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It looks like Tillbury’s trying to buy it with pennies.”

Ethan was getting even more confused. This was...odd. Tillbury was trying to profit off the old duke's demise by buying land far below the price? Why would he do that? Surely, his uncle would have noticed that he was being swindled.

Or maybe Uncle Francis hadn't known about this at all. And Tillbury was counting on Ethan not knowing that to buy land for...what? Why would he want it?

"So that's something else I need to look at." He slumped back against his desk with a sigh. "That's just wonderful."

"Leave it with me. I'll look through it all."

"Are you sure?"

“Of course. Woodforde and I can make it make sense. He knows the land better than I do. We should be able to figure out what Tillbury’s up to. After all, while he does have money, he can’t even buy a quarter of the land for the price it deserves.”

“He is one of the villagers. Maybe he didn’t want to ask too much.”

“Or maybe he was hoping you would be too stupid not to look any further.” Harry shook his head. “Just leave it with me. You focus on getting Lady Sylvia sorted with a husband. That’s going to need all of your attention.”

Ethan had momentarily forgotten about that. And now it rested back on his shoulders. Another task he wasn’t looking forward to.

And from the way Sylvia had been behaving towards him later, she wasn’t too happy, either.

Chapter 12

“I’ll leave you now,” Cathy said as she tidied up the room.
“Would you like anything else, Sylvia?”

“No, I’ll be fine.” Sylvia managed a tiny smile at her maid.
“Thank you, Cathy. Goodnight.”

Cathy curtsied and left the room, leaving Sylvia sitting on the edge of her bed. She should be retiring and getting some sleep before she went to spend time at a garden party in the morning with several eligible gentlemen who wanted her attention.

And she didn’t want to do that. Lady Pritchard, Ethan’s matronly maternal aunt, said that she should if she wanted a husband, and Northbridge was standing off to one side, nodding at what his aunt said. It was what a lady in her position should be doing.

Sylvia didn’t want to do it at all. She hated it here.

Ever since they had arrived in London, Sylvia had felt overwhelmed. Of course, the townhouse Ethan owned was nice, and his aunt meant well, despite her bustling about so much, but it wasn't the same as what she was used to. Even Cathy's presence made her feel better.

This was a long way away from Wooler. Sylvia had ventured into the towns nearby—she had even travelled to Newcastle Upon Tyne when she was sixteen—but even that city didn't compete with London.

It was too much.

How did ladies cope with being looked at like they were in a fishbowl with everyone gawking at them? As soon as Sylvia entered a room, Lady Pritchard and Northbridge alongside her, people just flocked to her and fawned over her.

She couldn't begin to count how many times they thought she was just adorable with her different accent and the little quirks in the way she spoke. It made her uncomfortable, and Sylvia didn't know how to respond to that.

This had been her life for three weeks now, and Sylvia hated it. She pretended that she was enjoying herself, but inside, she loathed everything. She didn't like the high teas, the big balls that seemed to happen every other night, or the calling cards from so many gentlemen who wanted to come and see her when all Sylvia wanted to do was sit in a corner and read.

She wasn't allowed to do anything that meant she behaved like a member of the lower classes, and the only thing she could do was read. She couldn't even go out for a walk alone, one of the maids had to come with her. Lady Pritchard caught her trying to sneak out alone, and she had been gently scolded about it, saying that things were different in the city, and she had to remember that.

Sylvia didn't want to be here anymore. She wanted to go home. She didn't care that she was here to find a husband; all that mattered was going back to Wooler.

She cast a look at the bed ruefully. No amount of sleep was going to make her feel better. She really needed to do something that would exhaust her, but Sylvia knew that she shouldn't go out into the street for a walk. Someone would spot her, and then she would get into more trouble.

Also, the smell coming from a distant factory that was apparently for making crockery stank, and it made her stomach churn. How did Northbridge cope with any of this?

Sylvia found a shawl, pushed her feet into her shoes, and silently left the room. She might not be allowed to go for a walk around the streets, but nobody could complain about her walking in the garden, surely? It was a good place to escape to when she didn't want to be found, although Northbridge had found her once before with some bemusement, catching her hiding behind a tree and hoping whoever was looking for her would leave her alone.

It wasn't her fault that she didn't want to meet with the people who came flocking to the house. Why wasn't she allowed to have a moment or two alone? At least Northbridge had been willing to deter people that time, but he wouldn't do it each time Sylvia wanted to be left alone.

At least he didn't scold her. He just told her to come back when she was ready and left. Sylvia, not wanting to upset him by being rude, had returned eventually to greet the random gentleman who had come to see her. If they were upset by her not being there to greet them, they didn't say anything.

Tiptoeing past Lady Pritchard's room, and hearing her snoring behind the closed door, Sylvia went downstairs and sneaked through the house, carefully feeling her way along in the dark. She didn't light a candle, not wanting to bring any attention should anyone still be awake. Tonight, she wanted to be left alone.

Finally, she found the door to the garden, and Sylvia turned the key in the lock and stepped out into the warm night air. She stood on the terrace, folding the shawl around her shoulders, and tilted her head back to feel the gentle breeze waft back her face. At least the smell from the flowers mostly masked the stench from the factory. Sylvia had no idea how anyone coped with that, but she wasn't about to question it.

She wasn't going to be here for much longer. If she was lucky, she could persuade Northbridge to take her back. She would make sure it was a failure. Northbridge would be annoyed, but Sylvia didn't care. She didn't want to marry anyone she had met.

That's only because you keep comparing the men you meet with the duke. And that's just making things more complicated.

Sylvia sighed. She didn't like doing that. She knew it was foolish to put her guardian on a pedestal and use him as an example, but Sylvia couldn't help it. Northbridge had captured her attention far more than she anticipated. Her heart skipped several beats whenever he was around her, she longed to see him smile in her direction, and Sylvia longed to spend more than a few minutes with him. It was selfish, and she couldn't stop herself from wanting it.

It didn't help that Northbridge seemed to have a few people giving him a lot of attention as well. Ladies were flocking around him now that they knew he was a duke, practically hanging off his arm and flattering him to the point Northbridge looked like he wanted to get out of there. He was gracious, but his discomfort was clear to Sylvia. She wished she could help him out.

This felt like torture. The ton was there for a reason, and some people could melt into it easily and with little effort. But

Sylvia had grown up outside of Society as a little girl. The countryside and the rules out there were what she liked, what she was comfortable with, not city life and rules. She was more comfortable in a relaxed atmosphere.

The atmosphere at her last ball had been wound so tight she was half-expecting it to fall apart, and something bad was going to happen.

Sylvia didn't want that. She wanted to go home.

“Sylvia?”

Sylvia turned, her heart leaping into her mouth at the sound of a familiar voice. Northbridge was stepping out onto the terrace, shrugging into his jacket. His hair looked like it was standing on end on one side, and she could see the lines on the side of his face in the moonlight. He frowned at her.

“What are you doing out here? I thought you would be asleep.”

“I can’t sleep. I thought I’d get some fresh air.” Sylvia arched an eyebrow. “Or as fresh as I can get in London. Seeing as I’m not allowed to go out alone for a long walk.”

Northbridge sighed.

“I know you want to do that, but we have different rules here. I don’t want anything bad to happen to you or have my new reputation brought into question about how I look after my ward.”

“I understand that,” Sylvia said quietly. “But it does make me feel like a prisoner.” She turned away and looked at the darkened garden, wishing that she could see the simple beauty more clearly. “I miss my old life. I don’t like being here at all.”

Northbridge didn't say anything, but Sylvia heard his footsteps. They seemed to be getting closer. When he did finally speak, he was so close that Sylvia jumped.

“Are you crying, Sylvia?”

“What? Of course not.” Sylvia wiped at her face, only to find that her fingers were coming away wet. When had that happened? “It's just the wind making my eyes water.”

Northbridge didn't comment on that lie. Instead, he put his hands on her shoulders, and it made Sylvia shiver.

“Look, you know that you needed to be introduced into Society at some point....”

“But I wasn't born a lady! Doesn't that give me a special dispensation?”

“Not when you’ve been a duke’s ward for several years. Otherwise, there would be a lot of questions.”

“If it means I don’t have to find a husband I’ll never get, I’m fine with that.” Sylvia shrugged his hands off and turned to him, prodding him in the chest. “I told you so many times that I didn’t want this. Are you so desperate to get rid of me that you would make me go through this?”

“It’s not a question about getting rid of you, Sylvia....”

“It certainly feels like it!”

Northbridge grabbed her wrist, holding her hand against his chest. Sylvia could feel his strong grip, but it didn’t hurt. It was like he was just holding her. She couldn’t bring herself to pull away.

Not when his touch was so warm.

“There are things in life that we don’t like, but we have to get through them,” Northbridge said, his voice almost a whisper. “Finding you a husband is normal, and you won’t like being called a spinster if you leave it until you’re too old.”

“What if I don’t want that?” Sylvia shot back. “What if I want to do things differently?”

“It’s not about what you want at this point....”

“I’ve noticed.” Sylvia swallowed. “I’ve noticed how restrictive this life is. In Wooler, I had more freedom. People are warm without needing anything in return. I have family there. They may not be my blood, but I consider them family. Cathy being here with me isn’t helping at all. I feel like I’ve been put in a room, and the walls are closing in. I don’t want it.”

She didn't realise that more tears were falling until Northbridge's expression changed. He released her wrist and used his thumbs to wipe away her tears.

"Sylvia, there's no need to cry. It's not all that bad, I promise. It will get better soon."

"When?" Sylvia sniffed. "I don't see my future looking good if I stay here. I want my old life back. I know that makes me sound selfish, but I can't see myself being happy unless it's in a place of my choosing."

She was aware that when she married, she would become the property of her husband, and she would barely have a say in anything. The thought left Sylvia feeling cold and alone.

"Oh, Sylvia." Northbridge drew her close, resting his forehead against hers. "This is my fault. I caused you this distress. I shouldn't have pushed this."

“You did what you had to do. I don’t blame you.” Sylvia blinked hard, trying to push the tears back. “I just wish I could go back to how things were. Before Uncle Francis died.”

“Before me?”

Did she mean that? Sylvia looked up at him. His face was so close, his breath tickling her mouth. It wouldn’t take much to....

Did she want to?

Finding a little bit of courage, Sylvia rose up on tiptoe and quickly kissed him on the cheek. Northbridge froze, but he didn’t pull away, although he looked stunned. Sylvia gave him a small smile.

“No. I don’t regret meeting you.”

For a moment, they stared at each other. Sylvia could feel the air getting warm, and she wondered if the breeze was still there, or was there something else going on? Then Northbridge cupped the back of her neck in his strong, warm hand and kissed her. Sylvia's mind went blank, and then it fell into place as his warm lips moved over hers.

He was actually kissing her.

Why wasn't she responding?

But before she could reach for him, Northbridge broke the kiss quickly and stepped away, leaving Sylvia swaying.

"God, what am I doing?" Northbridge growled. He paced away, running his hands through his hair. "I shouldn't have done that. I apologise. That was...I shouldn't...."

Sylvia's hopes suddenly went flat as she listened. After kissing her enough to make her head spin, he was backing away from her? Her heart sank.

“There's nothing to apologise for.”

“There is a lot to apologise for. I'm your guardian. I shouldn't be...doing this....” Northbridge shook his head. He wouldn't look at her, hands on his hips as he stared at the ground. “You'd better go inside and go to bed. I won't disturb you.”

Sylvia wanted to say that she didn't want to go anywhere, but Northbridge was already pulling away. No amount of protesting would sway his decision. Swallowing, she stormed towards the door.

It felt satisfying to slam the door behind her, but it didn't stop the tears as she went up to her room.

Ethan didn't think he would be so relieved to get back to Wooler and see the familiar sight of the estate coming over the hill. He had even missed the incredibly steep hill to get to it.

It was surprising what a few weeks away from the place that he called home when he was a child, and a brief return to the place as a grown man could do to change his opinion so much. Ethan felt the tightness in his chest easing, knowing that he was away from the women who wouldn't give him a second look because he was a doctor now paying him so much attention that it made him nauseous simply due to his new title.

Ethan would rather go back to being a doctor. It came with less hassle than dealing with the ton.

Although the place was going to feel a little odd without Sylvia being there, but he had to do that. She had to stay in London until she found herself a husband, even if she wasn't comfortable on doing it.

Besides, watching her being wooed by many eligible gentlemen was rather difficult to watch, and Ethan didn't want to see it anymore. Coming back to Wooler and leaving his aunt in charge of Sylvia would work better for everyone.

For the most part. Ethan missed Sylvia the longer he was away from her.

As he was getting out of the carriage, Harry came out of the house. He grinned and came down the steps as Ethan went up them to meet him.

"I had a feeling you would be back soon," he commented as he shook Ethan's hand.

"You thought I couldn't cope?"

"I knew you wouldn't cope. Although people are going to question why you left your ward in London."

Ethan frowned.

“I’m not going to go into it, Harry. It’s best that I’m not there.”

“Right.” Harry’s expression said he knew something, but he wasn’t about to reveal it. He turned away. “Come on in. Woodforde and I have left things as you left them. For the most part.”

“For the most part?” Ethan fell into step beside him. “You mean you’ve left most of the papers all over the floor?”

“I’m not that messy!”

“Did you see your study before we came here? I’m sure the doctors you left your work to haven’t made a mark in it.”

“You haven’t been along to look for yourself?”

Ethan shuddered.

“I’m not wading into that mess. Anyway, did you manage to get any sense from the papers Tillbury wanted me to sign?”

“Woodforde and I have looked over them so many times, and we’ve come to the conclusion that they are worth absolutely nothing.” Harry shook his head. “If he actually showed those to your uncle, and I’m thinking that he didn’t, then he must have talked his head off for the old duke to be convinced that he should sell him land at a tiny fraction of the original price.”

“So, they’re fraudulent documents.”

“Absolutely. There’s no doubt about it. Tillbury made sure the first page and last page where the signatures would go are in proper English where the sentences make sense, but the pages in between is just a mash of legal jargon that doesn’t make sense.”

Ethan found this interesting. He had had his own suspicions about this, but Harry had confirmed it. Tillbury was out to swindle them of land that could bring in a lot of money. He had been planning on selling the land around the estate so he could use the money to repair the house, anything to keep it going, but there was no chance that he would sell it where it was handed to him in a small cloth bag that barely made a noise.

What was he up to? Did he think that Ethan would be stupid enough to not know that the land was worth more than what he offered? Why was Tillbury trying to take this land?

“Has Tillbury come over to ask about this contract?” Ethan asked as they entered the study. “Or has he been sensible and stayed away?”

“He was actually here this morning. I saw him coming up the drive as I was leaving to head into the village. He asked if he would be notified when the deal would be signed and sorted.”

“What did you say to that?”

“I said that your solicitors are still looking at the papers and that we want to make sure things are solid and have no chance of collapsing.” Harry looked bemused. “He didn’t seem too happy with that. Probably because he knows that any decent solicitor, including his own father, would recognise that they are fake papers.”

Ethan grunted.

“We should have sent them to his father to see what he would say. He has to know what his son is up to?”

“Maybe he doesn’t. I don’t believe he knows what’s going on.”

“I’ll believe you on that.” Ethan slumped into his chair behind his desk with a heavy sigh. “I didn’t think I would be relieved to be back here.”

Harry chuckled.

“It was that bad, was it?”

“Get me a large drink, and I’ll tell you about it.”

“A large drink at this time of day? Now that is bad.” Harry crossed over to the drinks cabinet in the corner. “You’d better tell me everything. That sounds very interesting.”

Ethan wasn’t sure about that. But he knew for sure that he wasn’t going to tell Harry about how he gave in and kissed

Sylvia. Harry would say that it was about time that he did something.

All Ethan knew was that he had made things more complicated.

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Chapter 13

“Not long now,” Cathy commented as their carriage bounced around. “We should be home soon.”

“Thank goodness for that.” Sylvia leaned towards the window and looked out, seeing the familiar countryside around them. “I can’t wait to get back and for things to get back to normal.”

“I thought you would have taken well to London. You’re good at adapting to any situation.”

Sylvia made a face.

“Not that situation. It was too suffocating.”

Cathy looked sympathetic. Sylvia knew she didn't need to say much. Her friend had seen how Sylvia had been during her month in London and how she struggled. She must have heard Sylvia crying as she tried to sleep, but she never said anything. Having Cathy with her stopped Sylvia from going mad.

She couldn't handle it anymore. Even though she had been proposed to twice, from good-looking and wealthy gentlemen, something that Northbridge wanted for her, Sylvia just couldn't do it. The thought of being the country-girl wife paraded around on a man's arm did not make her happy.

And she knew that's how they thought of her. Cathy was good at gathering information that nobody else would be able to obtain, and she told him that was how Sylvia was perceived as. The country-girl who was rather pretty and would be seen as a project to make into the perfect quiet wife. It might have been in jest, but it left Sylvia wondering how they were going to change her.

She didn't want to change. She wanted to be herself. If she was ever going to marry, she didn't want to be changed to what the husband wanted. He would need to want her as she was already.

That ended up with Sylvia thinking about Northbridge again and their kiss in the dark. It had been brief but very sweet. Sylvia had wanted more of it, but she knew that would likely not happen again. Northbridge had kept his distance from her since then, and four days later, he was travelling back to Wooler. Sylvia had asked to go with him, but Northbridge told her to stay.

She barely lasted a week before Sylvia was desperate to go home. She was feeling homesick, and the thought of being so far away was making her falter in public. People were beginning to look at her a little oddly, and Sylvia was running out of excuses as to why she was unable to concentrate and behave like a proper lady. Her excuse that she was missing home sounded juvenile and was running a little thin.

She wanted to go home.

Sylvia could still remember her last conversation with Lady Pritchard as they stood on the pavement waiting for the luggage to be tied onto the back of the carriage. The older woman had taken Sylvia's hands in hers.

“Are you sure that I can’t persuade you to stay, Sylvia, dear? The Season isn’t quite over yet.”

“I’m afraid I can’t, my lady. It’s best that I return.” Sylvia had managed a smile. “Thank you for your hospitality and your kindness. I do appreciate it.”

“Anything to help you, love.” Lady Pritchard had squeezed her hands. “I’m sure my nephew will be happy to see you.”

Sylvia had been thinking over that in the two-and-a-half days it had taken to travel back up North. There had been something in the way Lady Pritchard had spoken in a way that suggested she knew something, but she wasn’t giving it away. Sylvia didn’t think she could get her to divulge it, either.

Was she aware of Sylvia’s feelings towards Northbridge? Or was it something else? She would probably never know. She would just have to wonder what that twinkle in Lady Pritchard’s eye was all about.

Thoughts of the woman who was kind enough to take her in and look after her while she went through her brief second Season left her mind as they reached the driveway and took the steep slope up towards the house. Sylvia found herself smiling when the building came into sight.

It was good to be home. She couldn't wait to see everyone and get into a dress that was far more comfortable than what she had been made to wear in London. They were gorgeous gowns, but they felt just as restrictive as the rules.

The carriage finally slowed to a halt, and Sylvia jumped out. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Of course, there was the smell of the animals nearby, but it was far cleaner than what had filled her lungs in London. It certainly felt preferable to Sylvia.

"It feels very quiet," Cathy commented as she moved to Sylvia's side. "After being in the big city, this feels deafeningly quiet."

“I know. Doesn’t it feel wonderful?” Sylvia started towards the steps. “Let’s go inside. I want to get back to normal as soon as possible.”

“Are you going to let Lord Northbridge know that you’ve returned before you do that?” Cathy asked slyly. “After all, you did return without him knowing about it.”

Sylvia didn’t respond. She would be telling Northbridge once she found him. He would be upset that she followed him back, but Sylvia didn’t care. She just wanted to be where she belonged. This place might not have been her home all her life, but it was a big part of it. Sylvia didn’t want anywhere else.

No matter what Northbridge said, she was staying.

Mrs Goodpepper was coming down the stairs as Sylvia and Cathy entered the foyer. She stopped and did a double-take when she saw them.

“Lady Sylvia? Cathy?” She hurried across to them, her expression one of stunned amazement. “I don’t believe this. You’re back?”

“We’re back, Mrs Goodpepper.” Sylvia grinned at her expression. “Surprised?”

“Well, of course! Lord Northbridge said that you were staying in London until you found a husband.” Mrs Goodpepper peered at her. “Has that happened, then? Are you here to tell him?”

“Of course not! I have no intention of doing that.” Sylvia looked past the housekeeper. “Is His Grace here?”

“He is. He’s in the study with Viscount Richardson.”

“I’ll go and see him.” Sylvia nodded at Cathy. “Would you make sure my things are put away?”

“I will.” Cathy gave her a rueful look. “Good luck.”

She left the foyer before Sylvia could respond. Mrs Goodpepper shook her head.

“I don’t know what to say. I thought you were actually gone for good.”

“Not a chance, Mrs Goodpepper. You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“I wouldn’t want to get rid of you. But I genuinely thought....”

“I know.” Sylvia patted the older woman’s hands. “I’m not going anywhere now. You can rest assured about that.”

Stepping away from the housekeeper, Sylvia headed towards the study. As she walked, her heart skipped several beats, and she could feel her hands getting sweaty. Would Northbridge be happy to see her again? Would he kiss her again? Sylvia was hoping that he would, and she would gladly accept it.

That's not exactly proper etiquette, is it? You should be behaving properly.

Out here, nobody cares. And nobody's around to scold me otherwise.

Sylvia opened the door very slowly, relieved that it didn't creak as it moved. Slipping into the room, she saw Northbridge and Richardson sitting in the chairs by the unmade fire, papers scattered across the floor and their heads down reading what was in their hands. The silence was almost deafening in the room.

Richardson looked up first, and his eyes widened when he saw her. Sylvia put a finger to her lips and gestured at him to stay silent. Then she tiptoed towards Northbridge, who hadn't moved. How he didn't hear her coming towards him, she had no idea; her skirts must have been making a lot of noise.

Feeling a little cheeky, Sylvia leaned over as she reached Northbridge's chair and put her hands over his eyes. Northbridge reacted immediately and pushed her hands away, jumping up as he stumbled over some curse words. He spun around, looking ready to scold whoever did that to him, and then he faltered when his eyes locked with hers.

“Sylvia?”

Sylvia managed a smile, putting her hands behind her back.

“Your Grace.”

“What...what are you doing here? I thought you were in London.”

“I was. But I was getting homesick, so I thought it was time for me to come home.”

“But you weren’t...” Northbridge began, but Sylvia held up a hand.

“I’m not going to argue on this. I said I didn’t want to go, and I did when you said it wouldn’t be for long. I’ve done as you said, and now I’m back. I’m not going back to London even if you tie me up and send me there in chains.”

Richardson burst out laughing, slapping his thigh.

“Now that is some interesting imagery.”

Northbridge glared at him.

“That’s not the point. Harry, could you give us a few minutes?”

“Are you sure?”

Northbridge growled, which had Richardson sighing and holding up his hands.

“All right, fine. I’ll go.” He stood him, his expression softening as he looked at Sylvia. “It’s good to have you back, Lady Sylvia.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

Richardson left the room, and Northbridge turned to Sylvia as the door closed.

“You travelled here without a chaperone?”

“I wasn’t alone! Cathy was with me.”

“That’s not the point. I’m surprised my aunt let you go.”

Sylvia sighed.

“With all due respect, Northbridge, I’m not interested in arguing about this. I hated it in London, and I wanted to come home. I lasted a month, which is more than what I expected. No more, and you’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

Northbridge faltered.

“Who said I wanted to get rid of you?”

“Well, you wanted to marry me off to someone, didn’t you?”
Sylvia folded her arms. “Don’t deny it, you wanted that.”

Northbridge looked like he wanted to argue that, but instead, he turned away and headed towards the window, running his hands over his face. Not quite the response Sylvia was wanting, but what did she expect? He wasn’t going to immediately jump up and down and pull her into his arms, was he?

Although Sylvia wouldn’t mind if he did that. She would actually prefer it.

“Forgive me for not being welcomed back to the place I know as home...” she began, but Northbridge cut her off.

“No, it’s nothing to do with you. I was...not expecting you to come back.”

“Chances are I would have gotten back before my letter if I had chosen to write.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if that happened.” He sighed and turned to her. “Besides, I can’t be upset that you’re here. As you said, this is your home. And I’m not about to take that away.”

“You tried to take it away by marrying me off to someone else,” Sylvia reminded him.

Northbridge winced.

“Can we not talk about that?”

“That is perfectly fine with me.”

Sylvia knew neither of them would be addressing the kiss they shared. But she could feel the tension hanging in the air between them. Pulling her gaze away from him, Sylvia looked over the papers all over the floor.

“How do you find anything in this mess?”

“We have a system. It’s not always like this.” Northbridge pinched the bridge of his nose. “Although looking at numbers for so long is giving me a headache. All the numbers are merging together.”

“Do you want me to look at them?”

“What?”

Sylvia shrugged.

“I’m good with numbers. It was my best subject when I had a governess. And it wouldn’t hurt to have a fresh pair of eyes, would it?”

Northbridge looked like he was going to argue. Sylvia saw the strain in his face and wondered if he had actually gotten any sleep. He looked like he needed to rest properly. Sylvia wished that she could make him feel better.

Finally, he sighed and nodded.

“All right. You can help me. If it will make you feel better....”

“Don’t make it sound like an inconvenience.”

“My apologies. It’s been a long day already.” Northbridge’s expression softened, and he smiled. “Thank you, Sylvia. I do appreciate it. Hopefully, I’ll be able to find a way to save the house.”

For a moment, Sylvia thought she had misheard.

“I beg your pardon? You don’t want to sell this place?”

“Honestly? No. I’ll do whatever I can to make sure that doesn’t happen.” Northbridge spread his hands. “Of course, it means we’re going to have to make sacrifices somewhere....”

Sylvia flew at him, flinging her arms around his neck. Northbridge made a noise, and he seemed to freeze as she hugged him. Then his arms were wrapping around her, holding her close. They stayed like that for a while, Sylvia soaking up

the warmth from his body, enjoying the feel of his arms around her. Then she remembered what she was doing and slowly pulled away.

“Forgive me,” she mumbled. “That’s not exactly appropriate, is it?”

“Nobody’s here.” Northbridge winked at her before stepping past her. “I won’t tell if you won’t.”

Sylvia didn’t know what to say to that.

Ethan looked over at Sylvia, who was curled up in front of the fire with one of his account ledgers on her lap, her head bent over the page as she made a note with a pencil. She had been like that since he entered his study over an hour ago, barely registering him as he greeted her. Ethan couldn’t help but smile at the sight.

Sylvia's head for numbers was far better than his, even more than Richardson's. Looking over the accounts again from her point of view had shown that she was able to figure out where to save money. As someone who had lived on the estate for many years more recently than Ethan, she knew just where to make things work.

He should have done that a long time ago. Woodforde could manage the estate with great efficiency, but he was the first to admit that he wasn't that good with numbers. That was something Uncle Francis had done. Ethan wondered if he should ask to make Sylvia Woodforde's assistant and see if that would be received well.

He went back over his notes. He had just been into the village to check on some patients, who were looking better than they had been when he last saw them. When Ethan offered to take over some patients from the other doctor, who was further away than he expected, it had been accepted pretty quickly once Ethan and Harry had given their credentials. The old doctor was getting on in years, and he needed an assistant. Having two qualified doctors on the cusp of becoming surgeons had to be a dream come true for him.

And it gave them something else to do other than looking over the accounts all the time. Harry said he didn't mind doing it, but he was missing his job. However, he wasn't keen on going back to London.

Apparently, Northumberland was doing him a world of good, and Harry was keen on staying and finding something useful for him to do. Ethan wondered if it was something to do with Sylvia's maid, Cathy, who had been caught in Harry's company quite a few times since they had returned from London. Nothing had happened, but from the way Cathy blushed, Harry had been flirting with her.

Ethan could see his friend's love life flourishing before his eyes, whereas his didn't seem to be going anywhere. Not that he wanted to address it, anyway. He was content with what he and Sylvia were doing, although he had a feeling that people were talking about it. His valet, Simpson, was certainly making pointed comments about Sylvia, which Ethan had started to ignore after he got fed up telling him to stop. It was none of his business.

He thought back to when he and Sylvia were talking after dinner on her first evening back in Wooler. Sylvia had told him about the proposals she had been given, but that she had

turned both of them down. She wouldn't give a definitive reason as to why, nor did Ethan didn't want to know.

He was just glad that she had refused them. If she hadn't, he might not have seen her as often as he wanted, and the thought of another man with Sylvia filled him with a rage he had never experienced before.

Harry had commented that he was smitten with Sylvia several times, something Ethan denied. But now Ethan had to accept it. He was in love with her. It had settled down once he realised it, and Ethan felt warm thinking about it.

If only he was brave enough to actually say something about it to Sylvia. He spent so much time with her, both in the study, working and going out for long walks where Sylvia regaled him with tales from her childhood. Ethan liked to think that he was a confident man.

So why couldn't he tell her that he loved her? What was wrong with him?

A crash of thunder sounded outside the window, the storm raging on, which made Ethan look up. Sylvia jumped with a gasp, and she grabbed at the ledger before it fell off her lap.

“That was loud,” she commented, and she put the ledger on the settee beside her. “It’s been getting worse all evening.”

“I’m sure we’re going to have a storm coming in.” Sitting back, Ethan looked towards the window. “It’s going to be fun tonight, sleeping with the tiles rattling above our heads.”

“It’s going to be a noisy night, then.” Sylvia yawned. “I think I’ll be retiring to bed in a moment. My head’s starting to hurt after staring at this book for hours.”

“You should be taking periods of rest.”

Sylvia rolled her eyes.

“Yes, Doctor Duke.”

“I’m still not sure what to say about that title.”

“It’s better than something mean, don’t you think?” Closing the ledger, Sylvia stood up and carried the book over to the desk. She placed it down, giving him a smile. “Goodnight, Ethan.”

Ethan liked it when she called him that. He had insisted that she called him Ethan shortly after she came back. It was often only them and Harry, so there was no harm in being so informal. And Ethan was glad that he asked Sylvia to do that; it felt more intimate.

Sylvia was heading towards the door when there came the sound of shouting. Ethan sat up as it reached them. What was going on out there? One of the voices sounded like Harry. Why was he arguing with one of the servants?

Then the door flung open, almost hitting Sylvia as she jumped back, and Tillbury came storming into the room. Harry was just behind him, grabbing his arm and turning him around.

“I told you that His Grace wasn’t going to be disturbed at this time of night, Mr Tillbury. You have to leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere until I’ve had my answer!”

Tilbury pulled away and bumped into Sylvia as she tried to get out of the way. She stumbled back and knocked into a chair. Ethan was on his feet immediately.

“That’s enough!” he snapped. “You watch what you’re doing, Tillbury. Your behaviour right now is unacceptable.”

“Unacceptable?” Tillbury swung around on him, the raindrops on his clothes flying everywhere. “I’d say what you’re doing is unacceptable! You still haven’t given me an answer!”

“Answer?”

“To the deal your uncle made with me. You said when you returned that your own solicitors were having a look at the papers, and you have been giving me excuses for weeks now. I’m not used to being kept waiting.”

“Wait, what?” Sylvia straightened up, her expression confused. She looked at Ethan. “What is he talking about? What’s going on?”

“It’s between men, Sylvia.” Tillbury waved at her with barely a glance in her direction. “Why don’t you leave and let us talk?”

“Sylvia is not going anywhere,” Ethan said sharply. “The only person who can tell her to leave is me, and she’s not leaving.”

As much as Ethan didn’t want to cause Sylvia any distress, he wanted her to know what Tillbury was up to. He had a feeling that she didn’t know her friend was trying to commit fraud. He came around the desk and stalked over to the young man.

“I think she deserves to know what you’re trying to do, Tillbury.”

“This is nothing to do with Sylvia!”

“Given that you’re trying to steal land that belongs to us, I’d say it has everything to do with her.”

Sylvia gasped. Tillbury’s face went even redder than it was a moment ago.

“How dare you? Steal land? I would never do that!”

“Are you sure about that? Because the papers looked rather odd when we looked at them. On closer inspection, we realise that they’re meaningless and have no legal weight to them.”

Sylvia was staring at Tillbury. She looked like he had just slapped her.

“Stewart? Is that true? You were trying to steal from us?”

“Of course, I wasn’t!” Tillbury snapped. “Your old guardian promised me land, and I was just following through on the deal. He knew that I wanted to marry you, so he wanted to be sure that we were set.”

Now Ethan felt like he had been slapped. Tillbury wanted to marry Sylvia. Why was he so surprised about that? He swallowed back his anger. Both of them losing their tempers wasn't going to help anyone, and he wanted the man out. Glancing at Harry, who was standing in the doorway with his arms folded, wearing a dark scowl, Ethan decided that holding back was not an option anymore.

Sending a silent apology to Sylvia, he turned back to Tillbury.

“I don't believe the old duke knew about you wanting to marry Sylvia, and if he did, he wouldn't have given his blessing for it. I'm sure he knew you were as much of a crook as I do. As for giving you land, if he did agree to that, I very much doubt he was planning on giving you half.”

“Half?” Sylvia squeaked.

“If he wanted to leave you land, it would have been in the will. Your father might have mentioned it to you, and if you were left anything, that ‘deal’ would have been in there.” Ethan picked up the fraudulent papers from his desk and thrust them in Tillbury's face.

“I know you created these after his death, making up sentences as you went along. I don’t know much about legal jargon, property deeds, and all that, but even I know this is nonsense. I don’t know what you’re trying to do, but you’re not about to do it with me. I’m not selling anything to you, so you’d better stop trying.”

He felt worn out after saying all that. Sylvia looked like she didn’t know what to think, while Tillbury’s expression said he knew he had been found out. And he was close to doubling down. Ethan slapped the papers into the man’s chest.

“Take these and get out. Don’t even think about coming anywhere near us again. I’ll notify your father. Also, if you go anywhere near Sylvia, I’ll make sure everyone knows that you’re a crook and a foul human being.”

Tillbury bared his teeth at Ethan. Then he grabbed the papers and flung them away, sending them flying everywhere and falling to the ground like huge snowflakes.

“This isn’t over,” he snarled. “I’m owed that land, and I’m going to get it.”

“How are you going to get it when you can’t get my signature? You try that again, and I’ll be notifying your father about what you’re doing. I’m sure he won’t be too impressed to know what you’ve been up to.” Ethan looked at Harry. “Would you escort him out, please, Lord Richardson? I want Mr Tillbury out of the house.”

“With pleasure, Your Grace.” Harry took Tillbury’s arm. “Come on, sir.”

“Get your hands off me!” Tillbury pulled away. “I’m not having you touch me!”

Harry was about to reach for him again, but Sylvia got there first. She stood between him and Tillbury, giving him a pleading look.

“Stewart, please. Just calm down. We can talk about this. If you’re struggling with what happened between us, I’m sure we can work something out.”

Ethan saw the way Tillbury’s expression changed, and it sent a shiver down his spine. He stepped towards Sylvia, giving her a look of contempt.

“If you wanted things to work out for me, you would have agreed to marry me,” he said in a low voice. “You wouldn’t have turned me down if you weren’t so taken in by whatever words he’s charmed you with. I didn’t think you were so easily swayed.”

Sylvia flushed.

“This has nothing to do with what we’re discussing,” she hissed.

“It has everything to do with it. I could have given you marriage and money, both of which you will need when he finally throws you out. And you refused. I thought you were simple, but I didn’t think you were that stupid.”

“That’s enough!” Ethan pulled Sylvia away, gently pushing her behind him. “You will not speak like that about my ward. And I want you to get out.”

Tillbury’s eyes glittered. Ethan half-expected him to lash out, and he was bracing himself for a fight. Then the young man turned away abruptly and stormed out of the room, knocking into Harry’s shoulder as he went. Sighing, Harry shook his head.

“I’ll make sure he leaves. Do you want me to notify his father?”

“No, I’ll do it in the morning. Too much has happened right now.”

“If you’re sure? Because I’m sure he’s going to be trouble for us still.”

Harry left, closing the door behind him. Ethan turned to Sylvia, who was still looking shocked. He touched her arm.

“Sylvia?”

“He was planning to take half of your land by using lies?”
Sylvia sounded dazed. “Half?”

“I’m afraid so.” Ethan swallowed. “I apologise that you had to hear that, but he’s not a good person. He’s caused trouble for so many people, and I know he’s a friend of yours....”

“Why wouldn’t he talk to me? I could have helped him.”

“I don’t know. Whatever he’s up to is his own fault, and I don’t want you mixed up in it.” Ethan rubbed the back of his neck, wishing that he could get rid of the shiver. “He’s not a good man, Sylvia. I know you saw him differently....”

“I’m certainly seeing him differently now.” Sylvia frowned and shook her head. “I wanted to believe that he gave Louisa chamomile because he was trying to help, but now I’m not so sure.”

“He doesn’t like being told that he’s in the wrong, so he doubled down. He’s just selfish.”

“I’m only just beginning to realise that.” She closed her eyes, her expression pained. “God, I can’t believe that I thought he was a friend. Did he ever care about me?”

“I’m sure that he did. But his belief that he’s always right is greater than his love for you.”

Ethan had no doubt that Stewart loved Sylvia. Unfortunately, he loved money more. That had to be why he wanted to take land for a stupidly small amount, thinking that Ethan was too foolish about business to know what was going on. But why did he want that land in the first place? As far as Ethan knew—as far as anyone in the house knew—there was nothing there of any importance.

He made a mental note to go out once the storm was over to go and look again. There had to be something that told him what Tillbury wanted.

“I must apologise for Stewart’s behaviour,” Sylvia said.

Ethan frowned.

“What are you talking about? Why would you apologise for what he’s done?”

“I...I know that I’m not the one who caused this, but he is my friend.” Sylvia gave a small shrug. “I do feel some responsibility for him.”

“You don’t need to.”

“I feel like I need to.”

She looked close to tears, and Ethan pulled her into his arms, cradling her in his embrace.

“You don’t need to do anything. Tillbury is responsible for himself, not you. And I’m not cross with you.”

“He’s been my friend for years. I never....”

“You never thought he would do something like this? I know.”
Ethan stroked her hair. “I know.”

Sylvia rested her cheek against his chest, sinking into his embrace. Ethan held her for a moment longer, enjoying the feel of her in his arms, and then he gently took her chin and tilted her face up to him. He pressed a soft kiss to her mouth.

“It’s going to be all right. We’re going to get this sorted.”

“Which bit?” Sylvia whispered.

“All of it. Everything. It will be made right eventually. We just have to be strong and be patient.”

Sylvia licked her lips, looking uncertain.

“I don’t know if I can,” she murmured.

“You can. You’re stronger than me. We’ll be fine.”

Ethan couldn’t help but kiss her again, and this time Sylvia responded. She shifted until she was flush against him, her arms going around his neck. Ethan growled, tightening his arms around her. He could get used to holding her like this.

A sudden knock at the door had him jumping away from her so fast he almost knocked her over. Clearing his throat, Ethan adjusted his jacket.

“Come in.”

The door opened, and Pearson came in. He glanced between the two of them, but he didn’t make a comment.

“Lord Richardson has just escorted Mr Tillbury out of the house, Your Grace. I think he’s going to make sure he gets off the estate entirely.”

“They’re not fighting, are they?”

“I think Mr Tillbury was thinking about it, but he thought better of it.” Pearson’s expression was blank. “He left without further fuss once Lord Richardson said something that made him look nervous. I didn’t ask what was exchanged.”

Ethan didn’t think he would ask, either. He just wanted all this to stop. A clap of thunder made all of them jump, and Sylvia let out a gasp. Resisting the urge to put his arms around her again, Ethan moved towards the desk.

“Could you let Cathy know that she’s to prepare Lady Sylvia’s room for her? And, if possible, prepare her a bath?” He gave Sylvia a nod. “That should help you sleep tonight.”

“I...” Sylvia faltered, and then she drew herself up. “Very well. I’ll retire then.”

Before Ethan could say anything further, she swept out of the room, Pearson following her. Before he disappeared from sight, though, he gave Ethan a look that was easy to interpret. He thought that his master was a fool for not doing anything further with Sylvia.

Were his feelings for Sylvia that obvious?

Ethan collapsed into his chair and closed his eyes. For someone who knew what to do when a woman was in difficult labour, he had no idea how to confess that he had fallen in love with his ward. What sort of a man was he?

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Chapter 14

Sylvia looked out of the window at the workers. There were many villagers milling around, tidying up the debris that had fallen from the house in the night, putting the slates and bricks onto the cart before they were pulled away. She wondered how they managed to control the carts as they went down the steep slope. That was quite impressive.

She thought it was really kind of the villagers to come here and help them with the mess. The storm must have ruined everything they had as well, but they were helping Ethan with the estate. Nobody was complaining or making comments about it. They were just getting on with it.

The storm had been destructive. Sylvia had experienced bad storms before, but this was something else. She was relieved when it finally died down in the early hours, but to say she was shocked by what she saw when she looked out of the window was an understatement.

Her window was also broken and needed to be replaced. Sylvia hadn't even realised that had happened; the howling

wind had been too loud. At least it explained why she had been cold during the night.

Given the debris all around the house, it was a miracle that the house was still standing. Or that they had a roof.

“Sylvia?”

Sylvia turned around. Mrs Goodpepper was in the doorway, wiping her hands on a cloth, looking a little red-faced.

“We’re just going to take out some food for the villagers. Do you want to help us?”

“Oh, of course!” Remembering that she was meant to be doing something, Sylvia hurried over. “Forgive me, I wasn’t paying attention. I got distracted.”

The housekeeper gave her a knowing look before turning away.

“I’m sure. It’s pretty bad out there, isn’t it?”

“To the point that Ethan...I mean, Lord Northbridge...won’t let me out of the house until they’ve looked over everything.” Sylvia cleared her throat when she saw the other woman glance at her. “I’m just surprised everyone came here to help. Surely, they’ve got their homes to look after?”

“According to the older Mr Tillbury, the village isn’t as badly damaged as the house. It’s something they can sweep up and fix a few things without a problem. But it’s this place that is the bigger concern.”

Sylvia wasn’t sure about that. She was grateful that people she had known all her life were willing to help. If only she could help them in return in a way that wasn’t serving them food to keep them going.

Ethan had told her she was doing the right thing, and it kept her out of the way. Tiles were still falling off the roof, so she shouldn't venture outside just yet. He was concerned about her getting hurt, while Sylvia was worrying about him being up on the roof to look at the carnage. She shuddered to think how much it was going to cost to replace everything.

Hopefully, they would figure something out. She couldn't bear to lose her home.

They were almost at the kitchen door when there was a loud rumbling and then a violent thud towards the far side of the house, followed by muffled shouting. Mrs Goodpepper sighed.

“God, that's probably a good chunk of the coach house roof gone. It's been threatening to fall down for a long time.”

“Do you think everyone's all right?”

“They should be. They were told to clear out of there. And you know everyone in this part of the country is tough. Let’s get this food sorted. I’m sure the men are hungry.”

Sylvia followed her, wondering if Ethan and Harry were all right. They were helping to clear the debris, and she was sure they wouldn’t be too far away. At least there were two doctors on the site in case something happened.

Then the shouting got closer, and there were running feet. Then the kitchen door was flung open, and Harry came striding in ahead, several villagers staggering in behind, carrying someone between them. Harry looked grim, his face pale as he pointed at the kitchen table.

“Clear that right now. We need to put him down somewhere.”

“What’s going on?” Mrs Goodpepper asked.

Then Sylvia saw who they were carrying. Her heart stopped.

“Oh, my God! Ethan!”

She started towards him, but Harry grabbed her and hauled her back.

“Don’t go to him, Sylvia,” he said quietly. “I need to properly assess him.”

“But...what happened?”

“I’m not sure. One minute, he was on the coach house roof looking at the damage, and then he’d fallen off and was lying in a heap on the ground.”

Ethan had fallen off the roof? But he wasn't clumsy. He had never so much as stumbled. So how could...?

Then she saw the blood on his head and how awkwardly his foot looked. It shouldn't be pointing in that direction, should it? She felt nauseous at the sight.

"Lay him down on the table," Harry ordered as Mrs Goodpepper and the kitchen staff finally cleared the space. "Then give him some room."

"Do we need to get a doctor?" one of the men asked.

"I am a doctor. We don't need one." Harry turned to Sylvia. "Get Cathy, Simpson, and Williams to prepare Ethan's room. We're going to need to take him upstairs once I'm done. And tell Williams I need him here as soon as he's finished."

"Will he be all right?"

“Just go!”

Sylvia didn't need to be told twice. Her heart was racing as she stumbled out of the kitchen, looking for her maid and the two valets. It took a moment more than it should to explain everything, but the three servants were moving before Sylvia had even finished. She could feel her legs giving way as they hurried off, and Sylvia sagged onto the stairs, leaning her head against the wall. Her head was pounding, and she felt like she was going to throw up.

Ethan was hurt. He had fallen from the roof. God, if he had fallen from the roof of the actual house...Sylvia didn't want to think about it. She needed to stop herself from going into hysterics.

Closing her eyes, she took several deep breaths. This was not going to be bad. Ethan was going to be fine. He had just had a knock to his senses, and he would be awake soon as if nothing had happened.

If only his foot would go back to the position it was supposed to be in....

Sylvia groaned and curled over, clutching at her stomach. No, she would not lose what little breakfast she had consumed now. She needed to think about something else. But when her thoughts were full of Ethan, that was easier said than done.

“Lady Sylvia?”

Aware that someone was close by, Sylvia looked up. Woodforde was approaching her, wiping the sweat and grime off his forehead with his cap. His expression was tight, almost like he was fighting back anger. Swallowing back the bile in her throat, Sylvia sat up slowly.

“What is it, Woodforde?”

“I heard something that I think you need to hear.”

“Can’t it wait? Lord Northbridge just fell off the roof.”

“It’s about Lord Northbridge.” Woodforde hesitated. “I asked around the people who had been around that side of the house what happened, but it was difficult to get an answer. Finally, one of them told me how he came off the roof.”

Something about the way he said it told Sylvia that she wasn’t going to like this. Grabbing onto the balustrade, she pulled herself to her feet.

“Tell me.”

“His Grace was pushed. By Stewart Tillbury.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in, and another moment for Sylvia to comprehend what she had just heard. She stared

at the estate manager.

“Are you telling me that Stewart deliberately pushed Lord Northbridge off the roof? Was this witnessed?”

“Yes. By quite a few people. Some of them said it looked like Lord Northbridge had lost his footing, and Mr Tillbury was trying to help him, but he lost his hold on him.”

“But you don’t believe it.”

“Not with the way they’re surrounding him right now. Something happened, and he was a part of it, but Mr Tillbury is saying it was an accident.”

After the night before, Sylvia didn’t believe that. She might have thought that Stewart would never do such a thing, but she saw a completely different person. It wasn’t someone she wanted to be around anymore. Sylvia had lost a friend, and she wasn’t too upset about it.

She headed towards the door.

“Where is he now?”

“He’s near the stables, but...my lady....” Woodforde hurried after her. “You shouldn’t go outside! It’s not safe for you!”

“Do you think I care when the duke is unconscious and might never wake up again?” Sylvia knew she was being hysterical, but she couldn’t stop herself. “Stewart has answers, and I want them right now.”

Going outside, with Woodforde following close behind, Sylvia made her way towards the stables. She could see a crowd building of both the remaining servants and several of the villagers. The noise from the commotion got louder as she neared it. Sylvia could hear Stewart’s voice above it all, protesting his innocence.

She pushed her way through to find Stewart in the middle of the crowd, gesturing with his arms as he stood with his back to her.

“I don’t know why you’re getting so worked up about this! I never touched him like that! Why would I?” He looked from one man to another. “Why would I do something so stupid?”

Sylvia folded her arms.

“I don’t know, Stewart. Why don’t you explain it to me?”

Stewart spun around, his eyes widening when he saw her. Then he recovered and approached her.

“Please, Sylvia, you have to believe me,” he pleaded, reaching for her hand. “I would never do something like this. You know

that.”

Sylvia moved away from him. She didn't want him touching her.

“After what happened last night, I don't know what to think. You did threaten Lord Northbridge, after all.”

“No, I didn't!”

“You said this is over. That you were going to get the land you were trying to swindle from us. You have a solicitor for a father. Does that constitute a threat?”

Stewart stared at her in shock.

“Do you really think I would do that? I thought we were friends!”

“I thought we were friends until you tried to steal from us and hurt Louisa to soothe your own ego.”

“I never hurt Louisa!”

“Then why did you give her the chamomile after you were told it wasn’t safe for her? She could have died! The baby could have died! You were told that you shouldn’t give it to her, and you did it anyway.” Sylvia kept her arms firmly folded; she was tempted to hit him. “All for what? Because you didn’t like being told no? Did you push Northbridge off the roof because he said no to you as well?”

Stewart’s eyes were wild. He looked like an animal being caught in a corner.

“But...I wouldn’t hurt anyone. I never intended that.”

“But you hurt Northbridge, didn’t you?” Sylvia demanded.
“Just tell me the truth! Now!”

She thought Stewart was going to carry on denying it. Instead, Sylvia was surprised as Stewart advanced on her, looking completely different to the man she thought she knew.

“All right, fine!” he practically spat in her face. “I did push him. What does he have that I don’t, anyway? What makes him so special?”

Sylvia took a step back. Being this close to him was making her very uncomfortable.

“You could have killed him.” She swallowed, her throat threatening to close up. “He might still die.”

“So what? He’s an outsider. Nobody wants him here!”

“He was raised here just as much as you were,” Woodforde said sharply, moving to stand beside Sylvia. “He’s not a stranger to us.”

“He’s a stranger to me! And he thinks he can parade around here with all the money and land he could possibly desire?” Stewart pointed at Sylvia. “It didn’t take much for her to fall for him, did it? She’s meant to be my wife, and all that man had to do was smile at her, and she’s fawning all over him.”

Sylvia could feel her face getting warm. She didn’t look around to see if anyone was staring at her. Instead, she focused on Stewart.

“You pushed him because you were jealous? You thought he stole things from you?”

“He certainly stole you! But I guess it shows how shallow you really are.” Stewart threw up his hands. “I just wanted that for myself. If I was really rich, you would be paying attention to me, wouldn’t you?”

“You know that’s not true.”

“Do I really know that? Do I know that if that man hadn’t turned up that you would have been mine?” Stewart sneered at her, looking her up and down. “I guess, after this, he’s not going to be yours anymore. And you really will be left alone.”

Sylvia was struggling to breathe as a murmur went around the crowd. God, this was humiliating. It was like Stewart had knocked her senses off-kilter. Had he just admitted to hurting Ethan because he was jealous? She tried to draw in more air, but it was a struggle.

A movement to her left distracted her, and Sylvia saw Stewart’s father coming through the crowd. From the look on his face, he had heard everything. Her heart broke for him. It couldn’t be easy to hear any of this. Tillbury glared at his son.

“I think you need to go, Stewart,” he said in a low voice.

“Father...” Stewart faltered, and he started towards the older man. “This isn’t what it looks like....”

“I heard enough. And to say I’m disappointed is an understatement.” Tillbury shook his head. “I never thought you would behave like this. All because you want what somebody else has, and you think you’re entitled to take what doesn’t belong to you? Northbridge has already told me about what you did to try and buy some of his land for mere pennies.”

Someone gasped behind him. “I was going to talk to you about this later, but I think we’re going to have that conversation now.”

“Father....”

“We’re going. Now!” Sylvia had never heard the solicitor raise his voice like this before. Nor had she seen him look this angry. “If you have any sense left in you, you’ll be leaving with me. Or do you want a riot on your hands where you’re at the centre of it?”

Stewart looked like he was going to argue back, but then he seemed to realise that people were staring at them. He looked around, and Sylvia could see the bewilderment. Did he really think people were going to be on his side? Everyone was staring at him with stony expressions. Nobody was pleased about what he did.

It made Sylvia want to cry even more.

“Come on, Son.” Tillbury turned away and walked off without waiting for his Stewart to follow. “Let’s go.”

Stewart took one last look at Sylvia, but she stared at his feet, willing him to move. Eventually, he did, disappearing from view and stalking away. Someone touched her arm, and Sylvia looked up to see Woodforde.

“Lady Sylvia?”

“I...I’m all right.” Licking her lips, Sylvia looked around at everyone. “Let’s get back to it. I’m sure there’s plenty we can salvage. Once we’re done, we can get started on your houses.”

“Don’t worry about us, Lady Sylvia,” someone said from the back. “We’ve got everything under control.”

Sylvia didn’t know what to say to that, and she didn’t argue when Woodforde steered her towards the house.

“Come on, my lady. Let’s get you back inside.”

The first thing Ethan was aware of when he came around was the pain in his body. Everything hurt, from his head to his feet. Especially his right foot. His shoulder felt like it was on fire as well, and when Ethan tried to wriggle his fingers, it just brought more pain that went up through his hand.

Had he been working so hard that he was sore all over? If that was the case, why did his head hurt? Did he hit it on something?

Ethan opened his eye and waited until his vision cleared. He was on a bed, and it was mostly dark. It was also very warm, the sound of a fire crackling practically vibrating in his ears. It was hard to turn his head towards the fire, but Ethan managed it. Simpson was putting more wood on the fire, embers jumping out with each addition. And Sylvia was curled up in a chair beside him, a blanket over her. She didn't stir, which suggested that she was asleep.

“Welcome back to the land of the living.”

Ethan could hear Harry's voice, but he couldn't see him. Then he recalled hearing the voice behind him. Flinching, he slowly turned his head back and saw his friend leaning over him.

“Harry?”

“At least you haven't forgotten me,” Harry commented with a slight smile, sitting on the edge of the bed. “That bang to the head could have scrambled your senses.”

“What...what happened? I don't....”

“Stewart Tillbury shoved you off the roof of the coach house.”

“What?”

Had Ethan heard that correctly? Harry sighed and nodded sagely.

“You two were checking the roof, and Tillbury thought nobody was looking, so he pushed you. But there were witnesses, and he ended up admitting to it. If he had admitted it to me, though, he would be in worse shape than you.”

“You are very violent for a doctor, Harry.”

“Given what he did to you, I think it’s justified,” Harry replied with a scowl.

Ethan didn’t have the strength to argue with him. He tried to lift his head up, but he couldn’t move.

“Can I sit up? Or do you want me to stay like this?”

“For now, I want you to lay flat.”

“How bad is it?”

Harry hesitated.

“You’ve got a crack on the back of your skull. It took forever to stop the bleeding. Your elbow is shattered, and your ankle snapped. I’ve put supports on both, and hopefully, you’ll be right as rain in about six weeks.”

“You say that after you tell me I have a fractured skull.”

“As long as you rest, you’ll get better quicker.”

Ethan was aware that rest was needed, but he doubted that it would be comfortable. Not when his whole body hurt. Then again, given that he had been forced off a roof, it could have been much worse. Tillbury could have killed him.

Was that his intention? Had he planned to kill him? The thought left Ethan feeling cold. All to get some land for practically nothing. That just felt...unreal. Ethan would never have thought Tillbury would do something so dangerous for his desires.

Something was not right about this situation, and Ethan had a feeling this wouldn't be the last time Stewart Tillbury did something stupid to get what he wanted.

He licked his lips, his mouth feeling dry.

“Do you want a drink?” Harry asked.

“Please.”

Harry reached for a glass on the bedside table and carefully eased Ethan up a little so he could drink. Ethan tried not to flinch as he drank and stopped himself from falling back onto the pillows again. This was going to be tough to handle.

“How’s Sylvia?” he croaked.

“She’s not left since you came in here. I’ve not had the heart to tell her to give you some space.”

“Don’t let her leave. I want her here.”

Harry raised his eyebrows.

“It’s not exactly proper, Ethan...”

“Do you think either of us cares about that right now? Given the circumstances, having her here should be the least of our worries.” Ethan looked over at Sylvia, wishing that he could reach out and touch her. “Let her stay. But can you wake her? I want to see her properly.”

Harry looked like he was going to argue, but instead, he sighed and got to his feet.

“If you say so. But you must rest. I don’t want you doing anything stupid.”

“What do you think I’m going to do when I can barely move?”

“I know you, Ethan. You’ll find a way.” Harry gave him a gentle smile. “Just make sure you listen to me, Doctor Duke.”

Ethan groaned. Not that name again.

He watched as Harry went over to the chair Sylvia was slumbering in, leaning over and gently shaking her shoulder. Sylvia awoke, and Ethan watched as Harry whispered something to her. That was when Sylvia looked over. Ethan saw her eyes light up, and she rose from her chair, wrapping the blanket around her shoulders. Harry gave Ethan a nod and left the room, closing the door silently behind him.

She approached the bed, hesitating as she reached his side.

“How are you feeling?” she asked. “I...I know that’s a stupid question....”

“I’ll live. I’m going to hurt for a while, but I’m not going to die.” Ethan managed a smile. “You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

Sylvia frowned.

“Please don’t jest about that. You scared everyone.”

“I think I scared myself when it happened.”

Ethan wanted to reach for her, but his broken arm was held in a sling and braced against his chest, and his good arm felt too sore to move. He wondered if Harry had missed something, and he had also broken his other arm. But he could move his fingers, and he was able to turn his hand over, weakly lifting it before the soreness got too much and it dropped to the bed again.

“Ethan...” Sylvia said as she carefully sat on the edge of the bed and took his hand, raising it to her face. “I thought you were never going to wake up.”

“You have so little faith in me.” Ethan’s arm was hurting from being moved, but he didn’t care. He was touching Sylvia, his fingers touching her skin. She was warm, but he could feel her trembling. “Where’s Tillbury now?”

“His father took him away. I don’t know what’s going to happen to him.” Sylvia sighed. “I don’t think I want to know, if I’m honest.”

“I know he was your friend, Sylvia....”

“After what he did to you, he is no longer my friend. I don’t want him anywhere near me.”

Ethan didn’t respond to that. He didn’t think he needed to; Sylvia was clearly hurting from knowing that someone she had seen as a friend for a long time could do something so horrible. He wished he knew what he could do to make her feel better.

“I’m glad you’re going to be all right,” Sylvia said quietly, moving his hand so his palm was cupping her cheek.

Ethan smiled, his thumb brushing against her lower lip.

“And I’m glad you didn’t find a husband in London.”

God, did he really just say that? Why did he say that? Ethan realised that was as close as he had come to admitting how he felt about her. Not exactly the most romantic moment, though.

They stared at each other. Then Sylvia gave him a smile and turned her head to kiss his palm, holding his hand close.

“I’m glad I didn’t, either. Do you want me to stay with you?”

“Would that be an inconvenience? I know we need to monitor clearing everything up....”

“I’ll stay as long as you want me to.” Sylvia leaned over and kissed his head. “If you need anything, I’m right here.”

Ethan didn’t doubt that at all. Even with this body feeling like it was on fire, he was already feeling better.

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Chapter 15

“Are you retiring soon, Sylvia?”

Sylvia nodded and closed the book.

“I was just having another look over the numbers,” she said, rising to her feet and stretching her arms above her head, unable to fight back a yawn. “There has to be a way where we can save or raise money. There are so many repairs we’re going to need to do, and right now, I don’t know where the money is going to come from.”

Harry hovered in the doorway for a moment. Then he crossed over to her, clasping her shoulders.

“You don’t need to worry about that for now. Let’s focus on Ethan getting his strength back. Then we’ll focus on the house.”

“But....”

“Woodforde and a few of the villagers have gone onto the roof and said that while a lot of the roof has gone, it’s fixable. You know that the Whistler family are builders, don’t you?”

Sylvia frowned.

“Of course I do. But are you suggesting we ask them to work for free?”

“I’m not suggesting that. They’re offering it, so we’re going through a bartering process with them.” Harry backtracked a little. “Well, I’m not, the staff are, but they’re coming to an agreement.”

Sylvia knew all about bartering, but she didn't think it would be a good thing to do at this point. It felt disrespectful to those who were trying to make a living. Just because Ethan was the duke didn't mean he should barter for something he needed. Especially when it was something as big as repairing the house.

She was too tired to argue with Harry about it, though. She would deal with that in the morning.

“Sylvia?” Harry gave her a smile. “It's going to be all right. Ethan's going to get better, the house is going to be fixed, and the duke's treasuries are going to recover.”

“When? I've been looking over everything, and all it's doing is giving me a headache.”

“Ethan's resourceful. He'll think of something. And he's had plenty of time to think about all of this.”

Sylvia looked towards the ceiling. It had been three weeks since Ethan had been pushed off the roof, and while his recovery was going well, he was still restricted to his bed. But he was sitting up now, and Sylvia was sure he was hobbling about in his room despite Harry's orders to stay in bed. Sylvia had caught him once, and from the look on Ethan's face, this was definitely not the first time. He would be up and around in no time at all.

But it still felt like an eternity. Sylvia hated seeing him broken and in pain. It reminded her of what Stewart had done. He was meant to be her friend, and he did this?

"Go on, Sylvia," Harry said gently, turning her towards the door. "Go to bed. It's coming up to one in the morning. You really need to rest."

"It's that late?"

"I'm afraid so. I lost track of time myself." Harry gave her a little push. "Go on. The books are going to be there in the morning. You need to rest, or you're going to be no good to anyone."

Sylvia made a face at him.

“I wish you weren’t right about that.”

Harry smiled, squeezing her arm before letting go.

“Ethan says that all the time.”

“He is right, after all.” Sylvia headed towards the door.

“Goodnight, Harry.”

“Goodnight.”

Sylvia yawned again as she left the room, picking up a lit candle on the way out. The servants had extinguished all of the lights around the house, and the place was in complete darkness, with just a sliver of moonlight coming through the windows. While Sylvia could walk around the house with no light, she was too tired to try it tonight.

As she climbed the stairs, she wondered if Ethan was still awake. He had started sleeping a lot during the day and doing everything else in the evening, sometimes through the night. It was like he had turned into an owl. Sylvia would see if he was awake. Spending time with him, while a little questionable with no chaperone, was precious, and she looked forward to it.

What had Stewart been thinking? She was certain he had acted out of more than just jealousy. Sylvia didn't believe that being jealous of Ethan was the main motivator for trying to kill his rival. And Sylvia was sure that Stewart had planned to kill him.

All over land he had no proper claim over and a woman he couldn't have. It just felt so ridiculous. Stewart had always been stubborn and believed he knew what he was doing was the right thing, but Sylvia was not of the same opinion.

If only she had been able to talk to him about it, but Stewart hadn't been seen since the accident. His father had explained to her that he had forced Stewart to stay in his room until he knew what to do with him. Like everyone else, Mr Tillbury was unsure about what should happen, and Ethan said that he wouldn't get anyone to come after Stewart as long as he never stepped on the estate again.

There was a good chance that he would be sent away. Maybe to America. Sylvia couldn't see Stewart getting another chance after trying to kill someone.

It made her feel sad that someone she thought was a friend had ended up like this. But she knew it was the right thing to do.

As she reached the top of the stairs, Sylvia became aware of a crackling sound. Also, the light around her was flickering. But the flame on her candle was barely moving when she was standing still. What was going on? Had someone forgotten to extinguish a light somewhere?

Turning around, Sylvia looked towards the drawing room, seeing that the door was open. Sure enough, there was light coming from there, but there was something wrong about it. The sound was louder than it would be, and Sylvia was sure she saw a flickering flame just out of view.

Realising what was happening, she flew back down the stairs and hurried over, pushing the door enough to enter the room. Only to be pushed back by the heat that came from inside. Gasping, she dropped the candle, the light going out as it bounced on the tiles and rolled away.

The drawing room was ablaze, the furniture having ignited and beginning to burn away. The flames were also creeping up the bookcases at the far end of the room.

Sylvia couldn't believe what she was seeing. She couldn't do anything but stare at the sight.

“Sylvia!”

Someone grabbed her from behind, and Sylvia screamed as she was pulled away. Harry pushed her behind him, staring at the carnage before him.

“What the....”

“I don’t know what happened!” Sylvia cried. “I just found it like that!”

Harry didn’t respond. His expression grim, he pushed her towards the stairs.

“Get the servants up. We need water, and a lot of it. And get everyone out who’s not helping. Go!”

Sylvia wasn’t about to argue. She was terrified at the thought of having to deal with a fire on her own, especially when it looked like it was getting out of control.

She ran up the stairs, almost colliding with Simpson on the landing. Ethan's valet looked confused.

"Lady Sylvia, what...?"

"The house is on fire."

"What?"

"The house is on fire!" Sylvia pushed him towards the stairs.
"Lord Richardson needs help. Quickly!"

Thankfully, Simpson didn't say anything further. He charged down the stairs, joining Harry as the viscount took off his jacket and tossed it aside before rolling up his sleeves.

“Sylvia?”

Sylvia spun around and saw Ethan limping along the hallway, leaning on the wall with one hand as he moved. His face was flushed. Sylvia hurried to him.

“What are you doing out of bed?”

“I couldn’t sleep, so I was sitting by the window. Someone was running away from the house. Then I heard a roar of something and a crackling noise. The floor was getting warm as well.” Ethan was gasping for air as he leaned against the wall. “What’s going on?”

“The house is on fire!”

“What?”

“The house. It’s on fire!” Sylvia got him off the wall, wrapping an arm around his waist as she helped him to walk. “We need to get you out of here!”

“There’s a fire?” Ethan started to pull away. “I have to do something!”

But he didn’t get very far before his foot buckled, and he ended up on the floor with a pained cry. Sylvia fell to her knees beside him.

“You’re in no fit state to help. Harry and the staff will take care of it.”

“But....”

“Stop arguing with me, and let’s go! We have to get you out before the fire spreads. Your room is right above the drawing room.”

Ethan looked like he was going to argue, but then Sylvia heard someone shouting their names. She saw Harry charging towards them, his face streaked with sweat and soot, his expression grim.

“Need any help?”

“How bad is it?” Ethan asked through gritted teeth.

“The fire’s spreading out of the drawing room. The staff are getting as much water as they can to contain it.”

“Then I need to be down there!”

Harry snorted and bent down, hauling Ethan to his feet.

“You are going down the back stairs and out of the house. I’m not risking your life again by fighting a fire when you’re not able to stand upright.”

“But this is my house!” Ethan tried to push Harry away. “What man am I if I don’t do something?”

“The staff are doing it. And you need to look after Sylvia.” Harry glanced at Sylvia. “Someone needs to look after her.”

Normally, Sylvia would have been annoyed at being treated as if she was a weak woman, but she could feel the shift in the air at Harry’s words. It was either that or the acrid taste in her mouth was getting worse, and it was making her lightheaded. Not looking happy, Ethan put his good arm around Sylvia’s shoulders.

“Let’s get you outside,” he said gruffly. “But you might have to lead me.”

Sylvia was only too happy to oblige. She didn’t think she could take the smell of the smoke that now seemed to fill the air.

Ethan sat on the grass, leaning against a tree, and watched as the household finished putting out the fire. Somehow, they managed to get it contained to the east side of the house.

The fire had reached his bedchamber, part of his study, and quite a bit of the hallway. The floor was unstable and would need to be replaced, and nobody dared to go upstairs to that side in case the floor gave way. If Ethan had been asleep when the fire started, he might not have been able to get out as he did.

He didn't want to think about that. It was cool enough outside, as it was, without wondering what might have happened.

It felt like luck that he hadn't been able to sleep, so Ethan had decided to go and sit by the window. It was a warm night with a nice breeze, which made Ethan wish he could go for a walk. But if Harry had caught him, he wouldn't have been too impressed. Sitting by an open window had been the next best thing.

Then Ethan had caught sight of someone running away from the house. It was too dark to see who it was, and for a moment, he thought someone was sneaking off for a romantic rendezvous or maybe leaving after such rendezvous.

But that man had more than likely set the fire. The windows in the drawing room had been blasted inwards during the storm—they had been very thin and in need of replacing—so it wouldn't take much effort to throw something to start a fire inside.

Who would do that? Was their intention to try and kill everyone? Or was it something else? Either way, Ethan had a feeling he knew who had done it.

“How are you feeling now?”

Ethan looked up. Sylvia was walking towards him, wiping grime off her forehead. She looked flushed, even in the moonlight. Even covered in soot and looking like she had walked through a fire herself, she still looked lovely. Ethan couldn't stop himself from smiling at the sight of her.

Sylvia gave him a sardonic look.

“You must be feeling all right if you're able to smile.”

“You manage to make anything look good. Even though you look like you've gone climbing up the chimney.”

Sylvia snorted.

“You stay close enough to that for a while, and you’re going to end up getting covered in soot one way or another. It’s still really hot over there.”

“Where’s Harry?”

“He’s treating a few people for burns, but no lives were lost. Apparently, most of the servants were already making their way out.” Sylvia nodded towards Pearson, who was hovering nearby, talking to Simpson. “Pearson saw something when he was making his last round of the house and suspected that something was wrong. Then he smelled the smoke.”

At least someone was alert.

“Pearson was on his way to alert us about it, but we found the fire before he could,” Sylvia went on, settling onto the grass beside Ethan. “I think he’s still in a bit of shock over what happened. I heard him talking to Simpson about what could have happened if he hadn’t been up and walking around.”

“He’s got nothing to feel guilty about. He did well.”

“It’s going to be a while before he gets over the shock. I think everyone will be fine.” Sylvia frowned. “Who would do this? Harry is sure that the fire was set deliberately.”

“I’m pretty sure it was as well.” Ethan hesitated. “And I don’t want to speculate because I could be wrong....”

“You think Stewart was the one who set the fire?”

“Well....”

Sylvia swallowed.

“I don’t want to admit it, but I think he did it as well,” she said.

“Really?”

“He was angry. He wanted something, and he wasn’t going to get it, so he decided to go another way about it.” She hugged her knees to her chest. “I’ve witnessed him do things when he didn’t get his own way before, but this? It feels like he’s taken a leave of his senses.”

Ethan put his arm around her shoulders, urging her to lean into him.

“He sees this as his way of getting what he wants. He thinks it will make him feel better because I’ve humiliated him a few too many times.”

“But to try and kill you....”

“It’s going to take more than that to get rid of me.” Ethan smiled and kissed her head. “Trust me, I’m not going anywhere.”

He heard Sylvia sigh as she settled into his embrace. They leaned against the tree for a while, watching as everyone milled around the house. Harry was directing everyone, looking like he was the man in charge. Ethan was happy to let him get on with it. Right now, he had something else to think about.

Stop tiptoeing around it and tell her. Before something happens and you never get the chance.

“I love you.”

Ethan felt Sylvia still. He looked down to see her staring up at him. Then she straightened up, still watching him with an expression of confusion.

“What did you say?”

“Has the fire made you deaf?” Ethan smiled. “I just said that I love you.”

“I heard you, but I wasn’t sure if it was actually you or simply in my head.”

“No, it was me.”

Ethan waited. He wanted Sylvia to get excited and say she loved him back, but she wasn't moving. She still looked dazed as she tucked her hair behind her ear.

"I never thought I'd hear you say that," she said quietly. "I really wanted to hear it, but I was...well...I thought you would reject the idea."

"Why would I reject it?"

"Well, I'm not exactly...." Sylvia gestured at herself. "I know tonight is especially not a good example, but I'm not a proper lady. I'm a country girl who refuses to leave the country. And I'm not exactly the quiet one who sits in a corner. I have to make my own voice known. That's not exactly what a duke needs in a duchess."

Ethan reached up and stroked his fingers across her cheek.

“I think you’ve discovered by now that I’m not a conventional duke. I’m a doctor, first and foremost, and then I’m a duke. As you said before, why couldn’t I do both? I want to try, but only if I have someone who can keep my feet on the ground, who can support me and not make me feel like I’m doing too much.

I want an equal as a wife, not a trophy or a possession. No lady in the ton could cope with my home here, but you can. You can handle anything that life throws at you, which makes me love you more.”

“So...does that mean...?”

“That I want you to be my wife? Yes.” Ethan brushed his thumb across her mouth. “I might want you as my duchess, but before all that, I want you as my wife. A doctor’s wife. Do you think you can cope with that?”

For a moment, Sylvia stared at him. Then she beamed and threw her arms around Ethan’s neck. He cried out as his bad arm was pressed on, at which Sylvia drew back quickly.

“Oh, forgive me! I didn’t...”

“Shut up.” Ethan put his good arm around her waist and drew her back. “Come here.”

Sylvia accepted his kiss, and Ethan could feel her smiling against his mouth. She put her arms around him, this time careful of his injuries. Ethan was tempted to put her across his lap to hold her closer, but he wasn’t about to make more of a spectacle in front of everyone.

“I take it that’s a yes, then?” he asked when they came up for air.

Sylvia grinned.

“That’s a yes. Over and over, it’s a yes.”

Ethan didn't think you could get more certain than that.

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Chapter 16

One Month Later

Sylvia stood on the porch and looked at the sea in awe. It had been some years since she had seen the sea, and it was just beautiful. The waves crashed against the sand at the bottom of the hill, and the sound roared in her ears.

She found it surreal that they were here, on their honeymoon. Sylvia hadn't given it much thought, but Ethan had said he wanted to give her something that she would love. And she had expressed loving the sea when she was a little girl and that she would love to visit again.

Two weeks in a cottage by the sea. It felt like paradise.

“What are you thinking about?”

Sylvia turned, smiling when she saw Ethan step out onto the porch. He had divested himself of his jacket, and the sleeves of his shirt were rolled up, revealing the sinewy muscles of his arms. Sylvia liked the look on him, so he had been doing it more often since they finally confessed their love for each other. Anything to make her smile.

“I was just thinking about how this feels like a dream.” Sylvia gestured at the sight before them. “It’s just beautiful. I hope the weather isn’t bad, though.”

“We don’t want to be caught in another storm,” Ethan chuckled as he put his arms around her. “And I hope there isn’t one back home. I doubt the house will be able to withstand another one.”

“You’ve got people rebuilding the place, so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Although Sylvia was concerned about where the money was going to come from. She was shocked that Ethan said he and

Harry had put their resources together to reinforce the house and make it liveable again. That would drain most of their resources, and what would they do after that? Ethan had assured her that she should trust them. They knew what they were doing.

She hoped so.

“How are you feeling after the journey?” Ethan asked, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. “It was a long time in the carriage.”

“I’m fine. I’m just glad to be here.” Sylvia rested her cheek against his chest, looking out at the sea again. “It’s beautiful at sunset, isn’t it?”

She could hardly believe that only that morning they had been married at the village church, surrounded by the villagers who had come together to give them a small but beautiful wedding. They donated a lot of things, refusing payment or anything in return. Sylvia had experienced their kindness over the years, but nothing like this. It made her want to cry at the generosity.

The Duchess of Northbridge. That did sound strange. Mrs Colbert, the doctor's wife, sounded better. But Ethan said that he could be both doctor and duke, so she could be a wife to both roles. Sylvia was sure she could manage it.

"Let's get inside," Ethan whispered, tilting her face up to him and kissing her softly. "It's been a long day, and I think you and I need to rest."

Sylvia giggled.

"Is this your way of trying to seduce me, Your Grace?"

"I suppose I am."

Laughing, Sylvia kissed him, slipping her arms around his neck. They remained in that embrace for a while before Sylvia

drew back and took Ethan's hand.

“Lead the way, Your Grace. I'll follow.”

“You don't need to keep calling me that, you know,” Ethan said as they went into the cottage and up the stairs. “I certainly won't approve if you call me that in the bedroom.”

“What about Doctor Duke?”

Ethan groaned.

“Sylvia....”

“All right, I'll stop,” Sylvia laughed as she followed Ethan into their bedroom, pressing up against his back with her arms

around his waist. “I guess I’m getting a little jittery about it... all.”

Ethan turned to her, kissing her before pulling back with a smile.

“At your pace,” he whispered. “Whatever you want.”

That was Ethan all over. He let her take control until she was comfortable. Sylvia appreciated that. After all, she was about to make love to her husband, and she didn’t want to get it wrong.

Although, from the way Ethan was looking at her, she doubted that he would care about that.

Her hands went to his shirt, and she slowly undid the buttons, along with the waistcoat. Ethan tugged the cravat off and tossed it aside before he started undressing her. They worked together in silence, Sylvia’s heart racing as Ethan’s fingers

brushed against her bare skin, revealing more of her body to him. He was better at this than she was because Sylvia was soon wearing just her chemise while he was still wearing his breeches and stockings.

Ethan drew her close, cupping her bare backside as he kissed her, his hands sliding under the chemise. He groaned, nipping at her bottom lip with his teeth.

“Why don’t you lie down?” he suggested. “It’ll be quicker if I do the rest.”

“I...all right.”

Sylvia wasn’t sure that she could look at Ethan as he undressed, her nerves becoming a little overwhelming, but she found herself unable to stop looking as she slid onto the bed and watched Ethan divest himself of the rest of his clothes. His body was complete muscle, making him look like he had been carved out of marble. Her mouth went dry as she drank in the sight, unable to look away as Ethan turned to her. He gave her a sly look and gestured at her.

“That needs to go.”

“What? Oh.”

Sylvia had forgotten about the chemise. She took it over her head, gasping when the fabric came away from her eyes, and she found Ethan already in front of her. Laughing, he tackled her backwards, kissing her as they fell onto the bed.

Soon, they were a tangle of limbs on the blankets, Sylvia enjoying the feel of her husband’s naked body against hers, his hands cupping and caressing wherever he touched. She was practically squirming in his arms as he used his mouth to kiss her all over, shifting his weight between her legs.

“Put your legs around me, darling,” Ethan panted, reaching between them as he propped himself up on his hand. “Keep your eyes on me. Relax.”

Relax? Sylvia gasped as she felt their bodies join for the first time, and for a moment, she wondered how she could relax. This couldn't be possible, could it?

Then her worry faded away, and a wave of pleasure washed over her. Sylvia closed her eyes with a sigh, running her hands over Ethan's arms as he rocked into her, his mouth on hers, on her neck, her chest...anywhere he could touch while making Sylvia melt into his arms. Her legs tightened around his waist, and she found her hips lifting to meet his.

Now that felt better than she'd thought it could.

"Sylvia...." Ethan took her hands, linking their fingers together as he pressed them onto the bed. "My sweet Sylvia...."

Sylvia wasn't sure if he said anything after that because there was a roaring in her ears, louder than the waves had been. Something hot and fierce washed over her, and Sylvia forgot how to breathe. She threw her head back, her body shaking

against Ethan as she tried to get some air. The feeling was too intense.

But she wanted to keep it going.

Ethan let out a growl, his whole body tensing before he groaned and slumped against her. Just as Sylvia was coming down from the height of pleasure that didn't seem to want to let go, Ethan sagged onto the bed, drawing Sylvia into his arms as he rolled onto his back. For a moment, neither of them spoke, and all Sylvia could hear was the beating of Ethan's racing heart.

She licked her lips, her fingers brushing against Ethan's sweaty chest.

“That was....”

“Yes. That was.” Ethan's fingers stroked her hair away from her face. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” Sylvia lifted her head. “Is it always like that?”

Ethan looked bemused.

“Is that you saying something about my ability to make love?”

“I didn’t mean it was bad,” Sylvia said hurriedly. “I just mean...is it always that good?”

Chuckling, Ethan drew her close as he rolled onto his side. He kissed her, running a hand over her back.

“It can be better,” he said against her mouth. “Give me a moment to catch my breath, and I can show you.”

Sylvia smiled.

“I like the sound of that.”

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Epilogue

One Year Later

“What are you doing in here?”

Ethan looked up, his vision clearing as he stared past the flickering candle. Harry was in the doorway to the study, looking like he hadn't slept for a while, either.

“Harry.” Ethan slumped back in his chair. “I thought you would be sleeping by now.”

“Cathy's with Sylvia, and I'm on edge knowing there's a medical emergency, and I'm not allowed to help.” Harry looked up at the ceiling as another muffled moan reached their ears. “I don't know how you're managing to cope with that.”

Ethan shuddered. He hated hearing Sylvia in pain, knowing that she was going through labour, and he wasn't able to be at her side. But the midwife was adamant that husbands weren't allowed in the room during the labour and birth, and as the duke, he had to follow protocol. Ethan had tried to point out that he was a doctor as well, but he was shooed out.

“I'm not coping. I want to be in there, but I've been banned until our child is here. I'm surprised that you're not in there, though.”

“That midwife is very strict. No men are allowed.” Harry collapsed into a nearby chair and yawned. “I don't know if I'll be able to manage this when Cathy goes into labour. She's not keen on not having me next to her, either.”

“I'm sure you two will get used to being away from each other for a few hours.”

Harry scowled, but Ethan somehow managed to smile in return. If the ton had been shocked at Ethan marrying his ward, they had been almost catatonic when Harry announced

that he was getting married to a maid. This would have caused a huge scandal, and Harry would have needed to keep himself away from the rest of Society until the uproar died down.

But from the way his friend had been since he announced that he had asked Cathy to marry him, Harry didn't care. Of course, he was a viscount, but he was also a doctor. A doctor and a maid getting married didn't make anyone bat an eyelid.

It was an odd pairing, but Ethan and Sylvia had seen it coming for a long time. It just took a while for Harry to finally admit to Cathy that he was in love with her. He was lucky that Cathy returned his feelings, otherwise, it was going to get rather awkward living under the same roof.

"I could do with a drink," Ethan said, getting to his feet and heading over to the drinks cabinet. "Do you want one?"

"Just the one. More than that, and it's going to make me feel asleep."

“Isn’t that what you want?”

Harry sighed.

“Sylvia is like a little sister to me. I want to know that she’s all right before I look after myself.”

Ethan smiled, pouring out two generous measures.

“You really have taken a shine to her.”

“Who wouldn’t? She’s actually quite refreshing.” Harry winked at him. “I’m not surprised you fell head over heels for her. Although I’m still surprised that it took you forever to admit it.”

“I didn’t take forever.”

“It felt like it. I was so close to just blurting it out for you.”

Ethan wouldn’t have wanted that. Harry wasn’t exactly good at telling things delicately. Picking up the glasses, he brought them back to the desk and handed one to his friend, trying to ignore the fresh cry coming from the room upstairs. It took everything in him not to charge up the stairs and barge into the room.

Childbirth was scary. Ethan knew he wouldn’t be able to cope with it.

As he settled back into his chair, Ethan looked towards the window. Even though it was the middle of the night, he could see the rolling hills beyond the window. Pretty much all of what he could see was his. And it was there to stay.

Who knew that this land was richer than anyone expected? While the foundations had been built to reinforce part of the wall, the ground had revealed something nobody expected.

There was coal. A lot of it. Ethan didn't know much about the stuff beyond using it for heating, but he did know that there had been some coal mines in the area in the past, but they had been shut down and lost to time for several years, long before the house had been built. Everyone in the area had forgotten about it.

Except for Tillbury. He had found out about it somehow. Nobody was quite sure how, but Ethan surmised that was why he wanted the land. He knew that the entrance to a coal mine was on the estate itself, and if he could find it, he could lay claim to it and have his own wealth with a coal mine. It would certainly make him richer than Ethan's situation at the time.

Now that was gone for him. And the land was very much Ethan's. He had gotten a crew of men to explore, finding out where the possible entrance was and seeing what they could do to get it open again without everything collapsing on top of them. It hadn't taken long for the coal mine to start up again; Ethan was happy to let the villagers and other workers use the land to get the coal out.

Of course, he was the one who had his name connected to it, and he got the profits. It was more than enough to pay off the debts that had kept on accumulating, and now Ethan didn't have to worry about money for a while, maybe not until his great-grandchildren were the ones living there.

If he and Harry hadn't used their savings to make changes to the house, they wouldn't have found out about the coal. And their gamble had paid off more than they could ever imagine. Now Ethan was able to make his estate prosperous while his friend worked with him at a new clinic in the village.

It had taken everyone a while to get used to the fact that their duke was also a doctor, but things had fallen into place in the year since everything started getting better. And Harry was just happy that he had a job that he loved.

Who could have guessed that, only a year ago, they had been studying to become surgeons at one of the best hospitals in London? It felt like a lifetime ago now.

A knock at the door had Ethan looking up. Mrs Goodpepper was coming into the room, looking red-faced and flustered. But she was smiling.

“The baby’s here, Your Grace.”

“What?” Ethan almost spilt his drink as he stood up. “Really?”

“She and your wife are getting cleaned up right now. I’ve come to let you know.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in, and another moment more for Ethan to understand what she had just said.

“I have a daughter.”

“You have.” Mrs Good pepper’s expression warmed. “She’s so beautiful, and she has a healthy pair of lungs on her.”

Sure enough, Ethan could hear another cry, this one with a different pitch and continuous. His chest swelled. He was a father now. Harry gave him a tired smile and raised his glass.

“I’ll drink to that, Ethan. Congratulations.”

Taking a gulp of his drink—his mouth had suddenly gone dry—Ethan left the room and headed upstairs. Cathy was coming out of the bedchamber as Ethan arrived, wiping her hands with a cloth. She gave Ethan a smile and curtsied.

“The midwife said you could go in when you come up. Sylvia wants to see you.”

“How is she faring?”

“She’s exhausted, but she’ll be fine once she’s rested. I’ll be going to fetch the wetnurse from the village. We’ve managed to soothe your daughter for now.” Cathy squeezed his arm. “Congratulations, Your Grace.”

Patting her hand, still feeling like he was in a daze, Ethan entered the room. It was dark, with the fire going fiercely and several candles lit around the room. It was very warm, a little too warm. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw the midwife clearing away the bloodied bedsheets, moving them out of the way as she adjusted the new bedsheets around the duchess.

Sylvia was sitting up, leaning against the pillows as she cradled something in her arms. She looked up as Ethan approached, her tired expression softening when she smiled.

“Meet Celia, Ethan. Our daughter.”

“Can I... can I hold her?”

“Of course. You’ve held a baby before, haven’t you?”

Ethan had, but they had been other people’s babies. Somehow, it was different with his own. He sat on the edge of the bed, and Sylvia passed the little bundle over. It was so light, more so than Ethan expected. He looked down and saw the baby’s face. She was awake, her expression saying she didn’t know whether to cry or not. They stared at each other.

Ethan didn’t think it was possible to love someone as much as this who wasn’t his wife. But now he knew how new parents felt when he helped with the occasional birth. This was a beautiful moment.

“She’s gorgeous.”

“Just like her father,” Sylvia said, leaning her head on his shoulder. “Worth the pain.”

“Are you all right?”

“I will be now.” She smiled at him. “I love you.”

Ethan kissed her.

“I love you, too.”

THE END

*Can't get enough of Sylvia and Ethan? Then make sure to
check out the [Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...*

*How will Sylvia's curiosity about Stewart's return lead her
down a dangerous path?*

*What will Sylvia's reaction be upon discovering that Tillbury
has been residing in London for the past five years?*

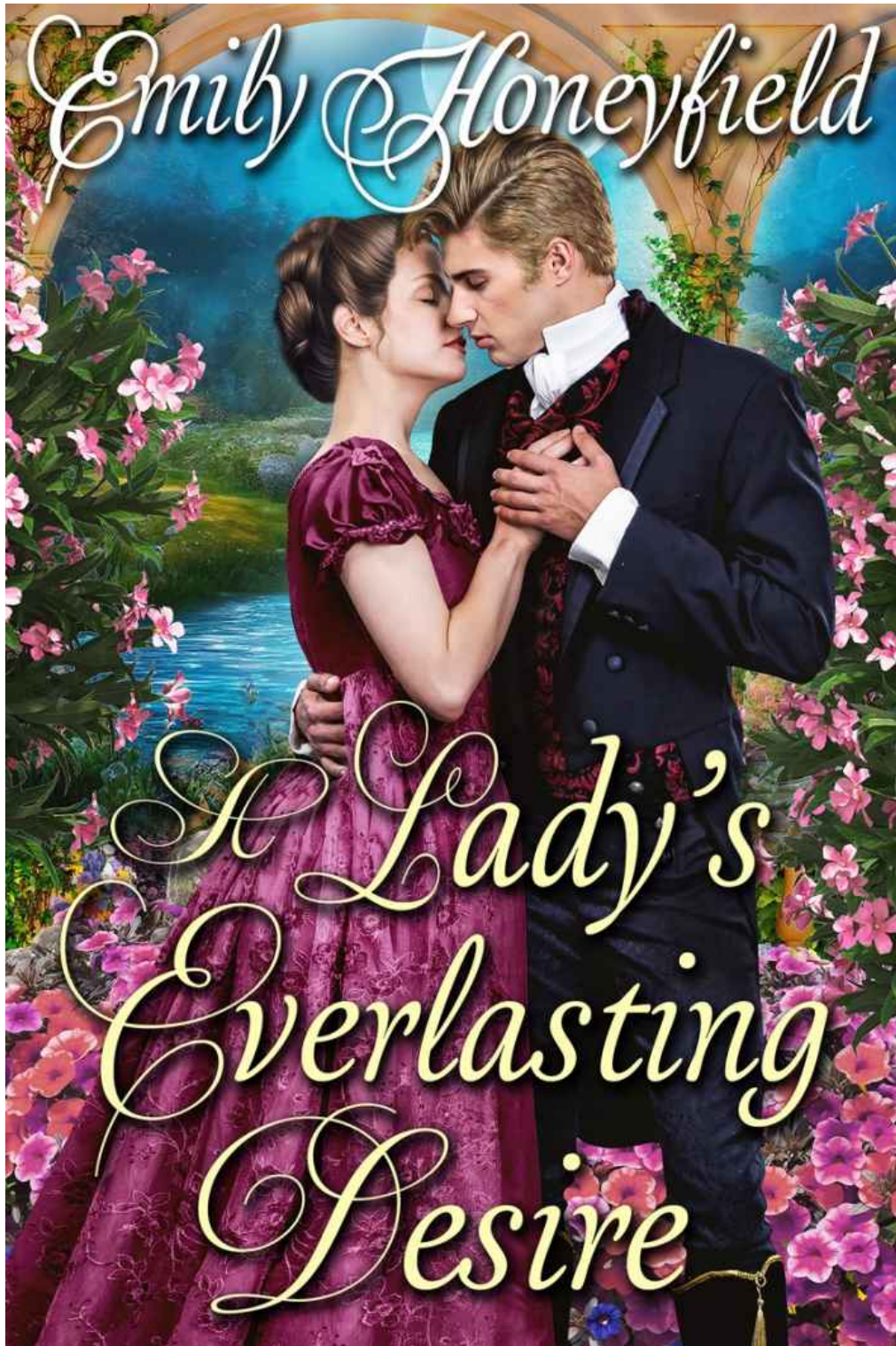
*What will happen when the Tillbury family's dark secrets come
to light and threaten the lives of everyone involved?*

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://emilyhoneyfield.com/sylvia>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read
the first chapters from "A Lady's Everlasting Desire", my
Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*

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A Lady's Everlasting Desire

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Introduction

After her father's death, Miss Lucy Felton was forced to move across the Atlantic. She left behind her childhood friends and the love of her life, Christopher Harcourt. Three long years passed before she returned to England and she wanted nothing more than to fall straight back into the arms of the man who had set fire to her heart and soul. Unfortunately, she was soon to find out a devastating truth; he was promised to another lady.

Love's sizzling touch has slipped through Lucy's fingers once again...

Despite his mother's constant pressure, Lord Christopher Harcourt was struggling with finding a suitable bride, because he could never forget the burning passion he had felt for Lucy. Right when he finds a match, he discovers that Lucy is back in town and he feels powerless to resist their scorching allure. He knows that their path to love would be riddled with danger and

treachery, but he is willing to risk everything to call her his own.

He will soon find himself with one choice, love or ruination...

When they find themselves embroiled in a scandalous journey of lust, the forbidden thrill of their affair sends shivers down their spines. With every stolen kiss, they risk losing everything they have worked so hard to achieve... As they navigate the tumultuous waters of deceit and betrayal, will their love survive the inferno of desire, or will they both be consumed by the flames?

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Chapter 1

1809 Oxfordshire countryside, England

The two lifelong friends raced their horses in the bright sunshine of the day. Christopher didn't consider himself a gentleman when it came to racing, so he would not allow Lucy to win. Besides, he didn't like to be beaten by a girl; he'd never live it down.

"You must have cheated!" she called out as her dappled, grey filly came to a stop next to his larger, dark brown gelding.

"How could I cheat?" he yelled back at her, panting from the exertion of the horse race. "It is impossible to cheat."

"You did not jump the broken-down wall, I saw you," Lucy called back as she watched him jump from his horse. "You went over the little beck instead, and that, my friend, is cheating."

“Actually, I would like to point out that the way I went, was longer,” he insisted, as he went to help her down from her horse. “Therefore, it was not dishonourable in the slightest.”

Lucy slid down from her horse and into his arms from her side-saddle position, continuing to argue her point. What he didn't expect was the stirring in his manhood as she didn't let go of him once she was on the ground. “You were meant to jump the wall, to give me an advantage. You behaved like a scoundrel so that you would win.”

She pushed away and out of his arms, running away as she laughed, and he knew that she wanted him to chase her.

“You are nothing but an immature cad,” she called back to him. “You try to belittle me because you are so insecure.”

“Come here, and I will show you what this scoundrel can do to a little chit like you,” he called after her, setting to chase her

down.

Lucy couldn't escape his capture because she'd inadvertently gone in the direction of the river, so she was forced to stop. As it happened, he was glad to capture her. Lately, he'd found himself wanting her to be in his arms more and more. Within seconds, he caught her up, moving in to take hold of her arms as he threatened to push her down the riverbank and into the water. Should he kiss her lips? Should he risk it?

"Unhand me, you buffoon," she giggled, pushing herself into his body, and instead he hugged her.

"Let's go sit together for a while," she said as he let go. She went to sit down on the ground, making a dent in the long grass, and he sat close by her side, looking up at the sky.

"Gentlemen are not meant to be mean to ladies," she scowled at him.

“I do not see any ladies around here,” he said, snatching her hand and kissing it. He hoped that she too was feeling all the changes in their friendship. Though he didn’t say, he wished that could kiss her while they were alone.

“At eighteen years old, Christopher Harcourt, you should act more mature,” she grumbled.

“And at sixteen years old, you should not be running around as wild as you do,” Christopher answered as he rolled away. Rolling back, he handed her a dandelion. “I am sorry, my Pretty Fairy. Here, for you.”

Lucy accepted the flower, rubbing the soft petals against her cheeks. She’d never objected to Christopher’s nickname of Pretty Fairy. He’d given it to her when she was much younger because she’d loved pretending to be a fairy from the many stories that she read with him and his sister.

“Bah! Why do women always like flowers,” Christopher huffed as he stood up and held his hand back down to help her up. “You coming to dinner tonight?”

Lucy didn't reply as she accepted his hand. She twirled the flower with one hand, keeping hold of his hand as she looked into his face. Could she see him looking at her lips? Should he make his move and kiss her?

"Emily should be back from her errand by now," he said, letting go of her hand and turning to walk back to the horses. It would be dishonourable if he took advantage of her, and he didn't want to hurt her feelings.

As he went to lift her back onto her saddle, his touch lingered on her leg. Yet still, he was a gentleman and soon moved his hand away.

"We will need to ride to my home first. I must leave word with Nanny Alice. If Cousin Peter doesn't know of my whereabouts, he'll be cross with her."

"Your cousin does not sound like a very nice man," Christopher remarked. "It is a terrible thing that he has taken over your home since your father passed."

Sitting side saddle, Lucy held onto her dandelion, saying nothing. Christopher was well aware of the tragic turn that had happened in her life. She was struggling to find much happiness from one day to the next, so he and his sister tried to bring her some joy.

“What are you thinking about?” Christopher’s voice cut through her thoughts. “You seem lost in your thoughts.”

“I miss Father,” she replied, caressing the yellow petals of her flower.

“I know you do,” he sympathised. “Which is why you should stay with us for longer and get away from that new Earl who has taken over your home. He is a braggard if you ask me, and I should have words with him.”

“Do not be so harsh on Cousin Peter,” she remarked. “It was not his fault that Father died in a coach accident.”

“Emily and I will cheer you,” he offered, giving her a cheery smile. “Come, let’s get going so you can collect some clothes and stay for at least two days, how about that?”

“I very much like the sound of that, Christopher, thank you,” she replied. If he could have his way, she would live with them at Killington Manor, where she was always welcome. Lucy had lived in their neighbourly estate at Northmore Hall all her life. She had been born there, and he recalled when her mother had died some years ago, in a bed within those very walls.

“Is your father home?” she asked him as they trotted along the trail that would take them to the Northmore Estate.

“No, otherwise I would not invite you to stay,” Christopher replied, drifting off into deep thought.

“Why do you not like your father?” she asked.

“I just do not, and that is the end of it,” Christopher snapped at her in a harsh tone, raising his brows at her as if daring her to ask any more about it.

He moved his horse into a canter because he didn't wish to talk anymore. They rode along through a wildflower meadow, full of blue and purple cornflowers.

As he rode along in silence, he recalled how Lucy had told him that even the servants treated her differently now. The new Earl of the Northmore Estate had brought with him many of his own servants, in the two weeks he'd been there. Lord Peter Agar was much younger than her father had been, and he was very much a dandy.

Leaving the wildflower meadows behind, they entered fields of livestock, with the sound of cows and sheep filling the air. The smell of dung hit his nose, but it was a smell of the English countryside. He spurred his horse into a gallop, he was keen to get to Killington Manor so that Lucy could join Emily. As their horses arrived at the top of a hill that overlooked Northmore Hall, he stopped and waited for Lucy to catch him up yet again.

“It looks as if you have visitors,” he remarked, looking down at a carriage that was standing on the roadway near the main entrance.

“Pft! We always have visitors,” Lucy replied. “The Earl never spends a moment alone. He is constantly surrounded by grand ladies and fine gentlemen.”

“My poor Pretty Fairy,” he said, lending her a warm smile. “You are so unhappy. I do wish I could change things for you.”

Lucy smiled back at him, “You do plenty for me, Christopher. Even if you are annoying and a big fat cheat,” she reminded him, shaking the reins to race him down to her home.

As they neared the house, they slowed to a canter. Lucy headed towards the stables to hand over her filly. She would ride behind Christopher on his horse when they returned to his home.

Entering her home through the back door, she passed through the kitchen, and he followed in her trail. She led him up the servant's stairway.

Halfway up the steps, he stopped and pulled on her arm to get her attention. "Why are we entering your home through the back door and using the servant's stairway?"

Lucy put her fingers to his lips to stop him from speaking, "Sshh," she hushed him. "My cousin doesn't like it when we bump into one another, so I try to avoid him by using the servants' stairways."

Christopher was taken aback by her reply, "Lucy, this is your childhood home," he said, shocked at how she sneaked around.

She shook her head at him, taking hold of his hand as she led the way. Again, his crotch stirred at the closeness they shared, but couldn't help but feel that they were sneaking around as if they didn't belong there.

“Ah, Miss Lucy!” a voice called out as they reached the top of the stairway.

It was Nanny Alice, who he knew had cared for his friend since she was a baby. She was a kindly old soul, and he hoped she would chastise Lucy for using the servant’s stairway.

“Nanny Alice, it is fortunate I have found you so soon,” Lucy said, still speaking with a hushed voice. “I need you to pack me a few outfits so that I might overnight at Killington Manor. Will you do that for me?”

Alice looked surprised at her charge, and Christopher could see that something was worrying her.

“Do not fret so, Nanny Alice, my sister will take good care of Lucy,” Christopher assured her, in case she thought that she was to be alone with him.

“It is not that, young Lord Christopher,” Nanny Alice replied, her fearful eyes flitting from Lucy to Christopher. “There is something else that’s amiss. You have a visitor, Miss Lucy, and Lord Agar insisted that I find you at once.”

“What?” Lucy looked shocked at the news. “Who would come to see me?”

“Perhaps the young Lord will accompany you into the drawing room, Miss Lucy,” Nanny Alice suggested. “I am quite fearful at what is going on, Miss.”

Lucy turned to Christopher, and he nodded in agreement. “I will stand by your side, and what is more, I shall not allow that man to bully you, do you hear me?”

With that promise, he took hold of Lucy’s hand and squeezed it to show his support. He was coming to terms with the fact that things were much worse for Lucy than she’d let on. She was such a merry little soul, despite everything that had happened in her life. To him, she would always be his Pretty

Fairy because she flitted around, always with a little laugh as if nothing could infiltrate her happy world.

Lucy stared at him; her blue-green eyes wide with a panic that he'd never seen in her before. He knew she was worried, and he too was worried for her.

"I am ready, Nanny Alice, lead the way," Lucy said, putting on a brave face.

Christopher wished he could impart some strength to her because he could feel that she was trembling. Lucy had always been in his life, and he loved her as much as he loved his sister. If Emily were here now, she'd be holding Lucy's other hand because between them they'd never leave their friend alone.

He'd hated to see her so heartbroken because it hurt him too. He would do whatever it took to keep his Pretty Fairy safe, even if it meant standing up to Lord Agar, who he'd taken an instant dislike of.

The man was a dandy, dressed every day as if he was attending an all-day soiree. He'd seen him only once, and that was from a distance. The new Earl was always surrounded by other lords and ladies that pampered to him. When he'd first arrived, the man had swaggered around as if he owned the place. But then Lucy had reminded Christopher that he did, for he'd inherited the earldom.

After that, Lucy refused to talk about what was going on in her childhood home, and Christopher wished now that he'd forced her to talk more.

Entering the drawing room, Lucy cried out in delight.

“Grandmama, this is wonderful!” she called out, and immediately ran towards an older woman who was standing by a window.

The sudden change in Lucy surprised Christopher. She'd gone from a quivering wreck to her usual bouncing Pretty Fairy within seconds. It was good to see that she was her happy self once again and it pleased him.

“Christopher, come and meet the best Grandmama in all the world,” Lucy called over to him.

“I am delighted to meet you, young man,” the older woman greeted, and he could hear by her accent that she was not English.

He took her hand, expecting her to offer her fingertips, but instead, she gave him a firm handshake.

“Come, let us sit and drink some of your English tea, shall we?” the woman said, leading them towards the seating area where he noted Lord Agar was standing.

“Oh, Grandmama, I had no idea you were coming. Cousin Peter said nothing of it,” Lucy remarked, unable to tear herself apart from her visitor.

Christopher watched Lord Agar as he sneered down at the little gathering.

“I was unsure how long it would take your grandmother to get here. Or even if she could actually make the journey” Lord Agar explained, not breaking even a glimmer of a smile on his lightly powdered face. His hair stood tall and with tight curls on the top of his head, and he wore a large, frilled cravat on his neck. Pompous and dandy was all Christopher could think of to describe the man.

“No matter, I’m here now, and most intrigued by the young gentlemen who accompany you, my dear. I am Mrs Adele Stewart, young man. You may call me Mrs Stewart,” she said. “It’s important to know who my granddaughter’s friends are, as well as her enemies,” she added as she glanced at Lord Agar.

“This is Christopher, Grandmama, and he is one of my best friends, along with his sister, Emily,” Lucy spoke for him.

“Don’t you be looking so worried, young Christopher,” Mrs Stewart said in her drawled accent. “Let me assure you that I have not travelled across the ocean to allow my daughter’s daughter to suffer a moment longer. I’m here in Lucy’s best interests; she always has a place in my heart. Does that put your mind at ease, young lord?”

Christopher bowed his head in respect of this visitor. If she had Lucy’s best interests at heart, that was good enough for him.

“I rarely get to see my Grandmama, Christopher,” Lucy told him, and her voice was fused with happiness. “We write to one another every month, and when I was only eight years old, I visited the States with Father. We had such a jolly time there.”

“Yes, I do recall that visit,” Christopher said because he’d pined for her return home again. He’d missed her because she’d been gone all summer long.

“Thank you, Cousin Peter, for arranging this. It is such a delightful surprise,” Lucy said to Lord Agar, who looked surprised at her statement.

“I came here for your sake, my dear, not for your cousin’s,” her grandmother said, again glaring over at Lord Agar with annoyance on her face. “At sixteen years old, you cannot continue to live with an unmarried gentleman, but we will discuss that more later.”

“Oh, Christopher, is this not such a wonderful surprise?” Lucy said, not really listening to the warning words her grandmother had hinted at. She was far too excited at seeing her grandmother, who had travelled all the way from America.

The maids bustled around to pass everyone tea and cake. Whilst Christopher accepted a teacup and a plate of cake, he didn’t touch it because he had noted the words of Mrs Stewart. Though it was wonderful to see Lucy laughing again, and it gladdened his heart to watch her. Finally, he stood up, readying to leave.

“It has been most enchanting to meet you, Mrs Stewart,” he said, his manners impeccable, as he had been taught. “I will bid you all a good day,” he said with a bow, making sure that he ignored Lord Agar. “And I will speak with you later, Lucy.”

“Forgive me if I do not see you to the door, Christopher,” Lucy said. “But I have so much to catch up with my Grandmama.”

With that, Christopher left the drawing room, and the butler of the house showed him out through the main door. Heading towards the stable to collect his horse, he smiled to himself. It was far better going through the front door as a lord should, as opposed to sneaking through the service door at the back.

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Chapter 2

“You have no idea how much it pleases me to see you, Grandmama,” Lucy said as she stared adoringly at her grandmother.

Lady Adele looked at her granddaughter with a happy grin. “It cannot have been easy for you, losing your father and then your home.”

As Lucy hugged her grandmother, she could see her cousin watching them from his seat on the sofa.

“Miss Lucy has not lost her home, Lady Stewart,” he retorted, as if he’d been accused of some foul crime.

“Those are kind words, Cousin Peter. But this place no longer feels like my home, not without Father here,” Lucy admitted, letting go of her grandmother’s embrace. “We cannot blame

my cousin for what has happened, Grandmama. Father would not want me to do that.”

“Your father should have made better arrangements for you, my dear,” Lady Adele said.

“One supposes he did not expect to leave this life so suddenly,” Lucy sighed, her mind drifting off as a fond image of her father appeared in her head.

“Quite so,” Lord Agar snapped, looking at Lady Adele Stewart with a fire in his eyes.

“It is an awfully long way for you to pay me a visit, Grandmama,” Lucy pointed out, staring back at her grandmother’s tired grey eyes. “You must be awfully tired.”

“Indeed I am, my dear, but we have much to discuss you and I,” Lady Adele replied, as she continued to stroke her

granddaughter's hair. "You are growing to look so very much like your mother."

"Yes, Father often told me that too," Lucy said, smiling at the thought of looking like her mother. From what she could remember of her, she had been a beautiful woman.

"Will you show me to my room, my dear?" Lady Adele asked. "You are quite correct about the journey being a long one, and I do believe that I could do with a lie down before dinner."

"Have the servants prepared a room, Cousin Peter?" Lucy asked.

"Indeed." Lord Agar bowed his head. "I had them prepare the guest room near to your bedchamber."

"That means that you must have known my Grandmama was coming?" Lucy questioned, forgetting who she was talking to. "Why did you not tell me?"

“I am not here to act as your servant, young lady!” Lord Agar snapped, showing his offence at Lucy questioning him. “And I will have you stop addressing me by name,” Lord Agar barked at her as she went to stand up. “From here on, you will address me as Lord Agar, do you hear? I will allow for the little error of your ways, given your age, but do not let it happen again.”

“Of course, my Lord,” Lucy said, giving him a little curtsy and hiding her smile as she did so. “Come, Grandmama, let me show you your room so that you can rest awhile,” she added.

“Lord Agar,” Lady Adele confronted him as she stood up. “You may have gained the eminent title of an earl, but you will mind your manners in my presence. Young Lucy is still grieving the loss of her very dear father, and you will allow her leniencies.”

Lady Adele didn't wait for a reply, but Lucy could see by the look on her cousin's red face that he was not pleased. Lucy led her aunt to the huge spiralling staircase, but she could see that she was uncomfortable.

“I will not have that man belittling you, my dear. You are the daughter of an English Earl, and it is only through the stupidity of the English laws that he has been handed the title on a plate,” Lady Adele informed her.

“I do not believe that he is all bad, Grandmama,” Lucy tried, hating the thought of any dislike between them. “He has no experience of children in his life, and does not know how to deal with me, or so he told me.”

“You are not a child, my dear. You are almost a young lady,” Lady Adele said, a little out of breath as they reached the top of the staircase.

“You can tell that to Christopher,” Lucy laughed. “He is always telling me I am too young and wild.”

Lady Adele gave her a reassuring smile. “The British are far too stiff and proper, if you ask me.”

Lucy giggled. “Do you not care for my cousin, Grandmama?”

“As I say, it’s more the British ways I don’t care for. There are far too many la-di-das,” Lady Adele said as she yawned. “We still have our gentry in America, but we don’t tolerate the pompousness of aristocracy. Now then, dear, come and get me when it’s time to go down for dinner. Can you do that?”

Lucy wished she didn’t have to leave her grandmother, but she had travelled a long way, and she needed her rest. She gave her a small curtsy and left her room. Going to her room, she decided to stay there until dinnertime. It wouldn’t do to bump into her cousin. He was bound to be in a foul mood with her, as he always was.

Laying on her bed, she pondered on how to pass away an hour or two, and then remembered the dandelions in her pocket. As she stared at the limp flowers, she thought of Christopher and hoped he hadn’t been too disappointed about her not returning with him. Christopher’s father came to mind, and she wondered why the two didn’t get along with each other. She had adored her father, and from what she could remember, her mother too.

Once, she'd overheard Christopher arguing with his father. It had been quite a heated row, and his father was telling him to grow up. At the time, she hadn't thought much of it. Now that she was learning the importance of titles and ownership, she supposed that one day Christopher would inherit his father's estate.

As well as his title of Viscount. Perhaps his father wanted him to take on more responsibilities. She knew all too well that Christopher hated being serious about life, so he no doubt fought against carrying out his father's wishes.

Whatever their reason for falling out, Lucy promised herself that she would speak with Christopher soon. She needed to remind him that fathers were not around forever. One day, he would lose him, as she had lost hers. Therefore, he must stop the animosity between them, and enjoy his company while he still could.

As she thought of Christopher, she recalled how close he'd held her when he helped her from the horse. Lately, her feelings for him were changing, and she'd almost wanted him to kiss her. She was sure that he felt the same way, too, but it was all so confusing.

Thinking of him caused a stirring between her legs, and she now wished that she had been staying with them this night. But then again, it wasn't right for her to feel this way about a friend, so she must make sure it never happened again.

The evening soon arrived, and she enjoyed a pleasant meal with her grandmother. Laughing at days gone by, and then discussing both her friends, Christopher, and Emily. Following dinner, they went to sit in Lucy's favourite parlour room. It smelled of her father's tobacco, and that was why she liked it in there. Her grandmother didn't seem to mind the aroma, so they settled with tea and apple pie.

“And now, my dear, we must have our little chat,” Lady Adele began, and Lucy thought she looked quite serious. “I need to tell you the main reason why I have come to visit you.”

“Oh dear, Grandmama, you look very sullen,” Lucy remarked as she picked up some sewing work, so she'd have something to do with her hands.

“You do know that it is not very fitting for a young woman of your age to be living in the same house as an unmarried man, don’t you?” Lady Adele asked her.

“I am not yet a young woman, Grandmama, so I hardly think that people will gossip about us,” Lucy chuckled, not seeing the graveness of the topic.

“I will tell you the short version, dear, so that we can get on with things,” Lady Adele said, tapping her fingers on the arm of her chair.

Lucy nodded as she waited for her grandmother to tell her what was on her mind.

“This is not a good environment for you, in my opinion, and so I would like to offer to raise you if you will accept me?” her grandmother announced, still looking at her, but now with raised brows.

“What exactly do you mean, Grandmama?” Lucy asked, putting down her sewing work. “Do you mean to come and live here?”

“This is no longer your home, my dear, but I can offer you a new one,” Lady Adele replied. “Come home with me to a place of love, and a place where no one will talk down their nose to you. Please say yes and make me a happy grandmother?”

“Goodness, I had not thought of that. Of course, I want to say yes, but my friends?” Lucy said, her mind churning over with so many questions.

“You will make new friends, I promise you that,” Lady Adele assured her. “Now then, I am off to my bed, for I am still exhausted. I will need to build up my strength for the return journey. Meanwhile, you should write everything down that worries you, and tomorrow we can go through your list and sort each one out sensibly.”

“Grandmama, I do love you so very much, thank you,” Lucy said as she hugged her grandmother, feeling a sense of adventure at the new life ahead.

* * *

The next day, Lucy walked through the wildflower meadow. On her way to Killington Manor, she wondered if America would boast such beautiful forests and meadows. The more she thought about it, the more unsettled her mind became.

“I know that I must go with my Grandmama,” she spoke out loud as she attempted to convince herself. Lucy stopped walking and leaned over to smell a wild red rose growing in a hedgerow.

“I will miss this walk,” she told herself, hoping there would be similar walks in America. “And I will miss my friends even more,” she said, stopping in her tracks again. “What of my love for Christopher?” she asked herself. I don’t know that I could bear to part from you, my dear Christopher. I... we... I hoped that we might marry, but now...

With that thought, she sped up her pace, keen to get to Emily and Christopher and tell them her news.

When finally, she had the manor house in her sight, her heart sank at the thought that this might be the last time she visited the grand house. She loved visiting Killington Manor.

Lucy decided to take a little time and go by the lake's edge. Making her way towards the water, she was soon in for a lovely surprise. In the distance, she could see Emily, and she waved over to her, shouting her name. The two young ladies ran to greet one another, always happy to embrace when they met.

"I had no idea you were visiting today," Emily said, as let go of her friend. "Christopher said that your grandmother had arrived all the way from America."

"I have come to visit so that I can share my news with you," Lucy said, unsure of how Emily was going to take it.

“Do tell me that your dreadful cousin has decided to go and live elsewhere,” Emily teased as they walked towards the orchard. “That way, you can have Northmore Hall all to yourself.”

“While it would be nice to stay in my childhood home, I would be a little lonely all on my own in that big place,” Lucy said.

“When I am older, I could come and live with you and we could be a pair of old spinsters together,” Emily laughed.

“Lord no,” Lucy said. “I would hope to find romance in my life one day. But no, I am not to live alone, and my uncle is not leaving. It is me who is leaving, for I’m to move and live with my Grandmama.”

“No, Lucy! That cannot be?” Emily exclaimed. “She lives in America!”

“Yes, I know, and I am sorry it has come to this, but I see no other way for me,” Lucy tried to explain. “I do not have a choice in the matter, Emily,” Lucy explained. “I miss Father so very much, and my Grandmama loves me so dearly and I love her too.”

Emily stood staring at Lucy in silence, watching her with sad eyes. “Have you told Christopher?” Emily asked. “He will not allow it. You must put a stop to it, Lucy.”

“Christopher does not know yet, but I am afraid this is a matter beyond us all,” Lucy replied, swallowing hard.

“I... I am utterly devastated, Lucy,” Emily cried out. “How will I ever live without you?”

“I feel the same way, Emily. But I must go with my Grandmama, she’s the only real family I have left.” Lucy tried

to explain her dilemma, but Emily walked away, turning her back on Lucy, who was following close behind her.

Then she stopped and turned to face Lucy. “I do hope you have a trusty captain and a robust ship, Lucy, for I have heard many terrible tales about that crossing. Make sure they ration you with a good water supply. I have heard of passengers getting a disease called typhus after such a long journey,” Emily stressed. She looked frightful, with her concern that her friend was going over the Atlantic.

Emily continued walking and Lucy followed in her trail until her friend stopped again. Emily turned around, throwing herself into Lucy’s arms and sobbing. Lucy held on to her with a tight hug. She had never meant to make her friend so unhappy, but what could she do?

Lucy had no adequate answers to Emily’s questions that afternoon. They spent the rest of the day waiting for Christopher to return home. It would soon be dark, and Christopher had not yet returned, so Lucy had no choice but to make her way back home. She regretted having to leave Emily with a broken heart.

Once home, she could not eat dinner that evening. The day had left her too distraught.

Settling down into her bed, she wished that she had spoken with Christopher, but he was always a busy sort, having a great many friends. Soon, her eyes started to close, but a familiar spattering sound on her window woke her up. Instantly, she knew what and who it was.

Jumping from her bed, she dashed to the window, lifting the curtain to wave to him. Rushing to be with him, she grabbed for a thick night robe. Stealthily, she sneaked down the servant's stairway that would take her to the kitchen, and then out through the back door.

“Christopher!” she called out as he greeted her. “I suppose Emily has told you of my news?”

“Why do you think I am here?” he said with a frown on his face. “Come, let us sit on the roof where we can talk.”

He grabbed her hand, and they dashed off together, heading for their favourite childhood spot. It had always been a good place for them to sneak away from the prying eyes of adults.

As they lay down, side by side, they both stared up at the silver twinkling stars.

“What are you smiling about?” Lucy asked.

“I was thinking of your father, and wishing he was still here,” he said. “Then you would not be leaving us. I never imagined that the three of us would ever part ways.”

“Christopher, will you kiss me?” Lucy’s voice cut through his thoughts.

“Shall we elope to Gretna Green?” he replied, looking serious.

“I love you, Christopher, but we cannot marry,” Lucy answered, looking a little shocked. “Your father would disown you and Grandmama will be heartbroken if I do not go with her.”

Turning his face, he looked her in the eyes. “I will be heartbroken if you leave me,” he said softly, taking her chin in his hand and pressing his lips on hers. Lucy’s body tingled at his touch. She wanted more, but she didn’t know what it was that she yearned for.

She hadn’t wanted the kiss to stop, but then he told her, “Stay in England and become my betrothed, Lucy. You know Mother would welcome you to come and live in our home.”

“Of course, I will. But only if you stop accusing me of cheating at everything,” he replied.

“I have no choice in the matter,” Lucy said with an aching sadness in her heart. “I do believe, no... I know I am in love with you.”

He pulled her closer to him and pointed to the skies. “You see that star over there?” he said, pointing randomly at the black sky.

“Where? Which one do you mean?” Lucy asked.

“It doesn’t matter, you can choose any of them, and I will name it Lucy’s Star,” he said. “Whenever I next look up at the night skies, I will wonder where Lucy’s Star is hiding.”

“Oh, you are a silly creature,” she laughed, and she was pleased that they could laugh on their very last night together. But if only they could do more; something that would show how much they loved one another. Yet she knew it was not time, and instead, she must relish having him close by.

Before the night was done, they enjoyed more kisses, each one more passionate than the last. Until finally, she knew that if they didn’t part, she would lose herself. But when she insisted he leave, he seemed angry with her. Lucy hadn’t wanted to part in such a sad way, but she didn’t trust herself if she stayed longer. Why he’d been angry, she didn’t know. Life had suddenly become so very confusing, and she felt very alone.

Want to read the rest of the story? [Check out the book on Amazon!](#)

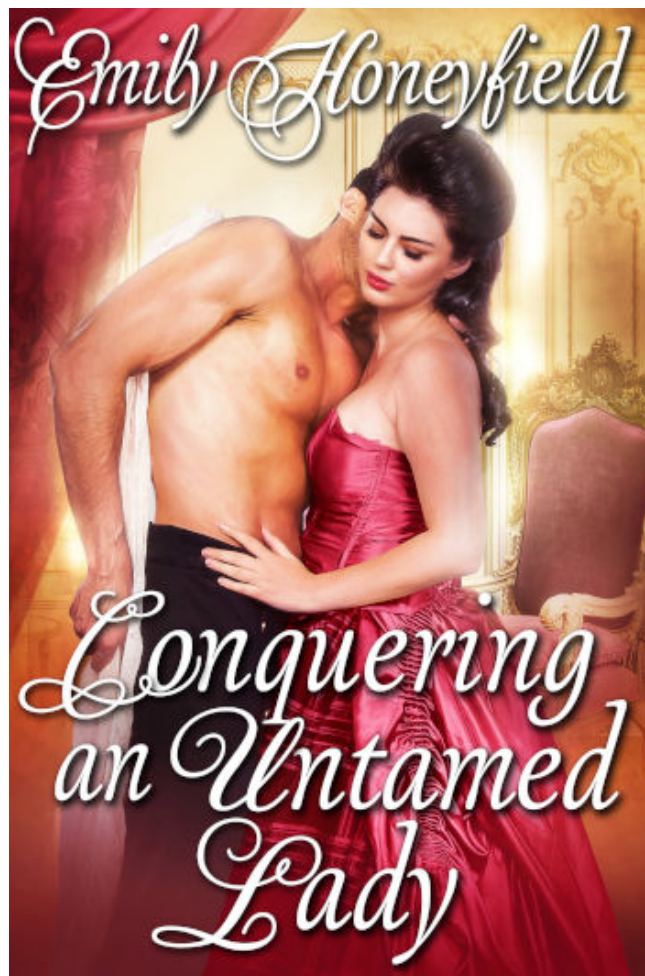
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