



Glitter

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ABBI GLINES



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To Emerson- you, my wild- intelligent- headstrong- sweet girl, **are** Emma.

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Acknowledgments

Never has a book taken me six months to write... until this one. There are those who work with me and those who support me that I could not do this without.

Britt is the numero uno for those who need to be acknowledged. He went above and beyond with taking up the slack while I researched, wrote, researched more, wrote, got Covid, wrote some more... He will also hate that I said all this. Hopefully he doesn't read it.

Ava and Emerson had to hear "Mom is working. I can't right now." For the most part they didn't complain. Emerson had her moments. Ava was a trooper though... although she's been on this ride since 2011 and knows the score.

My older children who live in other states were great about me not being able to answer their calls most of the time and they had to wait until I could get back to them. They still love me and understand this part of mom's world.

My foreign rights agent, **Lauren Abramo**, who was already making publishing deals on this book in other countries before it was even finished.

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Abbi's Army ALWAYS. Y'all are what keeps me sane when I release a new book. Thanks for always supporting me.

My readers - without you there would be no one to read my stories. I get to write because y'all read. I love you all!

A note from Abbi...

Just as the title isn't your typical Regency Romance title, neither is this story. When I decided to write a historical romance, I had a lot of questions. However, three things I knew without a doubt:

This would be set in Regency London. I have a love/obsession with England and its history. I have for as long as I can remember. Did this help me with my writing? Not really. I found that I averaged at least an hour of research a day while writing this. Simple things like "When were mirrors invented?" or better yet "What year did England start having afternoon tea?" and then there was "Did they have ice in London in the early 1800's" possibly my favorite "When was glitter invented?"

I would write it in first person. I have been reading historical romance novels since I was fifteen years old and picked up "Whitney, My Love" by Judith McNaught in the library. I could not read enough of them after that book. So, I know full well they are written in third person. At least every historical romance novel I have ever read has been third person. I am a first person writer so I knew that I would write this book in first person. I wouldn't change that.

The writing would still sound like me. I never went into this intending to sound as eloquent as Jane Austen. I knew no amount of research was going to keep me from making mistakes in my dialect. It was just going to happen y'all. Facts remain- I'm from Alabama no matter how badly I wish I had been born British. This is a new world for me as far as writing goes. However, I will tell you, I enjoyed the hell out of it! I fell in love with the characters and I hope you do too.

With each movement, be it a full turn or slight move of hand, Miriam knew she was being watched closely. The smile she kept on her lips wasn't easy and she had no doubt that her dance partner noticed the less than genuine expression she was trying hard to keep in place. This was it, tonight would be the last night she attended a ball as simply Miss Miriam Bathurst. There was no more time to decide. Her decision had been made.

Miriam felt her body stiffen as she moved in the arms of the man she had agreed to marry this morning in her aunt's rose garden. He, however, wasn't who she loved, and she wished desperately that he was. She did not have forever to wait for the man she had thought might love her to make up his mind. Her mother and sister needed her to marry. Glancing up into beautiful green eyes, her smile became genuine, even if it was sad.

Tonight would be the last time she was given this freedom to enjoy his friendship and the simplicity of his company. So much would change and she hoped it didn't destroy them all. For after she became his wife, the man her traitorous heart loved, would hate her. That was a pain far worse than any she could comprehend. Yet, she knew she would never have been his choice. He had made that clear with his failure to choose.



Six months earlier...

Miriam Bathurst - age eighteen years and one month

One would believe that being given the chance to go to London and be thrown into the marriage mart, with fancy gowns and a pretty face being all you truly needed, was the most brilliant moment in a girl's life. At least, if they were listening to my mother speak of it. If one cared to hear my opinion, which they obviously did not, then they'd get a different description. I didn't care for all the silliness a season in London promised. Who wanted to be squeezed into ball gowns that were terribly heavy and uncomfortable, added to the weight of the hair piled high on top one's head and laced with pearls, flowers and the like? It all sounded dreadful in a way that I would very much like to miss every last aspect of it.

“Just to dance among all the loveliness would be truly magical. Can you imagine the way they all shine and glimmer?” my twelve-year-old sister Whitney said in her dreamiest of voices. The guilt came as it always did. A reminder that what I wanted nothing to do with was the one thing Whitney wanted so desperately, yet would never experience. The limp that remained to this day, after a dreadful fall from her horse when she was nine years old, would keep her from dancing in a ballroom. She would never have a dance card on her delicate wrist filled with men who wished to spend a moment in her presence. She would never be seen for the true beauty she was, unless I

changed it all. Me, it was all up to me to ensure my sister had the life she dreamed of and I'd do anything for her. Even sacrifice my own.

I placed a smile on my face before turning to look at her. She was sitting on the settee in the bedroom we shared, watching as I packed my things. Since the death of our father last year, our world had abruptly changed. Mostly due to the fact my father was a gambler and left us in debt. Along with no more servants, we also had no silver in the house. Mother had sold all she could find of value to keep us fed and pay off my father's debts. I didn't mind the simpler way of life. In truth, I embraced it. Less fuss and worry over dressing. No formalities at dinner. It was an unexpected ease that I felt we were lucky to experience. I didn't mind fetching my own breakfast and serving my mother and sister the meals I managed to prepare. Although I had many failures in the kitchen thus far, I had become adequate at making a proper pot of tea.

London would not be so easy.

"You're going to turn London on its ear, Miriam," my sister said with excitement in her voice. "I so wish I could watch it all unfold."

The wistfulness held a touch of sadness and I wanted nothing more than for Whitney to have all she wanted. I'd often felt the need to scold God for letting it be Whitney that was left with a limp and not me. For I would be quite happy living a life alone in the country, writing novels and enjoying the solitude. I wasn't fond of people in general. It was as simple as that. They annoyed me with their behavior. I preferred truths and I had found very few who spoke the truth. Most only worried over how they appeared to others. All but Whitney. She was a perfect creation, if there ever was one: selfless, kind, intelligent, hopeful. Her presence lit up a room. I'd yet to meet another person like her. She was the true gem in this family and I would make sure she had her moment to shine.

I had none of her qualities; my mother would agree with me. She often scolded me for my sass and rude behavior. I loved our mother, but she wanted things for me that I didn't want for myself. It caused great strife between us with every year that passed. Once I yearned to have Mother look at me with the same love she did my sister, but over the years, I realized whereas Whitney was easy to love, I was not.

Whitney's sweet voice was the one thing that kept me in check when Mother started in on me about my manners and behavior. I didn't want to let

Whitney down. It might seem inconsequential to others, but they hadn't lived in our home nor did they understand this family and all we'd been through. Our father had not been happy with either of his daughters. He'd wanted a son.

He had gotten his wish when I was born, for I was a twin. However, my brother didn't live but for a few days. More than once in my life, I heard my father say he wished it had been me that died. It had left me damaged in a way I dare not admit to anyone. I often wondered if my father had loved me, would I have turned out more like Whitney. He had simply ignored her, but at least she'd never been on the receiving end of his harsh tongue. Her gentle nature made it impossible to find fault in her behavior. It made it easier for me to accept when our mother showed my sister the affection I knew she required. Whitney wasn't thick-skinned like I was and she would never survive being the unwanted disappointment.

"I am sure Uncle Alfred will agree to sending for you. I will ask that of him on my arrival. I can't bear the thought of us being apart."

Whitney beamed up at me and her smile truly was remarkable. If I wanted to be beautiful, I'd wish for her enchanting smile. I, however, did not care how I looked. My face held only one purpose now and that was to find a wealthy husband so that my sister and my mother were taken care of properly. Uncle Alfred had agreed to step in and help them, but not like I wanted them helped. At least not Whitney. I had spent hours poring over medical journals in my father's library and I knew that there were procedures that could help, if not completely mend, my sister's limp. Then all those dreams she had could come true. Whitney's face was one of fairy tales. She belonged in the beautiful gowns and to be dancing in the light that she believed glistened with whimsy.

If it was up to me to give her that, then I would do it. I would stand in the way of a bullet for my sister and at times, I felt this was one in the same. The bullet may possibly be more appealing. I did not feel as if I would ever fit the part I must now play. Turning back to my clothing, I hid my scowl at the idea of dealing with a man. I wasn't fond of men. My father had shown me the cruelty of the opposite sex. I preferred to stay buried in my books or with my quill in hand, writing stories of women who were brave and resourceful.

"Oh, do you think he will? Truly?" Whitney asked as I folded another item and placed it in my open trunk. I had never packed my things before and I

wasn't sure this was the proper way, but I was working from memory from the few times I'd seen Anna, my former lady's maid, do it for me. I did so miss Anna. She had been an excellent listener. I hoped she had found a good home that would treat her well. Mother assured me that she had made sure all the servants had found new places of work, but I was never sure how much to believe when it came to my mother. I'd often caught her in an untruth.

"Yes, I am sure of it. Uncle Alfred is a kind man from all I have been told. Mother respects him greatly."

"Do you know anything of Aunt Harriet? Mother says she's American." Whitney said 'American' as if someone from America would be exotic. I smiled imagining a much different reality. I had read many books set in America and I knew she would not be exotic at all.

"Mother has only met her once and has told me little about her," I replied honestly, but left out the distasteful look on Mother's face when she told me that Uncle Alfred would be providing me with a proper English lady to aid in my introduction into society. It was clear that Mother did not approve of her brother's choice in a wife. This, of course, meant I was likely to appreciate Aunt Harriet immensely.

"This room will be so lonely without you." Whitney's tone had changed. The melancholy pitch made my heart ache for her and for me. I didn't want to leave her. She was the only human on earth I truly loved. I placed one of the few nicer day gowns I had left on the bed and turned to look back at her.

"I will miss you terribly and I promise as soon as I can bring you to London, I will. I am doing this for you too. Not just for Mother. I want you to have all the happiness in the world. I love you." I didn't say those three words enough and neither of our parents ever spoke them. From the moment Mother had brought Whitney to meet me all wrapped up in a soft yellow blanket, I had known what love truly was. Even at the tender age of seven years, I'd known I would do anything for her and protect her at all cost.

"Oh, don't look so melancholy. I shouldn't have said that. I just want you to know how dearly you will be missed." Whitney forced a smile I could easily see she didn't feel at all.

"I will be sad every day until the moment I see you again. I promise to write letters of all the beautiful people, the busy streets, the gossip I will most definitely hear," I told her, trying to brighten her spirits.

"And the beautiful ball gowns! I need to know all about how they sparkle

and shine. Do tell me every detail of Grosvenor Square,” she reminded me.

“Yes, most definitely. I will describe every small detail,” I promised, although I hoped I saw it the way she would. I couldn’t be sure I’d notice the glamour she dreamed of at all. My views on the marriage mart were sorely different than hers.

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Chapter One

Miriam Bathurst

Without even a knock to prepare me, the door to the bedroom I'd been given at my uncle's home on 18 Mayfair Street swung open and my aunt Harriet came barreling into the room, carrying a gown the color of the bluest sky and grinning so brightly her gums were on display above her teeth. She smiled that way often. I now prepared myself for those wide tooth grins, knowing that something was about to be announced in her loud, strange American accent. She always spoke as if I were in the other room. I wondered if it was because I struggled with her accent and many of the words she used. Unlike the Americans I had read of in books, my aunt was not from those areas. My uncle had made his fortune in the transport of whiskey, tobacco and cotton in New Orleans, Louisiana, and he had met my aunt there. It hadn't taken me but a moment to realize not all Americans were alike. They were indeed very diverse.

"It's here, honey, and it's a beauty!" she proclaimed as she laid the gown out at the foot of my bed. "I said something fit for a princess and the dressmaker delivered," she paused, "Oh what is her name? It's French, that I do recall." Aunt Harriet began to bite her lower lip, which was a habit of hers as was talking too loudly as if I had a hearing impediment.

"Marguerite Badeaux," I offered, although I knew Aunt Harriet wouldn't remember it the next time either. She often forgot names amongst other things. Just yesterday, she was looking for her slippers that she'd taken off, as she often did, and the entire time she had been carrying both of them in her left hand.

"Yes, yes, well, she has done just as I asked. Look at this will you." She waved her hand at the gown on my bed and sighed as she placed both her hands on her chest dramatically. "You will be a vision. Even more stunning than your introduction to the queen and you were a true star then. The way she so obviously approved of you, but then who wouldn't? You have the face of an angel. I didn't think it possible another dress could outshine that one,

but this one has and oh how thrilling. You'll be married before we can even blink!"

The gown was everything Whitney would love. Aunt Harriet was correct in that it was remarkable. I dreaded tonight so fiercely that I couldn't even appreciate its stunning qualities. I had been in London for almost two months, preparing for the season to truly begin. However, it had been more intriguing than I had expected, for Uncle Alfred had not provided me with a proper English chaperon like my mother had said he would do. Instead, he had left me in the hands of Aunt Harriet and that, in itself, had been entertaining. She knew nothing of the ton's rules and restrictions. Her mishaps and odd behavior brought a smile on my gloomiest of days. I'd been enjoying myself here more than I had ever thought possible.

I was sure my letters about my outings with Aunt Harriet had amused Whitney to no end. I could almost hear her musical laughter as she read my penned descriptions of my days spent at 18 Mayfair. I missed her terribly and hoped soon she would be sent for a visit. Mother was too concerned about my introduction into society that she didn't want Whitney here this soon to distract me. I was already distracted with what was expected of me. Even with the daily entertainment provided by Aunt Harriet, I did so miss my home.

"I'll send Betsey up to you shortly. Your hair is always glamorous, but I believe, given the time, Betsey can place it so that even a crown would pale in comparison."

I doubted my aunt's fanciful belief, but it was no hardship to sit for Betsey and let her do what she would with my hair. I had wanted to trim it for so long, but mother refused. The heaviness of my auburn locks often caused my head to ache. However, mother seemed to believe it was one of my finest attributes. I disagreed, but my opinion was of no value, it would seem.

"Thank you, Aunt Harriet," I replied simply. For I was thankful. For many things. I was thankful that she wasn't an uptight bore. I was thankful she was happy with the fact my uncle had dumped me on her to marry off. I was thankful that if I behaved properly, I'd have a good chance at giving my sister a better life.

"I can't help but notice that you aren't happy about all of this," Aunt Harriet said with a small frown on her lips. She rarely frowned. I felt guilty to have caused my ever-chipper aunt to frown.

“I am thankful,” I said, because I couldn’t describe myself as happy and mean it. “I miss my sister,” I admitted. “But I am grateful that Uncle Alfred and you have given me this opportunity. I want nothing more than to make sure Whitney is properly taken care of.”

My aunt continued to frown. “What about you, honey? You always mention your sister’s happiness and that’s a very commendable attribute but what of your own happiness? Do you not want to enjoy the London season and be the bell of the ball? Are there no dreams of your future that you think about? All girls have dreams. I was once a girl too, you know. I do remember all my dreams.”

I had dreams. Dreams that would not be because they couldn’t be. I knew if I told Aunt Harriet these dreams, she’d understand and not look down at me for them. But they were my dreams, my secrets, and I wanted to keep them that way.

“Finding a husband who will be kind to me and my family is my dream,” I lied. That was why I was here. It was my duty, but it was *not* my dream.

Aunt Harriet sighed and walked over to pat my shoulder, as if she must console me. “Perhaps one day you’ll realize I’m a good listener. I have several younger sisters, you know. I’m more wise than I appear.” She then turned and with a swoosh of her skirts, she walked out of the room. Before the door closed behind her, she called out much too loudly, “Betsey!”

I winced at her shrill voice and then I had to cover my mouth to muffle my laughter. The stories I would send back to Whitney after tonight’s ball would be colorful indeed. Aunt Harriet would steal the show without meaning to. I wondered if she would shout at everyone she spoke to... I truly hoped she would. That would entertain me for a fortnight, at least.

Standing, I walked over to the blue gown. It was the most beautiful dress I had ever owned. When I was younger, much younger than Whitney, I too had dreamed of wearing a gown such as this. I’d never seen so much silk. I touched it briefly and smiled. Whitney would truly love this gown. I would describe it for her perfectly in my next letter.

There was a very small part of me who wanted to hope for something more than just a marriage of convenience. My parents hadn’t been a love match by any means. I hadn’t believed that was part of a marriage until now. My uncle truly adored his wife and she very nearly worshiped him. They were refreshing to watch and I feared the more I was around them, the more I’d

wish silently for a match like theirs. The idea was unrealistic and I had no time to waste with such a whimsical idea of falling in love. What did I know of love? Very little indeed.

Turning my attention elsewhere was for the best, as not to let vanity take hold of any of my thoughts. The street outside my window was busy as usual. I often watched the people as they strolled by in their day gowns, wanting to be seen. This was all so different from my home in the country. We rarely had company and the need to outshine others wasn't understood. At home, I had found myself in the kitchen most days, attempting to cook food that was edible or washing bedding. We all had taken up household tasks since father had passed away. Whereas my mother often complained and sighed in weariness from the work, it had made me feel useful. There had been a purpose to it all that I greatly enjoyed.

I saw nothing useful about the activity on the street below. The people out there had no worries in the world, except what they were wearing to the next ball or reading whatever gossip paper they could find. Sinking down on the window seat, I sighed once more because that was what would become of me too. My future sounded very boring. Even I couldn't write myself out of this if I wanted to.



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Chapter Two

The Earl of Ashington

The last time I poured a glass of brandy before noon had been the day I removed my stepmother from this house. That had been for celebration purposes as well as preparation for when my brother would return from Paris irate with me. Today, however, was not celebratory, in nature but rather, solely preparatory. I did not attend the ridiculousness that the London season entailed. It was a marriage mart, and I had no need of it until recently.

If marrying and having an heir meant that at my death, my brother would not become the next Earl of Ashington, then that was a strong push for me to do so. However, it wasn't my priority. If it was, I would have been in search of a wife before now. I had something more important than a title to protect and it was indeed time I married. Finding a wife that could step into the role as countess was easy enough. There were plenty young women in London who had been groomed to become a proper countess. However, I didn't require just a properly trained lady, but one who would fulfill yet another role much more important to me. Finding a lady who would do so, without issue, would not be an easy task.

Being a countess was one thing but being my wife was another. I was a package deal and no one realized it... yet. I took another drink of the brandy in my hand and leaned back in my chair with a long, deep sigh. This past year had been chaos indeed. I'd found I had more patience than I had previously believed. No doubt the memories of my childhood had played a factor in my willingness to keep from giving up and tossing my responsibility aside.

At this point, I had done all I could do and a wife was beyond a simple decision. It was a requirement. I would rectify that as swiftly as I could. After much research, I had my intentions set on a one Miss Lydia Ramsbury. She was the granddaughter of a Duke. Her demeanor was soft and quiet. She was quintessentially English and exactly what this house needed. I did not take choosing a mother for my children lightly and a pretty face would not be enough.

The heavy door to my office swung open with more force than necessary, and I knew who the intruder was without looking. She would have been informed of my plans for the evening and I had no doubt that she was going to have her own set of questions. Sitting up from my relaxed state, I met the curious eyes of my inquisitor.

“You are going to a ball?” she asked, her eyes slightly brighter as she said the last word. I was sure she believed balls to be much different than their reality.

“I am sorry, my lord. Miss Emma was supposed to be taking her rest. I realized too late that she had escaped, again.” Alice, the most durable governess in England I’d wager, said as she entered the room.

“I want to go to a ball,” Emma added as she did a twirl in front of my desk before giggling. “I dance like a princess.”

I gave a nod and let the smile that Emma so often elicited from me show clearly on my face. She hadn’t seen many smiles in her short life and I never wanted to withhold one from her. I knew all too well what coldness did to a child. My brother and I were examples of just that.

“Miss Emma, you are not of age to attend balls. It is time for your rest. Come now,” Alice said in her typical stern voice.

Emma wasn’t bothered at all by Alice’s tone, giving Alice a sharp frown then turning her attention back to me. “Will you go alone?” Emma asked me.

I nodded my head. “Yes, I will attend alone.”

That seemed to bother her and her frown deepened. “You will be lonely,” she stated.

“His lordship will have many friends in attendance and ladies to dance with, Emma. This is not a child’s concern. It is to the nursery for you.” Alice was still trying to sound as if she were in control when all three of us were aware that she had no control over the child but then neither did I.

“Alice is rude,” Emma replied with a scowl. “She is often rude, Ashington,” Emma told me and I did attempt to hide my smile this time.

“Miss Emma!” Alice exclaimed horrified. “How many times have I told you that you are to address the Earl as Lord Ashington!”

Emma placed one very small hand on her waist and lifted her shoulder in a shrug. “I don’t know. I can only count as far as ten and sometimes twenty, if I so choose.”

A chuckle escaped me and this time, Alice was frowning at me in

disapproval. “If I’m to teach her properly, my lord, we cannot encourage this... this rebellious behavior. It is unacceptable.”

Emma flipped her long blonde hair behind her shoulder and beamed brightly at me. She enjoyed it when I laughed at her antics and when I, in turn, was scolded by Alice.

“She’s only four,” I reminded Alice, feeling rather proud of her intelligence and quick wit at such a young age.

“I question that and her certificate of birth, my lord. She’s much too... advanced and difficult to be so young.”

I had no question of her age. I knew full well the timeline in which her mother must have conceived her. Solange Bisset had once been my mistress for well over a year when we ended our agreement. Emma’s eyes had been the only proof I’d required when she’d arrived on my doorstep a year ago. Seeing them staring up at me, I had known she was a Compton.

“Emma, it’s time you go with Alice to the nursery. I will tell you all about the ball tomorrow over breakfast. How does that sound?”

Her mood brightened and she nodded her head with enthusiasm. I doubted Alice would manage to convince Emma to take a nap today. She was full of energy. Emma turned and headed to the door quickly. “Make haste Alice, I must take a nap.”

Alice glanced at me and the weariness in her eyes was amusing. Emma could keep one on their toes. She needed a mother and of that I was certain. Solange hadn’t been much of a one to her before she left her in the hands of a stranger. I would not allow another Compton child to be treated as I had been in this house. Her illegitimacy, I was working hard to cover up, although I wasn’t certain my lie would hold solid. Not with Emma’s ability to use the English language so well at such a tender age. The child’s memory was incredible and that I regretted simply because there were things I wished she could forget.

The door closed with a soft click and I reached for my drink once more. Emma had changed everything for me. My future especially. There was no longer time for me to waste. The grudge I once harbored for my stepmother was forgotten. The riding accident that had taken her life last year ended any untoward feelings I had toward the woman. The hatred I received from my brother, however, especially after his mother’s death, as if that had been my fault, was of no consequence. Not when I had Emma to consider. When

Emma arrived here, I had planned on finding her a good home with a distant relative in the country. A place where she could grow and be trained to be something as ambitious as a Governess.

Within a fortnight of her arrival, I had known she would stay here. There was no sending her away when she could be given the life she deserved. I had a chance to give her a good home, to be raised properly, and I fully intended to do just that. My plan would begin with a proper wife that was willing to accept Emma as my child. Lydia appeared fit for the position. I did hope I was not wrong.

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Chapter Three

Miss Miriam Bathurst

I had often read the word “lavishness” and I understood it well enough, but I had not, until this moment, experienced it. The word was an intriguing one that I liked to say aloud for the way it rolled off my tongue, yet being placed in the center of such a description was surreal. My books hadn’t given adequate description to a ball being held at the home of nobility. I realized now that Whitney’s fanciful ideas may hold more truth than I had believed. I was already writing her letter in my head as I took in the entire experience. She would need all the details I could give her. The society balls were something I was determined to give her one day, but for now, I would describe them in a way that she felt as if she were here herself.

Aunt Harriet was beside me and I glanced at her to see if she too were in awe by our surroundings. Her expression didn’t appear to be anything other than typical. She turned her head to smile at me. “And so it begins,” she said then did a small gesture with her hand as if she were offering me a buffet of food to choose from. In truth, I had no idea what we were to do, and this might have been why my mother requested I had a proper chaperone. I was sure Aunt Harriet had no idea what was to happen next either.

“Lady Wellington, I presume?” We both turned at the use of my aunt’s proper title. That was something that often caused her to chuckle and I was thankful she hadn’t done so tonight. The woman in front of us was the Duchess of Rothesborne and tonight’s hostess. Although I had never met her, I had done my studies in preparation for the season.

“Yes, hello,” my aunt began, and I quickly curtsied before she could mess this up. “Your Grace,” I said and my aunt realized her mistake and followed my greeting.

“Your home is lovely,” Aunt Harriet said much too loudly and gave the Duchess a big toothy, gum flashing grin. It was too bright and much too sincere for this setting. My aunt didn’t understand that of course. I added this to the mental letter I was already writing to Whitney.

The Duchess's intimidating gaze was now on me and I tried not to fidget. "You're Miss Miriam Bathurst," she stated as if I needed to be informed. "I have been curious about you."

I wasn't quite sure how to respond to that. I kept my smile in place but said nothing. What was one to say after all?

"You'll do well," the Duchess then added. "Enjoy your evening," she said with a small nod, before moving past us with a gentle swoosh of her skirts.

"I feel mentally exhausted already," my aunt said under her breath, while continuing to smile much too brightly.

"Indeed," I agreed.

"Excuse me but I do so hope there is a place left on your dance card," a gentleman, not much older than myself, said as he stopped before me with a small tilt of his head.

Aunt Harriet nudged my arm and I tried not to wince when she giggled. I doubted very much that this man would be the one to save my family. He was far too young. However, I needed to be seen and hopefully attract the attention of other possible suitors.

It didn't take long at all before I was weary of the dancing, listening to much talk about nothing that interested me, and three glasses of lemonade before I realized that promenading in the Park no longer felt foolish but a much-preferred pastime. At least then I just had to appear attractive without the bothersome conversation. It was a bit smothering having several men surrounding me with endless talk. This was why I had come to London or at least this was what I must do in order to find a husband. However, the longer they gathered around me the more I realized how difficult my reclusive tendencies may make things.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but I do believe I'm next on the lady's dance card," a deep voice silenced the others, and as if they'd been commanded, the small collection of suitors moved to allow the man adequate space. I would think this surprising, but upon seeing the owner of the deep voice, I understood. He had an intimidating presence and I was sure his name was not on my card. He held an important title and from the quick glance I'd taken of my card earlier, I did not recall a title that went with that face. I would, no doubt, remember such as that.

"If I may, Lord Ashington, I believe I am, in fact, next on Miss Bathurst card," a man who had introduced himself as Mr. Fletcher spoke up, although

there was a slight quiver in his voice.

Ignoring Mr. Fletcher, Lord Ashington stood before me, waiting with a challenge in his eye that I believed must have been for me. Was he suggesting I tell an untruth? I did not expect Mr. Fletcher to be my future husband, but he was kind, and he'd obviously just done something that wasn't easy for him. The nervous tremble in his voice had given that away. I wouldn't embarrass him for the attention of the more powerful man before me. Although, I was positive Lord Ashington expected me to do just that. Arrogance was never appealing, at least not to me.

"I am most positive that Mr. Fletcher is correct," I replied, looking up at the tall dark-haired man refusing to feel intimidated. I had only focused on studying those of the ton whose homes we would be visiting this season. Ashington wasn't one of them. I did not recognize his face, but I could assume by the others' response to him that he was important. That was all well and good for him, but I wasn't important and I would not act as his silly puppet.

Lord Ashington lifted one dark eyebrow and studied me a moment. "My mistake," he said after a moment's pause. Then turning to look back at Mr. Fletcher, he gave a slight nod.

"I will, uh, that is Lord Ashington, I will give up my spot, uh, if you desire," Mr. Fletcher stammered nervously. I wanted to roll my eyes at the ridiculousness of his words. Was Mr. Fletcher that weak? What could Lord Ashington do to make him so nervous? Had I not just declined Lord Ashington for him?

"That won't be necessary, Fletcher. I find my attention has shifted elsewhere," he added and then walked away through the path the others had supplied for him.

The insult wasn't lost on me. I did not expect to converse with Lord Ashington again. A touch at my elbow wasn't subtle, and when I turned to see who it was, my aunt's anxious face was focused on the direction of Lord Ashington's departure.

"Oh dear, what did you say to Lord Ashington?" my aunt whispered close to my ear.

"He claimed he was next on my dance card, but he was not. He's not even on my card."

Aunt Harriet bit her bottom lip worrisomely. I waited for her to explain her

sudden concern. I was slightly shocked she even knew who Lord Ashington was. She hadn't recognized the Duchess earlier. Why would she recognize him?

Mr. Fletcher stepped up and held out his hand in my direction. "Shall we?" he asked and as much as I wanted to hear Aunt Harriet's explanation, I had an obligation to Mr. Fletcher.

It took only a few moments into the dance for me to realize Mr. Fletcher wasn't a conversationalist and that he remained very nervous. I couldn't be the one making him feel so, which left only his encounter with Lord Ashington. That soured my mood somewhat, but I refused to let the emotion fester.

Once our dance was finished, Mr. Fletcher excused himself, appearing rather relieved and an older man that I believed had introduced himself earlier as Lord Haddington replaced him. At least Lord Haddington enjoyed speaking of himself, so I was only required to smile and nod as if what he was saying interested me. I scanned the room to find Lord Ashington. My curiosity had gotten the better of me.

He was rather dashing in a dark and foreboding sense. His raven hair was just long enough to keep tucked behind his ears and although it was well-kept, it made him seem dangerous, as if rules did not apply to him. The lady he was speaking to was lovely. A blonde with the palest of hair and creamy white skin. Her lashes were lowered over her cheekbones and a slight blush attractively highlighted her face.

"Oh good heavens. This is unexpected indeed," Lord Haddington said in a tone that caught my attention. I moved my gaze back to my dance partner to see him focused on the entrance. Looking toward it to see what could be of interest, I saw only a man with hair the color of the lightest of honey that was pulled back with a tie, but not as neatly kept as Lord Ashington's. Although he was tall with broad shoulders and rebellious locks, he wasn't at all intimidating. Something about the way his eyes twinkled with mischief and the curve of his mouth appeared to be a charming smirk made him seem slightly wicked.

"This evening might have some life to it after all," he said to me, or to himself, I wasn't sure. The dance came to an end and Aunt Harriet was motioning for me to join her. I believed there was a Mr. Needs on my card next, but my mouth was parched and lemonade sounded refreshing. After

thanking Lord Haddington for the dance, I excused myself and went to Aunt Harriet.

Just as I reached her, she grabbed my left arm and said in a whisper, “Mr. Compton is here. I’ve just heard from Lady Hawthsmore that he and Lord Ashington rarely attend a ball, yet they are both here tonight. What are the odds? This may make for excellent entertainment.”

My aunt did love a scandal as well as gossip and drama. I had mentioned several novels I thought she’d enjoy with all those things, but she never gave them a chance. She much preferred to stick her nose in one of those gossip society papers that cost far too much money for the foolishness it shared.

“I am assuming Mr. Compton is the blond man at the entrance just so,” I replied, not looking back to see if he was still there.

“Oh yes, and the whisper is that he and his brother, Lord Ashington, hate one another. Something to do with the mother or stepmother. I’m not sure. I need to read the cards Alfred gave me more seriously,” Harriet added. “What was it you said to Lord Ashington? He didn’t look charmed.” She seemed deeply concerned by this. I couldn’t care a farthing if he was charmed or not. He was most definitely not charming. The stern jut of his chin and the remote yet perfect features seemed a tad too harsh in my opinion. I was sure most ladies swooned at his attention. I was not most ladies and I was proud of my discernment. One needed such a gift when searching for a wealthy husband.

I lifted my left shoulder in a small shrug. “He was arrogant. I don’t like arrogant men.”

Aunt Harriet sighed. “I understand, however, the gentlemen with money and power tend to be just that.”

I didn’t want to believe I would be stuck with not only a man I wasn’t in love with but also an arrogant one in order to save my family. The notion seemed intolerable. The more I learned of my future, the more foreboding it became. “I need some fresh air,” I told her, before heading toward the balcony to the left of the lemonade. If I stayed inside this place one more moment, I might fall apart from the rude awakening I was having about my decision to marry. Perhaps fresh air and a moment away from the people would remind me that all is not lost just because one evening has been so very disappointing.

“Do you want me to join you?” My aunt asked.

I most definitely did not. A moment of peace was what I was after.

Listening to more dreadful gossip or facts, whatever it may be, about the ton would only cause me further duress. “No, that won’t be necessary. I will be just there if you need me,” I told her then walked past the lemonade for fear she would take my pause as a chance to catch up to me.

The briskness in the evening air was refreshing, but not enough to make my future appear brighter. The warmth inside was just as stifling as the people surrounding me. So many people and so much talking. I didn’t know a time where I’d been required to talk so much about nothing at all of importance. I was not talented at appearing meek, gentle, or demure and it would seem that was the basic list for a gentleman’s search for a wife.

“I’m not known to attend the gatherings of London society, but I’m within the circle enough to be certain, I have never had the pleasure of making your acquaintance. A new face, especially one as beautiful as yours, isn’t forgotten,” the voice was smooth, refined and masculine. I had come outside to escape talking and it seemed as if it would now follow me out here.

I turned to see who had interrupted my solitude. A one Mr. Compton stood before me with his hands tucked into his front pockets and his jacket slightly askew. A lock of his blond hair had come loose from the hair tie that was at the nape of his neck. The evening breeze caught it and I watched as it danced beside his cheek. His features, although similar to his brother’s, weren’t as harsh or cold. There was a welcoming softness to him that didn’t lessen his beauty, only making him more approachable.

“I didn’t come to interrupt your escape from the insanity inside. I just wanted to meet the lady who shut down my brother so effortlessly. Possibly shake your hand if I may be so presumptuous.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I replied, feeling accused of something that was completely incorrect.

“I’m sorry, I should have begun with an introduction. I am Nicholas Compton and Ashington is my brother, half-brother. We only share a father.”

As intriguing as I was sure he meant for that small clarification to be, I was already aware of who he was and his relationship to the rude Earl of Ashington. However, pointing out my prior knowledge was of no consequence.

“Mr. Compton, I did not shut down Lord Ashington. I merely corrected him. You see he is not on my dance card this evening and allowing him to take another’s spot was rude. I am not rude nor do I condone rudeness.”

Mr. Compton's mouth turned up at one corner into a crooked grin of sorts. He seemed to find my response amusing and as attractive as he was, I didn't see how his behavior was much better than his brother's. They may both be devastatingly handsome, but I wouldn't be drawn in by something as shallow as appearance. Beauty was truly only skin deep. As for Mr. Compton, he may not be arrogant like his brother, but the wicked gleam in his eyes did not commend him to me at all.

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Chapter Four

Mr. Nicholas Compton

This was not why I had come but then beauty had always been my unfortunate weakness. My intentions were inside the ballroom, currently being charmed by my older brother. If I were to accomplish humiliating him, I had to stay focused on the plan. However, I was a man who enjoyed beautiful women and the one before me was not only stunning but the challenge in her eyes called to my basic instincts. The only thing better than a beautiful woman was a challenge. She was both but she was also not why I was in London for the season. I couldn't lose my focus because of beauty. Revenge was far greater an emotion than lust or desire.

"I'm trying to decide if Fletcher is feeling empowered by the experience or terrified of any future dealings with Ashington," I said, ignoring her protest that she had done nothing to Ashington. Her refusal on the subject meant nothing. She had, in fact, turned her nose up at his interest and that couldn't be denied, no matter how lovely she might appear trying to do just that.

"I am sure Mr. Fletcher is neither empowered or terrified. He was a smart man of few words and a competent dance partner," she said in defense of Fletcher. There was no flutter of lashes or gentle manner in which she spoke. Instead, there was a fire behind her remarkable eyes and I was drawn to it. Reckless of me indeed, but it couldn't be helped. She was a rare find.

"In other words, he is boring. I quite agree. Fletcher loves nothing more than his hunting hounds. If you want him to talk then mention the beasts and he won't shut up." I spoke poorly of Fletcher just to get more of that spark behind her spectacular expressions. She would not fawn over me like most ladies here tonight while I spoke to her, and I found it was quite enjoyable.

"And what of you? If you are such an excellent conversationalist, what would you talk about to a lady you have just made acquaintance?"

I could not recall a time when a female had chosen not to flirt with me, especially while in London. This was an odd experience for me, but if I were being honest, it was ... refreshing. I oft began a conversation with ladies

prepared for them to use their feminine wiles to draw me in. This one not only had an opinion, but she was openly curious about mine. If she was in London to find a husband, she was not going about it the right way. I daresay even her beauty could not distract from her sharp tongue and mind. At least not in this setting.

“I would show interest in her and find out what makes her smile. Listen to her words and not blabber about my own. If I am to spend a moment dancing with a lady then I want to remember her by the things that delight her not simply by who she is,” I replied honestly.

Her sapphire eyes widened slightly; however, she didn’t smile coyly or soften, but then had I truly expected her to? If simple words had broken down the fortress she had built around her then she would be no true challenge at all.

“I see,” was all she said then she glanced back at the ballroom. “I’ve been gone long enough. I must return.”

She was running away and we both knew it. “It was a pleasure, Miss Bathurst,” I said with a genuine smile.

Her eyes narrowed then as she studied me. “I do not recall giving you my name.”

I gave a small nod. “I asked of you the moment I witnessed you refuse my brother.”

She sighed then, as if reminding her of how she’d treated Ashington was cumbersome. “Again, I did nothing to your brother but correct him. A title means nothing if you wield arrogance and power because of it.”

“Unfortunately, the rest of London doesn’t agree,” I replied. Nor would the eligible gentlemen of this season fancy hearing such. She was a treasure indeed.

Miriam Bathurst flashed a small sad frown as if I’d snatched away her last hope that the ton wasn’t as shallow as they seemed. Watching her walk away from me, I felt an odd sense of guilt for being the one to inform her of such a truth.

I watched her as she stopped to get a glass of lemonade and yet before she could leave the table, three men had surrounded her. I knew their faces and none of them were verbally ready to handle Miriam Bathurst. She would require much more than a young man who fancied himself in love with her beauty. Her mother must have allowed her into the library instead of forcing

needlework upon her or other silly involvements. Miriam Bathurst was clever.

Taking my eyes off her, I met the heated glare of my brother. He wasn't happy to see me but then I couldn't recall a time in our adult years that he was pleased by my presence. Once we had been rather close, but those years seemed a lifetime ago. Our childhood had changed that and I regretted it, but I would not let that regret carry any weight on my decision to follow through with my well-constructed plan.

I gave him a nod and smirked. Yes, dear brother, I am here to make sure you are humiliated far worse than what Miss Bathurst presented you with tonight. You should be nervous.

Shifting my focus to Lydia Ramsbury, I knew she'd be easy to lure away. There would be no true challenge with that one. My brother knew nothing of romance. He was too cold and indifferent to the desires of a woman. Lydia was a business transaction for him. Choosing his countess had nothing to do with true affection but then neither did it with his peers. They were all so mundanely boring.

I, on the other hand, hadn't stayed in London's confining society. Paris had taught me much about the allure of romance. Ashington had the title, of course, but he had no idea how to seduce a lady. If only he'd chosen a more interesting woman. Lydia wasn't exciting in the least. She represented no challenge at all. If, in fact, I was correct in my estimation that Lydia Ramsbury was who my brother intended to make his bride.

When I looked back to the refreshment table, Miriam was gone. Scanning the ballroom, I found her easily enough, dancing yet again. I knew little of her, but that this was her first season. She was on the market for a husband. There would be no other reason for her being here. Yet, when one of the most eligible Earls in London approached her, she refused him. That made Miriam Bathurst so damn intriguing, I had a hard time thinking of anything else.

"Compton," a familiar voice interrupted my musings.

I moved my gaze from Miriam Bathurst to the man beside me. "Radcliff," I replied. "On the market for a wife, are you?"

He grunted in reply. "Perhaps and you?"

I chuckled at his question because it wasn't meant to be serious. George Radcliff had known me far too long to believe I was here to find a wife. "I'm simply here to cause trouble," I assured him.

“Indeed. I expected that was to be the case. I just wasn’t rude enough to state such,” he said as the corners of his mouth curved into an amused grin. “What mischief are you about tonight?”

Glancing once more in Miriam Bathurst’s direction, I found she was now dancing with another young dandy who wouldn’t suit her at all. Did the girl have no direction from a chaperone? For Christ’s sake, I could do a better job at choosing her partners.

“Ah, you have noticed Alfred Baxter’s niece, I see. She is a beauty, but I’ve heard her tongue is quite sharp and she’s appeared bored this evening more than anything. Word is Baxter is trying to marry her off for her mother was left with nothing but gambling debt by her deceased father.”

How did Radcliff know all of this already? He was as drawn to gossip as the old biddies huddled together. However, it did put some light on things. From what I had witnessed, it did not appear that Miss Bathurst was very keen on being her family’s saving grace.

“Tell me, Compton, why are you here tonight?” Radcliff asked.

I turned my attention in the direction of my brother. “Family business, one might say,” I replied, not intending to tell Radcliff anything he could share with anyone else. The man was too damn chatty.

“Be elusive then my friend. I have no time to draw it out of you, although my curiosity is peeked. My name is next on Miss Bathurst dance card and I don’t want to lose my place,” he said then beamed at me as if he had won an award. Radcliff would never be enough to interest one such as Miriam Bathurst but who was I to dampen his hopes.



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Chapter Five

The Earl of Ashington

There was a time that I had simply taken breakfast in my office. I had forgotten just what a silent morning was like. Now when I was to take my morning meal, it was in the dining room seated at the table with Emma. My decision to spend this meal with her was because I had never been given this opportunity as a child. I felt it would be good for her development, and if I was being completely honest with myself, I enjoyed her chatter.

“Did you dance with a princess?” Emma asked before taking a sip of hot chocolate. Her eyes wide with curiosity stared up at me over the rim of her cup.

“There were no princesses in attendance, I am afraid,” I informed her, already knowing she would have many more questions for me before I finished my ham and eggs.

“Why can’t I have jam and a biscuit for breakfast? I love jam,” she said, frowning at the food placed in front of her. Then, instantly distracted, she looked back at me. “If there were no princesses then how was it a ball?”

“A princess is not required to attend in order to hold a ball,” I explained.

Emma scrunched her small nose in distaste as she looked back at her eggs and ham. “Don’t you like jam, Ashington?” she asked me then.

“Why yes, I do enjoy jam. I’m sure you will have a jam and biscuit during afternoon tea,” I assured her.

“I want jam all day,” she stated rather fiercely.

Grinning, I tried to hide my amusement behind my cup.

“Miss Emma, are you complaining over your breakfast again? I’ve told you countless times it is rude to complain about the meal placed before you. You are to be grateful for what you are given.” Alice was just entering the room as she spoke, but it was clear she had overheard the conversation.

Emma shrugged her shoulders as if Alice’s words meant little. “When I am a lady, I will eat jam and biscuits all day,” she announced primly.

“Then you will find much difficulty fitting into your gowns,” Alice replied

without pause.

“There were no princesses at the ball, Alice,” Emma then stated, changing the subject once again.

“I explained to you last night there were to be no princesses in attendance,” Alice said with a nod.

Emma huffed in what I assumed was annoyance at Alice being correct and took another drink of her hot chocolate. “I bet princesses eat jam and biscuits when they want to,” she told no one in particular but scowled at the food on her plate.

“I will see if we can arrange for jam and biscuits for your breakfast tomorrow,” I finally said before Alice began to scold her again.

Alice then scowled at me in disapproval. “Miss Emma needs to learn she cannot demand things,” she said tightly.

I shrugged. “It is just jam and biscuits, Alice.”

“I understand that, my lord, however it starts with small things. Soon she will be demanding new gowns and jewels.”

“I will not! I don’t want more gowns or silly jewels. I am but four, Alice,” Emma stated with a pinched frown. “I would like more hot chocolate.”

I covered my mouth with my napkin and masked my laughter with a cough for fear Alice may strike me if I encouraged Emma’s way with words.

Alice let out a sigh of irritation and left the dining room with a whoosh of her skirts. Emma knew exactly how to set her governess off and at such a tender age, I found that to be a strong quality for the future. There would never be a man or woman that would break Emma’s spirit. It was something I was grateful for, considering the life she lived before she was brought to my doorstep.

“Is Alice fetching me more hot chocolate?” Emma asked with an angelic smile on her face that Alice referred to as deceptive.

“I find that very unlikely, my dear,” I replied.

Emma sighed and looked back down at her food. “Hot chocolate would make my eggs easier to eat.”

“When did you decide you didn’t like eggs?” I asked her, knowing full well she had been eating them every morning for months.

She lifted her tiny chin and straightened her shoulders as she met my gaze. “When Alice allowed me to have jam and biscuits with my tea. I do love jam and biscuits.”

Mrs. Barton, the housekeeper, emerged from the door that led directly to the kitchen. She was carrying a small tray in her hands and there was an obvious glint in her eyes. I did not need to see the tray to know what would be upon it. Emma had won over my housekeeper almost immediately. She was no doubt the reason Emma had been given the jam and biscuits with her tea.

“Good morning, my lord,” she said with a small tilt of her head then walked over to stand beside Emma. I gave her a slight nod of approval as she waited for me to allow her to proceed. I doubted she’d care if I didn’t approve the treat for Emma. She took this job only after making sure I understood she would expect Emma to behave as if she were in fact the legitimate daughter of an Earl. It was clear Alice wanted Emma to have a life fitting my rank and when the time came be accepted into society. I understood this and respected it. However, it made for an odd relationship between the two of us.

“Oh, thank you, Mrs. Barton!” Emma squealed with delight as the hot chocolate was placed before her and the eggs and ham replaced with jam and biscuits.”

“You’re welcome, Miss Emma. No need to worry about your figure just yet is there.” She gave Emma a wink then stepped back with the unwanted food and left the room.

Emma smiled brightly over at me. “Mrs. Barton is my favorite in the world.”

“I can accept that,” I replied. “She is indeed a wonderful housekeeper.”

“She is my friend,” Emma corrected me.

“Yes, indeed. I believe she is the truest of friends,” I agreed.

We had found a balance within these walls. Emma had brought light and energy to the everyday schedule. Finding the right countess that would fit effortlessly into the household was important. Lydia Ramsbury had appeared to be all I had believed last night. However, she was a touch too quiet, too agreeable and I feared that Emma may be too much of a personality for Miss Ramsbury.

Possibly, I was judging her unfairly, simply because my attention had been elsewhere. Miss Miriam Bathurst had been difficult to ignore. Even after she had made it clear she wasn’t interested in my title or my attention. Smiling into my cup, I imagined her meeting Emma. I had no doubt the two would be

quite a pair.

I knew little of Miss Bathurst, but I was going to rectify that today. I could not settle on Lydia Ramsbury until I was sure she was the match I, no make that the match... Emma required.

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Chapter Six

Miss Miriam Bathurst

Rising early had always been something I enjoyed. A good book, a cup of hot chocolate and a slice of warm toast was my ideal morning. Awakening to dress and prepare for callers was not my idea of an enjoyable morning, yet it was to be my life for a time, it would seem. The sooner I found a husband, the sooner this ended and along with it, my freedom.

With a deep sigh, I felt so clearly in my soul, I made my way to the drawing room. At home, I would often find my mother and sister in the drawing room when it neared noon. My mother would be with her needlework and Whitney would be at the pianoforte. However, here in my uncle's home, it was much different for my aunt Harriet wanted nothing to do with needlework or music.

A plate of chocolates was by her side as she sat rather unladylike on the sofa with her slippers abandoned on the floor and her bare feet, not even covered by stockings, tucked beneath her. In her lap lay a correspondence it would seem. My aunt wasn't one to enjoy literature; however, she did find entertainment in letters from her family in New Orleans and in the gossip papers of which my uncle didn't approve. He often complained of the cost of such scandalous society papers, but he would then soften when Aunt Harriet would flash her smile at him.

Aunt Harriet lifted her head from the letter she had been reading and beamed brightly at me. "You are a vision. The gentlemen callers will be more enamored this morning than they were last night." She dropped her bare feet to the floor and held the paper in her lap toward me. "You must read this. My cousin, Adelle, wrote to me about our most recent family scandal."

"Most recent?" I asked as I reached out to take the letter from her.

"Oh yes. My family tends to find themselves in compromising positions quite often," she replied with a touch of pride in her voice that was both scandalous and amusing. Much like her bare feet.

"Alfred said something about expecting gentlemen callers I believe within

the next hour. I'm to chaperone and there is a time limit on what is proper for their visit?" It sounded more like a question than a statement.

"It will be awhile still yet. No man of his ilk would arrive at a lady's home this early," Uncle Alfred said as he entered the room. "Already in your chocolates I see, my love," he asked his wife with a teasing tone.

Aunt Harriet popped one in her mouth and smiled as her cheeks puffed out.

"When I go broke, dear child, let it be known it was because of my wife's addiction to chocolate and gossip papers. Both of which cost more than they are worth. Now, do tell me what it was you said to Ashington last night. It appears to have made the rounds rather swiftly."

I felt my face heat up. How had my uncle already heard of this, if not from my aunt? Surely it wasn't important enough for talk. It was simply a dance. Nothing more. I cleared my throat to stall when Aunt Harriet managed to finish the chocolate she had stuffed into her mouth.

"You could have asked me. I was there you know. Don't embarrass her," Aunt Harriet scolded him.

He looked taken aback. "I wasn't trying to embarrass the child. I was impressed. Her first ball and she was already making the news circuit."

Aunt Harriet rolled her eyes. "Good Lord, Alfred. Of all things."

"Tis true! She turned down Ashington flat, they say. While all the other ladies were hot on his coattails, I assume. Not my niece," he sounded proud as he said it and I was relieved.

"She was quite the bell of the ball. The gentlemen were all enamored but then she's a beauty like no other," Aunt Harriet bragged then ate another chocolate. This one she took a nibble from rather than place the entire piece in her mouth.

I did not agree that I was the bell of the ball. It was clear Lydia Ramsbury held that title and rightfully so. She was a true English beauty. I was doing my best not to appear an imposter.

"Tell me then exactly what you said to Ashington," Uncle Alfred demanded then slapped his knee as he sat down across from me. He appeared ready to hear of a great tale.

"It was nothing really. I believe the gossips have turned it into something more than it truly was," I said, wishing I didn't have to rehash this.

Uncle Alfred chuckled. "No doubt. They always do, dear girl, but I want to know the real story."

It was becoming clear that I wasn't getting out of this.

"Ashington came up to me claiming he was next on my dance card, when he wasn't on it at all. The gentleman who was next spoke up and I sided with him."

Uncle Alfred was grinning broadly. His jovial face was always so friendly. Nothing like my mother's. It was hard to believe the two were siblings. "Arrogant ass. You set him straight."

"Right? It was arrogant, wasn't it? "I liked the confirmation from my uncle.

"Absolutely! Teach him to assume his title can get him anything he desires," Uncle Alfred stood then and patted my shoulder. "Well done, girl, well done," he replied.

I felt an odd sense of pride and acceptance. It was new and I wasn't sure how to describe it. My mother nor my father had ever said words even remotely close to those to me. I felt tears sting my eyes and I fought them back. I would not get emotional over this. That was weak and silly. I was neither.

"A Mr. Fletcher is here to call on Miss Bathurst," the butler announced from the doorway.

My first thought was, Aunt Harriet is still in her bare feet. My second thought was, at least the first gentleman to visit was a pleasant one. Even if I had no interest in him as far as a husband went. He was still kind, had a genuine smile, and didn't require much conversation.

"That would be my cue to leave. Enjoy your morning, ladies," Uncle Alfred said as he went to leave. "Fletcher," he greeted as he passed him.

"Sir," Fletcher replied nervously.

I wasn't sure this situation could become anymore awkward unless, of course, Aunt Harriet decided to shove another entire piece of chocolate in her mouth. I glanced quickly at her, wondering if that was, in fact, her next move.

Aunt Harriet quickly put her slippers on and I wasn't sure if I was relieved or disappointed. It would make for an interesting story if she'd kept them bare. The letter in my hand, I quickly folded, and handed back to my aunt just as Mr. Fletcher entered the drawing room. She didn't reach for another chocolate but then this visit was not yet over.

"Good day," he said as he smiled much too brightly. It seemed as if he was much too nervous for a simple visit. He clutched a handful of wild flowers

that appeared freshly cut from a garden. “For you,” he said as they were thrust toward me awkwardly.

“Thank you, they’re lovely,” I replied.

Aunt Harriet was on her feet hurrying to my side. “I’ll have these placed in water. Please Mr. Fletcher have a seat. Should I ring for tea?” My aunt sounded as nervous as Mr. Fletcher. The situation was becoming somewhat amusing. This may be the only caller I received today and if so then it would be a relief *and* a disappointment. Not being forced into pointless conversation sounded nice, but then I did come here to find a husband. Mr. Fletcher was not what I was looking for as far as a husband went. Especially since he was an avid hunter.

“Tea would be—” Mr. Fletcher began, but alas did not get to complete his response.

“Lord Ashington to call upon Miss Bathurst,” the butler announced, causing my amusement to fade ever so abruptly.

My gaze passed Mr. Fletcher and the sudden pale pallor of his face made it clear he did not want to have another encounter with the Earl of Ashington. That I was sure we all could agree on. If one were to have asked me who I expected to call on me this morning, Lord Ashington would not have made the list. Our brief interaction at last night’s ball should have cemented his never coming near me again.

Striding into the drawing room as if he were royalty, very attractive royalty, the Earl of Ashington held an overtly large bouquet of hyacinth, the color of the most brilliant blue, in his right hand. They were stunning and so full yet delicate. Whitney would adore these. I made a mental note to describe them in detail to her later today in a letter.

“Lord Ashington,” Harriet addressed him with too much enthusiasm then she curtsied not once but twice. Perhaps hoping to get it right. I wasn’t sure. It was more than obvious she was pleased to see him and she was quite nervous. “Welcome to our home. Please come have a seat.” For once, I was not amused by my aunt’s inability to mask her facial expressions.

Mr. Fletcher, I noticed, seemed rather tense and uncomfortable. There wasn’t much I could do to remedy that. I had no real reason to dislike the Earl of Ashington. The assumption that I’d willingly give someone else’s place on my dance card to him wasn’t surprising. I was sure most debutantes did so with glee. However, I did stand firm on not appreciating his arrogance.

Lord Ashington gave my aunt a smile that was sure to have her swooning out loud as he took half of the hyacinths from his hand, and I realized, at that moment, it was not one large bouquet but two bouquets. He'd brought my aunt one too. Something Mr. Fletcher hadn't done. Poor Mr. Fletcher, I thought as I saw his cheeks turn a bright pink.

"For you, my lady," Lord Ashington said as he handed my aunt the flowers meant for her. It was very thoughtful of him to think of her. Admittedly, a good deal of my dislike from our encounter last night faded but not entirely.

"Oh, these are stunning, Lord Ashington. Thank you for such a lovely gift."

I watched as my aunt gushed over her flowers before turning my attention to the Earl of Ashington. "Hello again, Lord Ashington," I said, smiling sincerely. He had just made my aunt quite giddy and that deserved a proper greeting.

"Miss Bathurst," he replied with a tilt of his head in my direction. "I fear the flowers pale in comparison to your beauty this morning. I should have chosen a more exotic flower although I chose these for their color. They reminded me of your eyes."

Very well said, Lord Ashington, I thought. He was indeed charming when he chose to be. It made last night's encounter less... important.

"The flowers are stunning. I do not believe a more exotic flower could compare to their beauty."

He closed the distance between us and held the remaining bouquet out for me to take. "I'm happy they please you," he replied and held my gaze a moment longer than proper. "I was told this particular flower would be the most appealing."

Unable not to smile at the flowers in my hand, I lifted my gaze back to his. "Your informant was very right. Tis a beautiful flower indeed."

The genuine look of pleasure on his face intrigued me. He appeared almost proud of whoever suggested the flowers. I wanted very much to ask him who had been his informant, but I bit my tongue. It would appear rude and I feared many of my aunt's American traits were beginning to rub off on me already. Being overtly inquisitive was one of them.

"Mr. Fletcher," Lord Ashington said then, as he directed his gaze to the other guest in the room, who had remained silent since the arrival of Lord Ashington.

“Lord Ashington,” he replied with a nod then stood, twisting his hands rather nervously. “I must be on my way. It was as always lovely to see you, Miss Bathurst. I look forward to our next meeting. Perhaps at the Gallagher ball.” He spoke so quickly that his sentences ran together, but the slight tremble of nerves in his tone was still noticeable.

“Yes, I shall see you there. Thank you again for the lovely flowers and visit,” I said, feeling sorry for him but knowing he must not be so hasty to flee any small obstacle. It made him appear weak.

I watched him nod his head again at Lord Ashington before he scurried for the door. He mustn’t scurry either. It was not at all an attractive trait. Someone needed to take him under their wing and teach him how to be more assured or at least how to act as if he were. He was a nice man and could make a fine match if he would simply show more backbone.

The butler stepped into the door just before Mr. Fletcher could exit.

“A Mr. Nicholas Compton here to see Miss Bathurst,” he announced.

I could have sworn I heard Mr. Fletcher gasp then cough as if strangled before making his way past the butler with great haste. Apparently, Mr. Fletcher didn’t care for Mr. Compton any more than he did the Earl of Ashington.

“Oh my,” I heard Aunt Harriet whisper entirely too loudly to truly be a whisper and that was when I remembered the gossip she had shared with me at the ball just before I encountered Mr. Compton on the balcony.

Oh my, indeed...



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Chapter Seven

Mr. Nicholas Compton

One could argue that I wasn't expecting my brother to be at 18 Mayfair but that wasn't entirely true. It had been a gamble of sorts and I was talented in that regard. Ashington should have been at Miss Ramsbury's home at 7 Grosvenor; however, he was weak when it came to beauty and Miss Bathurst did make Miss Ramsbury appear rather pale in comparison. I asked myself who I would pay a visit to this morning if I were to truly be in search of a wife. The answer was easy enough and although we shared a hatred for one another, we oft thought alike. Perhaps our father shone through in me more than I cared to admit. My mother had believed it to be true as well; she had surely said so throughout my life.

"Ashington," I greeted as his glare met my own amused gaze. I then turned my attention to Miriam Bathurst because, after all, she was why we were gathered here, was she not? "Good morning, Miss Bathurst. You are as breathtaking in the light of day as you are in the moonlight," I stated, knowing that couldn't always be said for a lady in society. I'd brought her six yellow roses that I carried in the crook of my left arm but in my right hand, I held the posies I had brought for her aunt. If one wanted to impress the lady then one must flatter the mother, or in this case, the aunt. Wisdom my own mother had shared with me. Not that I had ever truly planned on impressing a lady any further than getting under her skirts.

"You have a beautiful home," I informed her aunt then held the posies out to her.

She blushed like a debutant and gushed over the flowers. With a slight bow, I then turned to Miss Bathurst and held out the roses, a most unique shade of yellow. They had reminded me of creamy butter and I'd wanted them for her. She was unique and deserved something just so. This might be nothing more than a game for me, but Miriam Bathurst was indeed special.

"For you," I said.

She smiled sincerely at me for what might be the first time and I realized it

was a dangerous weapon. The way her eyes shone with the innocent gesture was almost knee weakening. Had I ever experienced such reaction from a woman's smile before? This might possibly be treacherous territory that I should tread carefully upon.

"They are lovely," she said with a softness to her voice. "Thank you."

For this simple response, I would go buy her every butter yellow rose in London and that I feared was a weakness I could not afford myself. Miss Bathurst was a pawn for me, if my brother chose her for his future wife. Remembering such was important. Although she threatened to make that difficult.

"I didn't expect to see you out at this hour, paying visits," Ashington stated with a clear warning in his tone.

Flashing my best jovial grin, I met his glare. "Well, of course, I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be."

"It's an honor that both of you chose to pay us a visit this fine morning," Lady Wellington gushed, drawing our attention from each other and the obvious silent standoff. "Please won't you both have a seat and I'll ring for tea. Martha, that is, our cook makes the most mouthwatering biscuits you have ever tasted. They are Miriam's favorite, aren't they, honey?"

There was an amused twinkle in Miss Bathurst eyes as she nodded in agreement. Her aunt was obviously American from her accent and the casual way she had called the cook by her first name was no doubt what Miriam found entertaining. Most ladies would be embarrassed or horrified by such a slip but not this one. It was clear she held a fondness for her aunt and I admired that. She was not what my brother would choose for a wife, however, even if her beauty drew him in. Ashington would make sure his countess was as boring and proper as he was.

"Thank you, that is most gracious of you," I replied when Ashington said nothing.

The over bright smile that showed too many teeth in a very alarming way flashed on Lady Wellington's face and one couldn't help but smile in return. It was most amusing. Yet another thing I doubted my brother could accept. A Baron's niece was not one that would have been raised to become a countess. Especially one who was being introduced into society with an American aunt such as this one.

I moved my gaze to Miriam to see she was still trying hard not to laugh.

Her full pink lips were pressed together in a gentle smile, but it was her eyes that gave way the humor she found in the situation. She wasn't proper at all, and I enjoyed that too much it seemed.

"I imagine you didn't expect to be visited by both Ashington and myself this morning. At least not at the same time. How, uh, lucky you are," I said with a smirk on my lips.

A small giggle escaped her and that had been exactly what I'd intended to do. More so for myself than for Ashington. If I were to use a lady in my plans to humiliate my brother then I didn't want to be fond of the lady. I might find it hard to use her as a pawn if I began to care for her. Miriam Bathurst was indeed a danger. I could care for her too easily. It was now of utmost importance I made sure Ashington chose Miss Ramsbury for his future wife.

I cut my gaze to see Ashington's reaction to the less than proper side of Miss Bathurst. He was showing no appreciation in his facial expressions but then he rarely did. The man was as stodgy as our father had been.

"A lady is never sure who might call upon her," Miriam replied demurely. She did that quite well, I realized. Maybe she could act the proper lady when she tried.

The tea arrived then and Lady Wellington began to chatter on nervously about the difference of biscuits and jam in England as that of the biscuits and jam in New Orleans. I took the moment to study my brother and see if he was preparing his leave. Surely after the short interaction here, he would be making his next stop to see Miss Ramsbury. Although, I hated to think this would be my last visit to 18 Mayfair. This was hands down the best time I'd experienced calling upon a lady, but then those were extremely limited visits. I did not make a habit of such behavior. Paris offered much more appealing options.

"Lord Radcliff to see Miss Bathurst," the butler announced and all eyes turned as George Radcliff entered the room, carrying a bouquet of lilies. It would seem that Miriam Bathurst had made a good impression during their dance last night. Either that or Radcliff was up to his usual nosey ambitions.

Lady Wellington sprang from her spot on the settee and Miriam stood as well. "Welcome Lord Radcliff, we were just about to have tea. I will ring for an extra setting. Please join us."

"That won't be necessary," Ashington interrupted as he stood up. "I must be on my way. Radcliff may take my place," he added then turned to Miriam.

“Another time when you aren’t so... overwhelmed with visitors perhaps.”

Most ladies would do all they could to get Ashington to stay, but Miss Bathurst did not disappoint me. She simply nodded her head and smiled at him. “Of course,” she said simply. Then turned her attention to Radcliff and walked over to meet him halfway to accept the flowers and invite him to join us. My attention was on my brother, however, as he dealt with the gushing American aunt who didn’t seem sure if she should be concerned he was leaving or not.

Ashington could not get out of the drawing room fast enough and I leaned back in my chair feeling rather pleased with the whole situation. He wouldn’t be returning here. Although Miss Bathurst’s beauty was indeed something to admire, I knew my brother would not be able to accept her less than expected attentiveness to his presence. She had seemed almost relieved he was taking his leave. I took the cup of tea placed before me and hid my satisfied grin as I took a sip of the hot liquid.

My job here was done, with very little effort on my part. Miriam Bathurst and her aunt had handled it all too well. I might find reason to visit again just to enjoy their company. It was the most entertainment I’d had in London, and dare I admit, I didn’t find the need to escape clawing at me as I had in the past. Paris no longer seemed that intriguing.



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Chapter Eight

Miss Miriam Bathurst

A stroll in the park with Mr. Compton was most likely a waste of an otherwise pleasant afternoon, but when he had inquired, Aunt Harriet had been so giddy with excitement, I feared she would cry in front of our guests if I made an excuse. Whereas Lord Ashington had not been able to escape my company fast enough, Mr. Compton had stayed while three other gentlemen had arrived with more flowers. It was only fair I accepted his offer for an afternoon stroll. Besides, being seen with him could only help my chances at finding a husband. He may not be an earl, but he was the second son of an earl.

I stood watching Aunt Harriet worry and fuss over my afternoon attire. I was positive this was not the beginning of a successful match. Although to convince Aunt Harriet of that would be rather difficult.

Mr. Compton had appeared too amused and relaxed during his visit to be considering a true courtship. At the moment, my aunt had three walking gowns spread across my bed as she bit her bottom lip worrisomely. They were all lovely gowns and I did not see why she must make such an event out of this.

“The green,” she said spinning around to look at me. “You will appear as a precious gem!” She clapped her hands together at the thought.

The green gown was indeed very fine, but my opinion was that I would match the grass and trees. Not that it mattered. This stroll was not as important as my aunt believed. I nodded in agreement, ready to get this over with. Fussing over a walking dress seemed silly but then it did give me more to write about in my next letter to Whitney. This morning had proven to fill at least two pages. Aunt Harriet had gone on and on about the fact both Lord Ashington and Mr. Compton had called upon me this morning. She thought it was a grand statement and that I was fortunate. Luck must have shined upon me, she had gushed.

I wasn't one to live in a world of fancy and fairy tales like she so often did.

I found it very odd and a perhaps even orchestrated. It was obvious that Lord Ashington had not been pleased to see his brother, so the entire fiasco might have fallen on Mr. Compton's rather broad shoulders. His sly grins and the cut of his eyes as he had studied his brother hadn't gone without my notice.

If I were to give up an afternoon with the pleasure of my books for a stroll in the park, then I intended to make it worth my while and ask him myself what mischief he was up to and request he leave me out of it in the future. Poor Aunt Harriet wouldn't fair well under much more excitement. Hopefully she walked at enough of a distance, she wouldn't be able to hear our conversation.

"You agree the green is the one?" she asked, reminding me that we had been in a conversation, even if it had been a touch one-sided.

"Yes, I believe you are right. As always," I told her, trying to smile but failing to do so successfully.

She didn't miss my struggle to appear pleased. Closing the space between us, she grabbed my shoulders and squeezed gently. "Oh, do be happy about this, dear. You find very little joy in life and I wish I could help you with that. I dreamed of beauty like yours when I was younger. You have it all yet it doesn't make you smile."

Whereas she found it sad that I wasn't happy with my outward appearance, I found it tragic that ladies put so much importance on beauty. Was that truly what should make me happy? Something that is rather fleeting, is it not? One will not stay beautiful forever. Looks fade and life continues on without a care. Shouldn't I seek happiness in something more substantial? These were thoughts that had plagued me for years and I knew voicing them to my aunt would be as pointless as sharing them with my mother. They wouldn't understand. Perhaps it was the way I was raised in a home where my father openly showed displeasure in me no matter how beautiful my mother believed me to be.

"You don't have to marry a man you do not care for. You know that, right?" My aunt touched my cheek with the palm of her hand. "You get to choose, honey. We are in no hurry to be rid of you," she added with a teasing smile. "I've always wanted children, but I've never been blessed with one. You are the daughter I didn't get to have. I so enjoy you being here. Don't feel as if you must hurry on our account. Your mother and sister are taken care of for now and Alfred will make sure they continue to live comfortably.

Take your time, honey. Enjoy the moment.”

As comforting as her words were, it did not change the fact I would eventually have to choose a husband. Uncle Alfred was indeed providing for my mother and sister, but he wouldn't be expected to do so forever. It was up to me to make a match. A suitable one that would provide for not only my family, but one that would give Whitney the surgery she required.

I managed a nod and touched my aunt's hand gently with mine. “Thank you. I will be forever grateful for all you and Uncle Alfred have done for us.”

My aunt smiled and tilted her head to the side, causing her dark curls to fall over her shoulder. “You have brought us joy. I just wish we could do the same for you.”

Guilt that I couldn't feel joy at the prospect of marriage stung my chest. I wish I could find happiness in all they were providing for me. I would try harder to appear more thankful. Smiling more wouldn't harm me. It was the least I could do for my aunt.

“You have,” I assured her. “Now, stop fretting over me. I am perfectly happy.” It was a lie and we both knew it.

With a sigh, my aunt smiled at me sadly then nodded. “I'll send for Betsey.”

Once my aunt was gone from the room, I let out my own heavy, sorrowful sigh and sank down onto the settee. Today had been a success in the eyes of London society. I had had several excellent prospects for a husband call upon me this morning. Aunt Harriet was right, I should be experiencing joy or at the very least, relief. Glancing out the window, I watched other ladies of the ton walking along the street below. If I would simply accept my future it would make this easier.

When Betsey opened the door to my bedroom, I began my attempt at finding happiness in the midst of what was surely very tragic indeed.

“Miss, are you ready to get dressed?” Betsey asked with a small nod of her blonde head.

I smiled brightly at Betsey and stood up. “Yes, please. Make me as remarkable as you can. I am told Mr. Compton is one of the most eligible bachelors in London.”

Betsey giggled then. “Oh, he is, Miss, and awful nice to look at too, he is.”

My smile was genuine this time. Yes, Mr. Compton was very nice to look at and he well knew it. He was also not in the market for a wife. When one

spends as much time reading as I have then you notice more and talk less. I was observant and I was well aware that Nicholas Compton was up to mischief.

“You like the slightly unkempt look of him then?” I asked her in a teasing voice.

She blushed brightly. Her cheekbones were highlighted with round red splotches against her freckled pale skin. “Yes, Miss. I do believe he is most handsome as do everyone else.”

I laughed at that. She was right. I might not be planning on getting a proposal from Nicholas Compton, but he was handsome. Almost too handsome. He could even be described as beautiful. I didn’t say as much to Betsey, though. Maids gossiped and that was not knowledge I wanted making its rounds through the London households.

“Do you think I’ll blend in with the grass, Betsey?” I asked her then as she picked up the green dress my aunt had chosen.

Betsey frowned at me as if I had spoken a language she didn’t understand. “No, Miss. You’ll be beautiful for sure. You always are. Come and let’s get you ready to make that Mr. Compton fall in love with you.”

I almost laughed loudly then. The full-bodied kind that caused one to bend at the waist. One thing I was most positive about was that Nicholas Compton was not a gentleman to fall in love, at least with only one woman. I believed perhaps he loved us all.



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Chapter Nine

Mr. Nicholas Compton

More than once I had questioned my reasoning for this outing. Being seen with Miriam Bathurst in the park or the square was indeed enough to feed the gossip mill. My brother would hear of it by nightfall, if not sooner. However, I wasn't so sure Ashington was still planning on pursuing Miss Bathurst. I had decided it was very unlikely; yet, I had still invited her to join me for a walk.

I knew from talk already circling that Ashington had left 18 Mayfair and gone directly to the Ramsbury's residence. Lady Ramsbury had made sure everyone knew about it. No doubt she was already planning a grand wedding in her head while visions of her daughter as a countess fed the flame. I wondered how long it would take before she found out Ashington had chosen to pay a visit to Miss Bathurst first. The thought made me grin.

With this knowledge, it should have also been where I had visited once I left Miriam and her aunt's delightful company. However, I'd done no such thing. Now, I had plans with Miss Bathurst and no reason for them. Ashington was very unlikely to spend any more time getting to know Miriam. If he were indeed in search of a countess, then Miriam Bathurst wouldn't have met his criteria. She would never be one to fit into the small uninteresting mold that London society demanded. I liked that about her, and dammit, I enjoyed her company. No harm there. It wasn't as if I, myself, would court her, but I could enjoy her company.

Turning my attention to Lydia Ramsbury would be difficult after time spent with Miriam. However, I would do just that. I was here to humiliate Ashington, not find a future wife. Cringing at the thought, I forced myself not to think of today's outing as anything more than a one-time event meant only to amuse me.

What I didn't consider was that the sight of Miss Bathurst would quite nearly take my breath away. How did she do that? Appear so utterly beautiful. The sort of beauty that made a man do stupid things. I had known

many beautiful women and enjoyed them with pleasure, however something about this one was different. It was as if she were a magnet and one couldn't help but be drawn to her side. If only to admire her for a moment.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Compton. I am so pleased the weather is perfect for a stroll in the park," Lady Wellington said with her overly bright smile. "I would so hate to have been confined to a carriage today."

"As am I," I assured her, while forcing myself to meet her gaze instead of taking in the vision Miriam Bathurst presented. "It is a lucky man indeed that is given the opportunity to enjoy such fine weather with true beauties beside him."

Lady Wellington blushed brightly and waved a gloved hand in my direction. "Oh, you. It is Miriam who is the beauty."

I looked at Miriam then to see her studying me closely as if she were reading my thoughts. There was no hint of color on her cheeks or shy smile on her full lips. My flattery hadn't affected her in the least. She appeared to be appraising me. Measuring my words and my worth. Most interesting female, this one was. She would be hard to stay away from.

"You are quite a vision." I agreed with her aunt but kept my eyes locked with hers.

Miriam gave me a small smile, but her eyes didn't twinkle with delight but rather with mischief. As if this were a game and she were part of it. "Thank you," she said simply. "It's the dressmaker's talents, I assure you."

The emerald walking gown she was wearing was indeed stunning, but it was not the gown. Miriam Bathurst would be a vision in rags. The sparkle of intelligence in her eyes and the way she held her shoulders with confidence was enough to draw any man's attention. Yet there was true simple beauty in the line of her jaw, the curve of her lips, the slant of her eyes, the small tip of her nose. She was flawless and no amount of demurring would change that fact.

"It's pointless trying to complement her, Mr. Compton. She doesn't see herself clearly, I'm afraid," Lady Wellington said with a tsk and shake of her head. "I try to get her to open her eyes and peer closely into the looking glass, but she does not see what the rest of us do. It's a pity and a blessing, I've decided."

I wanted to have Miss Bathurst alone so I could ask her about this. Why did she not clearly see what others did? I also wanted to touch the clear

creamy skin of her cheek and press my lips against hers to see if they felt as lushly plump as they appeared. None of this would happen for it would disarm all I had come to do. Letting lust get in the way of revenge was stupid. I'd enjoyed enough lust in my life to ignore this temptation. Even if this temptation was the sweetest ever to be dangled in my path.

"Tis a pity," I said low enough just for Miriam's ears then held out my arm. "Shall we?"

Miriam studied my arm a moment then slid her hand to rest in the crook.

"I'll just enjoy the nice warm day and stay back here far enough to give you a bit of privacy," Lady Wellington said with a smile in her voice. I felt guilty for giving her aunt hope for something that wasn't going to be. No more would come of today. Miss Bathurst didn't appear as pleased as her aunt about our walk, so I was relieved of the guilt where she was concerned. Instead, I was ridden with curiosity. There would not be another young lady in London society who wouldn't be pleased by my attentions. Yet, this one was not.

We walked toward the park in silence for a short time. Perhaps I should have made conversation, but I wanted Miss Bathurst to do so. She had said very little since I'd arrived at her home. It didn't take long for her to appease me.

"Why did you offer this invitation?" she finally asked, breaking our silence.

I glanced down at her and grinned. She didn't disappoint when it came to conversation. She always made it interesting. No talk of flowers, dresses, and balls for Miriam Bathurst. She went right to the point. Direct like a man and damn if that wasn't fun.

"I would assume it was obvious. I enjoy your company."

She lifted her head then and looked up at me. "You do?" she asked, looking as if she thought I was crazed if I thought she'd believe that statement.

"Who wouldn't? You're delightful. You aren't boring and proper. I find you intriguing."

She looked away from me then and kept her gaze straight ahead. "Is that so? Well, I believe you are up to something."

I hadn't expected her to hit so closely to the truth. She was intelligent of that I had no doubt. However, this was impressive. Uncomfortably so.

“Why would you think that?” I asked because I could think of nothing else to say. She’d blindsided me.

She didn’t respond right away, but when she did, she looked back up at me. Those eyes of hers so full of wisdom and disillusionment. She didn’t have the same sparkle of hope most ladies in society did. There was no fairy tale brewing in her head or dreams of being a title that held esteem and power.

“Your eyes say much about you, Mr. Compton. Just as your brother’s do. I amuse you and that is why we are out today. Nothing more. I’m a moment of intrigue and that is all. I don’t harbor some hope of more where you or Lord Ashington are concerned. I came to London for my sister and I will do what I must for her future happiness. I have no desire to play any games you may have; I simply have no time for them.”

Words so bluntly expressed without a batting of lashes and flirtatious grin, I had never heard from a lady’s mouth. At least not in London. Taking a quick glance at Miriam, I asked, “Are you sure you aren’t from Paris?” I knew she was not but the way she did not hold her tongue and expressed her thoughts so boldly reminded me of the reason I much preferred Paris.

Miss Bathurst smirked then and her shoulders seemed to be a touch straighter than before, if that were possible. “Thank you,” she said simply.

Frowning now unsure of why I was receiving thanks, I paused but a moment then asked. “You are most welcome, but what is it I am being recognized for?”

Miss Bathurst grinned then. A smug grin, not at all an expression I expected to see on her face. It was almost wicked and damn if it wasn’t appealing. She need not do anything to be more appealing, but yet here she was flashing a smile that could make a man’s knees weak without notice. “There are many things I do not wish, Mr. Compton. Being one of the many silly English ladies in search of a husband is one of them.”

But yet she was here in London for the season doing just that. “Correct me if I am wrong, but you are, indeed, in London for the marriage mart, are you not?”

She sighed then and her shoulders drooped only the slightest inch. “Yes, you know that I am. It does not mean I want to be or that I wish to appear to be like all the others. A husband was never something I desired. I realize that may come as a shock to you, but not all women want to be married. Not all women want to give up their freedom to be... to be...,” she paused and then

waved her hand in the general direction of the others out for a stroll, “them.”

I didn't need to look about to understand her words. I was fascinated by Miriam Bathurst, but I had been since the moment I watched her turn my brother down. She was an anomaly in a sea of indistinguishable females.

“You are the most fascinating lady I have ever known,” I told her truthfully.

A small smile touched her lips then and her cheeks turned a light pink. I found an odd pleasure in knowing I had made her blush. I did not believe such a feat would be easy. If I wasn't careful, Miss Miriam Bathurst would ruin everything I had set in motion.

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Chapter Ten

The Earl of Ashington

I was too young for this. Too young to be weighed down with choosing the proper wife. Or was I too damn picky. Whatever my problem, I had to get my priorities sorted. Emma deserved a mother and I would supply her with just that. However, I must first overcome the issues I currently faced. Staring down into my glass of brandy, I knew the answers weren't there, but at least it took the edge off my dilemma.

Today's visit to Lydia Ramsbury's home had proven several things. One, she was a proper lady, she had been raised to run a home, she was aware of all that was required of a countess, she was demure and soft spoken, she was kind and talented at the pianoforte, and she was completely and utterly boring. Scowling at that last admission, I took another drink. It was an unfair description that she had done nothing to deserve. Yet, my poor decision to call upon Miss Bathurst this morning had hindered my thinking. That was the only way to explain it.

If Miriam Bathurst wasn't so, so, bold, and so, confident, and... so damn beautiful, it would be easier for a man to forget her when he left her presence. However, she made it damn well impossible with her eyes that shown a depth most ladies her age would never fathom. She would make a poor countess and wife. There was not one ounce of meekness in her gaze. She was fascinating and intelligent. The life I would provide would bore her and Emma needed a mother to be a proper role model, so she could ease into this society without question or speculation.

The door behind me opened and a squeal erupted before a flash of blue passed beside me to hide behind the heavy drapes. I stared a moment, wondering if I should ask or just wait on Alice to arrive. She wouldn't be far behind. I took another drink of the brandy then sat my glass down on the desk beside me, just as Alice entered the room.

The exasperated look on her face as she scanned the area then looked at me was clear. Emma was causing trouble. Another reason my pursuit of a wife

needed to speed up and my thoughts about Miss Bathurst were wasting my time.

“Where is she?” Alice asked, placing a hand on her hip and scowling at me as if I had been the one to hide her. I motioned toward the drapes just as a small giggle came from them.

“Miss Emma, come out from behind those drapes at once!” Alice demanded. I wondered what the child had done now. It looked as if it were bad. Alice was not happy, but then she was not a happy person.

“No!” Emma shouted, but it was muffled from the thick fabric in front of her.

Alice sighed in frustration. “You were to be writing your name.”

“I don’t like writing. Tis boring,” Emma shot back at her Governess. “I want to wash my baby.”

“You’ve washed more than your baby. Come out from there so we can change your clothing. You are completely and utterly soaked.”

“You’ll make me write my name more!”

Alice shot me a look that was clear she required help.

I walked over to the drapes and pulled back the panel and my little troublemaker was hiding behind. Emma stood there shivering slightly in a damp blue dress with her blonde hair in wet ringlets around her face. “What have we here? Did you decide to take a bath in your clothing?” I asked her.

She shook her head and her bottom lip quivered slightly. “No-oo-o” she said chattering her teeth. “I was washing May and I fell into the ba-ba--bath. It wasn’t o-o-on purpose.”

“I should hope not. It would be silly to bathe with your dress on then dart around wet and hide behind drapes. Why was there water still in the bath?” I asked, wondering who had been remiss at their duties.

Emma scrunched her nose at me then. “I had it drawn for May,” she admitted.

“I see.” I didn’t ask who had drawn a bath for a doll for I had a feeling Emma wouldn’t rat on them. I respected that in her. I held out my hand to her. “Come now, you need to go get on dry clothing and dry your hair before you catch cold.”

Emma leaned to the side and peeked around me. “She will make me write my name some more,” Emma said as if this were a grave issue meant to be dealt with.

“I should hope so. It would be a terrible thing for a young lady not to be able to write her own name.”

Emma looked up at me then. “Truly?”

I nodded. “Every princess I know can write her name brilliantly.”

Emma considered that a moment then sighed in defeat. “Very well,” she said then walked around me toward Alice. “Come, Alice. Let’s get me dry.”

Alice looked relieved and gave me a nod of thanks.

“Will you tell me who drew the bath for you?” Alice asked her then.

Emma shook her head no. “I am afraid not, Alice.”

“Of course not,” Alice replied sourly.

I grinned then as they walked from the office. There wasn’t a dull moment in this house with Emma. I had an idea who had drawn her bath for her and it wasn’t a house maid but rather a cook with a soft spot for the girl, no doubt. I wouldn’t be the one to reveal their secrets. No harm was truly done.

How would having a wife change this? Would she handle the situation like the one I just dealt with similarly? Was I doing anything wrong? How would it change our dynamic? Was I making a mistake by seeking a wife? So many questions and no answers. Who was I to ask?

I imagined Lydia Ramsbury dealing with a runaway wet Emma hiding behind drapes in protest. How would Lydia handle her and could she? Alice was stern, but even Alice struggled with Emma’s strong will. Was searching for a wife that was the proper picture of an English Lady the right thing? Surely it would help as Emma grew and introducing her into society, but what of now? I wanted Emma to keep that spirit and strong will. Breaking it wasn’t what I desired at all.

Against my will, an image of Miriam Bathurst appeared in my head. Without any struggle, I could see her handling the strong-willed Emma with ease. Miss Bathurst wasn’t proper, but she was from a respected family in society and there was no true scandal attached to her name. Perhaps I was being hasty by casting her aside as an option. Someone like Miriam may be exactly what Emma would need. Her ideas of a proper English home were not as strict as most and truly wasn’t that what I needed? The more gently bred the female, the more unlikely it would be that they would accept a bastard child as their own.

Miss Bathurst needed to marry to save her family from poverty at least that was the information I had received when I inquired of her. I needed a mother

for Emma, one who was willing to protect her with the lies I had in place when the time came. A smile tugged at my lips and I picked my glass of brandy back up. The day seemed brighter now. I wouldn't think too hard about why because I wasn't searching for a wife that made me happy. I was searching exclusively for Emma a mother. There was no need to let my emotions get involved. That would be disastrous. Feelings only complicated marriages. Respect was all that was required.

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Chapter Eleven

Miriam Bathurst

Once I had loved to dance. As a young girl, I'd fancied dancing at balls. The reality was not very grand. Listening to one gentleman after the other talk of themselves as if they were trying to sell me a piece of property was tedious. The first chance I was given to escape, I did, right out the side door, leading onto a lovely rose-covered patio. Another couple stood to the far left talking while an older lady, who was no doubt the chaperone, stood a distance away. I breathed a sigh of relief and inhaled the heady scent of rose that filled the air.

Tonight's ball had been my chance to focus and find a man suitable for marriage. I had been determined to keep an open mind and try and enjoy myself. Neither of those things had thus far happened. Instead, I'd had my toe stepped on, had suffered a terrible case of garlic breath being blown in my face, and was almost positive I'd received an improper advance from a married man. The only highlight of the evening had been that neither Mr. Compton nor Lord Ashington were in attendance.

I hadn't expected for Lord Ashington to call upon me again; however, I was a touch surprised that Mr. Compton hadn't after our walk. It had started out tense, but in the end, we had both relaxed and talked without pretense. We had even laughed more than once at different stories we both shared. I hadn't expected to enjoy the outing, but I had. I'd thought he had too.

Apparently not, I thought sourly. It wasn't as if he would be the husband I was seeking. I needed more than he could offer financially. Only for my sister though not for me. I hated the way it sounded even if it was just in my own head.

Giggling came from behind me and I turned to see two girls, and what I assumed was one of their mothers, exiting the ballroom. One of the girls held a glass of lemonade, looking annoyed, while the other was highly amused. I turned my gaze back to the roses and gave them their privacy. I recognized all three, but I didn't know their names. The annoyed one with dark hair, the

color of a rich mahogany, had danced with several of the same gentlemen I had tonight. She wasn't a pale beauty, but a beauty none the less. She drew male attention. The other girl was younger and I was surprised she was already out in society. She seemed too silly and immature for the marriage mart.

"Stop giggling. You sound ridiculous," the older of the two girls said.

"You're just sour Lord Ashington didn't attend," the younger girl replied.

"The night is young yet," the mother added, as if this was, in fact, the issue the eldest daughter was having.

"Even if he does arrive, he will seek out Lydia Ramsbury. Everyone knows he has called on her and taken her for a ride in the park this week. I even heard she went to the opera with him and sat in his box." The youngest girl seemed to be enjoying herself.

I wanted to roll my eyes, but then I was the one eavesdropping on a conversation that wasn't mine to listen to. I should be rolling my eyes at myself.

"Nothing is certain," the mother said with a tone that made me shiver slightly.

"Lydia Ramsbury would make a perfect countess," the older girl said grudgingly.

"As would you," the mother said.

It had been obvious that Lord Ashington had been interested in Lydia Ramsbury at the last ball. The next morning, his visit to me had been surprising. His abrupt departure had not been. Not that any of this mattered. I was not interested in the affairs of Lord Ashington. Not in the least. He would make a most difficult husband.

Feeling as if I were a lurker in their conversation, I took one last deep inhale of the lovely fragrance before turning to go back into the ballroom. Just as I stepped inside, I scanned the room for Aunt Harriet, but my gaze locked on Mr. Nicholas Compton. He was here and he was dancing... with Lydia Ramsbury.

Disappointment stung and I truly hated to admit it. When just a few days ago I was sure I didn't care for him at all. Yet he was here and he wasn't just dancing with anyone. He was dancing with the girl his brother had spent the most time with this week. I wasn't naïve and I understood completely what was happening. Which was why the sting of disappointment.

Reality was something I had learned to face at a young age and I knew now that the brief attention I had received from him had nothing to do with me at all but with his brother. Mr. Compton was indeed playing a game. A vicious hurtful one meant not only to affect his brother but others along the way. I had thick skin and a blow such as that wouldn't wound me the way it would others. Sheltered girls who had lived easy lives with security wouldn't survive such a scandal.

It was in that moment, I decided I truly hated Nicholas Compton. He wasn't interesting but spiteful and cold. I truly hoped Lydia Ramsbury was smart and didn't fall for his charming smile and attractive face. There was something I disliked more than arrogance and it was cruelty.

"There you are, honey," Aunt Harriet appeared at my side with a glass of wine in her hand. "I searched for you when Mr. Compton arrived so I could tell you, but I couldn't find you anywhere."

I gave Nicholas Compton one last scathing glance then turned to my aunt. "I needed fresh air," I explained.

Aunt Harriet nodded then looked back to the dance floor. "Do you have room on your dance card?" she asked hopefully.

"No, I'm afraid I have a headache and need to leave. Are you ready?" I asked her.

She frowned then, as if I had just spoken a foreign language to her. "Oh dear, alright," she stammered and then I began walking to the exit, hoping she was following in my wake. Just before we reached my escape from all this... Lord Ashington filled the entrance. I didn't have to look around to know his arrival had already drawn interest. I paused, waiting until he passed before leaving, but his gaze found mine and what I saw in his expression was unexpected.

He seemed interested in something. It couldn't be me since we had already established that after his brief visit, he didn't find me to be worth calling upon again. He made his way toward us instead of the waiting crowd.

"Lady Wellington," he greeted my aunt then his gaze was back on me. "Miss Bathurst. Did I arrive to find you are already taking your leave?"

I managed a nod. "I have a headache," I replied not sure why he cared if I was here or not. He needed to be more concerned with the fact his brother was flirting with Lydia Ramsbury, like a complete and utter rake.

He seemed truly concerned as his brow furrowed. Who was this man and

what had he done with Lord Ashington? “May I escort you both home, then?”

What?

“That is very kind of you Lord Ashington, but our carriage is just outside,” Aunt Harriet said, sounding somewhat devastated that it was.

“Of course,” Lord Ashington replied, giving my aunt a kind smile I’d never seen on the man before. What was happening here? When had Lord Ashington become so... nice?

Then it dawned on me. Nicholas Compton was currently dancing with Lydia Ramsbury or he had been. Lord Ashington must have witnessed it and he was giving us attention simply to remind Lydia just who she was dealing with. The idea of it annoyed me to the point my head was truly starting to ache. It was no longer a lie just to escape. I was not in London to be involved in some ridiculous drama between two brothers. I was here to find a husband.

“Enjoy your evening, Lord Ashington,” I replied and stepped around him before anything more could be said. Whatever game he and his brother were playing, I was not to be a pawn in it. I pitied the girls who were blinded by their good looks and place in society that they were used as such.

I did hope Aunt Harriet was behind me as I hurried out the front door and down the stairs toward the awaiting carriages. She was sure to have much to say about my behavior, but she didn’t realize what was happening as I did. Whatever they held against each other should stay there. Between the two of them. Bringing innocent people into their web of lies and deceit was unfair.

My eyes stung slightly and I blinked back any tears. Crying was silly and I was not silly. I was anything but silly. I doubted I had ever truly been silly. Crossing my arms at my waist to fight off the evening breeze, I heard my aunt’s footsteps behind me.

“Oh dear, oh my,” she said, sounding truly worried.

“It’s fine, Aunt Harriet,” I assured her.

She chewed nervously at her bottom lip in a worrisome way. “He is an earl, Miriam. An eligible one.”

I didn’t need reminding. I said nothing and we stood there as we waited on our carriage to be brought around.

“If you are to find a husband then you must be a bit... more agreeable,” she said.

She was right, of course. However, neither Nicholas Compton or Lord

Ashington were going to ever ask for my hand. She needed not to waste her concern on them.

“I know,” I said simply. Explaining more to her was of no use. She would think me daft or full of fancy.

“Very well,” she said softly.

I could not explain to my aunt why I wanted to leave, for it showed a weakness I myself hated. Watching Mr. Compton with Lydia tonight and knowing he had blatantly ignored me had stung. I had not wanted to feel anything, so the fact that I did was a very bitter pill to swallow. I was sure my aunt would understand, but I did not want her pity. I had been silly for a moment and I would not do it again. Imagining there was more to the walk with Mr. Compton had been my mistake. I wouldn't make it twice.

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Chapter Twelve

Nicholas Compton

Keeping my attentions on Lydia Ramsbury had been difficult with Miss Bathurst's presence in the room. It would seem each time I was to see Miriam Bathurst, she was more appealing than the last. It had taken many drinks and stiff talks with myself the past few days to keep from going to visit Miss Bathurst again. My brother's complete dedication to courting Lydia Ramsbury had been all that had kept me from cracking.

It had been a relief albeit a concern I didn't want to feel when Miss Bathurst and her aunt left. I couldn't be sure if Ashington had said something to make her leave early, but it had looked as if she was on her way out when he arrived. Ashington had turned to watch her exit and for a moment I had thought he was going to follow after her. Not something I would have expected.

I had danced and given his current interest my attention since my arrival. It would be now that he would search her out and find that I was already in his place. He should have arrived sooner. A night at the opera didn't secure his position with Lydia Ramsbury.

Whispers started as he was spotted and I heard Lydia's name mentioned more than once. Her gaze had found him and her cheeks flushed pink as she watched him. He had made quite the impression on her this week. If I hadn't been battling my attraction to Miriam Bathurst, I might have made a move to make this easier on myself. I didn't doubt my charm, but I was struggling to feel it enough to make it believable.

When his gaze found us, he simply gave a nod and continued walking. Ashington did not make scenes and this would be my chance to sway Lydia Ramsbury my way. My brother would be in a foul mood at having arrived to find us together. It was a good time for her to experience his less than pleasant nature.

"I'm sorry, Lady Ramsbury," I said with a small bow. "My brother isn't fond of me as is common knowledge and I know you wish his attentions. I

will leave you so he may find his way over to you. Thank you for your company. It was truly enchanting,” I said with my most charming of smiles and backed away before she could say more. I didn’t expect a protest from Lady Ramsbury and prolonging my departure was of no consequence. She would be wanting my brother’s attention and of that I understood. He was an earl and I was not. Her mother would be filling her ear with how important it was to keep Lord Ashington’s favor. I had to allow my brother’s less than shining personality pale in comparison to mine.

Pleased with my evening’s progress in that regard, I headed for the exit with no desire to stay in order to see my brother act broody in front of Lydia. He would do so and she would see it. Her mother would tell her to smile brighter and be more appealing. He would be less than charming. At the end of the evening, when Lydia was alone, she would remember the part of the night she had enjoyed most and I would be the star of that memory.

I spoke to few people as I retreated, not wanting to get caught in this circus any longer than necessary. There hadn’t been another dance card I had bothered with but, then I rarely did. Mothers who had heard the gossip of my brother’s interest this week were now eyeing me and nudging their daughters in my direction. Getting free was becoming more of an obstacle course than I had anticipated. After excusing myself for the fifth time, I was sure not to make eye contact as I went through the door.

The evening breeze was a blessed relief from the stifling warmth inside the ballroom. The breathtaking view of Miriam Bathurst in the moonlight just as her carriage pulled up was even more so a relief. She was a temptation I was weak to resist. Even if just to speak to her a moment.

“Miss Bathurst,” I called, just loud enough to draw her attention and that of her aunt. Both ladies turned to see me. While Lady Wellington beamed, making it clear she was pleased by my presence, Miriam scowled in... distaste. Such spirit that one. She wasn’t one to flirt or pout. She made her feelings quite clear in a dramatic fashion I truly enjoyed. She did not appreciate my not calling on her again or my preoccupation tonight. A proper English lady such as Lady Ramsbury would smile and pretend she hadn’t been affected by the slight. Miss Bathurst, however, would not. The simple fact had been difficult for me to ignore. I did not want Miss Bathurst to hate me or write me off. She should and if we were both to get what we came to London for then I should let her. However, at this moment, I realized I might

not have the strength to do so.

“Mr. Compton,” Lady Wellington replied, turning fully around to face me. “You’re leaving so early?” I could see the sly look in her eyes as she asked it. I had given my full attention to Lydia tonight and no doubt Lady Wellington noticed. I saw the flash of challenge in her gaze as if she were about to take me down in the most ladylike of fashions. I did like this American.

“I’m afraid the evening has become a bore,” I replied with a smirk then turned my gaze to Miriam, who was studying her gloved hands as if she were the one bored. “Your dance card was full before I arrived. My loss I’m afraid,” I said trying to soften her. Last we had spoken, there had been laughter and something more I had been careful not to dwell on. However, that had been days ago and she’d heard nothing from me. The reception I was getting now was indeed deserved, but I wasn’t going to be able to let it go. I missed her smile... all of them. Especially the slightly wicked one.

“Yes, well, we must be going. Our carriage has arrived. Good night, Mr. Compton,” she said with a tight smile that very clearly told me to go to hell. That smile I could have done without. I had the sudden urge to grab her and press my lips against hers until they softened and moaned in response. I didn’t, of course, but the desire stirred none the less.

“You are leaving quite early,” I said, trying to stop her long enough to find the right words to make her smile at me again. The way she had on our walk.

“As are you,” she said then turned from me.

“Miriam has a headache,” Lady Wellington said in way of explanation.

I doubted that very much. Miss Bathurst was angry with me and possibly hurt. The idea of her being more than just angry made me feel unsettled in my gut. I wasn’t sure I could deal with the reality that I had caused her any pain. Yet another weakness she had revealed in me I didn’t know existed.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I replied, looking back to Miriam as she placed her hand in the footman’s and he helped her up into the carriage.

“Goodnight, Miss Bathurst,” I said when I knew there was nothing more I could do to hold her here.

She took a seat and her gaze found mine once more. She gave me a small nod then again looked the other way. The regret that consumed me was something new. I wasn’t accustomed to this emotion. I acted and accepted my actions. I wasn’t one to regret them. Yet, not being able to coax one real smile from Miss Bathurst did indeed cause remorse. If only I hadn’t spent

time with her. If only I hadn't gotten to know her more than just the outward beauty. However, if it were even a possibility, would I go back and not go on that walk with her?

We had enjoyed our day in the park. At least I had so much so that I'd stayed clear of her after. She was dangerous for me, to my plans for my brother. Too appealing, too unique, too damn beautiful.

"Goodnight, Mr. Compton," Lady Wellington said with an amused grin on her face. She was enjoying my situation and didn't mind letting me know just how much. Her aunt made it clear she wanted Miriam happy more than she wanted to see her make a fine match.

"Goodnight," I replied with a slight bow. "I shall see you soon, Miss Bathurst," I promised then stepped back as the carriage pulled away, leaving me with only the warmth of the evening breeze.

Her sharp look at my last words caused me to grin when I truly had no reason to after that encounter. Miriam Bathurst would not make it easy on me to regain her good favor. However, I did so enjoy the challenge. Damn, if this wasn't a predicament I was in. If only it was Miriam my brother had his sights on. My job would be more than the satisfaction of revenge; yet then again, I didn't cherish the idea of using Miriam. Hurting her in any way seemed unforgivable. There was no clear answer to this. If I reacted so fiercely to the slight I had given her tonight then how would I live with myself if I truly hurt her? Could I make Miriam Bathurst fall in love with me then walk away? I wasn't sure I could.

"She's not your type, Brother," the last word coming out in a disgusted drawl from Ashington.

Turning, I faced my brother, standing only a few feet away. He was the last person I expected to escape the ballroom tonight, especially after his late arrival. Was he not here to woo Lady Ramsbury?

"And pray tell, Brother, what do you know of my type," I replied. Truth was my brother knew very little about me. He had chosen that years ago.

"I know she's intelligent, not easily charmed, and in need of a wealthy husband," he said, matter-of-factly.

Annoyance simmered in my gut. He spoke of Miriam as if he knew her. He had spent very little time with her and he knew nothing. "She's witty, has a sense of humor, and when she laughs, her face is even more beautiful, which I find to be a true rarity. Yes, her family needs her to marry well but a title is

of no importance. She is well read and can talk of literature for hours,” I paused then and took a step toward my brother. “Unlike you, she’s not another face I’ve inquired about. She’s a person who I have taken the time to get to know.”

Ashington didn’t flinch. He showed no emotion in his stony expression. “Yet, she couldn’t get away from you quickly enough.”

He had me there. Although there was reason for that, I wasn’t going to spend my time explaining it to him. She wasn’t part of my plan, and unfortunately, I wasn’t going to get to know her like I wished to. The fear I may never meet another female like Miriam Bathurst did nag at me. However, I had a score to settle with Ashington and revenge that must be met.

“Don’t talk about what you don’t know, Brother,” I replied.

“Actions are far louder than words, little brother. I believe I know more than you give me credit. I was here to witness the entire scene. Only Lady Wellington noticed my presence and I will say she seemed entertained by it all.”

I hated him. With every moment spent in his presence, I remembered just how much pain he had caused. I wanted nothing to do with the man in front of me. However, I had once promised my mother revenge and I would see it through.

“As always, it’s been a pleasure,” I drawled sarcastically and walked away from him before I let myself say anything to make him think I cared. He meant nothing to me as did the words he spoke. I would be free of him soon and he would have reason to hate me. I would give it to him and enjoy every last moment.



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Chapter Thirteen

Earl of Ashington

“Is she a princess or perhaps a duchess?” Emma asked me with a hopeful expression. Her little cherub face was turned up to stare at me with wide eyes so full of wonder. She had noticed I was dressed for more than dinner at home and had begun asking questions faster than I could answer them.

“No, I’m afraid she isn’t a princess or a duchess, but I do believe you would like her just the same. She’s very beautiful,” I told her, hoping to let her down easily.

Emma seemed to take a moment to study that bit of information before continuing with her inquisition. “Is she the same lady you took to the opera last week?”

The child forgot nothing. Ever. It could be that Alice was correct and I did not need to share my outings with Emma. If she were going to remember each and every one that could become confusing for her later.

I shook my head. “This is a new lady,” I told her, truly hoping she wasn’t keeping a tally in her head of the different females I spent time with and how much was too much information. Alice often corrected me for speaking to Emma as if she were an adult. There were things not meant for me to tell a child. I wasn’t good at measuring what that line was and I crossed it often, it would seem.

“Is this lady prettier than the last?” she asked, her eyes lighting up again with curiosity.

I started to tell her the truth when Alice entered the foyer looking stern. “That is of no consequence nor is it proper to discuss such things, Miss Emma.”

Emma rolled her eyes and sighed loudly. I bit the inside of my mouth to keep from grinning at her spunk. “Tis a simple question, Alice,” she said swinging her gaze to her governess.

“It is rude for child and adult alike to ask such a thing,” Alice replied. “Now, say your goodnight and come with me. It is well past time for you to

be in bed.”

Emma’s shoulders sagged. “Goodnight, Ashington,” she said in defeat.

“Lord Ashington, Emma. You are to address the Earl as Lord Ashington,” Alice corrected her firmly.

Emma ignored her and sighed again with a dramatic rise and fall of her small shoulders. “I hope she’s lovely and likes to laugh. For you need to laugh more,” Emma said then threw her arms around my legs and hugged them tightly.

I glanced at Alice whose expression softened. Emma had a way of doing that even to the stern Alice. It was why Alice hadn’t been sent running from the house already. Emma had been a test to her patience from day one. However, there were these small moments when she made it worth it. I bent down to give Emma a proper hug. “Goodnight, Emma. Dream of the best things,” I told her.

She nodded. “I shall.”

Alice didn’t toss out anymore stern orders and Emma walked over to her slowly and reached up to take Alice’s hand in hers. “Twas a good day wasn’t it, Alice?” she said, tilting her head back to look up at the governess as they retreated to the staircase.

“Yes, Miss Emma, I do believe it was,” Alice agreed.



The drive over to 18 Mayfair was short and I had little time to prepare for exactly what I would say to Miss Bathurst once we had some privacy. When I sent the invitation for her and her aunt to join me in my box at the opera, I hadn’t been sure of her acceptance. However, I was sure she had accepted due to her aunt, not because she truly wanted to. It was clear that Miss Bathurst wasn’t fond of me or my brother. I was going to do my best to rectify her dislike for me. As for Nicholas, I thought she was wise to keep her distance.

Emma had been so full of questions it had distracted me for a time. Now that I was pulling up to Wellington’s home, I was fully aware I might be in for a rather unfriendly female by my side this evening. Why this made me smile I wasn’t sure. What man wanted a surly women to entertain? Had I gone mad of late?

As the carriage came to a stop, I straightened myself and stepped down onto the footpath. With every step I took closer to the door, I reminded myself that I was doing this for Emma. I needed to spend time with Miss Bathurst to see if she was the fit we needed. Not just as countess but as Emma's mother. It was a good thing Miriam Bathurst wasn't meek and quiet, for if she were, Emma would send her running within a day. There was strength and confidence in Miriam Bathurst that Emma would require in a mother and that would be expected from a countess, especially when the ton began the murmuring and gossip about Emma. No matter my rank and power, Emma's legitimacy would be in question. The lie I had in place was a strong one, but it would take a stronger female to pull it off.

The butler escorted me to the drawing room, assuring me the ladies would be down in but a moment. A maid had offered me tea while I waited but before I could respond, the loud American voice of Lady Wellington rang down the hallway. I smiled thinking of how she would be entertaining for Emma and how Alice wouldn't approve.

Lady Wellington came swishing hastily through the door. "Lord Ashington, I would have had Alfred greet you, but he's out for the evening. I do hope you haven't waited long. Miriam will be down in just a moment. Would you like tea? Or perhaps a glass of brandy? I can send for some of Alfred's best."

Brandy did sound appealing right about now but I shook my head. "That won't be necessary," I assured her with a grateful smile.

My response seemed to make her nervous as she began fidgeting with her hands and her smile failed a bit. Perhaps I should have said yes. I didn't mean to cause her undue stress.

"We are looking forward to this evening," she said smiling. "We've talked of little else all day. Thank you so much for the invitation."

I returned her smile knowing full well Miriam Bathurst had not spent her day gushing over the evening in my box at the opera. However, it was an amusing thought. I doubted Miss Bathurst gushed about much. She was not easily impressed or perhaps she was. There was very little about her that I did know. Nicholas had been right about that. I knew only what I had been told and the little time I had been around her to witness. Nicholas had more knowledge of Miriam and he seemed to find pleasure in that. Tonight I would seek my own information. Starting with conversation with Lady Wellington.

She would be a well of information where her niece was concerned.

I started to speak, but whatever words had been on my tongue were lost as Miriam Bathurst entered the room. I wasn't sure there were words to describe her. Every time I had seen Miss Bathurst, she had been breathtaking. She was blessed with the natural beauty that couldn't be fabricated. It was unparalleled. However, the pearl almost iridescent color of her silk evening gown made her appear more angelic than real. The dark red curls piled high upon her head accentuated the smooth perfect skin of her neck and shoulders.

Had I ever laid eyes on anyone this lovely? She was truly ethereal in her appearance. Unlike anything I had ever seen. If I didn't know she was just a flesh and blood woman, I would believe she was a celestial being. Emma would believe she was a princess.

I only had a moment to be enraptured by the vision before me before she shot me a tight haughty smile that reminded me she was very much female and she didn't hold a fondness for me. I had much to rectify, it would seem. The idea of doing so was suddenly very appealing. For the more time spent in her presence, the better I could discern if she was truly what I was searching for in a wife.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting long," she said although her eyes said she didn't care if she did. Yes, she was indeed full of willfulness that would be required for anyone who dealt with Emma.

"Not in the least. I would wait hours for the pleasure of escorting such a beauty as yourself anywhere," I replied. She tensed and I could tell she was unsure how to respond to the compliment.

"Oh, Miriam, you are absolutely gorgeous," her aunt exclaimed in awe.

Her cheeks flushed then as she shifted her gaze to her aunt who was openly praising her. For a moment, I thought she might scold or correct her aunt, but she simply gave her a soft smile and thanked her before turning her attention back to me.

Nicholas was right about one thing. I knew very little of Miriam Bathurst.



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Chapter Fourteen

Miriam Bathurst

The view was incredible. I had never enjoyed the opera in such luxury. Aunt Harriet was glowing and although I wasn't sure why Lord Ashington had invited me tonight, I was grateful my aunt was getting this experience. Furthermore, I didn't feel as if Lord Ashington were playing a game. The small amount of time I had spent with him thus far, he seemed truly interested in me. He'd inquired of my family, and when he had noticed the fondness I held for my sister, he asked more detailed questions of her. Mr. Compton had never asked of Whitney once. I hated that I was comparing the two, but it was difficult not to. They were the only two men in London I had spent more time with than just a dance or brief visit.

Before the music had even begun, the Earl of Ashington knew a great deal about me. I realized I had been talking since our arrival. The ease in which he asked questions made one forget they were talking so much. I felt my cheeks heat at the thought and studied my hands for a moment, trying to sort out all I had said.

"I do hope your sister gets to visit London this season. It is clear you miss her," he said, and I could hear the sincerity in his tone.

Glancing back up at him, I managed a smile. "Me too. She would simply love the city," I told him.

He returned my smile. "And do you love the city?" he asked then.

I thought a moment then decided there was no reason to lie. I shook my head. "No. I don't mind it. There are things, such as this, that are truly remarkable about being in London. However, nothing compares to the lush unspoiled countryside or the fragrant smell of the outdoors."

His smile softened. "I could not agree more. Whereas London is full of energy and lights, the countryside is full of natural beauty and peace. I miss it when I'm away."

His reply surprised me. "Away? You don't spend most of your time in London?" I asked. I had pictured someone like Ashington being near the city,

not tucked away in his country manor.

“Not if it can be helped. I much prefer the country,” he replied.

Lord Ashington had truly surprised me. As the stage lights drew my attention and the music began, my thoughts stayed on the conversation and how... it had been nice. Not at all what I had expected.

Aunt Harriet’s hand reached over and squeezed mine from the excitement of the evening. I smiled over at her and she was truly happy. Yet another thing that softened my previous feelings toward Lord Ashington. Nothing about this evening had been less than enjoyable.

Eventually the music pulled me in and I was lost in the beauty of the voices and the extravagance of the clothing. Whitney would adore this. I wanted this for her. I wanted her to sit in a box such as this one and experience it all. She was why I was here after all. I had come to London for her. Securing her a future was all that had mattered to me.

I glanced over at Lord Ashington and found his gaze wasn’t on the stage as mine had been, but he was leaning back in his chair watching me. I was suddenly very nervous and unsure of myself. Why hadn’t I noticed he was studying me? Had I been that lost in the scene below? I met his gaze unsure as to why he was watching me and wondering if I had been making a strange face or if I had possibly made a sound of appreciation.

Thoughts of Whitney were gone as I became acutely aware of his nearness and the darkness surrounding us. Although Aunt Harriet was on my other side, it suddenly felt as if we were doing something improper. We weren’t, of course, but my cheeks burned regardless. I was thankful for the darkness, so he couldn’t see my reaction to his attention. Why wasn’t he watching the performance as was everyone else? Wasn’t that why someone attended the opera? To watch the performance?

“It’s remarkable, isn’t it?” Aunt Harriet whispered close to my ear, causing me to jump.

I started to turn so that I may reply but not before I saw the amused smile on Lord Ashington’s face. It wasn’t at all like him. Nothing about that smile was stiff or unapproachable. It wasn’t forced but so very real. His eyes twinkled and he appeared years younger in that moment. How often did he smile that way? I was sure I had never witnessed it, not even when he was busy charming Lydia Ramsbury, not that I paid close enough attention to be sure, of course.

I felt my own smile spread across my lips in that moment and my chest felt funny. A little tug or maybe a touch of warmth. It was a strange new sensation I didn't quite know how to categorize and I wasn't sure the exact way to describe it. Whatever it was, there was something there in the moment I wasn't prepared for, but it excited me and possibly frightened me at the very same time. Lord Ashington was not a man in whom I should let my guard down and begin to feel things for... was he? How sure of his attentions could I be?

When I finally broke his gaze, and turned to my aunt, she studied me but a moment, then she grinned saucily. "Well, if I didn't know better, Miriam Bathurst, I would think you were smitten," she whispered.

My smile vanished then and I instantly frowned. "I am not smitten," I assured her. I wasn't a silly girl. One did not get smitten by a smile. It took more depth than that. I was more careful. There was a level of rejection I had suffered in my life that no other rejection could dare compare. It had made me tough and it had made me cautious. I wasn't sure I would ever allow myself to truly be smitten for the simple fact I didn't trust people. My father made sure of that.

Aunt Harriet wiggled her eyebrows then turned her attention back to the reason we were here. Unable to look back at Lord Ashington now, I did as well. Tonight had been meant to appease Aunt Harriet. It hadn't been meant for more. Yet, here I was, thinking possibly I had been wrong about Lord Ashington. There was more to the earl than he allowed the world to see. I just couldn't be sure I was brave enough to find out his depth. If he was closed off to protect himself then that I understood completely. For he had no idea the lengths I would go to in order to protect myself. Maybe it was we were kindred spirits and nothing more. What an interesting thought.

The beauty on stage eventually enraptured me and when the curtain call came, I realized I had forgotten Lord Ashington and my aunt. I'd been completely focused on the music. The lights were dim and slowly rising as I took a deep breath and turned to Lord Ashington.

"Thank you for inviting us tonight. This was truly a remarkable view," I told him honestly.

"Yes, I have never seen an opera from such a grand station," my aunt added, sounding pleased.

"It was my pleasure, ladies. I do hope you both will attend with me again. I

don't believe I've ever enjoyed the opera as much as I did tonight.”

His words again made me question their truth, although his eyes seemed so sincere. I wanted to believe he wasn't just being charming but honest as well. However, he had spent the last week with another lady on his arm and next week, it may very well yet another.

“That's very flattering, my lord,” I replied.

“It's the truth, Miss Bathurst,” he said simply then held his arm out for me to take.

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Chapter Fifteen

Nicholas Compton

“Your rose garden is truly one to be envied, Lady Ramsbury,” I said as Lydia and I walked farther away from her mother, who was sitting on a bench under the shade.

“Tis my mother’s garden, Mr. Compton. Not mine. I know little when it comes to flowers or shrubbery,” she demurred.

When I had arrived to call upon her this morning, she had been busy with needlework, sitting just so the sunlight shone upon her making her pale hair appear as if she were angelic. It was well thought out and placed. I had wondered who had thought of it, her or her mother. It was clear they both were aware my brother had taken Miriam Bathurst to the opera last night.

The forced smile on her mother’s face and Lydia’s solemn behavior this morning made that more than obvious. Even without the scandalous gossip papers that circulated London, word would have reached them by early morning, if not last night. I was myself surprised to hear the news and wondered if this was a game that Ashington was now playing with me.

However, the less than stellar conversation with Lydia compared to the time I had spent with Miriam, did make one the more obvious choice. Both were indeed beauties, although Miss Bathurst was more of a striking unique beauty whereas Lydia was a typical pale English beauty.

I had planned on inviting Lydia and Lady Ramsbury on a ride through the park this afternoon but perhaps I would wait. If Ashington was unsure of his attentions, I had to practice patience and see which way to move. The idea of using Miriam as a pawn in my revenge felt like a sour pill in my gut. My coming here had been me truly hoping Ashington was on the same course. I did not know how I would proceed if Miriam became part of this game. Did he know that? Was that why he had taken her to the opera last night? Had he sensed my weakness for her?

If only I were a praying man then I could put hope in something more than chance for my brother to choose Lydia and not Miriam for his future bride.

Although Lydia did seem rather fragile, much more so than Miriam. I wasn't a complete monster and guilt nudged me at the idea of causing her undo pain and humiliation. However, she would marry well eventually. Just not to a Compton. For that, she should truly be thanking me indeed. It would be much too easy if it were Lydia my brother chose. The other option was not something I was ready to face.

Feeling better about my plans for the ruination of my brother's future plans, I smiled my most charming of smiles and turned to Lydia. "I can't help but notice you aren't quite yourself this morning. Are you feeling unwell?" I asked as if I didn't know why she was in such a sulk.

Her cheeks blushed slightly and she ducked her head as if to hide it from me. *Oh, naïve girl, I am more aware of women than you shall ever know. I ask what I already have full knowledge of but want to only hear what your answer will be.*

When she finally lifted her gaze to me, she gave me a weak smile. "I feel fine, Mr. Compton. It's the stress of the season I believe. Mother does lay much importance on my making an advantageous match," she trailed off as if she wanted to say more but dared not.

"That does seem to be the case among mothers in the marriage mart. They all have their eye on the prize. It's unfair, I dare say."

Her eyes widened at my words. "You think? That it is unfair, that is?"

I chuckled softly, thinking how young and sheltered Lydia Ramsbury truly was. My brother would be a terrible match for her and if her mother cared at all, she would see that. "Of course that is what I think. I've seen ladies in their first season married off to a duke or earl too long in the tooth to produce an heir. It's a shame. Women should be free to choose a man they can love or at least like. Marriage doesn't have to be a business contract."

Lydia's face looked shocked by my words. "I believe, sir, that it does."

With a sigh, I continued to walk. Lydia Ramsbury had been trained from the nursery to marry for status and nothing more. She would do just as she was told and if the lord that asked for her hand in marriage was powerful enough, her father wouldn't care just how old he was. His daughter would marry.

We circled the rose garden in silence and as we drew closer to Lady Ramsbury, she bestowed upon me a smile that was pleased and possibly grateful for my presence. Not because she wanted to marry her daughter to a

mere Mister. But because she thought my brother would hear of this visit and come to call on Lydia. She may be right. I wasn't positive any longer what Ashington would do next. My hope was that he would indeed come to call.

"Your roses are to be envied, Lady Ramsbury," I told her, not really caring about her roses at all but knowing she would appreciate the praise.

"Thank you, Mr. Compton. I do so love to spend time out here enjoying them."

When it was clear Lydia was going to remain silent, I decided it was time I took my leave. "Thank you, ladies, for such a pleasant morning," I began.

"It has been our pleasure," Lady Ramsbury replied. "We did expect to see Lord Ashington this morning. You were indeed a nice surprise."

Ah, there it was. She couldn't help herself. She was asking me without truly asking me if I knew of my brother's whereabouts this morning. Lady Ramsbury must be desperate for information to stoop to asking the brother that Ashington detested.

I simply nodded, not giving her the satisfaction of a response and said my farewells before leaving both ladies behind in the garden. It was very likely that Ashington had spent the evening with Miriam because he needed more conversation. Lydia was rather quiet. I felt slightly drained from having to carry the mornings conversation as I climbed into my carriage but not before instructing the driver to take me to 18 Mayfair.

Ashington's carriage wasn't outside and to that I was relieved. My morning had been taxing enough. I was here for two reasons and seeing Ashington was not one of them. However, finding out how last night went *was* one of them. The other was completely selfish. I wanted to see Miriam. I was an honest man, at least I was honest with myself. Others, it was give and take.

The butler led me to the drawing room, and unlike the last time, I did not have flowers to enchant Miriam with nor was she entertaining a suitor. Instead, Miriam sat on the settee with a book open in her lap and what appeared to be a chocolate in her left hand.

Her eyes widened at my arrival and she sat both the book and chocolate down before standing up. "Mr. Compton," she said in way of greeting although it was neither warm nor inviting. I had come past the typical visiting hours and it was clear she was quite comfortable. I enjoyed seeing her this way and I was glad I'd chosen to stop by, even if it was unc customary.

"My aunt will be right back, she just left to go find a letter from her sister,"

Miriam explained. "I wasn't expecting company." There was a cautiousness in her eyes I truly hated to see there. She was not happy to see me nor did she trust me.

"It's past the typical visiting hours I realize, but I was passing by and wanted to see you. Seems I missed your conversation. My morning has been rather dull," I explained.

Miriam studied me as if she wasn't sure what to believe. "I thought perhaps you might be lost," she replied, not willing to pretend she was pleased with my company. I liked that fire. It was one more thing to like about Miriam Bathurst. As if I needed more encouragement.

"I am not lost, I can assure you. I've thought of little else but speaking to you after our last encounter." I decided a little bluntness was in order to get her attention if not to soften her as well. I didn't believe easing back into her good graces would be easy.

Surprising me, she motioned for the high back chair across from her. "Please have a seat. I shall ring for tea. Tis a bit early but biscuits must be better for me than the chocolates Aunt Harriet keeps around."

Smiling, I took the chair she motioned toward. "Thank you. Tea sounds good. As does your company." I hadn't expected to be offered a seat until her aunt's arrival in the room. This had to be a good sign.

Miriam took her seat again and didn't reach for the book or chocolate she had been holding when I arrived. "Is it my company you seek or are you here to find out about your brother's business?" she asked me directly without blinking.

There it was. The lady was indeed fearless. She got to the point and didn't feign ignorance to appear attractive. Something I had never understood anyway. Her offering me tea meant nothing. She had simply decided to deal with me head on. Lead the attack by making me uncomfortable. Had she hoped that would send me running? Surely not. She was much too smart for that.

"Both," I replied just as directly. If there was a chance that Miriam would be in the crosshairs of a revenge meant only to harm my brother then she deserved my honesty when requested. I wanted nothing more than for Ashington to choose Lydia. However, I could easily see my brother being bewitched by Miss Bathurst.

She nodded. "I thought so."

“Why does this not surprise me?” I asked.

She lifted a shoulder and sighed. “I don’t know, perhaps because your charming smile and pretty face don’t distract me from your true intentions. I am aware you will unleash your best work on whoever can best assist you in your games.”

“Pretty face? I don’t know if I should be insulted, horrified, or flattered. No woman has ever labeled me as pretty before, Miss Bathurst. Why is it with you I always experience a first?” I had chosen to ignore the part about my true intentions. It appeared Miss Bathurst understood way more than I had believed. I had to protect my plan for revenge. Even from her.

She scrunched her nose playfully. “Most people use the word pretty as a feminine description but the definition is not necessarily the case. Handsome is a harder more rugged description while you have such perfect features women find themselves swooning over your appearance alone. It is rather shallow.”

My laughter wasn’t forced or part of an act. It was real and it seemed that only in the presence of Miriam Bathurst did I feel any positive emotions at all. She reminded me of happiness and light. She made me want to be a different man. One that I was sure I could never be. Not even for her. However, in the moments I was with her, I wanted to forget that and just soak in the feeling of all that was Miriam.

Miriam, however, did not smile. It was almost as if she knew of my desire to see her smile at me again and was punishing me. I regretted the fact one day soon she would want nothing more than to forget me. I had no doubt she would accomplish just that. However, I knew forgetting her would be an impossible task. Miriam Bathurst may just haunt me for eternity.



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Chapter Sixteen

Miriam Bathurst

“I have the grandest of news, honey! Your sister is to come for a visit! Isn’t that the most spectacular thing? I have been sending requests to your mother as has your uncle since the beginning of the season and we finally got a response. She is a rather difficult lady, isn’t she?” Aunt Harriet came barreling into the drawing room, not only speaking so loudly in her excitement that it could be considered shouting, but she was also in her bare feet with a piece of chocolate in one hand and another shoved in the side of her mouth so she could speak while she read the letter in her other hand.

Unfortunately, she didn’t take a moment to look up from the letter she was reading as she continued to speak rather loudly in her American accent whilst eating the chocolate in her mouth. “She says right here that Whitney will require proper attire if we wish to take her out into the city but request that if we do not plan on buying her new gowns to keep her indoors unseen. Can you believe she’d say that? I mean of course we will provide the darling with gowns but that we should-” She stopped mid-sentence as she finally lifted her gaze from the letter in front of her to find I wasn’t alone.

Her eyes went so wide as her mouth dropped open in surprise. There was a moment of silence and I knew the small facts of her bare feet and chocolate stuffed mouth were all beginning to dawn on her. As I saw the light in her eyes, I began to giggle. I couldn’t help myself. Aunt Harriet was rather comfortable in her home and held no stock in formality. My gaze swung over to see how Nicholas Compton was taking this and I found that it was taking much for him to keep from joining me in laughter. I hadn’t felt like smiling much less laughing since his arrival but leave it to Aunt Harriet to change that.

It was in that moment laughter did join mine, but it wasn’t Mr. Compton’s. It was Aunt Harriet’s. She let out one of her loud belly laughs and finished eating the chocolate she’d had stuffed in the side of her cheek while speaking. This only fed my laughter more but then there was the reason she

had come in here so rashly and in a hurry to tell me the news that also had me suddenly feeling buoyant and full of joy.

I stood then and walked over to her. She stopped laughing and smiled at me as I stood in front of her. "Tis true. Whitney is coming?" I asked.

She nodded her head vigorously. "And we will buy her the most beautiful gowns. She will feel like a princess," my aunt promised.

My laughter soon turned on me and tears of joy filled my eyes. I threw my arms around Aunt Harriet, hugging her tightly. "Oh, thank you. Thank you so much. She will love London."

I missed Whitney more and more every day. Just having her here with me would make this all so much easier.

"Of course, honey. I would have gotten her here sooner had your momma not been so difficult," Aunt Harriet assured me. She didn't need to explain that. I knew all about my mother and how she could be.

Aunt Harriet patted my back and then said, "It appears you've come to call and found us in a less than formal state, Mr. Compton. I do hope you can forgive us," Aunt Harriet said over my shoulder in a tone that was light-hearted and not at all worried what he may think of all the emotion he had witnessed.

I pulled away from her then and wiped my eyes and face from the tears that had escaped. Crying in front of Mr. Compton hadn't been my plan, but the emotions that hit me all at once had been too much. I went to sleep at night thinking of the day I would once again see my sister. My dreams were of when she would be given the opportunity to experience the London season and all the things she wanted so badly.

"Please do not apologize," Mr. Compton said as I managed to dry my face enough to turn and face him again. He stood and I thought he was going to take his leave. For that I could not blame him. Most men would have bolted for the door well before now. However, he walked over to me and held out a small white starched handkerchief. I saw his initials in the top corner as I folded it before drying my face properly.

"Thank you," I said, but I didn't feel the need to make excuses for the scene he had witnessed. He had chosen to visit when we were not expecting visitors. My aunt was an American and her ways were not English ways. In her home, if she wanted to walk around in her bare feet and talk with her mouth full then she could. Furthermore, I was not trying to impress Mr.

Compton. I knew he was not here for anything more than information on his brother.

Whereas I did believe Lord Ashington was truly seeking a wife, Mr. Compton was only seeking to cause trouble. I could be wrong but that was how it all seemed to be playing out thus far. Nicholas Compton was being much too obvious with his back and forth between me and Lydia Ramsbury. He had chosen no other female to escort to the opera, for a walk in the park, or for even a dance. There was nothing true about his intentions.

“I was unaware we had company. It was just that when I opened the letter and saw that Alfred’s sister had finally agreed to send her youngest daughter for a visit, I knew Miriam would want to know right away. She has missed her so very much,” Aunt Harriet continued to explain herself, which I wished she wouldn’t. None of this was of any concern to Mr. Compton nor would it ever be. I was not going to be a willing participant in his games.

“It is my belief that Miss Bathurst is a very lucky lady to have such a loving aunt on her side who champions her the way you do. I am but a visitor in your home and I feel honored to have witnessed such a touching scene between the two of you,” Mr. Compton replied.

Although I knew his response wasn’t proper at all, Aunt Harriet beamed, having no idea how informal he was being. This was her way and if it made her more comfortable, so be it. At this point, how more informal could we be? She was already in her bare feet and talking with her mouth full.

The maid entered with afternoon tea that I had forgotten I had rung for at Mr. Compton’s arrival.

“Oh, do stay for tea,” Aunt Harriet said to Mr. Compton, not realizing the afternoon tea was quite early and I must have already sent for it due to his visit.

“I would love to,” he replied then turned to me and gave me a small smile. It was our secret. He didn’t want her corrected and if I didn’t like him for it. Most gentlemen would criticize and find reasons to leave. Nicholas Compton might have some faults, but this was not one of them. He had good deep inside, if only he chose to use it more.

Aunt Harriet seemed more than thrilled by his response. She clapped her hands together. “Wonderful. Let me find my slippers and I will join you both shortly,” she said then turned and hurried back out the door.

When she was gone, Nicholas looked at me. “Do her feet not get cold?” he

asked.

I shook my head. “No and it might be a while before she returns. She rarely remembers where she left them,” I replied honestly.

This caused him to laugh some more and I smiled as I took a sip of my tea. There was no harm in relaxing in his company. I knew he wasn’t here for reasons that concerned me. He simply came to find out what his brother’s intentions were. Truthfully, I doubted very much that Lord Ashington would spend much more time with me. I held no title and I was much too opinionated to be a countess. I had never thought to aspire to such ranks and I wasn’t sure I wanted to start. I needed a husband, but I didn’t require one with such a grand title.

These were the things I had been telling myself since arriving home last night. It did me no good to feel anything for Lord Ashington. There had been moments last night when an odd warmth in my chest startled me when I looked at him. He had been much more interesting than I had assumed. I believed he would make a fine husband. Just not mine. I wasn’t what he would choose as a wife and letting myself believe otherwise would lead to future heartbreak. For I was afraid I might find myself truly having feelings for Lord Ashington if I let my guard down.

“Tell me about your sister,” Mr. Compton said as he placed his cup of tea back on the table beside him.

The smile came easily to my lips as I thought of my sister’s arrival. “What is it you wish to know?” I asked him, not sure if he was truly interested or if he was seeking conversation only.

“Anything you wish to share. I’ve not heard you speak of her much and it is clear you two are very close. That is something quite foreign to me. Ashington is my only sibling.”

He didn’t need to say more. We both knew what he meant by that; however, I wasn’t sure it was Ashington’s fault entirely that the two hated each other. Nor was it my business to know the details of why they were at odds. Even if I did probe, I doubted very much that I would receive much truth. There was a gleam in Nicholas Compton’s eyes that made one question his sincerity.

“Whitney is a true beauty and brightens any room she enters. Her laughter is musical and she can make the dreariest of days happy. She finds joy in the simplest moments and makes one wish to see the world as she does. I don’t

miss home, I miss Whitney. She is home to me.” It was easy to speak of my sister. Knowing she would be here with me soon eased the ache of missing her so much. Just speaking of her made my mood lift.

Mr. Compton said nothing but the way he looked upon me was puzzling. It was as if he were seeing someone he had never met. Measuring them and their words perhaps. It was an odd experience to be on the receiving end of such a gaze. I wondered what he was thinking, but I asked nothing, remaining silent.

When he finally spoke, he cleared his throat and leaned back in the velvet high back chair. “Not in all my days have I heard a lady speak of another with such honest reverence. Even amongst sisters, there is always a hedge, be it rivalry or jealousy. However, your words were spoken with such purity that it can’t be questioned.” He said this as if he couldn’t believe the words he was speaking.

“I would give my life for my sister,” I stated because, in truth, I was doing just that. Choosing to marry was giving up the dreams I had for myself. The life I had wanted I would give up so that Whitney could have the one she deserved.

“I have no doubt and I must say I am shocked by it,” he replied, still studying me as if I were something strange. “I think you can’t be any more intriguing Miss Bathurst yet, with each moment I spend in your presence, I find I am wrong.”

His words were flattering I would admit, but again, I was never sure if I was but a pawn in his game. I dare not take his words to heart for they could become something to hurt me in the future. I was not in London for myself. I was here for my sister. I best remember that.

“I assure you I am as common as the next girl,” I replied then took a sip of my tea. In the future, it would do for me to be careful how much emotion I laid bare for others to see. Especially the likes of Nicholas Compton. His beauty was not something to be blinded by, for his inside did not reflect his outward appearance.



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Chapter Seventeen

Earl of Ashington

I wasn't sure how long I could remain in the city before going back to Chatwick Hall and dealing with pressing matters of business. Emma loved the country and would be more than happy to return, but I had yet to decide on a wife. Perhaps we could be gone but a fortnight and the time away would give me time to clear my thoughts.

A blur of yellow ran past me then skidded to a halt beside the library door before turning and darting inside. It was as if I hadn't been standing here at all. I waited and it was but a moment before I heard the heavy footsteps of Alice coming down the hallway.

"Miss Emma, if you stain one piece of furniture," she called out in a warning tone.

Stain? What had the child done now?

Alice spotted me and stopped. "Have you seen her?" she asked me, looking weary.

I pointed to the library door.

Alice raised her eyebrows. "Pray she hasn't touched your priceless collections with her jam covered fingers," she said then made her way to the library.

Concerned for my books, I followed Alice. The library was normally dark with the drapes closed, but I had been in here earlier and had them opened. I would remember next time to close them to keep naughty little runaway girls out.

"I know you took the jar of jam from the kitchen, Miss Emma," Alice began. "If you touch anything with the jam, you will ruin it. There are priceless books in this room."

I was scanning the area for any sign of small feet hidden under or behind something.

"I licked my fingers clean," a small voice called out.

I sighed in relief.

“There will be no jam with tea ever again for you if you don’t come out,” Alice warned.

That was enough to draw the well-hidden Emma from behind a bookcase containing all of Shakespeare’s plays. One small white slipper appeared then a small body slid out with it as she looked at both of us solemnly. Berry jam was smeared around her mouth and a touch on her nose. She may have cleaned her hands, but her face was quite a mess.

“Come, we must clean you up. Then to rest for you. No tea today. It seems you’ve had enough jam already,” Alice said.

Emma’s shoulders fell. “But I love the tea,” she replied.

“No, you barely drink the tea. You eat the biscuits covered in jam. However, you’ve eaten the entire jar of jam meant for our tea today so there will be no jam at tea.”

Emma sighed. “Don’t we have more jam in the kitchen?” she asked with the smallest touch of hope in her voice.

Alice shook her head. “The only jam left is for Lord Ashington’s biscuits.”

Emma turned her attention to me then. I could see her already planning and strategizing in her eyes. There was such intelligence in her tiny face and I was proud of it. “Do you want your jam, Ashington?” she asked it as if it were a challenge. As if I said I did, she would take it from me by force.

“Yes, Lord Ashington wants his jam,” Alice stated before I could respond. Apparently she did not trust my response to Emma in the least.

Emma ignored her as she often did and continued to size me up. Waiting for me to respond. As fearsome as she was trying to look, I was more afraid of Alice than I was of her. “I would very much enjoy jam with my biscuits,” I told her when it was clear she wasn’t moving until I gave her a response.

Her shoulders fell then and she looked forlornly back at Alice. “You are sure there is no more jam in the kitchen, Alice? Perhaps Mrs. Barton could run to the market for more?”

Alice shook her head vigorously. “Absolutely not. You have eaten an entire jar of jam, Miss Emma. It will be a miracle if you do not have a stomach ache because of it. Now, come with me and take your rest.”

Emma finally made her way over to Alice with the slowest of steps as if I would come up with a solution while she was walking.

“Remember this when you are missing tea today. Ask yourself was it worth it?” Alice told her as Emma reached her side.

Emma looked up at her then and her eyes went wide. “Oh, Alice, it was worth it. I love jam,” she replied honestly.

I covered my chuckle with a cough and covered my mouth as Alice hurried Emma out of the library.

Once they were making their way up the stairs, I turned to go back to my office when there was a knock at the door. I paused and watched from where I stood as the butler opened it. I wasn’t expecting anyone and rarely did visitors stop by so late in the afternoon. Tonight was Lady Witherington’s ball and I was attending.

When Charles, the butler, stepped back to allow entrance to the guest, I froze at the sight of Nicholas, as he took off his hat and his eyes met mine. “Hello, Brother,” he said jovially. “How kind of you to come greet me.”

We both knew that was not the case and his presence in my home so close to Emma made me tense. He wasn’t welcome here and although I had never stated such, it was an understood fact just as I would never appear on his doorstep. Emma’s safety was my ultimate priority. Nicholas was a threat to that.

“Why are you here?” I asked, moving toward him to keep him from coming any farther into the house.

“To see you, of course. We rarely have a moment to talk. We have much to catch up on,” he said as if we were truly brothers who enjoyed one another’s company.

“Then you need not come any further. I do not wish to see you and I have business of which to attend,” I replied then turned my back to walk away. He was not welcome here if for no other reason than to protect Emma. It was not time for him to know of her existence. My staff was loyal. They also adored the child. Their silence wasn’t for my benefit but for Emma’s and I knew it. Charles would understand this and he would make sure Nicholas came no further. I was the Earl now and there was no claim on this house for Nicholas.

“I’ve just been visiting with Miss Miriam Bathurst and her aunt. She is a rather charming lady, is she not?” Nicholas asked, stopping me from my retreat which was indeed what he had intended to do.

Turning back around, I looked at my brother. He thought I didn’t know what he was doing, what his plans were, but I was older. I understood his hatred for me. His need for revenge. I had humiliated his mother and the fact not once in my life had she shown me one small token of kindness even as a

child made no difference to him. He expected me to treat her with respect. He would forever be sorely disappointed. That woman was inherently evil but then there were times I was sure my father had been equally so.

“I do not care where you spend your time, Nicholas. It is of no consequence to me. If a lady cannot see through the mask of falsity you wear then she isn’t fit to be my countess,” I replied.

Nicholas was not one to show any emotion. He was the master at appearing jovial at all times, even when he was at his lowest. Our father had not condoned weakness and this had been the way Nicholas had learned to mask his own. I understood him more than I believed he understood himself.

“Very well, Brother. If you have no time to visit with me, I will be on my way. Do have a lovely evening. I presume I will see you again at this evening’s festivities,” he replied.

I did not reply. It would mean I was playing along with his games and I was not participating. Nicholas was damaged and although I had tried to protect him at a young age, I had failed. I couldn’t protect either of us. Turning, I left him there for Charles to see out. The sooner her left, the safer Emma would be. Although she was meant to be resting that did not mean at any moment she wouldn’t come flying down those stairs, creating another mischievous deed in her wake.



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Chapter Eighteen

Miriam Bathurst

Were they all so much the same? I was growing low on adjectives to describe the balls of the season. Soon Whitney would be in London with me, but even then, how would I find more creative ways to give her the details of yet another ball much like the last?

Gowns seemed to become grander and more elaborate as the ladies wanted to outshine the others. Favorite ladies had become very clear; some never sat out a single dance and others stood off to the side with lemonade and the gossip of the matrons to keep them occupied. Mothers had become even more aggressive as it became quite obvious that many gentlemen were openly seeking the hand of a particular lady.

My feet ached from the dancing and my mouth was so very tired of the smiling as I listened to Lord Briar speak of his days spent traveling abroad. Truly he had been to many exotic locations, but his talking never ceased and after a while, one's ears became tired.

As the song came to an end, he walked me over to my aunt, not once stopping his incessant chatting. If only he would be silent but for a moment. His voice was beginning to grate on my nerves. He was his own biggest fan and felt no shame in going on and on about his achievements.

"And I do so hope to have the pleasure of your company again," he was saying then, and I realized at some point he must have stopped telling me of the foreign transport industry and moved on to our farewell.

"Indeed," I managed to say, hoping that was the last dance I would experience with Lord Briar. I cared not that he was a viscount or how 'very successful' he was. My ears had never been so weary from so much chatter. Plus, he was also old enough to be my father.

My smile was forced and my aunt covered her mouth to conceal a fake cough. When he had finally walked away, I sighed in exhaustion. "Do you have any idea the different silks they have in India? Or perhaps you know about the unparalleled beauty of the beaches in Spain?" I asked my aunt and

she stifled a giggle.

“Lord Briar is well traveled I take it?” she replied.

I nodded. “Oh yes and ever so successful. He is quite impressive. Just ask him.”

Aunt Harriet grinned as she began to fan herself. I would regale her with more quips about Lord Briar over breakfast in the morning.

“Here comes a more appealing partner,” my aunt whispered beside me and I followed her gaze to see Lord Ashington headed in our direction.

“Please don’t turn down a dance with him this time,” Aunt Harriet whispered. “He did treat us to such a wonderful night at the opera,” she added, as if I needed reminding.

“I won’t,” I replied, feeling slightly ashamed that she felt she must plead with me.

“Oh, that’s good to hear,” she said with relief in her voice.

“He’s next on my dance card.” I turned to meet her gaze then and smiled.

“Of course he is,” she replied.

“Good evening, Lady Wellington, Miss Bathurst.”

Aunt Harriet did a small bow. “Good evening, Lord Ashington,” she replied, and I didn’t correct her for the bow. If her mishap was noticed by others, they could all very well get over it.

Lord Ashington smiled and bowed his head back to her.

He then turned his attention solely to me. “I do hope you survived your dance with Briar. I dare say he never once stopped talking the length of your time together. I was worried for your ears and peace of mind by the end,” he said with a teasing lilt in his voice.

The simple fact he had been watching me made me feel flutterings inside and I was taken aback by the sudden reaction. This was the second time Lord Ashington’s attention had brought me such a reaction. It was so new to me I wasn’t sure how to categorize it at all.

“He is very... informative,” I replied.

“If you should ever venture farther than Paris then he will be the man you should refer to for information,” Lord Ashington said with a full grin this time. He looked younger and not at all the earl when he smiled like that. He reminded me of... his brother.

“Indeed,” I agreed.

“Shall we,” he asked then as he held out his arm.

I returned his smile and stepped forward, taking his arm. Unlike Lord Briar, who smelled of moldy wood and ointment, Lord Ashington smelled of mint and spice. It was an appealing scent I wanted to draw closer to. Tonight, it had taken great will power not to watch his every move. He had danced once with Lady Ramsbury, and I would be lying to say I hadn't been slightly jealous. I knew his name was on my dance card and that was the only reason I was able to continue smiling and dancing with Mr... Mr... Oh I forgot who I had been dancing with at that moment. I'd been rather distracted. Lydia Ramsbury was wearing a beautiful gown of ice blue and with her pale blonde hair and skin, she did look like a princess this evening.

I was becoming like all the others. Measuring up the competition. When had this happened and when had I decided I cared who Lord Ashington danced with? Before I could think too much further into the matter, Lord Ashington took my hands and we were dancing. Nothing else seemed to matter at that moment.

"It has taken me three balls to secure a dance with you, Miss Bathurst. I do hope you live up to the expectation," he said.

I felt my face heat up and I knew I was blushing fiercely. "I'm afraid I may disappoint you, Lord Ashington. You may find that our first encounter was more of a blessing."

He laughed then and the light in his eyes made my heart squeeze a little, that is if a heart could squeeze. I wasn't sure that was a possibility, but it did, in fact, feel as if it had. "I believe you are unaware of your many favorable traits," he replied.

"It would seem. Unless one acknowledged my sharp tongue as a favorable trait."

He smiled at me softly. "Let me be the one to enlighten you, Miss Bathurst. Your sharp wit, kind heart, measure of decency, belief in what is fair, love for family, and, of course, your unsurpassable beauty are all favorable traits."

My heart was back to doing that funny thing again that I had no real explanation for and for once in my life, I truly had no words. My sharp wit had failed me, and I continued our dance unsure what the proper response was to such a description. It was more than a thank you could cover yet that was all I knew to say. Finally, after a few moments of thought, I replied.

"That was the most generous description I've ever heard, especially related to me. Thank you, Lord Ashington."

He studied me for a moment as our dance ended. "If no man has ever noted any of those things to you then he isn't a man worth your time. Those are just the finest of your qualities, but they aren't the only ones."

Again, I had no words. What other qualities did he think I had? I was afraid if he truly knew me, he would be sorely disappointed. The ones he had stated were nothing more than any other female would have. They weren't something that took much effort.

He held out his arm to me and we retreated in the direction of my aunt. I felt as if I should be saying more but I wasn't sure what the right thing to say would be at this moment. Should I praise his attributes?

"Would you mind greatly if Miss Bathurst and I stepped out onto the veranda for some fresh air for a moment? There are others out there so we won't be alone, I assure you." Lord Ashington's request to my aunt startled me since I had been inside my thoughts, wondering what I would say to him next. Now, he was excusing us to be outside. Did I want to be outside with Lord Ashington?

"Of course," Aunt Harriet gushed happily. "Please, go get fresh air. It is rather stifling in here. I am sure Miriam needs it."

She wasn't going to wait on me to give her a nod that it was okay. It was clear she wanted me outside with the earl. Tsk Tsk Aunt Harriet, you are becoming as bad as the other mothers here tonight. I couldn't be mad at her, however, because more time with Lord Ashington was something I wanted.

Lord Ashington led me to the large open archway where the breeze and cool evening air greeted us. I sighed in relief as we moved out toward the far left of the veranda near the different shades of pink roses covering the wall. They smelled as lovely as they looked.

"It's better out here, is it not?" he asked.

"Oh yes," I replied. "The fresh air is nice after so long inside."

"Do you spend much time outside when you are in the country?" he asked.

"If the weather permits. I enjoy the sunshine and warmth, but on cold dreary days, I prefer a spot near the fireplace and a book."

He smiled. "You enjoy reading very much." He wasn't asking. It was a statement. "I do as well. My library at Chatwick Hall is extensive. Perhaps you and your aunt and uncle could come for a visit."

"To Chatwick Hall?" I asked, not sure I was understanding him correctly. I wasn't sure where the Earl of Ashington's country estate was located exactly,

but I did know it was Chatwick Hall. That was all I could remember.

He nodded. “Yes, that is if you would be interested in a short break from the London season. Perhaps for a few days.”

He was inviting me to his estate. His home. What did this mean? Was this something he did often with ladies? “My sister is coming for a visit. I don’t know how long she will be staying with us,” I said.

“Excellent. I know you’ve missed her. She would come too, of course. I look forward to meeting this sister you care for so dearly. She must be very special.”

Whitney would be beyond the moon at the chance to visit a home such as Chatwick Hall. It would be even more exciting for her than the limited bit of London she was going to see while at Uncle Alfred’s. Lord Ashington was offering her a chance to experience a life she may never see otherwise. And if I was truly honest with myself, I wanted to see his home. I wanted to spend more time with him.

I fancied Lord Ashington. Admitting it to myself was slightly freeing.

“That’s very generous of you,” I replied.

He placed a finger under my chin and lifted my face up so that my gaze met his. The sincerity on his face made my heart pick up its pace. “Make no mistake, Miriam. I’m not being generous. I am being selfish. For I want more time with you away from this,” he glanced around then back to me, “circus. I want time for us to get to know one another and enjoy some fresh air. As for your family, that is a bonus because you care for them and I want to know the people you love.”

He wanted to get to know me.

He wanted to get to know my family.

He had called me... Miriam.

“We would love to.” My voice was but a whisper as I said the words.

He smiled then and it was the genuine sort of smile that made a girl feel it throughout her body when directed at her. There was a power he wielded with that smile and I wondered if he realized it.



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Chapter Nineteen

Nicholas Compton

Scanning the ballroom, my gaze locked on Ashington and Miriam as they entered from the veranda. He had taken her outside. How... charming. Perhaps I should have arrived early to see what he was about tonight. Had he been giving Miriam his undivided attention or had he taken her outside for some fresh air because he wasn't on her dance card yet again?

"Lord Ashington, I'm so glad you came," a female said to my left, and I begrudgingly turned from the study of my brother and Miriam to see Lady Gallagher standing much too close. The Duchess was half her husband's age. This wasn't the first time she'd sought me out while I was in London. I knew of her tryst with others and I also knew what would happen if her elderly husband ever found out about them.

"Good evening, Lady Gallagher." I bowed. "You are as lovely as ever."

She wasn't a young innocent lady any longer and she did not simper and blush. Instead, she leaned forward, making sure I could see her breasts pressed up high, almost spilling from her gown. "And you are as tempting as ever, Nicholas," she whispered near my ear.

Nicolette Gallagher was stunning and had been the season's belle four years prior. She had won the most powerful title and the eldest husband. That hadn't been enough for her though. She had also been known to flip up her skirts well before she had been married. Lord Gallagher had known this and forgiven her previous indiscretions. Perhaps he had wanted someone with experience. I was sure he'd chosen well if that was the case.

"If you will excuse me, Lady Gallagher, I do believe I am next on a lady's dance card," I told her.

She pursed her red lips in a pout. "You would rather dance? I can think of other things to be done out in the far garden. There is a shed... it's unlocked."

How she knew there was a shed that was unlocked should be alarming in itself. How many times had she taken a man to this shed? This wasn't her home. Did she converse with the gardener before arrival?

“As tempting as that may be, I do hold the highest respect for Lord Gallagher. You do understand,” I replied with my most charming of smiles before walking away from her in fear she may grab my arm and sink her nails into my skin.

She was a beauty and she was well-practiced in the art of sex. I had no doubt if I went with her, I’d enjoy myself at the moment. She would make it an experience to remember. However, I was but a mister and her husband was a wealthy powerful duke. I wasn’t going to the gallows for a tryst in the gardener’s shed.

I glanced over to see Lydia Ramsbury surrounded by several gentlemen. She didn’t seem to be hurting for attention, but then Ashington didn’t seem to care that she was so popular either. He was paying no mind to her or her suitors. As I neared them, I noticed Miriam’s aunt smiling and nodding happily. Miriam seemed pleased about something too and a little... shy. I’d never seen such a look on her face. Was she blushing?

After being stopped only two more times, I finally made my way to the three of them. Ashington turned to see me when Lady Wellington’s eyes met mine and widened as they oft did.

Ashington appeared unhappy to see me and that said all I needed to know. He was set on Miriam Bathurst, it would seem. Not what I had hoped. This would be more difficult. Miriam was not someone I could easily use. I had allowed myself to know her and I liked too much what I knew.

“Good evening, ladies. Ashington,” I said in greeting.

“Mr. Compton, it’s nice to see you,” Lady Wellington said, but I wasn’t sure she meant that. Her voice sounded unsure. Had my brother charmed them both so quickly?

“Nicholas,” Ashington said.

Miriam said nothing and that spoke more than anything else. She had already called me out on what she considered a game and now she was seeing my sudden appearance as part of that game. She was wrong. This wasn’t a game. It was revenge. It was more than a silly game. I wasn’t here to prove anything to my brother. I was going to humiliate him the way he had humiliated my mother. She may make that plan more difficult by being so acutely aware of the happenings around her as if he had just chosen Lydia, my task would have been so simple.

“I believe I am next on the lady’s card,” I informed them, although I knew

not where I was on her card. I had just arrived and I didn't know who she had danced with up until this point.

"You aren't on my card tonight, sir," Miriam replied with a false sweetness to her voice. It sounded like a challenge, however, and oh how I liked challenges.

"Are you quite certain?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

She nodded. "Yes. Most positive."

At that moment, Mr. Needs appeared several feet behind Ashington as if he was unsure if he should approach further. I wasn't sure what he was doing when Miriam stepped forward to take his arm. "Mr. Needs is next on my card, it would seem."

I watched as they walked toward the dance floor.

Ashington cleared his throat. "It seems, Nicholas, you arrived too late this evening," he said.

I forced a smile for the sake of Lady Wellington. "It does seem that way. I shall not make that mistake again." It was a warning. One I knew my brother would understand.

"Oft it only takes one late arrival to change the course," he replied then he turned to Lady Wellington. "As always, it was a pleasure. I will leave you with the company of Mr. Compton. Both of us can be more than any one lady must endure," he said, causing her to laugh then cover her mouth and blush furiously.

Then, by God, Ashington winked. He fucking winked.

Turning, I watched Ashington walk away. Not toward Lydia Ramsbury but off to a corner that was empty. He stopped, directed his gaze toward Miriam and Needs on the dance floor, crossed his arms over his chest and stood there. It was a claim and everyone watching him knew it. There was no mistaking his meaning.

I looked back at Lady Wellington whose eyes were, once again, wide with wonder. She appeared to be as surprised by the turn of events as I was. What must I have missed in the short moments Miriam and Ashington were outside on the veranda? There had to be more to it than that.

"It would seem my brother has turned his attentions," I commented, hoping for more information.

Lady Wellington nodded still watching him. "I do believe you might be right," she whispered as if others were listening to us. There was always the

possibility of such but rarely did I spend any care on the matter. “Miriam is truly a rare gem, but she makes it hard for others to see. She’s so guarded. It would seem Lord Ashington saw past her ... walls.”

My brother saw something and I could easily list all he was attracted to in Miriam Bathurst. A man would have to be deaf, mute, and blind not to find himself drawn to her.

“Miss Bathurst has managed to find some good in him, I presume?” I asked, knowing full well last I spoke with Miriam she wasn’t fond of Ashington.

Lady Wellington lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “I have no idea. Honestly, this is all rather fascinating, isn’t it? Here I thought a season in London would be boring and stuffy. I had no idea the drama that could come of it.”

Smiling at her rather candid response, I did so enjoy conversing with Lady Wellington. She was always amusing. “Never a dull moment,” I agreed. However, I had preferred my brother’s choice in a wife to be dull, indeed. He was rather boring, so it would make sense that he chose a countess equally so. Yet, here he stands watching the most interesting bright light in the room or make that all of England. Miriam Bathurst had managed to take his attentions from Lydia with no effort at all. She had merely been herself.

With a sigh of regret, I watched her smile at Mr. Needs and wish this could all be different. It was one thing to seek revenge for one’s mother. It was another to lose what could possibly be one’s future happiness. My brother would never make Miriam Bathurst happy. He would force upon her a life she would never fit into or desire to do so. Whereas with me, she could continue to be exactly as she is and I would enjoy every moment.

Did Ashington know I was drawn to Miriam? Is that why he was doing this? Had the revenge been turned on me and I hadn’t realized his move? Miriam was not a chess piece to be played. How could I sit back and watch him use her?

How far was I willing to go for revenge?



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Chapter Twenty

Miriam Bathurst

I couldn't remember a time in my life that joy had burst within me so brilliantly than when Whitney stepped inside the door of 18 Mayfair Street. Tears filled my eyes and my chest felt so full it might burst. I stopped but a moment on the steps and took in her angelic face before sprinting toward her, unable to believe she was finally here.

Her laughter rang through the entry way and my world was once again complete. I found myself in a mixture of laughter and tears as I held her, unable to let go. Although I had been watching for her carriage to arrive from the window in my room all morning, I was still afraid this was a dream.

"Let the girl breathe, child." Uncle Alfred's deep voice came from behind us. I eased my tight hold on her and pulled back unable to completely let her go.

"You're here," I said in awe.

"Yes!" she replied gleefully. "And you're crying!"

I laughed again and wiped at the tears on my face. "I have missed you so. 'Tis all."

She looked around in wonder. "With all this around you, how did you have time to miss me? It's beautiful."

"I would miss you if I were in the Queen's castle," I assured her then held her face in my hands to look upon it. She was truly here with me.

"I promised you I'd get Ada to send her, did I not? You'll one day learn to trust me," Uncle Alfred said as he approached us.

Whitney looked from me to our uncle who I knew she had never met. The time he had visited our home, I had been so young, even I didn't remember. I followed her gaze and smiled at the tall, broad shouldered, brusque man that had been so very generous to us all.

"Yes, you did promise me and I didn't doubt you. 'Tis my mother, I fear, I doubted," I replied.

He made a tsking sound, as if my mother held no real power, then turned

his attention to Whitney. “We are pleased to have you here, dear. You look much like your mother at that age. However, from what Miriam tells me, you do not have her demeanor and for that we are all grateful,” he said with a booming voice.

“Alfred!” Aunt Harriet scolded loudly. “Don’t talk about the girl’s mother so. She’s just arrived.”

Uncle Alfred turned to look back at his wife, as she hurried toward us having missed Whitney’s arrival. “How many days do I wait then until I may speak plainly in front of her? Miriam does not seem to mind. Do you, dear?” he asked me then.

Grinning, I looked over at Whitney who was watching the entire thing with a look of pure amusement on her face. She smiled brightly at me and then giggled. “One cannot mind what is the truth, Uncle. It is alright, Aunt Harriet. Whitney has lived in the same house with our mother just as I have. She holds no illusions of her.”

Aunt Harriet smiled softly then and took a step closer to Whitney. “Oh, you are as lovely as your sister said. She talked of little else. We are so glad to have you here with us. Our home is your home. We want you to feel comfortable here. I’ve had your luggage taken to the room across the hall from Miriam’s. However, Miriam did mention you shared a room at home. If you would prefer to sleep in her room then that is completely up to you. We are just overjoyed to have both of you girls here now.”

Whitney glowed under the warm welcome, and although I never doubted they would make her feel less than, I was so very grateful for their generosity. In her last letter, I could tell how excited she was to be coming, but she was concerned about her being a problem or in the way. Aunt Harriet would have one more daughter and it was clear she was ecstatic about it.

“We are happy to have you both in our London home. Harriet will see to your needs and then some. If you ladies will excuse me before the gossip magazines and the chocolates come out, I must retire to my office to handle some pressing matters,” Uncle Alfred announced.

Aunt Harriet ignored his remark about her two vices but her eyes did widen a bit as she asked, “Do you enjoy chocolates, honey?”

Whitney thought for a moment then nodded. “Yes, I believe so. I’ve only had them once at a Christmas party we attended a few years ago.”

“The Rockinghams,” I added, remembering all too well the abundance of

food at the party. Until now that had been the most elaborate home and party I had attended. London, however, made it pale in comparison. Oh, if only Whitney could go to a ball.

“Yes! The Rockinghams,” she said happily. “They had an entire table of chocolates. All shapes and colors. I had never seen anything so beautiful in my life.”

“You also went to bed with a very bad stomach ache,” I added.

Whitney blushed. “I was but only eight,” she replied.

Aunt Harriet laughed then. “Eight! I would have a stomach ache now if I were presented with a table of chocolates and I am... well, I will not disclose that number,” she then added with a wink. “Come ladies. Let’s go to Whitney’s new room and help her get things put away. Then we can have tea and chocolates. I must hear all about life in the country.”

I knew there wasn’t much for Whitney to tell. Our life at home did not compare to the life Aunt Harriet lived whilst in the countryside. I would wait to explain that though. For now, I was too anxious for Whitney to see the bedroom she would call her own while here.

“I didn’t get much chocolate in America. My family is large and very close, but we aren’t wealthy people. My father is a hard worker and always made sure we never went without, but I had never seen the side of life Alfred has shown to me. It is a miracle he still wanted to marry me after giving me my first chocolate on but our second outing. I must have looked like a wild animal given a fresh piece of meat. It had been the most wonderful thing I’d ever tasted. I knew I loved him then.”

Whitney was hanging on every word of Aunt Harriet’s story. I smiled as we climbed the stairs, wondering how long it was going to take for her to realize Aunt Harriet wasn’t wearing slippers or stockings. I had mentioned that habit to her in my letters, but she was so overwhelmed with everything on her arrival, I doubted very much she was thinking about our Aunt’s feet at the moment.

“That’s a lovely story,” Whitney said. “You married for love then? It wasn’t a match made by your father?”

Aunt Harriet laughed loudly. “My daddy knew better than to marry me off to a man of his choosing. He had raised his daughters to be strong and independent. When I met your uncle, he never said one word against him. He simply told me he wanted me to be happy. When your uncle asked him for

my hand in marriage, he replied, 'If she wants to marry you then yes. But I'll be givin' her to you to protect and provide for. The day you decide you don't wanna do that no more or the day that mouth of sass makes you so angry you want to slap it, you just bring her on back to me. Don't ever hurt my girl or that day will be your last. Make no mistake 'bout that.'

I had never heard this story, and like Whitney, I was paused at the top of the stairs, listening to Aunt Harriet talk with a strange accent as she repeated her father's words.

"Your father said that?" Whitney asked, sounding as amazed as I was.

Aunt Harriet nodded. "Of course he did. He told the same thing to my five sisters' husbands as well." Then she began walking down the long hallway toward the door that would be Whitney's.

Whitney looked over at me with wide eyes full of wonder. She had never been around anyone as colorful as Aunt Harriet. If that story entertained her, there were more where it came from. I was so happy to have her close to me again. Thinking of all I had to show her and all I wanted her to experience in London made my heart feel lighter than it had in years.

She was going to love it here.



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Chapter Twenty-One

Earl of Ashington

Laughter rang down the staircase followed by Alice's voice of correction. They were leaving two days early to go to the country and get settled in. I had struggled with this decision for several days, not sure if it was best for Emma to remain here or accompany me to Chatwick Hall. Leaving her here meant that anyone could stop by and there was that small chance she could be visible, even if the visitor never made it past the door. Nicholas being my primary concern.

Taking her with me could mean that she would need to be explained to the Wellingtons and to Miriam. In truth, I would need to test the ground with Miriam and Emma soon enough. See how Miriam responds to the idea that I have a ward and I would expect my future wife to aid me in proper rearing of Emma. However, I did feel it could be much too soon for that introduction just yet. I was still getting to know Miriam and now this was a chance to spend time with not only her but her sister, aunt and uncle. I knew little of them and they would be a part of her life. For Emma's sake, I must measure all their worth. Relying on an attraction to a beautiful woman was not enough.

In the end, I had decided taking Emma to the country, but not keeping her inside Chatwick Hall, would be my best way to protect her. There was a former Dowager house on the grounds that hadn't been occupied since my grandmother resided there. I had sent to have it spruced up and staffed for Alice and Emma. It sat far enough back on the land that the small light it would give off at night would seem as if it were a neighboring home.

There were, of course, holes in my plan, but of all my options, this was the one I was most comfortable with and having Emma close was important. I could protect her if she were there, while if she were here, I was too far away if someone were to see her, meaning I wouldn't be able to do so. I hated having to keep her in this small bubble, but until I was married and the story was set into motion, she must live this way if I was to hope for her to have a

future she deserved as a Compton.

“Ashington! We are going on a trip! We are going on a trip!” Emma sang gleefully as she skipped toward me after bouncing off the bottom step.

“Indeed we are,” I agreed.

She frowned up at me then. “Alice says you aren’t riding with us.”

I bent down so that I may be at her eye level. “I have business to attend to here, but I will be along shortly. You go enjoy the countryside. It has been too long since we were there.”

She nodded vigorously. “Alice says we are staying in the cottage. The one that looks like it is in my storybook.” She seemed so giddy with this idea, I wanted to sigh in relief.

“It will be as if you are living in your own fairy tale,” I told her.

She squealed then spun around to face Alice who was standing a few feet away. “Did you hear that, Alice? We shall be living in our own fairy tale.”

Alice gave a nod. “Indeed we shall.”

Emma turned back to me and threw her small chubby arms around my neck. “I shall miss you, Ashington.”

Returning her hug, I felt my chest tighten. “I shall miss you more, Emma.”

She leaned back enough to press a kiss to my cheek then stepped away. “Do not be sad. We will see you soon,” she said with a small grin.

I stood then and gave her a small salute.

Alice held out her hand and Emma went running over to her and took it. “Come Alice, it is time for us to begin our journey.”

Alice glanced back at me with an amused smile on her typically tense face. I gave her a nod and she led the way to the servant’s entrance. Emma could not enter and leave through the front door for others would see a child and gossip would immediately begin. It was yet another thing I did to protect her but wished it weren’t required. This was Emma’s home and having her live as if she did not exist was unfair, yet I saw no other way.

I walked to the front entrance and Charles helped me with my jacket before I stepped outside. I wanted to see the carriage as it came from the side of the house and hopefully catch one last wave from Emma. I knew Alice would keep her safe at all costs, but I was never comfortable when she wasn’t close enough for me to protect.

Just as their carriage came around the house and onto the street, a small hand darted out the window and waved vigorously. Smiling, I waved back at

her. She was on a grand adventure and she didn't get to leave the house often enough. When we had left Chatwick for the London season, she had been sad to go. She loved the countryside as much as I did. It would be a nice break to get some fresh air.

"Are you ready, my lord?" the footman asked and I realized I hadn't noticed his arrival.

I gave him a nod and then turned back to Charles who was waiting on my instruction at the door. "We shall return no later than Tuesday eve," I informed him. Of course, if this trip was a mistake, we would be back sooner, but my hopes were that I would find all I needed in Miriam Bathurst and her family.

"Safe travels, my lord," he replied then stepped back into the house and closed the door. After this trip, all of London would know I was considering Miriam Bathurst as the next Countess of Ashington. No other lady had I invited along with her family to Chatwick Hall. The statement was very clear for the Wellingtons as well.

Another gentleman could ask for Lydia's hand in the process and I could have made a grave mistake. For her demeanor was that of a countess and one that would be readily accepted in all social circles. Whereas Miriam Bathurst was but a baron's daughter and she had lived her entire life in the country. I was choosing Miriam for her strength of will and ability to handle the spirited Emma. If I chose wrong, it would affect the rest of Emma's life.

If I were to be completely honest with myself, there were other reasons I was choosing Miriam Bathurst. Her wit, intelligence, determination, love for her family, and unparalleled beauty all had something to do with it as well. I was attracted to Miss Bathurst. Taking a wife to my bed hadn't sounded at all appealing before, but when I put Miriam in that role, I was very anxious to do so indeed. One did not need the entertainments of a mistress when they had a wife such as Miss Bathurst. Yet, I could not let my desire for her sway my choice. I had to choose who was best for Emma.

Feeling as if the weight of the world was indeed on my shoulders, I climbed into the carriage. I did not believe I would ever sexually desire Lydia the way I did Miriam. A marriage to her would be one of convenience and nothing more. Whereas with Miriam, it would be exciting and challenging in the very best way.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Miriam Bathurst

There were not adequate words to describe the splendor of Chatwick Hall. Upon arrival, I had been so struck by its grand beauty, I hadn't heard a word that Aunt Harriet had spoken. Whitney, however, reached over and grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly. I took my eyes off the lands and home, but for a moment, so that I could look at her face.

She was wide-eyed as she took in the view before us. If nothing were to come of this and Lord Ashington found that we weren't suited after all, this weekend would be worth every moment spent. Whitney was getting to live her dreams. She blinked twice, as if coming out of a daze then looked at me. "Have you ever seen anything so grand?" she asked in a hushed whisper.

"No," I admitted. For I truly hadn't.

"If the outside looks like this, I can't wait to see the inside," Aunt Harriet added.

We both nodded in agreement.

"I bet it is as splendid as the Palace," Whitney said.

Aunt Harriet laughed then. "Buckingham? Oh dear, it's majestic, but I do not think the inside will be fit for royalty."

I wasn't so sure. The closer we drew to the entrance, the more breathtaking it became. I was thankful we hadn't all ridden in a carriage together. Although the carriages that Lord Ashington had brought to gather our luggage and to pick us up were larger than any I had ridden, having the men in one and us in the other had been much more comfortable. Especially now that we were ogling his home.

There were things about Lord Ashington I still wasn't sure of and just because he had a home as grand as this one didn't mean I was ready to become his wife. Not that he had asked, of course. I just wasn't that shallow. A lifetime of misery would not be worth a home such as this one. Remembering the Ashington I had met before he had invited Aunt Harriet and me to the opera was important. One did not change overnight. I must

figure out the true nature of Lord Ashington.

The carriage pulled to a stop, and Aunt Harriet looked at me. “You must rescue Lord Ashington from Alfred. He’s been the inquisition for the entire journey, of this I have no doubt. Lord Ashington needs a reminder of why he invited us and a break from your uncle.” Although she was smiling as she said it, I could tell she was very serious. I hadn’t thought much about what they were talking about in the carriage ahead of us. If Uncle Alfred had truly been hammering him with questions, that would be embarrassing indeed.

Whitney giggled at that and I gave her a rueful grin. Just what I wanted to do after a long day’s ride: entertain the Lord of the manor. Whitney gazed out her window again in awe and sighed. To see her so happy, I would do anything. Besides, Lord Ashington wasn’t difficult to be around most of the time.

The carriage door opened and Aunt Harriet took the hand of the footman and stepped down. “I’ve never seen such a grand home in my life, Lord Ashington,” she exclaimed with delight.

Whitney giggled then covered her mouth, her eyes wide with disbelief at Aunt Harriet’s loud announcement. She was still surprised by Aunt Harriet’s ways, but soon, she’d grow accustomed to them. I shrugged and nodded my head for her to take the footman’s hand.

All amusement was gone when she was outside and standing before the home. This was why I had come to London. I hadn’t dared hoped for something quite like this but I had wanted to give Whitney the life she dreamed of.

As I stepped down from the carriage, my eyes met Lord Ashington’s and I smiled. It was genuine. He had given me a gift, just by making my sister and aunt so happy. Even if nothing more came from our time together, I would forever be grateful for this invitation. His life was one that we knew little about. Aunt Harriet and Uncle Alfred danced along the hem of this lifestyle. They were wealthy in the eyes of the ton, but this kind of wealth went far beyond what one could make. It was history. It was part of who Lord Ashington was.

“I trust your carriage was adequate,” he said, closing the space between us and offering me his arm.

“Yes, it was more than adequate. We were ever so comfortable. Thank you,” I replied.

“Very good. Would you like to be shown to your room so you may rest?” he asked as we made our way toward the entrance.

I thought of Uncle Alfred and Lord Ashington being stuck with him for several more hours. He was sure to have many questions about the grounds. “If it’s not too much trouble, I thought perhaps you might show me around. A walk outside after so much sitting would be lovely.”

A smile lifted the corners of his mouth and I wasn’t sure if it was in relief that he was free of Uncle Alfred or that he liked the idea of a walk. Whatever the case, it was the right thing to say. “Of course,” he replied.

I wanted to ask if Whitney could come too, but I didn’t. After such a long time in the carriage, she would need to stretch out her leg and rest for a while. It always cramped up and bothered her after travel.

When we stepped inside Chatwick Hall, I decided Aunt Harriet was wrong. Surely even Buckingham Palace wasn’t as majestic as this. I stopped and took in the stately entrance, marble floors, priceless works of art, and domed ceiling.

“Welcome to Chatwick Hall,” Lord Ashington said as we all stood in wonder. Even Uncle Alfred seemed at a loss for words.

What it must have been like to grow up here. How often did one get lost? I noticed then several maids were waiting quietly beside the staircase. There were three younger girls and one older woman who appeared to be the one in charge. I smiled at them and then wondered if they got lost in this home.

“After a long day of travel, I am sure you could all use a rest and time to freshen up. Agnes,” he waved toward the older lady who stepped forward, “will make sure everyone finds their room and your things are put away. If you should need anything, just ask.”

Aunt Harriet thanked Lord Ashington again and went toward Agnes, clearly ready to find a room and get some rest. Whitney followed her and I noticed her limp was slightly worse from the stress of travel. She would never ask for help or mention her discomfort. My leaving her so soon after our arrival would be difficult. She may need some help.

“What can I do to help?” Lord Ashington asked in a low voice beside me.

Startled, I hadn’t realized he was so close, and I turned to see him watching Whitney as she walked slowly behind Aunt Harriet. His consideration was thoughtful. I wasn’t sure others would pay much mind to my sister’s condition.

“If she could be shown her room so that she may rest and elevate her leg. It helps after travel.”

He nodded and motioned for someone I didn't see, then suddenly a man appeared at his side. He was older than Lord Ashington. His hair was silver and although it was clear he worked here, he still seemed rather refined. I heard him give the man the directions I had just requested for Whitney and the man was gone.

“Neil will make sure it is all taken care of. Agnes will know of Whitney's needs and she will be in the best care.”

“Thank you,” I said, wishing I could convey how I felt in words. It was more than simple thanks. It was relief. Whitney had always been my biggest concern. “She is so excited about being here. This is something I could have never given her. The travel is never easy on her, but she wouldn't miss the opportunity to visit a place such as Chatwick Hall. I am truly grateful, Lord Ashington,” I said the words with the emotion I felt, hoping it was enough. Although words rarely were.

He lifted an eyebrow. “Are you? Truly grateful?”

I was confused and taken off balance for a moment as I nodded slowly then said, “Yes, of course. How could I not be?”

“Then for this weekend, could you try addressing me as simply Ashington?”

I stood there staring up at him, unsure I was hearing him correctly. That was so informal and familiar. How was I to do such a thing? We didn't know each other well enough for me to address him by his given name.

“It's simple. Just Ashington. Lord Ashington was my father, and although I have adjusted to the name the past few years, I am still struggling. Hugh is my given name, but it was also the name my father called me. I do not have fond memories attached to it.”

When he put it like that it made it very hard to argue.

“Very well but if I am to address you as... Ashington, then you must call me Miriam,” I replied, wanting to level the field.

He grinned then. Almost wickedly. “I had intended to.”

Maybe I should have been taken aback by his forwardness, but I wasn't. I laughed. Perhaps that wasn't proper, but then I was not always the proper English miss. It was something he must know before it was too late.

“Your lady's maid is here to see you to your room. I will await your

company in the parlor. Please take your time, Miriam,” he replied, still grinning as if he had a secret.

“Thank you, Ashington,” I replied, before turning to walk toward the young brunette who was smiling shyly at me. I heard Lord Ashington chuckle behind me and my smile grew even brighter.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Earl of Ashington

While I was prepared to wait for quite a while, Miriam surprised me by returning in under an hour. Glancing up from the book in my hand, I was struck by her sheer beauty. Were ladies not meant to spend hours preparing to look as lovely as she so effortlessly appeared?

Closing the book in my hand, I placed it on the table beside me then stood up. “If you had needed to take more time, I would have understood,” I said, hoping she hadn’t rushed to return to me. Although, then again, the idea was appealing if done so for the correct reasons.

“Whitney is resting now and I need nothing more than to stretch my legs and explore,” she replied with a soft smile on her lips.

“Then I am a very fortunate man.” My words caused a slight blush to appear on her cheeks.

She said nothing more as we made our way out of the room and down the long hallway toward the entrance. Having her alone excited me. There was no one around for either of us to perform for their benefit and I would truly get to see Miriam Bathurst, or at least some of the real person beneath the protective layers she so firmly kept in place.

The late afternoon sun shone brightly in June and I inhaled deeply of the fresh air as we walked down the stairs toward the grounds.

“There is truly nothing like being home is there?” she asked me then, breaking the comfortable silence we had fallen into.

I thought of this place and the memories it held. Emma was changing those with her existence, but there was a lifetime of pain and loneliness within these walls. I wasn’t sure when it would feel like home. That revelation wasn’t one I wanted to have with Miss Bathurst so soon, however. Instead, I replied, “Indeed. Do you miss your home terribly?”

She was silent for a moment then she turned her head to glance up at me before speaking. “Whitney is my home,” she said. “I miss the country, but here we are soaking it in. I haven’t anything to miss now.”

Her words were simple yet spoke more than an in-depth conversation. Miriam had a mother who was alive, yet she said nothing of missing her. I understood all too well the lack of love or even mere affection between a child and their parent. I too suffered from that my entire life.

Whitney was very important to her and she seemed bent on protecting her younger sister at all cost. I admired her dedication. The degree of love it took for one to care as deeply as she obviously did for her sister said much about her character. More so than I could find out in time spent with her. Although, I hoped to have much of that too in the future.

“Your sister is lucky to have you,” I said.

“Oh, it is I who am lucky. Whitney brought love and joy into my life. I could not imagine a life without her in it. I dare not even try.”

Again. So many things spoken in so few words.



“Ashington! You’re here!” Emma exclaimed with glee as I walked inside the cottage.

I held open my arms just in time for her small body to slam against me. “I told you I wouldn’t be long,” I reminded her as I returned her embrace.

“It’s perfect, isn’t it?” she asked me as she let me go and stood back to hold her arms out wide.

I looked around the cottage that I hadn’t been in myself since I was a boy. “I do believe it is,” I agreed.

Emma spun in a circle. “I feel as if I am living in a storybook.”

“Storybook or not, you will finish your written assignment before you go back outside tomorrow,” Alice replied as she entered the main living area.

“Good Evening, Lord Ashington.”

“Hello, Alice,” I replied, standing back up. “I see things are the same. Nothing new.”

Alice sighed. “Just the same.”

I turned my attention back to Emma. “Tomorrow, I will be expected to entertain my guests. However, if you do all your assignments then we may go on a walk together before sunset. How does that sound?” I asked, hoping to inspire Emma.

Emma thought for only a moment then nodded her head vigorously. “Yes!

I shall do all that horrible writing if we can go for a walk.”

I looked back at Alice who appeared grateful for some assistance. “Very well then it is settled. You do all the work Alice gives you and I will take you on an adventure walk.”

“To see the horses? I have missed them, you know.” Emma sounded mournful.

I thought about the chances of someone seeing us and if it was just before sunset, we should be safe enough. “Of course. I am sure Buttercup has missed you as well. Be sure to bring her carrots. She will expect that from her very best friend.”

Emma beamed brightly. “Oh, I shall! “

Alice stepped forward then. “I promised you could remain awake until Lord Ashington stopped by to visit. Now it is late and you must get ready for bed. Tomorrow is a full day.”

Emma’s smile fell and she looked ready to sulk.

“Sleep is required for princesses and those who live in storybook cottages,” I told her.

She paused then finally nodded reluctantly. “I suppose it is. Goodnight, Ashington.”

“Goodnight, Emma,” I replied.

I waited until Alice took Emma’s hand and they disappeared into the back bedroom before seeing myself out. The evening sky was clear and the stars were on full display. I missed this when in London. Walking under the starlight, I headed back toward Chatwick Hall. Wellington had been an easy guest. Two cups of port and he was ready to turn in for the night. I’d been free to go check on Emma.

I hadn’t stopped by the parlor to see if the ladies were still awake. I knew Emma’s bedtime was near and I didn’t want her to be kept up on my account. She was expecting me today and there was no power on Earth that could have gotten her in that bed until she saw me. Smiling, I turned the corner and came out of the wooded path that led to the cottage and into the clearing.

Chatwick Hall stood majestic and lit up in the night. I saw what others did when they looked upon this place and I understood its impressive grandness. However, it held memories for me that couldn’t be changed. To me, this place had always been more imposing than it had been grand.

Crossing the backside of the garden, I glanced up at the window that I

believed to be Miriam's. The room was aglow with light. Either she was awake or she was yet to enter her room for the evening. Perhaps she was still visiting with her aunt and sister. Thoughts of finding her in the parlor caused my pace to pick up as I made my way to the house. However, just as I made it to the gardens, I saw movement.

Stopping, I waited for my eyes to adjust to the darkness and saw the pale blue of Miriam's gown shimmer against the moonlight. She turned then and saw me at the arched entrance to the gardens. I couldn't see her face clearly in the shadows, but I knew I had surprised her by my appearance.

"Lord Ashington," she replied.

"Try again," I said, taking a few steps in her direction so that I may see her clearly.

She paused but for a moment then I heard a small sigh before she said, "Ashington, then. I didn't realize you were out tonight. I needed fresh air. I do hope that it is okay."

It was more than okay. She had given me exactly what I had sought. Time with her alone, again. This afternoon had been much too brief.

"I want you to be comfortable here. You may do as you please. There is never any reason to ask," I assured her.

Her head tilted to the side and long red hair spilled over one shoulder. "Did you also need some fresh country air?" she asked.

I nodded once. "Indeed. It is hard to ignore the gentle call of the night whilst in the countryside."

"I thought the gardens were lovely in the daylight, but there is something magical about them tonight with only the full moon to illuminate their beauty."

Today I had led her to the gardens on our walk to continue our conversation I had hoped to deepen. Miriam was so taken with the flowers she had been distracted and I had, in return, enjoyed watching her enjoyment.

"I am told my mother loved these gardens. After her death, they remained the same. My father never had them changed. My stepmother hated it out here, however." I stopped then. This was not information that I needed to share with Miriam. Perhaps my future wife but Miriam was not that just yet.

"They must be very special to you," she said simply.

"They are the thing I love most about this place," I replied. For that was the truth. Here was something that had been my mother's. Something my father

hadn't changed.

Miriam was silent, staring off into the darkness for a moment, and I watched her. The delicate line of her chin and soft plump form of her lips were quite near perfect. Did she realize that? She didn't seem the sort of female that understood her physical beauty and the power it wielded. Or was that an act? There was so much I didn't know about Miriam Bathurst.

"What was your childhood like?" I asked her, thinking of how differently her life must have been. Not because of the difference in wealth and title but because of the fact she had both her parents. I understood from her earlier words that she wasn't close to her mother but what of her father? Was her relationship with her mother strained only because she was sent off to marry a wealthy man to save her family from poverty? There were so many things I did not know and the more I was around Miriam, the more I craved to know her.

I saw her shoulders drop just a touch, but it was enough to give her away. Then she looked at me. "The truth? It was difficult. Whitney made life bright and happy. The rest of it wasn't a story one wants to share," she said. I remembered her words earlier today about her sister bringing love and joy into her life. I had hoped she hadn't meant her childhood had been difficult, but it appeared it must have been.

"How is that?" I asked, not wanting her to stop there but fearing I was pushing too hard for information she wasn't ready to give.

"I wasn't a boy," she said halting my thoughts, and I stared at her confused by her words. "My father wanted a boy and I wasn't a boy. My twin brother was the boy he wanted and he didn't live past three days old. I was the child that he wished had died instead." Her words were almost a whisper.

I remained silent. More from the horror of what I had just heard than anything else. Did she truly feel that her father had wanted her to die? My struggles with my father paled in comparison. How could someone as bright, witty, and beautiful feel as if they were unwanted by their own parent? My father had made me feel as if I were a disappointment, but I had never believed he wished me dead. No child should grow up believing something so horrible.

"What of Whitney? Did he want her?" I asked, needing to find a small fact that would clear away this belief that she was unwanted. The idea of Miriam living with that kind of horror bothered me deeply.

She shrugged then. “He didn’t much care for her either. She wasn’t a boy. However, he ignored her and that was a blessing. I was thankful for that. She’s gentle and sweet. Her spirit couldn’t have handled it if he had chosen to acknowledge her.”

There was a darkness in Miriam’s voice that warned me I didn’t want to know more. I wasn’t sure she meant to warn me, but it was there. A smart man would stop asking questions and lighten the mood. Wanting to get to know Miriam meant knowing all of her and this was obviously a very large part of who she was. A hate for a dead man began to burn in my gut and I felt helpless to do anything about it. How could I fix damage caused such as this? Knowing I needed to stop asking questions for the answers would only haunt me, I couldn’t seem to do as my head screamed I must.

“He didn’t ignore you?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No,” she said as she stared off into the darkness. “He reminded me every day that I wasn’t the child who should have lived. I wasn’t the son he deserved. My life was a curse.” Her voice broke as she said the last word and I closed the space between us.

I wrapped an arm around her and pulled her to my chest. She didn’t cling to me and cry the way I expected her to do. Women normally broke down that way. I had experienced it more than once. Instead, she simply let me hold her. There were no tears or dramatic sobs. Just the silence of the night surrounding us. The part inside me that had twisted into an ugly hatred of a dead man needed her to cry in my arms so that I could help mend her. Nothing I could do would heal her past, yet I needed to do something.

“He was wrong,” I told her. I might not know Miriam Bathurst well, but what I did know was she was a loving niece who accepted her aunt no matter her faults and she would do anything for her sister. Even give up her own chance at happiness. Those two attributes were why we were here this weekend. The man who had raised her knew nothing of her. He had lived a bitter life and died without knowing the beauty his oldest daughter was. It was his loss and one he so rightly deserved. Yet as I held her, I knew none of these things mattered for there was a little girl inside who had just wanted to be loved.

She pulled back from my embrace and looked up at me. Her eyes were damp with unshed tears and she smiled sadly. “I know that now. I didn’t for a very long time, but my father wasn’t a well man. His addictions were a

sickness that attacked his mind and eventually his body. I know he never loved me, but I no longer need his love to feel loved.”

Miriam Bathurst was many things and the more layers I managed to peel back, the more true beauty I found. She hadn't allowed her childhood to defeat her nor had she let it make her cruel or selfish. She had become strong because of it. She was loyal and she was exactly the kind of mother I wanted for Emma.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Miriam Bathurst

In the morning light, I was truly embarrassed by my emotional outburst last night in the garden. I had never shared my father's disdain or perhaps hatred for me with anyone. Yet, somehow, in the safety net of the darkness, it had all come tumbling out. While Lord Ashington, had been truly wonderful about it all, I still felt ridiculous for sharing such intimate details of my life.

He had been the one asking me questions, but then I was usually very gifted at evading answers. Last night that gift had failed me as I had blurted out all the horrid details of my youth. When I had gone out to the gardens, I expected to be alone. His arrival had caught me unaware and perhaps I had been somewhat vulnerable.

Whatever the case, I should apologize to our host today. He did not invite us here so that he could counsel me on my troubled childhood. I watched as the lady's maid, Gertrude, that had been assigned to me finished styling my hair in a loose gathering on my head with several loose curls, framing my face before standing up.

"Could you remind me where I am to be for breakfast?" I asked Gertrude.

She grinned and two dimples flashed in her cheeks, making her appear much younger than I had first assumed. "Yes, Miss. Come I'll show you the way," she said and for that I was grateful. This place was so easy to get lost in.

"When you first began working here, did you get lost often?" I asked Gertrude.

She chuckled. "Yes, Miss. Once I was found in the east wing crying because I couldn't find my way to the kitchen," she recalled.

I smiled at her story and she closed the door behind me then waved a hand for me to follow her as she started down the long hallway. I glanced up at paintings along the way and wished I had more time to study them and decide who they were. One was of two young boys and I knew it must be Ashington and Nicholas. I wanted to come back and spend more time looking at that one

soon.

Gertrude moved quickly and I had to keep up. I knew we were drawing closer after we descended the stairs and headed left. Two large doors stood open and inside was the long dining table we had enjoyed a delicious dinner at last night. Gertrude turned to me then curtsied and scurried away behind a door.

I noticed Uncle Alfred was already at the table with a paper in hand and a cup of tea. Aunt Harriet was beside him, buttering a biscuit. I entered the room and glanced down at the end of the long table to see Ashington also with a paper and a cup of tea in front of him. Aunt Harriet was the first to notice me. Her gaze met mine and she smiled brightly.

“Good morning, Miriam. You will be pleased to know Lord Ashington has plenty biscuits, jam and hot chocolate,” she announced.

“Yes, I am sure the girl has come down here concerned over the state of Lord Ashington’s breakfast offerings,” Uncle Alfred drawled and rolled his eyes.

I glanced over at Ashington, and he was grinning behind his cup of tea or what I assumed was tea. Perhaps he was a coffee drinker. Some gentlemen preferred coffee in the morning, although it was an oddity I did not understand.

“I am sure anything he has will be splendid,” I replied and took my seat to the right of Ashington and across from my aunt.

“Of course,” Aunt Harriet agreed then winked at me, holding up a buttered biscuit before taking a bite. I struggled not to laugh at her antics. I wasn’t sure how Lord Ashington would handle such behavior at his breakfast table.

“You forgot the jam,” Uncle Alfred told her and I did laugh then. Covering my mouth, I hoped it wasn’t too loud. Uncle Alfred looked at me and raised his eyebrows. “She was rather enthused about the jam, was she not?” he asked.

I nodded and dropped my hand back to my lap. “Yes, I do believe she was,” I agreed.

Aunt Harriet finished the bite in her mouth. “I am going to try the jam. I just needed to taste the biscuit without it first.”

“Are we a connoisseur of biscuits?” Uncle Alfred asked.

I bit my bottom lip to keep from laughing again.

“Is it always this lively in the mornings at your breakfast table?” Ashington

asked then.

I felt my face heat up as I took a quick peek in his direction.

“More so, I am afraid,” Uncle Alfred replied dryly.

Aunt Harriet giggled then and I couldn’t help but smile. Turning my attention to Ashington, I lifted the corner of my mouth in a smirk. “Oft times Uncle Alfred will wake up early enough to take his breakfast without us. Rude as it may be,” I told him.

Ashington grinned. “Is that so,” he drawled.

“I am sure Lord Ashington will understand that choice after our morning meal,” Uncle Alfred replied.

“I find a quiet meal boring,” Aunt Harriet informed Lord Ashington. “I grew up with seven siblings and there was never a moment of peace in our house. I don’t think I could eat if it was silent.”

“Or if you hadn’t any jam,” Uncle Alfred added.

I covered my mouth to giggle into my napkin.

“Conversation and jam do make for a more appealing meal time,” Lord Ashington agreed.

“They do!” Aunt Harriet agreed readily.

“There is much to be said for a moment of peace with one’s coffee,” Uncle Alfred said, cutting his eyes at his wife.

Aunt Harriet lifted her right shoulder with a shrug. “Difference of opinion,” she replied.

The subject needed to be changed and I was thinking of something to say to do just that when a loud commotion came from somewhere not too far away. I didn’t know the house well enough to know where the noise was coming from, but there was yelling, some squealing perhaps, and it sounded almost like a... child was also present?

Everyone’s head had turned toward the door when a lady appeared suddenly looking rather wide-eyed and alarmed. “Lord Ashington,” she began, but he was already standing and making his way out of the room to check on the situation.

I looked across the table at my aunt and uncle.

“Did that woman have leaves in her hair?” Aunt Harriet asked, still staring at the doorway.

“And a twig of sorts, I believe,” Uncle Alfred added.

“Perhaps I could be of some help,” Aunt Harriet said, placing her napkin

on the table as if she were about to stand up.

Uncle Alfred put a hand on her shoulder before that could happen. “No, you stay here. Whatever is happening, it isn’t our business. Lord Ashington does not require your assistance.”

Aunt Harriet chewed on her bottom a lip a moment. “I think I heard a child. Did you hear a child?” She was looking at me now.

I had heard a child. A girl perhaps, but I wasn’t going to confirm that. Keeping Aunt Harriet in this room was the most important thing at the moment. Uncle Alfred was correct. Ashington did not need her help nor would he appreciate it.

“I believe whatever happened, the high squeal of one of the maids, perhaps a young one, sounded a bit childish,” I said for not only Aunt Harriet’s benefit but my own. For I too was struggling with the fact I had heard the voice of a child rather clearly.

Aunt Harriet didn’t seem appeased.

“Eat the biscuits and jam, dear,” my uncle told her.

She frowned at him then grudgingly picked up a biscuit and proceeded to put jam on it.

Another loud clamor caused us all to jump and a shriek followed. We made eye contact but said nothing. Aunt Harriet took a bite of her biscuit with wide eyes. Uncle Alfred ignored the sounds as if there were nothing happening at all. Eventually, it quieted and I drank my hot chocolate, although it was now cold and not nice and warm.



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Chapter Twenty-Five

Earl of Ashington

Feathers were flying around the kitchen as the staff ran in circles with their arms held open in an attempt to catch the chicken that was clucking, desperate to be free of the madness. Alice stood wide-eyed, watching from the far side of the room, but Emma was not beside her. Emma was in the center of it all calling out the name “Drusilla!” as she too made strides to capture the chicken, wreaking havoc on the kitchen.

I need not ask how the chicken came to be in the kitchen for I already knew who had freed the bird. What I did not know was why. I was sure the answer would be very thorough and colorful indeed. Most days I would be entertained by such antics, but today was not that day. How was I to explain this to my guests? Emma’s voice was ringing very clearly down the halls as she called out for the chicken she had named Drusilla.

“I HAVE IT!” Mrs. Barton called out with triumph.

“Don’t hurt her!” Emma pleaded as she rushed to her side.

“Emma, it is but a chicken. Come here at once,” Alice ordered, walking toward Emma with a stern expression that I felt was well-deserved.

“Ashington, tell her not to hurt Drusilla. She is frightened! I tried to rescue her from her near doom, but she ran in here.” Emma threw out her hands in frustration. “The place she needed rescuing from. She’s not a very bright chicken.”

“Indeed it appears she is not,” I agreed. Although I was sure the chicken had been perfectly fine until Emma had let it free.

“I am sorry, my lord. I was simply taking Miss Emma for a morning walk and she saw the chicken,” Alice began explaining, but I held up my hand to stop her.

“It is alright, Alice,” I assured her. It wasn’t the governess’ fault that Emma was so head strong. That would be the Compton blood in her veins. “If you will take Emma back to the cottage, Mrs. Barton will bring biscuits and jam. I shall come for a visit later this morning.”

Emma ran over to me and clutched my hand tightly in both her small ones. “But what of the chicken?”

“Do you want me to have Mrs. Barton feed it biscuits and jam?” I asked teasingly.

She frowned up at me. “No, Ashington. Chickens don’t eat jam.”

“Well then, I believe there is no cause for concern then.”

She pointed toward the door leading outside. “But it was in a cage. What are the plans for Drusilla? Are we to eat her?”

I glanced up at the cook then back down at Emma. There was no point lying to the child. I did not believe lying was a healthy habit, even if it was to protect their innocence. Not with something like this. “Yes, I do believe Drusilla was on this evening’s menu.”

Emma covered her mouth with both her hands and gasped loudly.

“However, it seems you have taken a liking to... Drusilla, so I see no reason why we can’t change the main course for the evening and allow Drusilla another chance at life.”

“Oh, thank you, Ashington. I promise Drusilla will be an excellent pet.”

“Chickens are not pets, Emma,” Alice informed her as she came over to take the child’s hand. I was grateful for her interruption because I had not intended for Emma to assume Drusilla was to become a pet. Just that we would refrain from making her our meal, tonight. I wasn’t sure on how to proceed with the future of the animal after that point.

“And why not?” Emma asked with indignation.

Alice gave her a tug and led her toward the door. “I will not discuss this further, Lady Emma. It is well past time for your breakfast. Come now,” she ordered as they left through the back door.

Once she was gone, there was an audible sigh amongst the kitchen staff. They all began cleaning up the feathers and other forms of chaos the chicken and Emma left in their wake. I turned and left the room, unsure what I would say to my guests upon my return. Had they heard any of that? The kitchen’s location was far enough that much of it should have been muffled, but the loud squeals had surely carried down the hallway.

Bringing Emma had been asking for such as this but leaving her in London was too much of a risk. I had much rather deal with this sort of situation than chance Nicholas finding out about her existence. Protecting Emma was my priority as was finding her a suitable mother.

Laughter rang out from the dining room as I drew closer and I stopped just shy of the entrance to listen to Miriam telling her aunt and uncle about the time she had first tried to cook breakfast for her family.

“I was washing flour out of my hair for weeks,” Miriam finished and her audience chuckled.

“But how did the biscuits taste?” her aunt asked.

“I do believe mother broke a tooth on one,” Miriam informed her with glee.

“Oh dear,” her aunt laughed.

“Yes, twas quite a learning experience for me. I appreciate a good soft biscuit ever so much these days,” Miriam quipped.

I found myself smiling at the easy banter and familiarity Miriam shared with her aunt and uncle. There was no stiff formality or hushed whispers about the ruckus they had obviously heard when I had rushed out. They took it in stride and carried on with their breakfast. Miriam Bathurst may not be what one would consider the perfect countess, but she may indeed be *my* perfect countess. Emma needed someone who wouldn't feel faint after an event like the one I just dealt with.

I turned the corner and entered the room. Miriam was sipping her cup of hot chocolate and her eyes seemed to brighten when she spotted me. That was a nice reaction a man could get used to. “Lord Ashington, you just missed the tale of my unique culinary achievements,” she informed me, causing her aunt to giggle once more.

“Perhaps you can share them with me another time then. I was unaware of your abilities in the kitchen,” I replied, taking my seat.

Her aunt laughed loudly this time and I couldn't help but smile at the boisterous sound.

“Please, my lord, do not get your hopes up. I fear you will be greatly disappointed,” Lady Wellington said with a grin.

“Unless of course you have a tooth that needs extracting,” Lord Wellington added and the three of them burst into fits of laughter. This house had heard very little laughter and it was as if the walls wanted to soak it in or perhaps that was just me.



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Chapter Twenty-Six

Miriam Bathurst

The peacefulness of the countryside was like a long-lost friend. I gazed admiringly outside the window of Whitney's room while she ate her breakfast. Soon, we would go out and enjoy the warmth of the sun.

Whitney had slept much later than the rest of us and missed breakfast in the dining room. Ashington had asked me what to have sent to her room for her and in doing so earned even more of my gratitude. I knew she would be disappointed she had missed the lively breakfast, but I would be sure to give her every detail when she was ready.

I heard her yawn behind me and turned to see her cover her small mouth with a dainty hand. "Did you not sleep well?" I asked her, concerned for her obvious fatigue.

"I slept fine. I believe I may have slept too much," she replied with a smile. "This bed is much too comfortable and it pulled me into the deepest of sleeps."

The much too pale pallor of her skin and the dark circles under her eyes told a different story than what she had claimed. Whitney never wanted to worry me, yet I could see she wasn't feeling well. The travel had been too much on her.

I moved my attention to the food that had been brought up for her. She had eaten a biscuit and some ham. Whitney had never been much of an eater, but she needed proper nourishment after such an arduous journey. I wanted her to have energy to enjoy our time here.

"Tell me what you meant by a lively meal indeed," Whitney urged as she picked up a berry from her plate.

I shared everything with Whitney, taking great care to be very detailed in hopes she would eat more of the food on her plate. Instead, she had finished her berry and then leaned back on the pillows of her bed as if the task of eating required more rest. My concern for her was mounting, and I had convinced myself to speak to Ashington about seeking a doctor once I left

this room.

Once I finished telling her of our morning, she yawned again and settled deeper into her pillows. “Oh, I do hate I missed that. I shall be on time tomorrow, but you must promise it will be just as entertaining.” Her smile wasn’t forced, but it was tired.

Standing, I walked over and pulled the covers over her gently. “The travel has exhausted you and rest is the only cure. We shall frolic in the garden later today when you are well and good. Right now, you need to take care.” I said all of this in my stern voice that left no room for argument. It was a habit with Whitney since oft times she could be stubborn.

“I believe you’re right. Just a bit more rest would do me well,” she agreed, only alarming me further. I had used my stern voice to keep her from disagreeing with me, yet her lack of argument did not sit well with me. For Whitney to want to stay in bed, it meant she did not feel well at all.

Kissing her on the head, I gave her one last glance to see she had already closed her eyes. As quietly as I could, I left her room in search of Ashington. Since I was on a mission, my focus was more clear and finding Ashington’s office was easier than the idea of finding the dining room this morning had felt.

It had only taken me three wrong doors before I opened the correct one. However, Ashington had not been in there. The office had been quite empty. Frustrated, I closed the door back the way it had been and went off in search of someone who might know of his whereabouts.

The butler was walking from the kitchen toward the entry way when I came down the stairway. I couldn’t recall his name and I felt ashamed, but my mind was preoccupied with other issues at the moment. “Excuse me, sir,” I called out before I reached the bottom step.

He halted and turned to face me. “Miss Bathurst. How may I be of service?” he asked.

“I need to find Lord Ashington. Tis my sister. She isn’t feeling well. I wouldn’t bother him otherwise you see but...”

The butler gave a singular nod. “Lord Ashington is on his morning ride. You may find him in the stables shortly.”

“Thank you,” I blurted in haste then made my way toward the front doors, but not before the butler could appear beside me and open them for me. Turning back to him, I smiled. “I didn’t get your name or I fear I do not recall

it,” I admitted to him.

He was much younger than most butlers, but his stiff back and regal demeanor was that of the finest English butlers. “Earlwin, Miss Bathurst,” he replied.

“Thank you, Earlwin, for your assistance. It is much appreciated,” I replied then picked up my skirts in a fashion I knew my mother would scold me for and hurried down the steps and out across the manicured lawn toward the stables.

Although my long strides had quickened my arrival at the stables, it was of no use, for Ashington was not back yet from his ride. A stable boy walked by carrying feed and I decided then I would find out in what direction he had gone and begin making my way toward him.

“Do you know where Lord Ashington takes his morning rides?” I asked the boy.

He nodded and pointed out toward the back of the house toward the woods behind it, yet he said nothing.

“He took his horse in that direction?” I asked incredulously. That didn’t seem safe for man or horse. Was there even a path?

The boy waved his hand again with his finger, pointing in the same direction. This time he used more flair as if trying to speak louder but remained silent.

“Is there a path I don’t see?” I asked him, wishing he would speak.

The boy nodded then walked away with the feed, never once uttering a word.

Hoping he was correct, I picked up my skirts again and headed back toward what looked like a forest from here. I couldn’t imagine Lord Ashington would go riding out into a dense forest when he had all this lovely land to enjoy. The closer I got to the wooded area, I realized that there was, in fact, a very wide path that had been hidden by the sun’s shadows. Perhaps the path led to a beautiful stream or open field of daises.

There must be a reason Ashington would take the path as there must also be a reason for the path’s existence. I began walking through the forest and the deeper I went, the more magical it became. The trees leaned toward each other at their tops, as if reaching to embrace a loved one. Birds flitted from branches as the sunlight that broke through made the path appear as if it were meant for fairies instead of humans.

It was a perfectly carved out trail by nature itself and I was so lost in the beauty and magnificence around me I missed the light at the end until I was almost upon it. A voice stopped me and I paused to listen. Perhaps I had come upon someone else's estate. I wasn't sure where I had been going, only that the boy had said Lord Ashington had went this way.

"Make another, Ashington!" A young voice pleaded.

"Why do you need another? That crown fits quite well. You look as if you are the queen of fairies," Lord Ashington replied.

"Tis not for me! I need one for Alice. If I am to be queen of fairies then she must be my princess. If she is the princess and I am the queen, I shall not take a nap today but dance among the flowers and eat jam all I want," the young girl said.

I couldn't see either of them and I feared if I made a move, they would hear me. Who was the child Ashington was talking to? Was it a neighbor's child? A relative?

Ashington laughed as if he were truly delighted. "I do not believe Alice will agree to such terms," he replied. "However, if you are very good, I will make sure jam is delivered with your biscuits at tea today."

He was sending them food? I wanted to move closer so I could see them but stayed in place. My curiosity was battling my good sense.

"Will you come have tea with us?" she asked with a hopeful tone.

"I'm afraid I cannot today. I must entertain my company," he replied.

A loud sigh came from the girl. "I wish to meet your company."

"I believe you shall soon," he told her.

"Truly! You said you had to be sure."

There was a pause and I wondered if he had noticed me or if I was breathing too heavily. I hated not being able to see them through the shrubbery.

"I am almost sure that you will meet this one," he said to her.

The child clapped her hands together and squealed in delight. "And truly she looks like a princess?"

"I would say any princess would pale in comparison to Miss Bathurst's beauty," he replied.

I took a step back then. So many questions swirling in my head that I couldn't pick a singular one to ponder. How did one ponder any of this? Slowly, I eased away until I could safely walk back in the direction in which

I had come.

Such familiarity... it seemed odd for Lord Ashington to speak that way to a mere neighbor's child or even a distant relative.

The tone of their voices, the trust in the girl's voice was clear, the affection in Lord Ashington's was equally so. My head spun even more as I waked quickly back to the house, no longer taken with the splendor of nature that surrounded me. For there was one explanation to what I had just overheard, yet how could that be? Lord Ashington would not be able to keep such a secret... or could he? Did he wield that much power?

I didn't stop moving until I was in the room given to me and I closed the door firmly behind me. Then I stood there and let the most obvious explanation play out in my head.

Lord Ashington had a child and a mistress. He was indeed searching for a wife to cover that up. I sank down on the settee and stared blankly at the wall in front of me. He had brought me here as if to interview my family. This was not to court me because he wasn't looking for a love match. He was looking for a position to fill. He needed a countess that would accept his child and his lover.

To be fair, I had not come to London in search of a love match. Not at all. He knew of this too because I had been rather clear on the subject, had I not? Lord Ashington was aware that I was in need of a wealthy husband to provide for my sister and my mother. I needed someone that could afford the medical procedures Whitney required and he needed a wife willing to look the other way. He must think he had found the perfect prospect in me. How could he not? I wasn't a silly debutante full of silly hopes to be a countess. Rank meant little to me. He had realized this and he had pounced on it.

My chest stung and I felt a heaviness in my stomach. I had allowed myself to like Lord Ashington. Possibly care for him and believe there might be something for us in the future. He had charmed me and I had been his fool. For a moment, he had me believe that I might have something akin to what my aunt and uncle have. It had been foolish of me to believe it possible. Especially with a man as powerful as Lord Ashington.

This wasn't heartbreak, for I wasn't silly enough to fancy myself in love. It was simply, yet again, the realization I was never someone's choice for the reasons I wanted to be. Nicholas only needed me if I were a pawn to hurt his brother. Lord Ashington only wanted me if I were the perfect wife who

turned my head to his secret family. My mother only wanted me because I was her only hope for financial security. Then, of course, I had never been wanted by my father. He hadn't found use in my existence at all. I shut out memories of him quickly. Dwelling on my father's lack of love was pointless.

Reaching up, I wiped the tears that had decided to roll down my cheeks, be as unwanted as they were. I would not let this get to me. I had been blinded by all the flash that came with Lord Ashington and missed the other signs. I had allowed myself to trust and I hadn't even realized it. My guard had slipped so easily. That would not happen again. I was sure of it. I was smarter now and I had learned a lesson.

The fact remained, I needed to marry well for my family's sake and I would do so, but I wasn't sure I could accept a secret family. Lord Ashington clearly loved the child and I respected that. He hadn't ignored his daughter, if that was indeed who she was, and he took care of her. I assumed he equally took care of her mother as well.

I knew my aunt and uncle shared a connection most in London society did not. They truly loved one another. My uncle didn't keep a mistress. Did I have the luxury of waiting until I found a man that would love me and need only me? I thought of Whitney lying in her bedroom and the pain one day's travel caused her. I knew that each day that passed made the hopes of the procedure restoring her leg completely, more slim.

What would I be willing to accept for the sake of her future?



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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Emma Marie Compton- age four and five months

Glancing back toward the bedroom, I checked one more time to see if Alice was well and truly asleep. Lying still with my eyes closed had been ever so difficult, but Alice had needed a good nap it seemed. She hadn't made me wait too long before she began to snore.

The door was quiet as I opened and closed it behind me then stood there holding my breath, almost positive she would sit right up and realize I had escaped. I had good reason for this journey. It was important that I meet Miriam Bathurst. Ashington had said she looked more lovely than a princess and I had never seen a lady that beautiful. What if he forgot to introduce me and I didn't get the chance?

I hurried down the cobblestone walkway toward the path through the woods I had taken with Alice yesterday morning. Today Alice had refused to take me back to the kitchen. She didn't trust me after I had freed the chicken, but the chicken had wanted to be free. I had only been helping a would-be friend. I was sure the chicken hated me after the way they had treated it. Poor chicken.

I had been very lucky indeed that jam had been sent this morning with breakfast. I was sure Ashington had sent it and I told Alice so when she threatened not to let me have some until tea. The jam here at Chatwick Hall was sweeter than that we had in London. I should ask Ashington to take it back with us. I missed being here. Our home in London didn't have the fairy forest or rose gardens such as these. Alice promised to take me for a walk in the fairy forest today. If she woke and I was still gone that wouldn't happen. I would also not be given jam with my afternoon tea.

I paused then, wondering if meeting Miriam Bathurst was indeed worth no jam or fairy forest. I did so miss the fairy forest. Glancing back at the cottage, I frowned. Alice would be very disappointed in me. She oft was and I didn't mind, but I truly wanted to go on that hike today. But I did want the jam.

I turned my head and looked toward Chatwick Hall again. If I was spotted

by any of the servants, they'd take me right back to Alice. My chances of getting to the house without being seen were not that good. With a sigh, I forced my feet to turn back toward the cottage. If I hurried, I'd be back before Alice knew I was ever gone.

"Hello," a voice so soft and pretty came from behind me. Had I come upon a fairy? Spinning back around, I didn't see a fairy at all. She was much too tall to be a fairy, but she could indeed be a princess.

"Hello," I replied. "Are you Miriam Bathurst?" I was almost positive she was.

The lady nodded and the sunlight made her dark red hair sparkle like that of a fairy. "I am and you are?" she asked.

Straightening my shoulders the way Alice always reminded me, I stood tall and held my head high. "I am Emma Marie Compton. Lady of the manor," I told her.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Compton," Miriam replied then curtsied. No one had ever curtsied to me before nor had they called me lady. I believed I liked that quite a lot. I should tell Alice we were to change my name to Lady Compton. I did not believe Alice would curtsy to me, however. She was much too stubborn for such as that. I would ask though, for it was rather lovely.

"I was looking for you," I informed her then. "Alice is taking her rest and I was to be taking mine too, but you see I didn't know if Ashington would truly introduce us and I was curious. Alice says I am much too curious. I don't think there is such a thing. Do you?"

Miriam Bathurst smiled at me and shook her head. "No, I don't think there is. One can learn a lot with curiosity, I suppose."

I liked her. "Do you want to go for a walk in the fairy forest? We have one you know. It is just over there and Alice is to take me, but if she awakens to find me gone, I am positive we won't go on the walk nor will I get jam with my tea."

Miriam pursed her lips together as if the idea of no jam was as terrible as I thought it to be. "No jam sounds awful," she replied. "However, seeing as you and I just met and no one other than me knows where you are, it might not be wise for us to go for a walk. I would love to see the fairy forest, but I do think it would be wise if Alice knew where you were."

That wasn't what I wanted her to say. Adults rarely said what I wanted

them to say. It was truly frustrating. “I could leave Alice a note.” Although my handwriting wasn’t excellent and I wasn’t sure how to spell very many words.

Miriam nodded as if thinking this idea over. If she agreed, I could have her write the note. Alice would likely be able to read it then. “Yes, well, that is a good idea, but what of your mother? Wouldn’t she be worried if you went walking with a stranger in the forest?”

I shook my head. “Not at all. My mother is dead. I have very little memory of her. She was blonde and spoke with a lovely accent. My father said she was French.”

The smile left Miriam’s face and I remembered that talking about dead people often bothered adults. I wasn’t sure as to why, but it always made them frown. Alice said it makes them sad to think of someone no longer living. “Don’t be sad. It is alright. I have Ashington. Alice said I am very lucky indeed.”

“Yes, I believe Alice is right,” Miriam agreed with a smile not as bright as her other one. I did wish I hadn’t mentioned my dead mother. I liked her other smile.

“Alice is often right, I am afraid,” I told her. “Ashington said that was what made her an excellent governess.”

“I will have to agree with Lord Ashington,” Miriam replied.

It was then that Alice’s voice rang out, calling my name. Miriam heard it too and she lifted her gaze from me to the path that led back to the cottage. If Alice caught me talking to Miriam, I would be in trouble. Possibly punished with no jam for many days.

“That’s Alice. She’s awake,” I told Miriam, staring toward the cottage, hoping Alice didn’t come walking out of it.

“Perhaps it might be wise if you hurried back before she decides not to take you to the fairy forest. Would be a shame to miss such a lovely adventure,” Miriam said.

I nodded my head in agreement. “And the jam,” I added.

“Yes, of course, the jam.”

“It was lovely to meet you,” I told her.

She curtsied again and replied, “it was indeed a pleasure Lady Compton.”

Smiling, I turned and ran back toward the cottage. I did so like it when people curtsied to me. I would suggest that Alice do so, although I did doubt

she would. Alice wasn't an easy one to convince of much. Hopefully my leaving the cottage wouldn't be cause to punish me. Perhaps Alice had slept well and was in a fine mood. One could always hope.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Earl of Ashington

Lady Wellington had informed me that Miriam had gone for a walk amongst the gardens. After another lively breakfast with Miriam, her aunt and uncle and her sister this morning, I had taken my leave to the office to catch up on work. I hadn't intended to be so long, but I had looked up from my desk to find it was well past noon. Lady Wellington had been coming in the front door with her shoes in her hand and flushed cheeks from the sunshine when I came out of the office.

I was glad to see Miriam's family felt so comfortable here. It said much for the future if her family liked me and Chatwick Hall. I had to keep in mind they hadn't met the most important person just yet, but the more I came to know of them, the more I believed they would react the way I needed them to. The way Emma needed them to.

Lady Wellington's disregard for the way society believed one should behave was a blessing really. She didn't have strict ideas of what a household should and should not be. I had rarely seen her in shoes since her arrival. She also found it amusing to tell stories about her family and home in America that would make most ladies of the ton blush with embarrassment.

I scanned the grounds as I made my way around to the gardens, looking for Miriam's red hair I was sure would shine with the day's bright sunlight. It wasn't until I reached the back of Chatwick Hall that I saw her sitting amongst the roses again. She was staring off toward the path that led to the cottage, and for a moment, I felt a shred of panic. Had she walked back there? Had she seen Emma? Then she turned her head before I could worry too deeply and smiled at me. The relief from just a simple smile was greater than she knew. I returned one of my own and made my way over to the woman I was almost sure would be exactly what I needed in a wife. Introducing her to Emma, however, would wait. I wasn't ready to take that step.

"I must apologize for getting lost in my work. I meant only to do some correspondence that had been delayed. Yet it seems I managed to spend an

entire morning locked away in my office.”

Miriam did not seem to hold any resentment for being left to her own whims. “Work won’t do itself, I’m afraid,” she replied. “Especially tedious correspondence.”

She was very agreeable and not at all demanding. At least she appeared that way. I wasn’t sure another lady of the ton that equaled her beauty would feel the same. I had found the more beautiful and sought after the female, the more they demanded attention. This was not the case with Miriam. Part of me felt as if perhaps she should demand more from others. She had a suitable dowry provided by her uncle and her beauty was truly unmatched. Shouldn’t she enjoy the perks that came with such gifts? Was I fortunate to have found her or was I being selfish to claim her before she truly had time to shine?

Perplexed by my sudden moment of wanting more for Miriam than she herself seemed to require, I took the seat beside her. Before I could think of my words more clearly and say things in a clear manner, I blurted out, “You really should expect more from a gentleman.”

Miriam turned her head to look at me, but for a moment, before a soft laugh escaped her bow-shaped pink lips. “Is that so, my lord?”

“Yes,” I replied simply, afraid what else I may say if I allowed myself.

“I expect what I believe is important. Honesty, kindness, intelligence, a man who is responsible and, of course, has an appreciation for the written word. I do not believe it is important to expect a man to bend to a woman’s every wish. It would do nothing more than spoil her and I daresay that ruins a lady. No matter how beautiful she may be.”

Her ideas were so unique yet so well said. How was it possible that every moment I spent with her, she became even more appealing? I wasn’t sure any amount of time spent with her would produce a quality in her I found distasteful.

“You speak as if you have known many spoiled females,” I replied.

She lifted a dainty shoulder then sighed. “Oh, I have. One doesn’t have to look very far.”

Especially amongst the ton. London was full of those who thought only of their own rewards. I had met very few who wanted more for someone other than themselves. Miriam would do whatever she must for her sister and that said more about her than anything else. It made me want her for Emma. I wanted Emma to grow into a lady who believed such as Miriam.

I paused then in my thoughts. Did I? Did I truly want Emma to grow to think of only others? Not to once take a moment to choose something for herself? Did I want Emma to believe her happiness wasn't important?

No. I did not. I wanted Emma to want more for herself than to only seek others' happiness. I wanted her to make decisions that would make her smile and I wanted her to have the life she deserved.

"I'm sorry if I have offended you," Miriam said as she studied me. "I often speak the truth or what I feel is the truth. My mother always said I was too blunt and should bite my tongue. I fear I never listened."

Realizing my thoughts must have put a scowl on my face, I quickly remedied that and softened the line of my lips. "I prefer honesty and bluntness," I told her. "I also agree with you fully."

She didn't seem convinced, but she also did not push the matter. Miriam Bathurst rarely pushed anything. She wouldn't search for her happiness. She was only concerned with her sister's. Something deep within me ached for the little girl who hadn't been shown love from her father. The young woman whose mother wanted her to sacrifice her future for her family. How could I take advantage of her situation, if I couldn't accept a similar future for Emma?

"Noble," I said and Miriam turned her gaze once again to me. Her eyebrows lifted in question at my singular word. "You forgot noble. A gentleman should be noble. Not in mere title but in deed. He should make decisions based on what is right and what is fair," I finished.

Miriam thought upon my words but for a moment then nodded her head once. "Indeed," she agreed. "He must be noble."

There were many things in that moment that could be said but a battle was waging inside me. I wasn't sure if I was noble enough and when the time came could I be labeled as such. Miriam Bathurst was exactly what Emma needed but was Emma and myself what Miriam needed... or deserved?

Standing I held out a hand to Miriam. "Take a walk with me. Let's enjoy the sunshine for it is England, and at any moment, the rain may come."

Miriam placed her gloved hand in mine and stood up. "Sounds like an excellent idea. Although I am not sure the rain will come today. There is not a cloud in the sky," she replied.

I felt the moisture in the breeze and knew it would be here sooner than either of us wanted it to be. "Regardless, let's enjoy the moment," I said.

Miriam walked beside me as I thought of a topic of conversation that would take my mind from the previous things we had spoken of. The smell of roses caught the breeze and it was as if the air was but their perfume. I watched as Miriam inhaled deeply, taking in their scent. I was sure I'd never seen a sight as lovely as she. Sunlight often highlighted the imperfections on one's face, yet with her, it just brightened the purity of her beauty. I could be happy with her. Not just because I was attracted to her outward appearance but because she was a female I truly enjoyed being around. I sought out her presence and desired her conversation.

"Tell me, Miriam, what is your favorite piece of literature?" I asked her, realizing again how little I knew of the things that delighted her. I was sure no one had ever taken the time to find out what they were and I wanted to know. I wanted her to feel like she mattered. Her dreams, her joys, her dislikes, they all mattered.

"*Justine*," she replied.

"Truly?" I asked surprised by her response. I was unsure if she was but teasing me or if this was, in fact, her favorite novel.

Miriam smirked. "So you've read it?" she asked me.

"I have. Like you I too enjoy reading."

"Even Marquis de Sade?" she asked with an amused tone.

"Especially Marquis de Sade," I assured her and that caused her to laugh. It was a sound I was sure I would never tire of and felt a moment of melancholy at the idea I might not always hear it.

"Tis nothing but a miracle Mother never found the book in my room. I found it in my father's library after his death. Mother has no interest in reading and never went in there herself. I don't even know if she would know the plot of the book, but for fear she had heard gossip among the shallow-minded, I took it and hid it in my room. I lost three nights sleep unable to put it down."

I pictured a younger Miriam hiding in her room with candlelight, reading *Justine* while others were sleeping and couldn't help but smile. It was rather adventurous for someone any younger than she was now. However, knowing she'd read it and enjoyed it also stirred me in a way that was not good for either of us.

"And what is yours, my lord?" she asked me then.

"*Ashington*," I reminded her.

“*Ashington* ,” she repeated.

“I must say that my favorite novel has recently become *Justine* by The Marquis de Sade,” I replied honestly.

Miriam laughed loudly this time and the pleasure from being the one to make her laugh with such freedom was rather intense. She was becoming more than I had planned for and I wasn’t sure how to handle it. I wanted Miriam Bathurst in my life and in my bed. I just needed her to want me for herself. Not because I would be exactly what everyone in her life wanted.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Miriam Bathurst

Whitney had been ready to explore by Sunday morning after breakfast. I still wasn't sure if she had been ill or if she had simply been giving me time to be with Ashington alone. As grateful as I was for the time I had spent with him getting to know him, I was more relieved by Whitney's recovery. However, tomorrow we would leave for London and I worried about her making that trip again so soon if, in fact, the first trip had put her to bed.

I enjoyed watching her talk to the horses in the stable as if they were as human as she and the way she inhaled the perfumed air as we walked through the rose garden. She was truly taken in by the splendor of Chatwick Hall, and even if I was here only for the reason I suspected, I was still thankful she had been given this experience. It was one of her many dreams to live in a place such as this.

While Whitney studied the different roses, calling out a different type of rose with excitement when she found them, I watched the forest in the back of the property where I knew a path was well-disguised. I thought of Emma and what she may be doing today. It had yet to rain, which was a rare gift and the sunshine was out again with but a few clouds. Yesterday, I had thought Ashington would mention her or possibly take me to meet her but neither happened.

Instead, we rode horses and had a picnic. He was an excellent companion and as I had laid in bed last night, I realized I laughed more that day than I had in a very long time. As lovely as the day had been, I did wonder when or if I would be introduced to Emma. His not doing so yet could only mean I had not met his qualifications. Perhaps that was a bit harsh, but it was all I could think. It was hindering an otherwise perfect day.

"Have you ever seen so many Tudor roses in one place?" Whitney exclaimed with glee. Her hands were clasped together as she looked reverently on at the roses she had just come across. I would admit that I knew little of roses, but I did enjoy them. Deciding to focus on Whitney, I turned

and walked back down the small path toward her.

“Which are the Tudor roses?” I asked.

Whitney frowned at me. “You can’t be serious. With all those books you bury your head in, you have read nothing of roses?”

Whitney was not one to read, so she did not understand the love of novels or the difference in a story and a book meant to educate. “I read novels that take me to another place and time. They give me an escape from the reality in which I live. I do not read books on botany. I have little interest in that sort of knowledge. However, it is clear that you do. Father had some books in his library that I believe you would find enjoyable. There aren’t any specifically about roses, but there are a few about the flower gardens of the English countryside.”

Her eyes widened at that. “Truly?” she asked as if the idea had never crossed her mind. She had never been one for stories, even when she was young. I tried to read to her and she never made it through one complete story before falling asleep.

“Yes, I should have thought of bringing you one before now,” I said, realizing all along I had been placing the wrong book in her hands.

“You did try to convince me that books were magical and I never agreed. One can’t blame you for not thinking of me when you found the garden books.”

“It could also be I was terrified you would ask me to read them to you and then I would be the one falling asleep after but a few pages,” I teased her.

Her laughter was always good for my soul. It had been since we were young. Whitney’s amusement faded quickly as she stared out across the back yards toward the trees. “I think I saw someone,” she said, studying the exact location of the path that led to the cottage.

There was no sign of someone there now, but that did not mean Emma wasn’t hiding just inside. Would she come out with Whitney here? I glanced at my sister and had to quickly decide if her meeting Emma was something that should happen.

Although I trusted my sister, I knew only what I had come to in my own imagination. I did not know the exact details of Emma’s being here, but I did know her last name was Compton. The rest took very little imagination. For if Ashington had a younger sister, she would be the daughter of Nicholas’s mother and not here at Chatwick with Ashington being hidden in a cottage.

“Tis but the breeze playing with the branches,” I told her and then took her hand to lead her somewhere else before Emma resurfaced.

“No, it was very clear. There was a little girl just inside the tree line. As if there was a path hidden.” Whitney continued to watch the area for another sighting.

“Perhaps fairies then,” I replied, remembering how she would search for the Fae so ardently when she was younger.

Whitney turned to look at me then and I was relieved her focus had shifted. “Fairies, Miriam? Truly? Do you think I am still but ten?”

Grinning brightly, I took her arm and looped it with my own. “I do fear that I will never see you as you are for you will always be the little girl who followed me everywhere.”

“That may be so, but I am no longer a believer in the Fae. I moved on from that fantasy years ago,” she assured me.

I sighed, as if that knowledge was truly heartbreaking, as I led her out of the garden. “Tis a shame you lost your youthful sight. Now you may never catch a glimpse.”

Whitney laughed again and thankfully seemed to have forgotten the girl in the trees. We turned toward the east corner before I chanced a quick glance and standing there watching us retreat was Emma. She lifted her little hand when I caught sight of her then she was gone once again.

“I could use some tea,” I said, making conversation as I kept moving toward the front of the estate.

“Oh yes, I do hope they bring the raspberry tarts again. Those were divine. I could have eaten a dozen,” Whitney said hopefully.

“I’m sure they can be requested,” I told her.

“And the cucumber sandwiches were lovely. It is so indulgent having tasty morsels when we ask but for tea,” Whitney said.

Aunt Harriet typically only asked for sandwiches with tea or biscuits if we had company. Typically, she preferred her chocolate with her tea. The array of food that had arrived with tea when Whitney had requested it had been all she could talk of when I returned late that afternoon. It was the most fascinating thing she had seen since our arrival.

When we reached the front of Chatwick Hall, Ashington was walking the path back toward the house from the stables. He looked as if he had just returned from a ride. His gaze found mine and he paused to wait on us to

reach him.

“Good afternoon, ladies. I trust you’ve found things to occupy yourself today,” he said.

“Quite! The rose gardens are truly spectacular and I do love your Tudor roses,” Whitney replied with enthusiasm. I was thankful she left out the sighting of the little girl in the forest.

“I will admit I know little of roses. Those were my mother’s passion. However, I also enjoy spending time in the gardens. It is rather peaceful,” Ashington told her.

His gaze shifted back to me then. The silly way my body reacted to his attention startled me yet again. The more time I spent with him, the stronger my reaction seemed to be. Although I was aware of his secrets and almost positive his interest in me had little to do with any attraction to me, I was very attracted to him.

“Has your day been enjoyable?” he asked me then.

“Yes, very much so. How can one not enjoy yet another day of sunshine and the beautiful countryside,” I quipped, trying not to let it show that I had, in fact, missed him. I loved time spent with my sister but upon seeing Ashington, I felt a pang at the idea we would be leaving tomorrow and seeing him would no longer be a daily occurrence.

“Indeed,” he agreed, but his eyes seemed to say much more. Perhaps it was my imagination or my wishful thinking, but it did feel as if he might have missed me as well.

“We were just going to have some tea,” Whitney told him. “Would you join us?”

His gaze stayed on me a moment longer than necessary when he finally looked toward my sister and smiled. “Tea sounds perfect. I’m parched,” he replied.

“Lovely. I’m ever so hopeful it arrives with raspberry tarts today as it did when I requested tea yesterday,” Whitney told him.

The corner of his mouth curled up with amusement. “I can make sure it does, in fact, arrive with the tarts,” he assured her.

Whitney released my arm to clap in delight. “Wonderful!”

Ashington was making it more difficult by the second not to fall in love with him. It was a ridiculous idea and I was very well aware of it. He had secrets and I knew about them, even if I did not know the specific details.

Until I was given the explanation of Emma Compton, then I had to remain sensible. Keeping my head about me when I was with him must become my focus.

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Chapter Thirty

Earl of Ashington

“Miriam’s a peculiar girl, I am quite aware, but I dare say she has a most unique way of looking at life. Never a dull moment with her,” Alfred said after his third glass of port.

The ladies had all retired for the evening and we had made our way to my study after leaving the dining room. The fortified Portuguese wine seemed to have loosened Wellington’s tongue. Dinner had been as enjoyable as the previous meals with his wife and nieces. Miriam and Lady Wellington often entertained us all with their quips and stories. I had found I looked forward to meal time while they were in residence with me.

“She has a way that causes her to stand out amongst the crowd. I find that rare indeed,” I replied honestly. Miriam’s beauty was one thing, but her quick mind and determination to succeed for her family was quite another.

“Her mother is nothing like the girl, and her father was an arse. I never cared for the man. Most of Miriam’s life I spent in New Orleans. Until her mother requested that I put her out into society, I hadn’t seen Miriam since she was a wee thing of perhaps two years of age. Whitney, I had never met at all. I find that a failing on my part. I just don’t care much for my sister. She’s a hard woman. In her youth, her vanity made her oft times cruel.”

I was sure the port had caused this information to come forth, but I was grateful for it. Any insight into Miriam’s life was indeed something I desperately wanted. Admitting to myself it was not solely for the sake of Emma but for me as well. Miriam Bathurst might easily make me love her. I was finding I thought of little else but her at all moments of the day. Whereas I had not expected or desired such a reaction to my future wife, I now believed I couldn’t accept anything else.

“She was a twin you know,” he continued. “Twas a boy. Exactly what that arse of a father wanted. A male to carry on the title. The wee thing didn’t last long at all and my sister, as spiteful as she is, was broken for some time after. Losing a child is difficult on any mother. I fear Miriam has been neglected

from her earliest days on this earth. A child should have the love of their parents. To see the young lady she has become, who loves her sister so deeply she would do anything while she herself lived her life without the love of her parents, it is truly remarkable.”

Miriam had said her father had wanted a son, but she hadn't explained it so very clearly. Perhaps she didn't want to see it laid bare before another. The simple fact that she had turned out so utterly lovely without her mother giving her the nurturing she must have longed for gave me hope for Emma. However, there was another part of me that ached for Miriam. The little girl who needed her mother's love and attention yet received none of it. How heartbreaking it seemed.

“Listen to me carrying on so. Port makes me melancholy. Always has. It's time I retire for the evening and leave you to some blessed silence,” Wellington said with a slight slur in his voice. He swayed slightly as he stood.

“Wellington,” I said standing up. “My intentions with your niece are noble. I was drawn to her for all the qualities you mentioned tonight. I do see the rare gem she is. Rest assured, I would not have brought you all here if I wasn't serious about getting to know Miriam and what is most important to her.”

Wellington nodded his head and gave me a smile. “I wouldn't have allowed us to come if I didn't know that, Ashington. Rest assured,” he replied, then with a nod he headed for the door. I thought of asking if he required help but he appeared to be walking straight enough. I did not want to insult him.

Once he was headed up the stairs, I sat back down leaving my door open. It was time I retire as well, but my thoughts would only keep me awake. Sleep wasn't something that had ever come easy to me. Oft times I found myself waking up on the sofa in this very room. Tonight, my head was even more crowded than most.

Wellington's description of Miriam's life had stirred anger inside me for a man that was now cold in the ground. The dislike for my own father didn't equal that of what I felt for Miriam's father. She had been just a girl. Emma's face came to me and I felt my stomach tighten at the thought of her having been left at the doorsteps of someone other than me. Her life could have been similar and the idea made me ill. Miriam deserved to be loved and to be

happy. She'd had enough of the other.

I did feel as if I could possibly love Miriam one day, but would I love her the way she deserved? I'd truly never loved anyone until Emma. Once I had loved my brother, but we had been young. With years, he had changed and those feelings had changed as well. Loving Emma was easy. She was a child in need of a family.

Loving a woman, that was another thing. I had seen the ugliness in marriage and the bitterness that changed a female. Although Miriam was nothing like my stepmother, once the former countess had been someone my father had loved. Marriage changed them both and so very quickly.

I stared at my empty glass and considered one more drink before heading up to my chambers. Perhaps a good liquor would aid in my sleep. That thought was lost when movement near my doorway caught the corner of my vision. Turning my head, my gaze landed on Miriam. I was sure I had not had enough port to conjure the image before me. Yet, the idea that she was real also seemed impossible. For never had I laid eyes on anything so utterly enchanting.

Long, thick, red hair curled at its ends as it cascaded freely over her shoulders. The simple white nightgown was covered by a thin shawl, but did little to hinder my imagination as I took in the sight before me.

"I'm sorry, Lord Ashington. I fear I could not wind down enough after such a full day to fall asleep. I thought I would search for the kitchen in hopes of some warm milk," Miriam explained, her cheeks stained pink, making her even more stunning.

I stood slowly for she appeared on the verge of fleeing. "If you are in search of the kitchen, I fear you are lost," I teased.

She blushed even brighter. "Yes, it does appear that way."

"Come, I will lead the way. I too could use an aid in finding sleep," I told her as I reached her side. She stepped back so that I could exit the room without our bodies touching.

"I believe your port may help with that more so than warm milk," she said with a touch of humor in her voice.

"Perhaps, but what kind of gentleman would I be if I left a lady to wander the dark halls alone?"

"If the lady carelessly left her bedroom, not knowing the path to the kitchen, then I would say she deserved to wander," Miriam replied.

“This may be true however another truth is that I am, in fact, a man and when a vision of beauty such as yourself arrives at my door lost and in need, I want nothing more than to assist in the matter.”

There was no quick response this time. I glanced down at her as we began to walk and saw the whisper of a smile on her perfectly shaped lips. Lips so pink against her pale skin, it made it hard to think of anything more than tasting them.

I thought of taking a much longer path to the kitchen but decided to stay on course. I preferred to look at her not walk beside her. The fact there was nothing under the nightgown and she was walking so close to me in her bare feet, clasping a thin shawl around her shoulders as her only covering, had my head in places that weren't safe for either of us.

I had been with mistresses barely covered by French silk meant to raise a man's desire but not once had I been struck by sheer beauty as I had tonight. Miriam dressed in slips of French silk would be something I may never recover from. The image, however, was now in my head and I wanted nothing more than to see her thus so.

By the time we reached the kitchen, my blood was pulsing and my need to touch her had become uncontrollable. Stepping inside the warmth of the large area, it was still lit by a lantern. I wasn't one to visit the kitchen, especially at this hour, so I did not know if we were to be alone in here or if someone would be returning. Not that it mattered to me.

“Have you enjoyed your stay here?” I asked her simply because I wanted to hear her voice again.

Miriam tilted her head back just enough to look up at me and a soft smile played along her lips. “Who wouldn't enjoy this place? It's almost magical. Whitney oft spoke of the sparkle and shine of London. She used the word glitter when speaking of it. However, this has been so much more than any ball in London could ever be.”

I had expected a simple yes or no. Not something so eloquent in response. Perhaps if she had said yes or no then I would have been able to control my burning desire to press my hand on her hip and draw her to me so that I may feel the curve of her body. I lowered my head to finally taste the lips that had mesmerized me from the first moment I laid eyes on her.



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Chapter Thirty-One

Miriam Bathurst

In my most secret of dreams, I had imagined this moment. Granted, I wasn't standing in a kitchen wearing my night gown, but when Ashington's lips met mine none of that seemed to matter. The world around us fell away and it could have been the most indulgent of balls and I dressed in a gown of the finest silks, but it would not change this moment.

No man had ever kissed me. My lips tingled in response to his and my body trembled. Did kissing always feel this way? If so, I understood why there were songs written of it and such description in the novels I read when they spoke of it. I was well read and I knew there was so much more to what happened between a woman and a man. I may be untouched, but I wasn't innocent of mind. This led to much more and if I were being smart, I'd step away.

I wasn't smart, however, I was blissfully lost in the moment and I wanted to remain so. Ashington's hand tightened on my waist and the thin materiel of my night gown fisted in his hand. The shawl I had been wearing as a cover fell from my shoulders when I let go of it to place my hands on his arms. I felt the need for support as my knees began to feel weak.

Twas as if our lips were made of the softest Italian satin as they moved so easily against one another. Ashington opened his mouth and this was once again something I had read about. One did not read the Marquis de Sade and not become well-educated in intimate things. However, I realized my education by the written word only was incomplete. One must experience such things to truly understand them.

Slowly, for I wasn't sure if the next moment I would regret this or not, I too opened my mouth beneath his and inhaled sharply in anticipation. Was this to be sweet and easy or something more intense? My hands gripped his arms tightly and as I did so, Ashington's right hand slid to my back, pressing me closer until our bodies had nothing but the fabric of our clothing between us. My breathing hitched at the thought, but I had little time to dwell on it

when I was lifted from the ground and placed on a table.

Ashington stood between my legs as he continued the kiss that had become something more untamed. It felt as if he might devour me or I him. My hands slid up his arms and into his hair of their own accord, and I craved to taste more and draw closer to him. He smelled of sweet wine and cinnamon. It was intoxicating and seemed to only cause me to cling to him more desperately.

He stepped closer to me and one of his hands slid over the top of my thigh. The sharp ache that shot through me, beginning at my most sensitive area, caused me to gasp. My hands tightened in his hair and he inhaled sharply, pausing the kiss.

I had a moment to catch my breath, but the sweet throbbing that had started between my legs was not easing as his body pressed so very close. Opening my eyes slowly, afraid this was all going to end, and wanting to be lost in the sensations that were now teasing me with what more there may be to all of this, I braced myself and looked at Ashington.

The flare of heat in his eyes as he watched me, once again, took my breath away. It was as if everything I was experiencing in my body was there in his gaze. Perhaps this was a reflection of my soul or more likely my wanton desire. For although I knew this was not proper and very dangerous, I wanted more. The sensations were all new to me and I now understood why ladies lost their morals and fell into bed with a man. Tossing away their good name for a moment like this one was an easier accident than I had once thought.

Ashington moved the hand that was on my thigh and I wanted to protest, but when I felt his fingers brush the bare skin of my calf, any words I would have spoken were forgotten. His hand moved ever so slowly up my bare leg and under the night gown until he was once again at the top of my thigh. My nails dug into his forearms as my body hummed with anticipation. The ache between my legs was more intense than any sexual description in a book I had stumbled upon had caused. I felt the urge to beg for release, but I did not speak. I dropped my gaze from his and watched his hand under the cotton material of my gown.

His hand moved to the inside of my thigh and paused for just a moment before his fingers brushed closer to where I knew he should not touch, but I wanted so desperately to be touched there I feared I would cry if he stopped.

Once again, his mouth was on mine and I moved even closer, unable to wait any longer. When his fingers finally met the throbbing heat, I made a

sound something close to a cry or possibly a plea. Whatever the sound, it was enough to end the slow torture. Ashington moved quickly then. My nightgown was completely bunched at my waist and my legs opened farther as his right hand covered my needy core and his left hand pulled my neckline down, causing the fabric to tear as he bared my breasts.

I thought for the briefest of moments that protesting and covering myself was what I should do, but one single finger began to fill me and the need that was growing flamed brighter. My hips moved against him and I moaned unable to control my body. It was delicious and intoxicating. Nothing mattered but this. I wanted to feel this way always.

Ashington moved his mouth from mine to trail kisses along my jawline and then his head lowered as he took one of my nipples into his mouth and sucked. My entire body ignited and I was lost to it all. My head fell back and I cried out as a burning sensation mixed with pure pleasure coursed through every nerve of my body.

I called out his name in a moan as I rocked against the pressure of his hand. His mouth moved from one breast to the other and I lay there almost naked on a wooden table in his kitchen like a woman with no morals. Knowing how I must look, I did not care. It was impossible to care when I wanted nothing more than to experience this pure rapture. Tomorrow was a faraway time and place that meant nothing to me.

I grabbed a fistful of Ashington's hair as I looked down at him still suckling my breast, biting down just enough to be painfully erotic. He lifted his head then so that his gaze found mine. Every glorious sensation wracking my body was there in his eyes. My chest tightened and something deeper happened inside me. Something more pronounced than the act of sexual pleasure. A slow panic began to unwind in me as I realized that I was indeed in danger of loving this man. Making myself vulnerable and I didn't trust enough to feel elation. Fear began to trickle in and the scene in which we were in became clearer.

Just as I was about to reach down and cover myself, unsure what I would say or if I could even walk, Ashington's head lowered yet again, but he moved until he was kneeling between my legs. Words failed me and another panic burst forth, although it had no time to cause a reaction. The wet warm touch of his tongue slid along the sensitive folds that had betrayed me already with the desire pulsing from the needy area.

As he began to taste me where I had never been touched by another until tonight, I forgot the sudden moment of clarity and cried out his name. There were no words descriptive enough to prepare one for the sheer bliss of the action. Ashington took my left leg and draped it over his shoulder as he continued his licking against the tight bud of my desire.

My breathing was coming in pants and as much as I wanted to watch him, I could no longer hold myself up to do so. Laying back on the cold wooden table, I stared at the ceiling my breast heaving with my erratic breathing. The build was there, clawing at me. Inside my body, it was as if every delightful experience was now burning together unable to contain itself. Just when I was sure I could no longer stand it, the pleasure went off inside me like an explosion.

“ASHINGTON!” came out as a loud cry from my lips and my body spiraled toward something so beautiful, I was lost to it. There was a roaring in my ears and I was sure nothing would ever be the same.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

Earl of Ashington

The line had been crossed and I was completely to blame. I picked up the shawl forgotten on the floor and wrapped it around Miriam's shoulders then pulled her into my arms. It was clear I wouldn't be able to let her go now. In my weakness, I hadn't sated my desire for Miriam, but ignited it. If I wasn't so positive she had enjoyed what had just taken place on the kitchen work table then I would be concerned by her silence.

I couldn't be positive that a servant didn't happen upon us during that time either. My thoughts had been on her solely. However, I was sure of their loyalty and silence. They were paid well and treated even better. This was to be their future countess and her name was not to be tarnished.

Miriam sagged against me as I held her and I pressed a kiss to her head as if she were a child. "I'll walk you to your room. You need your sleep," I said gently.

She nodded against my chest and when she lifted her face to meet my gaze, her cheeks were still flushed from her release. "I do not believe I will require warm milk after all," she said softly, causing my smile to spread.

"Perhaps not," I replied.

She gave me but a very small shy smile. Reluctantly, for I wished nothing more than to take her to my room and to my bed with me, I began our walk to her bedchambers. The silence was for the best as we passed through the hallway. Finding one of her family members awake and hearing us would cause an issue we did not need. When I asked for Miriam, I wanted it to be for no other reason than my desire for her to be my wife. No other dark shadows should hang upon the moment. No cause for her to believe my hand had been forced by her uncle.

When we made it to her door, I considered joining her, but then I did not know of her sister's habits when it came to visiting her. We had taken a chance in the kitchen. One I would never regret, however, I doubted we would be so lucky to continue in her room without notice.

She placed a hand on the door and then turned her head to look back at me. Knowing silence was best, I moved closer and leaned down to capture her lips with mine once more. I wanted her to sleep with thoughts of only me in her dreams. I did not linger as I wanted to, for fear I would forget my focus. “Goodnight, Miriam,” I whispered with my lips brushing her ear. She shivered as I stepped back.

“Good night, Ashington,” she replied softly then quickly turned and went into her room. Once the door clicked behind her, I turned to leave.



Wellington already at the dining room table was something I had come to expect the past few days. The man was an early riser. He had already been brought his preference of coffee and a tray of pastries had been placed on the table. I had enjoyed having them here and hoped in the future they would return to visit when their niece was the Countess of Chatwick Hall. Knowing the closeness they shared with Miriam, I was sure this would be a regular event.

Emma would love Lady Wellington. They had much in common. Especially their love for jam and hot chocolate. It was luck that I had found, not only a lady that would fit perfectly into our life, but one with a family such as this one. They were not at all locked down to society’s rules and I appreciated that immensely. How I thought someone as proper as Lydia would have been able to accept the package that I came with I was not sure. It had been poorly thought through. Emma would have kept her in tears and I would have been left dealing with the aftermath of it all.

“It is a fine coffee you have brewed in your kitchen. I will admit my cook has not perfected the process as of yet, so I am envious of your luck in having one that can make it to taste like the coffee I drank during my time in New Orleans. I did grow quite fond of it there,” Wellington informed me in way of greeting as I went to take my seat.

Speaking to him about his niece now seemed like a good time, but I feared doing it in my home around my table would make it seem as if I wanted an upper hand. His acceptance should be done at his home where he did not feel as if I were trying to control his decision. Waiting until that time now seemed difficult. After last night, I did not wish to go another night without Miriam

in my home. Preferably in my bed.

“I’ve read that New Orleans uses chicory in their coffee much like France. The concept hasn’t made it to England yet, the taxes remain an issue. One would think they too would use the additive of chicory to stretch the product,” I replied.

Wellington grinned broadly. “Indeed. I have oft said the same thing. Many do not enjoy the taste of chicory in coffee, but I much prefer it. There is a hint of wood in the taste,” he paused and thought a moment then added, “almost nutty perhaps would describe it best.”

“Please do not tell me you are boring Lord Ashington with your talk of chicory coffee,” Lady Wellington said as she breezed into the dining room, looking bright and well-rested. “He does so miss coffee with the added chicory. My family complains of the additive and the need to use it and my husband swears it is a brilliant combination,” she added as she took the seat that was held out for her.

“Hot chocolate please,” she then said in her loud American voice to the servant awaiting her request. Her eyes lit up as they found the pastries already placed on the table. “I shall be too large for my gowns after a weekend here. The sweets have been simply fantastic,” she gushed and beamed at me, before taking two different pastries and placing them before her.

I imagined Emma was equally thrilled with the pastries brought to the cottage this morning. I would need to make my way out there after breakfast to make sure they were ready for their travel back to London. She would be disappointed that she did not get to meet Miriam, but that introduction was of utmost importance and it’s timing was even more so.

“I am pleased to hear you’ve been properly indulged while at Chatwick Hall,” I replied.

“If only I could steal your cook,” she said, before biting into the chocolate croissant in her hand.

“I assure you, we cannot,” Wellington said drawly beside his wife.

Lady Wellington’s eyes shifted toward the door and widened in surprise. Turning my head, I followed her gaze, not prepared for who I found standing there. Although she seemed quite pleased with herself and her smile was plastered on so brightly that I knew she was up to mischief. If only she understood this was not the mischief easily cleaned up or explained.

“Hello,” Emma said in a cheerful voice as she walked into the dining room, her head held high as if she were the lady of the house.

Standing, I glanced at the door, expecting Alice to appear, but she had not yet caught up with Emma it would seem. “Where is Alice?” I asked, unsure how to explain her appearance.

Emma gazed up at me with a challenge in her eyes. “I am not quite sure,” she told me.

That response could mean many things. However, asking her questions in front of company was going to get me nowhere with Emma. “Let’s go to the kitchen,” I told her, but she did not move.

“The sweets are in here, Ashington,” she said, walking toward the table.

She wasn’t going to obey without a scene and it was past the point that I could usher her out without an introduction. Sighing in defeat of the situation, I turned back to my guests. “This is Emma. Emma, this is Lord and Lady Wellington.”

Emma gave them her brightest of smiles. “It is very nice to meet you,” she said then climbed into a chair closest to the pastries and leaned over to pluck one from the tray. “I believe this is jam. What do you think?” she asked Lady Wellington as she held it in her small hand.

“It does look like strawberry jam,” Lady Wellington agreed, watching Emma with curiosity on her face.

“I do love strawberry jam,” Emma said then lowered herself into the chair she had used as a stool before taking a large bite.

“There are few things tastier than a tart filled with strawberry jam,” Lady Wellington agreed.

Emma nodded her head enthusiastically.

“Oh,” Miriam’s surprised tone as she entered the room only made this situation more dire. I had not prepared for this. Emma’s introduction to Miriam was to be something well planned and organized. Throwing her in the face of my company such as this and expecting them to not only accept her but keep her existence a secret was asking too much, I was afraid. Yet it was what I must do. Emma had left me no other choice in the matter.

“Please, have a seat, honey. There are a delicious array of pastries and we have a lovely guest to enjoy them with,” Lady Wellington beamed brightly at her niece.

Miriam walked slowly into the room, casting a gaze my way that wasn’t

questioning or confused like one would expect, but more...concerned. Who was it she was concerned for? Me? Herself? Emma?

“Good morning, Emma,” Miriam said, taking the seat beside her and silencing the entire room. One could hear a pin drop, and in that moment, I realized Miriam Bathurst had been keeping her own secret.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

Miriam Bathurst

Seeing Emma in the dining room wasn't what I had expected to see this morning. My walk from the bedchamber to here had been torturous because I was sure my aunt would see the guilt on my face from what had taken place last night between Ashington and me. However, I still could not make myself regret it. I wasn't sure a girl could regret something such as that. She could, however, fear her family finding out.

Emma sitting at the table as my aunt smiled brightly at her and my uncle gaped at her had not been what I thought I'd walk into this morning. I could tell by the look of panic on Ashington's face that Emma's appearance had been one orchestrated by Emma alone. I did feel sympathy for Ashington, for I knew he did not plan on introducing Emma to us this way if at all. Something I should remember when my thoughts wanted to trust him and believe we might have a future.

Emma turned in her seat at my greeting and she smiled at me mischievously with her mouth full of sweet pastry. "Did you have to come searching for the sweets this morning?" I asked her. "Tis a good thing you came here then. There seems to be an abundance," I said as I took the seat beside her.

She managed to swallow her mouth full. "It will be worth it even after Alice finds me," she said with such passion I chuckled.

"I believe you are right. Have they brought you hot chocolate yet?" I asked her.

She shook her head no and frowned, looking around toward the doorway where a servant stood looking as panicked as Ashington had seemed. "I do so hope they bring it soon before I choke," she told me.

"Indeed," I agreed then smiled at the young server. "Might Lady Emma and I have some hot chocolate?" I asked her.

The server glanced warily toward Ashington, who nodded once, and then scurried out of the room back toward the kitchen, where I was sure she would

tell everyone of who had come to the dining room.

I met my aunt's curious gaze. She was fascinated and I knew she had a dozen questions for me once we were alone. Perhaps I should have acted as if I hadn't met Emma but lying in front of a child seemed wrong. I couldn't make myself do it. She was so young and taking in everything she witnessed around her. I did not want her to remember me as someone who told untruths. Even if it were an untruth her uncle had wanted.

"Aunt Harriet, Emma enjoys biscuits and jam just as much as you do. I believe the two of you have much in common," I informed her.

Aunt Harriet's eyes lit up as she studied Emma. She was truly charmed by the girl, but it was very difficult not to be.

"I don't know many people who don't love a tasty jam with their biscuit," Aunt Harriet said smiling.

Emma frowned then. "Alice doesn't. She says jam is much too sweet and not at all needed on a biscuit."

"Who is Alice?" Aunt Harriet then asked unable to stop herself.

"My governess," Emma replied.

Aunt Harriet nodded her head then as if that made all the sense in the world. "I never had a governess but I did read about them in my books. They don't appear to be the sort that enjoys treats," Aunt Harriet said.

Emma crawled back up to her knees then and reached for another pastry. "Oh, they're not. Alice won't care at all for these pastries," Emma informed us.

Ashington cleared his throat then, reminding us all that he too was in the room. I turned my head to look his way and he was studying me. I waited for the inevitable question and wondered if he would ask me here in front of my aunt and uncle or when we were alone.

"When did you meet Emma, Lady Miriam?" he asked me, clearing that up rather quickly.

I glanced down at Emma and gave her an apologetic smile. For I would not lie for her, but I would do my best to make it my fault and not hers that we met in the forest path.

Turning to look back at him, I held the same smile and shrugged. "I was out for a walk and found a lovely path in the forest. I decided to take it and while enjoying the beauty around me, I came upon what I first believed might be a fairy child. However, Lady Emma assured me she was not." Emma

giggled beside me at my elaboration of the story.

“I see,” Ashington said, not looking amused.

“Yes, well, she introduced herself and I as well. Then we spoke of jam and biscuits and hot chocolate before she disappeared beyond the path, leaving me to believe I had, in fact, met one of the Fae. I was pleasantly surprised to see her this morning when I entered the dining room. Would have been a terrible shame to leave Chatwick Hall believing Lady Emma to be a fairy child when clearly she is a very bright young lady.”

Ashington understood the meaning behind my words even though they had been masked for Emma’s sake. She had been a secret he hadn’t intended to share with me. Yet last night, I had forgotten all about his secret and done things a proper lady wouldn’t do. I trusted him because I wanted him to be worth my trust. However, in the light of day with Emma beside me, it was hard to do that any longer.

“I see,” he said finally.

“Emma,” a stern yet distraught voice came from the doorway, and we all turned our heads to see who I could only assume was Alice, the governess. Her hair was pulled up tightly on her head and the glasses perched on her nose only made her pinched expression appear more severe. I felt the sudden need to protect Emma.

“Hello, Alice. I trust you slept well,” Emma replied, not seeming frightened at all.

“I am sorry, Lord Ashington,” Alice said, looking completely horrified. “I thought she was sleeping when I left the cottage to go get tea. When I arrived back, the door was locked. I thought she’d locked me out and she was inside.”

Ashington didn’t appear angry at the governess. He also didn’t seem surprised by Emma’s actions. Did she do these sorts of things often? I bit back a smile at the thought. What a mischievous little girl.

“Twas the last morning here. I wanted to meet everyone,” Emma said with her shoulders straight and her head held high. No fear in her expression. It was as if she was challenging them both.

“Emma, we spoke of this last night,” Alice said, sounding more exasperated than angry this time.

“I did not like your response,” Emma told her then turned back in her seat and took another bite of pastry.

Ashington stood then and held out his hand toward Emma. "You've had your introduction. Tis time you left. Your carriage back to London awaits," he told her.

Emma sighed and looked longingly at the half-eaten pastry in her hand.

"You may take the pastry with you," Ashington informed her.

Emma's face immediately brightened and she smiled up at me. "It was a pleasure seeing you again. I truly hope it won't be the last," she said then climbed down out of her chair and started toward Ashington.

Just before she reached him, she spun around and looked at Aunt Harriet. "It was a pleasure meeting you, too," she said then looked toward my uncle. "We did not speak but hello," she told him then slipped her hand into Ashington's and happily let him lead her from the dining room.

Silence fell over the room as my aunt and uncle both stared at me. I didn't have their answers. I was afraid what this appeared to be... who Emma appeared to be was indeed correct. It did not make me dislike the child, but I feared if word about her were to ever leak to the ton, things could go very differently. The idea made my stomach sick. She was so full of life and a lovely spirit.

"This cannot end well," Uncle Alfred said.

"We do not know that," Aunt Harriet snapped at him but even she didn't look convinced.

"I'm sorry I am late, yet again," Whitney said as she breezed into the dining room. "I cannot seem to rise at a decent hour while staying here."

We all looked up and her bright smile fell instantly.

"Oh dear, what did I miss?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"I dare say you would not believe it if we told you," Uncle Alfred said, standing from his chair. "I must go ready my things. I imagine we will be leaving shortly."

Whitney's gaze fell to the table covered in sweet pastries. "Do I have time for at least one?" she asked.

"Of course," Aunt Harriet replied.

The hot chocolate I had requested arrived.

Somehow I managed to drink a cup and finish a pastry. I will never know how because my stomach was never so in knots as it was in that moment.

Very little was said as we finished our breakfast. Whitney's curious gaze was on me and although I felt it, I did not meet her eyes. The less people who

knew of Emma the safer she was. I trusted my sister, but Emma's existence was not mine to share with anyone. It seemed that Aunt Harriet agreed with me for she too remained quiet.

Once we were done with breakfast, I made the move to leave the dining room. Ashington had not returned and I was relieved rather than disappointed. I was not sure what our next conversation would be and I did not know if I was ready to have it. Perhaps once we were back in London, I would have time to prepare as would he.

After we were dressed for travel, our things were taken from our rooms to be loaded onto the carriage. Whitney exited her room at the same time I did mine. We walked down the hall together. As we reached the stairs, I took a moment to take in the entrance of Chatwick Hall. It was truly a stunning place and one I was not sure I would ever visit again. My thoughts went to the kitchen and all that had happened there. Feeling a pang of loss, I followed my sister out the front doors and toward our awaiting carriage.

Lord Ashington was still nowhere to be seen.



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Chapter Thirty-Four

Nicholas Compton

“The ball has only just begun, yet I find you out among the roses already,” I said as I stepped out of the shadows and made my presence known to Miss Bathurst. It wasn’t a coincidence that we were both in the gardens, although I would have her believe it so. My purpose for coming to the St. Vincent’s affair tonight had been to simply see Miriam.

While my brother had whisked her away to Chatwick Hall, I had time to contemplate the matter. It was clear Miriam was his choice. It was also painfully clear that it would be Miriam that I must use to cause humiliation and pain to the new Earl of Ashington. However, while I had several days to reflect and think upon how this would affect everyone, including Miriam, I realized I could not do it. At least not in the way I had so carefully constructed.

My feelings for Miriam could not even be labeled as an inconvenience for being near her brought me a happiness I hadn’t realized I was missing. Whilst she was in the countryside with Hugh, I was battling my own emotions and forced to face the simple truth, I cared very much for Miriam Bathurst.

Turning in the moonlight, Miriam smiled at me. “Mr. Compton, I would say this is a surprise, but I am sure it is a well-planned meeting, is it not?” There was no accusation in her tone. There was more of a jovial lilt to her words. As if she found my game childish and predictable. I needed to rectify that immediately. It was my fault, of course.

“I assure it is not. This is pure luck, at least for me,” I replied. Then thought perhaps if I started telling the truth, it might help things. I had lied for so long it seemed that the lies came so easily to my tongue. It took very little thought.

“Very well,” Miriam said with a smile that said she did not, in fact, believe me. She was too smart to fall for the smooth words of a man such as myself. It wasn’t an easy thing to accept. I didn’t want to be that man. For the first time in my life, I wanted to be seen as something worthy. A man that she

could respect.

“Did you enjoy your time at Chatwick Hall?” I asked her then, unable to wait a moment longer for a response to this. Had Hugh let his guard down?

Even under the light of the moon, the pink blush on her cheeks was apparent. Miriam lowered her head as if to hide her response and I knew then it may be too late. My stomach clenched and I felt a tightness in my chest that I could only categorize as panic. Had I ever felt that before?

“Chatwick Hall is the most lovely place in all of England, I am sure,” she replied then. When she offered no more information, I could feel the wall there between us. It was clear that if there had been anything before, any connection she had felt with me, that it was no longer acknowledged. Miriam Bathurst was set on becoming the next countess.

It would be easy to believe she was like all the others and out for the title and power. After visiting Chatwick Hall and seeing all that Ashington had to offer her, why wouldn't she set her sights on being his wife? However, I knew Miss Bathurst and no amount of material wealth would draw her in. There had to be something more that happened.

“Am I to believe a wedding is to be announced soon then?” I asked, trying not to sound as bitter and jealous as I felt. There was time to turn this around, but at the expense of her happiness would be difficult for me. When had I become a man who cared for others feelings? Why now?

“Oh, no, I do not believe so. I haven't seen Lord Ashington since our return. I am sure he has been busy.” She stopped then and I could see the flicker of pain in her eyes before she turned her face to gaze off down the garden path and away from me.

This scenario was one I could work with more easily.

“The Earl of Ashington does have much weighing on him. I wouldn't give it too much thought. He will come around once his load lightens,” I assured her then motioned a hand toward the ballroom. “For now, would you return with me to the ballroom? I believe I am next on your dance card.”

That brought a smile to her face and I felt like a hero of sorts. Hugh might find he needed time to think over his decision and while he did that, I would move forward with my own. Miriam Bathurst was unique and I found getting her out of my thoughts was impossible. Her beauty alone was a fierce weapon, but yet one she did not wield. Her choice not to use such a power only made her more desirable. I was willing to admit that she had changed

my plans.

“I thought perhaps he may attend tonight,” Miriam said as we walked back to the ballroom.

“Ashington is often late. He may perhaps be there when we arrive,” I replied. Another lie so easily spoken. Guilt gnawed at my gut. Ashington was, in fact, inside the ballroom. I did not know whom he would be speaking to or if he would be dancing, but he hadn’t gone looking for Miriam. Someone else was occupying his time.

“Perhaps,” she agreed as we stepped onto the veranda and back into the warmth of the crowded room.

“Do you require a refreshment before we dance?” I asked her, not allowing myself to search for Hugh.

Miriam, however, was already doing so and I watched as she scanned the room. She glanced up at me and shook her head. “No, I am fine,” she replied.

Taking her hand and placing it on my arm, I led her toward the floor just as my eyes found Hugh. He was speaking to none other than Lydia Ramsbury and her mother. They were both openly delighted with the attention. All of London knew of his trip to the country with Miriam and her family. His speaking with Lydia made it appear as if that hadn’t been quite as important as the gossip papers thought it was.

Miriam stiffened beside me and I knew she too had found my arse of a brother. Although his stupidity helped me, it also infuriated me. I knew this was difficult for Miriam to see and I wanted to see her smile. I preferred to see her happy. A life with my brother would never make her happy. It was best she learned that now. Before it was much too late.

“She pales in comparison to you,” I whispered in her ear, before taking her arm and turning her toward me as the music began again.

Miriam was the one who was pale, however, and the pain in her face was so clear I realized she had truly come to care for my brother. She had been expecting more with their return to London than she had received. Yet, once again, he had turned his back on someone who thought he cared. I understood that more than she knew. Trusting the Earl of Ashington was a slippery slope and I feared I was too late to save Miriam from the fall. I would, however, be there to lighten the impact.

“I believe she is lovely,” Miriam whispered, looking stricken.

“Lydia is lovely but when compared to you, one fails to notice,” I clarified.

Miriam looked up at me then and forced the smallest of smiles. “You don’t have to make this better.”

“I know. However seeing the pain that is very clear on your face is something I do not wish to witness. If I could take that away, I would,” I told her honestly.

Her smile was less forced then, although the sadness in her eyes was still very evident. “Thank you, Nicholas. I will be fine. Just dance with me then take me to my aunt,” she said with a certainty that stemmed from someone who knew heartache.

“You are well-versed in overcoming, however, that does not mean you don’t deserve a shoulder to lean on. Everyone requires that eventually. Mine is here and very willing.”

Miriam sighed and then a small laugh came from her. Not something I was expecting to hear. “You perhaps, Mr. Compton, are the most complex individual I have ever had the pleasure of knowing.”

“I am going to believe you mean that as a compliment,” I replied.

“Oh, indeed. I do,” she said.

The hurt set deep in her eyes did not go away, but the way she relaxed as I held her in my arms was enough for now. Just when I thought all hope was lost, I was handed one last lifeline to turn this thing around.



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Chapter Thirty-Five

Miriam Bathurst

Keeping my gaze locked on Aunt Harriet, I focused on my expression remaining unconcerned. I was aware of the whispers and the eyes on me as Nicholas walked me to my aunt after our dance. It would seem all of London knew of my visit to Chatwick Hall. Lord Ashington's appearance tonight, with his attention on Lydia, only stirred the gossip in the room.

Fleeing would only make it worse. The one thing I was unable to control was the flush on my cheeks from the attention. I had never liked to draw attention to myself, yet tonight, simply by being alive, I was the object of everyone's whispers. I held tightly, perhaps too tightly, to Nicholas's arm, but he did not complain.

I was thankful for his assistance this evening. His appearance in the garden had been no accident and I knew now why he had sought me out. He had known what was inside waiting for me and he'd come to aid me. There was much that could be said about Nicholas Compton and I was aware he had faults that could not be ignored. However, when I had been in need of a friend, he had been there. That I would never forget.

Aunt Harriet's expression was not as controlled as I hoped mine appeared. She looked utterly beside herself with worry and possibly a touch of anger. I had never truly seen her angry, so I wasn't completely sure. Perhaps she was feeling ill with the situation at hand and it made her face appear pinched.

She stepped forward, taking my hand and holding it in both of hers much too dramatically for the audience that was watching my every move. "We can leave," she said immediately.

I shook my head, knowing that would only make matters worse. There was one thing I knew about rejection and it was that showing any weakness only made you a target. My father had taught me that lesson the hard way, but thanks to him, I was very well-trained in handling situations as painful as this one. "I see no reason to leave just yet. The night is still early. I have several dances left on my card," I explained. I was proud of my voice. Not once had

it faltered or shook, although I could see the lady behind Aunt Harriet visibly lean closer to hear what I was saying. Was this truly that fascinating?

“Perhaps some fresh air?” Aunt Harriet suggested, looking more confused and flustered now than angry. My response had baffled her, it seemed. She had expected me to leave. Most would I guessed, but I did not intend to give the ton more gossip for their morning calls.

“I was just going to fetch her a lemonade. May I get you something,” Nicholas said saving me, once again, from having to come up with an adequate response.

“Uh, oh, yes please,” Aunt Harriet replied. “Lemonade sounds lovely.”

Nicholas looked down at me and I released his arm, but he didn’t immediately move away. He was waiting for me to assure him I was good. All the wrongs I had witnessed of Nicholas Compton over the past weeks and the deceptions were being quickly forgiven and forgotten as he stood there beside me. If he hadn’t walked inside with me tonight, how much more difficult would this evening had been?

I did not think of it. Perhaps I would dwell on that later. At the moment, my attention must remain on the present and appearing confident. Just as I was gathering my thoughts and preparing myself to finish this night with my head held high, Aunt Harriet’s hand, once again, took my arm and held tightly. I lifted my gaze from her hold on me to meet her eyes. She looked stricken.

“Oh my, oh dear,” she whispered and continued to stand there, staring at me as if she must tell me the most dreadful news.

I considered pulling my arm free of her grasp, but I feared she would leave a mark, so I remained still and waited for her to say more. She opened and closed her mouth several times, much like I had seen a fish do once out of water. If she didn’t seem so near tears, I would have laughed at the sight.

“Whatever it is, Aunt Harriet, it can’t be quite so awful,” I said softly, not sure what ears around us were listening. I hated this feeling, yet I had walked right into this by agreeing to go with Lord Ashington to Chatwick Hall.

“Your lemonade,” Nicholas said then, interrupting the moment and handing Aunt Harriet her refreshment so that she had to then let go of my arm. He turned to me. “Tis nothing truly of importance. Ashington is dancing with Lydia. Boring really,” he whispered low enough that no one would hear. I doubted even Aunt Harriet could hear him.

Unable to help myself, I glanced back over my shoulder then and saw him smiling down at her. She didn't appear to be boring at all. Quite the opposite really.

"Do not feed the gossips," Nicholas whispered again, reminding me that I was being watched very closely.

I quickly looked away from the two of them dancing and it was a relief. The perfect image they portrayed only made my stomach ache with the reality that I would never fit in his arms like she did. Lydia Ramsbury was born to be a countess, whereas I was not. I had let my guard down and my common sense had left me just long enough to fall in love with a man who did not love me back.

I did love him.

Oh God, I did.

I took a long drink of my lemonade then looked at my aunt, who was watching the dancing with a stricken look on her face. "I've found my head aches, Aunt Harriet, and I need to retire for the evening."

She swung her gaze to mine, eyes wide with both relief and concern. "Oh dear," she gasped.

"Nothing to get worked up over. Except the fact I shall be known as the girl who leaves the ball much too early," I assured her.

"Shall I walk you out?" Nicholas asked with a worried tone that matched my aunt's. With the two of them fussing over me, I would soon have a headache if I didn't get out of this place.

"That won't be necessary, Nicholas. Thank you. Please enjoy what is left of the evening," I replied with a smile for all those who found my actions of interest tonight.

Wanting nothing more than the safety of my bedroom, I walked as slowly and with as much grace as I could toward the exit. Keeping my head held high, I smiled at those who made eye contact with me and continued on my way. They wanted me to look defeated for that was their way. I may feel broken inside, but they would not have the satisfaction of knowing it.

The music had stopped, and I was sure at this moment, Lord Ashington was escorting Lydia Ramsbury from the dance floor. Perhaps he was asking her if she needed some fresh air for it was rather stuffy inside the ballroom. She would smile and agree. They would then make their way out to the gardens to talk of things that were proper. All very regal and worthy of his

rank.

The image made me want to toss rotten fruit at their heads.

Aunt Harriet's hand clasped mine silently as we waited on our carriage to be brought around. For once, she said no words since the time I had known her. Even she realized there wasn't much that could be said.

I wondered what it was that I had done so wrong. Did my knowing about Emma cause this? Was he unable to forgive me for not telling him that I had met Emma in the forest and not told him? How ridiculous it was if that were so. Did he have a plan for introducing Lydia Ramsbury to Emma? For I doubted she would take it so well. Had he thought of that when he decided she was the one he was to court?

The tightness in my chest twisted and I took a deep breath, inhaling the cool evening air. I may never have answers and if that was what was to be then it just was. I had a purpose. I was here for a reason and falling in love with an earl had not been on my agenda at all.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

Earl of Ashington

A visit to 7 Grosvenor this morning was not where I wanted to be going. The more time I spent with Lydia, the more obvious it became that she would not fit into my life. Perhaps if there hadn't been, no. It was not fair to Lydia for my thoughts to always go back to Miriam.

The sunlight was sparse as I stepped outside hidden behind the clouds that promised rain. The day would be as dreary as my soul felt. How fitting. Last night had been enough torture for one year, let alone one night, yet I had prevailed.

"Ashington, off so soon?" Nicholas's voice snapped my thoughts from my dark future and into my dim present. His strides as he made his way toward me were purposeful and the look on his face said he had rather plant his fist firmly between my eyes than speak to me. Typically, I would be annoyed by his interruption in my life, but at the moment, he was causing me to stall something I was in no hurry to do.

"Good Day, Nicholas," I replied, wondering if we were to give London new gossip for their papers with a brawl on my front lawn.

"Fuck your good day, Ashington," he snarled. "I'm not here for pleasantries as you are aware. We can't stand the sight of each other."

I nodded in agreement. "Then how can I help you?" I asked, already knowing this had everything to do with Miriam. His objective had been clear as I watched him champion her last night. He had been doing it to get to me. It had worked. I had wanted nothing more than to break his hand every time he touched her.

"How can you help me?" He repeated my words as if I had asked the most obvious of questions. "You can't help me. You have never fucking helped me. Life is so easy for you, isn't it, *Lord Ashington*? You want something, you take it. Without care to who you hurt along the way."

My fists clenched at my side, but I said nothing. I waited until his ranting was over. His purpose for being here would eventually be stated and he could

leave. Perhaps I should have visited Lydia this morning. It would have been preferable to this.

“Why her, Ashington? Why Miriam? She’s kind and selfless. Her laugh can make a dark mood vanish. She forgives and holds no grudge. She’s smart and can talk of literature most females don’t know exist. Nothing with her is ever dull.” He paused, telling me things I already knew and I was trying hard to forget.

“It sounds as if you’re taken with Miss Bathurst,” I drawled, attempting to sound bored while white hot jealousy was coursing through me at the fact Nicholas knew these things about Miriam.

Nicholas took a step toward me. “I am in love with Miriam Bathurst. The problem is I fell in love with a woman who is in love with *you*. How unfair my life does seem, Brother.”

I stood there silent. There was nothing I could say to Nicholas. No explanation I would give him.

“You were never worthy of her. One day I hope she sees that clearly. She deserves to be loved and cherished. You, however, do not deserve to wake every morning with the gift of that woman by your side.”

Nicholas did not wait for me to respond. He turned and left after coming to say what he needed to say. I did not know what he had hoped to accomplish other than to hurt me.

With a heavy sigh, I walked back up the stairs and inside. There was only so much pretending I could manage in one day. I needed a drink and a dark room.

“NO ALICE!” Emma screamed and then she followed it by a high-pitched squeal as she ran down the stairs, her hair flying free behind her and a grin on her face.

“Miss Emma! You cannot wear britches!”

“Oh, yes, I can!” Emma replied, and it was then I realized Emma was, indeed, wearing a pair of boy’s britches. “They are ever so comfortable. Nothing like my dreadful gowns!” she called back over her shoulder then ran by me “Good Morning, Ashington,” she greeted me, heading toward the kitchen.

Alice finally made it to the bottom step, out of breath and already looking exhausted for so early in the day. “I’ve no idea where she found the britches,” she told me, then took a moment to catch her breath.

“Emma is rather industrious,” I replied.

Alice gave me an incredulous look, and for the first time all morning, I felt the tug of a smile.

“Tis time she had a mother, my lord,” Alice said.

The smile vanished and my dark mood returned.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

Miriam Bathurst

“You haven’t eaten any of the chocolate I brought you.” Aunt Harriet’s voice was concerned as if my not eating the sweet was disappointing. I glanced at the plate of chocolates she had sat beside me earlier.

“I do not seem to have an appetite, Aunt Harriet,” I explained. Normally it would have been the book in my hand that had me so engrossed that I had forgotten about the sweets, but my thoughts had been elsewhere.

“Of course,” she said, her concern now more etched on her face. “Of course. It was very poor timing of your mother to request your sister return home. I am truly sorry your uncle couldn’t change her mind. That woman is rather stubborn,” she added with frustration.

I sighed. Missing Whitney only added to the pain in my chest, but it was as if my mother had known about what was happening here and that was her way of reminding me what I must do. What my responsibilities were. As if I did not think of Whitney’s future daily.

“Mother is a bitter pill I have learned to live with. However, for Whitney’s sake, I must find a husband. There is not time for me to dwell on... other things,” I said, more for myself than for Aunt Harriet.

“Nonsense. Alfred has sent your mother yet another decent sum of money. She and your sister are comfortable, I assure you. He wants you to take your time and find the gentleman that makes you happy. Marriage does not have to be for status or name, Miriam. You can marry for love. I did and it was the best thing I’ve ever done. I want you to have that freedom.”

Tears I would not shed stung my eyes and I forced a smile through the emotion. For I had already guessed that my aunt and uncle loved one another. It was obvious in their marriage. As much as I wanted something like theirs, I feared I wouldn’t be given the same opportunity. Unlike my aunt Harriet, I had fallen in love with a man who did not love me in return. It was a foolish thing to do and one I hadn’t planned on, but it had happened without my realizing it at all.

“I will be forever grateful for all you and Uncle Alfred have done for me. My time here with the two of you has been some of the best moments of my life. I shall always hold these memories close to my heart.” I could speak those words honestly when others I could not. For I did not believe I would marry for love but telling Aunt Harriet that would only break her heart. She was such a gentle soul.

Aunt Harriet closed the distance between us and sat down beside me on the settee in such a quick movement it startled me. Then I was pulled into an embrace, just before she began to sob rather loudly. I was not sure if it had been my words that upset her or why we were embracing. I patted her shoulder in an awkward attempt at consoling her, but I could not be sure that was what she required.

“Good heavens, woman, why are you mauling the child with emotion?” Uncle Alfred’s voice boomed through the room and I had never been more relieved.

Aunt Harriet did not release me, however. If anything, she clung tighter to me, clutching me against her as she cried. I looked over her shoulder toward him in hopes he could find a way to help his stricken wife.

“Harriet, dear, I believe you are traumatizing the child. Do release her,” he said more gently this time.

Aunt Harriet sniffled then and eased her hold on me before slowly pulling back. “Oh my, did I frighten you?”

I was not sure how to answer this. The wailing and clinging to me was rather terrifying. However, it was typical for Aunt Harriet to be loud and to do things with more exuberant emotion than most.

“Of course you did! The girl has never seen such an outburst in her life. She’s English. Raised by my uptight sister. That sort of affection isn’t one practiced on this soil,” Uncle Alfred stated with a grin in his voice this time.

Aunt Harriet smiled then and wiped at the tears on her face. “I am sorry, honey. Your words were so special and I have come to love you as my own child. I just got so filled with emotion that I forgot myself and... well back home we are more affectionate,” she explained.

“And loud and emotional,” Uncle Alfred added.

Aunt Harriet glanced over her shoulder at him with a scowl and he shrugged. “Tis true.”

“My Lord, Mr. Compton is here to see Miss Bathurst,” the butler

announced from the open door behind Uncle Alfred.

Uncle Alfred's eyebrows raised in unison as he looked at me. He seemed to be asking me silently if I wanted to see Nicholas. I nodded once and he stepped back to look directly at the butler. "Very well, send him in, James," Uncle Alfred replied.

Aunt Harriet squeezed my hand, before getting up from the settee and moving across the room and taking a seat by the window. She picked up a letter that she had left there earlier and glanced up at Uncle Alfred.

"I will be in my office if anyone needs me," he said, before exiting the room. I wasn't sure if Aunt Harriet's look had been one telling him to leave or if he had not wanted to be there for the visit. One could never tell with my uncle.

My gaze shifted to Nicholas when he entered the room. Smiling, I placed the book beside me and stood up. "Good morning, Mr. Compton," I greeted him, realizing I didn't have to force my smile. It truly was nice to see a friendly face.

"Good morning, Miss Bathurst," he replied. "As always you are breathtaking. You manage that with so little effort it seems." He winked then turned toward my aunt. "Hello, Lady Wellington, you are looking lovely as well."

Aunt Harriet blushed and waved a hand at him. "You're such a charmer, but it isn't me you must win over," she said. "Would you like some tea or perhaps something to eat?"

Nicholas shook his head. "Thank you but I do not require either. I would like it very much though if Miss Bathurst would take a walk with me out to the garden. If that would be okay with you," he added.

Aunt Harriet glanced at me for a moment then back to Nicholas. "Of course. It's a beautiful day. The sunshine is warm and the roses are lovely. They aren't enjoyed enough. Please go out back and make use of the bench no one ever sits on."

Nicholas grinned and nodded then held out his arm for me to take. I did so and we made our way out to the hallway. "Do you know a better way to get to the garden in back than going out the front door and walking around?" he asked me.

"Indeed I do," I replied and led him toward the exit on the left side of the house used mostly by servants. There was a rock paved path from the door to

the small garden in the back of 18 Mayfair. Aunt Harriet did not spend much time outside, so Uncle Harriet did not worry much about the gardens here. I wondered if he did at their home in the country.

We walked in silence until we reached the one bench that sat in the shade, just near the rose garden like Aunt Harriet had mentioned. I took a seat and Nicholas hesitated before he then too sat down. The bench wasn't very large and our bodies were close yet not so close that we touched. I didn't get heated nor did my heart rate speed up from being this close to him.

He did smell very nice, however, and I was thankful he had come to visit. It gave me something to do rather than sit and stare at a book while my thoughts were on Ashington.

"I know that you believe yourself to be in love with Ashington. I'm a perceptive man and with you I find I am unable to take my eyes off you. Therefore, I have learned much about your expressions," he paused then and I turned to look at him. This was not the conversation I thought we would have.

I had hoped he would come talk of things that made me laugh such as whatever silly gossip he had heard last or something trivial.

"I'm not an earl, but I'm not without wealth. I know you do not care about being accepted into London's social rankings, but you do want that for Whitney and as you have witnessed, I am well-loved amongst the ton. My country estate is not comparable to Chatwick Hall, but it is lovely and there is room for your sister and your mother as well if you so choose. I can make you happy, Miriam. I can give you all the things you want so desperately for you sister and I can give you the one thing you seem to overlook for yourself." He paused again then stood up.

I remained frozen, unable to move. He was saying words that didn't make sense. Nicholas had his own agenda and this did not play into his plans at all. I watched as he knelt down on one knee in front of me and he took both my hands in his.

"I am completely in love with you. It does not matter to me that you love another. I love you enough for both of us and I believe one day you will grow to love me too. Marry me, Miriam."

I stared down at our hands joined together in my lap unable to meet his gaze.

"This isn't what you wanted. Marrying me does not get the revenge on

your brother you wanted. He does not want me.” My words came out in a whisper, as if there were others around that could hear me.

His hands held mine tighter. “Miriam, look at me,” he pleaded.

Unable to ignore him, for although I did not love him, he was my friend and I did care for him, I lifted my eyes to his. There was a gentleness there that was comforting. Something I had seen very little of in my life. Something I had craved.

“I came to London seeking revenge and instead I found you. You, Miriam Bathurst, changed everything. The anger, the bitterness, the hatred, it all melted away and all that was left was you. All I could see was you. All I wanted was you. You saved me from my own inner Hell.”

For the second time today, tears stung my eyes. This time I didn’t fight them. I didn’t withhold them. Perhaps I needed to cry. For all I had wanted. For all I had lost. For all I had dreamed about. And for what I had found. This wasn’t a love story. It was a story of redemption. It was a story of friendship.

I had always wanted to be loved and here was a man proclaiming his love for me. Could I want for something my entire life then when it was handed to me so selflessly walk away from it?

No. I could not. That wasn’t who I was.



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Chapter Thirty-Eight

Miriam Bathurst

With each movement, be it a full turn or slight move of hand, I knew I was being watched closely. The smile I kept on my lips wasn't easy and I had no doubt that my dance partner noticed the less than genuine expression I was trying hard to keep in place. This was it, tonight, would be the last night I attended a ball as simply, Miriam Bathurst. There was no more time to decide. My decision had been made.

I stiffened as I moved in the arms of the man I had agreed to marry this morning in my aunt's rose garden. He, however, wasn't who I loved and I wished desperately that he was. I did not have forever to wait for the man I had thought might love me to realize he did. My mother and sister needed me to marry. Glancing up into beautiful green eyes of the man that held me, my smile became genuine, even if it was sad.

Tonight would be the last time I was given this freedom to enjoy his friendship and the simplicity of his company. So much would change and I hoped it didn't destroy us all. For after I became his wife, the man my traitorous heart loved, would surely hate me. That was a pain far worse than any I could comprehend. Yet, I knew I would never have been his choice. He had made that clear with his failure to choose.

"You are quiet tonight," Nicholas noted.

"Yes, I believe I am nervous," I replied with honesty. For if we were to be married then I wanted to begin with truth always.

"It seems Ashington finds little else of interest in the room tonight," Nicholas said, making it clear he was aware his brother was watching us or perhaps me.

"He must have been reminded of my existence tonight," I quipped in an attempt to make light of the matter.

Nicholas smirked. "It does appear that way."

The dance was not even yet at an end when Lord Ashington began to move through the crowd in our direction. I knew no one was aware of our recent

betrothal, so his sudden attention could not be summoned from that knowledge. My hand tightened on Nicholas's arm and I tried to steady myself before his arrival.

With a quick glance over his left shoulder, Nicholas took in the situation at hand and I felt him tense as well. Neither of us had been prepared for Ashington to approach us. I had assumed he would continue to ignore me as he had at the last ball. Why tonight did he choose to remind me how he made me feel? It was not as if I had forgotten. I was haunted with my feelings for him every moment.

"Miss Bathurst," Lord Ashington greeted me formally when he made it to us just as the song had ended. "I believe I am promised the next dance."

I knew he was not.

But Nicholas did not know this.

I stood there on my very own precipice.

I was not a liar and I would tell Nicholas the truth, but not at this moment. For right now I needed this dance. There may not be another chance such as this to speak to Ashington before my betrothal to his brother is announced. He may not need to hear it from me, but I needed to be the one to tell him. It was me who was foolish enough to fall in love with him after all. I was seeking closure and I hoped Nicholas would understand my decision.

Slowly I removed my hand from Nicholas's arm and the small sense of security and support I had drawn from him was gone. Perhaps I had made the wrong decision. I thought I was strong enough to face Ashington, but without Nicholas beside me, maybe I was not.

Ashington held out his hand as the music started up again and as if I were watching someone else, I placed my hand in his and stepped away from my only friend and into the arms of the man who had broken my heart so easily. My body in turn reacted as if it had been given back to its rightful owner and hummed with pleasure from his nearness. Did the rest of me not realize my heart had been damaged by this man? Did those butterflies that were ever present in my stomach when he was near and the tingles from his touch not understand how very dangerous he was? Were we not all one and the same? Did they not feel the agony that I felt, knowing that he would soon hate me?

"I am sorry, Miriam," he said without hesitation. I could feel the heat from his gaze on me, but I kept my eyes locked on nothing and everything but him. I did not trust myself to look up into his eyes, the color of the darkest blue

seas. I dreamed of those eyes and the way they reminded me of a storm churning when he was aroused. No! I would not allow myself to get swept away with emotion and become weak. This was the man who had so easily forgotten me. Without explanation, he had acted as if we did not know each other at all.

“Me too,” I replied with a new found will. I swung my gaze to meet his, determined to say what needed to be said before this dance was over. “For trusting you,” I added. “It was a mistake. One I shall not make again. Today Nicholas asked me to marry him and I said yes. He chose me over the revenge he so harbored toward you. I can trust him,” I did not say ‘not to hurt me’ because I did not want my emotions to be laid bare to Ashington. He did not need to know how he had hurt me. It was done.

Ashington paused for a moment and stared at me as if he did not believe the words I was saying. I held my head high and my shoulders back. He may not think I was worthy enough to be his countess, but his brother did find worth in me. I would be a good wife and the incredulous look in Lord Ashington’s eyes would not break me. I would not allow it to. He couldn’t hurt me anymore.

“Nicholas accepts me for who I am,” I said, needing to remind myself possibly more than anything. “He wants me. Nothing more.”

Ashington continued to stare at me as if my words made no sense to him or if he could not believe what he was hearing. My chest felt as if it may explode from the pain I had said he could no longer cause me. I had been wrong. It appeared Lord Ashington could, indeed, cause me great pain with saying very few words or no words at all.

A deep breath was something that had become difficult to do under the duress of the breaking of my heart once again. At least that is what it felt was happening. Something utterly horrific inside me was exploding and I feared I may not survive it.

In that moment, an arm came around me and I heard Nicholas speak, but I wasn’t sure exactly what it was he said. Then we were walking, he and I. We were leaving the ballroom or perhaps the house. I did not know for sure. I was just relieved that I was being taken away from the crowd, the noise, from... Ashington’s eyes so full of disbelief.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t have told him,” I said.

“He was going to find out eventually,” Nicholas replied.

“But perhaps it shouldn’t have been here, me, in that moment,” I said the words as I thought them.

“I do happen to agree with her. I don’t think that was the best idea,” Aunt Harriet said, and I then realized she was following us.

“Are we leaving?” I asked, then realizing we had indeed walked out the front entry way.

“Yes, I think tonight we have given the ton quite enough to talk about. Don’t you?” Nicholas said with a smile that did not meet his eyes.

“We did?” I asked.

Nicholas brushed my cheek with the back of his hand. “More so than they’ve had in years.”

There were so many things I should have been concerned with in that moment. Ashington was not one of them... yet he was there in my thoughts, crowding out all others.



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Chapter Thirty-Nine

Earl of Ashington

When the door to 18 Mayfair opened, I did not even know the time. For I had not slept all night. I had spent most of it pacing the floor. There was no well laid plan or thought through speech I had come here to give. I had simply been unable to stay away any longer. There were few things that I was absolutely certain of in this life. Right now, I faced losing one of those things because I knew without a doubt that I was in love with Miriam Bathurst and there would never be another woman I loved as deeply as I did her.

“Lord Ashington,” the butler began, but I did not wait to be sent away until later when the family was ready for visitors. I could not wait any longer.

“I am very sorry,” I said as I walked past the man and into the foyer.

“Lord Ashington, if you will wait here, I will go get Lord Wellington. He is having breakfast but-”

“That won’t be necessary,” I replied. “Where is Miss Bathurst?” I asked.

“She isn’t awake-”

“Yes, I am,” she interrupted.

I spun around to see her standing on the third stair from the floor dressed in a morning gown, looking as if she were a gift from God if I, in fact, believed in a higher being. She did not appear well-rested and the weariness in her eyes made me want to gather her in my arms and hold her and protect her. The emotions churning within me were so out of control with my sleep-deprived brain I was not sure I could trust myself to take one step in her direction.

“Lord Ashington,” she said then. “How can I help you?”

“You can’t marry Nicholas,” I blurted out. There were no eloquent words or proclamations of love like I had intended. Instead, I went directly to the point, which I could tell by the way her eyes heated was a mistake.

“I do not need your permission and neither does Nicholas,” she replied with her chin jutting out and her shoulders straight.

Sighing, I tried to regain my focus. I did not come here to get thrown out.

“I am sorry, that is not at all what I meant and not how I should have said it. I’ve not slept and-” I stopped because I realized that I now sounded as if I were about to ramble like a deranged drunkard.

“What is all the noise... Lord Ashington!” Lady Wellington entered the foyer, her eyes wide with surprise at the sight of me. I could not say I blamed her. “Lord Ashington, your hair is... it is standing up all over... are you unwell?”

I was beginning to believe I was in fact unwell. As for my hair, I hadn’t thought about it, but there was a chance I had ran my hands through it while pacing most of the night.

“Good morning, Lady Wellington. I am sorry to stop by so early,” I said, noticing then that she wasn’t wearing any slippers. Her toes were peeking out from her day gown.

“I would invite you to join us for breakfast but with the circumstances that might be-” She didn’t finish that sentence and then looked at Miriam.

“He was just leaving. He came to tell me I couldn’t marry Nicholas, which he has no power for such a proclamation,” Miriam told her aunt then looked back at me with a challenge in her gaze.

“You are right. I do not have the power to tell you who you can and cannot marry. That is not why I came. I am here, Miriam Bathurst, because I am in love with you and I cannot bear to lose you. When I say that you cannot marry Nicholas, it is because I love you. You consume my thoughts, you fill the void inside me, and I never believed that I would feel this way about anyone. Please, Miriam, don’t marry Nicholas. Whatever he feels for you, it is not to the depths of what I feel. You own me.”

Silence was only but for a moment.

“Oh my,” Lady Wellington blurted out loudly.

I kept my eyes locked on Miriam who continued to stand as stiff and determined as she had been before my proclamation of undying love. Something I never thought I’d find myself doing. Yet here I was doing just that.

“Nicholas asked me to marry him. I believe his feelings run deeper than you give him credit,” she said.

Nicholas may have asked for her hand but so had I. I needed the confirmation that she did not know of my meeting with her uncle and my request to marry her. I now had it, yet I did not want to be the one to tell her

of that meeting. I wanted nothing more than to have Miriam in my life and by my side forever and with her would come her family. She had no father, but she had an uncle and she cared for him. She respected him. Unsure how to explain myself without telling her the exact truth would be almost impossible.

“He asked for your hand in marriage first,” Alfred Wellington’s voice filled the room.

I did not take my eyes from Miriam. I watched as she looked at her uncle, clearly confused by his words. Over the past two weeks, I had thought many things of Alfred Wellington and none of them were fond thoughts. The man had so bluntly informed me that he did not care that I was an earl. I was not good enough for his niece. She deserved more than to just be the mother of my bastard. Hearing Emma called a bastard had been all it took to end my request. I had left 18 Mayfair without another word.

“What do you mean?” Miriam asked at the same time her aunt asked, “WHAT?” rather hysterically.

Wellington sighed and shot a look in my direction. I then met his gaze and waited to see what it was he was going to tell Miriam. The truth was I never said what all I had come to say that day. His accusation about Emma and my temper had been enough to end our meeting. I realized too late I should have stayed and pled my case. Perhaps if he had known the depths of my feeling, he would have changed his mind.

“Twas the day after we returned from Chatwick Hall. The two of you took Whitney for a stroll in the park and Lord Ashington arrived to speak with me.” He glanced at his wife briefly then at Miriam. “He asked for your hand then, but we had just seen the girl. He had made no explanation for her and expected you to just accept he was keeping his bastard child. I believed he was searching for a wife to mother the child and I wanted more for you than that. I want you to have what your aunt and I have. I want you to be loved, Miriam. You deserve more.”

“Oh, Alfred!” Lady Wellington said with exasperation. “Dear, the man does love her and no matter who the girl is, she is but a child and she too needs love. How could you be so callous of something such as that?”

Miriam was looking at me now. I saw many different emotions on her face and a few terrified me while others gave me hope. Hope that I wasn’t too late. Hope that she might possibly love me too. Hope that she didn’t see Emma as

her uncle did. For as much as I loved her, Emma was, indeed, just a child who needed me. Who needed to be loved. Wouldn't Miriam understand that?

"You ignored me then, at the ball, because Uncle Alfred had refused you," Miriam said finally.

I nodded once. "I thought perhaps my feelings for you could be forgotten or that they were not as deep as I feared. I was wrong."

"And Emma," she said. "She is your daughter?"

This was a question I expected. A secret I had kept to myself and only myself. Telling Miriam, and her aunt and uncle, meant that I had to trust them. Emma's future was fragile in this society. Every decision I made would impact how it all played out for her.

"She is not. However, she is a Compton. I am going to raise her as my own. The details as to her birth will have to be a lie if she is to ever live among the world we do. She is bright. She will make her way brilliantly one day. I have no doubt of that." I took one step toward Miriam then stopped. "When this season began, I had one goal: to find Emma a mother. Someone proper and quintessentially English. I believed if she had a mother such as that, she would grow to be a lady. For she is rather head strong and wild. However, I was wrong... about many things, it would seem."

"Emma needs a mother who understands what it is like to feel unwanted by those who are meant to love you most. You see, she was brought to me at two years old. Her mother had left her with some old woman she barely knew with coins and a promise she'd return. She did not. The old woman got word that Emma's mother had died and she brought the girl to me. Until that day, I had no knowledge of Emma's existence. Emma remembers everything about her life before she came to me. I wish so often that she did not. She can tell you the color of her mother's hair, features of her mother's face in great detail and the way her mother said specific words, for her mother was French and spoke with a heavy accent."

"Emma needs a mother who can accept who she is and be ready to protect her if the time arises. Emma needs a mother who is brave, loyal, loving, and kind. It is true I found all of those things in you. However, I would be lying to you and myself if I stood here and told you that I asked your uncle for your hand because of Emma."

I closed the distance between us and took Miriam's hand in mine. For a moment, I studied her delicate hand almost lost in my much larger one. Then

I lifted my gaze to meet hers. “I did not plan to fall in love. It was something I did not believe existed between a man and a woman. I believed only in lust and attraction. Both of those fade over time and I wanted nothing to do with either when choosing a wife. You, Miriam Bathurst, changed everything. I knew you were different from that very first meeting. You were the first lady to ever refuse a dance with me,” I reminded her and a smile tugged at the corner of her full pink lips.

“I knew after that first encounter that something about you was unique. I did not realize you would change everything for me. My beliefs, my desires, and my dreams. For now, I have none of those without you. You are everything I never knew I needed in this life but fear I cannot live without. I love you.”

Miriam’s hand gently squeezed mine. “And I love you,” she replied.

I wanted to crush her body against mine and kiss those sweet lips, once again, but we were not alone. There still stood two obstacles in our way. Her uncle and my brother.

“It appears we have an issue on our hands. You are engaged to the wrong brother,” Wellington stated.

“She wouldn’t be if you hadn’t said no when he asked for her hand,” Lady Wellington told her husband.

“I was protecting her. We knew nothing of the child and he did not come into my office telling me of his love for Miriam. If he had that might have swayed my decision,” he replied.

“Well, it is a mess that you have made and perhaps you need to clean it up, dear. It is clear she cannot marry Mr. Compton. He is charming and I do enjoy his visits, but she does not love him,” Lady Wellington said.

Miriam smiled up at me as her aunt and uncle continued to go back and forth.

I intended to go speak to Nicholas myself, but I would not interrupt them just now. They seemed too engrossed in their conversation. Miriam was amused and I enjoyed seeing her happy. I wanted to spend the rest of my life making her happy. If it was in my power, I would make it a point to do just that.

“If I may be so bold to ask, if Emma is not your daughter but she is a Compton, then whose child is she?” Lady Wellington asked me. I had been expecting this question earlier, but when it had not come, I had not offered.

“Aunt Harriet, perhaps it’s not a good time. Lord Ashington may not be ready to share that,” Miriam started to explain, giving me the choice to keep Emma’s secret, even from her.

“I do not know if Emma’s father knows of her existence. I was told by the woman who left her at my doorstep that he did know and did not care. Emma’s mother was my mistress for about one year then we parted ways after I found that she was also entertaining another man in the home I provided for her. It was four years after that parting that Emma was brought to my door at two years of age. The only proof I had other than the old woman’s claim was the color of her eyes. For Emma has the same color eyes as her father. They are distinct and a trait he himself inherited from his mother. The moment I saw her eyes, I knew who her father was, just as I knew he would not take responsibility for her.”

“But *who* is her father?” Lady Wellington asked again.

“Nicholas,” Miriam replied, so softly it was almost a whisper.



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Epilogue

6 Years Later

Lady Ashington sat on the plush summer lawn of Chatwick Hall and inhaled deeply, enjoying the break from London's busy season. It had been several years since she had spent her summer in London, and if it weren't for her sister, she would not be doing so this year. However, Whitney's pure joy over the experience did make it all appear a touch magical.

"I see Emma is still wearing britches," Nicholas Compton said as he took a seat on the grass beside Lady Ashington.

"That is a battle I am saving for a later date," she replied, grinning over at her brother-in-law.

"Well thought out," he agreed.

"Mom-ma! Philip won't give me any berries," Lady Abigail, now three years old, called out with tears in her eyes.

"Oh dear," Lady Ashington muttered.

"Shall I go give young Philip a lecture on not making ladies cry?" Nicholas asked.

Shaking her head, Lady Ashington stood up. "No, that won't be necessary. When Abigail cries, it is a warning. One that Philip needs to take more seriously."

"Warning?" Nicholas asked.

"Yes, a warning. Abigail may be tiny in stature but her temper, I fear, is rather large. Philip needs to make haste before she unleashes on him," Lady Ashington explained then headed off toward her children.

"Is there to be a fight?" Emma called out when she saw Lady Ashington headed in Abigail's direction.

"Will you fetch some of the berries from Philip?" she then asked Emma.

"Yes, of course, Mother," she replied then hurried off.

Nicholas Compton watched the entertainment at hand and secretly hoped that young Abigail got a chance to give Philip a lesson. He didn't get out to Chatwick Hall often and he knew he should do so more. The children all

seemed to be growing so quickly. Especially Emma. He watched as she bent down and discussed the berries with her younger brother.

She was as smart and resourceful as she was beautiful. Miriam was the kind of mother who a child such as Emma would bloom under, and she had done just that. Ashington may have taken his bride-to-be from him six years ago, but he, in return, had given his daughter a family. One that Nicholas knew he would never have given her. If he allowed himself to think of where Emma would be now if the old woman had brought Emma to him instead of Ashington, it spurred thoughts he did not want to have. He was a much different man today than he had been back then. A child from a mistress would have been of no interest to him. Watching Emma now, he realized what a tragedy it would have been not to have known such a child. He would forever be grateful to his brother for giving her a home when she had no one.

Miriam came walking back across the lawn toward Nicholas and it appeared as if the problem had been adequately handled. She was as lovely today as she had been the first time Nicholas had laid eyes on her. Loving Miriam had been so very easy for him. He had loved her at first sight or so he had believed. She was the kind of woman that men fell in love with before they had a moment to realize it themselves.

The difference between the way Nicholas had loved Miriam and the way Lord Ashington loved her was where the importance laid. For Nicholas had loved the thought of her, the idea of her presence. She brightened up a room and that was what he had been drawn to.

Lord Ashington simply loved her. He was only complete with her by his side. He didn't see her as a way to lift his spirits, but he saw her as his companion. They moved in unison and even in a crowded ballroom, they would find each other, their eyes would meet, and they would smile as if they had just shared the most intimate of secrets.

"Whitney!" Emma's voice rang out and Nicholas turned his attention toward the object of Emma's adoration. Her aunt Whitney.

At eighteen, Whitney was breathtaking in ways that made grown men forget words and how to use them properly. Whitney held open her arms to Emma who hugged Whitney tightly as she reached her.

"She's enchanting," Miriam said and Nicholas tore his gaze from Whitney to look at his sister-in-law again. Slightly embarrassed to have been caught looking at her sister. Miriam was grinning at him with a knowing look. "You

know, the Duke of Thorne has called upon her twice,” she said to him.

“He’s too old for her,” Nicholas replied, not at all pleased with the information.

“He is nine and twenty. She is eighteen, Nicholas.”

Nicholas scowled out over the yard as if it had suddenly become offensive. Lady Ashington hid her amused grin and lifted her gaze to find her husband making his way toward them. His long muscular legs clad in riding britches were always such a pleasing sight. Miriam loved him more today than she had the day they wed. She often wondered if she would continue to love him more every year and if so, how much she would love him when they were old. Could one body hold such an emotion?

“I would, of course, find you out here flirting with my wife,” Ashington said as he approached his wife and brother.

“You did steal her from me at the altar,” Nicholas drawled. “This is but the least I can do.”

“You never saw the doorway of a church. Yours was the shortest engagement in London’s history,” Ashington replied then took the spot beside his wife. His hand slipped over hers.

“Indeed, Brother, it was. What is most difficult to accept about it is that my story still has not made it into one of Miriam’s novels.”

This was not the first time Nicholas had asked when he would become a character in one of her novels. Miriam lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “Perhaps I am waiting to write you into a novel until your story has its proper happy ending.”

Both Nicholas and Ashington laughed then as if the idea that Nicholas would one day settle down was ridiculous. Miriam only smiled. She knew the day would come and possibly very soon.

Miriam looked out over the field just as Whitney chased after a giggling Abigail. Although Whitney’s limp would never be completely gone, it was barely noticeable now. She could walk and even run without pain or exhaustion. Everything she had dreamed of for her sister was coming true.

The warm June sunshine and the sounds of the children’s laughter made for a perfect day on the grounds of Chatwick Hall.

The End

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