



Duke of Fyre

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Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "Do not expect a true marriage from me, wife. I chose you for a reason..."

Elias, the Duke of Fyre, gets what he wants and demands what he needs. And right now, he needs a mother for his son. So marriage it is.

A renowned spinster, Lydia has failed her family. So given the opportunity to make up for it, she must accept. Even if she has to marry a renowned cruel recluse...

Yet, as his new bride takes his life by storm, Elias knows this must stay a marriage of convenience. For the Beast of Fyre cannot afford to lower his defenses... Never again.

*If you like powerful Dukes, loving Duchesses and a marvelous depiction of the majestic Regency and Victorian era, then Duke of Fyre is the novel for you.

Total Pages (Source): 86

CHAPTER 1

Lady Lydia Brandon swept through Hyde Park, her steps quick but measured, her posture rigidly proper despite the panic rising in her chest. Her eyes darted frantically from side to side, searching for any sign of her wayward companion.

"Mug," she hissed under her breath, trying to keep her voice low enough not to attract attention. "Mug, where are you, you impossible creature?"

A group of fashionable ladies strolled past, their eyes raking over Lydia with barely concealed disdain. She felt their gazes like physical blows, noting the way their lips curled ever so slightly at the sight of her last season's gown and unfashionably simple hairstyle. Heat rose to her cheeks at once.

Lydia straightened her spine, forcing a placid smile onto her face as she nodded politely to the women. "Good morning, ladies. What a lovely day for a turn about the park."

Lady Amelia Worthington, the undisputed queen of the ton's social circle, raised a perfectly arched eyebrow. "Indeed, Lady Lydia. Though one would think you'd have better things to do with your time. Still no suitors on the horizon, I take it?"

The barb struck true, but Lydia refused to let her smile falter. "Oh, you know how it is, Lady Worthington. I'm simply being selective. After all, one can't rush into these things."

The lie tasted bitter on her tongue, but it was better than admitting the truth - that at

five and twenty, with no serious prospects in sight, she was well on her way to permanent spinsterhood.

Lady Worthington's smile was razor-sharp. "Of course, dear. How... prudent of you. Well, we mustn't keep you from your... solitary constitutional."

As the ladies moved on, their tittering laughter floating back to her on the breeze, Lydia allowed her shoulders to slump ever so slightly. She knew what they thought of her - the plain, unremarkable daughter of Viscount Drowshire, who had failed to secure a match in her debut season and had been languishing on the edges of society ever since.

But she couldn't dwell on that now. She had to find Mug before he got himself into trouble. Again.

Lydia quickened her pace, her eyes scanning the verdant lawns and manicured flowerbeds. She was so focused on her search that she nearly collided with a gentleman rounding the corner of a hedge.

"Oh! I do beg your pardon, sir," she stammered, feeling her cheeks flush with embarrassment.

The man, a portly fellow with a kind face, waved off her apology. "Not at all, my dear. Are you quite alright? You seem rather distressed."

Lydia hesitated, weighing the impropriety of confiding in a stranger against her growing desperation. "I... I've lost my dog, you see. He's quite small, with rather scruffy fur. You haven't seen him, have you?"

The gentleman's brow furrowed in thought. "I'm afraid not, but I'll certainly keep an eye out. What's the little fellow's name?"

"Mug," Lydia replied, wincing slightly at the undignified moniker.

"Mug?" the man repeated, his eyebrows rising in surprise. "Well, that's... certainly a unique name for a dog."

Lydia felt compelled to explain. "He has a rather... distinctive face. Rather like a squashed mug, you see. The name just sort of... stuck."

The gentleman chuckled good-naturedly. "I see. Well, best of luck in your search, my dear. I'm sure he'll turn up."

As he ambled away, Lydia resumed her search with renewed urgency. She could feel the weight of disapproving stares from the other parkgoers, no doubt scandalized by her unladylike behavior. A proper young woman didn't go chasing after dogs in public parks, after all.

But Mug was more than just a pet. He was her confidant, her companion, the one creature in all the world who loved her unconditionally. She couldn't bear the thought of losing him.

Just as she was about to give up hope, a familiar yapping reached her ears. Lydia's heart leapt, and she hurried towards the sound, propriety be damned.

She rounded a copse of trees and found herself in a secluded glade. There, to her immense relief, was Mug. But her joy quickly turned to horror as she realized what the little dog was barking at.

Two men stood in the clearing, both tall and imposing in their finely tailored coats. One was older, with graying hair and a nervous demeanor. The other...

Lydia felt her breath catch in her throat. Never before had she seen a man that... well,

intimidating. While he was impossibly tall, his height was far less unnerving than the aura that radiated from him.

His dark hair fell in careless waves, framing a face that might have been handsome if not for the perpetual scowl etched upon it. His eyes, a startling shade of midnight blue, were fixed on Mug with a look of utter disdain.

Lydia crept closer, straining to hear their conversation without giving away her presence.

"...suitable in every way, Your Grace," the older man was saying, his voice placating. "From a respectable family, of marriageable age, and with a sizeable dowry. I really think you should consider-"

"I've told you, Figgins," the other man interrupted, his voice as cold and hard as steel. "I care not for the particulars. You know my expectations and you know which qualifications I expect of her. I have little regard for anything else. The only important thing is that she..."

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But whatever he had been about to say was cut off by a renewed burst of frantic barking from Mug. The little dog had apparently decided he'd been ignored long enough and was now doing his level best to intimidate a man five times his size.

The taller man turned that icy glare on the small creature, his lip curling in disgust. "What," he growled, "is that?"

Lydia knew she could hide no longer. Squaring her shoulders, she stepped into the clearing. "I do beg your pardon, my lord," she said, forcing her voice to remain steady. "That would be my dog, Mug."

The man's gaze snapped to her, and Lydia felt as though she'd been struck by lightning. Those eyes... they seemed to see right through her, stripping away every careful façade she'd constructed.

"It is Your Grace. And your dog," he continued, his tone flat and unimpressed. "Is out of control. Do you make a habit of allowing your... pet... to run wild and accost innocent bystanders, Miss...?"

"Lady Lydia Brandon," she supplied, dropping into a hasty curtsy. "And no, Your Grace, I do not. Mug simply got away from me for a moment. I assure you, it won't happen again."

She moved to scoop up the still-barking Mug, but the little dog danced away from her grasp, seeming determined to continue his assault on the Duke's trouser leg.

"Mug, stop that this instant!" Lydia hissed, mortification burning in her cheeks.

The Duke's companion, whom Lydia now recognized as Mr. Figgins, a well-known solicitor, cleared his throat nervously. "Perhaps we should continue this discussion at another time, Your Grace?"

But the Duke ignored him, his attention still fixed on Lydia. "You should keep better control of your animals, Lady Lydia. It's most unbecoming for a lady of your station to be chasing after ill-mannered curs in public parks."

Lydia felt a spark of indignation flare in her chest. How dare he speak to her in such a manner? Duke or no, he had no right to be so rude.

"I assure you, Your Grace," she said, her chin lifting defiantly, "Mug is not ill-mannered. He is simply... protective. And I would thank you not to refer to him as a cur."

Something flickered in the Duke's eyes - surprise, perhaps, at her temerity. But it was gone in an instant, replaced by that same cold disdain.

"Protective?" he scoffed. "Of what, pray tell? Your nonexistent virtue?"

Lydia gasped, shock and outrage warring within her. "How dare you, sir! You know nothing about me or my virtue!"

"Nor do I care to," the Duke replied dismissively. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have far more important matters to attend to than arguing with spinsters in the park."

With that, he turned on his heel and strode away, leaving Lydia gaping in his wake. Mr. Figgins hurried after him, shooting an apologetic glance over his shoulder.

Mug, sensing his mistress's distress, finally abandoned his attack on the Duke's retreating figure and trotted back to Lydia's side. He looked up at her with adoring

eyes, as if to say, "Don't worry, I scared him off for you."

Despite herself, Lydia felt a small smile tug at her lips. She scooped up the little dog, burying her face in his scruffy fur for a moment.

"Oh, Mug," she sighed. "What am I going to do with you? You've probably just ruined what little standing I had left in society."

As she slowly walked out of the park and to her carriage, Lydia couldn't shake the memory of those piercing blue eyes. There was no denial that the man was quite handsome and yet... irritation coursed through her. Arrogant, domineering, high-handed soul! He was frustrating - beyond belief.

As Lydia made her way home, her steps quick and purposeful, she couldn't shake the lingering anger and frustration from her encounter with the Duke. Mug, now safely ensconced in her arms, seemed blissfully unaware of the turmoil he had caused.

"You really must learn to behave, you know," she murmured to the little dog, who responded by licking her chin affectionately. "One of these days, your antics are going to land us both in serious trouble."

As she neared Drownshire House, Lydia's pace slowed. She was in no hurry to face her parents, knowing all too well the lecture that awaited her. No doubt news of her "unseemly" behavior in the park had already reached their ears. The ton's gossip network was nothing if not efficient.

Sure enough, as soon as she stepped through the door, she was accosted by her mother's shrill voice.

"Lydia! There you are, you impossible girl. What's this I hear about you making a spectacle of yourself in Hyde Park?"

Viscountess Drownshire swept into the foyer, her face a mask of disapproval. Lydia sighed, setting Mug down and straightening her posture.

"It was nothing, Mother," she said, striving for a casual tone. "Mug simply got away from me for a moment. I assure you, it won't happen again."

Her mother's eyes narrowed. "It had better not. Really, Lydia, at your age, you should know better. Running about in public like a hoyden, and in front of the Duke of Fyre, no less! What were you thinking?"

Lydia felt a fresh wave of irritation at the mention of the Duke. "I assure you, Mother, I had no intention of encountering His Grace. It was purely by chance-"

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"Chance or not," her mother interrupted, "you've likely ruined what little prospect you had left of making a decent match. No gentleman of quality will want a wife who can't even control her own dog, let alone a household."

The words stung, but Lydia refused to let it show. She had long since grown accustomed to her mother's cutting remarks and constant disappointment.

"Yes, Mother," she said quietly. "If you'll excuse me, I think I'll retire to my room for a bit. I have a bit of a headache coming on."

Without waiting for a response, Lydia hurried up the stairs, Mug trotting faithfully at her heels. Once safely ensconced in her bedchamber, she allowed herself to slump onto the window seat, burying her face in her hands.

"Oh, Mug," she sighed, as the little dog hopped up beside her and nuzzled her arm. "What are we going to do? I'm beginning to think Mother's right. I'll never find a husband at this rate."

As if in response, Mug let out a soft whine and rested his head on her lap. Lydia smiled despite herself, scratching behind his ears.

"At least I'll always have you, my faithful friend," she murmured. "Even if you do have a penchant for causing trouble."

As the afternoon light faded into evening, Lydia found her thoughts returning, unbidden, to the man she had seen in the park. His cold eyes, his cutting words, the way he had dismissed her so easily... it all made her blood boil.

And yet, there was something about him that intrigued her, despite her better judgment. Perhaps it was the brief flash of... something... she had seen in his eyes. Or perhaps it was simply the challenge he represented.

Whatever it was, Lydia knew one thing for certain - she had never met a man quite like him before and she was certain that she never would again. Never before had a man managed to make her blood boil in such an absolutely frustrating manner. And never would a man do so again, she promised herself.

CHAPTER 2

"Lydia... Lydia, wake up!"

It was Marian's voice that broke through the confusing dreams of strangers in parks and Lydia blinked a few times to allow both her sisters to come into focus. Both Marian and Jane looked quite panicked, what with their furrowed brows and flushed cheeks.

"Father and mother want to see you," Jane got out at last. "They look... Oh, I don't know how they look, but it is important."

Within seconds, her sisters had her dressed and ready - and she moved down to the drawing room where she sat with her hands clasped tightly in her lap as she faced her parents. Viscount Silas Brandon paced before the fireplace, his face set in stern lines, while her mother, Viscountess Prudence, perched on the edge of her chair, her lips pursed in disapproval.

"Lydia," her father began, his voice clipped, "your mother and I have come to a decision regarding your future."

Lydia's heart sank. She had known this day was coming, had dreaded it for months,

but now that it was here, she found herself woefully unprepared.

"Yes, Father?" she managed, proud that her voice remained steady despite the churning in her stomach.

The Viscount ceased his pacing, fixing her with a hard stare. "We have found you a husband."

The words hung in the air, heavy and suffocating. Lydia felt as though all the oxygen had been sucked from the room.

"I... I see," she said faintly. "May I ask who-"

"You are in no position to ask questions, Lydia," her mother interjected sharply. "You should be grateful that any man of standing would consider you at all, given your... circumstances."

Lydia flinched at the barely veiled contempt in her mother's tone. At five and twenty, she was well past the age when most young ladies of her station were wed. Her continued spinsterhood was a source of constant shame for her parents and a black mark on the family's reputation.

"Your mother is right," her father added, his voice softening slightly. "We have done our best by you, Lydia. But your failure to secure a match has not only damaged your own prospects but those of your sisters as well. It's time you did your duty to this family."

Guilt washed over Lydia in a bitter wave. She thought of her younger sisters - Marian, Jane, and Diana - and how her own shortcomings had cast a shadow over their futures. She had no right to protest, not when so much was at stake.

"I understand, Father," she said quietly. "I will do as you wish."

A flicker of relief passed over her father's face. "Good. That's... good. The marriage contract will be drawn up within the week. You will meet your betrothed when he comes to call in three days' time."

"Three days?" Lydia echoed, startled. "But that's so soon. Surely-"

"Lydia," her mother cut in, her tone warning. "Do not test our patience. You will be ready to receive him, and you will comport yourself with the grace and decorum befitting your station. Is that understood?"

Lydia swallowed hard, forcing back the tide of questions and protests that threatened to spill from her lips. "Yes, Mother. Of course."

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"Very well," the Viscount said, his tone final. "You may go."

Lydia rose on unsteady legs, curtsying to her parents before fleeing the oppressive confines of the drawing room. As she closed the door behind her, she leaned against it for a moment, taking deep breaths to calm her racing heart.

"Lydia?" a small voice called. She looked up to see Diana, the youngest of her sisters, peering around the corner. "Are you alright? We heard raised voices."

Lydia managed a small smile, pushing away from the door and straightening her shoulders. "I'm fine, dearest. Come, let's find Marian and Jane. I have news to share."

As they climbed the stairs, Diana slipped her hand into Lydia's, squeezing it gently. The gesture, so simple and sincere, nearly undid Lydia's carefully maintained composure. She blinked back tears, grateful for her sister's quiet support.

They found Marian and Jane in Lydia's bedchamber, already huddled together on the bed with anxious expressions. As Lydia entered, they both leapt up, bombarding her with questions.

"What happened?"

"What did Mother and Father want?"

"Are you in trouble because of yesterday's incident in the park?"

Lydia held up a hand, silencing the barrage. "Peace, both of you. Let me sit down,

and I'll explain everything."

As she sank onto the edge of the bed, Lydia felt a familiar weight settle on her lap. Mug, had sensed her distress and come to offer comfort. She scratched behind his ears, drawing strength from his steady presence.

"Well?" Marian prompted, her voice gentle. "What's happened, Lydia?"

Taking a deep breath, Lydia met her sisters' concerned gazes. "Mother and Father have found me a husband. I am to be married."

A chorus of gasps filled the room. Jane and Diana clutched at each other's hands, their eyes wide with apprehension. It was Jane who found her voice first.

"Married?" she repeated. "But to whom? Do we know him?"

Lydia shook her head. "They didn't say. Only that I am to meet him in three days' time."

"Oh, Lydia," Marian said softly, reaching out to squeeze her hand. "Are you alright? This must be such a shock."

Lydia managed a wan smile. "I'm fine. Really. It's... it's for the best, I'm sure. And perhaps now you three will have an easier time of it in society."

The sisters exchanged guilty glances. It was no secret that Lydia's prolonged spinsterhood had cast a pall over their own social prospects. Still, the girls did not blame their elder sister one bit. In fact, Lydia was rather certain a part of them quite enjoyed still having her around and she smiled ruefully at the thought.

"Don't say that," Diana said, her voice small. "We don't blame you, Lydia. It's not

your fault."

"Of course it is," Lydia replied, unable to keep the bitterness from her tone. "If I had just been prettier, or wittier, or..."

"Stop it," Marian interrupted firmly. "You are perfect just as you are. And any man would be lucky to have you as his wife."

Lydia felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes. "Thank you," she whispered. "I only hope my future husband feels the same way."

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room. Lydia looked up to find her sisters exchanging nervous glances.

"What is it?" she asked, a sense of foreboding creeping over her. "Do you know something about my betrothed?"

Jane bit her lip, hesitating for a moment before blurting out, "It's the Duke of Fyre!"

Lydia felt as though she'd been doused in ice water. "What?" she gasped. "How... how do you know that?"

The Duke of Fyre was a rather infamous recluse. Lydia had never seen the man before, but she had heard quite enough of him to be intimidated enough by the mere thought of him.

"We overheard Mother and Father talking," Marian admitted. "They didn't know we were listening."

"The Duke of Fyre," Lydia repeated, her mind reeling.. "But... but why would he want to marry me? I cannot imagine why... Why he would want to marry me..."

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"Oh, Lydia," Jane said, her voice hushed. "Haven't you heard the rumors?"

Before Lydia could respond, Jane produced a crumpled sheet of paper from her pocket. "Look," she said, smoothing it out on the bedspread. "It's from last month's scandal sheet."

Lydia leaned in, her eyes widening as she read the lurid headlines:

"BEAST OF FYRE STRIKES AGAIN: WILL MYSTERIOUS DUKE'S LIST OF VICTIMS GROW?"

"SERVANTS FLEE FYRE MANOR IN TERROR: 'HE'S NOT HUMAN,' CLAIMS FORMER MAID"

"MYSTERIOUS HOWLS HEARD FROM DUKE'S PRIVATE CHAMBERS: WHAT DARK SECRETS LURK WITHIN?"

"This... this can't be true," Lydia stammered, pushing the paper away. "It's nonsense. Pure sensationalism."

"But Lydia," Diana said, her voice trembling, "they say he never leaves his estate. That he's hideously deformed, or... or cursed. Some even claim he's not human at all, but some sort of monster in a man's skin."

"And now he wants a wife," Jane added, her eyes wide with absolute terror. "They say his last three brides all died under mysterious circumstances. No one knows what became of them."

Lydia felt her head spinning. Could this be true? Could it be that her parents would truly let her marry some hideous monster? And why would the monster want to marry her?

"This is ridiculous," she said, forcing a note of confidence into her voice. "You can't possibly believe any of this. It's nothing but idle gossip and wild speculation."

"But Lydia," Marian pressed, "why else would a man like the Duke of Fyre want to marry you? No offense," she added hastily, "but you're hardly the sort of bride one would expect for such a powerful nobleman."

Lydia flinched at her sister's words, stung despite the lack of malice behind them. "Perhaps," she said slowly, "he simply wants a wife who won't be cowed by his... reputation. Or someone who is a bit... older, who will not pay mind to these rumours."

Even as she spoke the words, Lydia wasn't sure she believed them. But she couldn't bear to see the fear in her sisters' eyes, couldn't stomach the thought of them worrying for her safety.

"Listen to me," she said, gathering her courage. "I'm sure these rumors are greatly exaggerated. The Duke may be... difficult, but he's still a man. A nobleman, at that. He would never harm his wife. He would not get away with it."

Her sisters didn't look entirely convinced, but some of the tension seemed to ease from their shoulders.

"You're probably right," Marian said, though she didn't sound entirely certain. "And perhaps... perhaps once you're married, you can help improve his reputation. Show people that he's not the monster they believe him to be."

Lydia managed a small smile. "Exactly. I'm sure that's all this is - a chance for the Duke to rehabilitate his image. Nothing more sinister than that."

As her sisters began to chatter about wedding plans and what Lydia might wear to meet her betrothed, she found her thoughts drifting back to the mysterious Duke of Fyre. What was he like? Would he be cruel, like the rumors suggested ? Or would he merely be introverted and shy?

But as night fell and her sisters finally left her alone, Lydia couldn't quite shake the chill that had settled in her bones. She thought of Fyre Manor, of the dark secrets that might lurk within its walls. And for the first time in her life, Lydia Brandon found herself truly afraid of what the future might hold.

Unable to sleep, Lydia slipped out of bed and padded over to her her sisters' bedchamber. To her relief, both Marian and Jane were still awake, though Diana was fast asleep. They looked up as she entered, their brows furrowed.

"We don't want you to leave, Lydia," Jane muttered, tears forming in her eyes. "What if..."

Jane did not need to finish her sentence. Lydia knew what she thought, she understood.

"I am afraid too," she admitted now, her voice but a whisper. "What if..."

Marian now nodded as well and it was she who uttered the words they all feared to do. "What if you do not ever come back?" she said at last and Lydia let out a shuddering sigh.

It was true that the Duke had a fearsome reputation.

"I hear he murdered his first wife," Jane let out now, her voice coming out in almost a wail. "What if he murders you too?"

"Oh," Lydia whispered, trying her utmost best to hide her own fears about this. "Do you really think I'll let myself be murdered that easily?"

Jane sniffed in response and Lydia leaned forward, pressing her hand against Jane's cheek.

"I will be fine," she said. "I promise."

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It was not a promise she could keep, Lydia thought. But she would try. She would certainly try.

A soft whine drew her attention to the foot of her bed, where Mug sat watching her with soulful eyes.

"Oh, Mug," she sighed, scooping the little dog into her arms. "What are we going to do? How can I possibly be a duchess when I can barely manage to be a proper lady?"

Mug responded by licking her cheek, his unwavering affection a balm to her troubled soul. Lydia hugged him close, drawing strength from his steadfast presence.

"Well, my friend," she said, her voice growing determined, "if we're to face this challenge, we'd best be prepared. What do you say we start planning?"

With renewed purpose, Lydia returned to her desk and began to make lists. First, she wrote down everything she knew about running a large household, drawing on her years of assisting her mother. Then, she jotted down ideas for social events and charity work - things a proper duchess would be expected to oversee.

As the candle burned low and the first light of dawn began to creep through her window, Lydia finally felt a sense of calm settle over her. She may not have chosen this path, but she would walk it with dignity and grace. And perhaps, in doing so, she might finally become the woman she had always longed to be.

With a weary smile, Lydia blew out the candle and climbed back into bed, Mug curling up at her feet. As she drifted off to sleep, her last thoughts were not of fear or

uncertainty, but of determination. Whatever the future held, she would face it head-on, with courage and an open heart.

For in the end, that was all anyone could really do.

CHAPTER 3

The morning of the Duke's visit dawned bright and clear, a stark contrast to the tempest of anxiety roiling within Lydia's chest. She stood before her mirror, fussing with her hair for what felt like the hundredth time, willing her trembling hands to steady.

"It will be fine," she whispered to her reflection, forcing a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Everything will be fine."

A soft whine from the corner of the room drew her attention. Mug lay curled in his basket, his dark eyes fixed on her with an uncanny intensity. The little dog had been unusually restless all morning, as if he could sense the importance of the day ahead.

"Oh, Mug," Lydia sighed, crossing to scratch behind his ears. "What am I going to do with you? You must be on your best behavior today, do you understand?"

Mug's only response was to burrow deeper into his blankets, letting out another plaintive whine.

A sharp rap at the door made Lydia jump. "Lydia!" her mother's voice called, sharp with impatience. "Are you ready yet? The Duke will be here any moment!"

"Coming, Mother!" Lydia called back, casting one last glance at her reflection. She smoothed down her gown - her finest, a pale blue silk that brought out the green in her eyes - and took a deep breath. "Well," she murmured to Mug, "here goes

nothing."

As she descended the stairs, Lydia found her parents waiting in the foyer, their faces tight with barely concealed anxiety. Her father's cravat seemed to be choking him, while her mother's fingers twisted nervously in the folds of her skirt.

"There you are," Viscountess Prudence said, her eyes raking over Lydia's appearance with a critical gaze. "I suppose you'll do. Now, listen carefully, Lydia. The Duke of Fyre is a man of great importance and even greater wealth. This match could secure the future of our entire family. You must do everything in your power to please him, do you understand?"

Lydia nodded, swallowing hard against the lump in her throat. "Yes, Mother. I understand."

"Good," her father added, his voice gruff. "And for heaven's sake, make sure that mongrel of yours is kept out of sight. The last thing we need is for him to offend His Grace."

Before Lydia could respond, the sound of carriage wheels on gravel reached their ears. Her mother let out a small gasp. "He's here! Quickly, Lydia, go make sure that dog is secured in your room. We can't risk him getting loose."

Lydia hurried back upstairs, her heart pounding in her chest. She found Mug pacing restlessly by the door, his ears pricked forward at the commotion below.

"Now, Mug," she said firmly, scooping him up into her arms. "You must stay here and be a good boy. No barking, no fuss. Can you do that for me?"

Mug wriggled in her grasp, letting out a series of agitated yips. Lydia struggled to keep hold of him, growing increasingly frustrated as the little dog refused to calm

down.

"Mug, please," she pleaded, aware of the voices drifting up from below. "We don't have time for this. You must stay here!"

But Mug was having none of it. With a sudden burst of strength, he wriggled free from Lydia's arms and darted out the open door. Lydia let out a strangled cry, hitching up her skirts to give chase.

"Mug!" she hissed, trying to keep her voice down as she pursued the dog down the hallway. "Come back here this instant!"

But it was too late. Mug had already reached the top of the stairs, and with a series of excited yaps, he bounded down towards the foyer.

Lydia's heart sank as she heard her mother's shrill exclamation of dismay, followed by a deep, rumbling voice that could only belong to the Duke of Fyre.

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Taking a deep breath, Lydia descended the stairs. Maybe if she was fortunate, the ground would open up and swallow her whole at the bottom. As she rounded the corner into the foyer, she was greeted by a scene of utter chaos.

Mug was dancing around the feet of a tall, imposing figure dressed in black, barking as if his life depended on it. Lydia's parents stood frozen in horror, their faces pale with shock and dismay.

And there, in the center of it all, stood the very stranger she had seen in the park the other day. Lydia felt the blood draining from her cheeks as the realization hit her. It was him! The handsome stranger from the park, the one who had been accosted by the very same dog that was barking at him now, was the elusive Duke of Fyre himself. Elias Blacknight cut an impressive figure, his broad shoulders filling out his perfectly tailored coat, his raven hair falling in careless waves about his face. But it was his eyes that captured Lydia's attention - those piercing blue orbs that seemed to see right through her.

For a moment, their gazes locked, and Lydia felt a jolt of electricity pass between them. She saw the Duke's eyes widenslightly, a flicker of what could only be surprise passing across his face before it settled back into its customary scowl. Lydia felt her cheeks grow warm under his intense scrutiny, and she silently cursed her fair complexion that no doubt betrayed her flustered state.

"Your Grace," Lydia said, dropping into a hasty curtsy. "I do apologize for my dog's behavior. He's not usually so... excitable."

The Duke's eyebrow arched slightly, but to Lydia's immense relief, he made no

mention of their previous encounter in the park. "Indeed," he said, his voice as smooth and rich as aged brandy. "Perhaps you should consider a firmer hand in his training, Lady Lydia."

Lydia felt her cheeks flush even deeper at the barely veiled rebuke. "Yes, Your Grace. Of course."

Her father stepped forward, his face a mask of forced joviality. "Your Grace, welcome to our home. We are honored by your presence. Might I introduce my wife, Viscountess Prudence, and of course, our daughter, Lydia."

The Duke inclined his head slightly, his gaze sweeping over the family with an air of cool assessment. When his eyes landed on Lydia once more, she felt her breath catch in her throat. There was something in that gaze that made her heart race, though she could not quite place it.

"A pleasure, I'm sure," Elias said, his tone giving nothing away. "Shall we proceed to the drawing room? I believe we have much to discuss."

As they made their way into the house, Lydia scooped up Mug, who had finally ceased his barking and now seemed content to glare balefully at the Duke from the safety of her arms. She couldn't shake the feeling that she had ruined everything before it had even begun.

The drawing room seemed to shrink in the Duke's presence, his imposing figure dominating the space. Lydia perched on the edge of a delicate settee, her back ramrod straight, while her parents settled into chairs across from their guest. An uncomfortable silence descended, broken only by the ticking of the mantel clock.

"Well," Viscount Silas began, his voice unnaturally loud in the quiet room, "we are most grateful for your interest in our Lydia, Your Grace. She is a fine girl,

accomplished in all the ways a lady should be."

The Duke's gaze flicked to Lydia, who fought the urge to squirm under his scrutiny. She felt as though he could see right through her, past the carefully constructed facade of the perfect lady to the , uncertain woman beneath. "Is she indeed?" he murmured, his tone giving no indication of his thoughts.

Viscountess Prudence jumped in, her words tumbling out in a nervous rush. "Oh yes, Your Grace. Lydia is an excellent pianist, and her needlework is beyond compare. She's also quite well-read for a young lady of her age."

Lydia felt her face grow hot at her mother's effusive praise. She knew it for what it was - a desperate attempt to paint her in the best possible light, to secure this match at any cost. She risked a glance at the Duke, only to find him watching her with an inscrutable expression. Was that amusement glinting in those stormy blue eyes?

The Duke, however, seemed unimpressed by her mother's litany of accomplishments. "I care little for such trivial pursuits," he said dismissively. "What I require is a woman of sense and capability, one who can manage a household and present a proper face to society when necessary."

"Of course, Your Grace," Viscount Silas rushed to agree. "Lydia is more than equal to such tasks, I assure you."

Lydia, feeling she ought to speak for herself, cleared her throat softly. "I have assisted my mother in managing our household for several years now, Your Grace. I am confident in my abilities to oversee the running of an estate."

The Duke's piercing gaze met hers, and Lydia felt a shiver run down her spine. There was something in those eyes - a coldness, yes, but also a hint of... approval? She couldn't be sure, but the intensity of his stare made her pulse quicken.

"We shall see," was all he said in response, but Lydia thought she detected a note of intrigue in his voice.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur of stilted conversation and uncomfortable silences. The Duke sat ramrod straight in his chair, his posture radiating an aura of barely contained impatience. Lydia's father stumbled over his words, clearly intimidated by the nobleman's presence, while her mother fluttered about, offering tea and cakes with trembling hands.

Lydia herself felt as though she were walking on eggshells, acutely aware of the Duke's piercing gaze whenever it fell upon her. She tried to make light conversation, commenting on the weather and inquiring about his journey, but his responses were terse and cold, offering no encouragement for further discussion.

Where they sat in the parlor now, Lydia's fingers tightened imperceptibly on the teapot handle as she poured the next cup. The china clinked softly, the sound seeming to echo in the suddenly too-quiet room. She focused on the task at hand, watching the amber liquid swirl into the cup, careful not to spill a drop.

"Milk, Father?" she asked, proud of how steady her voice remained.

"Just a splash, thank you," her father replied coolly. It was the second time the Duke had visited their home - and it was clear that her parents were more than satisfied with the prospect of him as her husband, though Lydia was still quite frightened of him.

As Lydia reached for the milk jug, she caught a glimpse of the Duke in her peripheral vision. He still stood by the fireplace, his tall frame casting a long shadow across the Persian rug. She didn't dare look up, but she could feel his gaze on her, as palpable as a physical touch.

Gathering her courage, Lydia ventured a comment. "I hope your journey wasn't too taxing, Your Grace. The roads can be quite treacherous this time of year."

The Duke's response was as chilly as the winter wind. "It was satisfactory ."

Lydia's smile faltered, her cheeks flushed, and she busied herself with stirring her father's tea, the spoon clinking against the china a touch too forcefully. She held her breath, half-expecting to hear the Duke's deep voice point out some flaw in her technique.

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Just then, her father's voice boomed across the room. "I say, did you hear about the baker who went broke? He ran out of dough!"

A collective groan rippled through the parlor. Lydia couldn't help but giggle at the sheer awfulness of the joke, her hand flying to her mouth to stifle the sound. As her laughter subsided, she glanced up, only to find the Duke watching her with an odd expression. His brow was furrowed, but there was something in his eyes – a flicker of... curiosity? – that made Lydia's heart skip a nervous beat.

She quickly turned back to her duties, lifting the next cup with hands that trembled only slightly. As she poured, a sudden gust of wind from the open window sent the curtains billowing. The movement startled her, and a few drops of tea splashed onto the saucer.

"Oh!" Lydia exclaimed, mortified. She quickly reached for a napkin to dab at the spill.

"Clumsy girl," she heard her mother mutter under her breath.

Lydia's cheeks burned with embarrassment. She chanced a glance at the Duke, certain she would find disapproval etched on his stern features. To her surprise, he was watching her with that same intensity she had noticed earlier. She could not quite make out what it was she noticed in his gaze, but she was certain that it was not disapproval.

Their eyes met for a brief moment, and Lydia felt her breath catch in her throat. Then the Duke blinked, and the connection was broken.

Lydia released a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. She straightened her shoulders and continued her task.

Later, as they moved to the dining room for dinner, Lydia felt her anxiety mounting. She was overly aware of every movement, every word spoken, terrified of making another misstep. The Duke's presence seemed to fill the room, casting a pall of tension.

"So, Your Grace," Lydia's father ventured as the first course was served. "I understand you have extensive holdings in the north. How do you find the climate there compared to London?"

The Duke's response was curt. "Colder. Wetter. But infinitely more tolerable than the cloying atmosphere of town."

An awkward silence fell over the table. Lydia, desperate to salvage the conversation, spoke up. "I've always thought the north sounded terribly romantic. All those windswept moors and ancient castles. It must be quite beautiful in its own way."

The Duke's eyes flicked to her, his gaze intense. Lydia felt her cheeks grow warm under his scrutiny, but she held his gaze, refusing to be cowed. "Beauty, Lady Lydia," he said, his voice low and rich, "is often a mask for danger. The moors you find so romantic have swallowed many an unwary traveler."

Lydia felt a chill run down her spine at his words. Was it a warning? A threat? Or perhaps... a challenge? She couldn't be sure, but she found herself unable to look away from those piercing blue eyes for the remainder of the meal.

As the last plates were cleared away, Lydia's mother spoke up, her voice overly bright. "Perhaps we should retire to the drawing room for coffee? Lydia, my dear, why don't you show His Grace the way?"

Recognizing the dismissal for what it was, Lydia rose, forcing a smile. "Of course. Your Grace, if you'll follow me?"

As they made their way down the hallway, Lydia was acutely aware of the Duke's presence behind her. His footsteps were nearly silent on the plush carpet, but she could feel the heat radiating from his body, could sense his gaze on her back. It took all her willpower not to turn and look at him, to try and decipher the mystery that was Elias Blacknight.

Just as they reached the drawing room door, the Duke spoke, his voice low and intense. "Lady Lydia," he said, causing her to turn and face him. "Before we proceed any further, there is something you must know."

Lydia's heart leapt into her throat. Was he about to call off the engagement? Had her behavior, or Mug's, offended him so greatly? She looked up at him, suddenly aware of how close they were standing. From this distance, she could see flecks of silver in those midnight blue eyes, could detect the faint scent of sandalwood and leather that clung to him.

"Yes, Your Grace?" she managed, her voice barely above a whisper.

The Duke's face was impassive as he continued, but Lydia thought she detected a hint of vulnerability in his eyes. "I have a son. He is ten years old, and he is the sole reason I am seeking a wife. I require a mother for my child, nothing more. If you find this arrangement unsatisfactory, now is the time to speak up."

Lydia felt as though the wind had been knocked out of her. Of all the things she had expected him to say, this was not it. A son? A child who needed a mother? She searched the Duke's face, trying to understand the emotions that flickered behind his carefully controlled expression.

"I... I see," she said, struggling to gather her thoughts. "May I ask what happened to the boy's mother?"

A shadow passed over the Duke's face, and for a moment, Lydia saw a glimpse of the pain he usually kept so well hidden. "She is gone," he said, his voice rough with some unnamed emotion. "That is all you need to know."

Lydia nodded, her mind whirling. A motherless child, a cold and distant father... her heart ached for the boy she had never met. And yet, a small part of her couldn't help but feel a flicker of hope. Surely, if she could be a good mother to the Duke's son, he would come to appreciate her. Perhaps even...

No, she told herself firmly. She couldn't allow herself to entertain such foolish fantasies. This was a marriage of convenience, nothing more. And yet, as she looked up at the Duke, she couldn't help but wonder if there might be more to this enigmatic man than met the eye.

"I understand, Your Grace," she said, lifting her chin to meet his gaze. "And I accept. I have helped raise my younger sisters, so I have some experience with children. I would be honored to be a mother to your son."

For a second, the Duke's brows lifted and a begrudging look of respect flickered across his features, but it was gone as quickly as it had appeared. For a moment, Lydia thought she saw his gaze drop to her lips, but surely that was just her imagination.

"Very well," he said, his tone clipped but somehow softer than before. "I shall have my solicitor draw up the marriage contract. We will wed in a fortnight's time."

With that, he turned on his heel and strode towards the front door, leaving Lydia staring after him in shock. She hurried to follow, her mind still reeling from their conversation.

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"Your Grace!" she called, catching up to him at the door. "Won't you stay for tea?"

The Duke paused, his hand on the door handle. He turned to look at her, Lydia coldly. "I think not, Lady Lydia," he said, his voice low. "I have pressing business to attend to. Good evening."

And with that, he was gone, leaving Lydia standing alone in the foyer, her head spinning with all that had transpired. She pressed a hand to her cheek, feeling the warmth that lingered there

As she made her way back to the drawing room, where her parents no doubt waited with bated breath, Lydia couldn't shake the feeling that she had just agreed to something far more complicated than a simple marriage of convenience.

The Duke of Fyre was a mystery, a man shrouded in rumors and darkness. And now, she was to be his wife, the mother to his child. It was a daunting prospect, to say the least.

But as Lydia thought of the motherless boy waiting at Fyre Manor, she felt a surge of determination. Whatever challenges lay ahead, whatever secrets the Duke might be hiding, she would face them with courage and grace. For the sake of the child, if nothing else.

CHAPTER 4

With a deep breath, Lydia squared her shoulders and pushed open the drawing room door, ready to face her parents and the future that awaited her as the soon-to-be

Duchess of Fyre.

"Well?" her mother demanded the moment Lydia entered the room. "What did he say? Is the engagement settled?"

Lydia nodded, still feeling slightly dazed. "Yes, Mother. We are to be married in a fortnight."

Her father let out a sigh of relief, while her mother clapped her hands together in delight. "Oh, Lydia! This is wonderful news. Just think - our daughter, a duchess!"

But Lydia hardly heard their excited chatter. Her mind was still reeling from the Duke's revelation and the unexpected intensity of their interaction. A son. A child who needed a mother. It changed everything, and yet... perhaps it changed nothing at all.

As she excused herself and made her way back to her bedchamber, Lydia found Mug waiting for her, his tail wagging tentatively. She scooped him up, burying her face in his soft fur.

"Oh, Mug," she whispered. "What have I gotten myself into?"

The little dog licked her cheek, as if to say, "Whatever it is, we'll face it together." And for the first time that day, Lydia felt a genuine smile tug at her lips.

She moved to the window, gazing out at the darkening sky. In the distance, she could just make out the Duke's carriage disappearing down the lane. Her heart fluttered strangely at the memory of his piercing gaze, the subtle hints of vulnerability she'd glimpsed beneath his stern exterior.

Whatever the future held, whatever challenges lay ahead at Fyre Manor, she would

meet them . She was to be a duchess, a wife, and most importantly, a mother. It was not the future she had envisioned for herself, but perhaps... perhaps it could be something even better.

With that thought to comfort her, Lydia began to prepare for bed, her mind already turning to the preparations that would need to be made for her impending nuptials and the new life that awaited her as the Duchess of Fyre. And if, as she drifted off to sleep, her dreams were filled with stormy blue eyes and the faint scent of sandalwood, well... that was her secret to keep.

The carriage rattled over London's cobblestone streets, carrying Lydia and her three sisters towards Madame Hughes's renowned modiste shop. Despite the excitement of shopping for a wedding gown, a tense silence permeated the air.

Lydia glanced at her sisters' worried faces. Marian, the eldest after Lydia, sat rigidly, while twins Jane and Diana exchanged nervous looks.

"Really, now," Lydia said, injecting cheerfulness into her voice. "Why such gloomy expressions? This is meant to be a joyous occasion!"

Jane, always outspoken, burst out, "Joyous? Lydia, you're marrying the Beast of Fyre!"

"Jane!" Marian hissed, eyeing the carriage driver warily.

Lydia sighed, patting Jane's hand. "Don't believe everything in gossip sheets, dear one. I'm certain the Duke is a perfect gentleman."

"But Lydia," Diana whispered, "the stories we've heard... They say he never leaves his estate, that he's horribly scarred, or... or worse."

"Nonsense," Lydia said firmly. "I've met the Duke, remember? He's perfectly normal. Handsome, even, in a... stern sort of way."

Her sisters remained unconvinced as the carriage halted outside Madame Hughes's shop. Lydia took a deep breath, steeling herself. This was more than just dress shopping - it was the first step towards her new life as a duchess.

The shop's bell tinkled as they entered. Madame Hughes hurried forward, exclaiming, "Ah, the future Duchess of Fyre! Come, we must create a gown fit for royalty!"

As Lydia was whisked away for measurements, her sisters settled onto a plush settee, their worried whispers barely audible over rustling fabric.

"I cannot believe she's going through with this," Jane muttered.

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Marian shushed her, but Diana nodded agreement. "It's so unlike Lydia. She's always been so... practical."

"That's exactly why she's doing it," Marian said softly. "Because she is practical. Do not be foolish, sister. She is doing this for us... for our futures."

Behind the dressing screen, Lydia heard snippets of her sisters' conversation. She closed her eyes, remembering the humiliation of her first season. The whispers, pitying glances, dance cards stubbornly empty. It was then, in her mortification, that she'd vowed to become the perfect lady, marry well, and restore her family's social standing.

"Lift your arms, please, my lady," Madame Hughes instructed, interrupting Lydia's thoughts. Obeying, Lydia caught her reflection. The half-pinned gown was already a marvel of silk and lace. She'd be a vision on her wedding day, she was certain.

"What do you think, mes cheries?" Madame Hughes called to Lydia's sisters. "Shall we show them?"

As Lydia emerged from behind the screen, her sisters gasped. For a moment, their worries seemed forgotten as they crowded around, exclaiming over the gown's exquisite details.

"Oh, Lydia," Diana breathed, "you look like a princess!"

"Better than a princess," Jane corrected, her usual mischief returning. "You look like a duchess."

Lydia smiled, admiring herself in the full-length mirror. "It's perfect," she said softly. "Absolutely perfect."

As Madame Hughes adjusted the gown's train, Jane's voice piped up, tinged with laughter. "Remember, Lydia, when you first started learning the pianoforte? I thought my ears would bleed!"

Diana giggled, covering her mouth. "Oh, yes! It sounded like a cat being strangled. But she wouldn't give up, would she? Practiced hours daily until she could play Beethoven in her sleep."

"Or when she decided she must master embroidery," Marian added, smiling fondly. "Remember how she pricked her fingers so often she could barely hold her teacup?"

Lydia's cheeks flushed, but she laughed along with her sisters. "Well," she said, lifting her chin proudly, "all that practice paid off, didn't it? I'd like to see any of you play a concerto or embroider a handkerchief half as well as I can now."

"That's our Lydia," Jane said affectionately. "Never gives up, no matter how difficult the task."

As her sisters reminisced about her self-improvement attempts, Lydia felt a surge of determination. They were right - she never gave up, regardless of the challenge. This marriage, this new life as a duchess, would be no different.

She'd vowed to be the perfect lady, which meant more than mastering social graces. It meant making advantageous connections, restoring her family's reputation, and providing an heir for her new husband. The thought warmed her cheeks, but she pushed aside any embarrassment or trepidation. This was her duty, and she'd fulfill it with grace and determination.

"You know," Marian said thoughtfully, "I think this marriage might be good for Lydia after all. If anyone can tame the Beast of Fyre, it's our stubborn sister."

Jane nodded, eyes glinting mischievously. "True. Remember when she decided to learn sidesaddle riding? Father said it was too dangerous, but Lydia wouldn't hear of it."

"Oh, I remember," Diana chimed in. "She fell off so many times, I thought she'd be black and blue forever. But she kept getting back on that horse, day after day."

Lydia smiled at the memory. "And now I can outride all of you, can't I?"

"That's not the point," Marian said gently. "The point is, you never give up, Lydia. No matter how difficult or scary something might be, you face it unflinchingly. That's why I think... I think you might be exactly what the Duke of Fyre needs."

Lydia felt a warm glow of pride at her sister's words. "Thank you, Marian. I intend to be the best wife and duchess I can be. The Duke may be intimidating, but I'm determined to make this marriage work."

"But Lydia," Diana said hesitantly, "what if... what if he's cruel? What if the rumors are true?"

Lydia turned to face her youngest sister, her expression serious. "Diana, I've met the Duke. He's stern, yes, and perhaps a bit cold, but he's not cruel. I believe there's more to him than the rumors suggest. And I intend to discover what that is."

Jane raised an eyebrow. "And if you can't? If he truly is the beast everyone says he is?"

Lydia lifted her chin, a determined glint in her eye. "Then I'll simply have to tame

him, won't I? After all, I managed to tame that wild mare Father bought last spring. How much harder can a duke be?"

Her sisters laughed, the tension in the room finally breaking. As Madame Hughes returned with a selection of veils, the conversation turned to lighter topics - flowers for the bouquet, music for the ceremony, the guest list for the wedding breakfast.

As she stood there, surrounded by tulle and silk, Lydia's mind raced with plans for her future. She would be the perfect duchess, of that she was certain. She would charm the ton, host magnificent parties, and bring honor to the Fyre name. And perhaps, in time, she might even find a way to warm the Duke's cold heart.

"Lydia," Marian said softly, drawing her attention back to the present, "are you happy? Truly?"

Lydia paused, considering the question. Was she happy? Perhaps not in the way romantic novels described, with hearts aflutter and cheeks aglow. But there was satisfaction in knowing she was doing her duty, in knowing that she was on the path to achieving everything she had worked so hard for.

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"I'm content," she said finally. "And I believe happiness will come, in time. This marriage is a chance to fulfill the vow I made to myself, to be the perfect lady and to restore our family's standing. One item on my list will soon be accomplished, and the rest will surely follow."

"Your list?" Diana asked, curiosity piqued.

Lydia nodded. "After my debut, I made a list of everything I needed to do to be considered the perfect lady. Marrying well was at the top, of course. But there's also making influential friends, hosting successful social events, perhaps even... siring an heir."

Her sisters exchanged glances at this last item, and Lydia felt heat rising to her cheeks. "I suppose that... it is part of a marriage," she muttered. "Though perhaps we will simply be... housemates."

"But Lydia," Jane protested, "surely there's more to life than just duty and social standing?"

Lydia smiled, reaching out to squeeze her sister's hand. "Of course there is. But for now, this is what I need to focus on. Who knows? Perhaps in fulfilling my duty, I'll find a deeper happiness than I ever imagined."

As Madame Hughes draped a gossamer-fine veil over Lydia's dark curls, she caught sight of herself in the mirror once more. The woman who gazed back at her was poised, elegant - every inch a duchess. For the first time since the engagement was announced, Lydia felt a flicker of excitement for her new role.

"Well," she said, turning to face her sisters with a bright smile, "what do you think? Am I ready to be the Duchess of Fyre?"

Her sisters exchanged glances, their earlier worry giving way to tentative hope. It was Marian who spoke first, her voice soft but sure. "You're ready to be anything you set your mind to, Lydia. You always have been."

As they left the shop, the gown carefully packaged and ready for delivery, Lydia felt a sense of purpose settle over her. One goal was nearly accomplished - she would be marrying well, securing her place in society. The rest, she was determined, would follow in due course.

She would win over the ton, charm them with her accomplishments and grace. She would be the perfect hostess, the ideal wife, the mother of future Dukes of Fyre. And perhaps, in time, she might even find a measure of happiness in her new life.

As they climbed back into the carriage, Jane nudged Lydia with her elbow. "So, future Duchess," she teased, "any chance you'll use your new influence to find suitable matches for your poor, unmarried sisters?"

Lydia laughed, feeling lighter than she had in days. "Just you wait," she promised. "Once I'm settled at Fyre Manor, I'll have eligible bachelors lining up to court you all. After all, what gentleman could resist the charms of a duchess's sister?"

As the carriage rolled towards home, Lydia's mind was already racing ahead, planning how she would win over her new husband, his household, and eventually, all of society. It would be a challenge, certainly, but then again, Lydia Brandon had never been one to shy away from a challenge.

She was to be the Duchess of Fyre, and she would be perfect. After all, she had made a vow, and Lydia Brandon always kept her promises.

The carriage had scarcely come to a stop before the front door of Drownshire House flew open, revealing a frantic-looking Viscountess Prudence.

"Girls! Thank heavens you're back. Quickly, Lydia, come inside. There's been a letter from the Duke."

Lydia's heart leapt into her throat as she hurried after her mother, her sisters close behind. In the drawing room, she found her father pacing before the fireplace, a creased piece of parchment in his hand.

"What is it, Papa?" Lydia asked, trying to keep the tremor from her voice. "Has something happened?"

Viscount Silas turned to face her, his expression grave. "The Duke has... requested some changes to the wedding arrangements. He wishes for a smaller ceremony, with only immediate family present. And he wants it moved up. To next week."

Lydia felt as though the floor had dropped out from beneath her feet. "Next week?" she echoed faintly. "But that's... that's so soon. How can we possibly be ready?"

"We'll manage," Viscountess Prudence said firmly. "We must. This is too important an opportunity to risk losing because of mere logistical difficulties."

Lydia nodded numbly, her mind whirling. A week. She had only a week to prepare for her new life, to say goodbye to everything she'd ever known. The enormity of it all suddenly crashed over her, and she felt her knees go weak.

"Lydia?" Marian's concerned voice cut through the fog of her thoughts. "Are you alright? You've gone quite pale."

"I... I think I need some air," Lydia managed, stumbling towards the French doors

that led to the garden. Once outside, she gulped in great breaths of the cool evening air, trying to calm her racing heart.

She heard footsteps behind her and turned to find Jane and Diana, their faces etched with worry.

"Lydia," Diana began hesitantly, "if you don't want to go through with this, you don't have to. We'll support you, no matter what."

For a moment, Lydia was tempted. Oh, how easy it would be to give in to her fears, to retreat to the safety and comfort of her familiar life. But then she thought of the Duke's son, of the lonely child who needed a mother. She thought of her family, of the opportunities this marriage would bring them all.

"No," she said, straightening her shoulders. "No, I made a commitment, and I intend to see it through. This is just... unexpected, that's all. I'll be fine."

Jane studied her face for a long moment. "Are you quite certain? Because if that beast does something to harm you..."

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"He will not," Lydia interrupted firmly. "The Duke is not a beast, Jane. He's a man, with his own reasons for wanting to hasten the wedding. I'm sure he has his reasons."

As she spoke the words, Lydia lifted her chin bravely, despite the wicked racing of her heart. The Duke of Fyre was a mystery, one she was now more determined than ever to solve.

"Well," Jane said, a mischievous glint in her eye, "if you're determined to go through with this, we'd better make the most of your last week as a free woman, hadn't we?"

And so began a whirlwind of activity. The next few days passed in a blur of fittings and preparations, interspersed with moments of quiet panic that Lydia did her best to suppress. Her sisters were a constant presence, offering support and distraction in equal measure.

A few nights before her wedding, as Lydia lay awake in her childhood bed for the last time, she found herself reflecting on the journey that had brought her to this point.

"I can do this," she whispered to herself in the darkness. "I can be the duchess he needs, the mother that poor boy deserves. I can make this work."

CHAPTER 5

Lydia stood at her bedroom window, watching the empty driveway with a thin frown between her brows, her lips pursed. Two days. Just two days until her wedding, and the Duke of Fyre had yet to pay her a single visit since their initial meeting. She clenched her fists, willing herself to remain calm. A lady never lost her composure,

after all.

One would think, she thought irritably, that the man would want to get to know the woman who was to be the mother of his child.

A sharp knock at the door startled her from her brooding. "Lydia," her mother's voice called, "are you decent? We must go over the final preparations."

Lydia sighed, smoothing down her skirts. "Come in, Mother."

Viscountess Prudence swept into the room, a whirlwind of purpose and barely contained anxiety. "There you are, child. Sit down, we have much to discuss."

As Lydia perched on the edge of her bed, her mother began to pace, ticking off items on her fingers. "Now, the flowers have been ordered, the cake is being prepared, and your gown is nearly finished. Have you practiced your vows? Remember, clear enunciation is key."

"Yes, Mother," Lydia replied dutifully. "I've practiced them every night."

Prudence nodded approvingly. "Good. Now, we must discuss your duties as a duchess. You'll be expected to host dinners, attend balls, and manage a large household. It's a great responsibility, Lydia. I do hope you're prepared for it."

Lydia straightened her spine, lifting her chin. "I am, Mother. I've been preparing for this my entire life."

Prudence flashed a thin smile before pursing her lips once more. "Yes, well. See that you don't disappoint. The Duke is a powerful man, and this match is crucial for our family's future."

Lydia felt a twinge of resentment at her mother's words. Had anything she'd ever done been good enough? But she pushed the feeling aside, focusing instead on the task at hand.

"Mother," she began hesitantly, "the Duke... he hasn't called on me since our first meeting. Is that... normal?"

Prudence waved a dismissive hand. "Men of his station are very busy, Lydia. I'm sure he has many important matters to attend to. You mustn't bother him with trifles."

Lydia nodded, though the knot of anxiety in her stomach only tightened. How was she supposed to be a good wife to a man she barely knew?

As if sensing her daughter's unease, Prudence's expression softened slightly. "Lydia, my dear, I know this isn't the romantic match you might have dreamed of. But love... love isn't always necessary in a marriage. Respect, duty, these are far more important."

She paused, seeming to choose her next words carefully. "You may never feel love for the Duke, but you will love your children. That can be enough, if you allow it."

Lydia swallowed hard, fighting back the sudden prick of tears. "Yes, Mother. I understand."

Prudence nodded, satisfied. "Good. Now, there is one more matter we must discuss. Your... wedding night."

Lydia felt her face flame. "Oh! I... that is..."

"Come now, Lydia," Prudence chided. "You're to be a married woman. We must speak of these things."

Viscountess Prudence perched on the edge of Lydia's bed, her face a mask of discomfort. "So yes... ah... your wifely duties."

Lydia's eyes widened. "Wifely duties?"

"Yes, well..." Prudence coughed delicately. "You see, when a man and a woman love each other very much..."

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"Or in this case, are contractually obligated," Lydia muttered under her breath.

"What was that, dear?"

"Nothing, Mother. Please continue."

Prudence soldiered on. "Well, you see, it's rather like... like the bees and the flowers."

Lydia frowned. "Are you suggesting the Duke will sting me?"

"Good heavens, no!" Prudence gasped, fanning herself vigorously. "I simply mean... well, the bee... that is to say, the Duke... will... pollinate..."

At that moment, a bee buzzed in through the open window. Prudence shrieked, leaping to her feet and swatting wildly at the air. In her haste, she knocked over a vase of flowers, sending water and petals cascading across the floor.

"Oh dear," Lydia sighed, reaching for a towel. As she bent to mop up the mess, the bee settled on her nose. She went cross-eyed trying to look at it.

"Don't move!" Prudence hissed, inching towards the door. "I'll fetch your father. He'll know what to do."

"Mother, it's just a bee," Lydia said, trying not to move her lips too much.

"Precisely!" Prudence nodded vigorously. "And now you see why it's so important to discuss these matters before your wedding night!"

With that, she fled the room, leaving Lydia alone with her new striped friend.

"Well," Lydia addressed the bee, "I don't suppose you could explain what on earth she was talking about?"

The bee, unsurprisingly, did not respond. It did, however, fly off her nose and out the window, apparently deciding that the Viscountess's impromptu biology lesson was not to its liking either.

Lydia flopped back on her bed, more confused than ever. If this was what marriage entailed, perhaps spinsterhood wasn't such a terrible fate after all.

She understood the basic mechanics of how children were made, of course, but the reality of it - of lying with a virtual stranger - was suddenly, terrifyingly real.

What had she gotten herself into? How could she possibly be a good wife, a good duchess, when she knew next to nothing about the man she was to marry?

A soft knock at the door roused her from her spiraling thoughts. "Lydia?" Marian's voice called softly. "May we come in?"

"Of course," Lydia replied, hastily composing herself.

Her three sisters filed into the room, their faces etched with concern. Jane was carrying a tray laden with tea and biscuits, while Diana clutched a small bouquet of wildflowers.

"We thought you might need some cheering up," Diana said, offering the flowers with a shy smile.

Lydia felt a rush of affection for her sisters. "Thank you," she said softly, taking the

flowers and inhaling their sweet scent. "You're right, I could use a distraction."

As they settled around the room, pouring tea and passing biscuits, Lydia felt some of the tension leave her shoulders. Here, surrounded by the familiar chatter of her sisters, she could almost forget the daunting future that awaited her.

"So," Jane said, a mischievous glint in her eye, "are you ready to become the fearsome Duchess of Fyre?"

Lydia laughed, the sound surprising even herself. "Fearsome? Hardly. I'm more likely to trip over my own feet and embarrass myself in front of the entire ton."

"Nonsense," Marian said firmly. "You'll be magnificent, Lydia. You always are."

"But what if I'm not?" Lydia whispered, voicing the fear that had been gnawing at her for days. "What if I can't live up to the Duke's expectations? What if I fail?"

Her sisters exchanged glances, and it was Diana who spoke up. "Lydia," she said gently, "do you remember when you taught me to ride? I was so afraid, certain I'd fall and make a fool of myself. But you told me something I've never forgotten."

Lydia smiled faintly. "What was that?"

"You said, 'The only true failure is not trying at all.' And you were right. Even when I fell - and I fell a lot - you never let me give up. You won't fail, Lydia, because you'll never stop trying. That's who you are."

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Tears pricked at Lydia's eyes, and she reached out to squeeze Diana's hand. "Thank you," she whispered. "I needed to hear that."

As the afternoon wore on, Lydia's spirits lifted. Her sisters regaled her with stories and jokes, reminding her of happier times and filling the room with laughter. For a few precious hours, she was able to set aside her worries and simply enjoy the company of those she loved most.

But as the light began to fade and her sisters prepared to leave, the weight of her impending future settled back onto Lydia's shoulders. She walked to the window, gazing out at the darkening sky.

"Lydia?" Marian's voice was soft behind her. "What are you thinking?"

Lydia turned, offering her sister a small smile. "I was just... remembering. All those hours spent practicing the pianoforte, perfecting my French, learning to embroider. I used to resent Mother for pushing me so hard. But now..."

"Now you're grateful," Marian finished for her. "Because it's prepared you for this."

Lydia nodded. "Exactly. I may not know the Duke, may not love him, but I can be the perfect wife and duchess. I can make Mother proud, prove to everyone that I'm worthy of this position."

Marian studied her face for a long moment. "And what about your own happiness, Lydia? Doesn't that matter?"

The question caught Lydia off guard. She'd been so focused on duty, on living up to expectations, that she'd scarcely considered her own desires. "I... I suppose I hope that happiness will come in time," she said slowly. "That in doing my duty, in being the best duchess I can be, I'll find fulfillment."

Marian didn't look entirely convinced, but she nodded. "Just... don't lose yourself in the process, Lydia. Promise me that."

"I promise," Lydia said, embracing her sister tightly.

As her sisters left, Lydia moved to her writing desk, pulling out a fresh sheet of paper. If the Duke wouldn't come to her, then she would go to him - through letters, at least. She would write to him every day until the wedding, sharing her thoughts, her hopes for their future together. Perhaps, if she could not win his love, she might at least earn his respect.

"Dear Duke," she began, her hand steady and her resolve firm. "I hope this letter finds you well. As our wedding day approaches, I find myself thinking of the life we will build together..."

The words flowed easily, filling page after page. Lydia wrote of her hopes for their future, her commitment to being a good wife and duchess. She spoke of her accomplishments, her desire to be a worthy partner to him. And though she did not mention love - for how could she love a man she barely knew? - she infused every word with sincerity and determination.

As she sealed the letter, ready to be sent first thing in the morning, Lydia allowed herself a small smile. This was not the future she'd expected. But would face it head-on, with all the grace and determination she could muster. After all, she had made a vow to be the perfect lady, the perfect wife. And Lydia Brandon always kept her promises.

The next day dawned bright and clear, but Lydia's spirits remained clouded with anxiety. As she went through the motions of her daily routine - breakfast with her family, a final fitting for her wedding gown, a meeting with the florist - she couldn't shake the feeling of unease that had settled over her since her mother's talk.

"Lydia," Prudence called as she passed the drawing room, "come here a moment. We need to go over the seating arrangements for the wedding breakfast one last time."

Suppressing a sigh, Lydia entered the room. Her mother sat at a small writing desk, surrounded by papers and diagrams. "Yes, Mother?"

Prudence looked up, her keen eyes taking in every detail of Lydia's appearance. "Stand up straight, child. A duchess must always have perfect posture. Now, about these seating arrangements..."

For the next hour, Lydia stood dutifully by her mother's side, offering suggestions and nodding agreement as Prudence rearranged the names of guests over and over. It was tedious work, but Lydia knew better than to complain. A lady always maintained her composure, no matter how trying the circumstances.

As they finished, Prudence set down her pen with a satisfied nod. "There. That should prevent any social faux pas. Now, Lydia, let's review your duties one last time."

Lydia straightened her shoulders, reciting from memory: "As Duchess of Fyre, I am to manage the household staff, oversee the estate accounts, host social gatherings, support my husband in his business and political endeavors, and present a dignified and gracious face to society at all times."

"Very good," Prudence said, a hint of approval in her voice. "And your primary duty?"

"To provide an heir for the Fyre lineage," Lydia replied, fighting to keep the tremor from her voice.

Prudence nodded. "Exactly. Remember, Lydia, everything else is secondary to that. The continuation of the family line is of utmost importance."

Lydia swallowed hard, her mother's words from the previous day echoing in her mind. Love wasn't necessary in a marriage. Duty, respect, these were what mattered. But as she stood there, on the eve of her wedding, Lydia couldn't help but long for something more.

"Mother," she said hesitantly, "what if... what if the Duke and I never come to care for each other? What if it's always just... duty?"

Prudence's expression softened slightly, a rare occurrence. "Oh, my dear. I know it seems daunting now, but you'll see. Once you have children, once you build a life together, a different kind of love will grow. It may not be the passionate romance of novels, but it can be deep and lasting all the same."

Lydia nodded, not entirely convinced but unwilling to argue. As she turned to leave, Prudence called out once more.

"Lydia. Remember everything I've taught you. You've been prepared for this your entire life. Don't let us down."

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The words, meant to be encouraging, felt like a weight on Lydia's shoulders. She had always strived to meet her mother's exacting standards, had pushed herself to excel in every area of a lady's education. But this - marriage to a virtual stranger, the weight of an entire duchy on her shoulders - this was beyond anything she had ever faced before.

As she retreated to her room, Lydia's mind whirled with all she had learned, all she still didn't know. The mechanics of producing an heir, vaguely explained through metaphors of flowers and bees, seemed both terrifying and oddly anticlimactic. Was that truly all there was to it?

CHAPTER 6

The heavy oak door of Elias Blacknight's bedchamber groaned as he pushed it open, his shoulders sagging with exhaustion. After a day of grueling business negotiations, all he craved was solitude and a glass of brandy. Instead, he found the Marquess of Stone, Nicholas Grant, pacing before the fireplace like a caged lion.

"Nicholas?" Elias said, surprise momentarily overtaking his fatigue. "What in Heaven's name are you doing here?"

Nicholas whirled to face him, his usually jovial face set in lines of fury. "What am I doing here? What are you doing getting married without so much as a word to your oldest friend?"

Elias sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. He should have known word would reach Nicholas eventually, but he'd hoped for a few more days of peace before this

particular inquisition.

"I see news travels fast," he said dryly, moving to pour himself that much-needed brandy. "Would you care for a drink?"

"Don't try to distract me with alcohol, Elias," Nicholas snapped, though he held out his hand for a glass nonetheless. "When exactly were you planning to tell me about this... this... sudden union?"

Elias took a long sip of his brandy, savoring the burn as it slid down his throat. "I hadn't given it much thought, to be honest. It's merely a necessary transaction, nothing more."

Nicholas's eyes widened in disbelief. "A necessary transaction? Elias, you're getting married! To a woman you've barely met, if the rumors are to be believed. How can you be so cavalier about this?"

"Because it's not a matter of great importance," Elias replied, his tone maddeningly calm in the face of Nicholas's agitation. "It's an hour in a church, some paperwork to sign, and then life goes on as usual. I fail to see why you're making such a fuss."

Nicholas threw up his hands in exasperation. "An hour in a church? Elias, you obtuse fool, you're taking a wife! A living, breathing woman who will share your home, your name, your life. How can you not see the significance of that?"

Elias's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "I see the significance perfectly well, Nicholas. I'm gaining a mother for my son and a mistress for my household. That is the extent of it."

"The extent of it?" Nicholas repeated, incredulity coloring his voice. "Goodness, man, do you hear yourself? This isn't like hiring a new housekeeper. You're bringing a

young woman into your home, into your life. She'll be the Duchess of Fyre, for heaven's sake!"

Elias set down his glass with more force than necessary, a hint of irritation finally breaking through his calm facade. "I'm well aware of what I'm doing, Nicholas. I don't need you to explain the basics of marriage to me. It will not be my first."

Nicholas took a deep breath, visibly trying to calm himself. When he spoke again, his voice was quieter, tinged with concern rather than anger. "Elias, my friend, I'm worried about you. This isn't like you, making such a momentous decision so... hastily. What's really going on?"

For a long moment, Elias was silent, staring into the depths of his brandy glass as if it held the answers to all life's mysteries. When he finally spoke, his voice was low, almost vulnerable.

"It's Peter," he said softly. "He's been... struggling lately. More withdrawn, less interested in his studies. I've heard him crying at night when he thinks no one can hear."

Nicholas's expression softened. "The boy longs for his mother."

Elias nodded, a shadow passing over his face. "He needs a mother's love, Nicholas. Something I... something I can't provide."

"And you think marrying a stranger will solve that?" Nicholas asked gently.

Elias shrugged, a gesture so unlike his usual confident demeanor that Nicholas felt a pang of worry for his friend. "What else can I do? I've tried everything else. Tutors, governesses, even that blasted dog he begged for last Christmas. Nothing helps. He needs a mother, and I... I need a wife to run the household. It's a sensible solution."

Nicholas sighed, moving to place a hand on Elias's shoulder. "Oh, my friend. I understand your intentions are good, but have you considered what this might mean for the young lady in question? To be thrust into a ready-made family, expected to mother a child she's never met?"

Elias's jaw tightened. "Lady Lydia understood the terms when she agreed to the marriage. She knows what will be expected of her."

"Lady Lydia," Nicholas mused. "So that's her name. Tell me about her, Elias. What's she like?"

For a moment, Elias seemed at a loss. "She's... young. Well-bred. Comes from a good family. I'm told she's accomplished in all the ways a lady should be."

Nicholas raised an eyebrow. "And? What else?"

Elias frowned. "What else is there to know? She'll be a suitable mother for Peter and a capable mistress of Fyre Manor. That's all that matters."

Nicholas shook his head, exasperatedly, a trace of pity in his eyes. "Oh, Elias. There's so much more to marriage than that. What of companionship? Shared interests? The possibility of love?"

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At the word 'love,' Elias's expression hardened. "Love has no place in this arrangement, Nicholas. Love is weakness that I have not the time for."

Nicholas opened his mouth to argue, but something in Elias's eyes made him pause. He knew the pain his friend had endured, the betrayal that had left him so cold and guarded. Perhaps, he thought, this marriage could be a chance for healing, if only Elias would allow it.

"Very well," Nicholas said at last. "I can see your mind is made up. But promise me one thing, Elias."

"What's that?"

"Give her a chance," Nicholas said earnestly. "This Lady Lydia. Don't shut her out before you've even given her a chance to prove herself. Who knows? She might surprise you."

Elias's expression remained impassive, though he was quite certain Nicholas knew him well enough to not be fooled by it. "I'll... consider your words," Elias said finally.

Nicholas nodded, knowing it was the best he could hope for at the moment. "Good. Now, when exactly is this wedding taking place? And don't even think about not inviting me, or I shall create such a scandal the ton will be gossiping about it for years."

A ghost of a smile tugged at Elias's lips. "It's in three days' time. A small, private ceremony at the local church. You're welcome to attend, if you must."

"If I must?" Nicholas repeated, his usual good humor returning. "My dear Duke, I wouldn't miss it for the world. Someone needs to be there to make sure you don't scowl your way through the entire ceremony."

As Nicholas made to leave, the heavy oak door creaked open, revealing a small figure hesitating on the threshold. Peter Blacknight, all of ten years old, clutched a sheet of paper to his chest, his dark eyes wide as they darted between his father and the unexpected visitor.

"I... I'm sorry, Father," Peter stammered, shrinking back slightly. "I didn't know you had company."

Elias felt a familiar tightness in his chest at the sight of his son. The boy was the spitting image of his mother, with the same golden curls and delicate features. It was like looking at a ghost, a constant reminder of his failures.

"It's quite alright, Peter," Elias said, his voice stiffer than he intended. "What is it you need?"

Peter took a tentative step into the room, his gaze fixed on the carpet. "I... I wanted to show you something, Father. But it can wait if you're busy."

Nicholas, ever perceptive, stepped forward with a warm smile. "Nonsense, young man! I was just leaving. But I'd love to see what you've brought before I go."

Peter's eyes widened at this unexpected kindness from a stranger. He glanced at his father, seeking permission, and Elias gave a curt nod.

"Go on, then," Elias said, gesturing for Peter to approach.

With trembling hands, Peter unfolded the paper he'd been clutching. It was a drawing,

painstakingly rendered in charcoal. Despite the childish execution, there was a clear talent evident in the bold lines and careful shading.

"It's... it's the view from my window," Peter explained softly. "Miss Nancy said I should practice drawing what I see."

Nicholas leaned in, examining the sketch with exaggerated interest. "Well, I must say, this is quite impressive! You have a real eye for detail, young man. Look here, Elias - see how he's captured the shadow of the old oak tree?"

Elias stepped closer, peering at the drawing over his son's shoulder. He was surprised to find that Nicholas was right. There was a certain... something in the sketch, a hint of real artistic promise.

"It's... very good, Peter," Elias said, the words feeling awkward and inadequate on his tongue. He wanted to say more, to express the pride that was welling up inside him, but the right words eluded him and he swallowed with difficulty. Not for the first time, Elias inwardly chastised himself for being so inept at connecting with his son.

Peter's face lit up at the praise, a tentative smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Really, Father? You like it?"

"Of course he does!" Nicholas interjected, ruffling Peter's hair affectionately. "Your father may not say much, but I can see it in his eyes. He's proud of you, lad."

Elias shot Nicholas a sharp look, but his friend merely grinned unrepentantly.

"Thank you, sir," Peter said shyly, ducking his head. "I... I'm glad you like it, Father."

There was a moment of awkward silence, heavy with unspoken words. Elias cleared his throat, searching for something to say. "You should... keep practicing," he

managed finally. "Drawing is a valuable skill for a young gentleman."

Peter's smile faltered slightly, but he nodded dutifully. "Yes, Father. I will."

Nicholas, sensing the tension, clapped his hands together. "Well, I really must be going. It was a pleasure to meet you, Peter. Keep up the excellent work!"

As Nicholas made his way to the door, he paused beside Elias, speaking in a low voice meant only for his friend's ears. "Talk to him, Elias. He's reaching out to you. Don't push him away."

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With a final nod to Peter, Nicholas swept from the room, leaving father and son alone in a silence that seemed to stretch endlessly.

Elias stood awkwardly, acutely aware of his son's presence but unsure how to bridge the chasm between them. He had never been good at this - the easy affection, the casual conversations that seemed to come so naturally to other fathers. Every interaction with Peter felt like navigating a slope littered with sharp, jagged gravel, fraught with the potential for missteps and hurt feelings.

Peter shuffled his feet, still clutching his drawing. "Should I... go now, Father?" he asked hesitantly.

Elias felt a pang of guilt at the uncertainty in his son's voice. This wasn't what he wanted - this distance, this formality between them. And yet, he couldn't seem to find a way past it.

"No, stay," Elias said, forcing himself to soften his tone. "Tell me... tell me more about your drawing. What made you choose that particular view?"

Peter's eyes widened in surprise at his father's unexpected interest. "Well," he began hesitantly, "I like watching the birds in the old oak tree. They're always so busy, flitting about and building nests. And the way the light changes throughout the day, casting different shadows... it's fascinating."

As Peter spoke, his initial nervousness faded, replaced by a quiet enthusiasm. Elias found himself drawn in, seeing the world through his son's eyes for perhaps the first time.

"You notice a great deal," Elias observed, a hint of warmth creeping into his voice. "That's... that's good. A keen eye is a valuable asset in many pursuits."

Peter beamed at the praise, straightening his shoulders. "Miss Nancy says I have a talent for observation. She thinks I might make a good naturalist someday."

Elias felt a flicker of surprise. He hadn't realized Peter had such specific interests. When was the last time he'd truly spoken with his son about anything beyond his studies?

"A naturalist?" Elias repeated, trying to keep the skepticism from his voice. "That's... an interesting ambition."

Peter's face fell slightly at his father's tepid response. "You don't approve," he said softly, more a statement than a question.

Elias sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "It's not that, Peter. I just... there are certain expectations for a young man of your station. The sciences are all well and good as a hobby, but your future lies in managing the estate, in politics, in..."

"In being just like you," Peter finished, his voice barely above a whisper.

The words hung in the air between them, heavy with unspoken hurt and disappointment. Elias felt as though he'd been struck. Is that truly how Peter saw him? As some looming, inescapable fate?

"Peter, I..." Elias began, but his son was already backing towards the door, his earlier enthusiasm completely extinguished.

"I should go, Father," Peter said, his voice carefully controlled. "I have lessons to attend to."

Before Elias could formulate a response, Peter was gone, the door closing behind him with a soft click that seemed to echo in the sudden silence.

Elias slumped into his chair, burying his face in his hands. How had things gone so wrong so quickly? He'd tried to connect with his son, to show an interest in his pursuits, and somehow he'd only managed to push the boy further away.

Nicholas's words echoed in his mind: "Talk to him, Elias. He's reaching out to you. Don't push him away."

But how could he bridge this gap when every attempt seemed to end in failure? How could he be the father Peter needed when he could barely manage to be present in his son's life at all?

Determined not to let the moment slip away entirely, Elias rose from his chair and strode purposefully towards Peter's room. He paused outside the door, taking a deep breath to steel himself before knocking softly.

"Peter? May I come in?"

There was a moment of silence, then a quiet, "Yes, Father."

Elias entered to find Peter sitting at his desk, bent over a book. The drawing lay discarded on the bed, a silent reminder of their earlier conversation.

"Peter," Elias began, his voice gentler than usual, "I... You must understand my position. I am merely ... looking out for the estate, for our name. I didn't mean to dismiss your interests. It's just... being Duke of Fyre comes with certain responsibilities, and I worry about your future."

Peter looked up, surprise evident in his eyes. "You do?"

Elias nodded, moving to sit on the edge of the bed. "Of course I do. You're my son, Peter. Everything I do, every decision I make, is with your well-being in mind. I know things are not always easy, but... from the day after tomorrow, there will be a mother in this house and I do hope that we will... benefit from it."

Peter was silent for a long moment, processing this information. Then, in a small voice, he asked, "Do you think she'll like me?"

The vulnerability in that simple question nearly broke Elias's heart. He moved without thinking, crossing the room to kneel before his son's chair. "I believe she will. She... I do not know her that well, but she does seem quite intelligent and insightful."

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Tears welled up in Peter's eyes, and before Elias knew what was happening, the boy had launched himself into his arms. Elias stiffened for a moment, unused to such displays of affection, but then he slowly, carefully, wrapped his arms around his son in a clumsy embrace.

"I love you, Father," Peter mumbled into his shoulder.

Elias felt a lump form in his throat. "Yes, yes very well, Peter," he whispered, the words rising up to his throat but stubbornly refusing to leave his lips.

After a long moment, Elias gently pulled back, his hands resting on Peter's shoulders. "Now, about this drawing of yours," he said, his voice gruff with emotion. "I think we should have it framed. It deserves to be displayed properly, don't you think?"

Peter's eyes widened with delight. "Really? You mean it?"

Elias nodded, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Indeed. In fact, why don't we go into town tomorrow and choose a frame together? We can make an afternoon of it."

"Just... just the two of us?" Peter asked, hope evident in his voice.

"Just the two of us," Elias confirmed. "And perhaps... perhaps you can show me some of the birds you've been observing. I'd like to see them through your eyes."

The smile that lit up Peter's face was brighter than any Elias had seen in years. It stirred something in him, a long-dormant desire to be the father his son deserved.

As Elias bid Peter goodnight and returned to his own chambers, he found himself facing his reflection in the mirror above his dresser. The man who stared back at him was one he scarcely recognized - not the cold, distant Duke of Fyre, but a father who was trying, however imperfectly, to connect with his son.

He thought of Lady Lydia, the woman who would soon be joining their small, broken family. What would she make of them? Would she see past his gruff exterior, past the rumors and whispers that surrounded him? Could she be the missing piece that would help them become whole?

Elias shook his head, chiding himself for such fanciful thoughts. This was to be a marriage of convenience, nothing more. And yet... and yet he couldn't help but feel a flicker of hope. Hope that perhaps, just perhaps, this union might bring more than just stability to Fyre Manor. At least for Peter, he hoped, she could bring some warmth.

A dry smile appeared on his face as he thought of the dog she so seemed to adore. In the single note she had sent him since they had agreed to marry, she had only begged for the animal to join her here at the manor. Of course, his first instinct had been to refuse but now... Elias shrugged and sighed. Perhaps the animal too, for he was hardly able to honestly call it a dog, could bring something that his home quite lacked: laughter. A frown darkened his brow.

He could honestly not remember the last time there had been boundless laughter in this home. Of course, he had never been one to think lightly of life... but Peter was still a boy. He was certain that the animal would bring him joy, he decided now.

For the first time since agreeing to this marriage, Elias felt a spark of curiosity about his bride-to-be. Perhaps Nicholas was right. Perhaps he should give her a chance, allow her to surprise him.

With that thought in mind, Elias moved to his desk and pulled out a sheet of paper. It had been years since he'd written a personal letter, but he felt compelled to respond to Lady Lydia's earlier request with a warmer answer.

"Dear Lady Lydia," he began, his pen hovering uncertainly over the paper. "I do hope you are quite well and that you are adequately prepared for our impending marriage. Peter and I..." He paused and frowned. It would be quite dishonest to claim that they were looking forward to receiving her here. Instead, he had to admit that he was rather apprehensive - though that was not something he would say.

"Peter and I are quite prepared to receive you here. I have considered once again your request with regard to bringing your pet along to the manor. After giving it much thought and taking into account what the desires of my son would be, I have decided to grant that permission after all. Mug, if I am not mistaken, is more than welcome at the manor."

Elias sighed and shook his head. He had no idea how to set the poor woman's mind completely at ease. "I hope that you will find joy," he continued "and fulfillment in your journey here at the manor."

As he signed the letter, Elias felt a weight lift from his shoulders. It wasn't much, perhaps, but it was a start. A first step towards the future that awaited them all.

Setting the letter aside to be sent in the morning, Elias finally retired to bed. As he drifted off to sleep, his dreams were no longer haunted by ghosts of the past, but filled with tentative hopes for the future. A future that, for the first time in years, didn't seem quite so bleak and lonely.

Tomorrow would bring him one day closer to his wedding, one day closer to a new chapter in the story of the Duke of Fyre. And while challenges undoubtedly lay ahead, Elias found himself, against all odds, looking forward to turning the page.

CHAPTER 7

The small church was awash with the soft glow of candlelight, the air heavy with the scent of lilies and anticipation. Lydia stood just outside the doors, her heart pounding a frantic rhythm against her ribs. She smoothed down the front of her gown for the hundredth time, the ivory silk cool beneath her trembling fingers.

"Are you ready, my dear?" her father asked softly, offering his arm.

Lydia took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. "Yes, Papa. I'm ready."

As the doors swung open and the first notes of the wedding march filled the air, Lydia felt as though she were stepping into a dream. The faces of the small gathering blurred as she focused on the figure standing at the altar. Elias Blacknight, the Duke of Fyre, cut an imposing figure in his dark coat, his raven hair gleaming in the candlelight.

As Lydia drew closer, she felt her breath catch in her throat. Elias's eyes, those piercing blue orbs that had haunted her dreams, were fixed upon her with an intensity that made her pulse quicken. Was it her imagination, or did those eyes darken as they swept over her form?

When she reached the altar, her father placed her hand in Elias's. The Duke's fingers were warm and strong, and Lydia felt a jolt of electricity at the contact. She was rather certain that she noticed at least some surprise in the Duke's eyes as well - at least for a second, before he rearranged his expression into one of indifference again.

The vicar began the ceremony, his voice a soothing drone in the background as Lydia struggled to focus. She was acutely aware of Elias beside her, of the subtle scent of sandalwood that clung to him, of the way his thumb absently brushed against her knuckles.

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"Dearly beloved," the vicar intoned, "we are gathered here today to witness the union of His Grace, Elias Blacknight, Duke of Fyre, and Lady Lydia Brandon. Marriage is a sacred bond, not to be entered into lightly..."

As the vicar spoke of love and commitment, Lydia found her gaze drawn to Elias. His profile was strong and aristocratic, his jaw clenched tight. What was he thinking? Was his heart racing as wildly as her own or was he entirely unaffected by all of this?

"Love is patient, love is kind," the vicar continued, his words seeming to echo in the small church. "It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud..."

Lydia couldn't help but wonder if love - or care, at the very least - would ever enter into this arrangement. She stole another glance at Elias, only to find him already looking at her. Their eyes met, and for a brief moment, Lydia thought she saw a vulnerability in those blue depths that made her heart ache.

"Do you, Elias Blacknight, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?" the vicar asked. "Do you promise to love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, keep yourself only unto her, so long as you both shall live?"

Elias's voice was low and firm as he responded, "I do."

"And do you, Lydia Brandon, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband? Do you promise to love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, keep yourself only unto him, so long as you both shall live?"

Lydia swallowed hard, her voice barely above a whisper as she said, "I do."

As they exchanged rings, Lydia's hand trembled slightly. Elias's fingers were steady as he slipped the gold band onto her finger, but she thought she felt them linger for just a moment longer than necessary.

"With this ring, I thee wed," Elias said, his deep voice sending a shiver down Lydia's spine.

As Lydia placed the ring on Elias's finger, she was struck by the intimacy of the moment. This man, still largely a stranger to her, was now her husband. The thought was both terrifying and exhilarating.

"By the power vested in me," the vicar said at last, "I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Lydia's heart leapt into her throat as Elias turned to face her fully. For a heartbeat, their eyes met, and she saw a storm of emotions swirling in those blue depths. Then he leaned in, his lips brushing against hers in a kiss that was chaste, though it sent a flutter to the pit of her stomach.

As they turned to face the assembled guests, Lydia caught sight of her sisters. Marian stood tall and proud, a reassuring smile on her face. Jane was barely containing her excitement, bouncing on her toes. And Diana... sweet Diana was cradling Mug in her arms, the little dog surprisingly well-behaved for once.

The sight of her family brought a lump to Lydia's throat. As she and Elias made their way down the aisle, she felt a pang of anxiety. What would become of her sisters now that she was leaving?

Outside the church, as guests threw rose petals and called out congratulations, Lydia

pulled her sisters aside for a moment.

"I'll write to you all the time," she promised, her voice thick with emotion. "And I'll do everything I can to help you find suitable matches. You will not be forgotten, I swear it."

Marian squeezed her hand. "We know, Lydia. Don't worry about us. Just... be happy, alright?"

Jane nodded vigorously. "Yes, and tell us all the gossip about life as a duchess!"

Diana, still holding Mug, stepped forward. "Here's your little troublemaker," she said with a watery smile. "He's been very good, haven't you, Mug?"

As Lydia took Mug into her arms, she felt a presence at her back. Elias stood there, his expression unreadable as he regarded the small dog.

"Thank you," Lydia said softly, looking up at her new husband. "For allowing me to bring him."

A ghost of a smile tugged at Elias's lips. "Well, we couldn't very well leave a member of the family behind, could we? Besides, I think Peter will quite enjoy the little... thing."

The words, so unexpected, made Lydia's heart skip a beat. Before she could respond, Elias was guiding her towards the waiting carriage, his hand a warm presence at the small of her back.

After helping her into the carriage, he settled in beside her, Mug curled up contentedly at their feet, Lydia found herself studying her new husband's profile once more. The man beside her was now her husband, yet in many ways, he remained a

mystery.

The carriage lurched into motion, carrying them away from everything Lydia had ever known and towards an uncertain future. As the church and her family faded from view, Lydia felt a curious trepidation flutter in her stomach.

"Your family seems... close," Elias said after a moment, breaking the silence.

Lydia nodded, surprised by his observation. "Yes, we are. My sisters... they mean the world to me."

"I'm sure they'll miss you," Elias replied, his tone neutral.

"As I'll miss them," Lydia said softly. Then, gathering her courage, she added, "I hope... I hope that in time, you and Peter might come to see them as family as well."

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Elias turned to look at her then, his expression unreadable. "Perhaps," he said after a long moment. "Time will tell."

They lapsed into silence once more, the only sound the rhythmic clop of horses' hooves and the occasional whine from Mug. Lydia's mind raced with all that had transpired, with all that lay ahead.

She thought of Peter, the boy she had yet to meet but who already held a place in her heart. Would he accept her? Could she be the mother he needed?

And then there was Elias himself. Her husband. The thought still seemed surreal. She snuck another glance at him, only to find him already watching her. Their eyes met, and Lydia felt a jolt of... something. Attraction? Curiosity? Fear? Perhaps all three.

"You're very quiet, eh... wife," Elias said, his deep voice breaking through her reverie. "Are you having second thoughts already?"

There was a hint of humor in his tone, but Lydia sensed a underlying tension as well. "No, Your Grace," she replied carefully. "I'm simply... contemplating the future."

"Elias," he said suddenly.

"I'm sorry?"

"When we're alone, you should call me Elias," he clarified. "We are married, after all."

Lydia nodded, a small smile tugging at her lips. "Very well... Elias."

The name felt foreign on her tongue, but not unpleasant. It was a small step, perhaps, but a significant one.

"Tell me, Lydia," Elias said after a moment, "what do you expect from this marriage?"

The question caught her off guard. She considered her answer carefully before speaking. "I expect to be a good wife to you, and a good mother to Peter. I expect to fulfill my duties as Duchess of Fyre to the best of my abilities. And I... I hope that in time, we might build a partnership based on mutual respect and understanding."

Elias nodded, seeming to mull over her words. "Those are admirable goals," he said at last. "I, in turn, will endeavor to be a good husband to you. I cannot promise you love, Lydia, but I can promise you honesty and respect."

"That's all I ask," Lydia replied softly.

As the carriage rolled on towards Fyre Manor, Lydia found herself filled with a quiet determination. This might not be the love match she had once dreamed of, but perhaps it could be something equally valuable. A partnership, a friendship even.

Elias turned to her then, his blue eyes intense as they met hers. "Are you ready?" he asked, his deep voice sending a shiver down her spine.

Lydia lifted her chin, meeting his gaze squarely. "Yes, Your Grace-- Elias," she corrected herself. "I'm ready for whatever comes next."

CHAPTER 8

Soon, the silence in the carriage grew thick and uncomfortable once more as they rolled through the countryside. Lydia found herself fidgeting with her gloves, desperately searching for something to say that wouldn't sound completely inane.

"The weather is... quite pleasant today," she ventured at last, immediately wanting to cringe at such a pedestrian observation.

"Indeed," Elias replied flatly, not looking up from the document he was perusing.

Another painful silence descended. Mug chose that moment to let out a rather undignified snore from his position at their feet.

"Your dog seems... comfortable," Elias remarked, his tone suggesting he found this less than ideal.

"Oh, yes, he's quite adaptable," Lydia said quickly, grateful for any topic of conversation. "Though he does tend to..." She was cut off by a particularly loud snort from Mug, followed by what could only be described as a canine whimper. "...dream rather actively," she finished, feeling her cheeks grow warm.

Elias's eyebrow rose slightly as he finally looked at her. "I see. And does he often make such... interesting noises?"

"Only when he's particularly content," Lydia assured him, then immediately wondered if that had been the right thing to say. "Not that he'll be sleeping in your... that is, I mean... he'll stay in my chambers, of course."

She could have sworn she saw the ghost of a smile flicker across Elias's face before he returned his attention to his papers. "One would hope so."

Desperate to change the subject, Lydia blurted out, "I look forward to meeting Peter."

You seem to think highly of him.”

This got Elias's full attention. He set down his papers, fixing her with that intense blue gaze that never failed to make her pulse quicken. "I do . Though I must warn you, he can be... challenging at times."

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"All children can be challenging," Lydia said, then hastily added, "Not that I have much experience with children, of course, except for my sisters, but they were different, being my sisters, and I wasn't really their mother figure, though I did help raise them, but that's not the same as being a proper mother, which I suppose I'll have to learn to be now, though I'm sure Peter won't make it too difficult, unless he does, in which case I'll simply have to..." She clamped her mouth shut, mortified by her rambling.

The silence that followed was excruciating. Lydia wished fervently that the ground would open up and swallow her whole.

"You needn't be nervous," Elias said after what felt like an eternity. "Peter is... adaptable. Like your dog, apparently."

Was that an attempt at humor? Lydia wasn't sure, but she offered a tentative smile anyway. "I do hope we'll get along well. Peter and I, I mean. Not Mug and Peter. Though I hope they get along too. Not that it's the most important thing, of course. The most important thing is that I be a good mother figure, which I fully intend to be, even though I'm not quite sure how to go about it yet, but I'm determined to learn, and..."

"You're rambling again," Elias observed, though his tone seemed more amused than annoyed.

"Yes, I... I do that when I'm nervous," Lydia admitted, twisting her gloves in her lap. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Elias said, surprising her. "It's... refreshing."

Before Lydia could process what that might mean, Mug let out another dramatic snore, followed by what sounded suspiciously like a tiny bark. Both of them looked down at the sleeping dog, then back at each other.

"He's usually much more dignified," Lydia said weakly.

"Somehow, I doubt that," Elias replied, but there was definitely a hint of humor in his voice now.

They lapsed into silence once more, though this time it felt slightly less uncomfortable. Lydia found herself stealing glances at her new husband, noting the strong line of his jaw, the way his hair curled slightly at his collar, the elegant way he held himself even while sitting in a moving carriage.

"Is there something on my face?" Elias asked without looking up from his papers.

Lydia startled, realizing she'd been staring. "No! No, I was just... that is... I was admiring the... the countryside. Through the window. Behind you."

"The countryside," Elias repeated slowly, "through the window that is currently covered by the curtain?"

Lydia felt her face flame. "Ah. Yes. Well. I suppose I wasn't doing that at all, was I?"

The corner of Elias's mouth twitched. "No, I suppose not. Well," he continued as the carriage slowed. "We are almost here."

He glanced at her with a shadow of a smile before opening the curtain behind him and Lydia leaned forward slightly, eager for her first glimpse of her new home. As

the imposing structure came into view, she felt her breath catch in her throat.

The manor was truly spectacular, all soaring spires and elegant stonework. Ivy climbed the weathered walls, and mullioned windows glinted like jewels in the fading light. It was both beautiful and slightly forbidding, much like its master, Lydia thought.

As the carriage drew to a halt, Elias descended first, turning to offer his hand to Lydia. She accepted his assistance, noting how easily he lifted her down, his grip firm but gentle. Mug wriggled in her other arm, eager to explore his new surroundings.

"Welcome to Fyre Manor," Elias said, his deep voice oddly formal. Was it her imagination, or did his eyes linger on her face a moment longer than necessary?

Before Lydia could respond, the great oak doors swung open, revealing a small figure hovering uncertainly in the entrance hall. Peter Blacknight was a slight boy with golden curls and his father's striking blue eyes. He stood ramrod straight, clearly trying to affect the dignified bearing expected of the heir to a dukedom, but Lydia could see the barely contained nervousness in his stance.

"Peter," Elias called, his tone attempting to be gentle. "Come meet your new mother."

The boy approached slowly, his eyes downcast. When he reached them, he executed a perfect bow. "Welcome to Fyre Manor, Your Grace."

As Lydia knelt before him, she noticed small details that tugged at her heart – the slight trembling of his lower lip, the way his small hands were clenched tightly at his sides, the careful distance he maintained even while bowing. This was a child who had learned to be wary of changes, she realized, who had perhaps been disappointed too many times before.

"Thank you, Peter," she said softly. "But please, when we're alone, I'd love it if you'd call me Lydia. And I believe I have someone here who's very eager to meet you."

She gestured to Mug, who had been watching Peter with obvious interest. To her surprise, the usually boisterous dog seemed to sense the delicacy of the moment. Instead of his typical enthusiastic greeting, he approached Peter slowly, tail wagging gently, and sat perfectly still at the boy's feet, looking up at him with soulful eyes.

Peter's eyes widened slightly, a crack appearing in his careful composure. "He's... he's very small," he observed quietly, as if afraid speaking too loudly might frighten the dog away.

"Yes," Lydia smiled. "But what he lacks in size, he makes up for in heart. Would you like to pet him? He's very gentle."

Peter glanced quickly at his father, seeking permission. Elias gave a slight nod, his face unreadable as he watched the interaction.

With trembling fingers, Peter reached out to stroke Mug's scruffy fur. The moment his hand made contact, something magical happened. Mug's entire body wiggled with joy, but he remained sitting, letting the boy pet him at his own pace. A smile broke across Peter's face, transforming his serious countenance into something bright and childlike.

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"His fur is so soft," Peter whispered, his smile growing as Mug leaned into his touch. "And warm."

"He likes you," Lydia said, watching as the tension gradually left Peter's shoulders. "He's usually much more excitable with new people. I think you must be special."

Peter's eyes lit up at this, though he tried to maintain his proper demeanor. "Really? Could I... could I perhaps play with him sometimes?"

"Of course you may," Lydia assured him. "In fact, I think Mug would be very disappointed if you didn't."

Throughout this exchange, Elias had remained silent, his expression unreadable as he watched his new wife and his son interact. Lydia caught him frowning several times, though she couldn't fathom what she might have done to displease him. Was she being too familiar with Peter? Should she have maintained more distance?

"Peter," Elias said suddenly, his voice cutting through the moment like a knife. "It's time for you to return to your room. Lady Lydia needs to rest after her journey."

The boy's face fell slightly, but he nodded obediently. "Yes, Father." He turned to Lydia, offering another small bow. "Good evening... Lydia. And thank you for letting me meet Mug."

As Peter disappeared up the grand staircase, Mug looked torn between following his new friend and staying with his mistress. Lydia smiled, gesturing for him to go. "Go on, then. Keep Peter company for a while."

The little dog needed no further encouragement, scampering after the boy with obvious delight. Lydia watched them go, her heart warming at the instant bond that had formed between them.

"Come," Elias said, offering his arm. "I'll show you to your chambers."

Lydia accepted his arm, acutely aware of his warmth even through the layers of clothing between them. They ascended the stairs in silence, moving through corridors decorated with ancestral portraits and priceless artworks. Finally, Elias stopped before a door in the east wing, well away from the master suite she knew must be in the west wing.

"These will be your rooms," he said, pushing open the door to reveal an elegant suite decorated in shades of blue and cream.

Lydia hesitated in the doorway, confusion clouding her features. "My rooms? But I thought... aren't we to share chambers?"

Elias went very still beside her. Then, in one fluid movement, he stepped closer, effectively backing her against the doorframe. His considerable height forced her to tilt her head back to meet his gaze, and she found herself trapped by the intensity in those midnight blue eyes.

"Are you so eager to fulfill your wifely duties, Lady Lydia?" he asked, his voice dropping to a low rumble that sent shivers down her spine.

Lydia felt heat flood her cheeks as she realized the implications of her question. "I... that is... I merely thought..."

"Listen carefully," Elias said, leaning even closer. His scent enveloped her – sandalwood and leather and something uniquely male. "You have no duties to fulfill

in my bed. Your only obligations are to be a mother to Peter and to accompany me to social functions when absolutely necessary. Nothing more."

Lydia could hardly breathe. He was so close she could feel the heat radiating from his body, could see the flecks of silver in his blue eyes. She knew she should be frightened – he was essentially pinning her to the wall, after all – but instead, she felt a curious excitement stirring in her belly. Her pulse quickened, and she was certain he must be able to hear her heart pounding.

"Do you understand?" Elias asked, his gaze dropping briefly to her parted lips before snapping back to her eyes.

"Yes," Lydia whispered, her voice barely audible. "I understand perfectly."

For a long moment, neither of them moved. The air between them crackled with tension, and Lydia found herself wondering what would happen if she simply leaned forward those few inches that separated them...

Then Elias stepped back abruptly, leaving her feeling oddly bereft of his warmth. Without another word, he turned on his heel and strode away, his footsteps echoing in the empty corridor.

Lydia sagged against the doorframe, her legs trembling slightly. What had just happened? And why did she feel so... disappointed that he had walked away?

Shaking her head to clear it, she entered her new chambers, closing the door firmly behind her. As she moved to the window, gazing out at the darkening grounds of her new home, she couldn't help but wonder what other surprises awaited her as the Duchess of Fyre.

CHAPTER 9

Lydia's first night at Fyre Manor settled around her like a heavy cloak. The vastness of her new chambers seemed to amplify every small sound – the tick of the mantel clock, the whisper of wind through the ancient windowpanes, the occasional creak of centuries-old timber adjusting to the night's chill.

Sarah had helped her prepare for bed with the same quiet efficiency she'd shown all day, though Lydia noticed how the maid's eyes kept darting to the shadows in the corners of the room, as if expecting something to emerge from them.

"The house... it makes strange noises at night, Your Grace," Sarah had said hesitantly when Lydia questioned her nervous glances. "You'll get used to them, in time. We all do."

Now, lying in her massive four-poster bed, Lydia understood what Sarah meant. Every sound seemed magnified in the darkness – the rustle of leaves against the window, the distant echo of footsteps in the corridor, the soft whine of Mug as he settled into his new bed beside hers.

"It's just an old house," she whispered to herself, though her words seemed to be swallowed by the darkness. "All old houses have their quirks."

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But it wasn't just the unfamiliar sounds that kept her awake. It was the weight of everything that had changed in a single day. This morning, she had woken in her childhood bed, surrounded by the comfortable chaos of her sisters' chatter. Now she lay in a stranger's bed, in a stranger's house, married to a man who was still very much a mystery to her.

Mug whined again, and Lydia reached down to scratch his ears. "At least I have you, my friend," she murmured. The little dog's presence was remarkably comforting in the vastness of her new chambers.

A particularly loud creak made her start, and she found herself wondering what Elias was doing. Was he still awake in his chambers across the manor? Did he lie awake at night, listening to these same sounds? Or had he grown so accustomed to them that he no longer noticed?

The thought of her husband brought a flush to her cheeks as she remembered their encounter outside her door. The way he had looked at her, the heat in his eyes before he'd turned away... Lydia pulled her pillow over her face, as if to hide her blush from the darkness itself.

"Stop that," she scolded herself. "This is a marriage of convenience, nothing more. The Duke made that perfectly clear."

But as she finally drifted off to sleep, her dreams were filled with midnight blue eyes and the scent of sandalwood, and the echo of a voice that made her shiver even in sleep.

She woke rather early the next morning – to a house that was far too quiet to be comfortable. With a sigh, Lydia dressed before heading out to find her husband, her new son or even any of the servants. She found the boy first – in the schoolchamber, where he sat hunched over his Latin grammar. His small face was scrunched in concentration, his golden curls falling into his eyes as he carefully formed each letter.

Lydia paused in the doorway, taking a moment to observe her new stepson. He looked so serious, so proper – far too proper for a child of ten. A woman stood nearby, her graying hair pulled back in a severe bun, watching Peter's progress with hawk-like attention.

"Good morning," Lydia said softly, not wanting to startle them.

Both heads snapped up at her voice. Peter immediately jumped to his feet, offering a small bow. "Good morning, Your Grace – I mean, Lydia," he corrected himself, a faint blush coloring his cheeks.

The woman – whom Lydia could only assume to be Miss Nancy, the governess – curtsied deeply. "Your Grace. We weren't expecting you this morning."

Lydia smiled warmly, moving further into the room. "Please, there's no need for such formality. I thought I might observe Peter's lessons, if that's acceptable?"

Miss Nancy's lips tightened almost imperceptibly. "His Grace is most particular about Master Peter's education. We follow a very strict schedule..."

"Of course," Lydia said smoothly, settling into a nearby chair. "I wouldn't dream of disrupting it. Please, carry on as if I weren't here."

Peter returned to his work, though Lydia noticed his posture was even more rigid than before. She watched as he labored over his translations, his small hand gripping the

pen so tightly his knuckles turned white.

After several minutes of tense silence, broken only by the scratch of Peter's pen, Lydia couldn't contain herself any longer. "Perhaps," she suggested gently, "we might take a short break? The weather is lovely today."

"Oh, we couldn't possibly," Miss Nancy said quickly. "His Grace insists that Master Peter complete his morning studies without interruption. Education is of paramount importance to the Duke."

Lydia glanced at Peter, noting the way his shoulders had slumped at the governess's words. "Surely a brief respite would do more good than harm? All work and no play makes for a dull mind, after all."

Peter's head lifted slightly, hope flickering across his features before being quickly suppressed. "Father says play is for common children," he said quietly. "A future duke must focus on his studies."

Something in Lydia's heart cracked at those words. She rose from her chair, moving to kneel beside Peter's chair. "Do you know what I think?" she said conspiratorially. "I think future dukes need to know how to have fun too. How else will they understand their people?"

Miss Nancy made a small sound of protest. "Your Grace, I really must object. The Duke was very clear about Master Peter's schedule."

"Then I shall take full responsibility," Lydia declared, rising to her feet. "Come along, Peter. I believe I saw some excellent climbing trees in the garden. Perfect for a pirate's lookout, wouldn't you say?"

Peter's eyes widened. "Pirates?" he whispered, as if the very word might summon his

father's disapproval.

"Oh yes," Lydia said, warming to her theme. "Fearsome pirates searching for buried treasure. And look – we even have a proper first mate!" She gestured to Mug, who had wandered in and was wagging his tail enthusiastically.

"But... but my Latin..." Peter protested weakly, though Lydia could see the excitement building in his eyes.

"Latin will still be here when we return," Lydia assured him. "Sometimes the best lessons happen outside of books. Miss Nancy, won't you join us? We could use a wise navigator."

The governess looked torn between her duty to follow the Duke's instructions and her obvious affection for her young charge. "The Duke will not be pleased," she warned.

"Let me worry about the Duke," Lydia said firmly. "Peter needs this. Please?"

After a moment's hesitation, Miss Nancy's stern expression softened. "Well... I suppose a short break couldn't hurt. But only thirty minutes!"

Peter's face lit up with joy, transforming him from a miniature adult into the child he truly was. "Really? We can really play pirates?"

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"Of course!" Lydia said, offering her hand. "Captain Peter, your ship awaits!"

They quickly made their way to the garden, Mug bouncing excitedly around their feet. Peter's initial hesitation quickly melted away as Lydia helped him transform a gnarled old oak tree into a pirate ship, with branches serving as crow's nests and lower limbs as gangplanks.

"Look out, Captain!" Lydia called dramatically. "Enemy ships approaching from the starboard bow!"

Peter, perched on a low branch, played his part with growing enthusiasm. "Quick, First Mate Mug! Sound the alarm!" The little dog barked on cue, making them all laugh.

Even Miss Nancy, initially standing stiffly to the side, was eventually drawn into their game. She proved to have a surprising talent for pirate voices, though she insisted on incorporating educational elements by teaching Peter the proper nautical terms for different parts of their "ship."

As they played, Peter gradually began to open up, sharing little snippets of his life with his father. "Father never plays," he confided during a quiet moment when they were supposedly hiding from rival pirates. "He says it's beneath our dignity."

Lydia's heart ached at the loneliness in his voice. "Perhaps he's forgotten how," she suggested gently. "Sometimes grown-ups need to be reminded that play is important too."

Peter nodded thoughtfully. "He used to smile more, I think. Before... before Mother died." He paused, then added in a rush, "I don't remember her very well. I was very small when she left."

Lydia reached out to squeeze his hand. "That must be very hard," she said softly.

"Father never talks about her," Peter continued, his voice barely above a whisper. "Sometimes I think... I think it makes him sad to look at me. Miss Nancy says I look like her."

"Oh, Peter," Lydia murmured, pulling him into a gentle hug. After a moment's hesitation, he melted into her embrace, his small arms wrapping tightly around her waist.

"I try to be good," he said into her shoulder. "I try to be what Father wants. But sometimes..."

"Sometimes you just want to be a boy," Lydia finished for him. She pulled back slightly, looking into his eyes – so like his father's, yet filled with a vulnerability Elias never showed. "Listen to me, Peter. There's nothing wrong with that. You can be both – a future duke who takes his studies seriously, and a child who enjoys playing and laughing."

Miss Nancy, who had been pretending not to listen, cleared her throat. "Your Grace... Lydia... you should know that His Grace means well. He loves the boy fiercely, in his way. He's just... he struggles to show it."

"I know he does," Peter said quietly. "But sometimes I wish..."

"What do you wish, darling?" Lydia prompted when he fell silent.

"I wish he would just tell me," Peter admitted. "Just once. That he loves me, I mean. That he's proud of me."

Lydia felt tears prick at her eyes. In that moment, she made a silent addition to her list of duties as Duchess of Fyre. Somehow, some way, she would help bridge the gap between father and son. It wouldn't be easy – Elias was nothing if not stubborn – but she would find a way.

"Well then," she said brightly, pushing aside her emotions for now, "shall we return to our adventure? I believe I spotted some suspicious-looking clouds that might be hiding treasure!"

Peter's face brightened immediately, and soon they were back to their game, with Mug playing the part of a fearless sea dog and Miss Nancy serving as their resident cartographer. The thirty minutes she had initially granted them stretched into an hour, then two, as none of them could bear to end the magical morning.

Finally, Miss Nancy insisted they return to their lessons, though her usual stern demeanor was somewhat undermined by the leaf stuck in her hair from their "jungle expedition."

As they made their way back to the library, Peter turned to Lydia, his face serious once more. "Thank you," he said softly. "This was... this was the best morning I can remember."

Lydia squeezed his shoulder gently. "Then we shall have to have more mornings like it, shan't we? Perhaps next time we'll be explorers discovering new lands, or knights on a noble quest."

Peter's eyes lit up at the possibility, though he quickly glanced at Miss Nancy. The governess sighed, but there was a fond smile playing at her lips.

"I suppose," she said with exaggerated resignation, "that we might be able to incorporate some... alternative learning methods into our schedule. In moderation, of course."

"Of course," Lydia agreed solemnly, though she winked at Peter when Miss Nancy wasn't looking.

As she watched Peter return to his studies, his face notably more relaxed than before, Lydia mentally reviewed her expanding list of duties. Be a good wife, manage the household, maintain social connections – these were all still important. But now she had added two more crucial tasks: bring joy back into Peter's life, and help heal the rift between father and son.

It wouldn't be easy, especially given Elias's stern nature and apparent aversion to anything resembling frivolity. But as she thought of Peter's bright smile and the way he had clung to her during their brief embrace, Lydia knew it would be worth any amount of effort.

Perhaps, she mused as she left the library, this was why fate had brought her to Fyre Manor. Not just to be a duchess or a wife, but to help this broken family find their way back to each other. And maybe, just maybe, in helping them heal, she might find her own place in this grand but lonely house.

With her chin lifted and a steely gaze in her eyes, Lydia headed towards her chambers to change out of her now slightly dirt-stained dress. She had a feeling she would need all her wit and determination for the challenges that lay ahead.

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But first, she needed to figure out how to explain to her husband why his son and his governess had spent the morning playing pirates in the garden.

Somehow, she suspected that conversation would require every ounce of diplomacy she possessed. But as she remembered Peter's laughter – probably the first to echo through these halls in years – she knew it had been worth it.

Let Elias frown and scowl all he liked. Some things were more important than dignity and proper behavior. And bringing happiness back to Fyre Manor was most certainly going to be one of them.

CHAPTER 10

Elias sat at his massive mahogany desk, staring unseeing at the papers before him. Try as he might, he couldn't focus on the estate accounts. His mind kept wandering to his new wife.

Lydia. Even her name was distracting. He'd caught himself writing it in the margins of his correspondence twice already this morning, like some lovesick schoolboy. Irritated with himself, he scratched out the offending letters with perhaps more force than necessary.

It had been three days since their wedding, and Elias found himself increasingly aware of her presence in his home. Little things kept drawing his attention – the sound of her footsteps in the corridor, the faint scent of lavender that lingered in rooms she'd occupied, the way the servants seemed to stand straighter when she passed by.

And then there was the way she looked at him, those green eyes full of questions he didn't dare answer. The memory of their encounter outside her chambers still haunted him. The softness of her skin, the slight catch in her breath when he'd moved closer, the way her lips had parted...

Elias shook his head sharply, forcing his attention back to the ledger. This wouldn't do at all. He was the Duke of Fyre, not some romantic hero from one of those ridiculous novels his sister was always reading. He had responsibilities, duties, a reputation to maintain.

A sharp knock at his study door interrupted Elias's brooding. Without waiting for a response, Nicholas Grant strode in, looking entirely too cheerful for so early in the morning.

"Well," Nicholas said, dropping into the chair across from Elias's desk with his usual lack of ceremony. "How's married life treating you, old friend?"

Elias scowled at the interruption. "Don't you have your own estate to manage?"

"Oh, certainly," Nicholas agreed amiably. "But I couldn't resist checking in on you. Especially after hearing some rather interesting rumors about changes at Fyre Manor."

"Changes?" Elias's voice held a warning note.

"Apparently, your new duchess is quite... spirited. She and your son seem to be playing in the gardens. Playing, Elias. When was the last time Peter did anything of the sort?"

Elias's jaw tightened. "The boy needs discipline and education, not frivolous entertainments."

"The boy needs to be a boy," Nicholas countered. "Even you must see that."

"What I see," Elias said coldly, "is that my wife appears determined to upend the routine I've carefully established."

Nicholas raised an eyebrow. "And is that necessarily a bad thing? This house hasn't exactly been overflowing with joy these past years."

"Joy is hardly the point," Elias muttered, though something in his chest tightened uncomfortably. "There are expectations to maintain, standards to uphold."

"Ah yes, the mighty standards of the Duke of Fyre," Nicholas said dryly. "Heaven forbid anyone actually smile within these hallowed walls."

"If you've come merely to mock me?—"

"Not mock, my friend. Observe. With great interest, I might add. You're... different since she arrived."

Elias frowned. "Different how?"

"Less rigid, perhaps. More alive. I've even caught you almost smiling once or twice."

"Nonsense," Elias dismissed, though he found himself unable to meet his friend's knowing gaze.

"Is it? Tell me, what do you think of her?"

The question caught Elias off guard. What did he think of Lydia? She was... unsettling. Unpredictable. Everything he hadn't wanted in a duchess. And yet...

"She's... adequate," he said finally. "She seems to get along well with Peter, at least."

Nicholas snorted. "Adequate? That's all you have to say about the woman who's managed to bring more life to this mausoleum in three days than it's seen in years?"

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"She's also stubborn, impulsive, and entirely too informal," Elias added irritably. "That ridiculous dog of hers had my butler in fits yesterday, racing through the halls with Peter's cravat in its mouth."

"Ah yes, the infamous Mug," Nicholas grinned. "I heard about that. The staff says Peter actually laughed."

Something in Elias's chest twisted at that. When was the last time he'd heard his son laugh?

"The point is," Nicholas continued more seriously, "she's making changes. Good changes, from what I can see. Would it kill you to unbend a little? To let some light into this tomb you call a home?"

"I didn't marry her to make changes," Elias said stiffly. "I married her to provide Peter with a mother figure and to manage the household."

"And is she not doing both? Just perhaps not exactly as you expected?"

"Were you here to scold me, or are you here for business?" Elias bit out and Nicholas sighed. "I brought you some documents. I shall take my leave soon... but be careful to not ruin more than your own happiness with this bitterness, my dear friend."

Before Elias could respond, Nicholas left. He may have gotten quite stuck in a daze – but then laughter drifted in through the window – bright, joyous laughter that made him start. Elias frowned. Laughter was not a common sound at Fyre Manor – he preferred a quiet, orderly household. Another peal of merriment rang out, followed by

what sounded suspiciously like barking.

With an irritated sigh, Elias rose from his desk and strode to the window. What he saw made him freeze in his tracks.

There, in the carefully manicured garden, was his son – his perfectly proper, always dignified son – rolling in the grass with that ridiculous dog. Peter's golden curls were wild, his fine clothes smeared with dirt, and his face... his face was transformed by pure joy.

Lydia stood nearby, her own hair escaping its pins as she acted out what appeared to be a sword fight with an invisible opponent. Her cheeks were flushed with exertion, her green eyes sparkling with mischief as she called out encouragement to Peter.

"Quick, Sir Peter! The dragon approaches! Defend your loyal knight, Sir Mug!"

Peter's laughter – when was the last time Elias had heard his son truly laugh? – rang out again as he jumped to his feet. "Fear not, fair lady! Sir Mug and I shall protect you!"

The little dog barked enthusiastically, running circles around them both while Lydia pretended to swoon in distress. Even Miss Nancy, whom Elias had always considered a paragon of proper behavior, was smiling as she watched from a nearby bench.

Elias felt something strange stir in his chest as he watched them play. Peter looked so... young. So carefree. So unlike the solemn little adult he usually pretended to be. And Lydia...

His breath caught as she spun in a circle, her skirts swirling around her legs, her face lifted to the sun. She was beautiful – wildly, vibrantly beautiful in a way that made his fingers itch to reach out and touch her.

But then his eyes fell on Peter's dirt-stained clothing, and propriety reasserted itself. This wouldn't do at all. They had standards to maintain. What if someone were to visit and see the heir to the dukedom behaving like a common street urchin?

Before he could think better of it, Elias found himself striding out to the garden. As he approached, Peter spotted him first. The boy's laughter died immediately as he scrambled to his feet, attempting to brush the grass from his clothes.

"Father! I... we were just..."

"Slaying dragons, apparently," Elias said dryly, noting how his son's shoulders hunched at his tone.

Lydia turned to face him, and Elias felt his breath catch again at the sight of her. Her hair was coming down in wild curls around her face, her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes... her eyes were challenging him to say something disapproving.

"Your Grace," she said, dropping into an elegant curtsy that somehow managed to seem both perfectly proper and slightly mocking. "Would you care to join our adventure? We could use another knight in our quest."

For a moment – just a moment – Elias was tempted. He remembered playing such games as a child, before his father had beaten all such frivolity out of him. He could almost feel the sun on his face, the grass under his feet, the simple joy of pretending...

But no. He was the Duke of Fyre. He had responsibilities, expectations to uphold.

"I think not," he said stiffly. "Peter, you should change before dinner. Your clothing is quite unsuitable."

The light dimmed in Peter's eyes, and he nodded sullenly. "Yes, Father."

"Oh, but we haven't finished our quest!" Lydia protested. "Surely the young knight can't abandon his post in the middle of battle? What would become of the kingdom?"

Elias found himself caught between amusement and annoyance at her obvious manipulation. "The kingdom, madam, will survive without Sir Peter's protection for one afternoon. The proper appearance of the future Duke of Fyre, however, is not negotiable."

"And what of his happiness?" Lydia asked quietly, her eyes meeting his with an intensity that made him want to look away. "Is that negotiable?"

The question struck him like a physical blow. Elias opened his mouth to deliver a sharp retort, but the words died in his throat as he caught sight of Peter's face. His son was watching the exchange with a wide-eyed look that made something in Elias's chest ache.

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"Perhaps..." he found himself saying, much to his own surprise, "perhaps Sir Peter might be permitted to finish his current quest before changing. Provided it doesn't take too long."

The smile that blazed across Peter's face was like sunshine breaking through clouds. "Really, Father? You mean it?"

Elias nodded stiffly, telling himself he wasn't affected by his son's obvious joy. "Fifteen minutes," he said firmly. "No more."

"Thank you, Father!" Peter exclaimed, then caught himself and attempted to assume a more dignified expression. "I mean... thank you, Your Grace."

Lydia's eyes were dancing with triumph as she turned back to Peter. "Well then, Sir Peter, shall we vanquish this dragon once and for all?"

As the "battle" resumed, Elias found himself rooted to the spot, unable to tear himself away from the scene before him. Peter's laughter rang out again, pure and uninhibited, and Elias felt that strange ache in his chest intensify.

He should return to his study, to his accounts and his responsibilities. But somehow, he couldn't quite make himself leave. Instead, he found himself sinking onto the bench beside Miss Nancy, who was watching the proceedings with poorly concealed amusement.

"She's good for him," the governess said quietly, not looking at Elias. "I haven't seen him this happy in years."

Elias grunted noncommittally, but he couldn't deny the truth of her words. Something had changed in Peter over the past few days. He seemed... lighter somehow. More like the child he should be, rather than the miniature adult Elias had tried to mold him into.

And it was all because of Lydia. His wife, who had swept into their lives like a summer storm, disrupting everything in her path. She was nothing like what he'd expected – not the meek, proper duchess he'd thought he wanted. Instead, she was... vibrant. Challenging. Alive in a way that made him feel oddly awakened himself.

As if sensing his thoughts, Lydia glanced over at him. Their eyes met across the garden, and Elias felt that now-familiar jolt of awareness. She smiled – a real smile, warm and inviting – and for a moment, he almost smiled back.

Then he caught himself, remembering who he was, what was expected of him. Rising abruptly, he nodded to Miss Nancy. "Fifteen minutes," he reminded her. "Then Peter must change for dinner."

As he strode back to his study, Elias could still hear the sounds of laughter and play behind him. His fingers itched to loosen his cravat, to run through the grass, to join in their game. But such things were not for the Duke of Fyre.

Still, as he settled back at his desk, he found himself positioning his chair so he could see the garden from where he sat. Just to ensure they didn't exceed their allotted time, he told himself. Not because he enjoyed watching his son's face light up with joy, or the way Lydia's skirts swirled as she danced around the garden, or the way the sunlight caught the auburn highlights in her dark hair...

Elias forced his attention back to his ledgers, but the numbers seemed to swim before his eyes. In the garden, Peter was demonstrating his swordsmanship with a stick, while Lydia applauded enthusiastically. That ridiculous dog – Mug, he reminded

himself – pranced around them both, adding his barks to the general chaos.

It was noisy, undignified, and completely contrary to everything Elias had tried to establish in his household. And yet... and yet he couldn't quite bring himself to put a stop to it.

Perhaps, he thought grudgingly, a little noise wasn't such a terrible thing after all. But only for fifteen minutes. And only because it seemed to make Peter so happy.

It had nothing at all to do with the way Lydia's eyes sparkled when she smiled, or how her laughter seemed to warm something cold and lonely inside him. Nothing at all.

CHAPTER 11

Elias descended the grand staircase with measured steps, his mind preoccupied with estate matters. The afternoon post had brought concerning news about one of his northern properties, and he was already composing a strongly-worded letter in his head when the sound of approaching voices caught his attention.

"And then the pirate king said..." Peter's excited voice drifted in from the garden entrance, followed by a peal of childish laughter that made Elias pause mid-step. The sound was so foreign in these halls that for a moment, he didn't recognize it as coming from his own son.

"Oh, but what did the first mate say to that?" Lydia's voice responded, warm with amusement. "Surely Mug had something to add to the conversation?"

As if on cue, an enthusiastic bark echoed through the entrance hall, followed by the distinctive sound of muddy paws on marble floors. Elias's jaw tightened. Mrs. Winters would have fits about the mess.

"First Mate Mug says we should check the treasure map again," Peter declared with authority, though his voice began to fade as he apparently caught sight of his father's approaching figure.

Elias rounded the corner just as they were entering through the garden door. The scene before him was one of complete disorder: Peter's usually immaculate clothing was covered in grass stains and what appeared to be mud, his golden curls were wild and untamed, and that infernal dog was prancing about with what looked suspiciously like one of the gardener's gloves in its mouth.

But it was the look on Peter's face that struck Elias the hardest – the way his son's bright smile instantly vanished, replaced by that too-familiar mask of anxious formality. The transformation was like watching a candle being snuffed out.

"Father," Peter said, his voice small as he attempted to brush some of the grass from his jacket. "I was just... that is, we were..."

"Exploring the high seas," Lydia finished for him, placing a protective hand on Peter's shoulder. Despite her own disheveled appearance – her hair falling from its pins, her hem distinctly muddy – she met Elias's stern gaze with remarkable composure. "Though I believe we've successfully avoided any sea monsters today."

"Sea monsters," Elias repeated flatly, noting how Peter seemed to shrink further into himself with each passing second. The sight made something twist uncomfortably in his chest. When had his presence become something his son dreaded?

Mug chose that moment to drop the sodden glove at Elias's feet, apparently offering it as some sort of peace offering. The dog's tail wagged hopefully as he looked up at the Duke with what could only be described as canine optimism.

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"Your Grace," Miss Nancy's voice came from behind the group, slightly breathless as she finally caught up. "I tried to suggest a more... sedate activity, but?—"

"But I insisted," Lydia interrupted smoothly. "The weather was simply too perfect to waste indoors. The responsibility is entirely mine."

Elias found his gaze drawn to his wife despite himself. There was a smudge of dirt on her cheek, and a leaf had somehow become tangled in her dark curls. She looked utterly unlike a proper duchess – and yet, something about the way she stood there, chin lifted defiantly as she shielded his son from censure, made his heart beat faster.

Which only served to irritate him further.

"I would have thought," he said coldly, "that as Duchess of Fyre, you would show more concern for the proper appearance of your stepson. He looks like a?—"

"Like a boy who has been enjoying his childhood," Lydia cut in, her green eyes flashing. "Which is exactly what he is, Your Grace, despite your best efforts to make him forget it."

The silence that followed her words was deafening. Peter's eyes darted between his father and stepmother, his small hands twisting anxiously in his ruined jacket.

"Miss Nancy," Elias said finally, his voice clipped. "Please escort my son to his chambers to change before dinner."

"Yes, Your Grace," the governess said quickly, clearly relieved to be removing Peter

from the brewing storm. "Come along, Master Peter."= Let's get you cleaned up before dinner."

Peter cast one last worried glance between his father and stepmother before allowing himself to be led away. Mug, showing surprising wisdom for such a scruffy creature, followed them up the stairs.

Once they were alone, Lydia turned the full force of her indignation on Elias. "How dare you suggest I'm a bad influence? All I've done is show that boy a moment of joy – something that seems to be in remarkably short supply in this mausoleum you call a home!"

"Watch your tone," Elias warned, taking a step closer. "You forget yourself, madam."

"No, Your Grace, you forget that Peter is a child!" Lydia shot back, refusing to be intimidated by his proximity. "A child who needs time to play, to laugh, to simply be young. Why does that frighten you so much?"

"It does not frighten me," Elias growled, closing the distance between them even further. "I simply understand, better than you ever could, the weight of responsibility that comes with our position in society."

"He's ten years old!" Lydia exclaimed, standing her ground despite the way her pulse quickened at his nearness. "The weight of responsibility will come soon enough. For now, all I'm asking is one hour a day – one single hour where he can set aside his lessons and simply play."

Elias found himself caught by the passion in her eyes, the slight flush of her cheeks, the way her chest rose and fell with rapid breaths. She was magnificent in her anger, he realized with a jolt. Like a goddess of justice, defending the right of children to be children.

"One hour?" he repeated, his voice rougher than he'd intended.

"Yes," Lydia said firmly. "One hour each day where he doesn't have to be the future Duke of Fyre. Where he can just be Peter." Her expression softened slightly as she added, "Surely you remember what it was like to be young? To want to run and play and imagine?"

The question struck uncomfortably close to home. Elias did remember – remembered all too well the harsh lessons his own father had used to drive such childish impulses from him. He'd sworn to be different with Peter, hadn't he? And yet...

"Please," Lydia said softly, and something in her tone made him look down at her. Her eyes were wide and earnest, her lips slightly parted as she gazed up at him. "Just one hour. That's all I ask."

Elias became acutely aware of how close they were standing. If he leaned down just slightly, he could capture those tempting lips with his own, could taste the passion that made her eyes spark so brilliantly...

He took a hasty step backward, alarmed by the direction of his thoughts. "Very well," he said gruffly. "One hour per day. But he must complete all his other lessons first, and his clothing must be protected during these... activities."

The smile that blazed across Lydia's face was like sunrise breaking over the horizon. "Thank you, Elias," she said warmly, using his given name for the first time since their wedding night.

The sound of his name on her lips sent a shiver down his spine. Without another word, he turned and strode away, his footsteps echoing in the vast hall. He needed distance – from her smile, from her warmth, from the dangerous way she made him want things he had no business wanting.

Behind him, he heard a small sound of triumph, and he could picture her celebration perfectly – the way her eyes would be dancing, the slight bounce she probably couldn't quite suppress. Despite himself, he felt the corner of his mouth twitch upward.

One hour per day. What harm could it do? And if it meant seeing Peter smile more often – seeing Lydia smile more often – well, that was merely an incidental benefit. Nothing more.

Elias walked quickly through the corridors of Fyre Manor, his thoughts in turmoil. The memory of Lydia's defiant eyes and flushed cheeks haunted him, along with that maddening scent of lavender that seemed to linger wherever she went.

He was so distracted that he almost missed the voices drifting from the small sitting room near Peter's chambers. But his son's quiet words made him pause mid-stride.

"Miss Nancy?" Peter's voice was hesitant, thoughtful. "What... what is it supposed to feel like? Having a mother, I mean."

Elias found himself frozen in place, just out of sight of the partially open door. He knew he should walk away, that eavesdropping was beneath his dignity, but something kept him rooted to the spot.

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"Well," Nancy's voice was gentle, carefully considering her response. "I suppose it's different for everyone. Why do you ask?"

There was a pause, and Elias could picture his son fidgeting with his sleeve buttons as he often did when nervous. "It's just... Lydia is different from what I expected. When Father said he was bringing home a new duchess, I thought..."

"What did you think, dear?"

"I thought she'd be like the mean stepmothers we read about in those books... And that she'd just yell and fight all the time." Peter's voice took on a higher pitch, mimicking the society matrons who occasionally graced their halls. "But Lydia... she plays with me. She listens when I talk about my drawings. And she doesn't mind when Mug gets mud on her dress."

Nancy chuckled softly. "No, she certainly doesn't seem to mind a bit of mess, does she?"

"Today when we were playing pirates," Peter continued, his voice growing animated, "she helped me make up a whole story about treasure maps and sea monsters. And when I said I didn't know how to sword fight, she used a stick to teach me! Can you imagine? A duchess, playing with sticks!"

The pure joy in his son's voice made Elias's chest ache. When was the last time he'd heard Peter speak with such enthusiasm?

"And... and when Father came home," Peter's voice dropped lower, "she didn't let me

get in trouble. She stood up for me. Like... like a real mother would. Wouldn't she?"

There was a long pause before Nancy responded. "Yes, dear. That's exactly what a real mother would do."

"I wish..." Peter started, then stopped himself.

"What do you wish, Master Peter?"

"I wish Father could come play with us . Playing and laughing and just... being happy. Lydia makes it seem so easy. But whenever Father appears, everything has to be proper and perfect and... and I don't want to disappoint him."

Elias felt as though someone had struck him in the chest. He leaned against the wall, his son's words echoing in his mind.

"Oh, I just know the Duke loves you very much," Nancy said softly. "He just... shows it differently."

"I know," Peter sighed. "But sometimes I wish he could show it more like Lydia does. She hugs me and smiles at me and doesn't mind if my cravat is crooked. And when she looks at me, I don't feel like... like I'm doing everything wrong."

Unable to listen anymore, Elias turned and walked silently away, his son's words haunting his steps. When he finally reached his study, Elias closed the door firmly behind him and dropped into his chair. He could still smell the faint trace of lavender that clung to her, could still see the fire in her eyes as she defended his son's right to play.

His son. Something did not sit quite right with him when he thought of the way the boy looked at him—at times it seemed also as though he were scared, hesitant. At

times, their relationship resembled the tumultuous one he'd had with his own father and now...

It was Lydia, of course, who brought on these ridiculous feelings. He'd never before been bothered by the fact that he had to put duty first.

With an irritated grunt, he pushed away from his desk. Perhaps a ride would clear his head. Anything to escape the maddening presence of his new wife and the equally maddening effect she seemed to have on him.

As he strode towards the stables, he caught sight of Peter emerging from his room in fresh clothes, his hair neatly combed once more. But there was something different about the boy's bearing – a lightness that hadn't been there before, a hint of that earlier joy that hadn't been completely suppressed.

And perhaps, Elias admitted to himself, that made the grass stains and the noise and the disruption to his perfectly ordered household worth it after all.

Not that he would ever tell Lydia that, of course. She was quite satisfied enough with her victory – no need to encourage further disruptions to his carefully maintained dignity.

Though a small voice in the back of his mind suggested that perhaps a little disruption wasn't such a terrible thing after all.

CHAPTER 12

Afew mornings later, Lydia was arranging flowers in the drawing room when Elias found her. She heard his measured footsteps approaching and felt a strange, unfamiliar flutter in her stomach that she steadfastly refused to examine too closely.

"Your Grace," she said, not turning around as she adjusted a particularly stubborn rose. "I trust you slept well?"

"Well enough," Elias replied, his deep voice sending an involuntary shiver down her spine. "I've come to inform you that I must leave for Yorkshire tomorrow. There are matters at one of the northern estates that require my personal attention."

Now Lydia did turn, surprised by the slight note of... was that reluctance in his voice? But his face was as impassive as ever, those striking blue eyes revealing nothing.

"I see," she said carefully. "How long will you be gone?"

"A fortnight, perhaps longer." He paused, seeming to choose his next words with unusual care. "I trust you will... continue Peter's education in my absence?"

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Lydia couldn't quite suppress her smile. "You mean will I allow him his hour of play each day? Yes, Your Grace, I shall ensure he both studies and enjoys himself in appropriate measure."

Something that might have been amusement flickered in Elias's eyes. "See that you do. And try to keep that mongrel of yours from completely destroying my gardens."

"Mug is a gentleman of refined tastes," Lydia protested, her eyes dancing. "He merely appreciates the finer points of landscape decoration."

"Is that what we're calling digging holes now?" Elias's voice was dry, but Lydia could have sworn she saw the corner of his mouth twitch.

Before she could respond, Peter appeared in the doorway, Mug trotting faithfully at his heels. "Father! Are you really leaving tomorrow?"

The boy's face fell as Elias nodded, and Lydia's heart ached at the careful way Peter tried to hide his disappointment.

"It's necessary," Elias said stiffly. "The estate..."

"Requires your attention, yes, I know," Peter finished, his small shoulders slumping slightly. "Will you... will you at least come see my new drawings before you go?"

Something shifted in Elias's expression – so subtle Lydia might have missed it if she hadn't been watching him so closely. "I suppose I could spare a few minutes," he said, his voice strained with an attempt to be gentle.

Peter's face lit up, and he grabbed his father's hand without thinking. Elias looked startled by the contact but didn't pull away as his son dragged him toward the schoolroom.

Lydia watched them go, her heart doing strange things in her chest. These glimpses of the man beneath the Duke's stern facade were becoming more frequent, and they were... unsettling. Much like the way she found herself missing his presence at dinner, or the way her eyes sought him out whenever he entered a room.

"This won't do at all," she muttered to herself, turning back to her flowers with perhaps more force than necessary. She was not some silly girl with a tendre for her husband. This was a marriage of convenience, nothing more.

Still, as she watched him ride away the next morning, his tall figure cutting an impressive silhouette against the dawn sky, she couldn't quite ignore the hollow feeling in her chest.

"Well," she said briskly to herself, "no use moping about. There's work to be done."

And indeed there was. Lydia had been making mental notes about the manor since her arrival – the heavy draperies that blocked out nearly all natural light, the somber color scheme that made every room feel like a mausoleum, the general air of neglect that clung to certain areas of the house.

"Mrs. Winters," she called, catching sight of the housekeeper. "Might I have a word?"

The older woman approached with obvious trepidation. "Yes, Your Grace?"

"I've been thinking about making some changes to the morning room and perhaps the small library. Nothing drastic," she added quickly, seeing the alarm in Mrs. Winters's face. "Just some lighter fabrics, perhaps some new furniture arrangements..."

"Oh, Your Grace," Mrs. Winters wrung her hands anxiously. "His Grace is very particular about changes to the manor. Perhaps we should wait for his return?"

"Nonsense," Lydia said firmly. "I am the Duchess of Fyre, and it is my duty to manage the household. Surely some fresh curtains and a bit of rearranging can't hurt?"

Over the next few days, Lydia threw herself into the renovations. She replaced the heavy velvet drapes with lighter silk ones that let in streams of sunlight. The dark furniture was rearranged and interspersed with lighter pieces she discovered in storage. Fresh flowers appeared in crystal vases, and new cushions in soft blues and greens added touches of color.

It was while she was exploring the manor's stored furnishings in a dusty attic room, that Lydia discovered a collection of paintings wrapped in protective cloth. As she unwrapped one particularly large canvas, she felt her breath catch. The portrait revealed a striking woman with delicate features, dressed in the finest silks. The late duchess, Lydia realized with a start.

She stood there for a long moment, studying the painted face. There was something both fascinating and unsettling about finally seeing the woman who had come before her. What had she been like? What mark had she left on this grand house and its inhabitants?

"Lydia?" Peter's voice broke through her reverie. "What are you looking at?"

She turned to find him watching her curiously, his head tilted to one side in a gesture that reminded her so much of his father it made her heart squeeze.

"I found some paintings," she said, carefully keeping her voice light. "Would you like to help me choose some to brighten up the morning room?"

Peter nodded eagerly, and soon they were sorting through the wrapped canvases together, exclaiming over landscapes and still lifes. If Peter recognized the woman in the portrait, he gave no sign, and Lydia didn't ask.

"This one," Peter declared, holding up a cheerful scene of the manor's gardens in full bloom. "It makes me think of our adventures with Mug."

Lydia smiled, pushing aside her earlier disquiet. "Perfect choice, darling. And look – here's one of the sea. Perfect for our pirate games, don't you think?"

They spent the afternoon arranging the paintings, and if Lydia quietly had the portrait of the late duchess hung in a lesser-used parlor, well, that was her prerogative as the current Duchess of Fyre.

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"The rooms look wonderful," Miss Nancy commented later, finding Lydia adjusting a vase of fresh roses. "Though I must admit, I worried about such dramatic changes."

"They're hardly dramatic," Lydia protested. "Just a bit of light and color. Besides," she added with a small smile, "what's the worst that could happen?"

"His Grace might actually smile when he returns," Miss Nancy said dryly, causing Lydia to laugh despite herself.

"Now that would be dramatic indeed," she agreed, trying to ignore the way her heart fluttered at the thought of Elias's return.

The days began to develop a pleasant rhythm. Mornings were spent with Peter at his lessons, afternoons devoted to their promised hour of play (which sometimes stretched to two when Miss Nancy wasn't watching too closely), and evenings occupied with household management and correspondence.

Yet Lydia couldn't help but notice how often her thoughts strayed to Elias. She found herself wondering what he would think of the changes she'd made, if he would notice the way Peter seemed to stand taller in the brighter rooms, if he would appreciate the fresh flowers she'd taken to placing in his study.

"You're being ridiculous," she told herself firmly one evening as she prepared for bed. "He's only been gone a week. There's no reason to miss him."

But miss him she did, with an intensity that both surprised and alarmed her. She missed his commanding presence, his dry observations, even his occasional scowls

when Mug got too exuberant in the gardens. The manor felt emptier without his measured footsteps in the corridors, quieter without his deep voice carrying from his study.

"This wasn't supposed to happen," she whispered to herself as she lay in bed, listening to the unfamiliar creaks and groans of the old house. She wasn't supposed to miss him. She wasn't supposed to care whether he smiled or frowned at her changes. She certainly wasn't supposed to feel this strange ache in her chest when she thought of him.

This was a marriage of convenience, after all. Nothing more.

CHAPTER 13

It was strange, Lydia thought as she sat at her desk in the morning room, reviewing household accounts. Her head snapped up when a familiar scratching at the door caught her attention.

"Come in, Mug," she called, smiling as the little dog trotted in, followed by a slightly disheveled Peter. "And good morning to you too, darling. You're up early."

"I couldn't sleep," Peter admitted, dropping into a nearby chair. "I was thinking about the story you were telling me yesterday, about the knight and the dragon. Does the knight really manage to befriend the dragon in the end?"

"Well," Lydia said, setting aside her ledgers, "that rather depends on whether the knight is clever enough to realize that not all dragons need to be slain. Sometimes the fiercest creatures simply need to be understood."

Peter's brow furrowed in thought. "Like how everyone was afraid of Mug at first because he barked so much, but really he just wanted to make friends?"

"Exactly like that," Lydia agreed, watching as the dog in question curled up contentedly at Peter's feet. "Speaking of friends, I noticed you've been spending quite a bit of time with young Thomas from the village. The gardener's son?"

A flush crept up Peter's neck. "He's been teaching me about the different plants in the kitchen garden. Did you know that some flowers are actually edible? And that certain herbs can help when you're feeling ill?"

"Is that so?" Lydia said, hiding a smile at his enthusiasm. "Perhaps we should ask Mrs. Winters if we might start a small herb garden of our own. Something you could tend to during your free hour?"

Peter's eyes lit up. "Could we really? Father wouldn't mind?"

"I don't see why he would object to his son learning about useful plants," Lydia said carefully. "Especially since such knowledge could be valuable for managing the estate one day."

"You're very clever," Peter observed, giving her a knowing look. "You always know just how to explain things so Father won't disapprove."

Lydia felt her cheeks warm. "I simply try to see all sides of a situation. Now, shall we go down to breakfast? I believe Cook mentioned something about raspberry preserves this morning."

As they made their way to the breakfast room, Peter chattered hesitantly about his plans for the herb garden. Lydia could not help but smile as he spoke, her eyes finding his. He was eager and caring – and with his father gone, it seemed, the boy was far more open. For the first time, he spoke without being spoken to and though his voice was still soft and hesitant, she could see a twinkle in his eye that she had not noticed before.

"Your Grace," Mrs. Winters approached as they finished their meal. "The new linens have arrived from London. Would you like to inspect them?"

"Yes, thank you," Lydia said, rising from the table. "Peter, why don't you go start your lessons? I'll join you later for our history discussion."

But Peter had already jumped up, eyes bright with interest. "Could I help? I promise I won't get in the way. I just want to see how everything works."

Lydia exchanged glances with Mrs. Winters, who gave a small nod. "Very well," she agreed. "A future duke should understand all aspects of household management, shouldn't he?"

They spent the next hour examining fine linens and discussing thread counts, with Peter asking surprisingly astute questions about cost and durability. Mrs. Winters, initially hesitant about having a child involved in such matters, gradually warmed to his genuine interest.

"You have quite an eye for quality, Master Peter," she praised when he correctly identified the finest set of sheets. "Your father will be pleased to know you're taking an interest in household matters."

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Peter beamed at the compliment, then turned to Lydia with a slightly mischievous grin. "Does this count as a lesson? Since I'm learning important things about managing the estate?"

"Nice try," Lydia laughed, ruffling his hair. "But I believe Miss Nancy is still expecting you for mathematics this morning."

Later, after lessons were complete and their daily hour of play had been spent building an elaborate fort in the library (with strict rules about treating the books with respect), Lydia found herself sitting with Peter in the garden while he sketched the flowerbeds.

"Lydia?" he asked, not looking up from his drawing. "Are you happy here? At Fyre Manor, I mean?"

The question caught her off guard. "Of course I am. Why do you ask?"

Peter shrugged, adding careful details to a rose. "It's just... it can be quite gloomy sometimes. And Father can be... well, Father. But you've made everything brighter somehow. Not just the rooms, but... everything."

Lydia felt her throat tighten with emotion. "Oh, darling. You've made everything brighter for me too, you know."

"Really?" He looked up at her then, hope shining in his eyes.

"Really," she assured him. "You and your father and even this grand old house –

you've all become very dear to me."

"Even Father?" Peter asked innocently, though there was a knowing gleam in his eye that made him look remarkably like his father.

"Yes, even your father," Lydia admitted, feeling her cheeks warm. "When he's not being unnecessarily stern about Mug's gardening habits."

Peter giggled, then grew serious. "I'm glad you came here," he said softly. "Even if it was just because Father needed a duchess."

"Oh, Peter," Lydia pulled him close, pressing a kiss to his curls. "I'm glad I came too. So very glad."

They sat in comfortable silence for a while, Peter drawing while Lydia worked on her embroidery. Mug chased butterflies through the garden, occasionally bringing them interesting leaves or sticks he'd discovered.

"Do you think Father misses us?" Peter asked suddenly. "Even a little?"

"Of course," Lydia said automatically, though a thin frown appeared between her brows. In all truth, she had not thought much of her husband since he's been gone – much less of whether he missed them.

She was certain that he did not miss her – or notice her absence from him – in the slightest.

But surely, she told herself, he had to miss his son?

"I know he misses you," she insisted now, though Peter looked at her quite doubtfully. She leaned forward and tapped her index finger against his nose. "He

must miss you! After all, I would!"

"I don't think he does," Peter said simply. "But I'd miss you if you were gone."

Lydia didn't know quite how to respond to that, so she simply hugged Peter closer and turned her face to the warm summer sun. Together, they watched Mug chase another butterfly, their laughter echoing through the gardens of Fyre Manor.

The house, she realized, no longer felt like a strange place she was trying to fit into. Somewhere along the way, it had become home. Her eyes found Peter again – his face scrunched up in thought, and her heart ached for the boy.

"Peter," she said softly, her voice gently. "What do you say we play another game?"

Just like that, his face lit up and Lydia flashed him a true smile. At least one person at Fyre Manor wanted her there, she could not help but think – a rather melancholic thought, but one that faded when Peter's face broke open into a smile.

CHAPTER 14

"And then the pirate queen discovered that the treasure wasn't gold at all," Lydia said, watching Peter's face light up with anticipation, "but something far more precious..."

"What was it?" Peter leaned forward in his seat by the library window, completely absorbed in the tale. Even Mug had stopped chasing dust motes to listen, his head tilted to one side.

"Books!" Lydia declared dramatically. "An entire library of ancient knowledge, preserved in a magical cave beneath the waves."

Peter's eyes widened. "Like Father's library?"

"Similar, though perhaps with fewer treatises on proper estate management," Lydia teased, reaching out to ruffle his curls. The afternoon sun streamed through the newly lightened curtains, catching the golden highlights in Peter's hair and making him look, for a moment, like a fairy-tale prince.

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Their quiet moment was interrupted by the sudden sound of hooves on gravel. Peter jumped up so quickly he nearly knocked over his chair, rushing to the window. "Lydia! There are riders coming up the drive! Do you think...?"

Lydia joined him at the window, her heart doing a peculiar flutter as she recognized the tall figure leading the group. "Yes, darling. Your father's home."

Peter's face lit up with joy, though Lydia noticed how quickly he tried to school his features into something more dignified. "Should we go down to greet him? Or would that be too... improper?"

The hesitation in his voice made Lydia's heart ache. "I think," she said carefully, "that any father would be delighted to be greeted by his son after a long journey."

But before they could reach the door, Mrs. Winters came hurrying in, her face pinched with worry. "Your Grace... perhaps you and Master Peter might wish to wait in your chambers? His Grace seems... somewhat out of sorts."

Lydia was about to protest when she heard it - Elias's voice, deeper and harsher than usual, demanding Mrs. Winters's presence in the morning room. Peter's face fell, and he took an instinctive step closer to Lydia.

"It's alright," she assured him, though her own stomach was twisting with apprehension. "Why don't you go up to the schoolroom and work on that surprise drawing you were planning? I'm sure your father will want to see it once he's settled."

Peter nodded, his earlier excitement dimmed but not entirely extinguished. "Will you

come find me? After...?"

"Of course, darling." She pressed a kiss to his forehead, then watched as he and Mug headed up the stairs, the little dog staying closer to his young master than usual, as if sensing his anxiety.

Lydia took a deep breath, smoothing down her skirts and squaring her shoulders. She had known this confrontation was coming from the moment she'd decided to make changes to the manor. Best to face it head-on.

She had barely reached her chambers when she heard his footsteps - those measured, commanding steps she'd found herself missing over the past fortnight. But there was nothing measured about the way he burst into her sitting room, his face dark with fury.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded without preamble.

Lydia turned, lifting her chin as she met his stormy gaze. Despite everything, her traitorous heart still skipped at the sight of him -travel-worn and magnificent in his anger, his blue eyes fierce as a winter storm.

"Welcome home, Your Grace. I trust your journey was productive?"

"Don't change the subject. What gives you the right to make changes to my home without my permission?"

"Your home?" Lydia felt her own temper rising to match his. "I was under the impression that as Duchess of Fyre, this was my home as well. Unless I misunderstood the role I was meant to play here?"

"The role you were meant to play?" His voice could have frozen flame. "You were

meant to care for Peter, not turn my house upside down and hang—" He broke off, and Lydia saw something flash across his face - not just anger, but pain.

"I am caring for Peter!" She took a step forward, her frustration finally boiling over. "Do you have any idea what it's like for him in this... this tomb you call a home? Where he's afraid to laugh too loudly or play too enthusiastically? Where he has to check his every impulse against what he thinks you might approve of?"

"He has everything he needs?—"

"He needs to be a child!" Lydia cut him off, her voice rising. "He needs sunlight and laughter and the freedom to make mistakes without feeling like he's disappointed his father at every turn. Yes, I made changes to the house - because this house needed changing! Because your son needed it!"

"You had no right?—"

"I had every right! What else am I supposed to do here? You've given me nothing - no guidance, no real position, just one order: take care of Peter. Well, I am taking care of him!"

"Is that not enough?" Elias's voice had dropped dangerously low.

"No!" Lydia's fists clenched at her sides as years of proper behavior finally gave way to raw honesty. "It's not enough! Peter has a governess - a very good one, I might add. What he needs is a mother, a family who loves him, friends who make him laugh. But I'm not allowed to be any of those things, am I? I'm just supposed to... to what? Watch him from a distance like some sort of guardian spirit?"

She was breathing hard now, her carefully constructed composure shattered. "Do you have any idea what it's like? Trying to navigate this impossible position you've put

me in? Trying to be everything to everyone while also being nothing to anyone?"

The silence that followed her outburst was deafening. Lydia waited for his thunderous response, for the ducal rage that would surely follow such impertinence. But when she finally dared to look at him, she found his attention fixed not on her face, but on her hands.

She followed his gaze, surprised to find her fingers clenched so tightly her knuckles had gone white. Before she could process what was happening, Elias had crossed the room in two long strides and captured her hands in his.

"Stop that," he ordered, his voice rough with some emotion she couldn't quite identify.

Lydia's breath caught at the contact. His hands were warm, strong, surprisingly gentle as they enveloped hers. But her anger hadn't fully dissipated. "Stop ordering me about as if I were one of your servants! I am your wife, and I?—"

"Please."

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That single word, spoken so softly she almost missed it, stopped her cold. It sounded foreign on his tongue, as if he had to drag it up from some deep, unused place within himself. Lydia felt her fingers relax almost involuntarily, shocked by the naked emotion in that simple syllable.

For a long moment, they stood frozen - his large hands cradling her smaller ones, her pulse racing at the unprecedented contact. Elias seemed equally stunned by his own actions, his thumbs moving in small, unconscious circles across her knuckles as if to soothe away any potential harm.

"If you wish to make changes," he said finally, his voice low and carefully controlled, "you need only inform me first."

"Inform you?" she shot back, her voice suddenly as cold as his own. "And when do you suppose I do that since you lack the will to see me at all?"

"I am busy," he countered, but Lydia shook her head.

"It seems to me, Your Grace," she challenged now, "that you are uncomfortable in your own house. And here I thought you a courageous man."

To her surprise, Elias refused to let himself react. When he answered, he kept his voice carefully measured. "We will... we will take breakfast together each morning. You can tell me your plans then."

Lydia nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She was acutely aware of every point of contact between them - the slight calluses on his fingers, the warmth of his palms, the

gentle but firm way he held her as if she might shatter or flee at any moment.

Suddenly seeming to realize he was still holding her hands, Elias released them and stepped back. The loss of his touch left Lydia feeling strangely bereft, though she would rather die than admit it.

He turned to leave but paused at the door. "The other changes..." he said without looking at her, "they're... acceptable. Just have the portrait removed."

Then he was gone, leaving Lydia standing in the middle of her sitting room feeling as though a storm had just passed through. She sank into a nearby chair, her legs suddenly unsteady beneath her.

A soft knock drew her attention to the door, where Peter stood hesitating on the threshold. "Lydia? Is everything alright? I heard raised voices..."

"Come here, darling," she said, opening her arms. Peter rushed into them, burying his face in her shoulder as Mug pressed against their legs.

"Father's very angry, isn't he?" Peter's voice was small against her neck.

Lydia stroked his curls, considering her answer carefully. "He's... adjusting," she said finally. "Change isn't easy for any of us, but especially not for your father, I think."

Peter pulled back slightly, his face serious. "But you're not leaving, are you? Even though he's angry?"

"Oh, my darling boy." Lydia hugged him close again. "No, I'm not leaving. It takes more than a little ducal thunder to frighten me away."

"Good," Peter said firmly. "Because I drew something for Father, and I want you to

help me give it to him at dinner."

Lydia smiled, pressing a kiss to his forehead. "Then we'd better make sure you're properly dressed for the occasion, hadn't we?"

As she helped Peter prepare for dinner, Lydia's hands still tingled with the memory of Elias's touch. That moment of connection had revealed something - a crack in his carefully maintained facade, a glimpse of the man beneath the ducal mask.

There were depths to Elias Blacknight that she was only beginning to understand. That quiet "please" had told her more than hours of conversation might have - about his capacity for gentleness, about the vulnerability he kept so carefully hidden, about the man he might be if he ever allowed himself to truly feel.

"Lydia?" Peter's voice broke through her thoughts. "Do you think Father might smile tonight? Just a little?"

She thought of Elias's final words, the way his voice had softened when he spoke of the changes being acceptable. "You know what, darling? He just might."

She was still not certain that he would – though for the first time since she'd moved into Fyre Manor, she found herself hoping at least, in the possibility.

Dinner that evening was a curiously tense affair. Lydia sat at her usual place, vividly aware of Elias's presence at the head of the table. He seemed equally conscious of her, though he maintained a studied focus on his plate that might have fooled anyone who hadn't noticed the way his eyes flickered toward her when he thought she wasn't looking.

Peter, bless his heart, did his best to fill the silence with cheerful chatter about his lessons and the new herb garden plans. Lydia noticed how carefully he watched his

father's reactions, hope warring with anxiety in his young face.

"And Miss Nancy says my Latin is improving," Peter ventured, sneaking another glance at Elias. "Would you like to hear some, Father?"

Elias looked up from his plate, and Lydia held her breath, silently willing him to recognize the olive branch their son was extending.

"Perhaps... perhaps after dinner," Elias said, his voice gentler than she'd expected. "In the library?"

Peter's face lit up with such joy that Lydia felt her heart squeeze. "Yes, please! And... and maybe I could show you my new drawings too?"

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Something shifted in Elias's expression - a softening around his eyes, a slight easing of the tension in his jaw. "I would like that," he said quietly.

Lydia busied herself with her soup, pretending not to notice the way Peter was practically bouncing in his chair with excitement. Or the way Elias's gaze kept returning to her face, as if trying to solve some particularly vexing puzzle.

After dinner, true to his word, Elias accompanied them to the library. Peter proudly displayed his latest artwork, including several detailed sketches of the gardens and one particularly charming portrait of Mug attempting to chase butterflies.

"Your technique has improved considerably," Elias observed, studying the drawings with genuine interest. "The perspective in this garden scene is particularly well-executed."

Peter beamed at the praise, then hesitated before pulling out one final drawing. "I... I made this one especially for you, Father. While you were away."

Lydia watched as Elias carefully unfolded the paper. It was a family portrait - not a formal, stuffy piece, but a scene from one of their afternoon adventures. Peter had captured himself and Lydia in the garden, playing their pirate games, while Elias stood in the background, watching with what might have been the ghost of a smile.

The silence that followed seemed to stretch for an eternity. Peter's fingers twisted anxiously in his jacket, and Lydia found herself holding her breath.

Finally, Elias spoke, his voice rougher than usual. "You've captured the light

beautifully," he said softly. "The way it falls across the garden... it's exactly right."

"Really?" Peter's whole face transformed with joy. "I worked especially hard on that part. Lydia helped me understand how to show the shadows properly."

Elias's eyes met Lydia's over their son's head, and she felt that same jolt of awareness she'd experienced in her sitting room earlier. There was something in his gaze - gratitude, perhaps, or understanding - that made her chest feel suddenly too tight.

"Perhaps," Elias said slowly, still holding her gaze, "we might have this framed? It would look well in my study, I think."

Peter launched himself at his father, forgetting propriety in his excitement. For a moment, Elias stiffened, clearly startled by the embrace. Then, slowly, carefully, his arms came up to wrap around his son.

Lydia turned away, feeling like an intruder on this precious moment. But before she could slip quietly from the room, Elias's voice stopped her.

"Stay," he said quietly. "Please."

That word again - so simple, yet coming from him, it felt like a gift. Or perhaps a promise.

Later, after Peter had been sent to bed (but not before extracting a promise from his father to join them for breakfast the next morning), Lydia found herself alone with Elias in the library. The silence between them felt different now - charged with something she wasn't quite ready to name.

"The changes you've made," Elias said finally, his eyes fixed on the dancing flames in the fireplace. "They're good for him. For the house." A muscle jumped in his jaw and

a frown appeared between his brows. "I suppose I should thank you," he said, his voice cold again.

Lydia's heart did that strange flutter again. "It's quite alright," she said softly. "Though I am sorry about the portrait. I should have asked first."

Elias shook his head. "No, I... It is fine, keep it. Where it is. Peter should know his mother's face, even if..." He trailed off, the stoic mask back again.

Without thinking, Lydia moved closer, close enough to feel the warmth radiating from his body. "Even if the memories are difficult?"

He nodded, still not looking at her. "I suppose. I was trying to protect the boy. I see now that it may not have gone over in that manner."

"Oh, Elias." The words slipped out before she could stop them, filled with a tenderness that surprised them both.

He turned to her then, his eyes dark with some emotion she couldn't quite read. For a moment, she thought he might say more, might finally let her see behind the walls he'd built so carefully around his heart.

But the clock struck nine, breaking the spell. Elias stepped back, though something in his expression had shifted, softened.

"Goodnight, Lydia," he said, her name like a caress on his lips.

"Goodnight... Elias."

As she made her way to her chambers, Lydia found herself smiling. Perhaps change wasn't always so terrifying after all. Even for the mighty Duke of Fyre.

CHAPTER 15

The morning light streamed through the newly lightened breakfast room curtains, casting a warm glow over the carefully set table. Lydia smoothed her skirts for the third time, acutely aware of the empty chairs that would soon be filled. Her hand trembled slightly as she adjusted a fork that was already perfectly aligned.

"Your Grace?" Mrs. Winters appeared in the doorway. "Master Peter is asking if he might come down now, though it's a quarter hour early..."

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Lydia smiled, remembering the boy's excitement the night before. "Of course he may. Heaven knows we wouldn't want him wearing a hole in his carpet with all his pacing."

Moments later, Peter appeared, dressed with particular care in his best morning coat. His golden curls had been ruthlessly tamed, and Lydia noticed he was wearing the cravat she'd helped him practice tying last week.

"Good morning, darling," she said warmly. "You look very handsome."

Peter beamed, then quickly tried to school his features into something more dignified. "Good morning, Lydia. I trust you slept well?"

The formal words in his child's voice made her heart squeeze. "Quite well, thank you. Though I suspect not as well as Mug – I found him sprawled across half my bed this morning, if you can believe it."

Peter giggled, then glanced anxiously at the door. "Do you think Father will really come? He's usually already in his study by now..."

"He gave his word, didn't he?" Lydia kept her voice light, though she shared some of Peter's uncertainty. "And a duke's word is his bond, or so I'm told."

As if summoned by their discussion, Elias appeared in the doorway. He too was dressed with particular care, his dark coat emphasizing the breadth of his shoulders. Lydia found herself remembering how those shoulders had looked the day before, when he'd loomed over her during their argument, and felt heat rise to her cheeks.

"Good morning, Father!" Peter's voice was pitched slightly higher than usual with barely contained excitement.

"Good morning, Peter." Elias's voice was grave, but Lydia detected a softness in his eyes as he regarded his son. "You're up early."

"Yes, sir. I... I wanted to be sure I wasn't late."

Something flickered across Elias's face – regret, perhaps? – before he turned to Lydia. "Good morning, my lady."

"Your Grace." Lydia dipped into a small curtsy, focused on his presence as he moved to his seat at the head of the table. The room suddenly felt much smaller.

An awkward silence fell as they began their meal. Peter kept darting hopeful glances between his parents, clearly wanting to speak but unsure if he should. Lydia's throat felt tight every time she looked at Elias, remembering the warmth of his hands on hers, that softly spoken "please" that had undone her so completely.

"Peter," she said finally, unable to bear the tension any longer, "why don't you tell your father about your plans for the herb garden? I'm sure he'd be interested in your ideas for improving the estate."

Peter brightened immediately. "Oh! Yes, well, Thomas – that's the gardener's son, Father – he's been teaching me about different medicinal herbs. Did you know that lavender can help you sleep? And peppermint is good for digestion?"

"Is that so?" Elias's voice was neutral, but Lydia saw how intently he watched his son's animated face.

"Yes! And I thought, well..." Peter faltered slightly, then gathered his courage. "I

thought perhaps we might set aside a small plot? Near the kitchen garden? Thomas says the soil there is perfect for herbs, and it would be practical, wouldn't it? Having our own supply?"

Lydia held her breath, watching Elias carefully. After what felt like an eternity, he nodded. "A sound proposal. Well-reasoned and practical, as you say. Perhaps you might draw up a plan? Something we could review together?"

The joy that blazed across Peter's face was like sunrise breaking through clouds. "Really? You mean it? I'll start right after breakfast! I already have some ideas sketched out, and Thomas said?—"

A knock at the door interrupted Peter's excited chatter. Seconds later, Nicholas Grant swept into the room, his usual good humor lighting his handsome features.

"Good morning, all! I hope I'm not interrupting anything too important?"

"Uncle Nicholas!" Peter jumped up to greet his father's friend, then quickly remembered his manners and attempted to bow instead.

Nicholas laughed, ruffling the boy's carefully arranged curls. "None of that now, young man. I've known you since you were in leading strings." His eyes fell on Lydia, and he executed an elegant bow. "And this must be the new Duchess of Fyre! My dear lady, I've been dying to meet you properly."

"Lord Stone," Lydia rose to curtsy, charmed despite herself by his easy manner. "We're honored by your visit."

"Nicholas, please," he insisted, taking the seat Mrs. Winters hastily arranged for him. "I've heard so much about you from our mutual friends in town. They say you're working miracles here at Fyre Manor."

"Hardly miracles," Lydia demurred, though she couldn't help smiling at his infectious warmth. "Just a few small changes."

"Small changes indeed," Nicholas's eyes twinkled as he glanced around the sun-filled room. "Why, I hardly recognized the place! It's as if someone finally remembered to let the light in."

Lydia laughed at his theatrical wink, then stopped abruptly as she felt the temperature in the room seem to drop several degrees. She glanced at Elias and found him glaring at his friend with surprising intensity.

If Nicholas noticed his friend's dark look, he gave no sign. "I must say, it's delightful to see the family gathered for breakfast. Usually, our dear Duke is buried in his study by now, scowling at his correspondence as if it had personally offended him."

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"I do not scowl," Elias muttered, though his current expression rather belied that claim.

"Of course not, dear fellow. You merely look severely disapproving. Much more dignified." Nicholas turned back to Lydia with another charming smile. "I don't suppose you've managed to convince him about the Hartley s' ball next week? The ton is positively dying to meet the woman who finally captured the Beast of Fyre."

"The Hartleys are having a ball?" Lydia's interest was immediately piqued. She hadn't attended a proper ball since her marriage, and the thought of music and dancing made her heart lift.

"We will not be attending," Elias said firmly.

"Oh, but surely—" Lydia began, then caught herself. "That is... it might be nice to meet some of our neighbors?"

"The finest families in the county will be there," Nicholas added helpfully. "And Lady Hartley throws the most magnificent balls. The music is always excellent."

"Do you dance, Lydia?" Peter asked eagerly. "Father never dances, but I've been learning from Miss Nancy. She says every gentleman should know how."

"I love to dance," Lydia admitted, then quickly added, "Though of course, I understand if His Grace has other commitments..."

"None that can't be rearranged," Nicholas interjected before Elias could respond.

"After all, what's the point of having a lovely young duchess if you're going to keep her hidden away? People will talk, you know."

Elias's scowl deepened. "Let them talk."

Nicholas merely looked at Elias, who sighed at last.

"Very well," he said finally, though he still looked less than pleased. "We will attend. Briefly."

"Excellent!" Nicholas beamed. "Lady Hartley will be delighted. And speaking of dancing..." He turned to Lydia with another winning smile. "Perhaps you might save a set for me? I promise to be a more enthusiastic partner than our dear Duke."

"That would be lovely," Lydia agreed, then immediately wished she hadn't as she felt Elias's gaze burning into her.

"If you're quite finished arranging my wife's dance card," Elias bit out, "perhaps we might discuss the actual purpose of your visit?"

"Ah yes, business." Nicholas sighed dramatically. "How dreary. Though I must say, breakfast is far more entertaining than usual. I don't suppose I might impose upon your hospitality more often?"

The look Elias gave him could have frozen flame.

As the men withdrew to Elias's study, Lydia caught Nicholas winking at her. "Until next week, my lady. I look forward to our dance."

"As do I," she replied, pretending not to notice the way Elias's shoulders stiffened at her words.

Once they were gone, Peter turned to her with shining eyes. "Did you see, Lydia? Father said yes! We're really going to a ball!"

"So we are, darling." Lydia smiled, though her mind was already racing with preparations. "So we are."

As she helped Peter gather his garden plans before sending him off to his lessons, Lydia found herself humming a waltz under her breath. A ball! With music and dancing and perhaps... She remembered the intense way Elias had looked at her when she'd agreed to dance with Nicholas, and felt a curious flutter in her stomach.

Not that his obvious displeasure meant anything, of course. He was probably just concerned about maintaining proper dignity, as always. It certainly had nothing to do with jealousy.

But as she went about her morning tasks, Lydia couldn't quite suppress a small smile. The Beast of Fyre might not dance, but he certainly seemed to have strong opinions about who his wife danced with.

Not that she was planning to use that information, of course. That would be terribly undignified.

Though perhaps she might ask Nicholas for two dances, just to see what would happen...

Humming another waltz, Lydia headed upstairs to begin planning her ball gown. After all, if she was going to scandalize the ton by making the Duke of Fyre jealous, she ought to look her best while doing it.

Not that she was planning any such thing, of course.

But it was nice to have options.

A crash from the hallway interrupted Lydia's musings, followed by excited barking and the unmistakable sound of something expensive shattering.

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"Mug!" she called, hurrying toward the commotion. "What have you done now?"

She rounded the corner to find a scene of magnificent chaos. Mug had apparently discovered one of Mrs. Winters's prized Chinese vases – or what remained of it. The little dog stood proudly in the midst of the destruction, tail wagging, with what appeared to be Nicholas's dropped glove in his mouth.

"Oh, you impossible creature," Lydia sighed, just as Elias and Nicholas emerged from the study to investigate the noise.

"I say," Nicholas chuckled, "that's a rather fetching shade of blue on my glove. Though I don't recall it being quite so... damp before."

Elias opened his mouth, no doubt to deliver a thunderous reprimand, but before he could speak, Peter came racing down the hall.

"Mug! There you are! I've been looking everywhere for– oh." He skidded to a halt, taking in the scene. "Oh dear."

"Indeed," Elias said darkly.

But instead of cowering, Peter straightened his shoulders and stepped forward. "It's my fault, Father. I was supposed to be watching him while Lydia attended to her correspondence. I'll help clean it up."

Lydia held her breath, watching Elias's face. To her amazement, the stern lines around his mouth softened slightly.

"Well," he said after a moment, "I never did care for that particular vase. Though perhaps in future, your... companion might be confined to less decorated areas of the house?"

"Yes, Father!" Peter beamed, then turned to Mug with his sternest expression. "Did you hear that? No more stealing gloves from Father's friends."

Mug, apparently sensing he was the topic of discussion, dropped the sodden glove at Nicholas's feet and sat, looking absurdly pleased with himself.

"Remarkable creature," Nicholas observed, retrieving his ruined glove with admirable good humor. "I don't suppose he takes commissions? I have several other gloves that could use... redesigning."

To everyone's shock, a sound that might almost have been a chuckle escaped Elias's lips. He caught himself quickly, but not before Lydia had memorized the way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he was amused.

"Come along, Peter," she said quickly, before the moment could shatter like the unfortunate vase. "Let's find Mrs. Winters and see about getting this cleaned up."

As they headed toward the servants' hall, Peter whispered, "Did you hear that, Lydia? Father almost laughed!"

"Indeed he did, darling. Though perhaps we shouldn't mention it – we wouldn't want to damage his fearsome reputation."

They spent the next hour helping the maids clean up the mess, with Mug "supervising" from a safe distance. Peter took his self-imposed punishment seriously, carefully wrapping each piece of broken porcelain and apologizing profusely to Mrs. Winters.

Later, as Lydia was returning to her chambers to finally begin planning her ball gown, she nearly collided with Elias in the corridor.

"Your Grace!" she gasped, steadying herself against the wall. "I beg your pardon, I wasn't watching where..."

"He's a good boy," Elias interrupted, his voice gruff. "Peter, I mean. Taking responsibility like that."

Lydia's heart did that peculiar flutter again. "Yes, he is. Rather like his father in that regard, I think."

Their eyes met for a long moment, and Lydia felt that now-familiar spark of awareness pass between them. Then Elias cleared his throat and stepped back.

"Yes, well. Carry on."

As she watched him stride away, Lydia smiled to herself. Perhaps there was hope for the Beast of Fyre after all. And if it took a few broken vases and stolen gloves to crack that stern facade, well...

She glanced at Mug, who was looking entirely too innocent for comfort. "No more Chinese porcelain," she told him firmly. "Though if you happen to find any more of Lord Stone's gloves lying about..."

Mug's tail wagged with what she could have sworn was understanding.

Yes, Lydia thought as she finally turned her attention to her wardrobe, the upcoming ball promised to be very interesting indeed.

CHAPTER 16

Lydia stood amid a sea of silk and lace, contemplating which gowns to pack for their upcoming journey to the Hartley's ball in London. Mug lay sprawled across her bed, occasionally offering his opinion with a sleepy bark when she held up a particularly colorful option.

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A soft knock at the door drew her attention. "Come in!" she called, expecting Sarah with more dress boxes from the modiste.

Instead, Peter's golden curls peeked around the door. "Lydia? Are you very busy?"

"Never too busy for you, darling." She smiled, noting the slight droop of his shoulders. "Come help me choose which gowns to take. Mug's taste runs rather heavily to anything with ribbons he can chew."

Peter shuffled into the room, settling on the edge of her bed beside Mug. The little dog immediately rolled over for belly rubs, making the boy smile despite his obvious melancholy.

"I wish I could come with you," he said finally, his fingers buried in Mug's fur. "I've never been to London before."

Lydia's heart ached at the wistfulness in his voice. Setting aside a blue silk gown, she moved to sit beside him. "I know, darling. I wish you could come too. But it's only for a few days, and I promise to bring you back something special."

"Really?" Peter perked up slightly. "Like what?"

"Hmm." Lydia tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Perhaps a new sketch book? I know an excellent shop that carries the finest drawing papers. And maybe... oh, I don't know... a box of those chocolate truffles you've been dreaming about since Thomas mentioned them?"

A real smile broke across Peter's face. "The ones with the orange filling?"

"Those very ones. And," she added conspiratorially, "I promise to work on convincing your father to take you with us next time. After all, a future duke should know his way around society, shouldn't he?"

"Do you really think he'd agree?"

"Leave that to me," Lydia winked. "I can be very persuasive when I want to be."

Peter giggled, then sobered slightly. "Will you... will you tell me what it's like? When you get back?"

"Every detail," Lydia promised. "In fact, why don't I tell you about my first ball? It was quite the disaster, actually. I managed to trip over my own feet and nearly pulled down an entire table of refreshments!"

"You didn't!" Peter's eyes widened with delight.

"Oh, but I did! My sisters never let me forget it. Jane still brings it up at every family gathering." Lydia smiled at the memory. "Speaking of which, would you like to meet them sometime? I'm sure they'd love to know their new nephew."

"Really?" Peter sat up straighter. "What are they like?"

Lydia settled back against her pillows, drawing Peter close. "Well, there's Marian – she's the sensible one, always trying to keep the rest of us out of trouble. Though she did once convince us all to climb the apple tree in our nightgowns because she was certain she'd seen fairies in the highest branches."

Peter laughed, snuggling closer. "Did you find any?"

"No, but we did find an extremely angry mother when she discovered us all covered in bark stains at breakfast! Thenthere's Jane – oh, she's the mischievous one. Always planning some adventure or another. Once, she decided we should start a secret society in the attic..."

"What kind of secret society?"

"The Midnight Marauders, we called ourselves. Very dramatic. We had passwords and everything. Mother nearly had apoplexy when she found our coded messages hidden in her best tea service!"

"What was the password?" Peter asked eagerly.

Lydia lowered her voice to a whisper. "Prudence's porridge is poisonous!" Though don't tell your grandmother I told you that. She's still quite proud of her porridge-making abilities."

They both dissolved into giggles, Mug joining in with excited yips.

"And Diana," Lydia continued once they'd caught their breath, "she's the youngest. Sweet as sugar but twice as sticky when she wants something. She once convinced the cook that Queen Victoria herself was coming to tea, just so she could have extra biscuits!"

"Did it work?"

"For about ten minutes – until Mother discovered the kitchen in complete chaos and poor Cook having hysterics over the state of her best china!"

Peter's laughter faded into a thoughtful expression. "It must have been wonderful, having sisters to play with."

Lydia hugged him closer, sensing the shift in his mood. "It was. Though I imagine you would have given them all a run for their money with your pirate adventures!"

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"I used to imagine having brothers and sisters," Peter admitted quietly. "Sometimes I'd pretend my toy soldiers were my siblings, and we'd go on grand adventures together."

Lydia's heart squeezed. "Would you like to tell me about them?"

Peter was silent for a moment, his fingers twisting in Mug's fur. "There was William – he was the eldest after me. Very brave and strong. And Mary, she was clever like you, always knowing just what to do. And little Thomas..." He trailed off, blinking rapidly.

"They sound wonderful, darling."

"Father never talks about my real mother," Peter said suddenly, his voice barely above a whisper. "I don't... I don't even know what she looked like. Sometimes I think that's why he doesn't like to look at me too much. Maybe I remind him of her?"

Lydia felt tears prick at her eyes. "Oh, my darling boy. Your father loves you very much. Sometimes... sometimes people carry hurts so deep they don't know how to speak of them. But that doesn't mean they love any less."

"Did she..." Peter swallowed hard. "Did she not want me?"

"Peter, no!" Lydia turned him to face her, her heart breaking at the uncertainty in his eyes. "Listen to me very carefully. Your mother died when you were born – that wasn't anyone's fault, and it certainly wasn't because she didn't want you. I'm sure she loved you very, very much."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because," Lydia said softly, brushing a stray curl from his forehead, "it's impossible not to love you. You're clever and kind and brave, and any mother would be proud to call you son."

Peter's lower lip trembled. "Even you?"

"Oh, my darling." Lydia pulled him close as the tears finally spilled over. "Especially me."

She held him while he cried, rocking gently and stroking his hair as she had so often done for her sisters. Mug pressed close against them both, offering his own form of comfort with gentle whines and occasional licks to Peter's hand.

Finally, the tears subsided, and Peter pulled back slightly, wiping his eyes. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I didn't mean to cry like a baby."

"Nonsense," Lydia said firmly. "There's nothing wrong with crying. Even pirates cry sometimes, you know."

That got a watery chuckle out of him. "They do?"

"Oh yes. Especially when they're missing their families while out on long voyages. Why do you think they're always singing such sad songs?"

Peter considered this. "I suppose that makes sense. Though I bet they don't cry into their stepmothers' best silk dress."

Lydia glanced down at the tear stains on her gown and shrugged. "Well, this one needed altering anyway. Now it has character!"

Peter smiled, then grew serious again. "Lydia? Do you think... do you think someday I might have real siblings? Not just pretend ones?"

The question caught her off guard, making her heart flutter strangely. She thought of her list, of the duties she had yet to fulfill as Duchess of Fyre. But more than that, she thought of how wonderful it would be to give Peter the family he so desperately wanted.

"I hope so, darling," she said softly. "I hope so very much."

Peter brightened considerably. "I'd be a good big brother," he declared. "I'd teach them all about pirates and herbs and how to draw properly. And I'd protect them, like William always protected his siblings in my stories."

"You'd be the very best big brother," Lydia agreed, pushing aside the twinge in her heart at the thought of discussing such matters with Elias. That was a bridge to cross another day.

"And you'd tell them stories? Like you tell me?"

"Every night," she promised. "Though they'd have to be different stories – we can't have them stealing your pirate tales!"

"No," Peter agreed seriously. "Those are just for us."

Lydia felt her heart swell with love for this precious boy who had so quickly become her own. "Indeed they are. Now, speaking of stories, shall I tell you about the time Jane convinced Diana that she could teach Marian's cat to dance?"

Peter settled back against her pillows, his earlier melancholy forgotten. "What happened?"

"Well, it involved three yards of ribbon, Mother's best bonnet, and a very angry cat..."

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As she launched into the tale, watching Peter's face light up with laughter, Lydia silently added another item to her list: Give Peter the family he deserves. It wouldn't be easy, given Elias's careful distance and her own uncertainties. But as she looked at the boy who had so thoroughly captured her heart, she knew it would be worth any amount of effort.

After all, she'd already succeeded in becoming a duchess and finding happiness in her marriage – even if that happiness wasn't quite what she'd expected. Surely adding to their family couldn't be any more challenging than taming the Beast of Fyre?

Though perhaps, she thought as Peter dissolved into giggles at her description of the cat's escape attempt, she'd wait until after the ball to tackle that particular item on her list. One impossible task at a time was quite enough!

For now, she was content to sit here with her son – for that's what he truly was in her heart – sharing stories and dreams of the future. The rest would come in time. She just had to keep faith, stay determined, and perhaps invest in a few more silk gowns for tear-stained emergencies.

Just in case.

CHAPTER 17

The morning of their departure dawned clear and crisp, though Peter's face was anything but sunny as he watched the footmen load the last of the luggage onto the carriage. Mug sat beside him on the front steps, his usual exuberance dampened by the solemn atmosphere.

"Now then," Lydia said brightly, adjusting Peter's cravat one last time. "You'll remember to tend to the herbs exactly as Thomas showed you?"

"Yes," Peter nodded, his lower lip trembling slightly despite his best efforts. "And I'll document their growth in my notebook, just like we discussed."

"That's my clever boy." Lydia pulled him close, not caring who might see the display of affection. "I'll miss you terribly, you know."

"Even though you'll be at a grand ball?" Peter's voice was muffled against her shoulder.

"Especially then. Who will help me judge which dances are most pirate-worthy?" She felt him smile against her neck and hugged him tighter. "Be good for Miss Nancy, and remember – I want a full report on those herbs when we return."

"I will." Peter pulled back slightly, his eyes suspiciously bright. "And you'll remember about the chocolates? The orange ones?"

"How could I forget? I've only been reminded four times since breakfast," Lydia teased gently, tapping his nose.

Peter turned to his father then, straightening his shoulders in an obvious attempt to appear more dignified. "Have a safe journey, Father."

Elias stood stiffly, clearly uncomfortable with goodbyes. "Yes, well. Mind your studies. And do try to keep that..." he glanced at Mug, who wagged his tail hopefully, "...that dog out of Mrs. Winters's flowerbeds."

"Yes, Father." Peter hesitated, then suddenly threw himself forward, wrapping his arms around his father's waist.

Elias froze, his arms hanging awkwardly at his sides. But just as Peter began to pull away, those arms came up to return the embrace, however briefly.

"We'll return in three days," Elias said gruffly, his hand lingering for a moment on Peter's curls before he stepped back.

Lydia pretended not to notice the way both father and son blinked rather rapidly as they separated. She bent to give Peter one last hug, whispering, "I love you, darling," in his ear before allowing Elias to hand her into the carriage.

As they pulled away, she kept waving until Peter's small figure disappeared from view. Only then did she sink back against the cushions with a small sigh.

"He'll be fine," Elias said, though she noticed he was still staring out the window in the direction of the manor.

"Of course he will. He's very brave." Lydia dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. "Though I don't know why you're so certain, since you're clearly not looking at me while my eyes are leaking so ridiculously. "

A startled sound that might have been a chuckle escaped Elias's lips. "I was merely... admiring the scenery."

"Hmm. And I suppose that's also why you kept your head turned just so when Peter hugged you? To better appreciate the architectural features of the manor?"

Elias's head snapped around, a retort clearly forming on his lips. But whatever he saw in her face – gentle teasing rather than mockery – seemed to give him pause.

"He's becoming quite... demonstrative... lately," he said finally.

"He's becoming quite loved lately," Lydia corrected softly. "And learning that it's safe to show it."

A dark frown appeared on Elias's face before he turned back to the window. But Lydia noticed that he didn't disagree.

They rode in companionable silence for a while, the rhythmic sway of the carriage almost soothing. Lydia found her thoughts drifting to the upcoming ball, to Peter's hopes for siblings, to the way Elias's arms had come up to hold his son...

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"You're humming," Elias observed, breaking into her reverie.

"Oh!" Lydia felt her cheeks warm. "I'm sorry. It's just... I'm rather excited about the ball. It's been so long since I've danced."

"Ah yes. Your promised dance with Nicholas."

Was it her imagination, or did his voice sound slightly strained?

"Among others, I hope," she said lightly. "Unless you plan to keep me hidden in a corner all evening?"

"Certainly not. You're the Duchess of Fyre. You may dance with whomever you please."

"Anyone?" Lydia asked innocently. "Even my husband?"

Elias's jaw tightened. "I don't dance."

"Can't? Or won't?"

"Won't," he said firmly. "It's beneath my dignity."

Lydia bit back a smile. "Of course. How foolish of me to suggest the mighty Duke of Fyre might engage in something so frivolous as dancing with his wife."

Elias shot her a suspicious look, clearly trying to determine if she was mocking him.

Lydia kept her expression perfectly innocent.

"You're doing it again," he said after a moment.

"Doing what?"

"That... thing. Where you make me sound ridiculous without actually saying anything improper."

Now Lydia did smile. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Your Grace. I would never suggest that a duke might actually enjoy himself at a ball. How scandalous that would be!"

Another of those almost-chuckles escaped him. "You're a very dangerous woman, Lydia Brandon."

"Blacknight," she corrected automatically. "I'm Lydia Blacknight now."

Something shifted in Elias's eyes at her words. For a moment, the air in the carriage seemed to grow thicker, charged with an awareness that made Lydia's pulse quicken.

Then a wheel hit a rough patch in the road, jolting them both. The moment passed, but Lydia could have sworn she saw a faint flush on Elias's cheeks as he turned back to the window.

"Tell me about Peter's herbs," he said abruptly. "He seems quite invested in the project."

Lydia let him change the subject, launching into an enthusiastic description of Peter's plans for the garden. She noticed how intently Elias listened, asking careful questions about their son's progress.

Their son. The thought made her heart flutter strangely.

"He's quite clever about it," she said, watching Elias's profile. "Did you know he's been researching which herbs might be profitable for the estate? He has all sorts of ideas about supplying the local apothecary."

"Does he?" Elias's voice was carefully neutral, but Lydia saw the pride that flickered in his eyes.

"Mmm. He wants to prove it's a worthwhile venture. Very practical, very... ducal of him, wouldn't you say?"

Elias's lips twitched. "You're doing it again."

"Simply making an observation, Your Grace. Though it occurs to me that a father-son business venture might be an excellent way to combine education with... what was it you said? Proper dignity?"

"You're incorrigible."

"So I've been told. Usually by my mother, typically while holding a ruined bonnet or a scandalized cat. Or worse, Mug."

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This time the sound that escaped Elias was definitely a laugh, however quickly suppressed. Lydia felt absurdly proud of herself.

The carriage hit another bump, causing Lydia to grab the side for balance. Without thinking, Elias reached out to steady her, his large hand warm on her arm.

"These roads are abysmal," he muttered, though he didn't immediately remove his hand. "We should have taken the other route."

"And miss the lovely view of the countryside? Never." Lydia smiled, keenly aware of his touch. "Though I must say, your concern for my welfare is touching, Your Grace."

Elias withdrew his hand as if burned, but Lydia caught the faint color in his cheeks. "It would hardly do for the Duchess of Fyre to arrive at her first society event with bruises from poor road maintenance."

"Of course not. What would people say?" She affected her best impression of a scandalized dowager. "Did you hear about the new Duchess of Fyre? Covered in bruises! I heard she's been wrestling bears in that gothic mansion of theirs."

"Bears?" Elias's eyebrow rose. "Surely dragons would be more appropriate, given the circumstances."

Lydia's heart gave a little leap at his playing along. "Oh, but dragons are so last season. Besides, Peter has them all thoroughly charmed with his stories. We had to move on to bears for entertainment."

"Is that what you and Peter do all day? Plan mythological menageries?"

"Only on Tuesdays. Mondays are for pirate adventures, Wednesdays for knight's quests, Thursdays for?—"

"I begin to understand why Mrs. Winters looks so harried lately," Elias interrupted, though Lydia could have sworn she saw his lips twitch.

"Mrs. Winters," Lydia said with dignity, "is secretly delighted by all the excitement. Just yesterday I caught her teaching Mug to fetch her sewing basket."

"Did she succeed?"

"Well, he did fetch something. Though it might have been one of Cook's chickens. The details are still rather unclear, and everyone involved has sworn themselves to secrecy."

This time Elias didn't quite manage to suppress his smile. "You've turned my entire household upside down, haven't you?"

"Not entirely," Lydia said thoughtfully. "The attic is still perfectly respectable. Though give Peter time – he has plans for a proper pirate's lookout up there."

"Absolutely not."

"That's exactly what my mother said about the tree house. She was quite adamant until Papa pointed out that it would keep us from climbing the actual trees." Lydia paused. "In retrospect, he might have regretted that strategy when Jane decided the tree house needed a pulley we could slide down."

"Do I want to know what happened?"

"Let's just say that Mother's prized rosebushes were never quite the same, and Jane still can't look at a clothesline without wincing."

Elias shook his head, but his eyes were warm with amusement. "I suppose I should be grateful Peter's adventures are somewhat more... contained."

"For now," Lydia agreed cheerfully. "Though he did mention something about building a moat around the herb garden..."

"Lydia."

"Only a small one! And think how educational it would be – he'd learn about water management, castle defenses..."

"We are not building a moat."

"No, of course not." Lydia waited a beat. "A drawbridge would be much more practical."

Elias turned to her then, clearly intending to deliver a stern rebuke, but something in her expression made him pause. Their eyes met, and suddenly the air in the carriage felt charged with awareness.

"You're quite impossible, you know," he said softly.

"So I've been told." Lydia's voice came out equally quiet. "Though I prefer to think of it as... creatively optimistic."

"Is that what we're calling it now?"

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"Would you prefer 'determinedly whimsical'? Or perhaps 'strategically chaotic'?"

"I would prefer," Elias said, his voice dropping lower, "not to find my household in complete disarray every time I return from business."

"Ah, but think how dull life would be otherwise." Lydia leaned forward slightly, caught in the intensity of his gaze. "All that proper dignity, with no bears or dragons or pirate ships to liven things up?"

"I managed quite well before you arrived."

"Did you?" Lydia asked softly. "Were you happy, Your Grace? Was Peter?"

The question hung between them, heavy with implication. For a moment, Lydia thought she'd gone too far. But then Elias's expression softened almost imperceptibly.

"Perhaps," he admitted, so quietly she almost missed it, "things were a bit... austere."

"Just a bit," Lydia agreed gently. "Though I must say, you've adapted remarkably well to the chaos. Why, just yesterday you walked right past Mug's new tunnel system in the rose garden without a single scowl."

"That was a tunnel system? I thought we'd been invaded by particularly ambitious rabbits."

"Close! Pirates, actually. Peter's been teaching him to dig for buried treasure. Though perhaps we should redirect his enthusiasm to less... floral areas."

Their laughter mingled in the small space, and Lydia felt something shift between them – a warming, a softening of those careful barriers they'd maintained. For just a moment, they were simply a husband and wife sharing amusement over their son's adventures.

As they neared London, Lydia found herself studying her husband's profile. The stern Duke of Fyre was still there, but so was the man who had held his son, who almost laughed at her jokes, who listened so carefully to stories about Peter's adventures.

"You're staring," Elias said without turning from the window.

"Simply admiring the scenery," Lydia replied innocently.

This time his laugh, though soft, was unmistakable. Lydia felt it warm her all the way through, like sunshine after rain.

Perhaps, she thought as their carriage rolled into London, this ball would be interesting in more ways than one. After all, if she could make the Beast of Fyre laugh, who knew what other miracles might be possible?

She was still smiling at the thought when they arrived at their London townhouse. Elias helped her down from the carriage, his hand lingering on hers perhaps a moment longer than strictly necessary.

"Welcome to London," he said softly, and Lydia felt that warmth spread through her again.

Yes, this would be an interesting visit indeed.

CHAPTER 18

Mayfair bustled with mid-morning activity as their carriage drew to a stop before a handsome brick façade. Lydia peered out the window, taking in the well-maintained window boxes and gleaming brass fixtures that marked their temporary residence.

"The house has been opened and prepared for our arrival," Elias said as he helped her down, his hand warm and steady against hers. "Though I'm afraid it won't be quite as... lively as Fyre Manor has become."

Lydia smiled at his dry tone. "No enthusiastic dogs or impromptu pirate battles? However shall we manage?"

"I'm certain you'll find some way to introduce chaos," he replied, though she caught the slight upturn at the corner of his mouth. "You seem to have quite a talent for it."

Lydia's eyes widened slightly as she walked through the door and took in the place. It was... something. Everything was perfectly arranged, perfectly proper, and perfectly... lifeless. Rather like Fyre Manor had been before she'd arrived, she realized with a start.

The building itself seemed quite... well, sad.

"Your chambers are upstairs, first door on the right," Elias said, already moving toward what she assumed was his study. "I have some business to attend to, but perhaps..."

Her heart raced as she listened to him, only to come to a slow, dull plod when another man appeared to cut off his words .

"Your Grace," the butler interrupted with a small bow. "Lord Stone's card was delivered this morning. He asks if Your Grace and Her Grace might join him for dinner this evening at his club."

Elias frowned. "Impossible. We have the Hartley's ball tonight."

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"Ah, about that..." Lydia hesitated, then forged ahead. "I was rather hoping to visit a modiste this afternoon. My current ball gowns are..."

"Perfectly adequate, I'm sure," Elias finished, and a small frown appeared between his brows.

"Unless... I am not sure about women's clothing and the like. Do you not have other dresses?"

Lydia fought a frustrated smile. The man truly had a hard time understanding women, she thought.

"Perhaps. But as you said, I am the Duchess of Fyre now. Shouldn't I dress accordingly?"

The frown between Elias's eyes deepened slightly, but then he nodded slowly. "Indeed. Very well, I shall have the carriage brought around."

"You could come with me," Lydia suggested, evidently surprising him. She too was almost shocked by the words leaving her lips. She hurried to explain further, fearful of giving him an idea that might offend him .

"Since you have such strong opinions about proper dignity, perhaps you'd like to ensure my selection meets your exacting standards?"

Despite her explanation, Elias stared at her as if she'd suggested they join a traveling circus. "Shopping for gowns? With you?"

"Unless you're afraid?" The words slipped out before she could stop them, and Lydia immediately wished she could call them back. Challenging the Duke of Fyre was hardly the way to win his cooperation. Heat immediately rose to her cheeks and somehow she managed to suppress the desire

To her amazement, however, something like amusement crossed his face. "Afraid? Of watching you try on gowns? Hardly."

"Then you'll come?" She tried - though she thought she quite miserably failed - to keep the excitement out of her voice.

Elias sighed, but Lydia could have sworn she saw a hint of a smile curling around his lips. "I suppose someone must ensure you don't choose anything too... whimsical."

"Oh, you think you can stop me?"

This time, he actually laughed - a sound that was quite foreign to her ears, and seemingly to those of the few servants in the vicinity.

"David," he spoke now, his voice low. "Arrange a carriage. I am taking my wife to have a dress made, it would seem."

Less than an hour later, they stood before Madame Delacour's elegant shopfront. This particular French modiste was renowned throughout London for her exquisite creations, though Lydia had never been able to afford her services before. She peered into the shop excitedly, then followed her husband as he walked through the door as though the place belonged to him.

A small bell chimed through the shop when he stepped inside and the shop girl who hurried forward stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of Elias, her face draining of color.

"Y-Your Grace," she stammered, dropping into a wobbly curtsy. "We... we weren't expecting..."

"The Duke and Duchess of Fyre to grace our humble establishment!" Madame Delacour herself appeared, her accent thickening as she took in Elias's imposing figure. Lydia, of course, wondered if this was due to nerves or simply an attempt at impressing her husband. "What an honor! Only if we had known..."

"We require a ball gown," Elias cut through her fluttering. "For tonight's Hartley ball."

"Tonight?" Madame's eyes widened in horror. "But Your Grace, to create something worthy of the Duchess of Fyre in mere hours..."

"Surely you have something suitable already made?" Lydia intervened smoothly, noting how the modiste's hands trembled slightly. "I'm told your ready-made gowns are works of art in themselves."

Madame Delacour's expression brightened slightly. "Well... there is one piece... But no, perhaps it's too daring for..."

"Show us," Elias commanded, making both women jump and a small smile appeared around Lydia's lips. She could not deny that it was quite enjoyable to watch when the intimidation was not directed at her.

The modiste scurried into the back room, returning moments later with a creation that made Lydia's breath catch. The gown was silk the color of midnight, scattered with tiny crystal beads that caught the light like stars. The neckline was daring without being scandalous, the waist nipped in to emphasize a woman's curves before flowing out into a full skirt perfect for dancing.

"It's beautiful," Lydia breathed, reaching out to touch the fabric.

"But perhaps too bold?" Madame suggested anxiously, glancing at Elias. "We have some lovely lavender silk that might be more appropriate for a duke's wife..."

"My wife will try this one," Elias said firmly. "She seems to like it."

Within seconds, Lydia found herself whisked behind a screen, where Madame's trembling fingers made quick work of her traveling dress. As the midnight silk settled around her, Lydia felt transformed. The gown fit as if it had been made for her, the color making her skin glow and her green eyes seem more vivid. She suppressed a gasp as she looked at herself. The role of duchess had seemed like an ill-fitting robe until this moment.

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"Shall we show His Grace?" Madame asked, the accent almost untraceable now. She rubbed her hands together and nodded, clearly pleased with the effect.

Lydia nodded, suddenly feeling uncharacteristically shy. As she stepped out from behind the screen, she heard Elias's sharp intake of breath.

The look on his face made her pulse quicken. His blue eyes had darkened to midnight, matching the silk of her gown, and there was something almost hungry in his gaze as it swept over her form.

"Well?" she asked softly, turning slowly to show how the skirt moved. "Is it sufficiently dignified for the Duchess of Fyre?"

Elias seemed to have forgotten how to speak. His hands clenched at his sides as if he were physically restraining himself from reaching for her.

"Your Grace?" Madame prompted anxiously. "If it's not suitable..."

"It's perfect," Elias said roughly, his eyes never leaving Lydia's face. "We'll take it."

Lydia felt heat rise to her cheeks under his intense scrutiny. "Do... Do you like it?"

"I do indeed," Elias answered, his voice curt as always. "It suits you perfectly."

Though it was not spoken as compliments usually were, there was something in his tone that sent her heart aflutter and she pressed a palm against her breast. "Perhaps I should change back then?"

Elias nodded jerkily, finally tearing his gaze away. As Lydia disappeared behind the screen once more, she heard him clear his throat.

"Madame Delacour," his voice was low but carried clearly. "I want ten more gowns made in this style. Different colors, suitable for various occasions. Have them delivered to Fyre Manor within the month."

"Ten?" Madame's voice squeaked slightly. "But Your Grace, the expense..."

"Money is no object. But they must be... perfect. Like this one."

"Of course, Your Grace! I shall personally oversee every stitch. Though... might I suggest some slight variations? Perhaps an emerald silk to match Her Grace's eyes? And there's a new rose-gold fabric that would complement her coloring beautifully..."

Lydia froze in the midst of arranging her hair, her heart doing strange things in her chest. Ten gowns? From Madame Delacour? For someone who had a reputation of a hermit? Where would she wear them? And why?

"Yes, fine," Elias was saying. "Whatever you think best. But they must all make her look..."

"As beautiful as she does in this one?" Madame suggested gently, her earlier fear seemingly forgotten as she warmed to her subject. "Fear not, Your Grace. I can see how much you care for your duchess. I shall ensure each gown is worthy of such devotion."

Lydia couldn't see Elias's response, but she heard his quick intake of breath, followed by a gruff, "See that you do."

When she emerged in her own dress once more, she found Madame Delacour

practically glowing with enthusiasm while Elias stood stiffly by the door, a suspicious flush coloring his cheeks.

"Your ball gown will be delivered to your townhouse within the hour, Your Grace," Madame said, beaming at them both. "Along with all the necessary accessories, of course. And might I say what a pleasure it has been to serve the Duke and Duchess of Fyre? Such a handsome couple..."

"Yes, yes," Elias cut her off, though Lydia noticed his flush deepened. "Come along, Lydia. We have other matters to attend to."

As they settled into their carriage, Lydia couldn't resist saying, "Ten gowns, Your Grace? How very... extravagant of you."

"You are the Duchess of Fyre," he replied stiffly, staring determinedly out the window. "You should dress accordingly."

"Of course. Though I cannot help but wonder... would you want to... Host events?"

Elias's jaw tightened. "I have made no such decisions, but one never knows."

Lydia lifted a brow. "Ten gowns are quite expensive for not knowing," she said simply and he turned his gaze from her, a muscle jumping in his jaw. "Madame Delacour is an interesting woman," Lydia chose to continue. "She was quite talkative, wasn't she? Once she stopped being terrified of you, that is."

"I am not terrifying," Elias muttered, sounding remarkably like Peter when he was sulking.

"Of course not. You're merely... impressively dignified. Though I must say, your dignity seemed a bit shaken when I first stepped out in that gown."

"Lydia." His voice held a warning note, but she saw the way his hands clenched on his knees.

"Yes, Your Grace?"

"You're doing it again."

"Simply making observations," she said cheerfully. "Though I do hope some of those ten gowns will be suitable for dancing. It would be a shame to waste all that lovely silk standing in corners..."

"We are not having this discussion again."

"No? But what is it that you have against dancing? Perhaps that is something we should discuss, because I hardly think you were always so against..."

Her words cut off in a small gasp as Elias suddenly leaned across the carriage, bringing his face mere inches from hers. "Perhaps," he said softly, his voice dropping to a dangerous rumble that made her shiver, "we should discuss how impossibly beautiful you looked in that gown. How every man at tonight's ball will want to dance with you. How I'll have to watch them all trailing after you like lovesick puppies, while I..."

He broke off abruptly, seeming to realize what he'd been about to say. Lydia's heart was racing so fast she felt light-headed.

"While you what?" she whispered.

For a moment, she thought he might actually answer. His eyes dropped to her lips, and she felt herself swaying toward him almost unconsciously.

Then the carriage hit a bump, breaking the spell. Elias withdrew to his own seat so quickly he nearly knocked his hat askew.

"While I maintain proper dignity," he finished stiffly, though his voice was slightly hoarse. "As befits the Duke of Fyre."

"Of course," Lydia agreed, trying to steady her breathing. "Heaven forbid you should do anything improper. Like notice your wife's eyes. Or order her ten ball gowns. Or almost kiss her in a moving carriage."

The sound Elias made might have been a laugh or a groan. "You truly are impossible."

"So you keep saying." Lydia smiled, enjoying the way his eyes kept straying to her despite his best efforts. "Though I notice you haven't actually denied any of it."

The look he gave her could have melted steel, but Lydia merely smiled sweetly in response. After all, she thought as their carriage rolled toward home, if the Beast of Fyre was going to insist on maintaining his dignity, the least she could do was make it as difficult as possible for him.

And judging by the way his eyes had darkened when she'd worn that gown, she was succeeding admirably.

As they neared the townhouse, Lydia noticed Elias's eyes darken again as they passed a milliner's shop. "Perhaps," he said slowly, as though the words were being dragged from him, "we should consider some suitable accessories to accompany your new gowns."

"More shopping, Your Grace?" Lydia couldn't resist teasing him. "And here I thought you'd reached your limit for the day."

"One must be thorough," he replied with mock severity. "Unless you'd prefer to attend the ball without proper..."

"Oh no," Lydia interrupted quickly, fighting back a smile. "Far be it from me to interfere with your sudden interest in ladies' fashion. Though I must say, this newfound expertise is rather unexpected."

"I merely wish to ensure everything is..." he paused, searching for the right word.

"Perfect?" Lydia suggested innocently.

The look he gave her should have turned her to stone, but she merely smiled back, enjoying the way his jaw tightened. "Is something wrong with perfection?"

"Not at all," she agreed with a small smile. "And I suppose I should be grateful you didn't order matching ribbons for Mug. I fear even London's finest modistes might balk at creating fashionable attire for impossibly small dogs."

This time Elias did laugh, the sound rich and warm in the confined space of the carriage. "Don't give him ideas. The last thing we need is Peter deciding his pirate crew requires formal attire."

"Oh, but think how dignified they'd look! Tiny cravats, miniature waistcoats..."

"Lydia."

"Yes, Your Grace?"

"Stop plotting."

"I wouldn't dream of it," she said serenely. "I'm merely considering ways to maintain

proper dignity. Isn't that what you want?"

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His eyes met hers again, and this time there was no mistaking the heat in them. "What I want," he said softly, "is becoming increasingly complicated."

The carriage lurched to a stop before she could respond, and Elias was opening the door before she could gather her scattered thoughts. As he helped her down, his hand lingered on hers perhaps a moment longer than strictly necessary.

"We should prepare for the ball," he said, his voice rougher than usual. "And Lydia?"

"Yes?"

"Do wear your hair up tonight. With those pearl combs you brought from Fyre Manor."

She stared at him, startled. "You noticed my hair combs?"

"I notice everything about you," he admitted quietly. Then, before she could respond, he was striding away toward his study, leaving her standing in the entrance hall with her heart racing and her thoughts in delightful disarray.

Well, she thought as she made her way upstairs, perhaps the Beast of Fyre wasn't quite as immune to improper thoughts as he pretended to be. And if he wanted to see her in pearl combs and midnight silk... well, who was she to deny such a polite request?

After all, proper dignity could only withstand so much temptation.

CHAPTER 19

Lydia's fingers trembled slightly as she brushed them over the delicate pearl combs laid out on her dressing table. The cool, smooth surface of the pearls was in stark contrast to the heat in her cheeks. That Elias had noticed them—had specifically requested she wear them—was enough to make her pulse quicken, though she knew better than to allow herself to indulge in such thoughts. She caught sight of her flushed reflection in the mirror, the pinkness of her cheeks standing out like a confession, and shook her head at her own foolishness.

"You're being ridiculous," she muttered firmly to her reflection, as if it could offer some wisdom. "He's simply concerned with proper appearances. Nothing more."

Still, her mind replayed the memory of his rough voice when he'd mentioned the combs earlier, the way his gaze had lingered on her, leaving a trail of warmth in its wake, before he'd turned and strode away with that characteristic, impassive confidence. She couldn't shake the memory of the heated almost-kiss in the carriage, the way her pulse had stuttered at the closeness of him, at the tension between them that had been almost too much to bear.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts.

"Your Grace?" came Sarah's voice, muffled through the thick wood. "Some additional items have arrived from Madame Delacour for this evening."

"More?" Lydia's voice held a note of surprise. Surely the midnight silk gown was enough. What else could possibly be necessary? But when Sarah laid out the contents with a flourish, Lydia caught her breath. The stockings were crafted from the finest silk, translucent and soft to the touch, the evening gloves a perfect match for the gown, and the fan—a masterpiece, adorned with tiny crystal beads that would surely catch the light just so—left Lydia speechless.

"His Grace was most specific about the accessories, ma'am," Sarah said with a knowing smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "He sent a messenger to Madame Delacour with quite detailed instructions."

Lydia felt a blush creep into her cheeks once more, but before she could respond, there came another knock. A footman entered, bearing a message from Elias. His formal handwriting seemed to mock the unspoken tension between them.

"His Grace suggests a brief turn in the park before we return to prepare for the ball. The park is particularly pleasant at this time of day, should you wish to take some air before the evening's festivities."

Lydia bit back a smile at the carefully phrased words, so calculated in their formality. This was the same man who, mere hours ago, had nearly kissed her in a moving carriage, and who had apparently spent the interim sending messengers all over London with instructions about pearl combs and crystal-beaded fans.

"Sarah," she said with an attempt at nonchalance, though her voice wavered slightly, "perhaps the blue walking dress?"

It took only an hour before Lydia found herself descending the grand staircase of the townhouse. Elias was waiting at the entrance, a quiet figure in the shadowed hall. When he turned to face her, his eyes darkened, lingering on the soft blue silk of her gown and the way she had arranged her hair, with an effort to appear casually elegant.

"Shall we?" she asked, her voice soft, when he failed to speak immediately.

The streets of London were bustling as they emerged from the townhouse, the vibrant hum of the city alive around them. Carriages clattered past, their wheels striking the cobblestones in a rhythmic echo, while elegantly dressed ladies strolled along the

sidewalk, their parasols twirling against the clear summer sky.

"The park is lovely at this time of day," Lydia said with casual lightness, though she kept a close watch on Elias from the corner of her eye. She noticed the way the sunlight caught the silver threading through his dark hair, the way his stern profile softened imperceptibly as his gaze flicked toward her.

"Which is why I suggested we might make a brief turn," he said, though she caught the slight upturn at the corner of his mouth, as if he was amused by her attempt at keeping things light. "Though I warn you, if we encounter any pirates or dragons..."

"On your honor as a duke, I promise only proper, dignified entertainment," Lydia teased, slipping her hand into the crook of his arm. The warmth of his body through the fine fabric of his coat made her pulse quicken, and her fingers tightened slightly around his arm. "Though I did hear my sisters might be in town."

"Ah." Elias's expression darkened almost imperceptibly as they entered the park, the weight of his words hanging between them. "Your family."

As they strolled further into the park, several heads turned in their direction, whispers following in their wake. The Beast of Fyre rarely appeared in public, and never in something as frivolous as an afternoon stroll. Lydia could feel the tension beside her, the way Elias's muscles stiffened at the attention. He was a man used to remaining in the shadows, not under the public gaze.

"Relax," Lydia murmured, her voice soft but steady. She gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. "No one expects you to actually enjoy yourself. Your reputation for proper dignity is quite safe."

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The sound Elias made was half a laugh, quickly disguised as a cough. "You take far too much pleasure in tormenting me, madam."

"Only because you make it so entertaining, Your Grace."

Before Elias could respond, a familiar voice called out from behind them, one filled with surprised delight. "Lydia? Is it really you?"

Lydia turned and saw her sisters hurrying toward them, their dresses rustling with every step. Their parents followed at a slower, more dignified pace, their eyes wide with shock at the sight of Elias at Lydia's side.

"Jane! Marian! Diana!" Lydia started toward them, then caught herself, remembering her position. She glanced at Elias, who gave her a slight nod.

"Your Grace," her sisters curtsied in unison, their eyes darting between Lydia and Elias with barely concealed curiosity. Even Marian, usually the most composed, seemed unable to fully meet the Duke's gaze.

"My dear sisters," Lydia said warmly, maintaining proper dignity while her heart ached to embrace them. "May I present my husband, His Grace, the Duke of Fyre?" She turned to Elias. "Your Grace, these are my sisters - Lady Marian, Lady Jane, and Lady Diana."

"Your Grace," the girls murmured, dropping into deeper curtsies. Jane, ever the bold one, dared a quick glance up at him. "We're so pleased to finally meet you properly. Lydia's letters speak very highly of you."

"Do they indeed?" Elias's voice was cool, though Lydia caught the slight lift of his eyebrow.

"Oh yes!" Diana burst out, then immediately flushed at her own enthusiasm. "That is... we're so grateful for how kind you've been to our sister..."

"Diana. " Viscountess Prudence's sharp voice cut through the moment. "Remember yourself."

The girls withdrew slightly, though Jane managed to catch Lydia's hand and squeeze it quickly. "You look so well, sister. Marriage clearly agrees with you."

"Indeed," Marian added softly, her eyes warm with genuine affection. "Though we've missed you terribly. Haven't we, Mother?"

Viscountess Prudence forced a tight smile. "Of course, dear. Though naturally, we understand that Her Grace has... more important matters to attend to now."

Something in her tone made Lydia's spine stiffen, though she maintained her pleasant expression. "Actually, I was just thinking how lovely it would be to catch up properly. Won't you all join us for dinner tomorrow evening? We have so much to discuss."

Her parents exchanged panicked glances - clearly torn between their fear of the Duke and the social implications of refusing a duchess's invitation.

"Oh, please say yes!" Jane said eagerly, before her mother's sharp look silenced her.

"Of course, my dear," Viscountess Prudence finally managed, her voice slightly strained. "How... how kind of you to think of us."

"Wonderful," Lydia smiled, though she noticed how her family seemed to shrink away when Elias shifted his weight slightly. "Shall we say seven o'clock?"

"Perfect," her father said quickly, already beginning to guide his family away. "We... we look forward to it."

As they retreated, Lydia caught snippets of her sisters' whispered excitement - "Did you see how well she looks?" "But he's so tall!" "Do you think she's happy?" - before their mother shushed them firmly.

Lydia turned to Elias, her brow furrowed with exasperation and her lips pursed in a pout. "That wasn't necessary, you know. I'm quite used to their... reactions."

"Which is precisely the problem," Elias said, his voice low and hard. He stepped closer, turning toward her fully. "You are the Duchess of Fyre now, and it's time you started acting like it. Your own family treats you with barely concealed disdain, and you simply accept it."

"And you think I need to do that how, exactly?" she challenged, though her voice was soft.

"Stand up for yourself," Elias encouraged, but Lydia shook her head.

"And terrify my family like you seem to do to... well... some?"

"By demanding the respect you deserve." His blue eyes met hers, intense and unwavering. "If you won't put people in their place when they insult you, then I shall do it for you. I will not stand by and watch anyone treat my wife with disrespect—not even her own family."

Lydia felt a rush of heat flood her cheeks at his words. She opened her mouth to

protest, but he silenced her with the quiet force of his presence.

"You don't have to—" she began.

"Yes, I do." His voice was firm, resolute, and Lydia could see that nothing would make him back down. "You are my wife, the mistress of my home, the mother of my son. Anyone who forgets that will be swiftly reminded."

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Her heart began to race. She told herself firmly that this was about his pride—his position as a duke—and nothing more. He couldn't bear the idea of his duchess being insulted because it reflected poorly on him. It was simply a matter of propriety.

"You're doing it again," Elias said, his voice soft but perceptive.

"What?"

"Thinking too much." His hand lifted, almost as if in hesitation, before brushing a stray curl from her cheek. The touch was so light, it might have been a mere whisper of contact, but Lydia felt it deep in her chest. "Stop trying to explain away everything I do or say. Sometimes, Lydia, things are exactly what they appear to be."

She stared up at him, caught in the depth of his gaze. "And what do they appear to be, Your Grace?"

For a long moment, she thought he might answer her, his gaze heavy, his body close. But then a group of laughing ladies rounded the corner, and Elias stepped back, his expression closing off again.

"We should return home," he said, his tone suddenly gruff, as if retreating into himself. "You'll need time to prepare for the ball."

Lydia nodded, her breath catching in her throat as they walked back to the waiting carriage. She was acutely aware of his presence beside her, the lingering warmth where his fingers had brushed her skin.

This is nothing, she told herself firmly. Just a duke protecting his interests. Just proper dignity, social position, and...

"Stop that," Elias said suddenly, his voice low and amused.

"Stop what?"

"Whatever argument you're having with yourself. I can practically hear you thinking."

"I was merely considering the proper behavior for a duchess," Lydia replied primly, though her cheeks flushed again at the thought.

"No, you were trying to convince yourself that you were not worthy of being a duchess."

Lydia nearly tripped over her own feet. "I... what?", and that was precisely what she'd tell him if she had to

"You're not as subtle as you think, my dear." His voice had that dangerous softness again. "Though I must say, for someone so clever, you can be remarkably blind sometimes."

Before she could respond, they reached the carriage. Elias handed her in with perfect courtesy, his touch entirely proper, but Lydia felt it burn through her gloves nonetheless. As the carriage door closed behind them, they settled into the plush cushions in charged silence.

Lydia found herself thinking back to the pearl combs waiting in her chambers and the ball that lay ahead. Whatever happened this evening, she had a feeling it would be anything but dignified.

And judging by the way Elias's eyes kept straying to her, she wasn't the only one looking forward to it.

It was with this same excitement that mere hours later, Lydia stood before the mirror in her chamber, her heart racing as she surveyed herself in the reflection. Her maid had already begun the delicate process of preparing her for the evening, but Lydia's mind was elsewhere, lost in the memories of the afternoon's unexpected moments with Elias. The subtle brush of his fingers against her cheek, the dark glint in his eyes as he had looked at her in the park—those images kept repeating in her mind, making her pulse quicken every time she tried to focus on something else.

Sarah was now fastening the delicate pearl combs into Lydia's hair, the cool weight of the pearls adding an unexpected elegance to her usual hairstyle. Lydia's hair had been arranged in soft waves, the color rich against the blue of her gown, and the combs—so simple, yet so intricate—brought an added shine to the entire ensemble. Her mind returned to the way Elias had instructed the modiste, the careful attention he had paid to every detail, and the knowing smile Sarah had worn when she'd revealed the accessories he had chosen.

"Your Grace, may I help you with your gloves?" Sarah's voice broke into her thoughts, and Lydia blinked, as if waking from a dream.

"Yes, please," she said, her voice slightly strained as Sarah slid the delicate silk gloves onto her arms. They were a perfect match for the gown, reaching just above her elbows, and the smooth texture was a constant reminder of the evening that awaited her.

When Sarah had finished with the gloves, she stepped back, admiring her work. "Your Grace, you are truly radiant. His Grace will be most pleased."

Lydia's stomach tightened at the mention of Elias. "I hope so," she murmured, her

gaze slipping back to her reflection. It was difficult to deny how the gown transformed her, how it made her feel like someone else—someone who could walk confidently into a room and command attention. The woman she saw before her was polished, poised, the epitome of a duchess. But beneath the layers of silk and pearls, her thoughts were anything but steady.

"Your Grace, the carriage awaits," came the voice of a footman, his voice soft through the door.

Lydia nodded, forcing a calmness into her voice as she stood. She turned to Sarah with a fleeting smile. "Thank you. I'll be ready in a moment."

As the maid left the room, Lydia paused for one final look at herself in the mirror. The pearl combs glistened against her dark hair, the gown shimmered like a night sky filled with stars, and she felt as if the weight of the evening had already begun to settle on her shoulders.

She took a deep breath as she stepped into the hallway and found Elias waiting for her at the bottom of the staircase, dressed in a tailored black suit that only highlighted his striking features. His gaze lifted to meet hers, and for a moment, the world outside the townhouse seemed to fade away. The way his eyes swept over her was both intense and appraising, like he was taking in every detail of her, from the soft curves of her figure to the careful arrangement of her hair. It was the first time she saw something in his gaze that could almost be described as... tender.

"Shall we?" His voice was low, but there was a warmth in it that made her heart flutter unexpectedly.

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Lydia nodded, but the words lodged in her throat, and they descended the staircase together in silence. The ball loomed ahead, but all Lydia could think of was how Elias had looked at her—how his attention seemed to be both a privilege and a burden all at once.

As they reached the door, Elias extended his arm with the same perfect courtesy as always, but Lydia could not ignore the sudden tightness in her chest. She had no idea what to expect from him tonight, no idea how the evening would unfold. But one thing was certain: her life had already shifted, and she wasn't sure whether she was ready for what came next.

But the carriage door was already open, and with one final glance at Elias, Lydia stepped inside. The night awaited. And with it, the promise of something far more than she had anticipated.

CHAPTER 20

The carriage jolted slightly as it rolled over the cobblestone streets, but inside, Lydia felt nothing but a strange stillness. Her hands were neatly folded in her lap, her fingers occasionally brushing the smooth silk of her gown. The midnight fabric felt cool to the touch, its intricate design catching the candlelight with each subtle shift of her hands.

Beside her, Elias sat with the same stiff formality he always maintained. His jaw was clenched, and his eyes, though seemingly directed out the window, appeared distant, preoccupied with thoughts she couldn't reach. Lydia studied him, noting the tension in his posture, the slight furrow between his brows. The Duke of Fyre, always

composed, always powerful, seemed... unsettled tonight.

Lydia bit her lip. She had been quiet on the ride over, lost in her own thoughts, but now the silence between them was stretching too long. It felt heavy. As though they were both on the precipice of something neither could quite name.

"Are you nervous?" she asked softly, her voice cutting through the quiet.

Elias blinked and turned toward her, his lips pressing together in an unreadable line. "Nervous?" He met her gaze with a half-smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Hardly."

She tilted her head slightly, studying him more closely. "I've never seen you quite like this," she murmured. "I thought I was the one who would be nervous."

"I'm not nervous," he repeated, his tone more firm this time, but there was an undercurrent to his words that Lydia couldn't place. He didn't look at her directly, his gaze still focused on the passing scenery outside.

Lydia sighed, feeling a twinge of concern. There was something about the way he held himself tonight—a vulnerability masked by that immovable, dignified façade. She had grown accustomed to the Duke's reticence, but there were moments when she wanted to reach beneath that armor, to understand what lurked behind his stoic expression. But tonight, perhaps more than ever before, Elias seemed untouchable.

"I suppose we should enjoy it," she said, trying to lighten the mood. "After all, it's not every day a duchess makes her first appearance at a ball."

Elias finally turned toward her, his eyes softening just slightly. He didn't respond immediately, as if searching for the right words, or perhaps any words at all. "Just don't let them think you're like them," he said at last, his voice rough with something

Lydia couldn't quite place. "The world of balls and gowns isn't worth your time. You've already proven your worth to me."

Lydia's heart skipped a beat at the sincerity in his words. She didn't know how to respond, so instead, she settled for a simple, "Thank you," the words laden with more meaning than she could put into them.

The carriage slowed as they approached the grand Hartley estate, the towering columns of the ballroom visible in the distance. Lydia could feel her pulse quicken, the moment of truth approaching. She was about to step into that glittering world as the Duchess of Fyre, her every move watched and scrutinized by hundreds of strangers.

"Ready?" Elias asked, his voice breaking through her thoughts. He extended his arm, his usual composed expression back in place, though his eyes held a spark of something unreadable.

Lydia took his arm, feeling the warmth of his touch through the fine fabric of her gown. "As ready as I'll ever be," she said, though there was an unspoken weight to her words.

The carriage came to a complete stop, and before Lydia could say another word, the door swung open. She stepped out first, her gown swishing around her legs like a pool of midnight silk. The sound of the crowd inside the ballroom drifted to her ears—laughter, soft music, the clinking of crystal glasses.

For a fleeting moment, she felt a pang of nervousness. But then Elias was at her side, his presence grounding her. He was as imposing and regal as ever, his dark blue eyes scanning the crowd with the air of a man who was completely at home in such an environment.

Lydia's heart skipped as she noticed the sudden hush that fell over the guests. The crowd parted like the Red Sea, all eyes turning toward her. She felt the weight of their gaze like a physical thing, but it was Elias's gaze that truly caught her—his eyes locked on hers with such intensity that it nearly stole her breath.

For a moment, it was as if the entire world stopped. Nothing existed but the two of them, standing at the top of the grand staircase in the glow of hundreds of flickering candles. Lydia's breath caught in her throat. How could she possibly be dignified in such a moment?

"You look..." Elias's voice was low, thick with something she couldn't name. He paused as if lost for words, his gaze raking over her with a possessiveness that was both electrifying and overwhelming.

Lydia smiled softly, unable to resist teasing him. "Yes, Your Grace? Do I look suitably dignified?"

Elias's expression softened, a fleeting smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "You know perfectly well how you look," he muttered under his breath, though there was no hiding the admiration in his eyes.

The whispers from the crowd began, but they weren't the usual fearful murmurs about the Beast of Fyre. This time, Lydia heard words like beautiful, extraordinary, and gracious. She felt a flush creep up her neck at the praise. It was not how she had ever been seen - it was not even how she had ever imagined herself.

With an elegant bow, Elias offered her his arm. "Shall we?" he asked, his tone carrying a faint note of amusement.

Lydia placed her hand on his arm, and together they descended the staircase. Every step she took felt like an eternity, the silence growing heavier as they made their way

into the ballroom. She could feel the eyes of the room on them, but Elias's presence beside her was like an anchor.

At the foot of the stairs, Elias turned to face her. "You are truly one of a kind," he said quietly, a strange smile playing around his lips.

Before she could reply, before she could begin to ask him if it were a good thing or not ,the murmurs around them began to shift, and Elias's attention turned to a group of men clustered near the far side of the room. "Lord Pembroke wishes to discuss a business venture," he said, his voice low. "I should speak with him."

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Lydia nodded, her eyes scanning the crowd. "Then let us go," she said firmly, already steering him toward the elderly lord.

"Your Graces," Lord Pembroke greeted them with an affable smile. "How lovely to see you both this evening."

"The pleasure is ours," Lydia replied warmly, noting how several of the men shifted uncomfortably, clearly unsure how to interact with the Beast of Fyre's new duchess. "I understand you've been discussing the new railway line through Yorkshire?"

Lord Pembroke's eyebrows rose slightly in surprise. "Indeed, Your Grace. Though I wouldn't have expected..." He caught himself. "That is, it's rather a complex matter."

"Oh, but fascinating, don't you think?" Lydia continued smoothly. "The potential impact on local commerce alone is worth considering. I was reading just yesterday about similar developments in Lancashire."

Elias's hand tightened slightly on her arm, and she caught the flash of approval in his eyes.

"You're familiar with the Lancashire project?" another gentleman – Sir James Whitmore – asked, clearly intrigued.

"The quarterly reports make for interesting reading," Lydia smiled. "Though I must say, their proposed route seems rather inefficient compared to what Lord Pembroke is suggesting for Yorkshire."

"You've read the quarterly reports?" Sir James couldn't quite hide his amazement.

"My wife," Elias said quietly, his deep voice carrying a note of pride that made Lydia's heart skip, "has quite a head for business."

"Indeed," Lord Pembroke nodded, his initial surprise giving way to genuine respect. "Perhaps, Your Grace, you'd care to share your thoughts on the matter of the western route? We've been debating the merits of following the river versus cutting through the hills."

"The river route would be costlier initially," Lydia observed, "but considering the potential for future expansion and the existing trade routes..." She glanced at Elias. "Though Your Grace has far more experience with such matters."

"Please," Elias's lips curved slightly, "continue. Your analysis matches my own thoughts exactly."

The men gathered closer as Lydia elaborated, their earlier stiffness forgotten in the excitement of discussing business. She watched with quiet pleasure as Elias joined in, his brilliant mind cutting through complex problems with ease. The way he commanded attention without ever raising his voice, the depth of his knowledge, the subtle power he wielded – it was captivating.

"Remarkable insight," Lord Pembroke murmured as Elias explained a particularly clever solution to their funding concerns. "Though I suspect your duchess's suggestion about involving the local merchants' guild would smooth the way considerably."

"Lydia has a gift for seeing connections others miss," Elias agreed, his eyes meeting hers with unmistakable warmth. "It's one of her many... unexpected qualities."

The genuine admiration in his voice made Lydia flush with pleasure. They worked well together, she realized – her diplomatic skills complementing his strategic mind, her warmth softening his intimidating presence.

"I must say," Sir James commented, looking between them, "you make quite the formidable pair. The ton won't know what hit them."

"Let's hope not," Elias murmured, and Lydia caught the ghost of a smile playing around his lips. "Though I suspect they're about to find out."

"She is quite a woman, your duchess," Lord Pembroke murmured to Elias as the conversation began to wrap up. "You're a fortunate man."

Elias's hand tightened almost imperceptibly on her arm. "Indeed, I am."

Before Lydia could respond, the opening strains of a waltz filled the air, and Elias's hand was suddenly at the small of her back, guiding her toward the dance floor.

"You don't dance," she said softly, half in disbelief.

"I will tonight," he replied, his voice rough. "Besides, you have asked me so many times that I had no choice but to give in. Do not make me beg. Dance with me, Lydia."

Her heart fluttered at the intensity in his words, and with a smile that barely touched her lips, she nodded. "If you insist."

As they glided across the floor, Lydia was acutely aware of the warmth of his hand at her waist, the closeness of their bodies, the feel of his strong fingers encircling hers. She hadn't expected this—hadn't expected him to let down his walls so easily. He was dancing with her, but more than that, it felt as if they were opening a door to

something neither of them had fully explored yet.

"You're shaking," Elias observed quietly as they moved in perfect synchrony.

"I'm perfectly composed," Lydia said, her voice a little breathless. "As a duchess should be."

His lips twitched in amusement. "Ah, yes, your famous composure. Like when you told Lady Pembroke her hat looked like something a dog might have dug up from the garden?"

Lydia couldn't suppress a laugh. "I merely pointed out the fact that it did resemble something excavated. Diplomatic honesty."

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Elias chuckled softly, his hand at her waist tightening as they continued to dance. For a moment, it was just the two of them—no titles, no expectations—just the intimacy of shared laughter and an easy connection that felt entirely new.

"Tell me," he said softly, his voice dropping, "why does it matter so much to you? Being the perfect duchess?"

Lydia's heart gave a small lurch at his question. She tensed slightly. "I don't know what you mean."

He didn't respond immediately, as if waiting for her to realize it herself. The dance continued, the music swelling around them, but in that moment, all she could hear was his voice, asking a question she didn't have an answer to yet.

"Shall we take a walk outside?" she suggested impulsively, the cloying heat of the ballroom along with Elias's presence so close to her becoming a bit much.

A bit of a smile played around her husband's lips and he nodded as he led her outside wordlessly. The second they stepped out of the doors, into the coolness of the night air, Lydia drew in a deep breath, relishing the momentary peace.

"Too warm inside?" Elias asked softly, his hand still at her waist as he guided her down a secluded path.

"A little," she admitted, though warmth wasn't entirely to blame for her flushed cheeks. The memory of their dance lingered, the way he'd held her so close, how perfectly they'd moved together.

They walked in companionable silence, the sounds of the ball fading behind them. Lydia was acutely aware of his presence beside her, the subtle scent of his cologne, the way his thumb absently traced circles on her hand where it rested in the crook of his arm.

"You surprised them tonight," he said finally, his voice low and intimate in the darkness.

"Did I surprise you as well?" She dared to look up at him, finding his eyes already on her face.

"You always surprise me, Lydia." The way he said her name made her shiver. "From the very first day, when you dared to stand up to the Beast of Fyre..."

"You're not a beast," she whispered, turning to face him. "You never were."

Elias's hand came up to cup her cheek, his touch feather-light. "Perhaps not," he murmured. "Or perhaps you've simply tamed me without my noticing."

Before she could respond, he bent his head and captured her lips with his. The kiss was gentle at first, almost hesitant, but then Lydia sighed against his mouth and something in Elias broke. His arms wrapped around her, pulling her closer as the kiss deepened. Lydia's hands found their way into his hair, something she'd dreamed of doing for so long...

The sound of approaching voices shattered the moment. They sprang apart, both breathing heavily. Lydia hurriedly smoothed her skirts while Elias ran a hand through his disheveled hair.

"I... that is..." For once, the mighty Duke of Fyre seemed at a loss for words.

"We should return inside," Lydia said quickly, her voice unsteady. "People will wonder..."

"Yes. Of course." Elias's face was already closing off, his duke's mask sliding back into place. "The carriage should be ready."

The ride home was excruciating in its silence, both of them carefully looking anywhere but at each other. Lydia's lips still tingled from his kiss, and her mind raced with questions she didn't dare voice. What had the kiss meant? Would he pretend it never happened? Would they ever talk about the growing connection between them?

But as they reached Fyre Manor, Elias merely helped her down from the carriage with perfect courtesy, bid her a stiff good night, and disappeared into his study.

Lydia stood in the entrance hall for a long moment, her fingers touching her lips where his kiss still burned. "Oh, you impossible man," she whispered to the empty hall. "What am I going to do with you?"

Only silence answered, broken by the distant sound of Elias's study door closing with firm finality.

CHAPTER 21

When the sun rose a few mornings later, Lydia stood at her bedroom window, watching the flurry of motion outside, her fingers absently touching her lips. The memory of that moonlit kiss still haunted her, a lingering sensation that seemed to burn hotter every time she thought of it. Even now, days later, she could feel the ghost of his touch, the way his hands had trembled slightly as they held her.

She shook her head quickly. There was no time to ponder about kisses and her husband. Tonight... she swallowed nervously. Tonight her parents were coming to

dinner.

Lydia could not help but sigh deeply at the thought. It wasn't that she didn't love her family, but...

"Your Grace," It was a young Mayfair footman who appeared at her door and she turned quickly. It had to be important if the man came all the way to her bedchamber.

"His Grace requests your presence in the drawing room," the young man said simply before disappearing once again.

Lydia breathed deeply, then turned around and slowly made her way downstairs.

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Elias was seated in the parlor and he rose when she appeared, a hesitant smile appearing on his face.

Lydia lifted her chin, despite the slight trembling of her hands at the sight of him.

"Sit," he encouraged gruffly, his eyes remaining on her as she slowly took a seat across from him. Elias sighed deeply and ran a hand through his hair - disheveling it ever so slightly.

"I was just wondering," he said now, though she was rather certain that he was avoiding her gaze, "if you were ready for tonight's dinner with your parents."

"No." The word left her mouth before she could think more about it and she slammed her hand over it, an attempt to take the word back.

"I apologize," she said quickly. "I just... I merely... I... I suppose, I will be ready," she finished lamely and he leaned forward slightly, a smile playing around his lips.

"Lydia," he spoke in that deep voice that sent shivers down her spine. "I understand that your relationship with your family is complicated. That is why I asked - not out of politeness, but because it matters."

Lydia leaned back slightly in her chair at this. "I am not quite used to having my feelings matter," she admitted, almost in a whisper and Elias looked at her sympathetically.

"I want you to try to stand up to them tonight," he counseled gently. "You need not

fight. But at least... own your voice."

"I suppose I can try," she muttered - though in truth she knew it would not happen. The conversation came to a sudden halt and she looked at her teacup intently.

"Well, I have work to do," Elias said now, rising to his feet. "I shall see you this evening. Wear... wear midnight blue."

A smile played around his lips. "It suits you," he said before walking out calmly and Lydia huffed.

She was quite certain that he gained some type of satisfaction out of being maddeningly frustrating. With pursed lips, she put her teacup down before making her way up to her bedchamber again.

It was mere hours later when Sarah entered her chamber and soon, Lydia found herself dressed in a plain gown - a deep blue one, though not exactly midnight blue - and her hair pinned up in a simple style.

"My parents should be arriving soon," she muttered as Sarah pinned the last curl. She sighed, and closed her eyes.

"You look lovely, Your Grace," Sarah said now and with a soft smile, Lydia rose to her feet. "Thank you, Sarah," she muttered. "And now we wait."

Sarah curtsied quickly before rushing out and Lydia turned to the window - watching as the carriage drew nearer, nerves tightening into a taut ball in her stomach.

She made her way downstairs slowly - even from the hallway she could hear the door opening and her mother's voice traveling through the townhouse.

"Hmm. It seems somewhat dreary. Unadorned, even . There is nothing personal, I see."

"Father," Lydia greeted, attempting to keep her voice light. "Mother. Welcome."

"Hmm," her mother answered, peering past her. "And where exactly is our son-in-law?"

Lydia searched for an answer desperately. Elias must have gotten distractedly busy with work, she knew - but there was no way her parents would easily accept that answer.

"I am right here," her husband's deep voice boomed through the foyer just as she opened her mouth. "Forgive me, my lord. My lady. I was quite busy with work."

Within seconds, her mother's hardened look cracked and she nodded quickly at Elias.

"Oh, it is not a problem, Your Grace," she swooned. "We are simply delighted to have dinner with you."

Elias kept quiet, simply putting a hand beneath her elbow and leading her to the dining room.

Soon, plates were laid down in front of the four and Elias turned his gaze to Lydia.

"The appetiser looks lovely."

At this, Prudence lifted a not-so-subtle brow. "Oh, Lydia dear... did you plan this?"

Lydia glanced at her husband before nodding at her mother. "I did, mother," she said simply.

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Prudence grimaced as she brought her fork to her lips. "And what is in the Croûte?"

Lydia took a deep breath. "Poultry, mother."

"I'd have preferred liver," she said and Elias looked at his wife pointedly. Lydia, however, kept her head down - finishing the rest of her appetizer in silence.

Prudence, of course, had something to say about every dish. The salmon was too bland, while the roast beef was too rich and the mint sauce not quite as refreshing as it should have been. The vegetable medley lacked flavor and the fruit tart was far too sweet.

"It seems, my lady," Elias spoke at last, his voice cold, "that you have a bit of a problem with my cook."

"Oh, no," Prudence said quickly. "It is just that Lydia was never fond of learning much. I am merely trying to show her that she needs to keep a finger on the pulse of the staff at all times. You'll forgive her, of course. It will take some time for her."

Elias's eyes narrowed at this. "I find everything quite tasteful," he said now. "But if you are uncertain about the capabilities of my wife or my staff, perhaps we should attempt this dinner once we are back in the country."

"It will be... a privilege," Silas said now, glancing at his wife with raised brows. Prudence nodded slowly.

"It will be an honor to visit again," she said. "And I am sure your sisters will be happy

for the opportunity."

Lydia nodded, still half-dazed as she glanced at her husband. "Perhaps in time," he said now, "You will notice that you can be proud of your daughter."

With that, he pushed his chair out and stood - making it quite clear to all that the dinner was over.

Though she was not quite eager to have her parents come for dinner once they returned home, Lydia was relieved about returning to the country. Where she stood at the window the next day as she waited for things to get ready, her heart raced as she thought of the visit to London and the feelings it had awakened in her.

"Your Grace?" Sarah's voice cut through Lydia's thoughts, gentle but firm. Lydia turned to see the maid standing in the doorway, holding a gown over her arm. The midnight blue silk caught the light, reminding Lydia of another dress, another night. "The last of your gowns are packed. Though perhaps you'd like to keep out the midnight blue silk for..."

"No," Lydia cut her off, a little too quickly, a little too sharply. She took a breath, steadying herself. "No, I think... I think simpler attire will suffice for the journey."

Sarah paused for a moment, her eyebrows raised, no doubt questioning the sudden shift in Lydia's preferences. The maid had been with her long enough to recognize when something was amiss, and lately, everything about Lydia had been slightly off-kilter. "As you wish, Your Grace." Sarah's tone was carefully neutral, but Lydia caught the concerned glance she threw in her direction.

Lydia turned back to the window, watching as another trunk was loaded onto the carriage. "I suppose everything else is ready for departure?"

"Nearly so, Your Grace. The kitchen staff is preparing a basket for the journey, and the last of the correspondence has been sorted." Sarah hesitated, then added with careful deliberation, "His Grace asked me to inform you that the carriage will be ready within the hour."

The mention of the carriage made Lydia's heart beat a little faster. The prospect of several hours confined together in the carriage should have been dreadful, but instead, it filled her with a strange sense of hope. Perhaps Elias would finally speak with her, finally acknowledge what had happened between them. After all, they couldn't continue to ignore it, could they? The tension between them had grown so thick it was almost tangible, like storm clouds gathering before rain.

She made her way downstairs, her steps brisk despite her inner turmoil. The morning light streamed through the townhouse windows, creating patterns on the polished floor. She had grown fond of this house over their stay in London, but now its familiar corners seemed to hold too many memories.

When she reached the drawing room, she found Elias deep in conversation with his secretary. Papers and ledgers were spread out across the table, and Elias was absorbed in the details, his brow furrowed in concentration. He looked tired, she noticed, with subtle shadows under his eyes that suggested he'd been sleeping as poorly as she had.

"I'll need to review these contracts during the journey," he was saying, not even glancing up as Lydia entered. His voice was clipped, professional. "Ensure they're properly organized."

"Of course, Your Grace." The secretary's voice was respectful, though Lydia could hear the faint hint of nervousness in it. Everyone in the household had noticed the strange tension between their master and mistress. "And the letters from Lord Pembroke regarding the railway venture?"

"Those as well. In fact, bring everything from this morning's post. The journey should provide adequate time to address it all." Elias shuffled through some papers, his movements precise and controlled. Too controlled, Lydia thought.

She felt her heart deflate at the sight of him—completely absorbed in work, ignoring her entirely. Just like he had been for days now. She had hoped, foolishly perhaps, that he might be waiting for her, that the distance he'd put between them was a temporary hesitation. But this... this was worse than she'd feared.

She took a breath and steadied herself, drawing on years of social training. "Sarah," she called, her voice calm but firm, "please fetch my embroidery and that novel Lady Hartley recommended. If His Grace intends to work, I may as well make productive use of the time as well."

She saw Elias's shoulders stiffen slightly at her words, though he didn't turn around. His pen paused for just a moment before continuing its scratch across the paper. He had heard her, and that was enough. Let him bury himself in business. Let him hide behind it. She was more than capable of maintaining her own composure.

The departure itself was a blur of last-minute instructions and farewells to the townhouse staff. Lydia found herself seated in the carriage before she had time to second-guess her decision to join Elias rather than taking her own carriage. The leather seats were warm from the morning sun, and the familiar smell of polished wood and leather surrounded her.

The first hour of their journey passed in tense, pointed silence, broken only by the soft scratch of Elias's pen and the occasional rustle of papers. Outside, London gradually gave way to countryside, but Lydia barely noticed the changing landscape. Her eyes lingered on the page of her book, but she couldn't focus on the words. She couldn't do anything but think of Elias, sitting across from her, so close yet somehow unreachable.

She imagined his fingers lightly tracing the curve of her waist, the way he had whispered her name, the rawness in his voice when he'd told her that one kiss had made him want things he shouldn't. But that was the problem, wasn't it? He shouldn't want her. He was the Duke of Fyre, after all, and she was just his wife in a marriage of convenience. A practical arrangement that had become anything but practical.

The carriage swayed gently as it traversed a particularly bumpy stretch of road. Lydia gripped her book tighter, trying to focus on the words, but they swam before her eyes. A lock of hair had come loose from her careful morning arrangement, and she could feel it brushing against her neck, a maddening distraction.

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"You've been staring at the same page for twenty minutes," Elias said suddenly, his voice cutting through her thoughts. There was something in his tone—amusement? Frustration? She couldn't quite tell.

Lydia jumped, her cheeks flushing. She hadn't realized he'd been watching her. "I'm simply... savoring the prose."

"Indeed?" Elias's voice was dry, skeptical. He set down his pen, giving her his full attention for the first time that day. "And what, pray tell, is this fascinating book about?"

Lydia glanced at the cover, as if it might provide her with the answer. The gilt letters seemed to mock her. "It's... about proper behavior. For ladies."

Elias's brow lifted, and something flickered in his eyes—a dangerous sort of amusement. "Is it indeed? And does it mention anything about proper behavior for duchesses who kiss their husbands in gardens?"

Lydia's breath caught in her throat. Heat flooded her cheeks, and she could feel the temperature in the carriage rise. Outside, clouds drifted across the sun, casting shifting shadows through the carriage windows. "I'm sure I wouldn't know. I haven't reached that chapter yet."

"Hmm." His voice dropped to something more intimate as his gaze met hers, and she could see the muscle working in his jaw. "Do let me know when you do. I find myself quite interested in the proper protocol for such situations."

Lydia didn't trust herself to speak. She could only manage a soft laugh, a nervous, self-conscious sound that she hated. The air between them thickened as she looked at him, but she couldn't bring herself to say anything more. Not now. Not after everything. Her fingers twisted in her lap, gripping the fabric of her dress.

The silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken words. A bird called somewhere outside, and the steady rhythm of hooves on the road seemed to mock the racing of her heart. The morning light caught the silver at Elias's temples, and Lydia found herself remembering how soft his hair had felt under her fingers that night in the garden.

"Perhaps if you hadn't been so busy avoiding me, we might have discussed it already," Lydia muttered, her frustration bubbling over before she could stop herself. The words hung in the air between them, impossible to take back.

Elias's pen stilled. He turned his head slightly, his eyes narrowing. A muscle twitched in his cheek. "I have not been avoiding you."

"No?" Lydia's tone was sharp, her patience thinning. All the frustration of the past few days seemed to crystallize in this moment. "Then what would you call spending an entire day suddenly 'remembering urgent business' whenever I enter a room? Or taking your meals in your study? Or..."

"That's enough." His voice was tight, controlled.

"Is it? Because I rather think we haven't said enough. Not nearly enough." She could hear the tremor in her own voice, betraying her calm facade.

He clenched his jaw, the muscles in his neck visibly tightening. "I call it maintaining proper dignity while I..." He trailed off suddenly, the tension in his body palpable as he seemed to search for words.

"While you what?" Lydia demanded, her voice rising despite her efforts to keep it steady. "While you pretend nothing happened? While you convince yourself that one kiss means nothing? While you..."

"Lydia. It cannot. You need to understand. I had... an emotional moment, I was swept away. I do not want to give you a false impression of what... I don't..." He sighed deeply. "I don't want to hurt you," he said at last, his voice soft.

Lydia's breath caught in her throat. "Oh." The single syllable seemed inadequate for the storm of emotions his words had unleashed.

For a long moment, there was nothing but the sound of their breathing and the steady rhythm of the carriage wheels. The atmosphere shifted, charged with unspoken emotion. Elias ran a hand through his hair, disheveling it slightly in a way that made Lydia's fingers itch to smooth it back into place. A shaft of sunlight caught his signet ring, sending brief flashes of light across the carriage's interior.

"This isn't..." he started, his voice low and rough, as if he was struggling to find the right words. His hands gripped his knees, knuckles white with tension. "This is supposed to be a marriage of convenience. Simple. Uncomplicated. And then you had to go and..."

"And what?" Lydia whispered, her voice a breath. She leaned forward slightly, drawn despite herself.

"And make me dream of a life... I had given up on long ago," he finished, his voice thick with frustration, regret, and something else Lydia couldn't name. Something that made her heart race and her breath catch.

Before she could respond, the carriage hit a particularly bad rut, sending her lurching forward. Elias's hands shot out to steady her, pulling her closer to him. His grip was

firm on her shoulders, and for a moment, their faces were just inches apart. The air between them crackled with awareness, their breaths mingling, and Lydia could feel her heart race in her chest. His cologne filled her senses, that familiar scent that had haunted her dreams for days.

"We should..." Lydia's voice faltered, embarrassingly breathless. She could feel the warmth of his hands through the fabric of her dress, burning like brands against her skin.

"Yes," Elias agreed, though he didn't immediately release her. His hands lingered, his eyes dark with something that made her pulse race. "We should."

Their hands fell away from each other, and silence descended once more as the carriage continued its journey through the darkening countryside. Neither spoke again, each lost in their own thoughts, the weight of unspoken words hanging between them like a heavy curtain. Outside, the afternoon sun began its slow descent, casting long shadows across the rolling hills, while inside the carriage, two people sat in silence, each acutely aware of the other's presence and the growing impossibility of maintaining their careful charade of indifference.

CHAPTER 22

The sun was already setting when the carriage finally pulled into the long drive of Fyre Manor, painting the sky in shades of amber and deep rose. The autumn air had grown crisp as evening approached, carrying with it the scent of woodsmoke and fallen leaves. Lydia watched through the window as the familiar silhouette of the house emerged from the twilight, its dark windows reflecting the last rays of sunlight like dozens of watchful eyes.

"Here we are," Elias spoke as Fyre Mansion came into view. "Home at last."

Lydia shifted slightly, excitement rising within her. "Oh, I do hope that Peter is still up," she said now, her eyes alight with joy. "I cannot wait to give him his gifts."

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A dark frown settled between Elias's brows.

"He ought to be asleep by now," he said darkly and Lydia felt her lip curl into something akin to a pout.

"But... Couldn't we just tell him that we are home?" she dared. Elias, however, shook his head firmly.

"I understand that you are eager to see him," he attempted to explain, "But we cannot change his routine."

Lydia sighed deeply and nodded. "I understand," she said, her tone almost sad. "It is just that he would have been so excited to see us."

"He'll be just as excited tomorrow," Elias said quietly, a gentle smile playing around his lips. His voice was gentle, but there was an underlying weariness to it that made Lydia pause. For a moment, she caught a glimpse of the man beneath the duke's mask—someone who perhaps carried his own burdens, his own fears. Someone who might understand the ache in her heart at not being able to see Peter immediately.

"Yes," she said softly, not trusting herself to say more. The simple word hung between them, weighted with all the things they hadn't said during their journey. Through the window, she could see servants emerging from the house, their lanterns bobbing like fireflies in the gathering dusk.

The carriage door opened, letting in a rush of cool evening air that carried the scent of roses from the garden. She stepped down, accepting the footman's assistance, her legs

slightly unsteady after the long journey. The gravel shifted beneath her feet, and she took a moment to steady herself, breathing in the familiar scents of home—the roses her predecessor had planted, the ancient stone of the manor itself, the subtle hint of smoke from the kitchen chimneys.

When she turned back, she caught Elias watching her, his expression unreadable in the gathering darkness. For a moment, she thought he might say something, might acknowledge the charged conversation they'd shared on the journey. His hands twitched at his sides, as if he might reach for her.

But before either of them could speak, Mrs. Winters appeared at the top of the steps, her practical figure illuminated by the light spilling from the entrance hall. The housekeeper's grey hair was, as always, perfectly arranged beneath her cap, and her black dress seemed to absorb the remaining light. "Your Grace," she addressed Elias, bobbing a quick curtsy, "a moment of your time regarding tomorrow's arrangements? There are quite a number of documents that came for you, each marked more urgent than the rest. The business seems to be doing quite well right now according to Mister Taylor- he believes your marriage all but recreated a significant amount of interest in you and the company. "

And just like that, the moment shattered. Lydia watched as Elias's shoulders straightened, his duke's mask sliding firmly back into place. The transformation was subtle but complete—the vulnerable man from the carriage disappeared, replaced by the composed aristocrat she had first married.

"Of course, Mrs. Winters. I'll be right there." His tone was perfectly cordial, perfectly distant. He glanced briefly at Lydia, inclining his head slightly. "Good evening, Your Grace. I trust you'll rest well after our journey."

The formality in his voice made something in Lydia's chest ache. How could he do that? How could he switch so easily from the man who had confessed to wanting her,

to this polite stranger? But then, wasn't that exactly what she had agreed to when she married him? A proper duke, who knew his duties and maintained appropriate distance?

She didn't wait to hear more. She made her way inside, her steps measured and careful, though her heart was racing. The familiar halls of Fyre Manor seemed different somehow, as if the tension between her and Elias had changed the very air within its walls. The portraits of past Fyres watched her passage, their painted eyes seeming to hold new judgment. Had any of them ever found themselves in such a situation? Had any of their carefully arranged marriages ever transformed into something more complicated, more dangerous?

Sarah was already waiting in her bedchamber and Lydia flashed the girl a grateful smile.

"A bath, Your Grace?" Sarah asked, already moving toward the copper tub that had been brought in. Steam rose from the water, scented with the lavender oil Lydia preferred. "The journey must have been tiring."

Lydia nodded, grateful for the suggestion. Perhaps the warm water would help ease the tension that had settled between her shoulders. Sarah helped her out of her traveling clothes, each movement practiced and efficient. The routine should have been soothing, but Lydia found herself utterly sensitive to every touch, every sound. Her skin felt too tight, as if it could barely contain the emotions churning beneath.

As she sank into the bath, she closed her eyes, trying to sort through the tumult of her thoughts. The water was perfect—hot enough to pink her skin, but not scalding. Usually, this was her favorite time of day, when she could let the warmth seep into her bones and wash away any troubles. But tonight, not even the familiar comfort of her evening routine could quiet her mind.

Sarah worked silently, washing Lydia's hair with gentle hands. The scent of lavender filled the air, mixing with the steam. Through the closed door, Lydia could hear the distant sounds of the household settling for the night—footsteps in the corridor, the faint clink of china as the last of the dinner services were put away, the soft thud of doors closing.

"Cook kept some supper warm for you, Your Grace," Sarah said as she began to dry Lydia's hair. "Shall I have it brought up?"

The thought of food made Lydia's stomach turn. "No, thank you, Sarah. Just some tea, perhaps." She couldn't imagine eating, not with her nerves still jangling from the day's events.

As Sarah worked, Lydia's thoughts drifted to Peter. By now, he would be deep in sleep in the nursery wing, perhaps clutching the stuffed bear she had given him on her last birthday. She had missed him fiercely during their time in London, missing his morning visits to her sitting room, his excited chatter about his lessons, the way he sometimes fell asleep in her lap during evening stories. She had never expected to love him so much when she agreed to this marriage, had never imagined how completely he would capture her heart.

And now, with these new feelings for Elias threatening to complicate everything, what would happen to Peter? If she and Elias couldn't maintain their careful balance, if their arrangement fell apart... would she lose Peter too? The thought made her chest tight with panic.

Sarah finished with her hair and helped her into her nightgown, the silk cool against her bath-warmed skin. "Will that be all, Your Grace?" her maid asked softly, concerned eyes studying Lydia's face.

"Yes, thank you, Sarah. You must be tired after the journey as well. Get some rest."

Lydia managed a small smile for her maid, grateful for the woman's quiet efficiency and discretion.

Long after Sarah had gone, Lydia lay awake in her bed, the moonlight casting soft shadows through her window. Her thoughts wouldn't quiet, spinning between the memory of their kiss at the ball, the intensity of their conversation in the carriage, and the way he had looked at her as they arrived home. She closed her eyes, but the quiet rhythm of the manor outside only deepened her restlessness.

From somewhere in the house came the muffled sound of footsteps—probably Elias, still awake, still working. His study was almost directly below her chambers, and sometimes late at night, she could hear him pacing there, dealing with the endless responsibilities of the duchy. She wondered if he was thinking of her, if he was as unsettled by their conversation as she was. The thought made her pulse quicken.

She rolled onto her side, watching the moonlight move across the wall. The manor had its own nighttime symphony—the soft groan of old timbers settling, the whisper of wind through the ivy that climbed the east wall, the distant hoot of an owl in the woods. Usually, these sounds lulled her to sleep. Tonight, they seemed to mock her wakefulness.

The clock in the hall struck midnight, its deep tones reverberating through the quiet house. Lydia counted each strike, remembering the old stories about midnight being the hour when the veil between worlds was thinnest. Right now, she felt as if she stood on some threshold herself, caught between the safe, known world of her marriage of convenience and something darker, more dangerous, but infinitely more alluring.

Sleep, when it finally came, was fitful and strange. Her dreams were a confusion of memories and fears, all centered around Elias. She dreamed they were dancing again, but this time they were alone in a vast, empty ballroom. The music was distorted, too

slow and somehow threatening. The candlelight cast strange shadows on the walls, shadows that seemed to move independently of their source. Her ball gown, the same one she'd worn the night of their kiss, felt too tight, constricting her breathing.

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When she looked up at Elias's face, it changed before her eyes, twisting into something monstrous. His familiar features melted and reformed, becoming something ancient and terrible. The strong jaw she had admired became sharp, predatory. His aristocratic nose elongated, becoming almost beak-like. She tried to scream, but no sound came out. His grip on her arm was too tight, burning cold through her gloves, and his eyes, once warm and human, now glowed with an unholy light.

They spun faster and faster, the ballroom blurring around them, and she could feel something dark and ancient stirring in the shadows. Something that had been waiting, watching, all this time. The music grew louder, discordant, filled with voices that weren't human. The other dancers she glimpsed through their dizzying turns were mere shadows, their faces blank and featureless.

"This is what you wanted, isn't it?" dream-Elias asked, his voice a harsh whisper that seemed to come from everywhere at once. "To know what lies beneath the mask?"

Lydia woke with a gasp, her heart pounding in her chest. Sweat had dampened her nightgown, making it cling uncomfortably to her skin. "Just a dream," she whispered to herself, but the words sounded hollow in the darkness of her chamber. She sat up, pulling her knees to her chest, trying to shake off the lingering unease of the nightmare.

Dawn was just beginning to lighten the sky when Lydia finally drifted back to sleep, her dreams still uneasy, but no longer nightmarish. Tomorrow would bring its own challenges, sheknew. She would have to face Elias across the breakfast table, would have to maintain the facade of their perfect arrangement in front of the servants and

little Peter. But for now, she let herself sink into unconsciousness, trying not to think about what the new day might hold, or why her nightmare had seemed so much more than just a dream.

As she slipped into sleep, one last thought drifted through her mind: in all the novels she had read about love, no one had ever mentioned how much it felt like standing on the edge of a precipice, knowing that one step forward could lead to either flight or falling.

CHAPTER 23

The morning sun streamed through the library windows, casting warm patterns across the polished wood tables where Lydia arranged her London purchases. She adjusted each item carefully, wanting everything to be perfect for Peter. A stack of books here, the box of artist's materials there, each positioned to catch the light just so. It was a small ritual—this careful, deliberate arrangement of gifts—one that grounded her in a familiar comfort, as though the simple act of giving could bridge the distance she sometimes felt in her own life.

As she set a final package aside, she found herself smiling. The past few weeks had been a whirlwind—London had been so full of people and places, of music and chatter, of bright gowns and eager faces—but all of it seemed to fade in comparison to the quiet peace of her manor and the joy of returning to those who truly mattered.

"Your Grace?" Miss Nancy appeared in the doorway, a rare smile tugging at her lips. "Master Peter has not only completed his Latin exercises but done them exceptionally well. He's been quite determined since your return."

"Has he indeed?" Lydia beamed, adding a final touch to her display. "Well then, we must certainly reward such scholarly dedication. Though really, Miss Nancy, surely we can dispense with 'Your Grace' when it's just us?"

The governess's stern features softened. "Perhaps... Lydia. Though His Grace..."

"Is learning to be more flexible about such things," Lydia finished firmly, straightening the little pile of books in front of her. "Aren't you, Mug?"

The little dog, who had been industriously attempting to unwrap one of Peter's packages with his nose, barked enthusiastically. His tail knocked against a carefully arranged box, threatening to topple the entire display.

"Oh, you impossible creature," Lydia laughed, rescuing the packages just in time. "These aren't for you, you know. Though..." She pulled a small paper-wrapped bundle from her pocket. "I might have brought you something from that lovely shop in London."

Mug's eyes lit up at the sight of the beautifully carved wooden ball, perfectly sized for his mouth. He accepted it with grave dignity before immediately rolling onto his back to show off his belly.

"Shameless," Lydia said fondly, watching as Mug wriggled around in delight, too caught up in the excitement of his new toy to mind the overturned boxes. Just as she was about to scoop up the mess, the soft patter of running feet echoed down the hallway.

Peter burst into the room, his golden curls wild and cravat slightly askew in his haste. He skidded to a stop just inside the door, clearly trying to remember his manners despite the excitement bubbling over.

"Welcome home, Your—I mean, Lydia!" His formal greeting dissolved into a joyful cry as he rushed forward, launching himself into her arms. "You're back! Did you really go to a ball? Was it magnificent? Did Father dance? Did you see any pirates in London? Did you bring me—" He stopped himself, cheeks pink. "Not that you had to

bring anything, I just..."

Lydia laughed, hugging him tightly, her heart swelling at his enthusiasm. "Breathe, darling," she said softly, holding him close for a long moment. "One question at a time. Though perhaps..." She gestured toward the table. "These might answer some of them?"

Peter's eyes widened at the sight of the carefully arranged packages, his gaze darting from one to the other. "Are those... for me?"

"Well, they're certainly not for Mug," Lydia teased, nudging the little dog aside as he attempted to gnaw on another gift. "He has quite enough treasures buried in the rose garden already. Though speaking of gardens..." She pulled a small packet of seeds from her pocket, holding it out. "I thought these might make a lovely addition to your herb collection."

Peter took the packet gingerly, his fingers tracing the delicate script on the front. "Lavender," he read softly. "Like your perfume!"

"Clever boy," Lydia smiled. "Yes, and it has wonderful medicinal properties too. But that's just the beginning. Go on, open the rest!"

With great care, Peter began unwrapping the first large package. His gasp of delight as he revealed a leather-bound book of adventure stories made Lydia's heart swell.

"Tales of High Adventure on the Seven Seas," he breathed, running his fingers over the gilded lettering. "Oh, Lydia! It's perfect!" He flipped through the pages eagerly, his eyes lighting up at the beautiful illustrations of ships and distant shores. "Look at these ships! They're just like the ones we imagined for our stories!"

"I thought they might inspire some new adventures," Lydia smiled, watching him

closely. She knew how much he loved pirates and faraway lands. "Though there's more..."

But Peter was already reaching for the next package, his hands trembling with excitement. When he revealed the set of artist's materials—fine drawing pencils, a box of colored crayons, and a sketchbook with creamy white pages—his face lit up in a way that made Lydia's heart skip a beat.

"These are... these are real artists' materials!" He held the crayons like they were precious gems. "Like proper artists use! I've never... that is..." He swallowed hard, overcome with emotion. "Thank you," he whispered.

Lydia felt the sting of tears in her eyes as she watched him. She knelt beside him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "You are a proper artist, Peter. And every proper artist needs the right tools."

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Peter looked at her, a quiet awe in his gaze. "You really think so?"

"Of course," she said firmly. "Though..." She pointed toward the remaining packages. "There's a bit more."

Peter's hands trembled with excitement as he picked up the first package, carefully peeling back the paper. His eyes widened, and his lips parted in surprise as he pulled out a small wooden box, its surface etched with intricate patterns. He flipped it open to reveal a collection of glistening chocolate truffles, each one nestled neatly in the velvet-lined box.

"Is that...?" Peter gasped, his voice breathless.

"Go ahead," Lydia encouraged, her eyes twinkling. "You're allowed to open them, you know. They're yours."

Peter picked up one of the truffles, turning it in his fingers as if it were a treasure. He hesitated, then grinned at Lydia. "Orange-filled, just like you promised! Thank you!" Without waiting for further permission, he popped it into his mouth, closing his eyes as the rich flavor burst across his tongue. "Mmm... this is exactly how I imagined it would taste!"

Lydia chuckled at his delight. "I thought you'd appreciate them. Now, what else do we have?"

Peter, already halfway through the truffle, put it down carefully and reached for the next package. The excitement in his movements was almost contagious. He

unwrapped the soft paper with quick fingers and gasped aloud when he pulled out a small telescope, its brass casing gleaming in the light.

"It's a telescope!" he exclaimed, his voice rising with joy. "But it's so... so real!"

"Well, of course," Lydia said with a wink. "For proper pirate navigation, of course!"

Peter turned the telescope over in his hands, examining the polished brass and the fine lens that gleamed invitingly. He extended it, eyeing the far wall across the room, as if he could already spot a distant ship on the horizon. "This is amazing, Lydia! I'll be able to see the whole coast with this!"

Lydia smiled, watching him with amusement. "I thought it might help with your pirate adventures. You never know when you might need a good spyglass, do you?"

"No, you don't!" Peter laughed, clearly delighted, before carefully setting it down to open the next package. He pulled out a small wooden box with a rough, worn surface, and his eyes lit up even more as he peeled back the cloth inside to reveal a set of artist's pencils—sharp, well-made, and perfectly suited for his growing talent.

"Oh, these are..." He trailed off, unable to find the right words. "They're real artist's pencils! Not like the ones I've been using at all! Look how fine the tips are!" He reached for a piece of paper, eager to test them out, but then paused, glancing up at Lydia with wide, earnest eyes. "You really got these for me? To draw with?"

Lydia knelt beside him, her smile softening. "Of course I did. You're going to need good tools to create all those great adventures you imagine. Every pirate needs a map, and every artist needs the right materials."

Peter gave a small, almost awestruck nod as he reverently touched the pencils. "I'll draw the best pirates ever with these," he promised, his voice full of determination.

Lydia's heart warmed at the sight of his sincerity. "I have no doubt," she said gently. "Now, let's see what else we've got."

Peter eagerly tore into the next package, his energy infectious. He pulled out a beautifully bound sketchbook, its pages thick and creamy white, perfect for the delicate strokes of the pencils. He gasped, flipping through the pages, his fingers brushing lightly over the smooth paper.

"This is... this is just perfect," he whispered, as though in awe. "The paper feels so nice! It's... it's the kind of book real artists use, isn't it?"

"Exactly," Lydia said, her voice warm with affection. "I thought it might inspire you to fill it with all your grand adventures." She gently placed a hand on his shoulder, watching as he ran his fingers over the blank pages, his eyes alight with excitement.

Peter blinked back a sudden wave of emotion, swallowing hard. "I don't know what to say," he murmured, his voice soft but full of gratitude. "This is the best gift anyone's ever given me."

"Well," Lydia said with a teasing smile, "I had to make sure it was worthy of the best artist I know."

Peter's face broke into a huge grin, and he immediately began flipping through the pages again, eyes shining. "I'll start drawing right now! I'll fill this with pirates, and ships, and maps... and maybe a few treasures." He looked up at her, his expression serious. "Thank you. This means so much."

Lydia's heart skipped a beat as she watched him, overcome with emotion. "You're very welcome, Peter. I'm glad you love it." She caught sight of the small, mischievous gleam in his eye as he reached for the last package, and she couldn't help but smile in return.

Before she could say another word, Peter had already opened it, revealing a small box of intricately designed trinkets. "Oh, these are... perfect! Look, there's a compass, and a small chest, and—"He stopped, holding up a small wooden figure of a pirate, with a grin and a bandana, carved with such care that it almost seemed alive. "A pirate for my collection! This is the best part!"

Lydia laughed, her voice light and filled with affection. "I thought you might like that one. Every pirate needs a trusty figurehead, don't they?"

Peter beamed, his excitement overflowing. "This is going straight into my pirate ship collection. I can't wait to tell Father about all these! He'll think they're brilliant!" He paused, his expression turning thoughtful. "Do you think he'd like the telescope too?"

Lydia chuckled softly. "I'm sure he'd appreciate the telescope, though I'm not sure he'd have much use for the pirate figure. Perhaps you should keep that one all to yourself."

Peter nodded earnestly. "You're probably right. But I'll share everything else!" He paused, then added with a mischievous grin, "Though he might have to battle me for the truffles."

Lydia smiled at the familiar sparkle in his eye. "You have a deal, then."

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The two of them shared a laugh, surrounded by the spoils of Lydia's thoughtful journey, and for a moment, all the world outside the manor seemed to fade away—replaced by the warmth of family, the joy of giving, and the promise of many more adventures yet to come.

"Did you really get all these just for me?" Peter asked, his voice small with wonder, his eyes wide.

"Of course I did," Lydia replied, pulling him close for another hug. "I missed you terribly, you know. London was quite dull without my favorite pirate."

"Even with all the balls and fancy parties?" Peter asked, looking up at her with an expression full of hope.

"Especially then!" Lydia laughed, her fingers brushing through his curls. "Do you know, not a single person there knew the proper way to spot approaching enemy vessels? Most shocking." She tapped his nose playfully. "I kept thinking how much more fun it would be if you were there to teach them."

Peter giggled, his shoulders shaking with amusement, but then his expression softened. "I missed you too. And Father, though..." He hesitated, as though weighing his words. "Though I suppose he was too busy for missing."

Lydia's smile faltered for just a moment, then she straightened. "I assure you he wasn't," she said firmly. "He asked about you every single day. Didn't he, Miss Nancy?"

The governess nodded, her eyes softening. "Indeed. His Grace was most particular about receiving regular reports of your progress."

Peter brightened a little at that, though still uncertain. "Really?"

"Really," Lydia said with a wink. "Now then, shall we try out those new crayons? I believe that lovely white paper is simply begging for some color."

They moved to the table, spreading out the art supplies. Mug, of course, couldn't resist "helping" by running off with crayons now and then, presenting them to Peter with great ceremony, his fur damp from the frequent drops into water bowls.

"What shall we draw?" Peter asked, already testing colors on a spare sheet of paper.

"Whatever inspires you," Lydia said, leaning over his shoulder to peer at the paper. "Though I did notice you looking particularly thoughtful during our garden adventures last week..."

Peter's face lit up. "Oh! Yes, I had an idea..." His tongue caught between his teeth in concentration as he bent over the paper. "See, I thought... if we had the manor here, and the garden paths leading down... and here, this is where we play pirates..."

Lydia watched in awe as Peter's drawing began to take shape. There was a rawness to it, a wonderful energy, in how he captured the sprawling manor and the neat garden paths. The scene was alive with motion and color, even before Peter had finished.

"Is that... us?" Lydia asked softly, the words slipping out before she could stop them.

Peter nodded, his crayon carefully adding more details. "See? There's me, and you with your skirts all swirly, like when you're telling stories. And Father..." He paused, crayon hovering uncertainly. "Though I don't think he'd want to be in a picture about

pirates..."

Lydia's heart squeezed at the uncertainty in his voice. "I think," she said carefully, "that your father might surprise you. In fact..." She studied the drawing thoughtfully. "I think he should see this. It's quite remarkable, you know."

Peter's face fell slightly, his shoulders slumping. "Oh, no, I couldn't... Father's too busy for..."

"Nonsense," Lydia said, her tone warm but firm. "He's never too busy for something this important. Come along, darling."

"But..." Peter bit his lip, nervous again.

"What if he doesn't like it?"

"Then clearly the Beast of Fyre needs his eyes examined," Lydia said with a wink, trying to lighten the moment.

Peter giggled despite his nerves. "Alright... if you say so."

Hand in hand, they made their way to Elias's study. Lydia knocked firmly before Peter could lose his nerve.

"Enter," Elias's voice called, distracted but with a note of curiosity.

Lydia squeezed Peter's hand gently as they stepped inside. "Your Grace? We have something to show you."

Elias looked up from his papers, his brow furrowed in mild confusion as he took in their presence. The afternoon sunlight streamed through the study windows, casting a

warm glow over his dark hair, streaked with silver at the temples, making his face appear almost timeless despite the tension between his brow.

"I'm rather busy at the moment..." he began, though the words softened when he noticed the paper in Peter's hand.

"This won't take long," Lydia said gently, giving Peter a reassuring nudge forward.

"Go on, darling. Show your father what you've made."

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Peter shuffled closer to the massive desk, his small figure dwarfed by his father's imposing presence. His voice was small as he spoke. "I... I drew this. For you."

Elias took the paper automatically, his brow furrowing as he studied it, and for a long moment, there was only silence. Peter shifted his weight from one foot to the other, clearly fighting the urge to flee. Lydia could see the tension in his hands, the way he fidgeted with the fabric of his jacket.

Unable to bear the sight of the boy she was starting to consider as her son so nervous, Lydia moved closer to Elias's desk, leaning down as if to inspect the drawing herself. "We thought you might like to see Peter's artistic progress," she murmured softly, her breath warm against his ear. "Perhaps offer some... paternal encouragement?"

Lydia watched Elias closely, noting the subtle shift in his expression as he looked at the drawing again. His features softened, the lines around his mouth relaxing as his gaze lingered on the carefully drawn manor, the neat garden paths, and, at the center of it all, the three figures—one of them small, one with golden curls, and the third... taller, more imposing.

"This is..." Elias's voice was quieter now, the deep tone filled with something closer to admiration. "Quite remarkable, Peter." His fingers traced the details gently. "You've captured the garden beautifully, and the figures... the detail in the faces. Excellent work, son."

Peter's eyes went wide, his heart pounding with joy. "Really? You truly like it?"

Elias nodded, the smile that spread across his face lighting up his stern features.

"Indeed," he said, his voice genuine. "In fact, I think we should have it framed. It would look well here in my study, don't you think? Perhaps above the fireplace, where I can see it while I work?"

Peter looked at him, stunned into silence, before bouncing up and down in a flurry of excitement. "You want to... keep it? Here?"

"Unless you object?" There was a hint of hesitation in Elias's voice, and for a moment, Lydia wondered if he was still unsure of how to express his feelings.

"No! I mean... thank you, Father!" Peter nearly leapt into his father's arms. "I'll draw you another one tomorrow, even better! Maybe with the stables, and..."

"Why don't you go start planning it now?" Lydia suggested gently, watching Elias already eyeing his paperwork. "While everything's fresh in your mind?"

Peter nodded eagerly. "Yes! Thank you, Father! Thank you, Lydia!" He rushed out of the room, his footsteps echoing in the hall.

Once the door closed behind him, Lydia turned to Elias, her gaze soft. "That meant the world to him, you know."

"I'm beginning to understand that," Elias admitted quietly, rising from his desk. His tone was almost self-deprecating. "Though I might have missed the opportunity if someone hadn't whispered instructions in my ear."

"Well," Lydia said with a playful smile, "someone has to remind the Beast of Fyre of his humanity from time to time." Her voice was light, but there was a depth to it. "Peter tries so hard to make you proud. A little praise goes a long way."

Elias's eyes softened as he moved around the desk to stand before her. "I'm learning

that," he said, his voice quiet. "Though I wonder... did you make any drawings I should praise as well?"

Lydia blushed, taken off guard by the question. "I... no, I'm afraid not," she managed.

Elias's smile deepened as he stepped closer, his voice low and filled with an unexpected warmth. "No matter," he murmured. "You make quite a lovely picture yourself."

Lydia's breath caught at the intensity in his gaze, the warmth of his proximity stirring something inside her. She opened her mouth to reply but found her words caught in her throat. Before she could formulate anything, Elias returned to his desk, resuming his usual businesslike tone.

"Thank you," he said, the change almost imperceptible. "For helping me understand what Peter needed."

Lydia nodded, unable to meet his gaze for a moment. As she turned to leave, she glanced back at their reflection in the window—her flushed cheeks, his intense eyes following her every movement.

Progress, she reminded herself firmly. They were making progress.

In more ways than one, it seemed.

CHAPTER 24

As midnight settled over Fyre Manor, Lydia found herself drawn to the study, where the portrait of Elias's late wife hung quietly on the wall. The candlelight flickered, casting a pale glow over the painting, and in the shifting light, the woman's eyes seemed to watch her, distant yet piercing, almost as if she were asking Lydia a silent

question.

"Were you happy?" Lydia whispered, her voice soft as she reached out, her fingers barely grazing the edge of the frame. She felt a chill at her words, knowing this woman had been part of Elias's world in ways Lydia might never understand. "Did you love him? Or were you trapped here?"

A creaking floorboard made her whirl, hastily wiping her eyes, but it was only Mrs. Winters with an armload of fresh linens. The housekeeper's gray hair gleamed silver in the moonlight, her familiar presence somehow comforting in the strange intimacy of the hour.

"Oh! Your Grace, I didn't expect... that is..." The housekeeper's eyes darted between Lydia and the portrait, understanding dawning in her weathered face. Years of service had taught her to read the subtle currents that ran through the household, and something in Lydia's tear-stained face must have spoken volumes. "Shall I come back later?"

"No, please," Lydia managed a watery smile. "I was just... being rather silly, actually. Talking to portraits in the middle of the night like some character from a gothic novel." She attempted a light laugh, though it came out slightly shaky.

Mrs. Winters's face softened with understanding as she set down her linens. Her hands, worn from decades of service, smoothed the fabric in an automatic gesture. "Not silly at all, if you ask me. Many of us have spoken to that portrait over the years, wondering what might have been different if..." She trailed off, seeming to catch herself, years of discretion warring with what appeared to be a genuine desire to speak.

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"If?" Lydia prompted gently, sensing something important in the housekeeper's hesitation.

The housekeeper hesitated, then seemed to come to a decision. Her eyes, wise with years of watching the family's private dramas unfold, met Lydia's directly. "Might I speak freely, Your Grace?"

"Of course." Lydia found herself holding her breath .

"Lady Barbara... she was a good woman, but there was no love between her and His Grace. Their marriage was arranged, you see, to secure an alliance between their families. They were cordial enough, but..." The housekeeper shook her head, old memories clouding her eyes. "Not like what I see between you and His Grace now. Never anything like that."

Lydia's heart skipped. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean." But her cheeks warmed, betraying her.

"Don't you?" Mrs Winters smiled knowingly. "Child, you must understand... I have known His Grace since he was a wee boy. And I saw what led to the monstrous masks he chooses to wear. It is not my place to tell you everything, but what I will say is this: for the first time in many years, I have seen glimpses of the man he used to be and that... Well that is something special indeed."

"Is it enough?" The words were out before Lydia could stop herself and a deep blush rose to her cheeks.

"I just..." she tried to explain clumsily, "I just fear that I do not do enough."

"You do everything, dear," Mrs Winters encouraged her softly. "Young master Peter, His Grace... They are better with you here. You will see it too."

"

Lydia found herself blushing. "I... thank you, Mrs. Winters. Though I'm not sure His Grace would agree about all the changes."

"Wouldn't he?" The housekeeper's eyes twinkled with motherly wisdom. "Then perhaps you haven't noticed the way he smiles when you enter a room? Or how he touches the drawings Peter leaves in his study, when he thinks no one's watching? Or how he ordered the gardeners to plant more lavender because it's your favorite scent? The Beast of Fyre indeed - more like a man remembering how to smile again, if you ask me."

With that, she stepped away quite easily - though not without a last look in Lydia's direction.

CHAPTER 25

The tap of heels on marble echoed through Fyre Manor's entrance hall as Lydia's sisters huddled together, their eyes wide as they took in the imposing surroundings. Jane clutched Marian's arm, nearly stumbling over an ancient rug as she craned her neck to examine a particularly stern-looking portrait.

"Do all the paintings... watch you like that?" she whispered, loud enough to make Diana jump.

"Jane!" Viscountess Prudence hissed. "Contain yourself!"

"But Mother, look at his eyes!" Jane protested. "They follow you everywhere! And his sword looks positively?—"

"I'm sure Her Grace has better things to do than listen to your observations about the family portraits," their father cut in smoothly, though his own gaze darted nervously to the painting in question.

Marian, ever practical, was studying the fresh flowers arranged throughout the hall. "The house seems... brighter than I expected. From the stories, I thought it would be all cobwebs and... well..."

"Ghosts?" Diana supplied helpfully, earning another sharp look from their mother.

"Really, girls! Such talk is hardly—" The Viscountess's reprimand was cut short by Lydia's appearance at the top of the stairs.

"Lydia!" All three sisters exclaimed at once, then immediately tried to school their features into something more dignified as Mrs. Winters appeared to announce them properly.

"The Viscount and Viscountess Drownshire," the housekeeper intoned. "Ladies Marian, Jane, and Diana."

"Welcome to Fyre Manor," Lydia smiled, descending to embrace her sisters while their mother looked on disapprovingly. "Though I see you've already met some of our more... intimidating ancestors."

"Is it true what they say about the east wing being haunted?" Jane whispered as she hugged her sister. "And does His Grace really—ow!" She broke off as Marian stepped deliberately on her foot.

"What my sister means to say," Marian interrupted smoothly, "is how lovely everything looks. You've done wonders with the place."

"Though perhaps we could tour the less... watching parts of the house?" Diana suggested, still eyeing the portrait nervously.

Lydia bit back a laugh, remembering her own first impressions of the manor. "Come along then. The drawing room has much friendlier artwork. Though I should warn you about the ghost in the?—"

"Lydia!" all three sisters squeaked in unison.

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"—vase of roses. Honestly, what did you think I was going to say?" Lydia's eyes twinkled as she led her thoroughly unsettled sisters down the hall, their parents following at a more sedate pace while trying to maintain their dignity.

"You've gotten quite wicked since becoming a duchess," Jane observed admiringly, once their parents were out of earshot. "Does living with the Beast of Fyre do that to a person?"

"Jane!" Marian scolded, but her own curiosity was evident. "Though since you mentioned it..."

Lydia just smiled, ushering them into the drawing room. Living with the Beast indeed. If they only knew...

"Come," she invited gently. "Let us withdraw to the parlor and I shall have Mrs. Winters bring us tea."

With giggles, her sisters followed her to the parlor while her parents trailed behind rather dourly. Once seated and armed with their tea, Lydia leaned back ever so slightly and a smile played around her lips as she listened to the conversation around her.

"You should have seen him at Lady Morrison's tea," Jane was saying, her eyes dancing with mischief. "Poor Mr. Harrison nearly spilled his cup when Marian smiled at him!"

"I did no such thing," Marian protested, though her cheeks pinked prettily. "He was

merely... startled by our new footman's sudden appearance."

"Oh yes, entirely startled by the dog," Jane winked at Lydia. "That's why he's called on us three times this week alone!"

Lydia smiled, warmed by her sister's obvious happiness. "And he's a respectable gentleman? With good prospects?"

"Very respectable," Marian assured her. "Though not quite as... elevated as your match, of course."

"Elevation isn't everything," Lydia said softly, thinking of Elias's rare smiles, the way his eyes softened when he looked at Peter. "The heart wants what it wants."

"Speaking of wants," Jane's voice dropped to a whisper, "that odious Mr. Blackwood is still pursuing Diana, despite Father telling him she's not interested."

Diana squirmed uncomfortably. "He's not so bad, really. Just... persistent."

"Persistent?" Jane's eyes flashed. "He followed you home from church last Sunday! And I caught him lurking in the garden Tuesday morning. It's becoming frightening."

Lydia sat up straighter, concern sharpening her voice. "Diana, why didn't you tell me? This is serious."

"I didn't want to worry you," Diana mumbled, studying her hands. "You have so much to manage here, and it's not really..."

"Nonsense." Lydia reached for her sister's hands. "I'm still your big sister, duchess or not. In fact..." She smiled suddenly. "Being a duchess might be rather useful in this situation. Why don't you all stay with us for a while? We could host some small

gatherings, introduce you to more suitable gentlemen..."

"Really?" Diana's face lit up. "You'd do that?"

"Of course! And I'm sure Elias wouldn't mind advancing some funds for new gowns, if needed. You're my sisters – your happiness matters to me."

"Oh, Lydia!" Jane threw her arms around her. "You're the best sister ever! Though..." She pulled back, grinning. "Does this mean we have to call you 'Your Grace' now?"

"Only in public," Lydia laughed. "And only if you want me to tell Mr. Harrison about the time you tried to teach Marian's cat to dance."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Try me, little sister."

Their laughter drew a sharp look from their mother. "Really, girls," Prudence said acidly. "Such unseemly behavior. Though I suppose we can't expect better, given the example being set."

"I beg your pardon?" Lydia's voice cooled considerably.

"Well, my dear," her mother's tone dripped false concern, "one does wonder about your... priorities. All this frivolity when you should be focusing on your primary duty. Unless..." Her eyes narrowed speculatively. "Have you and His Grace even attempted to produce an heir?"

The room went deathly quiet. Lydia felt her sisters tense beside her, saw her father shift uncomfortably in his chair.

"Mother!" Marian gasped. "You can't just ask such things!"

"Why not? It's a perfectly reasonable question. After all, she's been married for months now, and still no signs of..." The Viscountess gestured vaguely. "One begins to wonder if she's even trying. Or if perhaps His Grace finds her... lacking in some way."

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Something inside Lydia snapped. She rose to her feet, drawing herself up to her full height. "That is quite enough."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said, that is enough." Lydia's voice was steel wrapped in silk. "You may be my mother, but I am the Duchess of Fyre, and I will not tolerate such disrespect in my own home."

"Disrespect?" The Viscountess sputtered. "I am merely expressing natural concern for your situation! After all, what good is a duchess who can't even fulfill her basic duties?"

"My 'situation' is none of your concern," Lydia said coldly. "Nor are my duties to my husband or this household. If you cannot maintain basic courtesy, perhaps it would be better if you shortened your visit."

Her father stood abruptly. "Now see here, Lydia..."

"No, Father. You see here." Lydia met his gaze steadily. "I am no longer the disappointing daughter you can berate at will. I am mistress of this house, and I will be treated with respect – both by you and by Mother. Is that understood?"

A tense silence fell. Lydia could feel her heart pounding but kept her chin lifted, her gaze unwavering. Finally, her father dropped his eyes .

"Perhaps," he said stiffly, "we should retire to prepare for dinner."

As her parents swept from the room, Lydia's sisters clustered around her.

"That was magnificent!" Jane breathed. "I've never seen anyone stand up to them like that!"

"Are you alright?" Marian asked more practically, noting how Lydia's hands trembled slightly.

"I'm fine," Lydia managed a smile. "Though perhaps you could ask Mrs. Winters to bring some tea? I find I need a moment to..."

"Of course," Diana squeezed her hand. "We'll give you some time alone."

Once her sisters had gone, Lydia sank onto the settee, her carefully maintained composure crumbling. Her mother always had a way of reawakening every doubt that dared exist in her mind.

She was failing in her most basic duty. For all her progress with Peter, all the small victories with Elias, she still hadn't fulfilled the primary purpose of their marriage. What if her mother was right? What if Elias did find her lacking? How could she hope for a real marriage when she couldn't even...

"Stop that," she told herself firmly, rising to pace the room. "You're being ridiculous. Elias isn't like that. He's..."

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. "Enter," she called, quickly composing her features.

Mrs. Winters appeared with the tea tray, her kind face concerned. "Your sisters mentioned you might need this, Your Grace. Shall I pour?"

"Yes, thank you." Lydia sank back onto the settee, accepting a cup with trembling fingers. "Mrs. Winters? May I ask you something?"

"Of course, Your Grace."

"Do you think... that is..." Lydia took a steadying breath. "Am I doing well? As a duchess, I mean?"

The housekeeper's face softened with understanding. "Better than well, if you ask me. This house hasn't felt so alive in years. Young Master Peter is flourishing, the staff actually smile at their work, and His Grace..." She paused meaningfully. "Well, let's just say we've all noticed the changes in him too."

"But is it enough?" Lydia whispered, more to herself than the housekeeper.

"Enough for whom?" Mrs. Winters asked shrewdly. "Your parents? Society? Or yourself?"

The question caught Lydia off guard. Who was she trying to please? Her parents, who had never been satisfied with anything she did? Society, with its endless expectations and judgments? Or her own heart, which wanted something far simpler and yet infinitely more complex?

"I don't know anymore," she admitted.

"Then perhaps that's where you should start." Mrs. Winters patted her hand gently. "Establish what it is that you want, Your Grace. The rest will follow."

As the housekeeper left, Lydia sipped her tea thoughtfully. What did she want? Peter's happiness, certainly. Elias's love, if she was honest with herself. A real family, a true marriage, children of their own someday...

Rising, she moved to the window, watching as her sisters strolled through the garden below. They looked so carefree, laughing together in the afternoon sun. She would help them find their happiness, she resolved. Diana would be safe from unwanted suitors, Marian would have her chance with Mr. Harrison, and Jane... well, Jane would probably find her own adventure, as she always did.

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Lost in her thoughts, Lydia almost missed the soft knock at the drawing room door. She turned to find Peter hovering uncertainly in the doorway, Mug at his heels.

"Lydia?" His voice was small. "Are you alright? I heard raised voices, and then my aunts looked worried, and..."

Her heart melted at his concern. "Come here, darling." She held out her arms, and he rushed into them without hesitation. "I'm perfectly fine. Just a little family disagreement."

"Like when Father and I disagree about proper dignity versus pirate adventures?" Peter asked, making her laugh despite herself.

"Something like that." She pressed a kiss to his curls. "Though speaking of adventures, shouldn't you be at your lessons?"

"Miss Nancy said I could take a break." He pulled back slightly, his face earnest. "I thought... maybe you'd like to see how the herb garden is growing? The lavender you brought from London is starting to sprout!"

How could she resist such sweet determination to cheer her? "I would love that. Though perhaps we should collect your aunts as well? I'm sure they'd be fascinated by your botanical expertise."

Peter beamed. "Oh yes! And I can show them the special medicinal section! Thomas taught me all about fever-reducing plants yesterday, and..."

As they made their way to the garden, Peter chattering excitedly about his latest horticultural discoveries, Lydia felt the tension from her earlier confrontation slowly melting away. Her sisters joined them eagerly, and soon the air was filled with laughter as Peter demonstrated his knowledge.

"See?" he explained seriously to a wide-eyed Diana. "The chamomile goes here because it needs afternoon shade, but the thyme likes full sun so it goes along this border..."

"He's quite the scholar," Marian observed quietly to Lydia. "You've done wonders with him, you know."

Lydia watched as Peter proudly showed Jane how to check the soil moisture. "He's done wonders with me too," she admitted softly.

After thoroughly touring the herb garden, they settled in the library. Peter pulled out his drawing materials while Lydia's sisters clustered around to watch him work. Even Mug seemed to understand the peaceful mood, curling up contentedly at Peter's feet instead of trying to steal his crayons.

"Could you read to us, Lydia?" Peter asked, not looking up from his sketch. "Like you used to do with your sisters?"

"Oh yes!" Jane clapped her hands. "Do you remember how you used to make up voices for all the characters?"

"And sounds, too !" Diana added. "Remember the time you got so excited during the storm scene that you knocked over Mother's favorite vase?"

Lydia laughed, reaching for Peter's new adventure book. "Very well, but let's try to keep the property damage to a minimum this time."

As she began to read, her voice bringing pirates and sea monsters to life, she watched Peter's hands move confidently across the paper. He was drawing the herb garden, she realized, but with fantastic additions – massive flowers in impossible colors, tiny fairies tending the plants, what looked suspiciously like a friendly dragon curled protectively around the lavender bed.

"Is that how it really looks?" she teased gently, pausing in her reading.

Peter grinned up at her. "Only if you know how to look properly. Thomas says every garden has magic in it, if you pay attention."

"Wise words," Marian nodded seriously. "Though I'm not sure your father would approve of dragons in his herb garden."

"Oh, Father's getting better about such things," Peter said confidently. "Lydia's teaching him how to see the magic too."

The simple faith in his voice made Lydia's throat tight. Setting aside the book, she pulled him close for a quick hug. "And you're teaching me, darling. We're all learning together."

As the afternoon light softened into evening, Lydia found herself treasuring each moment – Jane's dramatic recreation of her favorite scenes from the book, Diana's quiet giggles as Mug performed his own interpretation of a sea monster, Marian's thoughtful questions about Peter's garden plans. This, she realized, was what truly mattered. Not her parents' disapproval or society's expectations, but these precious moments with the people she loved.

"Lydia?" Peter's voice drew her from her thoughts. "I made something for you." He held out his drawing, suddenly shy. "To cheer you up. See? The dragon is protecting all the things that make you happy – the herbs, and the books, and us..."

Lydia studied the picture, taking in every magical detail. There in the corner, she noticed, was a figure that looked remarkably like Elias, watching over them all with what might have been a smile.

"It's perfect," she whispered, hugging him close. "Absolutely perfect."

Later, after Peter had been called away to his evening lessons and her sisters had gone to dress for dinner, Lydia carefully tucked the drawing into her journal. Whatever challenges lay ahead – with her parents, with Elias, with her own doubts – she had this. This love, this family they were building, this magic they were discovering together.

Perhaps that was enough for now. Perhaps that was everything after all.

CHAPTER 26

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The manor was blanketed in a thick silence, the night pressing in close, as Lydia made her way through the shadowed corridors toward the library. Her footsteps were muted against the carpet, but her pulse felt loud in her ears, beating out an uneasy rhythm as she approached. Her mind cycled back over the day's events, her parents' quiet disappointment, the financial strain weighing on her sisters—her sisters who bore their burdens with a resilience she had come to expect, yet could not easily accept.

She breathed deeply, her lips trembling as she thought of what she had to ask of Elias. It was something she had no right to request, and yet, she would. She had to.

The door creaked faintly as she entered. Elias sat at the far end, cloaked in shadows that sharpened the set of his jaw and the severity of his gaze as he looked up. For a moment, he appeared startled, though the expression softened almost immediately, his mouth settling into its usual unreadable line.

"Lydia." His voice was soft, steady. "What brings you here at this hour?"

He had not risen, nor had he set aside the heavy volume in his hands, yet his attention seemed to settle wholly upon her. His eyes followed her every movement. She took a step forward, her gaze flicking briefly to the dark windows behind him, the night a void of quiet beyond the glass.

"I needed to speak with you," she replied, her voice more measured than she felt. She moved further into the room, hands clasped tightly in front of her, waiting until the distance between them was no longer an excuse for hesitation.

He inclined his head, a gesture that might have been an invitation, though it held the quiet reserve that lingered perpetually about him, as if he wore it as a second skin.

"I..." Her voice faltered, and she swallowed, willing herself to keep going. "Elias, I came to ask—well, it is a rather large favor."

She thought she saw something shift in his gaze, though the movement was so fleeting that she could not be certain.

"Go on," he said simply, opening his hands on his lap.

She took a breath, quieting the tremor of anxiety that tightened her throat. "My sisters... they have been struggling financially. Father... well, he is struggling a little, and with the recent losses... it's become clear they will need help. Only a small sum, but something to tide them over for the season." She lowered her gaze, as if the words themselves had taken on a weight she could no longer bear to hold. "If... if you could spare something, Elias, it would mean a great deal."

For a moment, there was silence. When she looked up, she found his gaze steady upon her, his expression softened by something that lay just beyond her understanding.

"Is that all, Lydia?" His tone was low, almost bemused. "When will you realize that you never need to ask for such things?"

She opened her mouth, her words stilled by his faint smile. "Of course I will help them. They are as much yours to care for as they are mine. You need never doubt that."

The relief was unexpected, easing some inner knot she hadn't realized she was holding. She let out a quiet breath, her lips curving into a faint smile. "Thank you,"

she said softly, hoping the gratitude in her voice might convey what words could not. She had not anticipated such an immediate answer, nor had she expected his simple, reassuring certainty.

Yet there was more. She hadn't come here merely for her sisters, and she could feel the unspoken question forming just beyond the edge of her thoughts, lingering, insistently waiting to be asked.

She hesitated, her voice catching in her throat. "There... there was something else."

Elias set the book down, his gaze narrowing slightly, though he remained silent. She drew in a steadying breath, the vulnerability of her own request making her heart race.

"Would you consider... that is, perhaps we could... share the same room?" The words spilled out, softer than a whisper, carrying a weight that felt at once strange and utterly familiar. She saw the faint surprise in his eyes, a ripple that barely stirred his otherwise impassive expression.

Slowly, his face grew still, any warmth or familiarity slipping away, leaving only an impenetrable reserve. He was silent, his hands folding together as he held her gaze with a cold, almost detached composure.

"No," he said at last, his tone quiet, but unyielding. "Lydia, I have asked before that we not discuss this."

She felt her pulse quicken, a sharp breath catching in her chest. She had not expected rejection, nor the cold finality with which he delivered it.

"But, Elias..." Her voice wavered, the words catching on some raw edge of hurt. "I am your wife. When will I be... truly be your wife?"

He remained still, his silence stretching between them, filling the room with an unbearable tension. Finally, he drew a slow, deliberate breath, his gaze unwavering as he met her eyes.

"Never," he said, his voice calm, almost indifferent. "You will never bear a child, Lydia."

The words fell with a weight she hadn't anticipated, a finality that seemed to sever something inside her. She stared at him, feeling her own question reverberate back at her, hollow and unanswered. She wanted to ask him to take it back, to soften the words, but his gaze remained as cold and impenetrable as stone.

"I don't understand." Her voice was barely more than a whisper. "Then what... what does our marriage mean if I am not to be your wife in truth?"

He held her gaze, his expression unreadable. "It means precisely what it is, Lydia. Nothing more."

For a moment, she was silent, her mind racing to fill the silence with explanations, hopes, fragments of meaning. Yet nothing seemed to fit, and his refusal remained, cold and unmoving, a wall she could not breach.

"Elias," she tried again, her voice low and edged with a quiet, gathering anger. "I want a family. I want a life that is more than this... arrangement. I want something real."

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"I cannot give you that," he said, his tone stripped of warmth. He turned away, as if to end the conversation, his posture rigid, resolute. "This is not a topic we will revisit, Lydia."

The words stung, and a hot, bitter anger surged within her, fed by months of quiet hopes, silent questions, and now, an answer that felt as final as it was cruel.

"So I am to be a failure," she said, her voice trembling with the weight of the admission. "To be nothing more than an empty title, an adornment to your name. A wife in name only, a woman without purpose."

A flicker of something, perhaps regret, perhaps pain, passed over his face, but it vanished so quickly that she could not be certain it had ever been there.

"Lydia," he said, his tone colder, harder. "You may leave."

But she did not move. Her hands clenched at her sides, the ache in her chest tightening as she fought the wave of anger that surged within her.

"No," she said, her voice sharper than she intended. "I will not leave. I will not stand here and accept this... this sentence you've decided for me. I am your wife, Elias, not some piece of furniture to be pushed aside whenever it suits you."

"Then perhaps," he replied, his voice low and edged with a warning, "you should reconsider what it means to be my wife."

The words struck her like a blow, the cold finality of them chilling her to the bone.

She took a step back, her heartpounding, her anger giving way to a sorrow that felt too vast to contain.

"You speak of duty and of loyalty," she said, her voice a fragile whisper. "But what loyalty is this, Elias? What duty is there in denying me the very thing that would make me whole as a woman?"

She turned after this, her hands shaking - perhaps, she thought, from the vulnerability she had dared show him. As she turned away, however, Elias's voice broke the silence, laced with a chill she had come to recognize but not accept.

"Why must you press this, Lydia?" he asked quietly, though the edge in his tone hinted at something less calm, more troubled.

She stopped, her hand stilling on the doorframe, her voice low and steady, but trembling at the edges. "Because I am tired, Elias. Tired of pretending that this life, this empty pretense of a marriage, is enough. I am tired of wondering if I will spend the rest of my days merely watching you from across a table, never truly knowing you or sharing in your life."

Elias's gaze grew colder, yet she sensed something flickering beneath the surface—a tension, a warning. "I have given you a life of comfort, of stability," he replied. "I have fulfilled every obligation required of me as a husband."

"Obligations," she repeated, a bitter laugh escaping her. "You speak of duty and vows as if they are mere obligations. Is that what you want, Elias? A wife who does not challenge you, who remains silent and grateful for the privilege of being in your shadow? Tell me, do you find such a woman satisfying? Is there nothing more you want from life, from our marriage?"

For a moment, silence stretched between them, taut and heavy. His expression did not

change, but she saw a flicker of something in his eyes—a cold fire, as though he were weighing her words, assessing how deeply to let them cut.

"Do you even want a child, Lydia?" he asked finally, his voice soft but cutting. "Or are you simply trying to complete some notion of what a marriage should be?"

Her throat tightened, but she held his gaze, refusing to falter. "I want a child, Elias," she answered, her voice firm. "I want a life, a future. I want something more than this hollow existence you've deemed acceptable for us both. Can you not understand that?"

He crossed his arms, his posture growing even colder, his expression sharpening as if to distance himself further from her words. "I understand that bringing a child into this life—into my life—is a risk I am unwilling to take."

"A risk?" she repeated, her voice rising despite herself. "You live as if we are haunted by shadows, Elias, as if some terrible fate will befall us at any moment. I have no fear of your past—only of the walls you've built around yourself to keep it hidden."

For a fleeting moment, she thought he might respond, that he might reach for her, or at least soften the resolve in his eyes. But instead, his expression grew stonier, his voice even quieter, colder.

"You may leave," he said, each word deliberate, final.

She took a step forward instead, the anger in her rising, defying his command. "No, Elias. I am not a child to be sent away because the truth is uncomfortable for you."

"Enough, Lydia." His voice was low but sharp, holding a warning she did not heed.

"What are you so afraid of, Elias?" she demanded. "Why do you keep me at such a

distance? If you would only tell me, if you would only let me in, perhaps..."

"Leave," he repeated, his tone darker, harsher. "This conversation ends here."

The cold finality in his voice stole the air from her lungs, silencing the words that burned within her. She searched his face, hoping for some glimpse of regret, some hint of the man she had glimpsed in rare, unguarded moments. But his expression remained impassive, as unyielding as stone.

"I only wanted a life with you, Elias," she whispered, more to herself than to him, her voice fading as she turned once more toward the door.

But he did not answer, and as the door closed behind her, the silence swallowed her words whole, leaving nothing but the emptiness she had feared all along.

Without another word, she turned and left, her steps heavy, the darkness of the corridor swallowing her as she made her way back to her empty, silent room.

CHAPTER 27

Sleep did not come for Lydia at all that night—in fact, she never even considered it. Instead, she spent the whole night working, almost methodically. By the time the sun rose, Lydia stood in the entrance hall, her traveling bag at her feet. She had packed little—just enough for a brief stay—though the weight of what she was leaving behind pressed heavy on her heart.

Peter had wept when she told him, his small arms clinging to her waist as she explained that she needed some time away. "But you'll come back?" he had asked, his voice trembling. "You promise?"

"Of course, darling," she had whispered, pressing a kiss to his golden curls. "I just need a little time to... to sort some things out. You'll be good for Miss Nancy while I'm gone? And I... well, I will leave Mug here with you. He will take care of you while I am gone. And I shall write, I promise."

Now, the choice she had made during the night seemed far more impulsive, far more final than she had meant it to be. She took a shuddering breath as she stared at the door, everything in her aching to turn back and take Peter with her.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs made her turn. Elias stood at the landing, his face a mask of carefully controlled indifference. But there was something in his eyes, a flicker of emotion he couldn't quite hide, that made her breath catch.

"So," he said, his voice deceptively calm, "you're leaving."

"Yes." She lifted her chin, refusing to let her voice waver. "I've left instructions for Mrs. Winters about Peter's needs, and I've written down his schedule for..."

"You don't need to explain," Elias cut her off, his tone growing colder. "You've made your decision."

Lydia felt anger flare in her chest, hot and bright. "Have I? Or was that decision made for me last night when you made it clear exactly what my place in this household would be?"

A muscle jumped in his jaw, but his expression remained impassive. "Where will you go?"

"To my parents' house." She watched his face carefully, looking for any reaction. "I'll be helping my sisters find suitable matches. Since that seems to be all I'm good for—arranging marriages of convenience."

The words hung between them, sharp and bitter. Elias's hands clenched at his sides, and for a moment, she thought he might say something—might ask her to stay, might offer some explanation for his coldness. But he remained silent, his blue eyes stormy with unspoken words.

"I've told Peter I'll write to him," she continued when the silence grew too heavy. "And I've asked Miss Nancy to send reports of his progress. Though perhaps you'd prefer I maintain proper distance there as well?"

"That won't be necessary," Elias said stiffly. "Peter is... fond of you."

"Fond." Lydia laughed, though the sound held no humor. "What a perfectly proper word. How very ducal of you."

She saw the flash of anger in his eyes, quickly masked. "Lydia?—"

"No." She held up a hand, stopping whatever he might have said. "I can't do this anymore, Elias. I can't keep pretending that your coldness doesn't hurt, that your distance doesn't matter. I need... I need time."

The morning light caught the silver at his temples, softening his stern features for just a moment. She remembered how those features had relaxed when he smiled, how his eyes had warmed when he watched Peter in the garden. But now his face was a stranger's, closed off and remote.

"Then by all means," he said, his voice like ice, "take all the time you need."

Lydia felt something crack inside her chest. Even now, even after everything, he wouldn't unbend enough to ask her to stay. Pride and proper dignity would always matter more than whatever fragile thing had grown between them.

"Goodbye, Your Grace," she said formally, the title a deliberate barrier between them. She bent to pick up her bag, but a footman appeared, reaching for it before she could.

"The carriage is ready, Your Grace," he murmured, his eyes carefully averted from the tension between his master and mistress.

Lydia nodded, turning toward the door. She had almost reached it when Elias's voice stopped her.

"Lydia." His tone was different now, softer, almost uncertain. "I..."

She waited, her heart hammering against her ribs. But whatever he might have said died unspoken as his face hardened once more.

"Have a safe journey," he finished formally.

Without another word, she stepped out into the morning air. The carriage waited, its doors already open, and she climbed inside without looking back. As they pulled away from Fyre Manor, she pressed her fingers against the window, watching the great house recede into the distance.

Only then did she allow the tears to fall.

The journey to her parents' house passed in a blur of autumn countryside and tumbling thoughts. Lydia barely noticed the familiar landmarks that marked their progress, her mind too full of the morning's goodbye. She kept seeing Peter's tearful face, feeling the weight of Elias's silence.

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When they finally arrived, the house seemed smaller than she remembered, its neat gardens and modest facade a stark contrast to Fyre Manor's grandeur. Her mother appeared in the doorway before the carriage had fully stopped, her face pinched with concern and something that looked uncomfortably like satisfaction.

"Lydia!" Viscountess Prudence hurried down the steps, her voice pitched just loud enough to catch the neighbors' attention. "What a... surprise. Is everything quite well?"

"Good morning, Mother." Lydia stepped down from the carriage, grateful for years of practice at maintaining a calm facade. "I thought I might visit for a while. To help with the girls' season."

Her mother's eyes narrowed slightly. "The girls' season? Or has something happened with His Grace?"

"Nothing has happened," Lydia said firmly. "I simply missed my sisters and thought my experience might be useful in helping them make suitable matches."

"Hmm." The Viscountess's tone held volumes of skepticism. "Well, come inside. Though I must say, it's most irregular for a duchess to abandon her household without her husband's company..."

"I haven't abandoned anything," Lydia snapped, then immediately regretted the show of temper as her mother's eyebrows rose. "I merely thought a change of scenery might be beneficial for everyone."

Inside, she found her sisters waiting in the drawing room. Their faces lit up at the sight of her, though she saw the concern in their eyes as they took in her travel-worn appearance.

"Lydia!" Jane bounded forward to embrace her. "We weren't expecting you! Is something wrong? Has the Beast of Fyre..."

"Jane!" Marian cut her off with a sharp look. "Let Lydia catch her breath before you start interrogating her."

But Diana, always the most perceptive, was studying Lydia's face carefully. "You've been crying," she said softly.

"Nonsense," Lydia attempted a smile. "It's just the wind from the carriage. Now, tell me what you've all been up to. Has Mr. Harrison called again, Marian?"

Her obvious attempt at deflection didn't fool any of them, but they played along, filling her in on the latest neighborhood gossip. Their father appeared briefly, his expression troubled, but he said little before retreating to his study.

It wasn't until that evening, after their parents had retired, that her sisters cornered her in her old bedroom.

"Alright," Jane said, perching on the foot of the bed. "Out with it. What's really going on?"

"Nothing's going on," Lydia insisted, unpacking her bag with determined concentration. "I simply thought..."

"Lydia." Marian's voice was gentle but firm. "We're your sisters. We know when something's wrong."

The kindness in her tone nearly undid Lydia's composure. She sat heavily on the edge of the bed, her hands trembling slightly as she smoothed her skirts.

"I just... needed some time away," she said finally. "To think about things."

"What things?" Diana asked softly, settling beside her.

Lydia stared at her hands, twisting in her lap. How could she explain the complexity of her feelings? The way Elias's coldness cut deeper than any blade, the ache of wanting something he refused to give, the fear that she would never be more than a convenient arrangement in his life?

"Did he hurt you?" Jane demanded, her eyes flashing. "Because if he did, I'll... I'll..."

"No, nothing like that," Lydia assured her quickly. "He's been perfectly proper. Exactly as a duke should be." She couldn't keep the bitterness from her voice.

"Ah." Marian's expression cleared with understanding. "Too proper, perhaps?"

Lydia felt tears burning behind her eyes. "I thought... I was so foolish. I thought if I just tried hard enough, if I could show him..." She broke off, pressing her fingers to her lips to stop their trembling.

Her sisters exchanged glances, then moved as one to surround her. Diana's arms went around her shoulders while Jane clasped her hand tightly.

"You weren't foolish," Marian said firmly. "We've all seen how you've changed that household. Even Mother commented on how different the Duke seemed at dinner that night."

"But it wasn't enough," Lydia whispered. "It will never be enough. He doesn't want..."

he won't let me..." She couldn't finish, the words too painful to voice.

"Oh, Lydia." Diana hugged her closer. "Tell us how to help."

Lydia managed a watery smile. "Just... let me stay for a while? Help me remember who I was before I became the Duchess of Fyre?"

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"Of course," Jane declared. "Though I must say, I rather like who you've become. You're stronger now, braver. And if His Grace can't see what he has in you, then he's an even bigger beast than the gossips claim."

"Jane!" Marian scolded, but Lydia found herself laughing despite her tears.

"I've missed you all so much," she said softly. "Sometimes the manor feels so... empty, even with Peter's laughter and Mug's adventures."

"Speaking of Mug," Diana glanced around. "Where is that impossible creature?"

"I left him with Peter," Lydia explained. "I couldn't bear to separate them, and Peter needs the comfort more than I do right now."

Her sisters exchanged knowing looks at the maternal tone in her voice. "You love that boy," Marian said gently. "As if he were your own."

"He is my own," Lydia replied without hesitation. "In every way that matters." Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. "Which makes this even harder."

They sat in silence for a moment, the weight of unspoken words hanging between them. Finally, Jane straightened her shoulders with determination.

"Well," she announced, "if we're to help you remember who you were, we might as well start now. Diana, fetch that bottle of wine Cook keeps hidden in the pantry. Marian, find those chocolate biscuits Mother thinks we don't know about. And you," she pointed at Lydia, "are going to tell us everything. Every detail. And then we'll

help you figure out what to do next."

Lydia found herself smiling despite the ache in her chest. This was what she had missed—the unconditional support of sisters who knew her heart better than she knew it herself.

"Everything?" she asked, managing a weak laugh.

"Everything," Jane confirmed firmly. "Starting with why you're really here, and ending with how we're going to make that stubborn duke of yours realize exactly what he's about to lose."

As her sisters scurried to gather their illicit supplies, Lydia leaned back against the familiar pillows of her childhood bed. The room felt smaller than she remembered, yet somehow safer. Here, at least, she could let down the careful walls she'd built around her heart.

But as the night deepened and her sisters plotted various schemes to bring Elias to his senses, Lydia found her thoughts drifting back to Fyre Manor. To Peter, who would be preparing for bed now, perhaps with Mug curled at his feet. To the gardens where they had played pirates and dragons. To Elias, alone in his study, surrounded by the weight of duty and proper dignity.

She wondered if he missed her, even a little. Or if, like everything else in their marriage, her absence was simply another inconvenience to be managed with appropriate decorum.

The thought brought fresh tears to her eyes, but this time, surrounded by her sisters' love, she let them fall freely. Tomorrow would bring its own challenges, but for tonight, she could simply be Lydia—not a duchess, not a wife, just a woman trying to find her way back to herself.

And perhaps, in finding herself, she might also find the strength to face whatever lay ahead.

CHAPTER 28

The silence in Fyre Manor had grown oppressive in the week since Lydia's departure. Even the servants moved through the halls with hushed steps, as if the very air had become brittle enough to shatter at the slightest sound. The autumn rain that had settled over the countryside only added to the gloom, its steady patter against the windows a constant reminder of all that had changed.

Elias sat in his study, surrounded by papers he couldn't focus on reading. The lamp on his desk cast weak shadows across the room, though it was barely past midday. He had been avoiding meals in the dining room, taking them here instead, where the walls of books and business correspondence could shield him from the empty chair at the other end of the table.

But it wasn't just Lydia's absence he was avoiding. Peter's eyes, so like his own, held questions Elias couldn't bear to answer. The boy had grown quieter with each passing day, his usual enthusiasm dimmed to muted responses that twisted like a knife in Elias's chest.

Just that morning, he had encountered Peter in the library, curled in Lydia's favorite window seat with Mug at his feet. The little dog had lifted his head at Elias's approach, giving a soft whine that made Peter look up from the adventure book Lydia had given him.

"Father," Peter had said, his voice small and uncertain. "Have you heard from Lydia? Only, she promised to write, and I thought perhaps..."

"I'm sure she's been busy," Elias had replied stiffly, hating the way Peter's face fell at

his words. "Your lessons await, I believe?"

"Yes, Father." Peter had gathered his book and stood, shoulders slumping. But at the door, he had paused. "Father? Did... did we do something wrong? Is that why she left?"

The question had struck Elias like a physical blow. "No," he'd managed, his voice rougher than intended. "You did nothing wrong."

"Then why won't she come home?"

Elias had no answer that wouldn't wound them both further. "To your lessons, Peter."

Now, alone in his study, those words haunted him. You did nothing wrong. But he had, hadn't he? The memory of Lydia's face that last morning, the hurt in her eyes as he let her walk away...

A sharp knock interrupted his brooding. Before he could refuse entry, the door swung open to reveal Nicholas, his usual good humor replaced by an expression of grim determination.

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"This has gone on long enough," Nicholas announced without preamble, striding into the room.

"I'm rather busy at the moment," Elias said coldly, shuffling papers he hadn't read.

"Busy brooding, you mean?" Nicholas dropped into the chair across from him. "Tell me, old friend, how long do you plan to hide in here while your household falls apart around you?"

"I am not hiding," Elias bit out. "I am attending to business that requires my attention."

"Ah yes, very important business." Nicholas picked up one of the papers, turning it right side up with pointed emphasis. "So important you haven't noticed half these documents are upside down."

Elias snatched the paper back, his jaw clenching. "If you've come merely to mock me..."

"I've come because I care about you, you stubborn fool." Nicholas's voice softened slightly. "And because I just had a rather heartbreaking encounter with your son in the garden."

Something in Elias's chest tightened. "Peter?"

"He came running to me the moment I arrived, practically in tears." Nicholas leaned forward, his expression serious. "He wanted to know if I'd heard from Lydia, if I

knew when she was coming home. The poor boy is devastated, Elias. And from what I gather, you've been about as comforting as a block of ice."

"I've been..." Elias broke off, guilt warring with anger in his chest. "He needs to understand that sometimes people leave. It's better he learn that now."

"Is it?" Nicholas's voice took on a dangerous edge. "Better he learn that loving someone means watching them walk away? Better he believe that his feelings don't matter, that proper dignity is more important than happiness? Tell me, Elias, are you trying to turn him into you?"

"You go too far," Elias warned, rising from his chair.

"Do I?" Nicholas stood as well, matching his friend's height. "Or have I finally hit upon the truth you've been avoiding? This isn't about Lydia at all, is it? This is about Barbara."

The name fell between them like a stone in still water, ripples of old pain spreading outward. Elias's hands clenched at his sides, his face going rigid with fury.

"Do not," he said, each word precise and cold as ice, "speak of things you don't understand."

"But I do understand," Nicholas pressed on, ignoring the danger in his friend's tone. "I was there, remember? I know exactly how the guilt tore you up after she passed. You blamed your father, you blamed yourself, you perhaps even blamed..."

"Stop!" Elias's voice was cold and Nicholas raised a hand in apology. "Perhaps that is going too far," he agreed. "But my friend, Lydia is not Barbara. She's not going to?—"

"Enough!" Elias's voice cracked like a whip. "Get out."

"No." Nicholas stood his ground. "Not until you listen to reason. Your wife—your living, breathing wife who seems to care for you, who loves your son more than her own happiness—is gone. And instead of fighting for her, you're hiding in here, letting history repeat itself because you're too afraid to..."

"I said get out!" Elias roared, slamming his hands down on the desk hard enough to make the lamp rattle.

For a long moment, the two men stared at each other across the desk, decades of friendship warring with pride and pain. Finally, Nicholas stepped back, his expression sad.

"Very well," he said quietly. "But remember this, old friend—Barbara's death was a tragedy. Losing Lydia is a choice. Your choice."

With that, he turned and left, closing the door with deliberate softness behind him. The quiet click seemed to echo in the sudden silence.

Elias sank back into his chair, his hands shaking slightly as he reached for the brandy decanter. But before he could pour, a small sound from the doorway made him freeze.

Peter stood there, his face pale and uncertain, Mug pressed close against his legs. "Father? I... I heard shouting."

Elias set down the decanter carefully, forcing his voice to steady. "It was nothing. Just a disagreement between old friends."

"About Lydia?" Peter asked, taking a hesitant step into the room.

Something in his son's voice—so young, so vulnerable—made Elias's carefully maintained control waver. "Come here, son."

Peter approached slowly, as if afraid any sudden movement might shatter this rare moment of connection. When he reached the desk, Elias surprised them both by drawing him close, one hand resting awkwardly on his shoulder.

"I miss her," Peter whispered, his voice thick with unshed tears. "Why won't she come home?"

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Elias closed his eyes, feeling the weight of his son's pain like a physical burden. "It's... complicated, Peter."

"But she loves us," Peter insisted, looking up at him with those aching familiar eyes. "I know she does. She told me so."

"Sometimes," Elias began, then stopped, searching for words that wouldn't wound. "Sometimes love isn't enough."

"Like with my mother?"

The question caught him off guard, making his breath catch painfully in his chest. "What do you mean?"

Peter shifted uncomfortably, but pressed on with a child's determined honesty. "I heard Uncle Nicholas mention her name. Barbara. That was my mother's name, wasn't it? The one in the portrait Lydia found?"

"Yes," Elias managed, his throat tight. "That was her name."

"Did she love me?" Peter's voice was very small. "Before she... before she died?"

Elias felt something crack inside his chest, a hairline fracture in the walls he'd built so carefully. "She... she never had the chance to know you, Peter. She died bringing you into this world."

"Oh." Peter was quiet for a moment, processing this. "Is that why you won't let Lydia

be my mother? Because you're afraid she'll die too?"

The innocent question struck deeper than all of Nicholas's accusations. Elias pulled back slightly, studying his son's face—so like his own, hardly a trace of his late mother in it, yet with an openness, a warmth that was entirely his own. That was Lydia's influence, he realized with a pang. She had taught Peter it was safe to feel, safe to question, safe to love.

"It's not that simple," he said finally, though the words felt hollow even to his own ears.

"Isn't it?" Peter's chin lifted in a gesture so reminiscent of Lydia that it made Elias's heart ache. "She makes everything better, Father. The house isn't so dark anymore. And you..." He hesitated, then forged ahead with childish courage. "You smile sometimes now. Or you did, before she left."

Elias had no response to that simple truth. He could only pull his son closer, feeling the slight tremor in the small body pressed against his chest.

"Will you at least write to her?" Peter asked, his voice muffled against Elias's coat. "Ask her to come home?"

"Peter..." Elias began, but found he couldn't continue. How could he explain to a child what he barely understood himself? The paralyzing fear that gripped him whenever he thought of loving someone that completely again, of risking that kind of loss?

"Please, Father?" Peter pulled back to look up at him, his eyes bright with tears. "I promise I'll be better. I'll study harder, and I won't play pirates in the house, and..."

"Stop." Elias's voice was rougher than he intended. "This isn't about you being better

or worse. You are..." He swallowed hard. "You are perfect exactly as you are. Never doubt that."

Peter's lower lip trembled. "Then why won't you fix it? Why won't you make her come home?"

Because I'm afraid, Elias thought but couldn't say. Because loving you both would mean risking everything. Because sometimes the weight of proper dignity is easier to bear than the terrible vulnerability of joy.

"Go to your lessons now," he said instead, his voice gentle but firm. "Miss Nancy will be waiting."

Peter's shoulders slumped, but he nodded. At the door, he paused, Mug pressed close against his legs. "Father?"

"Yes?"

"Lydia says that sometimes the bravest thing isn't fighting dragons, but admitting when you're scared." He hesitated, then added softly, "Maybe... maybe you could be brave like that too?"

Before Elias could respond, Peter was gone, his footsteps fading down the corridor. Elias stared after him, feeling the weight of his son's words settle like stones in his chest.

Brave like that too.

He turned to the window, watching the rain trace patterns down the glass. Somewhere out there, Lydia was living her life without them, perhaps already forgetting the way Peter's face lit up when he mastered a new skill, or how the morning light caught the

silver in Elias's hair when he forgot to maintain his stern expression.

Nicholas's words echoed in his mind: Barbara's death was a tragedy. Losing Lydia is a choice.

But was it really a choice when the alternative was risking everything? When loving someone meant opening yourself to the possibility of that kind of devastating loss?

The rain continued to fall, offering no answers to the questions that haunted him. In the distance, he could hear Peter's voice drifting from the schoolroom, reciting Latin conjugations with none of his usual enthusiasm.

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Elias turned back to his desk, to the familiar comfort of ledgers and business correspondence. But try as he might, he couldn't focus on the numbers before him. All he could see was Lydia's face that last morning, the hurt in her eyes as he let her walk away.

All he could hear was Peter's voice, soft but certain: Maybe you could be brave like that too.

But some kinds of bravery, Elias thought grimly, came at too high a price. Better to maintain proper dignity, to keep the walls firmly in place, than risk having them crumble entirely.

Better to be the Beast of Fyre than to remember how it felt to be simply, vulnerably human.

CHAPTER 29

Lydia could hardly notice the beauty of the park as they walked. It was a route they had traveled countless times in their youth, though today the familiar surroundings felt somehow different—tainted perhaps by the weight of all she carried in her heart. The autumn breeze stirred fallen leaves around their feet, and Lydia found herself remembering how Peter had once described the changing colors as "nature's own art gallery."

Every memory of Fyre Manor seemed to pierce her anew. Even here, surrounded by the comfortable familiarity of her childhood home, she couldn't escape the ache of missing them. Missing Peter's morning visits to her chambers, his excited chatter

about his latest drawings. Missing the way Mug would chase butterflies in the garden while Elias pretended not to smile. Missing...

"Enough brooding," Jane declared, linking her arm through Lydia's. "You've been here a week and you've barely said two words about what really happened at Fyre Manor. You drift about like a ghost, staring at nothing, and we're worried sick about you."

"Jane," Marian warned, but Lydia shook her head.

"No, she's right. I owe you all an explanation." Lydia led them to a secluded bench, one that had witnessed many sisterly confidences over the years. The weathered wood still bore their initials, carved in secret one summer afternoon long ago. "Though I hardly know where to begin."

"The beginning is usually best," Diana suggested gently, settling beside her. She took Lydia's hand, her touch warm and reassuring. "When did things start to change between you and the Duke?"

Lydia twisted her hands in her lap, searching for words. The breeze caught at her hair, reminding her painfully of how Elias's fingers had once brushed a stray curl from her cheek. "I... I made a terrible mistake," she said finally. "I fell in love with him."

Her sisters exchanged glances. "Is that really such a mistake?" Marian asked softly. "Loving one's husband?"

"It is when he can never love you in return." Lydia's voice caught slightly. "When his heart still belongs to someone else."

"His first wife?" Jane's usual exuberance dimmed with understanding. "But surely?—"

"You didn't see his face when I asked..." Lydia broke off, the memory still too raw. That terrible moment in his study, when she'd dared to hope for more, only to have her dreams shattered by his cold refusal.

"I thought I could be content with what he offered," Lydia continued, blinking back tears. The words came easier now, as if speaking them aloud somehow lessened their power to wound. "A position, a home, a chance to be a mother to Peter. But I was foolish. I wanted more. I wanted..." She gestured helplessly. "Everything. His smile in the morning, his trust, his heart. I wanted him to look at me the way... I don't know, the way they do in books, I suppose... Like I was something precious, something worth protecting."

"That's not foolish," Marian said firmly. "You deserve everything, Lydia. And if the Duke can't see that..."

"Sometimes I think he does see it," Lydia admitted quietly. "There are moments when he looks at me, and I could swear..." She twisted her handkerchief between her fingers. "But then he remembers himself and the walls come back up. It's like watching a flower close at the first touch of frost."

"Men," Jane declared with all the wisdom of her nineteen years, "are impossibly stupid creatures. Even dukes, apparently."

That startled a laugh from Lydia, though it quickly turned watery. "He's not stupid, Jane. He's... wounded. Scarred in ways I can't reach. And perhaps that's the real tragedy—that I love him enough to understand why he pushes me away, even as it breaks my heart."

"Have you told him?" Diana asked. "How you feel?"

"Not in so many words. But surely he must know? After everything..." Lydia broke

off, remembering that kiss in the garden, the way he had looked at her in that midnight blue gown. "Or perhaps I've imagined it all. Perhaps I've been seeing what I wished to see, rather than what was truly there."

"From what you've told us in your letters," Marian said thoughtfully, "it seems the Duke cares for you more than you realize. The way he watches you with Peter, how he ordered all those gowns from Madame Delacour..."

"And danced with you at the ball!" Jane added. "Everyone says he never dances."

"Momentary lapses," Lydia said bitterly. "Weaknesses he immediately regrets. You should have seen his face when I suggested sharing his chambers, as a proper wife should. You'd have thought I'd suggested something truly scandalous, like teaching Mug to juggle or letting Peter eat dessert before dinner."

Her attempt at humor fell flat as her sisters exchanged worried glances. "Is that why you left?" Diana asked gently. "Because he refused you?"

"No. Yes. I don't know anymore." Lydia pressed her fingers to her temples, fighting back fresh tears. "I left because I couldn't bear to keep pretending. To sit across from him at breakfast, to watch him with Peter, to love them both so much while knowing I'll never truly be part of their family. I'm just... a convenient arrangement. A duchess to manage his household and mother his son. Nothing more."

"Lydia..." Marian began, but was cut off by Jane's sharp intake of breath.

"Look out," Jane interrupted suddenly, her voice sharp with warning. "It's that man."

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Lydia followed her sister's gaze to see a gentleman approaching their bench, his stride purposeful. Diana went rigid beside her, all color draining from her face. The shift in her sister's demeanor was so dramatic it made Lydia's protective instincts flare instantly.

"Lady Diana," the man called, his smile not quite reaching his eyes. Something about that smile made Lydia's skin crawl—too practiced, too perfect, like a mask carefully constructed to hide something darker beneath. "What a delightful surprise! And your sisters too, how charming."

"Lord Blackwood," Diana murmured, her voice barely audible. She seemed to shrink into herself, a reaction that set off warning bells in Lydia's mind. Diana, usually so composed, was trembling slightly beneath her carefully arranged shawl.

"I'm afraid we were just leaving," Lydia said smoothly, rising to her feet. She didn't miss the way Lord Blackwood's smile hardened slightly at her intervention, a brief crack in his pleasant facade revealing something that made her instinctively move closer to Diana. "Family matters to attend to, you understand."

"Surely you can spare a few moments?" His tone was pleasant enough, but there was an edge to it that reminded Lydia uncomfortably of a blade wrapped in silk. "I've been trying to speak with Lady Diana for days now. Most inconsiderate of her to keep avoiding me, wouldn't you say?"

"And I'm sure you'll have another opportunity," Lydia replied, her voice taking on a distinctly ducal chill. Living with Elias had taught her something about wielding authority like a shield. "At a more appropriate time. Good day, sir."

She guided her sisters away, noting how Diana trembled slightly under her touch. They walked quickly, not speaking until they were well out of sight. The cheerful afternoon had taken on a darker cast, the shadows between the trees suddenly seeming deeper, more threatening.

"Diana," Lydia said softly once they were safely away, "how long has this been going on?"

"It's nothing," Diana tried to insist, but her hands were shaking as she smoothed her skirts. "He's just... persistent."

"Persistent?" Jane's voice cracked with anger. "It's not nothing! He follows her everywhere, Lydia. Watches the house, appears wherever she goes. Last week he tried to force his way into the garden, claiming they had an understanding!"

"Jane!" Diana protested weakly.

"No, she needs to know!" Jane's eyes flashed with protective fury. "He's not right in the head, Lydia. The way he talks about Diana, like she belongs to him... it's frightening. He leaves notes, appears at church, at shops—anywhere she might be. Last Tuesday I found him standing outside her window at dawn, just... watching."

Lydia felt cold anger settle in her chest. "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"You had your own troubles," Marian said quietly, her arm protectively around Diana's shoulders. "And we thought we could handle it. Father spoke to him, told him to stay away, but..."

"But he ignored it," Lydia finished grimly. "As such men often do. Their sense of entitlement makes them deaf to any refusal."

"He says... he says I'm lucky he chose me." Diana's voice was barely a whisper, and Lydia had to lean closer to hear. "That no one else would want me, that I should be grateful for his attention. And sometimes when he looks at me, I..." She shuddered. "It's like being watched by something hungry. Something that wants to... to consume me."

"Listen to me," Lydia said fiercely, taking Diana's hands in hers. They were ice-cold despite the mild afternoon. "You are not lucky to be chosen by him. You are not beneath anyone's notice. And you do not owe him anything, do you understand?"

Diana nodded, tears spilling down her cheeks. "I'm scared, Lydia. He won't stop, and I don't know what to do. Last night I dreamed he was in my room, just standing there, watching me sleep. When I woke up, the curtains were moving and I thought... I thought..."

"I'll take care of it," Lydia promised, her voice hard with determination. "He won't trouble you anymore." She lifted her chin proudly. Despite her utter heartache over it, she had learned something about handling wolves in gentleman's clothing during her time at Fyre Manor. Sometimes it took a beast to fight a beast.

They started for home, taking a shorter route through the narrow streets. The afternoon shadows had lengthened, and Lydia quickened their pace, wanting to reach the safety of the house before dark. The comfortable familiarity of their childhood neighborhood seemed different now, every alley a potential hiding place, every shadow a threat.

None of them heard the footsteps until it was too late. The first warning was the scrape of boots on cobblestones, too close behind them.

"Now really, ladies," Lord Blackwood's voice came from behind them, making them all freeze. The pleasant mask he'd worn in the park was gone completely now, leaving

something darker, hungrier in its place. "That wasn't very polite, running away like that."

They turned to find him blocking the narrow alley, effectively cutting off their escape route. The fading sunlight caught the gleam of something in his hand—was it a knife? Lydia shifted slightly, positioning herself between him and Diana.

"Come along, my dear," he said, holding out his hand. His eyes never left Diana, as if the rest of them were merely inconvenient obstacles to be removed. "It's time we settled this nonsense."

"She's not going anywhere with you," Jane snapped, pushing Diana behind her. Lydia had never been prouder of her youngest sister's fierce courage.

Lord Blackwood's face twisted with ugly anger. The last vestiges of his gentlemanly facade crumbled, revealing something that made Lydia's blood run cold. "This doesn't concern you. Diana is mine by right. I've chosen her, shown her more attention than she deserves, and this is how she repays me? By hiding behind her sisters like a coward?"

"The only coward here is you," Lydia said coldly, drawing on every ounce of ducal authority she'd learned from Elias. "Harassing young ladies, following them about—is this how a gentleman behaves? What would your family say if they knew?"

"Gentleman?" He laughed, the sound sharp and dangerous as broken glass. "Oh, Your Grace, you of all people should understand. After all, didn't you marry a man they call the Beast? Some of us must take what we want, mustn't we? Though I must say," his eyes raked over her with contempt, "he didn't choose very well. No wonder he keeps you at arm's length."

The words struck deeper than they should have, finding all her hidden wounds. But

before she could respond, he lunged forward suddenly, grabbing for Diana. His fingers caught in her shawl, yanking her forward with shocking violence.

Jane reacted instantly, her fist connecting with his jaw in a most unladylike display of violence. He staggered back, shock turning quickly to rage as blood trickled from his split lip.

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"You little..." He raised his hand to strike Jane, but Lydia threw herself forward, screaming as loudly as she could.

"Help! Someone help us! Fire! Thief! Murder!"

His hand connected with her instead, sending her stumbling backward. The world spun crazily as her head struck something hard—the corner of a wall perhaps—and the ground seemed to tilt beneath her feet. She was dimly aware of more shouting, of running footsteps, of her sisters calling her name through the roaring in her ears.

"Lydia! No! Oh, no... Oh, no, she's bleeding!"

"Help! Somebody please help!"

"Diana, run for the doctor! Quickly!"

The voices seemed to come from very far away, as if she were underwater. She tried to open her eyes, to tell them she was fine, but the darkness kept pulling at her, dragging her down into its depths.

When consciousness returned, it came in fragments. Pain, sharp and throbbing at the back of her head, making even the faintest light unbearable. Voices, familiar and worried, speaking over her. The sensation of movement, of being carried, though she couldn't tell by whom.

"Lydia?" That was Marian's voice, thick with tears. "Can you hear me? Please, please open your eyes."

She tried to respond, but the words wouldn't come. Everything felt heavy, distant, as if she were trapped in a dream she couldn't wake from. Someone was pressing something cool against her head, but even that gentle touch sent waves of agony through her skull.

"The doctor's coming," another voice said—Jane? "And I've sent word to Fyre Manor. They need to know..."

Fyre Manor. Elias. Would they tell him? Would he care? Or would this be just another inconvenience to be handled with proper dignity?

"Peter," she tried to say, but she wasn't sure if the word actually left her lips. "Tell Peter... I'm sorry... promised to write..."

The darkness pulled at her again, stronger this time, and she was too tired to fight it anymore. Her last coherent thought was of Peter's face, of how his eyes lit up when he smiled—Elias's eyes, but warmer, full of a love he didn't try to hide.

Then there was nothing but silence, and the endless dark.

But even as consciousness fled, some part of her held onto a single truth: Elias needed to know about Lord Blackwood. Diana wasn't safe, none of them were, as long as that man walked free. Elias would be able to take care of it, he would protect them...

The thought followed her down into the darkness, a final prayer before everything faded away: Please, let me wake up. Let me keep them safe. Let me see them one more time...

Then even that was gone, leaving nothing but the quiet dark and the distant sound of her sisters' frightened voices, calling her name as if from very far away.

CHAPTER 30

The longer Lydia was gone, the more pressing and suffocating the silence in Fyre Manor became.

Elias had told himself that Peter needed time, space to explore his feelings on his own. But he was beginning to see the flaws in his reasoning. Peter was only a boy—one who had come to rely on Lydia's warmth, her gentle understanding, and the life she had brought to Fyre Manor. Without her, Elias could see that his son was withdrawing further each day, growing quieter, more remote. And tonight, as Elias stood outside Peter's door, he felt the weight of that guilt pressing down on him.

From within the room, he could hear a soft, muffled sound—a sniffing, so quiet that it would have been easy to overlook. But Elias knew immediately what it was, and the sound pierced him in a way he hadn't expected. It was the sound of a child trying to hold back tears, of someone who didn't want to be heard or seen in their pain. Taking a deep breath, he raised his hand and knocked softly, then opened the door without waiting for a response.

Inside, Peter lay curled up on his bed, his small frame swallowed by the thick blankets around him. Mug lay beside him, pressed close against Peter's side, his head resting protectively on the boy's arm. At the sight of Elias, Mug lifted his head, giving a soft, concerned whine, but Peter sat up quickly, swiping at his cheeks, trying to compose himself in front of his father.

"Peter," Elias said quietly, stepping further into the room. He kept his tone gentle, steady, though his heart twisted at the sight of his son's red-rimmed eyes and tear-streaked cheeks. "May I sit with you?"

Peter glanced away, nodding stiffly, his shoulders tense. "If you want to," he replied, his voice barely above a whisper.

Elias crossed the room and perched on the edge of the bed. For a long moment, he simply sat in silence, watching Peter, unsure of how to start, of what to say. The right words, the reassurances he should have given days ago, eluded him, leaving him feeling uncharacteristically uncertain.

Finally, after a pause, he reached out, his hand resting gently on Peter's shoulder. "You don't have to pretend, Peter," he said softly. "Not with me. At least... at least not anymore."

At his words, Peter's shoulders began to shake, and he let out a shuddering breath. Fresh tears filled his eyes, and he looked up at his father with a vulnerability that Elias hadn't seen before. "I miss her so much, Father," he whispered, his voice breaking. "Why won't she come home?"

The raw pain in his son's voice struck Elias deeply, more than he'd expected. Without thinking, he moved closer, gathering Peter into his arms. Peter's small frame trembled against him, and Elias could feel the boy's carefully constructed composure crumbling entirely.

"I'm sorry," Peter sobbed, his voice muffled against Elias's coat. "I'm trying to be brave, I promise. But everything feels wrong without her here. The house is too quiet, and nothing feels right."

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"Shh," Elias murmured, one hand coming up to gently stroke Peter's hair. "You don't have to be brave all the time, Peter," he said quietly. "It's alright to miss her. I miss her too."

Peter pulled back slightly, looking up at Elias, his face streaked with tears. "You do? You... you miss her?" he asked, his voice barely more than a whisper.

"Yes," Elias said, his own voice low. "I miss her every day."

Peter studied him for a long moment, seeming to absorb his father's words, and a small glimmer of hope appeared in his eyes. "Then... can't we bring her home?" he asked, his voice filled with a simple, unguarded hope that caught Elias off guard.

Elias hesitated, feeling the weight of Peter's question settle over him. How could he explain to a child what he himself struggled to understand? But Peter's gaze held only a quiet, unwavering belief, and Elias found himself nodding.

"I'll do everything I can to bring her back," he said softly, his voice filled with a determination he hadn't felt in days. "You have my word on that."

Peter's face softened, relief evident as he nodded, and a small, tentative smile crossed his lips. They sat in silence for a moment, Elias's arm still around Peter's shoulders as the boy's breathing gradually steadied, the sadness that had weighed on him easing, if only a little.

After a while, Peter looked up, his voice soft and hesitant. "Could you... could you read with me? Like Lydia used to?"

Elias blinked in surprise, but he reached for the stack of books on Peter's nightstand, picking up one that was well-worn and familiar. He settled back on the bed, opening the book as Peter leaned into his side, his small frame relaxing in a way that made Elias's chest tighten.

Clearing his throat, Elias opened the well-worn book, the familiar words sitting heavy on the page as he began to read aloud. His voice was soft at first, a low rumble that gradually steadied, smoothing into the cadence Lydia had used when she'd read this story to Peter.

"In the deep woods, where shadows stretch long and strange, the knight knew he would find his way..."

Peter shifted closer, his head coming to rest against Elias's arm, his small body finally relaxing, releasing the tension he'd been holding all evening. As Elias continued, he could feel the gentler rise and fall of his son's breaths slowing, each exhalation a faint warmth against his sleeve. With each sentence, Peter seemed to lean in a bit more, and Elias felt something loosen in his own chest, a tightness he hadn't realized was there until it began to ease.

The story's familiar rhythm flowed between them, each word a step into the world of heroes and quests. Elias glanced down, watching Peter's eyelids flutter as he sank deeper into the comfort of the tale. And in that moment, Elias could feel the bridge being built between them—an unspoken understanding that hadn't needed words or reassurances, only time together.

As he read, Elias found himself unexpectedly drawn into the story's depth. He had thought of these words as simple once, a child's tale of adventure and bravery, but tonight each line seemed to hold a weight he hadn't noticed before. His voice grew steady as he read of the knight venturing into the unknown, his path winding through shadows that stretched across ancient trees.

"In the deep woods, where light fades and the world grows strange, the knight tightened his grip on his sword. He did not know what dangers lay ahead, but his heart held steady, for he knew his quest was true..."

Elias paused, glancing at Peter. His son's small fingers clutched the edge of the blanket, his wide eyes fixed on the page, hanging on every word. There was something in Peter's expression—a fierce attentiveness, a glimmer of hope—that stirred something deeply protective in Elias.

"Though the shadows whispered fears into his mind, the knight moved forward, step by step," Elias continued, his voice low, resonant. "For courage was not the absence of fear, but the will to walk on despite it."

Peter's grip on the blanket tightened, and he shifted closer, nestling into Elias's side, finding a steady warmth there. Elias could feel Peter's trust, solid and unspoken, as he leaned against him, and the moment filled him with a quiet resolve of his own.

Each word, each turn of the page, built a bridge between them—a connection Elias hadn't realized he'd been longing for. He continued, his voice unwavering as the knight moved deeper into the dark, facing the unknown with a quiet resolve that, tonight, felt personal.

When he reached the end of the chapter, Peter looked up, his eyes thoughtful. "Do you think the knight was afraid?" he asked softly.

Elias considered the question, glancing down at the illustration of the knight standing before a dark forest, his sword raised, his stance resolute. "Perhaps," he said slowly. "But he kept going, even if he was."

Peter nodded, satisfied with the answer, and leaned his head back against Elias's shoulder, his eyes growing heavy. Elias closed the book gently, his gaze lingering on

his son's face, watching as the worry and sadness that had marked him seemed to fade, replaced by a peaceful stillness.

"Goodnight, Peter," he whispered, brushing a hand over his son's hair. He rose from the bed, tucking the blankets around Peter's small frame, ensuring he would stay warm through the night.

He had reached the door when hurried footsteps echoed in the hallway. Miss Nancy appeared in the doorway, her expression pale and tense.

"Your Grace," she said, her voice barely above a whisper, but her urgency unmistakable. "A message has just arrived from town. It concerns Her Grace."

Elias turned sharply, feeling a chill settle over him. "What about her?"

"She's been hurt, Your Grace," Miss Nancy said, her voice wavering slightly. "Some sort of attack in the street. The message wasn't detailed, but..."

He was moving before she could finish. "Where is she?"

"At her parents' house," Miss Nancy replied, struggling to keep pace as Elias moved quickly into the hall. "The doctor has been sent for, but we don't know?—"

"Have my horse saddled immediately," he ordered, his tone leaving no room for hesitation.

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"Father?" Peter's voice, soft and filled with fresh worry, reached him from the doorway. "Is Lydia... is she going to be alright?"

Elias crossed back to him, pulling Peter into a quick, fierce embrace. "She'll be fine, Peter," he said firmly, hoping his certainty would be enough for both of them. "I'll bring her home."

With those words, he left, his mind a whirl of fear and urgency as he made his way to the stables. The grooms were already preparing his horse, alerted by Miss Nancy's instructions, and he swung into the saddle, his focus fixed entirely on reaching Lydia.

"Your Grace!" his steward called out as he passed. "Shall I send word ahead? Prepare a carriage?"

"Yes," Elias replied sharply, urging his mount forward. "And quickly."

The night air sliced across his face, stinging his skin, but Elias barely felt it. The cold bit deep, but his focus was entirely on the road stretching out in the darkness, each shadowed tree and twisting path a blur as he pushed his horse to the brink. Beneath him, he could feel the powerful, rhythmic surge of muscles as his mount strained forward, steam rising in thick clouds from the horse's nostrils. Elias leaned closer, urging him faster still, as if sheer speed could shorten the endless distance that lay between him and Lydia.

Images of her flickered through his mind, hauntingly vivid, each one twisting his gut tighter. Her face, pale and still, as he might find her; her eyes closed, or worse, her gaze dimmed and unfocused. The thought made his stomach clench, a sharp pain that

radiated outward, and he gritted his teeth, forcing down the bile that rose in his throat. His hands clenched around the reins until his knuckles ached, but he couldn't release them; if he loosened his grip even slightly, it felt as if he might fall apart entirely.

Each beat of the horse's hooves against the ground echoed the thundering of his heart, relentless and punishing. What if he was already too late? The question tore through him, leaving an emptiness in its wake that he couldn't bear to face. His chest tightened, breaths coming faster and more shallow as the cold night air scraped his throat, but he pressed on, refusing to let himself falter. He could see Lydia's face as he had seen it last—hurt, disappointed, but still so alive, still so... hers. The image seared his mind, feeding the terrible urgency that drove him forward.

"Please," he whispered, barely audible over the wind. His jaw was clenched, and he could feel the muscles in his neck straining as if they, too, were pushing him onward. "Please, Lydia, be alright."

CHAPTER 31

The Brandon manor stood still and dark in the gathering dusk as Elias arrived, the thundering of his horse's hooves echoing off the cobblestone drive. He barely waited for the animal to stop before dismounting, his strides swift and determined as he took the front steps two at a time. All thoughts of proper dignity were forgotten, replaced by a raw, desperate need to reach Lydia.

When he reached the door, he didn't pause to wait for it to open. He pounded on it, each knock resounding through the quiet evening, his heart racing with a mixture of fear and urgency. A footman finally appeared, his eyes widening at the sight of the disheveled duke.

"Your Grace!" The young man's voice wavered, his surprise evident. "We weren't expecting?—"

"Where is she?" Elias demanded, already stepping past him into the foyer. His tone was urgent, edged with a barely restrained fury. "Where is my wife?"

The footman stammered, glancing uncertainly over his shoulder. "Upstairs, Your Grace, but..."

Elias didn't wait for further explanation. He was already moving, his boots echoing against the polished floors as he took the stairs, each step fueled by the single-minded need to see her. He barely registered the whispers in the hall—the hushed tones of Lydia's sisters, who were hovering near the door to the bedroom where she lay. Their voices, low and tense, did nothing to calm the torrent of emotions within him. He could hear a stranger's voice as well—the doctor, he presumed, and the sound only heightened his urgency.

Just as he reached the landing, Viscountess Prudence appeared, her expression pinched and full of concern. "Your Grace," she began, her voice apologetic despite the hint of coldness he could detect in it. "we did not expect you to arrive so soon. I must apologize for Lydia's behavior..."

"Where?" The single word came out as a growl, each syllable sharp with barely restrained fury.

Prudence faltered, casting a hesitant glance over her shoulder. "The blue bedroom, but Your Grace, please... perhaps we should discuss..."

Elias brushed past her without a word, his attention focused entirely on the door down the hall. His heart pounded as he neared it, and when he reached the doorway, he had to grip the frame to steady himself. The door was slightly ajar, and through the narrow opening, he caught his first glimpse of Lydia.

She lay motionless on the bed, her face pale against the pillows. A bandage wrapped

around her temple, stark against her skin, and even in the dim lamplight, he could see the dark bruise that marred her cheekbone. She looked so small, so fragile—nothing like the vibrant, resilient woman who had brought light back into his life and his home. The sight of her so still, so vulnerable, stirred something deep and fierce within him, a need to protect her that burned through him like fire.

"Your Grace." The doctor straightened, offering a respectful bow as he acknowledged Elias's presence. "I've just finished examining her, and I..."

"Leave us," Elias interrupted, his voice rough. His gaze remained fixed on Lydia, his hand tightening on the doorframe. "Everyone out. Now."

The doctor hesitated, his eyes darting to the viscount and viscountess, who had followed Elias into the room. "Your Grace, I should explain her condition..."

"Later." Elias's tone left no room for argument, each word cold and unyielding. The doctor, recognizing the finality in his voice, inclined his head and withdrew, gathering his medical bag as he left the room.

Elias barely noticed as the door closed behind them. For a moment, he stood frozen, his gaze fixed on Lydia's still form. Then, as if drawn by an invisible force, he moved forward, sinking to his knees beside the bed. His hands trembled as he reached out, taking her cold fingers in his own and pressing them to his lips.

"Lydia," he whispered against her skin, his voice raw with guilt and regret. "My love... what have I done?"

The door creaked softly behind him, and he looked up, his eyes narrowing as Viscount Silas and his wife, Prudence, entered the room. They hovered near the doorway, their postures stiff and uncomfortable, though neither seemed inclined to leave without speaking to him.

"What happened?" Elias demanded, his voice deadly quiet, each word edged with a barely restrained fury. He did not look away from Lydia's face as he spoke, his gaze lingering on the bruise that marred her delicate skin. "Tell me everything."

Prudence took a hesitant step forward, her hands wringing as she glanced nervously at her husband. "Your Grace," she began, her tone carefully contrite, "I assure you, we are as mortified as you must be by Lydia's behavior. To strike a gentleman in public, in full view of the entire street. It was most improper."

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Elias's head snapped up, his gaze blazing as he fixed her with a look of utter disbelief. "Strike a gentleman?" The words came out in a harsh whisper. "What gentleman?"

"Lord Blackwood," Silas replied, his voice carefully neutral. "There was... an unfortunate incident. Lydia attempted to intervene in a private matter between him and Diana."

"Intervened?" Jane's voice cut in from the hallway, sharp with anger. She stepped into the room, her expression fierce as she glared at her mother. "She stopped him from dragging Diana into an alley. He's been stalking her for weeks, harassing her, making her afraid to leave the house."

"Jane!" Prudence hissed, her face flushing. "That's quite enough! Lord Blackwood is a gentleman of means who has shown a keen interest in Diana. If Lydia hadn't interfered..."

"If Lydia hadn't interfered," Elias's voice was soft but lethal, "your youngest daughter might be dead or worse. And you dare stand there apologizing for my wife's behavior?"

Both Prudence and Silas recoiled slightly, exchanging uncertain glances. Prudence's mouth opened and closed, her expression a mix of shock and indignation.

Elias rose slowly to his feet, his full height and commanding presence forcing both of them to take an involuntary step back. His hands were clenched at his sides, his fury barely contained as he continued, each word precise and cutting. "She has been doing your job," he said, his tone cold, "protecting her sisters when you would sacrifice

them to the first 'gentleman of means' who showed interest, regardless of his character or intentions."

Silas stiffened, his jaw tightening as he drew himself up. "Your Grace, that accusation is entirely uncalled for. You can hardly blame us for..."

"I can and I do," Elias replied, his voice icy. "But not as much as I blame myself. My wife—my brave, loyal, and selfless wife—left the safety of our home because I was too much of a coward to fight for her. And now she lies here, hurt and helpless, because I failed to protect her."

"Your Grace," Prudence began, her voice wavering as she attempted to regain her composure, "surely you can't mean to encourage such unladylike behavior? A proper wife would never?—"

"A proper wife?" Elias let out a bitter, humorless laugh. "My wife is more noble, more worthy of respect, than anyone in this room. She saw someone in danger and acted to protect them, regardless of the cost to herself. That is true nobility, madam, not your shallow concerns about 'proper behavior.'"

He turned back to Lydia, taking her hand once more, his thumb tracing gentle circles on her palm. He felt a fierce, protective anger rise within him, mingled with the painful guilt he had carried since the day she left. "Now get out," he said quietly, his voice like iron. "All of you. I wish to be alone with my wife."

"But—" Prudence began, her eyes widening in protest.

"Out!" The single word cracked like a whip, and the tone was so commanding, so filled with authority, that even Silas seemed momentarily cowed. Without another word, he took his wife's arm, leading her from the room. Jane hesitated, casting a worried glance back at Lydia before following them, her expression grim.

As the door closed behind them, Elias sank back to his knees beside the bed. He pressed Lydia's hand to his cheek, feeling the faint warmth of life still lingering in her skin. For a long moment, he could only sit there, holding her hand, his chest tight with regret and self-recrimination.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. "For everything. For letting you go, for not seeing what was right in front of me, for being such a stubborn fool. Please, Lydia... please wake up."

A faint sound caught his attention, and he looked up to see her eyelids fluttering, her lashes casting delicate shadows on her cheeks. Slowly, her eyes opened, and her gaze met his, confusion clouding the green depths.

"Elias?" Her voice was barely more than a whisper, hoarse and weak. "What... why are you...?"

"Shh." He reached out, his free hand coming up to gently brush a strand of hair from her forehead. "Don't try to move. You've been hurt."

Her brow furrowed, and a flash of memory crossed her face. "Diana?" The word was urgent despite her weakness. "Is she safe?"

"She's fine," he assured her quickly. "Thanks to you. Though when I think of what could have happened..."

Lydia's gaze focused on him, and he could see a faint smile tugging at the corners of her mouth as she took in his disheveled appearance. "You came," she murmured, her voice filled with wonder as her eyes searched his. "I wasn't sure..."

His throat tightened at her words, the simple statement carrying a weight he hadn't anticipated. "Of course I came," he replied, his voice rough with emotion. "Did you

think I wouldn't?"

She was silent for a moment, studying his face, as though searching for something in his expression. "After everything... I wasn't sure," she admitted finally, her voice barely audible.

The admission struck him with a force he hadn't expected. That she could doubt him, that she could question his care for her, was unbearable. And yet, hadn't he given her every reason to doubt?

"Lydia," he began, but she cut him off with a slight shake of her head.

"Could you..." She winced at the movement, her face contorting with pain, and he instinctively tightened his grip on her hand. "Could you ask everyone to leave us alone? I need to speak with you."

"They're already gone," he told her, his tone gentle. "I sent them out."

A ghost of a smile touched her lips. "How very ducal of you," she murmured, her voice carrying a faint trace of her usual humor.

He returned the faint smile, his thumb gently tracing over her knuckles. For a moment, they simply looked at each other, the silence between them filled with unspoken words, with the weight of all that had been left unsaid. Then, slowly, he lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles, his touch lingering.

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"I was wrong," he said, his voice low but steady. "I was a fool to let you go, to make you think... to make you believe that you weren't wanted, that you weren't needed. You deserve better, Lydia. You deserve so much more."

She watched him, her expression unreadable, though he could see the faint tremor in her lips, the slight quiver that betrayed the depth of her own emotions.

"You hurt me," she said softly, her voice tinged with sadness. "You made me feel as though I was... nothing more than a duty to you."

He closed his eyes, her words cutting through him like a blade. "I know," he murmured. "And I am so sorry. I don't expect you to forgive me, but... I want you to know that I am here. And I am not going anywhere."

Her gaze softened, and she reached out, her fingers grazing his cheek. "You stubborn fool," she whispered, her voice tinged with a fondness he hadn't expected. "You nearly drove me away for good."

He felt his hands tremble slightly as he held hers, his chest tight with the fear that refused to leave. "I cannot lose you, Lydia," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I don't know what I would do..."

She silenced him with a gentle squeeze of his hand, pulling him down to lie beside her, her arms wrapping around him in a gesture of comfort. "I'm here," she murmured, her lips brushing against his temple. "I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere."

And for the first time, Elias allowed himself to believe her.

CHAPTER 32

It was some hours later that Lydia watched Elias as he lingered near the door, his silhouette tense against the golden hues of the dying day. She had sensed his turmoil all afternoon—his avoidance, the way his gaze slid from hers as though the mere act of meeting her eyes would summon the secrets he clearly didn't want to share. Now, as he crossed the threshold back into the chamber where she lay, his movements seemed heavy, as though he carried the weight of an entire history on his shoulders.

He stopped just short of the armchair opposite her bed, his hands clenching and unclenching. Lydia set down the book she'd been pretending to read, folding her hands neatly in her lap. "Elias," she said, her voice even but not unkind. "What's troubling you?"

For a moment, he didn't answer. When he finally spoke, his voice was low, edged with the kind of vulnerability she had rarely heard from him.

"There's something I've kept from you," he said. "About Barbara. About why...I am as I am. "

Barbara. The name lingered in the space between them, sharp and unyielding. Lydia felt her heart quicken, though she kept her face composed. She could still vividly remember his reaction at the portrait, and his first wife was ever-present in Peter... But hearing him say her name aloud, in this tone, was something else entirely.

"I'm listening," she said softly, her hands tightening slightly in her lap.

Elias let out a long, shuddering breath, his gaze still fixed downward. "It's not easy to talk about. I've carried it for so long, and I've always thought that if I just...if I buried

it deep enough, it wouldn't matter. But it does."

Lydia said nothing, waiting. She had learned that silence was often the most effective way to coax Elias from his walls.

He finally looked at her, his eyes dark and haunted. "Barbara and I...we were never truly married, not in the sense that matters. My father arranged it. He wanted an alliance with her family, and I—" He stopped, swallowing hard. "I went along with it. At the time, I thought it was my duty. That's what I was raised to believe."

Lydia nodded slightly, encouraging him to go on.

"But Barbara...she loved someone else," Elias said, his voice thick with something between anger and regret. "I didn't know it at first. She was always so...distant. We barely spoke after the wedding. I thought giving her space was the right thing to do. That it would make things easier for her, for both of us."

The lines between his brows deepened, and he leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. "Then Peter was born," he continued, his tone heavy with the weight of the name. "And everything changed. She went through a terrible labor—something I still blame myself for. Not even a week after, I found a note. She wrote that she hated me. That all of this—the marriage, Peter—was my fault. She said she'd done her duty, and now she was leaving."

Lydia's breath caught. She could feel the ache in Elias's words, the way they scraped against old wounds he'd never allowed to heal.

"I let her go," he said after a long pause, his voice a threadbare whisper. "I thought it was what she wanted. What would make her happy. I didn't go after her. I didn't stop her."

He straightened, his hands gripping the arms of the chair so tightly his knuckles turned white. "But she didn't make it far. They found her on the side of the road a few days later. Dead."

Lydia pressed a hand to her chest, her heart twisting at the pain etched into every word. "Oh, Elias..."

His eyes met hers, filled with a storm of guilt and grief. "It was my fault," he said, the words a quiet admission. "I should have stopped her. Should have done something. But I didn't. And Peter—he lost his mother because of me."

The room fell into a thick silence, broken only by the faint crackle of the fire. Lydia felt her own emotions rising—a thick sorrow for Elias and the unbearable weight of his suffering.

"I couldn't stand the thought of it happening again," he said, his voice shaking now. "What if you hated me after? What if I—" He broke off, closing his eyes tightly. "What if I lost you too?"

Lydia crossed the room without thinking, kneeling before him and placing her hands over his. "Elias," she said firmly, her voice steady despite the ache in her chest. "Listen to me. What happened to Barbara...it wasn't your fault."

His eyes opened, and she saw the doubt etched deep within them.

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"She made her choices," Lydia continued, her tone resolute. "You did what you thought was best. You can't carry this forever."

Elias shook his head. "But what if it happens again? What if?—"

"It won't," Lydia interrupted gently. "Because I'm not Barbara. And you're not the same man you were then."

He stared at her, searching her face as though trying to believe her words. Lydia squeezed his hands, her resolve unwavering.

"I thought that being the perfect wife—doing everything right—was the only way to be happy," she said. "But I've realized that none of it matters if I don't have you. If I don't have this family we've built."

Elias's gaze softened, the storm in his eyes giving way to something warmer, something fragile. "Lydia..."

"I love you, Elias," she said, her voice breaking slightly. "More than I've ever loved anyone. And I'm not going anywhere."

The silence that followed Lydia's confession seemed to stretch endlessly. Elias's arms remained firmly around her, his breath uneven against her temple. She let him hold her as long as he needed, her cheek resting against the warmth of his chest. She could feel the wild beat of his heart, and it matched her own.

Finally, he pulled back slightly, his hands still cupping her shoulders as though afraid

she might vanish if he let her go entirely. His dark eyes searched hers, and for the first time, she saw vulnerability laid bare in their depths.

"I don't deserve you," he said hoarsely, his voice barely above a whisper.

Lydia shook her head. "Elias, stop."

He didn't. "I don't. After everything—Barbara, Peter, the way I've shut you out so often—I don't deserve any of this."

"Yes, you do," she said firmly, her fingers tightening on his forearms. "Do you know why?"

He remained silent, his gaze dropping to the floor as though unwilling to face whatever kindness she might offer.

"You deserve it because you're here, Elias," she said, her voice unwavering. "You didn't have to tell me any of this. You could have kept it locked away, let it fester. But you didn't. You trusted me enough to share it, and that matters more than you know."

He exhaled sharply, as though her words had loosened something tangled in his chest. "I just... I can't stop thinking about what I've done. What I didn't do."

Lydia reached up, placing her palm against his cheek. "You were a boy when you married her. You were doing what you thought was right, the same way she thought leaving was right. But you've grown, Elias. You're not that boy anymore."

Elias turned his face into her hand, his eyes closing briefly. "But I still made mistakes. I thought keeping my distance from her would help her, but it only drove her away. And Peter—he's suffered for it. He lost his mother before he could even

know her."

"And yet, you've been there for him," Lydia countered. "You've been his father, his protector. Don't you see that? You're so afraid of failing him that you can't see all the ways you've succeeded."

Her words struck something deep in him, and she saw it in the flicker of his eyes. But Elias shook his head, unwilling to let himself believe it entirely.

"I swore I'd never repeat my father's mistakes," he said quietly, almost to himself. "But some days, I wonder if I'm just as blind as he was."

The mention of the old Duke of Fyre made Lydia's stomach tighten. She had heard, though it was in mere whispers, some of the stories about the man Elias had called father. According to the servants he was not only cold, but downright cruel—unable to love, to care.

"You're nothing like him," Lydia said, her voice soft but firm. "You care, Elias. You care so much it's tearing you apart. And that alone makes you different."

Elias let out a bitter laugh. "Caring doesn't mean I'll make the right choices."

"No, but it means you'll try," Lydia replied. "And that's more than he ever did."

The room fell quiet again, the only sound the faint crackle of the fire Elias had lit earlier. Lydia's fingers brushed against his, a small gesture that felt monumental in the stillness.

After a long moment, Elias broke the silence. "I never told anyone the full story about Barbara. Not even Peter."

Lydia's brow furrowed. "Why?"

He looked away, his jaw tightening. "Because I didn't want him to hate me. He already struggles with her absence—I couldn't bear the thought of him blaming me for it."

Lydia hesitated before speaking, her voice gentle. "Do you think he doesn't wonder? Children are more perceptive than we give them credit for. He might not know the details, but he knows there's a weight you're carrying."

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Elias exhaled, his shoulders slumping. "And what would I even tell him? That his mother hated me? That she would have rather died than stayed?"

"No," Lydia said softly. "You tell him the truth. That you loved her in the only way you knew how, and that you've spent every day since trying to do right by him."

Elias's eyes widened slightly, and for a moment, he looked like a man teetering on the edge of a precipice. "What if it's not enough?"

"It will be," Lydia said simply. "Because it has to be."

The resolve in her voice seemed to steady him, though she could see the doubts still lingering at the edges. But he didn't argue further. Instead, he leaned back in the chair, running a hand through his dark hair.

"I'm afraid," he admitted, his voice barely audible. "Of so many things. Of losing you. Of being the reason you might hate me one day."

"You won't lose me," Lydia said, her heart aching at the rawness of his confession. "And I could never hate you, Elias. Not for this. Not for anything."

He looked at her then, something in his expression shifting. It was as though her words had reached a place within him he hadn't realized was there, a place that had long been closed off.

"You're certain?" he asked, his voice almost desperate.

"Yes," Lydia said, her voice steady and unyielding. "I'm certain."

Elias stared at her for a long moment before leaning forward, his hands cradling her face as though she were the most precious thing in the world. "I don't deserve you," he said again, though this time his tone was filled with something closer to wonder than despair.

"You do," Lydia whispered, her own hands covering his. "And I'm not going anywhere."

Their lips met in a kiss that was both tender and fervent, a silent promise between them. When they finally pulled apart, Elias rested his forehead against hers, his breath mingling with hers in the quiet space.

"I love you," he said, the words rough but certain.

"I love you too," Lydia replied, her voice trembling with emotion.

The fire crackled softly in the hearth as they sat together, the world outside the chamber fading into irrelevance. For the first time in what felt like forever, Elias allowed himself to breathe—to truly breathe—and Lydia stayed by his side, her presence a balm to the wounds he had carried for so long.

CHAPTER 33

A few days later, a newly healed Lydia sat stiffly in the dining room, staring down at the teacup her mother had just set before her. The porcelain clinked faintly against the saucer as Prudence sat down across from her, her expression calm but determined. Silas, her father, sat at the head of the table, drumming his fingers lightly on the wood.

Elias had gone to fetch their carriage, giving them a few moments alone. Lydia knew what was coming; the unease in her parents' manner was unmistakable.

"Lydia," her mother began, smoothing invisible wrinkles in her skirt. "Your father and I have been thinking."

"That's not new," Lydia said lightly, though her attempt at humor fell flat.

Prudence's lips pursed, but she pressed on. "Now that you've recovered and life has settled down, it's time you and Elias begin thinking about your future—about an heir."

Lydia's stomach dropped. She hadn't expected them to broach the subject so soon. Her fingers tightened on the edge of her napkin, but she kept her voice steady. "We've already discussed this, Mother. Elias and I aren't planning to have children."

Prudence blinked, as if she hadn't heard correctly. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me," Lydia said, her tone firmer this time. "It's not something we're going to do."

Her father leaned forward, his voice heavy with authority. "Lydia, this isn't a decision you can make lightly. You're a duchess now. Your duty is to continue the line."

"It's not a decision I made lightly," Lydia countered, her spine straightening. "Elias and I have considered it carefully. This is what we want."

Prudence's hand fluttered to her chest, as though Lydia's words had physically struck her. "You can't mean that," she whispered. "Every woman doubts at first, but in time?—"

"I'm not doubting," Lydia interrupted, her tone sharp enough to make her mother flinch. "This is my final decision."

Silas's face darkened. "You've always been a willful girl, Lydia, but this—this is reckless. Thoughtless."

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"It's not reckless to know what I want, Father," Lydia said, her voice rising. "And it's not thoughtless to choose what's best for my family."

Her mother let out a soft gasp. "And what about us, Lydia? Have you thought about how this affects your family here? Your sisters?"

The mention of her sisters made Lydia pause for a moment, but only to gather her resolve. "Marian, Diana, and Jane deserve your attention now. Not me. I have my own family to care for."

Silas opened his mouth to retort, but Lydia's next words cut him off. "And before you try to make me feel guilty, let me be clear—this isn't up for debate."

The room went silent, her parents exchanging stunned glances. Prudence looked to Silas, hoping he might press the matter further, but before he could speak, heavy footsteps sounded in the hallway.

Elias entered, his expression unreadable, though his eyes flicked to Lydia with a silent question. She met his gaze steadily, giving him a small nod. He took one look at her parents and seemed to understand what had transpired.

"Is everything ready?" he asked, his voice calm but firm, as though daring anyone to challenge him.

Silas stiffened in his chair. "We were just discussing a very important matter."

"No," Lydia said, standing abruptly. "We were done discussing it."

Prudence rose as well, her composure beginning to crack. "Lydia, please. You can't mean to leave with this hanging in the air. Think of what people will say. Think of?—"

Elias's voice cut through her protests like a blade. "That's enough."

Prudence froze, her mouth opening and closing like a fish. Silas's eyes narrowed at the commanding tone, but he said nothing.

Elias stepped forward, placing a hand on Lydia's back. "This is our life, not yours. Lydia has spoken, and I will not tolerate anyone trying to guilt her into changing her mind."

"But Elias," Prudence tried again, her voice cracking slightly. "She's your wife. Surely you want?—"

"What I want," Elias said, his voice dangerously low, "is for Lydia to be happy. And if you truly cared for her, you would want the same."

Prudence looked as though she might cry, but Lydia had no sympathy to spare. She took Elias's hand, her grip firm. "I already have a family," she said, her voice calm but unyielding. "One that needs me, and one that I will protect with everything I have. If you ever wish to visit, you're welcome—but only if you respect my choices and my family."

The silence that followed was deafening. Prudence finally sank back into her chair, dabbing at her eyes with a lace handkerchief. Silas looked as though he wanted to argue further, but Elias's presence seemed to hold him in check.

"Very well," Silas said at last, his tone clipped. "If that's your decision, we will abide by it."

"Thank you," Lydia said, her voice carrying an unmistakable note of finality.

Without another word, Elias led her from the room. The carriage waited just beyond the front doors, the horses restless as if sensing their passengers' urgency. Lydia didn't look back as they stepped inside, though she could feel the weight of her parents' disappointment lingering like a shadow.

The journey home began in silence. Lydia stared out the window, her thoughts a jumble of emotions—relief, defiance, and a lingering ache for the relationship with her parents that would never quite be the same.

"You did well," Elias said quietly, breaking the silence.

Lydia turned to him, her expression softening. "Did I?"

He nodded, reaching for her hand. "You stood your ground. I'm proud of you."

She leaned her head against his shoulder, her fingers entwining with his. "I couldn't have done it without you."

Elias pressed a kiss to the top of her head but said nothing more. The steady rhythm of the carriage wheels on the road lulled them both into a companionable silence, and for the first time in days, Lydia allowed herself to simply breathe.

As the carriage rolled to a stop at the grand entrance of Fyre Manor, Lydia felt a flutter of nerves in her chest. She glanced at Elias, who gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. He stepped out first, turning to help her down with the ease and care that always steadied her.

Before she could take a single step toward the manor, a streak of fur shot out from the front doors, yapping furiously. Mug bolted toward her, his scruffy coat bouncing as

he ran. Right behind him came Peter, his small legs carrying him as fast as they could, his cries of "Lydia!" carrying across the courtyard.

Lydia's breath hitched as Mug reached her first, leaping up to plant his front paws on her skirts. She knelt, her arms outstretched, and the little dog wasted no time jumping into them. His tail wagged so furiously it seemed to vibrate, and he barked between frantic licks to her cheek.

"Mug, you silly thing," she said with a laugh, burying her face in his fur. "I missed you too!"

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Peter reached her next, his arms wrapping tightly around her as he buried his face in her shoulder. Lydia managed to hold both boy and dog, though tears prickled at her eyes as Peter's small body trembled against her.

"I thought you left us," Peter whispered, his voice muffled. "I thought... you weren't coming back."

Lydia's chest tightened, and she kissed the top of his head. "Oh, Peter," she murmured. "I would never leave you. Never. I missed you so much."

Elias crouched beside them, his presence grounding as he placed a hand on Peter's back and gently ruffled Mug's fur. "See?" Elias said softly to Peter. "Lydia's here. She's not going anywhere."

Peter pulled back just enough to look at her, his tear-streaked face breaking Lydia's heart. "Really?" he asked, his voice small and uncertain.

"Really," Lydia said, cupping his cheek. "I'm home now. And I'm staying right here, with you, your father, and Mug. We're a family, Peter. And I love you."

Peter sniffled but managed a small smile, his arms tightening around her once more. Mug gave a little bark of agreement, wiggling in her arms before darting up to lick Peter's face. The boy laughed through his tears, and Lydia felt her own tension easing at the sound.

Elias smiled faintly, standing and lifting Peter into his arms with ease. He rested one arm around Lydia's shoulders, pulling her close. "Come on," he said, his voice warm.

"Let's go inside."

With Peter still clinging to him and Lydia holding Mug, Elias guided them back toward the manor. Peter rested his head against Elias's shoulder, his small fingers clutching at his father's jacket as though afraid he might let go. Mug, meanwhile, nestled comfortably in Lydia's arms, his tail swishing in lazy contentment.

As they stepped through the front doors, the warmth and familiarity of the house embraced them. Mrs. Potts appeared almost immediately, her apron slightly askew as she hurried forward.

"Welcome home, Your Graces," she said with a relieved smile, her kind eyes flicking to Lydia. "Dinner is nearly ready."

"Thank you, Mrs. Potts," Lydia said, her voice steady despite the emotions still swirling in her chest.

Peter squirmed in Elias's arms, clearly more at ease now, though he glanced back at Lydia with wide eyes. "You're really staying?" he asked, his tone still holding a hint of worry.

"I'm really staying," Lydia said, stepping closer to place a hand on his back. "You couldn't get rid of me even if you tried."

Peter giggled, the sound light and pure, and Elias gave her a look of such quiet gratitude that it nearly stole her breath. He shifted Peter to his other arm and extended his free hand to Lydia.

She took it without hesitation, their fingers interlacing naturally. With Mug now perched on one arm and Peter resting on the other, Lydia felt a profound sense of belonging. As they walked deeper into the manor, the noise of daily life surrounded

them—the clatter of dishes, the distant hum of conversation, the soft creak of floorboards—and for the first time, Lydia felt she had truly come home.

EPILOGUE

Two months had passed since Lydia had stood firm against her parents—but it was also two months since she'd realized that love was far more important than anything else, two months since she had admitted to her husband that she loved him and he had told her that he loved her too. Since then, the rhythm of life at Fyre Manor had steadied, and Lydia had begun to feel the kind of peace she had never thought possible. Yet today was a special day—she, Elias, and Peter were in London, a rare venture into the bustling heart of society.

The green of Hyde Park spread out before them, the spring air light and fragrant. A checkered picnic blanket lay under the shade of a sprawling oak tree, laden with a simple yet elegant array of sandwiches, fruits, and cakes. Peter darted around the tree, his laughter ringing through the air as Mug raced alongside him, yipping enthusiastically. Lydia sat on the blanket, her skirts arranged neatly, while Elias leaned back on his hands, watching their son with a rare, unguarded smile.

"He's happy," Lydia observed, her voice quiet.

Elias nodded, his gaze following Peter's energetic movements. "He's thriving. He has you to thank for that."

"And you," Lydia said, turning toward him. "You've given him something I never thought possible—a family."

Elias reached out and took her hand, his touch warm and grounding. "We've given it to him together."

The moment was interrupted by a polite cough. Lydia looked up to see an older couple approaching, their steps careful but purposeful. The gentleman, with neatly combed white hair and a cane, offered a genial smile, while his wife adjusted her bonnet, her face bright with curiosity.

Then their eyes landed on Peter, who had paused his play to regard the newcomers with open interest. "And who might this fine young man be?"

Peter stepped forward, clutching Mug's leash as the little dog wagged its tail. "I'm Peter," he said, his voice clear and confident. "And this is Mug."

Lydia rose gracefully, smoothing her skirts as she stepped forward. "Lord and Lady Whitmore," she said warmly, extending her hand. "How lovely to see you again."

"Lydia!" Lady Whitmore exclaimed, her face lighting up. "It's been far too long. And I see you've brought your family. What a handsome boy!"

Lydia glanced back at Elias, who had stood and now joined them. "Lord and Lady Whitmore," she said, gesturing toward him, "may I introduce my husband, Elias, the Duke of Fyre."

The Whitmores exchanged quick glances, their expressions showing the mild surprise of meeting the elusive Duke. Yet their smiles never faltered.

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"It's a pleasure to meet you, Your Grace," Lord Whitmore said, extending a hand.

Elias shook it firmly, his posture as composed and commanding as ever. "The pleasure is mine."

Lady Whitmore knelt slightly to meet Peter at eye level. "And Peter, what excellent manners you have," she said, her tone kind. "It's a delight to meet you."

Peter grinned, glancing back at Lydia for reassurance before returning his attention to the Whitmores. "Thank you, ma'am."

As they exchanged pleasantries, another carriage arrived on the nearby path. Lydia turned and recognized it immediately—her family had arrived. The footman opened the door, and out stepped her sisters, their dresses fresh and delicate in the afternoon light.

"Marian!" Lydia called, waving. "Jane! Diana!"

The three sisters made their way toward the picnic spot, their differences as evident as ever. Marian led the way with her usual confident stride, her hands smoothing down the folds of her pale pink dress. Jane followed close behind, her expression bright and mischievous, her eyes darting around as though searching for some opportunity for amusement. Diana brought up the rear, her steps tentative and her gaze lingering on the path ahead, as though afraid to meet anyone's eyes.

When they reached the picnic blanket, Peter's eyes widened with curiosity. He edged closer to Lydia, Mug trotting faithfully beside him, as the sisters greeted her with

warm embraces.

"Lydia!" Marian exclaimed, planting a kiss on her cheek. "It's so good to see you."

Jane leaned in next, her grin as cheeky as ever. "Look at you, Lady Duchess," she teased, winking. "Still the picture of poise."

Lydia swatted her playfully. "And you're still incorrigible, Jane."

Diana hung back, her hands clasped nervously in front of her. Lydia stepped forward and took her sister's hands, giving her an encouraging smile. "Diana, it's wonderful to see you."

"It's wonderful to see you too," Diana said softly, her cheeks coloring slightly.

As the sisters exchanged greetings, Peter peered up at Lydia, his brow furrowed with curiosity. She knelt down beside him, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Peter," she said, her voice warm, "these are your aunts—Marian, Jane, and Diana."

Peter's eyes lit up, his shyness giving way to excitement. "My aunts?" he asked, looking from one to the other.

"Indeed," Lydia said with a smile. "And I think they're quite eager to meet you."

Peter took a step forward, Mug still tugging at his leash. Marian knelt gracefully and extended a hand. "Hello, Peter," she said, her tone gentle. "I've heard so much about you."

Peter shook her hand, his small fingers curling confidently around hers. "It's nice to meet you," he said, his manners impeccable.

Jane, never one to miss an opportunity, crouched down next, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "And what about me, young man?" she said, her voice teasing. "Are you prepared to put up with an aunt who's not quite so proper?"

Peter giggled, sensing her playful tone. "I think so," he said, his smile widening.

Jane clutched her chest dramatically. "Think so? Oh, Peter, you wound me!"

Laughter rippled through the group, even drawing a small smile from Diana, who stepped forward hesitantly. She crouched down and gave Peter a shy smile. "Hello, Peter," she said softly. "It's lovely to meet you."

Peter's gaze softened, and he extended a hand toward her. "It's lovely to meet you too, Aunt Diana."

Diana's cheeks flushed with warmth as she shook his hand, and Lydia's heart swelled with pride at how effortlessly Peter welcomed his new family.

Silas and Prudence approached next, their steps measured and their faces carefully composed. Prudence's eyes darted toward Elias, and Lydia noticed her mother's hands tightening on her reticule. Silas cleared his throat as they stopped a few paces away.

"Peter," Lydia said, placing a hand on her son's shoulder. "These are your grandparents—Lord and Lady Drowshire."

Peter looked up at Silas and Prudence, his expression thoughtful but polite. Lydia held her breath for a moment, uncertain how her parents would handle this introduction. To her relief, Peter stepped forward and offered a small bow, his hand still clutching Mug's leash.

"It's nice to meet you, my lord and lady," Peter said, his voice steady and clear.

Prudence's eyes widened briefly, and Silas glanced at Lydia as though surprised by Peter's confidence. Then Silas nodded, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"It's nice to meet you too, young man," he said, his voice unusually soft.

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Prudence bent slightly, her face breaking into a smile that seemed genuine despite her usual composure. "A fine boy," she said, looking at Lydia. "You've done well."

Lydia inclined her head slightly, acknowledging the compliment without letting her guard down. Elias, standing just behind her, stepped forward then, his presence commanding but not hostile. Silas stiffened slightly, but Prudence quickly spoke again, her voice more subdued.

"We're glad to see you all here," she said. "It's been too long."

"Yes, it has," Lydia replied smoothly. "And we're glad Peter finally has the chance to meet his aunts—and his grandparents."

Jane, who had been watching the exchange with thinly veiled amusement, leaned toward Lydia and whispered, "Mother didn't even mention heirs. Miracles do happen."

Lydia stifled a laugh, though she couldn't deny the sense of relief that coursed through her. For once, her parents seemed content to focus on Peter, rather than the expectations they had once placed on her.

As the family settled onto the picnic blanket, the conversation turned light and lively. Marian admired the perfectly arranged spread, Diana quietly petted Mug, and Jane regaled Peter with exaggerated tales of her escapades in London.

"You know," Jane said, her voice dropping conspiratorially, "the man who hurt your mother is no longer in town."

Lydia's breath caught, and she glanced sharply at Jane. "What do you mean?"

Jane's grin turned sly. "I heard he left for Scotland. In quite a hurry, I might add. Word is, someone threatened him—and rather convincingly."

Lydia's gaze shifted to Elias, whose expression remained neutral. Diana, ever observant, tilted her head slightly. "Elias," she said quietly, "do you know anything about this?"

Elias's lips curved into a faint smile. "Someone did the right thing," he said simply. "To ensure that man wouldn't hurt anyone else."

Jane raised a brow, clearly intrigued. "Someone, you say?"

"Yes," Elias replied, his voice steady. "And if anything, that man should thank him for being so kind."

Lydia stared at him for a moment before reaching for his hand. Elias glanced at her, his eyes softening as he laced his fingers with hers. He lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a gentle kiss to her knuckles.

Leaning close, he whispered in her ear, "If anyone tries to hurt you again, I might not be so kind."

A shiver ran through Lydia, but it wasn't from fear. She squeezed his hand, her heart full of gratitude and love. "I don't doubt it," she murmured, a small smile playing on her lips.

As the afternoon gave way to evening, the family began packing up the remnants of the picnic. Peter, worn out from a day of running and playing with his aunts, had fallen asleep in Lydia's lap, his soft breaths rhythmic and soothing. Mug lay curled at

her feet, equally exhausted from the day's excitement.

Elias bent to lift Peter into his arms, careful not to wake him. The boy stirred slightly but remained asleep, his head resting against Elias's shoulder. Lydia stood and brushed the grass from her skirts, smiling as she watched Elias cradle their son with such ease and care.

As they made their way back to the carriage, Elias glanced at Lydia, his expression thoughtful. "I've been thinking," he said quietly.

"About?" Lydia asked, tilting her head curiously.

Elias shifted Peter slightly, his free arm slipping around Lydia's waist as they walked. "Peter's been asking for a sibling."

Lydia raised a brow, her lips twitching with amusement. "Oh? And I suppose you're entertaining the idea because he asked so sweetly?"

Elias gave her a wry smile. "It's not just him," he admitted, his voice softening. "I want it too. I've realized I don't want to be held down by fear anymore. Not of what happened with Barbara, not of what could happen."

Lydia's steps slowed, her heart pounding at the weight of his words. She stopped, turning to face him as they stood just shy of the waiting carriage. Elias shifted Peter gently, holding the boy securely in one arm as he met Lydia's gaze.

"You're certain?" Lydia asked, her voice low but steady. She searched his face, looking for any trace of hesitation, any sign of the doubts that had plagued him for so long. "Even after we decided... that... that we..."

"I am certain," Elias said, his tone resolute. "You've shown me that fear doesn't have

to rule us. And I trust you, Lydia. More than I've ever trusted anyone. I know that whatever happens, we'll face it together. And this... it is not because of expectations. It is because... well, I want to have another child, one that... is born from love."

Lydia felt tears prickling at the corners of her eyes, but she didn't look away. She placed a hand on his arm, her touch gentle but firm. "Elias," she began, her voice trembling slightly, "you've already given me more than I ever thought I could have. A home, a family, a love that feels real. If this is what you truly want, then I promise—I won't change my mind. Not now. Not ever."

Relief and something deeper—something unspoken but fierce—flickered in Elias's eyes. He leaned down, brushing a kiss across her lips, soft and fleeting but full of meaning. "I love you," he murmured, his voice barely audible.

"I love you too," Lydia replied, her heart swelling as she reached up to touch his cheek. "More than you'll ever know."

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"I should hope so," Elias said, his smirk deepening. "Since you are my wife."

Lydia stepped closer, brushing her fingers lightly over the fabric of his jacket. "The best decision I ever made."

They stood like that for a moment, the fading light casting a golden hue over them as Peter slept soundly in Elias's arms. Finally, Elias helped Lydia into the carriage, ensuring she was seated comfortably before climbing in with Peter still cradled against his chest. Mug hopped in after them, curling up near Lydia's feet with a contented sigh.

As the carriage began to move, Elias leaned back, his free arm wrapping around Lydia's shoulders. She rested her head against him, her heart steady and full. Peter stirred briefly in his sleep, murmuring something unintelligible before settling once more against Elias's shoulder. Mug gave a small snort from his spot on the floor, and Lydia smiled, reaching down to scratch behind the dog's ears.

When they arrived at their townhouse, Elias carried Peter upstairs, his movements careful and deliberate. Lydia followed, her steps light as she ascended the familiar staircase. She paused in the hallway as Elias turned toward Peter's room, his broad back disappearing through the door. A few minutes later, he returned, his expression softened by the tenderness that only came when he spoke of or looked at their son.

"He's settled," Elias said, his voice quiet. "Mug's already curled up at the foot of his bed."

Lydia smiled. "Good. He's had a long, exciting day."

Elias reached for her hand, drawing her closer. "So have we," he murmured, his tone laced with something deeper, more intimate. His fingers lingered on hers, and Lydia felt a spark of anticipation flutter through her.

"You've given me so much," Lydia said softly, her eyes locked with his. "And now you're giving me something I never thought I'd find —a future that feels limitless."

Elias cupped her face, his thumb brushing along her cheek. "You've given me everything, Lydia. You've made me whole."

Her lips curved into a small, knowing smile. "Even if I did marry an incorrigible man?"

"Especially then," Elias replied, his tone lighter now, though his eyes remained steady and sincere. He leaned down, his lips brushing hers in a kiss that was both tender and filled with promise.

The End?