



A Dashing Earl's Secret (Secrets and Passions of High Society)

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Category: Historical

Description: One dark winter's night a tragedy results in Olivia Sherwyn losing her family, fiancé, and fortune. Devastated, she is left living with dreadful scars and chooses to hide away in seclusion. But everything changes when she encounters a mysterious stranger in a forest glade, an encounter that fuels her writing. When she finally returns for a London season Olivia is stunned to catch a glimpse of the handsome stranger across a ballroom...

Who is this enigmatic man, and why does he keep appearing in her dreams?

Marcus, Earl of Hatfield, is called back to England from his idyllic life in Italy to tend to his ailing father. Pressured by his mother to find a bride, he begrudgingly reenters society. Not long after his return, he meets a captivating young woman by a forest lake, only for her to vanish, leaving him longing to discover her identity. As he resumes his duties, thoughts of his elusive Cinderella linger...

Will Marcus ever reunite with the mysterious woman who has captured his heart?

As their paths cross once more, hope begins to blossom between Olivia and Marcus. Yet, dark clouds gather on the horizon as vicious gossip threatens Olivia's reputation, and a jealous rival conspires against them. Will they overcome these obstacles and find lasting love, or will Olivia be forced into hiding once again?

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Prologue

A knock on the door startled Olivia as she stared out of the window. A dismal, damp, gray day with a bitter north wind. The perfect weather for a funeral.

I thought I'd be safe in the morning room - that no one would think to look for me here. If I don't answer, then whoever it is might go away.

She needed to be alone that day; she craved solitude. It wasn't much to ask for, just a short time on her own, to calm her emotions and find the courage to face the world again. She could cope with the pain, the bandages wrapped around her shaven head. One day those bandages would be peeled away, and she would see her new identity.

There would be scars, and the doctor had been very specific in telling her to prepare herself for a changed appearance. She must, he had told her in somber tones, prepare herself for a life living with disfigurement.

I can live with physical scars. But the intense pain of losing Frederick and Mary will always be there. How could this have happened? She clutched at the velvet curtain, feeling the softness between her fingers.

I must be brave. I have to pull myself together for Jocelyn's sake. She has lost both her parents.

Her fingers flew to the bandages and the strange sensation of no hair covering half her head. The next day, she would get Ellen to cut the other half short. It would be better to look even on both sides while her hair grew back.

I don't need to look in the mirror. I know how I feel inside, that's all that matters, she thought to herself.

The knock came again, more insistent. The noise resounded in her head, the pain in her temples throbbing at the sound. A whining, whimpering noise began in the corner of the room. Olivia looked toward the King Charles spaniel sitting on its cushion near the fire. Her sister-in-law's tiny companion, Marguerite, looking toward her with enormous eyes.

Poor little thing, you've lost your family too, and you're just a puppy.

"Come here, Marguerite, " she called to the dog.

She lifted the little dog and held it close. Mary had always had Marguerite close to her, and the tiny scrap of soft fur was bewildered, continually keening for her mistress.

"I miss her too," murmured Olivia . "Jocelyn and I will look after you, don't worry my little friend."

Olivia capitulated to the knocking and called, "Enter."

She breathed a sigh of relief to see Mrs. Jennings, the housekeeper.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, miss. The guests who came here after the funeral have all gone, except for Sir Jonathan Ellington. He's still here and asked to speak to you."

Her heart skipped a beat. In the depths of this sadness her beloved Jonathan had stayed to support her. Her fiancé was an anchor in her time of turmoil and change.

Would their marriage need to be delayed now she had entered a period of mourning?

She smoothed down the skirt of her mourning gown of black bombazine silk. She hoped they could marry soon, then Jocelyn could come and live with her, rather than with her new guardian, her Uncle Harold, the new Earl of Riversmead.

“Thank you, Mrs. Jennings. I’ll see him now. Please show him in.”

“Very well. I’ll bring tea for you both, miss,” said Mrs. Jennings as she left.

She had not had a chance to speak with her fiancé at the service or in the churchyard. He entered the morning room with an air of confident authority, tall and handsome, reminding her of the statue of a Roman Emperor she had once seen in a museum in London.

Her eyes relaxed at the sight of his concerned face. He came immediately toward her and took both her hands in his.

“My dear. How are you?” he asked with gentle concern in his voice.

“As well as can be expected,” she responded. “I’m glad to see you Jonathan,” she said as she smiled into his flint gray eyes, expecting him to kiss her on the forehead as he usually did when they met. He didn’t kiss her though, and she thought fleetingly that this was no doubt because it was the day of the funeral for her brother and sister-in-law.

“Come, sit,” he said, somber and serious. “Does it pain you?” he asked as he gestured toward the bandages covering the side of her head.

“Not really,” she said, trying to smile and put him at ease. “The doctor said I’m healing well, and he will remove the bandages next week.”

Jonathan was concerned for her, and her heart melted with love for this man.

Olivia took a seat on the sofa but, to her surprise, Jonathan didn't sit next to her, instead taking a seat on a chair, a little distance away from her.

"Erm, this is difficult, Olivia," he began, "possibly one of the most difficult things I have ever done. I was awake all night thinking this through and there really is no alternative." He avoided looking at her, his eyes staring at his polished hessian boots.

What does he mean? thought Olivia as she listened, confused at his tone of voice.

"I spoke with Mama and we both thought it would be best to get this out of the way. It would be cruel to tell you in a few weeks' time. No, it's best for you to hear this now." He turned his head away from her, seeming like a stranger, so formal and cold.

Olivia gripped the lace edged linen handkerchief she held in her hands. A feeling of trepidation crept through her body.

"My dear, the reality is that we can no longer marry. I spoke to your Uncle Harold earlier this week. Your situation is bleak. It seems that the provision your father made for you in his will is not legally binding. The small estate near Olney, and your financial settlement... he tells me you are penniless."

Olivia felt the pounding in her temples growing stronger as she struggled to comprehend Jonathan's words.

"I may be a baronet, but the income of our family estate is small, and the finances perilous. I love you Olivia, but I have to marry well." He still looked away, running his fingers nervously through his sandy colored hair.

A sob broke from Olivia's throat. A strangled, harrowing sob, which she could no longer contain. "No.... That cannot be!"

“I’m afraid it is the reality of life. I regret breaking the news today, but I remain convinced it would have been crueler to wait. If things were different then we would marry.”

He stood, calm and contained and then bowed to take his leave. The tiny toy spaniel jumped from its cushion and, sensing the emotion in the room, growled at the baronet.

“Farewell my dear, I wish you well.”

He turned on his heel and left her, not looking back.

Olivia’s world collapsed around her. She had lost her family, her fiancé, and it seemed her inheritance. Sobs wracked her body as Marguerite jumped onto the sofa and buried its head in the folds of her gown. Her hand reached down to ruffle its soft, long ears.

You need me little friend. Jocelyn needs me. I will be strong.

Outside the wind howled and the windowpane rattled. Gray clouds released icy rain, which struck the glass with force. The young woman on the sofa did not look up; lost in her memories, she wondered if this was how it felt when your heart was broken?

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Chapter 1

Swanbourne Place, London

23rd September, 1816

Her quill pen darted across the page as Lady Olivia Sherwyn recorded her memories of another day. In this journal, she shared her inner thoughts about life at Swanbourne Place. Only on these secret pages could she pour out the emotional turmoil she felt about her changed circumstances.

She remembered describing the harsh days of the previous winter, when snow transformed the city, covering everywhere with a thick, icy blanket of sparkling white crystals. She remembered times when her fingers had been so cold it had been difficult to force them to form words on the page.

This house, which had once been warm and welcoming every day of the year, had become so cold that ice formed on the inside of the windowpanes. Her uncle only allowed fires during the day, in those rooms where he personally spent time. Olivia could bear frozen fingers, wrapping herself in a warm woolen shawl in her room. She knew that she could always find warmth in a corner of the kitchen by Cook's fire.

I can cope with the cold. No, it is the emotional emptiness I struggle to accept. If I could leave I would, but I can't leave Jocelyn alone in this icehouse. I will never accept his cold, harsh attitude to life.

Olivia looked across her room at Marguerite, sitting on her cushion. You have more

warmth, little friend, than my Uncle Harold. While my brother was alive, Swanbourne Place was a warm, loving family home.

She had learned to accept her uncle's manner and not cross him. In the early days she had argued with him, but as earl, and her guardian, he always prevailed.

Olivia gazed out of the window across the skyline of the city of London. The tall spire of St. Mary Abbots church in Kensington stood proudly on the horizon. She drew in a breath, shuddering for a moment as she remembered a quiet country churchyard near the family estate in Bedfordshire, where she had said her farewells to her brother Frederick and his wife Mary.

How long before this pain of grief eases? I lost my family and my fiancé. Each day is marked with a scar of sorrow for their loss. I miss them, so very much.

She noticed the trees in the small park in the center of Swanbourne Place were changing into a blaze of autumn colors. The maple trees were bathed in shades of yellow ochre and burnt orange.

How beautiful. There is always something in the world to be grateful for, she thought to herself.

A memory of a walk through Green Park with Jonathan, the autumn before the tragedy, made her clutch the windowsill, and she felt the crisp frost crunching under her boots as they walked to look at the frozen lake. Jonathan had offered her his arm and tucked it neatly under his, as they made their way through the park, marveling at the colors of the trees. They shared so much in common.

I must stop this, she told herself sharply. She almost felt his cool lips kissing her forehead and the tip of her nose, and telling her that he loved her.

Jonathan, I still miss you. I miss our conversations and shared laughter. She looked down to see large dark eyes staring up at her. She reached down to stroke Marguerite between her ears and the dog began to lick her hand. Well, I know that you care, she laughed. No one is more loyal and affectionate.

As she looked at the display of autumn colors, she drew her hand through her hair, wishing she could ask Ellen, her maid, to put her hair into a high updo with sparkling crystals, rather than the low hairstyles, with several ribbons, which she had needed to adopt to hide her scars.

A sharp knock on the door drew her away from the window. She turned to smile at Ellen as she entered, but was immediately aware that something was wrong.

“Ellen, whatever is the matter?” she enquired gently.

“I’m sorry, miss, it’s his lordship, he’s been in an agitated mood all afternoon. Mrs. Jennings had to go in there herself when he rang the bell, as he had spoken to little Millicent so sharply that she was in tears.”

“He has these dismal moods, that’s not unusual,” Olivia responded. “I’ll speak to Millicent myself. She’s an asset to this household, and we couldn’t manage without her.” She paused, “Is there something else?”

“I’m not sure, miss. We think he threw a crystal glass at the fire, as there was a terrible crash, about a half hour ago,” Ellen continued, hesitating, and clearly holding something back.

“And ...?” persisted Olivia.

“His lordship opened the door just now and demanded to speak with you immediately. I’m to tell you to go to his study directly.” She smiled at Olivia,

chestnut curls escaping from her mob cap. “I’m sorry to tell you about his mood, but it is best to be cautious when he’s like this.”

“Don’t worry Ellen, I’m quite used to Uncle Harold when he is cantankerous. It won’t help if I keep shilly-shallying here, and it’s always best to get these things over and done with as soon as possible.”

Despite her confident words she felt a slight sensation of discomfort. Since she had been forced to live with her Uncle Harold, now Earl of Riversmead, she had become used to his irascible temper which was often directed at her. She was always glad if that meant his anger was deflected away from her niece, Jocelyn.

Smoothing her hair and arranging it neatly around her face, Olivia made her way down the oak staircase, clutching the carved banister as she made herself walk with grace and confidence.

When she reached the hall she saw Mrs. Jennings, the housekeeper, waiting for her. “He’s asked if you will join him immediately, My Lady,” she said, smiling weakly, with affection in her gray eyes. Mrs. Jennings had been with the family since her father’s time as Earl of Riversmead, and had known Olivia since she was a little girl.

“Thank you, Mrs. Jennings. I’ll join his lordship immediately,” Olivia replied, smiling.

Mrs. Jennings knocked on the door, and bobbed a curtsey, telling her uncle she had arrived. There had been a new level of formality at Swanbourne Place when her uncle took the title of earl, after her brother’s death. It still felt strange to be announced within her own home.

Forcing her feet forward she entered the room, smiling warmly at the Earl of Riversmead. “Uncle, I believe you wished to speak with me?” she said brightly.

The elderly man, with dull gray hair and a stooped posture, took his time in raising his head to acknowledge Olivia. When he did, he looked at her as if she was a crumb which had fallen on his frock coat sleeve.

“I did send for you, but it has taken so long for you to join me that I have forgotten the matter which I wanted to discuss,” he said sarcastically.

Olivia, who had become used to these games, simply stood and waited for her uncle to speak again. Would he make her stand here, or ask her to be seated, she wondered?

“Ah yes, I remember,” he drawled. “I have been considering the accounts for this house in town and the re-construction of the damaged wing of Silverton Hall.” He fiddled with his papers, almost as though he had forgotten she was there.

“How long since you came out Olivia?” he enquired.

This is intolerable, she thought. She looked her uncle directly in the eye, “Uncle, may I be permitted to sit?” she asked, not answering his question directly.

“Erm.” He seemed to be considering his answer, but he could not refuse her request. “Pray be seated Olivia, we have much to discuss.” He finally answered, as he gestured to a hard back chair across from his desk.

Olivia continued to ignore her trembling legs and made her way to the chair with all the elegance of a young lady of quality.

“Thank you,” she said. “You wanted to know when I had my first season?”

“Indeed, I believe you are now twenty-three years of age?”

“I am indeed twenty-three and..” she paused, very briefly, “I’m very aware of the

passing of time, and my situation as an unmarried lady. You may recall, sir, that I had my first season at eighteen, before becoming engaged, and was due to be married at twenty. However, because of the change in my circumstances, of which you are fully aware, and I find it difficult to speak about ...”

Her voice cracked, but she would not let this odious man see the level of her distress and taking a sharp inward breath she continued. “After the tragedy, and the end of my engagement, I withdrew from society. I did attend two balls and several recitals last year, but I have no wish to return to the ton and attend society events.”

“I noticed some dressmaking invoices in the accounts, but they are reasonable and not of concern.” He turned to his papers and began sorting through them, as if searching for something specific. “Ah here, however, are the accounts for Lady Jocelyn’s seamstress, and those appear to be astronomical.” He pushed his fist down on the table.

“I do not believe Lady Jocelyn’s gowns and accessories are any more expensive than other young ladies of her age and station,” countered Olivia. “If anything, I thought she was prudent in her choices.”

“Well it can’t continue!” he said, Olivia could see the rage in his eyes.

He has the family fortune now, master of this house and the estate in Bedfordshire. He withdrew my allowance when he became earl and resents every penny which is spent. My uncle is a miser.

“She must be married,” he continued. His words echoed around the room. Stark and devoid of any emotion.

“She?” Olivia queried, knowing full well that he meant Jocelyn, but disliking the way he spoke about her dear niece, who was just nineteen years, and only now emerging

from her own grief at the loss of her parents.

“Of course I mean Jocelyn. The chit needs to be married. You may consider me a rich man, but I can’t afford to keep the two of you forever. You must begin to prepare Jocelyn for a season in London, in the spring, and I will expect her to find a husband within months.”

He really means this, thought Olivia. Although she knew that Jocelyn would be delighted at the prospect of coming out and having a season in London, the motives of her penny-pinching uncle were misguided.

“Very well, uncle. You realize there will be considerable expense? Every young lady of the ton must have a ball and a suitable wardrobe, including a dress for presentation at court.”

“I have included that in my calculations,” he retorted. “Much as I hate to see such a waste of a good shilling, I know it is necessary to get the girl out of my house.”

Olivia nodded. However, her uncle hadn’t finished.

“The same goes for you too. You’ve been moping about long enough. You might be penniless, but you are the daughter of an earl. You’ll find somebody to offer for you, if you make an effort.”

“But uncle, surely in view of...” she hesitated and didn’t know how to proceed. She felt tears welling up and forced them back. She would not let her uncle see how much his words were hurting her.

“I can’t return to society,” she said. As she replied she realized her hand was rising to touch the side of her face, so she pulled it back down, clasping her hands together tightly.

“Nonsense. You can and will return for a season, indeed you must accompany Jocelyn to all events. You can’t stay under my roof forever, and you must make a match. There is no other way for a lady of your station in society.”

“I could perhaps find a position as a companion, or governess,” she suggested, almost inaudibly.

This time he banged the table so hard that the quill pen flew off the table and ink scattered across his dress shirt.

“Damnation!” he snarled, “Now, look what you have made me do.”

Olivia gasped. She sat still, rooted to the chair, hoping this would soon be over.

“The daughter of an earl cannot be a governess or companion, don’t be so ridiculous. You will find a husband. There must be someone who will have you.” He began to dab at the ink with a piece of paper, but the stain on his desk only grew worse.

“Now get out of my sight. Ask Jennings to call for my manservant as this shirt is covered in ink.”

“Very well, sir.” She paused, reluctant to continue. “Might I remind you that I leave tomorrow to visit my friend, Lady Leighton, at Leighton Manor, and that I will be gone for several weeks. However, as soon as I return, I will ensure that Jocelyn is prepared for her first season and, if you insist, I will join her at events.”

“If you meet someone while staying at Leighton Manor that would be excellent,” her uncle mused, speaking to himself. “It will save me the cost of a season.”

Suddenly, his mood changed, and he looked calmer. He had a plan and he had put it into action. “Please convey my regards to Lady Leighton. I hope she will visit with us

at Silverton Hall, when the restoration is completed in the spring,” he said gruffly.

“Of course, uncle, I’m sure she would be delighted,” Olivia said, relieved at the change in mood.

“Enjoy your visit, niece,” he said, almost grudgingly. Olivia smiled, knowing how difficult it was for her uncle to say pleasant things. It was his way, there was generally no malice in his actions, though recently he had become obsessed with household expenses.

She stood up, curtsied, and made her escape, feeling the weight of the heavy oak door as she pushed it open. She could see Mrs. Jennings, hovering in the hallway and smiled wearily at her.

“I’ll bring you a nice pot of tea. There’s a fire in the small morning room,” said Mrs. Jennings, returning the smile.

Olivia nodded her thanks and found sanctuary in the elegant room, which her sister-in-law, Mary, had decorated in pale blue and silver, her exquisite taste evident throughout the townhouse. The window looked out onto a quieter part of the garden where it was pleasant to sit and take tea on a summer’s afternoon.

She made herself shake off the mood of despondency at the idea of having to endure a season in London. It was several months ahead, and entirely possible that her uncle would change his mind. Maybe she could attend a couple of balls and recitals and then fade away from society again. It had been her choice to live quietly at Swanbourne, and she did not regret it.

Olivia had accepted her changed status, and the loss of her inheritance upon the death of her brother. It had resulted in her losing her beloved fiancé Jonathan, with his family estate deep in debt, his mother had ordered him to end their engagement.

Within a few weeks Olivia had lost her older brother Frederick, her sister-in-law and friend Mary, plus the man she loved and had expected to marry.

In the midst of coping with her own grief and disfigurement, she threw herself into caring for her sixteen-year-old niece, Jocelyn, who had lost both her parents in such a sudden and untimely way.

Olivia sank wearily into a high winged chair, close to the fire, feeling the warmth on her fingers. She had clasped her hands so tightly together that there was a red mark where her thumbs had pressed into her skin.

She felt the soft brocade of the chair wrapping around her and closed her eyes, telling herself to relax and imagine a woodland walk, next to a stream, where she could smell the scent of pine trees on a warm spring day. This was her escape, her way of dealing with the reality of loss and the unpredictability of her Uncle Harold.

After a few minutes, Olivia opened her eyes and looked toward the gray clouds, as they moved across the darkening sky. The pull of the past was always strong, and she felt it then. Faces of her family and happier times.

We celebrated Christmas here, just days before the tragedy at Silverton Hall. There used to be so much laughter and love in our family.

Jocelyn, less than four years younger than Olivia, was a sister as much as a niece. Mary, Jocelyn's mother, had become a friend to her and was as much a mother to her as she was to Jocelyn. Silverton Hall had been a happy place, with a staff who had stayed with them for many years.

Her brother had been devoted to the Silverton Estate, and the crops which brought prosperity and helped maintain the cottages of the farm workers.

How I long for those days. If only I could turn back the clock and be with my family again. I miss them every day with an aching sadness which is never far away.

As memories of that early January night crept into her thoughts, she pushed them away. It was no use, the tears which she had forced back in her uncle's study welled up and streamed silently down her cheek. She wiped one away with her fingers and, running her fingers into her hair, felt the edge of the puckered, scarred skin. That night had taken away her family and changed her appearance forever.

I would have endured more scars, even across my face, if it meant I still had my family.

That loss made the loss of her beauty insignificant in comparison. Then there was Jonathan. He loved her, she knew in her heart that he loved her, but he had been forced to put family obligation and duty before love.

I'll never marry. I'll never have a man look at me in the way that Jonathan did, that night when he told me he loved me, and asked me to marry him. She lost herself in memories of an idyllic evening, after a ball at Silverton Hall, with the stars twinkling in the sky, when she lost herself in his eyes of Jonathan.

The shadows grew darker and the silver thread in the curtains sparkled brightly in this special room, which had become her sanctuary. She truly believed that Uncle Harold did not even know this small morning room existed.

The truth in his words had struck a chord. He's right. I can't stay at Swanbourne Place in town, or even live in the great house on the estate at Silverton, without his consent. Everything belongs to my uncle now.

She was practically penniless, her expected inheritance lost in some legal complications. Jocelyn had fared a little better. Her brother had ensured that his

daughter had a substantial settlement which would come to her on marriage or at the age of twenty-three.

The prospect of marriage dismayed her. Who would want a scarred bride? Was it fair for any children of a marriage to have a mother who caused comments from strangers when they saw her face? It would be best if she simply disappeared into obscurity.

Tomorrow she would leave Swanbourne Place for a long-awaited visit to her friend, Marianne, Lady Leighton, whom she had met during her first season in London.

I'll talk to Marianne about the future. She might have an acquaintance who needs a companion.

Despite what Uncle Harold had said, she needed to find a way to earn her own living. As soon as she had supported Jocelyn through her first season, she could look to her own future.

Once Jocelyn has found a husband, I can find a position as governess or companion and leave. I'll go in disguise if necessary.

A gentle rapping at the door brought her back to reality. She opened it to find Mrs. Jennings carrying a tray with a teapot.

"A pot of tea and some of Cook's special lemon cookies," said Mrs. Jennings, with a look of concern. "I thought you needed something to cheer you up. I know it isn't easy, with everything changed."

Olivia took the housekeeper's hand and pressed it gently. "Thank you, you always know when it's difficult. He doesn't mean anything by it, it's just his way."

Mrs. Jennings snorted and moved to pour two steaming cups of tea. "I still miss Lady

Mary too. This morning room was her favorite place in the house. I don't know what she would make of the way your uncle has behaved."

"You know I can't discuss it," said Olivia quietly. "He is my uncle."

"Of course. Now tell me about your visit to see Miss Marianne, I mean Lady Leighton," she asked, keen to know about Olivia's visit to Leighton Manor.

Olivia looked toward the window, seeing the rivulets of rain make patterns as they ran down the glass panes. She wished it was summer. As the days grew darker, leading up to the Christmas celebrations, the memories which haunted her grew stronger. She was glad her niece was staying with a friend in the North and would not return until November.

I don't think I could have left Jocelyn here with Uncle Harold and I do so long to see Marianne again.

The next morning, the sun shone brightly, and its warmth filled the air. Olivia felt a sense of relief flooding her whole body, as she climbed into the barouche carriage, waiting to take her to the Buckinghamshire countryside.

A whole month! Four weeks away from Swanbourne and Uncle Harold.

Beside her, Ellen already had her eyes closed, looking forward to a rest during the journey.

Olivia knew she could talk with Marianne about the dilemmas she faced. Marianne had supported her through those dark days three years ago, and helped her find her way toward recovery.

Her spirits lightened as the carriage gathered speed, trundling away from Swanbourne, and miserly Uncle Harold, toward the Chiltern Hills.

Chapter 2

Marcus, Earl of Hatfield, slowed his horse, Hector, from a canter to a walk as he rode down the track from the Folly on the hillside toward the lake. He always stopped to look at the view. That morning, the lake glimmered in the early sunshine as the last tendrils of late summer mist drifted away.

Beyond the lake, was his ancestral home of Belvedere Abbey, with its turreted tower joined to the remains of a medieval wing. His grandfather had modernized the Abbey, adding the new wing, but Marcus loved the ancient part of the building, and the great hall with its minstrel's gallery.

There really is nowhere more beautiful than Belvedere Abbey in the autumn. I hadn't realized I missed the place till now.

Whoever had called the estate Belvedere had chosen well, as the views across the Chiltern Hills stretched for miles in the distance. On a clear day, a white horse, carved into the hillside way back in the mists of time, was visible from the folly.

There was a crispness to the air. This was the transition between summer and autumn, when the leaves were beginning to change color, but the sun's warmth still made a difference on days with a clear blue sky.

For a moment his thoughts wandered to his home in Italy, where he'd spent much of the last two years. After Napoleon was sent to the Island of St. Helena, he had left his regiment and settled in the rolling hills of Tuscany. He loved the heat of the Mediterranean sun, and the landscapes covered with tall cypress trees.

He had made a home in a villa there and when he had been summoned home he had expected to miss that life. The widowed Contessa Lucretzia Fiorella, who had shared many of his days, and given pleasure during many starlit nights, had spoken to him six months ago. He remembered her words and wondered if she had been able to see into the future.

“Caro, I am not for you. You are thirty-one years old, and it is time for you to take a bride and settle down. You are the son of a duke, and all great families need an heir.”

“Lucretzia, I have no interest in the life of London society or farming a country estate in the gray mists of England. My life is here, in the heat of the Italian sun. I need you in my life. If it makes a difference, we could marry.”

Lucretzia had tossed her long, blonde hair and laughed in her low sultry voice. “My dear boy, what would the Duke and Duchess of Hargrove say if you arrived at Belvedere Abbey with a wife who was ten years your senior and with a history of scandal in her past. No, I have enjoyed my time with you, but it is time for me to return home to my palazzo in Rome.”

However hard he had tried to persuade the Contessa, she was adamant that their liaison was at an end. He had been desolate for several weeks, only roused from lethargy when a letter arrived from his mother, Elizabeth, Duchess of Hargrove, informing him that his father was ill.

The duke had suffered a seizure, and although he was recovering well, she felt it advisable for Marcus to return home immediately. So, he had closed the shutters on the Villa Montefalconi, and begun the journey back to the family estate in Buckinghamshire.

He waited on the brow of the hill for Colin, his cousin, to catch up with him. Even riding Hector at a canter, he had left Colin far behind.

“Come on,” Marcus called. “We need to be back at the Abbey before tomorrow. I’ve an appointment with my tailor in the morning and at this rate I’ll miss it.”

“You know you’ve always been the best rider in the county, and nothing has changed there. Hera and I had no hope at all of keeping up with you.”

Marcus looked down at Hera, his Italian spaniel, who was panting and clearly in need of refreshment. “Let’s stop at the lake. Hera needs a drink and the horses could do with one too,” he suggested.

Colin nodded agreement. “You’re glad to be home?” he asked “I thought you’d never return from Tuscany. Aunt Elizabeth had quite given up on you.”

“It’s strange. When I read the letter from Mama, asking me to return post haste I didn’t want to return. I had a life of ease and pleasure in Italy, but now I am back here it feels as if I’d never left. Belvedere Abbey is my home. I’ve even enjoyed overseeing the estate business; though I think Papa is itching to take that back, now his health has improved.”

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He found his mother working at her tapestry frame in a room adjoining the drawing room. The door was open, and a blazing fire roared in the hearth. The sun shone brightly through the mullioned windows.

“Marcus. Where have you been? You’re dripping wet. Stand away from the Aubusson rug,” she implored him. “And why have you brought Hera into the drawing room when she is wet through?”

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“A swim? The lake must be freezing cold this early in the morning. You can easily take a bath. I will never understand this desire to swim in cold water for pleasure. Now, let me think, what did I want to speak to you about?”

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“I remember, it was something your father said to me. He’s worried about there being no heir.”

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“But ...” interjected his mother.

“I will marry, Mama, but there is plenty of time for me to find a wife and produce an heir.”

“I think it would help your father’s recovery if you showed a willingness now to try to find a young lady, to bring home to the Abbey, as future duchess,” his mother added. “Lady Cressida Lantham would seem a perfect choice.”

“Mama, you are verging on blackmail by bringing Papa’s health into this,” exclaimed Marcus. “And as for Lady Cressida, I do not warm to her.”

“But it is quite true,” persisted his mother. “Your father would be delighted if you married. It would give his health a boost. Promise me that you’ll spend some time in town in the spring and attend a few balls. You may find a young lady who would make a suitable bride.”

“Very well Mama. If I am still in England in the spring, then I will attend at least 2 balls and 3 recitals. But beware, I will probably just offer for the first young lady who likes dogs and horses and has heard of the Greek gods.”

“You and your classical civilizations. It’s the future of this estate we need to think about. Ah, here is your father.”

His father, no longer looking as gray and drawn as he had at the height of his illness, smiled brightly at his wife and son. His brown eyes twinkled, and it was difficult to believe that he had been so ill.

“Marcus, I was wondering about repairing that old boat which we used to have on the lake? What do you think?” his father asked.

“An excellent plan. I believe it is the best way of fishing for trout. Let’s walk down there and take a look later.”

“And did your mother tell you that it’s time you found a wife?” his father added in his usual direct, blunt fashion.

“Indeed. I disagreed, but you were very persistent, weren’t you Mother?” said Marcus, grinning.

“As always,” said his mother, laughing.

Marcus went over to admire the tapestry his mother had been working on and compared the stitches with other quilts. He could see it was a work of beauty.

“This is exquisite, those colors go together perfectly,” Marcus said.

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grandmother. This is one of her patterns. Look here is a unicorn, in the forest, searching for a maiden.”

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“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to speak with the cook about the menus for the rest of the week,” his mother said, and she left the room with a scent of violets wafting around her.

“If you find a bride like your mother, then you’ll be doing well my boy,” said his father.

Marcus nodded his agreement, “One in a million. However, that doesn’t mean I agree to find a bride, just that I am prepared to look.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:19 pm

Chapter 2

Marcus, Earl of Hatfield, slowed his horse, Hector, from a canter to a walk as he rode down the track from the Folly on the hillside toward the lake. He always stopped to look at the view. That morning, the lake glimmered in the early sunshine as the last tendrils of late summer mist drifted away.

Beyond the lake, was his ancestral home of Belvedere Abbey, with its turreted tower joined to the remains of a medieval wing. His grandfather had modernized the Abbey, adding the new wing, but Marcus loved the ancient part of the building, and the great hall with its minstrel's gallery.

There really is nowhere more beautiful than Belvedere Abbey in the autumn. I hadn't realized I missed the place till now.

Whoever had called the estate Belvedere had chosen well, as the views across the Chiltern Hills stretched for miles in the distance. On a clear day, a white horse, carved into the hillside way back in the mists of time, was visible from the folly.

There was a crispness to the air. This was the transition between summer and autumn, when the leaves were beginning to change color, but the sun's warmth still made a difference on days with a clear blue sky.

For a moment his thoughts wandered to his home in Italy, where he'd spent much of the last two years. After Napoleon was sent to the Island of St. Helena, he had left his regiment and settled in the rolling hills of Tuscany. He loved the heat of the Mediterranean sun, and the landscapes covered with tall cypress trees.

He had made a home in a villa there and when he had been summoned home he had expected to miss that life. The widowed Contessa Lucretzia Fiorella, who had shared many of his days, and given pleasure during many starlit nights, had spoken to him six months ago. He remembered her words and wondered if she had been able to see into the future.

“Caro, I am not for you. You are thirty-one years old, and it is time for you to take a bride and settle down. You are the son of a duke, and all great families need an heir.”

“Lucretzia, I have no interest in the life of London society or farming a country estate in the gray mists of England. My life is here, in the heat of the Italian sun. I need you in my life. If it makes a difference, we could marry.”

Lucretzia had tossed her long, blonde hair and laughed in her low sultry voice. “My dear boy, what would the Duke and Duchess of Hargrove say if you arrived at Belvedere Abbey with a wife who was ten years your senior and with a history of scandal in her past. No, I have enjoyed my time with you, but it is time for me to return home to my palazzo in Rome.”

However hard he had tried to persuade the Contessa, she was adamant that their liaison was at an end. He had been desolate for several weeks, only roused from lethargy when a letter arrived from his mother, Elizabeth, Duchess of Hargrove, informing him that his father was ill.

The duke had suffered a seizure, and although he was recovering well, she felt it advisable for Marcus to return home immediately. So, he had closed the shutters on the Villa Montefalconi, and begun the journey back to the family estate in Buckinghamshire.

He waited on the brow of the hill for Colin, his cousin, to catch up with him. Even riding Hector at a canter, he had left Colin far behind.

“Come on,” Marcus called. “We need to be back at the Abbey before tomorrow. I’ve an appointment with my tailor in the morning and at this rate I’ll miss it.”

“You know you’ve always been the best rider in the county, and nothing has changed there. Hera and I had no hope at all of keeping up with you.”

Marcus looked down at Hera, his Italian spaniel, who was panting and clearly in need of refreshment. “Let’s stop at the lake. Hera needs a drink and the horses could do with one too,” he suggested.

Colin nodded agreement. “You’re glad to be home?” he asked “I thought you’d never return from Tuscany. Aunt Elizabeth had quite given up on you.”

“It’s strange. When I read the letter from Mama, asking me to return post haste I didn’t want to return. I had a life of ease and pleasure in Italy, but now I am back here it feels as if I’d never left. Belvedere Abbey is my home. I’ve even enjoyed overseeing the estate business; though I think Papa is itching to take that back, now his health has improved.”

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Chapter 3

“We’re almost there,” Olivia called to Ellen. “Look, I can see the lodge on the hillside.” For the first time since leaving London she saw hills and a lake glistening in the distance.

“It’s such beautiful countryside in Buckinghamshire,” said Ellen, peering out of the window.

“The hills and valleys make such a difference,” agreed Olivia. “I love Silverton estate, but our part of Bedfordshire is such a flat landscape, it’s like another world.”

“I do look forward to seeing Silverton Hall, as soon as the rebuild is completed in the spring. I miss seeing my parents and their cottage on the estate, but they’ve written to say the restoration looks almost complete,” said Ellen.

Olivia felt a brief pang of anxiety at the thought of a return to Silverton, but noticed with relief the feeling was only fleeting. Time was healing her emotional, if not her physical scars. She would find strength to cope with the return to her childhood home.

The carriage creaked and groaned along the road as the driver slowed the pace of the horses and waved at the lodge keeper. They followed the long, winding drive to the doors of Leighton Manor.

The carriage halted in front of a mellow, half-timber framed, manor house with mullioned windows shining brightly in the sunshine.

I like the look of Leighton Manor. The cream walls, against the oak beams and red tiles roof give it a warmth, Olivia thought before sighing deeply, wriggling her stiff shoulders after the long drive into Buckinghamshire. I've escaped from London and the cold, austere Swanbourne. Just breathing in the country air is so reviving.

Olivia heard a shout of welcome as her friend raced toward the carriage to greet her.

Marianne might have become Lady Leighton, Viscountess of Leighton, but she never stood on ceremony with her best friend. In those dark days three years ago, when Olivia had lost her family, and then Jonathan, it had been Marianne who had stayed with her and helped her realize that there could be a future, even if it was different to the one she had always dreamed about.

"Olivia, Olivia," she heard Marianne's lovely, soprano voice calling in greeting. A footman came forward to put out steps to help them dismount from the carriage and onto the drive. The moment she was out of the barouche Olivia found herself embraced in her friend's arms.

"And Ellen," added Marianne, remembering her friend's maid, and greeting her warmly. "Come inside. I've asked Parker to set up tea in the orangery. Oh, and Ellen, Cook has a warm fire and a meal ready for you. I'm so glad you are here Olivia. I've missed you so much!"

Once again Olivia felt that warm embrace of friendship and affection and was thankful she was lucky enough to have such a wonderful friend.

Marianne took her arm and led her into the hall of this ancient Medieval manor house. Olivia drew a breath as she saw the inside of Leighton Manor for the first time. The original carved oak paneling in the hall was exquisite, with a minstrel's gallery rising above it.

“You’re a real lady now, living in this most beautiful place,” Olivia told her friend.

“I know, I’m so lucky to have found Christopher. A year ago I thought I was almost on the shelf. Mama was quite despairing of my ever finding a husband. Then, one evening at Vauxhall Gardens our eyes met while listening to an orchestral recital and I’ve never looked back.”

“You look truly happy,” said Olivia, delighted for her friend.

“I am. I never believed in love at first sight, but it happened for me and my dear Viscount Leighton.” Marianne looked around and spoke briefly to Mr. Parker, the butler, who stood discretely awaiting her instructions.

“Parker, please arrange for Lady Olivia to be shown to her room and then we shall take tea in the orangery.” Marianne turned to Olivia, “The orangery is in the new wing of the house added by Christopher’s grandmother. You’ll love it, it overlooks the original herb knot garden, and there is a view down the valley. I want you to love Leighton and visit me often.”

“Marianne, I would visit you wherever you lived,” Olivia said, laughing, her blue eyes twinkling. “However, I admit I am more than happy to visit you here at Leighton Manor. It might possibly become my favorite place in England.”

After Olivia had been shown to her room by a housemaid, she splashed water on her face and then sat briefly on the carved oak four poster bed with its lavishly decorated brocade curtains all around it. There was an autumn chill in the air and a log fire was blazing cheerfully in the hearth.

She had escaped from Uncle Harold. It might only be a temporary escape for a month, but she had still escaped. No penny pinching, mean minded, disapproving glances for several weeks, and she would be warm in this lovely room, with a

comfortable chair close to the fire, the perfect place to read and to write.

Her friend Marianne knew her secret, and at an elegant desk near the window she saw a pile of parchment, quill pen and ink, all ready for her.

After tidying her hair, making sure the looped hairstyle covered her scars, she made her way down to the orangery.

As she entered the glass-fronted room she felt a sense of wonder. The scent of aromatic plants greeted her, and the rays of the sun felt warm on her face. She admired the exotic lemon trees in planters, and the vines climbing to the height of the room. Marianne had thrown open the glass doors which led to a terrace and knot garden, which was so close it felt it was almost part of the room.

Marianne stood on the terrace, gazing at the view of the Chiltern Hills on the horizon. Olivia made her way outside to join her friend.

“I didn’t hear you. I was lost looking at the view. I never tire of seeing the hills and the path down to Leighton Wood,” said Marianne. “Look over there you can just see the turrets of Belvedere Abbey, home of the Duke of Hargrove, and one of the finest houses in the county.”

“I’ve heard of Belvedere Abbey, it’s quite famous. Is it true that a lady who was married to a Plantagenet King once lived there?”

“I believe so. Christopher told me that they met in the woodland, just over there, down by the stream. The King was out hunting and got separated from the rest of his party. His horse bolted and threw him off and he lay injured in Leighton Woods. He lost consciousness, and when he awoke, he looked up into the green eyes of Lady Matilda. He thought she was a fairy, from the Land of Fey. Of course they fell in love instantly.”

“What a beautiful story,” exclaimed Olivia.

“I love those old stories. Their love was real though, and they were married in the chapel at Belvedere Abbey. What we need now is a love match and happy ending for you, my dear friend.”

“I think not, not now, after” Olivia started to object but Marianne ignored her.

“Nonsense, hardly anyone would notice those scars. I never thought I would see you looking so lovely again.”

“Ah, I cannot agree, but thank you for reassuring me.” Olivia took her friend's hand and squeezed it gently with affection. “It isn’t just the disfigurement though. I’m penniless. No fortune and a scarred face. I don’t think I will ever find a husband.”

“Penniless? Surely not? Your family is wealthy, and I know Papa told me your father set up a specific inheritance for you, which was independent of the entail. Your brother did the same for Jocelyn.”

“All I know is what Uncle Harold told me, which is that I must find a husband in the next season in London, and he wants rid of me from under his roof. In his own words, he cannot be expected to keep me forever.”

“Hmm. That seems very strange. Even if it is true though, you have looks and a character which will attract the eligible gentlemen of the ton . In fact, I believe I should enjoy being in London again for a season myself. Of course, this time I shall only dance waltzes with my beloved Viscount. I may well join you in London, my friend.”

Olivia smiled gratefully, knowing a season would be easier to bear if her friend was alongside her, as they had been in their first season in society.

Marianne continued, “Come, let’s take tea, then I’ll show you the knot garden. There’s a secret place to sit at the other side of the garden, and if we have warm weather, I can just imagine you taking your pen and notebook and writing there.”

Later, after being greeted by Marianne’s husband Christopher, Viscount Leighton, they all enjoyed an evening dinner. They then sat next to a roaring fire, sharing stories, news and much laughter, before Olivia retired to her bedchamber.

As she sat in her room, close to the fire, ready to write in her journal, Olivia wondered whether there was any truth in what Marianne had said about her fortune. Her brother Frederick, who had been her guardian since her father died many years ago, had always told her she would come into her inheritance at twenty-five, or earlier if married.

Despite the tragedy which had devastated her family, there was no reason to think anything had changed financially for her or, in fact, for Jocelyn. The title and estate were entailed to the male line of descent, but it could be possible her uncle had been wrong, and she would be well provided for.

Putting it out of her mind Olivia took up her quill pen and proceeded to write in her journal. The words flew across the page as she described her day of travel and the joy of friendship at Leighton.

Then, in her mind's eye she saw a hero, perhaps a duke with fifteen thousand a year, in search of a duchess, riding a stallion across the Chiltern Hills. Her pen began to record her ideas as the basis for a story swirled around her imagination. The duke was determined never to marry, but she knew that would change in a few chapters.

The next few days passed by in a whirl of activity. Marianne insisted they go

shopping in Longhamsted, the nearest town, which possessed not one but two haberdashery shops, both piled high with bolts of muslin and silk.

Despite Olivia's protestations Marianne identified several fabrics which she insisted complimented Olivia's complexion perfectly. After pouring over fashion plates, she announced that her own wardrobe was outdated, and alterations and new gowns were needed.

Marianne seemed determined to join her friend for a season in London in the spring. She arranged for the dressmaker to visit Leighton Manor and, from the arrangements Marianne was making, it sounded to Olivia as though a team of seamstresses might be taking up residence at the manor.

Marianne in a determined mood was a force to be reckoned with and Olivia gave up protesting. She enjoyed looking at the puffed sleeves and lower necklines from Paris. Silk, sprig muslin and velvet for cloaks, ribbons and lace were ordered by her friend.

By the time they reached the milliner's shop, Olivia was exhausted, though her friend seemed energized by the frenzy of shopping. She suspected the haberdasher and milliner had just experienced their most profitable day of the year.

For the first time in several long, miserable months, Olivia felt relaxed and away from Swanbourne she hardly felt any of her old anxiety. This first visit to her friend since her wedding to Viscount Leighton, one hot July afternoon the previous summer, had been just the tonic she needed.

Marianne had arranged a small soirée for several local families that evening, to introduce Olivia to the local society. Final arrangements of flowers, refreshments and the positioning of furniture in the hall, fully occupied Marianne, while Olivia watched on. "Why have a minstrel's gallery if we never use it?" Marianne had said as she directed Mr. Parker to bring chairs for her guests into the hallway.

Olivia could tell from the expression on the butler's face that he disapproved of this idea, however, Marianne was determined to have the small orchestra high above in the minstrel's gallery.

So, leaving her friend fully occupied with arrangements for her soirée, Olivia took the opportunity to take a long walk, with the intention of going down the valley to find the stream.

Putting on a simple gown and carrying with her a blanket and her ever present pen and journal, Olivia set off accompanied by Marguerite.

The sun shone brightly at Leighton Manor, with a gentle southerly breeze. This felt more like late summer than autumn. She had left her warm woolen cloak at the house, hoping that the weather would not change. The sky was a beautiful blue, with not a cloud in sight.

The air was filled with the scent of the last damask roses of the season, carried on the breeze, as they were warmed by the sun. Her feet brushed against the boxwood edging the herb beds, and she inhaled the woody fragrance.

She had already walked several of the paths through the wood with Marianne, so she was familiar with them, but they had not yet made it as far as the stream.

As she closed the gate to the knot garden and entered the meadow, she saw the last traces of early morning mist evaporating lower down the valley.

There was almost a golden haze in the air as the mist evaporated, and the sun shone against the golden, rust-colored leaves on the trees lining the path leading toward the ancient Leighton woods.

She had always been happy to walk alone, enjoying quiet moments of reflection close

to nature. Ellen was not a walker, and although she had gallantly offered to accompany her mistress, Olivia had taken pity on her and told her maid to stay at Leighton in case Marianne needed any help.

And I'm not alone, I've got Marguerite running beside me, thought Olivia as the little dog enjoyed herself, sniffing along the path and dashing through the meadow.

As she entered the woods, the path became winding, and zig zagged down the valley sides. It was some time before Olivia could hear the sound of the stream. She called Marguerite, wanting the toy spaniel to stay close and not wander too far away.

She longed to be able to take off her shoes and silk stockings and revive her feet in the cool waters of the stream.

Not long to go now, she thought.

High above, the trees joined in a canopy of rich color. Olivia gazed up at a ceiling of green, yellow, orange, and brown, with muted shades of red. In a few weeks the tree branches would be bare, sleeping till the spring; but that day they were vibrant in their autumnal glory.

Olivia emerged into a clearing, where the stream formed a glistening dark pool, shaded by weeping willow trees, whose branches reached into the water. At the far end of the pool she heard water gushing loudly and was startled to see a cascading waterfall. She took a deep breath, gazing in awe at the beauty and force of the water. With a splash Marguerite was in the pool, the water rippling around her.

I wish I could jump right in, I'd better take my shoes and stockings off.

The forest was silent and serene. She gasped as she placed her feet in the cool waters of the pool, wriggling her feet and toes. Olivia closed her eyes and listened to the

sound of the birds, feeling the cold water against the warmth of the rays of sun, somehow finding their way through the leaves of the trees above.

She ran her fingers through her hair, and for once didn't notice the puckering of the skin at the side of her face, where she had lost a strip of hair. She felt wrapped in the serenity of the moment, oblivious to any noise around her.

When she opened her eyes she started at the sight of a roe deer, head bent to drink at the other side of the pool. When it lifted its head, she stayed very still, and it felt as though the doe had made eye contact.

Where are you going to? Do you come here every day to drink in this pool?

Olivia's imagination took hold as she thought that perhaps this forest was close to the world of fairies.

Reluctantly taking her feet out of the water, Olivia spread a woolen blanket in a sun-speckled place under a willow tree, and took out her notebook and a graphite pencil, ready to continue writing. She had been writing in her journal for three years and it had become her constant companion.

Since arriving at Leighton her writing had changed from being just a diary of her life and thoughts to include more from her imagination. She decided to continue the story of romance and mystery which she had begun the evening of her arrival.

Somehow the writing helped heal the loss of Jonathan too. He had chosen to end their engagement, although she would have been happy to live as a pauper with the man she loved, but duty to family had called him away. Soon after their engagement ended, he left England to tour Europe. That chapter of her life was over.

She would be content to be a maiden aunt to Jocelyn and, hopefully, Marianne's

children, yet in her writing she could create love which lasted, against all the odds.

The hero in my story will value love more than anything else, and there will be a happy ever after.

Her pencil moved across the page, jotting down ideas. The Duke of Northshire was handsome with intense dark eyes. He would soon meet the Honorable Daphne Rillington and sparks would fly.

Olivia became engrossed in her writing, oblivious to everything around her as the ideas flowed.

Suddenly, something made Olivia look up from her notepad. Her breath caught in her throat. Was she imagining the figure before her in the shadow of the oak tree? He seemed equally startled to see her.

She didn't move, transfixed in time and neither did the handsome stranger. He gazed at her in surprise, then she caught his eyes and could not look away. She felt no fear, perhaps a sensation deep down within her of finding a safe harbor after a long voyage.

Locks of light brown hair fell to his shoulders, linen shirt open at the neck and a worn leather coat falling down below his knees.

Was this what it felt to be spellbound? she wondered.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:20 pm

Chapter 4

Marcus urged Hector into a gallop across Akeley Hill toward the ancient chalk horse, carved in the hillside, visible on the distant horizon.

What a wonderful day for a ride, he thought to himself, urging Hector onwards.

His cousin, Colin, rode alongside him. “It’s no good Marcus. I can’t keep up anymore. Hermes is older than Hector and I think he’s had enough for the day. I’ll take him back to the stables and see you later.”

“Very well. I’ll keep going toward the white horse, then down the valley and check on Leighton Woods. The Viscount’s land agent does a good job on that boundary, and I wish all our neighbors were as diligent and conscientious with their estates, but I’d still like to check the boundary for myself.

“You’ve been around nearly all the boundaries of the estate. It’s been long overdue,” remarked Colin.

“Yes, I think father has been struggling for some years. He needs a good estate manager. David Garrett has, I suspect, either been too lazy or just downright swindling the estate.”

“I tried to talk to your father about Garrett several times. My estate manager and the gamekeepers kept telling me he was neglecting raising the young birds, and last year he left the fields at Home and Willow Farms fallow. Your father told me he trusted Garrett, and I could see he thought I was a young whippersnapper who didn’t know

the first thing about estate management.”

“Your estate staff were right in their assumptions. Tomorrow I shall dismiss Garrett. If you have anyone on your staff looking to progress to estate manager, then let me know. I trust your judgment, Colin.”

“Of course,” said Colin as he steadied Hermes, who was becoming restless.

“The difficulty is father. He’s starting to show an interest in the estate business again.” He ran his fingers through his dark hair, which fell to his shoulders, loose from its simple leather tie. “I don’t want to tell him what a mess the estate is in, but I can’t let it continue as before. It isn’t fair on the workers or tenants, and he must have been running the estate at a loss.” Marcus sighed deeply and grimaced at his friend.

“Why not give him the Home Farm to oversee? It’s not too far from the Abbey. You could put in a good tenant farmer who would let Uncle suggest ideas. “

“Colin, that is a very good idea. A stroke of genius in fact.” Marcus replied.

“With my one good idea for the day used up I’ll bid you farewell. Enjoy your ride along the north boundary.” And with that Colin was off, heading back to Granville Hall.

Hector almost flew across the downs toward the white horse. Marcus felt at one with the stallion as they soared over hedges and raced across the heathlands. As he rode around the northern reaches of the Hargrove estate, he was glad the walls and fences were in excellent condition.

Viscount Leighton was a good neighbor and he determined to call soon at Leighton Manor and share his appreciation. He seemed to recall his mother saying the viscount had recently married. Perhaps his mother could ask them to one of her dinners?

Seeing the woods stretching out into the distance he decided to take the track down toward the stream. The trees would give Hector some shelter from the sun and his horse could cool down in the water. If he remembered rightly there was a pool which would be a perfect place to take a rest.

I love this ancient forest. This track has been here for centuries. My ancestors managed the forest, making charcoal and coppicing trees for firewood. Now where's the pool? I think I turn here, and it's not far away.

He heard the sound of water, wondering how he could have forgotten about Leighton Falls and the waterfall which he and Colin used to climb when they were children. He had some bread and cheese in his saddle bag, well prepared for reliving those childhood days and eating lunch in a forest glade.

Approaching the glade, he tethered Hector to a tree, wanting to approach the pool on foot and work out the best place for his horse to drink. The rocks bordering the pool could be slippery. He'd check before leading Hector down.

A roe deer startled him as it ran gracefully across the track in front of him, so close that he could almost hear it breathing. He reached the clearing, noticing how the willow trees had grown to an almost gigantic size, making the glade into a perfect sheltered hide-away.

He saw the pool of water and pulled off his cravat and began to unbutton his shirt, knowing he wanted to swim in that cool, dark pool, hardly disturbed by the cascading water from Leighton Falls.

Something made Marcus glance toward the other side of the pool, where there was a grassy edge, a perfect place for Hector to drink. He almost missed the young woman seated on a woolen blanket, her head down, scribbling in a notebook. Her straw bonnet with its green ribbon, blended into the woodland scenery. She had an

otherworldly look, almost like a fairy.

As he watched, knowing he should look away, she stopped her writing and put her pencil against her lips, in deep thought. An intense concentration, thinking about whatever it was she was writing in her notebook.

How strange , he thought. Although she was dressed in a plain dimity gown, she was writing, as would an educated young lady. Perhaps she was the daughter of one of the local gentry or more probably one of the farm tenants at Leighton Manor? The path from Leighton met the path from Belvedere Abbey here.

As he moved forward to make her aware of his presence, he was startled into standing still again, as she undid the green ribbons of her bonnet and threw it down onto the blanket beside her.

He drew a sharp inward breath, seeing her hair had fallen from the pins holding it into a low chignon against her neck. She raised her hands to her wavy, hazelnut hair, and pulled it back into a restrained, tidy state. The reddish undertones glistened in the sunlight.

Suddenly she looked up and saw him. As he stood there, she looked toward him and their eyes met, fusing together, caught in a moment in time, deep within this ancient woodland.

Marcus called a greeting as he walked toward the clearing.

Suddenly she reached for her bonnet and pulled it onto her head, tying the ribbons tightly under her chin. She stood, smoothing down her skirts and checking her chignon was in place beneath her straw bonnet.

“Pray accept my apologies. I’m traveling to Longhamsted and knowing my horse

needed a drink, I remembered this pool was here. I used to play here as a boy. I did not mean to disturb you.”

Why have I just lied about where I’m going? he thought. I don’t want to tell her I’m an earl. If she is the daughter of a local farmer, it might scare her away.

He bowed his head in formal greeting, as she nodded in acknowledgement.

I’m dressed for a day riding around the estate. I look nothing like a gentleman of the ton.

The sound of Hector’s neighing echoed in the valley.

“It sounds as though your horse is restless, sir,” she said, walking toward him. “You need to bring him to the water for that drink.”

For a moment he almost protested at her manner, directing him, telling him what to do. However, he found he didn’t mind, something about her manner intrigued him. He might be wrong about her being the daughter of a farmer, she had the air of a young lady of nobility.

They fell into step together, walking back toward Hector. Marcus untethered his horse and, as Hector tossed his mane, the young woman reached out to settle him.

“There boy, settle down,” she murmured, almost whispering to the horse.

She is used to being around horses. Hmm. Quite a mystery.

“He’s a fine horse. My brother used...” she stopped suddenly before continuing. “May I ask, sir, if you have travelled far today?”

As he took Hector to the pool, Marcus realized he had not yet introduced himself to this exquisite vision of loveliness. He left Hector to get a drink, and, after a moment's hesitation, Marcus said, "I must apologize, madam, I have not introduced myself. I am Mr. Brandon Hatfield," Marcus said, using his middle name, in case she knew of Marcus Hatfield. He continued, "I am seeking employment as an estate manager at Belvedere Abbey."

Bobbing a courtesy, as befitted the rules of polite society, even here in the depths of the forest, she replied, "I'm pleased to make your acquaintance Mr. Hatfield. My name is Olivia."

Marcus noted, but did not comment, that she had not given him her surname.

"And where do you live, Olivia?" Marcus asked.

Marcus was surprised by her answer. "I am staying at Leighton Manor, with a friend," Olivia replied.

What is a young lady doing out walking alone without a chaperone?

After Hector finished drinking, Olivia suggested tethering the horse in the clearing so he could rest and still see his master.

As they walked Olivia stumbled and caught her skirt in a wild blackberry bush. "Oh no, I'm caught in the bramble bush. I'm not missish, Mr. Hatfield, and would be grateful if you would help me to extricate myself."

As Marcus gently removed the thorns of the bramble from Olivia's dimity print skirt his hand brushed against hers and he felt a surge of desire, the strength of which took him by surprise.

Soon Hector was settled and tethered in the shade of a willow tree. Marcus didn't want to say goodbye to this young woman. He frantically tried to think of something to say which would make her stay a little longer.

"Might I suggest we make use of these troublesome brambles, and pick the berries, which look perfect and ready to eat."

The young lady hesitated, then surprised him by agreeing. "I have a basket with me," she said. "I had planned to pick berries later."

"Well, I have half a loaf of bread, some cheese, and several apples if you would care to join me for a picnic lunch?" he suggested.

And so, Marcus, Earl of Hatfield found himself seated on the edge of a woolen blanket, in a woodland glade in a far corner of his country estate. He shared an impromptu picnic, conversing with a young lady whose every word fascinated him.

Marcus had met many women over the years, including his liaison with the Contessa, and the many bland young ladies of quality, whom his mother was convinced would make an excellent bride.

The latest of these being Lady Cressida Lantham, who had been a regular visitor to Belvedere Abbey since his return. So many heads nodding in agreement with his every word, so careful of every propriety. He could not imagine one of those ladies, including his Contessa, sitting on a woolen blanket in a forest, unaware of blackberry stains on her chin, telling him about an encounter with a roe deer.

"Oh look," she said in her musical contralto voice. "I think I see a patch of wild strawberries over there." Indeed, the tiny berries were growing wild next to the pool. She picked one of the late summer fruits and handed it to him.

He smiled at her, eyes twinkling as he tasted the tart, almost lemony fruit. “We’ve had quite the feast,” he said.

Neither of us is talking about family or where we come from. I’m certainly aware I’m masking my identity. I don’t want to share my aristocratic background and possibly spoil the afternoon. This afternoon I’m enjoying not being an earl.

“The sun is getting lower in the sky, it must be late afternoon.” He felt a pang of poignancy that soon this pleasant interlude would end, and he knew very little about Olivia.

“Tell me,” he asked. “Do you enjoy music?”

“Very much,” she replied. “I heard a beautiful song a few months ago, called Dido’s lament and the music was so sad it brought tears to my eyes. The hero thought he had saved Dido, his love, but something goes wrong, and they can never be together.

“I know that opera,” he said. “I love Henry Purcell’s music.”

“It’s such a dramatic story of hope and lost love,” added Olivia.

He noticed she seemed to be lost in a daydream. Was she listening to the lament in her imagination?

“Do you play or sing?” he asked.

“A little. I enjoy playing the pianoforte for pleasure, and I can sing a country song as well as anyone, but I’m not gifted musically.”

He wished he could read her thoughts, and hoped that, like him, she did not want this lovely interlude in this idyllic woodland glade to end.

He did wonder why she had a habit of putting her hand to touch her right cheek and then pulling her hair forward.

“You were writing when I arrived. What do you enjoy reading?” he asked.

“Anything I can find,” she laughed “I enjoy Mrs. Radcliffe’s novels very much.”

“The Mysteries of Udolpho?” he said, thinking for a moment of Italy, “and the Romance of the Forest.”

As soon as he said it, he knew he had made a mistake. Olivia’s cheeks blushed. They were in the middle of a forest, close to an old abbey.

Murmuring something indistinct, she told him she must leave, that she had lost track of time. She ignored his offer of an arm to help her stand and went to gather her basket and notebook, ready to flee the scene.

“You’ve forgotten your blackberries,” he said, unable to think of anything else to say.

“Why thank you,” she replied, recovering a veneer of politeness. He could see how uncomfortable she looked and guessed the spell had been broken. She was obviously concerned about the impropriety of being alone, for so long, with a strange gentleman in a forest glade. He knew reputations had been ruined for less.

He bowed politely. “Thank you, Miss Mysterious Olivia, for a most pleasant afternoon, with a lovely picnic, accompanied by a very interesting conversation. I hope our paths cross once again in a woodland glade.”

She was already hurrying up the track, and he had no idea if she heard his words. His one regret was that he had not seized the moment and kissed those bramble-stained lips.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:20 pm

Chapter 5

January

In a cold, emotionless townhouse Olivia spent the winter quietly, avoiding society, whenever possible. In the evenings she wrote in her journal and continued writing the novel which she had begun to write during the autumn. She felt most alive when she lost herself crafting a story of mystery and romance, deep in the countryside of Buckinghamshire.

Jocelyn returned home to Swanbourne in time for their subdued Christmas celebrations. Uncle Harold begrudgingly allowed a Yule log, and decking the house with greenery of holly, ivy and mistletoe. Mrs. Jennings and Cook produced an excellent dinner for Christmas Day, and Twelfth Night, and the formal exchange of gifts with Uncle Harold took place.

Fully aware of the lack of enthusiasm of the master of the house, Mrs. Jennings made sure there was always a warm fire in the small morning room used by Olivia and Jocelyn. Mrs. Jennings, Ellen and Millicent, exchanged small, handmade gifts by candlelight on Christmas Eve.

As the short days of January passed, Olivia found joy helping Jocelyn choose a wardrobe of gowns and accessories, in preparation for her presentation at court and her first season in London.

Barely a week went by without Marianne sending a fashion plate, with suggestions for a Spencer instead of a Redingote, and the necessity of having several reticules to

complement different outfits. And what did Jocelyn think of pale rose for a ball gown instead of winter white?

This year the anniversary of the death of their family in the first days of the new year passed quietly.

“I can’t believe it’s been three years,” said Jocelyn. “I still expect to see Mama coming into my room with Marguerite to wish me goodnight.”

“You keep them alive by remembering those moments. They are there in our hearts,” added Olivia.

“Once we’re back at Silverton I’ll be able to visit their graves, but I talk to Mama all the time in my head. I know Papa would have loved to dance with me at my first ball. I’m not sure Uncle Harold will want to.” For some reason that sent Jocelyn into a fit of the giggles, so infectious that Olivia joined her, and they both collapsed in a heap of laughter. Marguerite gazed up at them from her cushion in confusion.

A vision of a reluctant Uncle Harold, forced to dance a cotillion in a set with his great niece, was enough to send Olivia off into a further spasm of laughter. “That will be a sight to see,” she spluttered. “And, my dear Jocelyn, I very much fear that as your guardian he might have to dance at your first ball. He must know the steps. I can’t believe he didn’t dance when he was young.”

“Olivia, stop it now. I’m sure we have a distant cousin who can relieve him of dancing duty. In fact, I am sure that Viscount Leighton will step in and do the honors.”

Later that evening Olivia wrapped herself in the warm shawl which Mrs. Jennings had given her as a Christmas gift, and felt the words flow as once more her quill pen flew across the parchment. Every evening, before retiring to bed, she wrote in her

journal. Her thoughts often returned to that day in the glade at Leighton Manor, and the mysterious stranger.

Dear Journal,

Only here can I write from my heart about my deepest emotions. I can share my secrets with you and know they will be safe. I often think of that strange meeting in a forest glade in Leighton Woods. Did I dream about meeting a ruggedly handsome gentleman farmer with dark shoulder length hair, bound with a leather binding? Had I gazed into caramel honey-colored eyes in the warm, autumn sunshine, wondering if he might kiss me?

We ate bread and cheese, plain country fare, then picked blackberries and wild strawberries and feasted on them in shared companionship. How I long for another conversation about the novels of Mrs. Radcliffe or Mr. Richardson's heroine Pamela.

It could never have lasted. Even though I am penniless Uncle Harold would never permit me to marry a gentleman farmer, however handsome and cultured. I stayed too long in that glade, drawn into an almost enchanted moment, a long way from real life.

The impropriety of spending time with a man I had never met before, unchaperoned by a waterfall in a woodland glade could have cost me my reputation.

And the harsh reality was that as soon as Brandon, the stranger with the stallion, saw my scars he would have galloped away as fast as that black stallion could carry him.

Until I write again,

Adieu,

Olivia.

Had it all been a dream? She knew it wasn't but at times it felt that way.

The past was with her every day, memories of life before that January day—when everything had changed—still haunted her continually. When she wrote in the evenings the hero may have had dark, shoulder length hair and mesmerizing eyes into which the heroine could gaze forever. Her heroine might have fallen in love with this stranger, and that love would be reciprocated.

She felt with bitterness that should she fall in love with her mysterious stranger, that love could never be returned.

March

Olivia gazed beyond Uncle Harold at a still life painting of a dead pheasant on the wall of his study.

What more can I say? We've had this conversation three times now.

The elderly man ran his fingers through his frazzled gray hair, staring at her in frustration. "This is non-negotiable. Until you are twenty-five years of age, I am your guardian, and you will do as I say."

"No, Uncle."

He banged his fist on the table and his eyes never left her face.

Olivia stepped backwards. They had argued about his insistence on her attending a London season and could reach no compromise. This was the first time she had seen his face turn a vivid shade of crimson in an apoplexy of rage. Despite his penny

pinching, miserly character, she had no wish to cause him ill health.

“Olivia,” he spoke so quietly that she had to peer forward to hear his words. “Very well. No season for you and no season for Jocelyn. You can both go to Silverton Hall and spend the season there.”

“But Uncle ...”

“You have what you wanted, niece. No London season.”

“But Jocelyn ...”

“Jocelyn will do as I say. You will both return to Silverton.”

“You cannot deprive Jocelyn of being presented at court. You know that Lady Leighton will sponsor and chaperone her throughout the season. It’s arranged.”

He continued to glare at her, still crimson with anger. “You have disobeyed me, niece. I stipulated that you needed to join Jocelyn in her season. I even agreed to the Viscountess sponsoring her. Then I find you had no intention of attending any events and seeking a husband.”

“Uncle. I cannot do this. You cannot make me attend balls and recitals alongside Jocelyn. One or two perhaps, but a whole season?”

“You are the elder. Propriety demands that you have a season alongside Jocelyn. I know she is your niece, not your sister, but there are less than four years’ difference in your ages. I’ve also said before, and will say again, that you must endeavor to find a husband. I speak out of concern for your welfare and future security. If you do not engage in a season, it will be too late. You will be an old maid on the shelf.”

Olivia stared at him, furious as his brutal words fell heavily on her shoulders. Tears welled up in her eyes, as she struggled to keep her composure.

I will not cry in front of him. I will stay calm.

“Uncle, I beg you to reconsider this plan. No one will want me, I could attend a hundred balls and it would make no difference. I see the looks on people’s faces. I remember the Duchess of Denver recoiling in horror and whispering behind her fan to the Marchioness of Wilmslow. I wish it was different with all my heart, I wish I didn’t carry these scars.”

“Nonsense, niece. You exaggerate as always. The disfigurement is nowhere near as bad as you maintain. I hardly notice those scars, and your maid arranges your hair in such a way that hardly anyone can see the disfigurement, unless they look closely.”

How can he say that? she thought to herself. My skin is tight and taught. When I look in the mirror I see puckered skin, raised red scars under my hair, which stand out against the fairness of my complexion. I am repulsed by my own appearance.

She looked up at her uncle and spoke quietly and calmly, pushing down the anguish she felt at his lack of understanding for her situation. She was not only scarred, but being made to feel guilty for feeling grief at her changed appearance.

She almost pushed back her hair to show the bald patch and the wizened skin, always disguised by her looped hairstyle with a variety of ribbons and headdresses, which Ellen had collected over the last three years.

“You are wrong uncle, wrong in so many ways. I wish to live quietly, away from the glare of society. However, I cannot deprive Jocelyn of her season. If you insist, then I shall join her at events.”

He had won. She had admitted defeat. She glanced at her uncle and saw no triumph on his face, only intense weariness.

Perhaps he truly thinks he is doing the right thing. Who knows? I've never thought him cruel. A miser, and a controlling personality, but not deliberately cruel.

He stood up and came out from behind his desk. He patted her on the shoulder. "I knew you would see sense eventually," he said. "Now, tell Mrs. Jennings we are ready for dinner. Where's Jocelyn? She has such a tendency to be late."

At that moment the door burst open and there stood Jocelyn. "I've been looking for you everywhere," she said brightly. "Mrs. Jennings says that dinner is ready, and that Cook is concerned the partridge will be dry if we don't eat soon. Apparently, the gamekeeper has sent the partridge down from Silverton and Cook has been braising them all afternoon."

Observing, almost as an outsider, Olivia noticed that her uncle seemed genuinely affectionate toward Jocelyn.

"We can't have dry partridge," he said, with almost a laugh in his voice.

Olivia looked at Jocelyn with pride. Jocelyn looked at her uncle and then at Olivia, "You've been arguing again, and I suspect it is about my coming out season," she said. "I'm right, aren't I?"

"The matter has been settled," said Uncle Harold. "Olivia has agreed to attend all your events alongside you."

"Have you Olivia?" asked Jocelyn with surprise. "Are you sure?"

"Of course, it's all settled," agreed Olivia, seething in silent fury at the tactics of her

uncle in manipulating the situation.

There's no way out for me, she thought. Uncle insists that I try to find a husband, but it's a lost cause. In the end he holds the power as my guardian. I wish I could find a husband as the idea of living here with him, after Jocelyn has left, fills me with despair. Why can't I just live somewhere on the Silverton estate with quiet dignity.

The idea of living in a society, where people talked about her disfigurement behind her back, made her feel nauseous. She would do it for one season, for Jocelyn, but no more than that.

The evening passed quickly enough. The partridge was not spoiled, Cook triumphing again with her presentation of the meal. Olivia excused herself as soon as politeness allowed, leaving Jocelyn talking with Uncle Harold.

Half an hour later she heard a faint tap on her door and Jocelyn's voice calling her name. "Olivia, are you awake?"

Opening the door, she smiled at her niece. "I'm not asleep. My conversation with uncle has put me out of sorts. I'd like to write, but the words won't flow."

"I knew you were upset," said Jocelyn gently. "I didn't want you to be on your own."

They sat together in front of the small fire in the grate. Silent companionship was what Olivia needed, and having Jocelyn's support helped to mend her mood.

"We'll be fine," said Jocelyn. "Lady Leighton has friends and influence. You mustn't worry about others talking about you. Lady Leighton won't allow it to be tolerated. Now, shall I read from that new book about the sisters in search of a husband. It's quite funny and I could see the author making Uncle into one of her characters."

“Very well,” said Olivia. “Read to me from that novel by The Lady.”

Later, when she was alone, the candle burning low, Olivia reflected on her plight.

I need to find a way to settle my thoughts and accept what has happened to me. It was difficult when she had so many flashbacks, and a feeling of overwhelming intense grief.

I need to stop caring what others might think and look after myself. I’ve almost finished the first draft of my novel. Marianne has read it, and she thinks it’s good enough to publish. I just need to find a publisher for it, and that will mean I have my own money.

If I can help Jocelyn find a husband, I won’t need to worry about her anymore. Then I may have enough money to live a quiet life, close to nature in a cottage in the countryside, visiting my friends when I want.

Olivia turned to Marguerite. “You’ll stay with me, won’t you” she said to the spaniel.

Olivia held her manuscript close, wondering if her writing, the words she poured onto paper every evening, might be a way to earn a living? Every lady of quality she knew had a collection of romantic and gothic novels, and many streets in town had a penny lending library. Olivia vowed to find the courage and send her story of lost love to a publishing house the next day.

Olivia’s thoughts then turned to when she had returned to society, after she lost her family.

Each time she entered a drawing room for a soirée, or a ball in a great house, her anxiety levels rose so high that she could hardly move her feet. Sometimes she felt as though a waterfall were gushing in her head, as dizziness made her feel faint. Her

smelling salts clutched in her hand made no difference.

She saw the ladies looking at her, their heads close together, murmuring behind their fans. She imagined the conversation they were having.

“That’s her, you know, Lady Olivia Sherwyn. You must have heard the story? No? Well, about two, possibly three years ago there was a terrible fire at Silverton Hall.

“Lady Olivia was almost at the door, safe from the flames when she realized her brother and sister-in-law, the Earl and Countess of Riversmead, were still upstairs. The servants tried to prevent her returning, but to no avail, and as she crossed the great hall the staircase collapsed, and she was knocked out by a piece of burning wood. Disfigured for life, they say.

“A terrible tragedy, she lost her family, and her looks, in the same night. Before the fire she was rumored to be a great beauty but look at her now.”

Every time she attended an event the same thing happened. Marianne had looked at her in surprise when they had returned from a concert, and she had disclosed her fears.

“Nonsense,” her friend had exclaimed in surprise. “I heard Lady Falkener and the Honorable Miss Carteret talking, and yes, it was gossip, but not about you my dear. It seems the Dowager Duchess of Billington is leaving the county to live in the Highlands of Scotland, with a laird she met last summer. It’s quite the talk of the town.”

Marianne had taken both her hands in hers and looked intently at Olivia. “I wish with all my heart that this tragedy had never happened. Losing Frederick and Mary and living with those scars caused by the fire is a heavy weight to bear.” Marianne had paused, struggling to find the words to give solace to her friend.

“Believe me, your personality shines wherever you go. There are scars, but it is you who notices them more than others. When you become distracted and forget they are there, then you hold your head high, your blue eyes shine brightly, and no one notices those scars in your hairline.

I saw it tonight at the concert, until you saw those two gossiping behind that fan. They are far more interested in a duchess and a Scottish highland laird, than whether you choose to style your hair in low loops to cover a disfigurement.”

Olivia knew there was truth in her friend's words, but the scars ran deep, both physically and emotionally. She had been so convinced that Lady Falkener and Miss Carteret had been talking about her. “Is that true? The Dowager Duchess of Billington is moving to the highlands?” she had asked Marianne.

I’m lucky to have a friend like Marianne, she thought. That’s one good thing about being forced to return to society. As Marianne is sponsoring Jocelyn then we will get to spend lots of time together.

Since then, she had withdrawn from society, but she now needed another project.

Olivia remembered the story she had started to write in the autumn, about a romantic meeting in a woodland glade. Her cheeks flushed bright pink as she remembered the interlude of the impromptu picnic, and the way Brandon’s hand had brushed against hers, while they picked wild strawberries, under a shaded canopy of autumnal forest colors. The story needed an ending and for once the ideas did not flow easily.

Now, as she faced the prospect of a season again, an idea began to form, a way of coping with the ordeal of a season in society. A game her mother used to play with her when she was a little girl came into her mind. Mama would tell me to create a character and talk and move as though I was that person. I could do that for the season. I can pretend to be someone else and turn the season into a game. I can tell

Marianne and Jocelyn what I'm doing, and they'll help.

The more she considered the idea, the more she thought it could work. She was always creating characters and scenes in her stories. It will give me time and space to find a plan, to work out a way to earn a living and live independently.

The embers in the meager fire burned low, and she shivered, pulling her shawl close around her. Ellen knew that sometimes Olivia worked late into the night, and had left a pile of logs next to the grate.

Olivia, feeling reckless, placed two on the fire and warmed her hands as the flames grew stronger, and the warmth spread through her hands. It was only later that she realized that she had been close to a fire, enjoying the warmth, without remembering the flames engulfing Silverton.

Sitting close to the heat of the fire, she reached for the paper and began to write.

The candle flame flickered, its shadows dancing on the white walls of her bedchamber. An idea for how to overcome her fear of the reactions of others to her disfigurement formed.

Why didn't I think of this before?

A wave of confidence flowed through her body as her words spilled onto the paper.

I can write a story about an heiress who is bored with society but loves dancing at balls. She is a gifted pianist, who can play competently, and is determined to have a good time, break as many hearts as possible and enjoy being part of the ton.

I'll not only write a story, I'll play one of the characters when I'm at society events—hmm—let me think. She picked up her pen and a new piece of paper. The

ideas flowed and the crippling anxiety drained from her body.

I'll play Contessa Allegra Fortuny and I move so quickly when I dance, that no one ever notices those scars.

A distraction to get through those balls and recitals without anxiety. Lady Allegra would never be nervous.

Watch out, tabbies of the ton! Lady Allegra is a confident, accomplished, beautiful heiress.

Maybe, just maybe, I can get through this ordeal, and write a story at the same time. Her anger diffused, she fell asleep into a deep slumber in the chair by the fire.

This might even be fun.

The Confident Contessa

By Lady Olivia Sherwyn

Chapter 1

Lady Allegra, descended from a family of Venetian counts, knew she would find a husband in her first season in London. She reveled in the idea of tossing her chestnut curls, which set her apart from other young ladies, as she handed her dance card to eager suitors.

No one danced the waltz as smoothly as Allegra, her feet barely touching the ground as she whirled around the ballroom. When she sang, the sound was sublime and when she played the pianoforte people were entranced. When she spoke, she had a slight stutter, but no one noticed, as her confidence in conversation diminished the impact

of her stutter.

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Chapter 6

During the long winter months Marcus' thoughts often drifted to Olivia, who in his mind had become Cendrillon, his Cinderella who had disappeared into the forest.

For several days after that strange meeting, he had ridden Hector over to the north boundary every day, often accompanied by Hera. He never saw Cendrillon nor any sign of her presence in the grove.

No one at Belvedere Abbey recognized his description of the young lady, Colin even joked that Marcus had imagined her, or she had indeed come through a portal from the land of fairies.

As the days passed into weeks, he visited the grove only occasionally, always hoping for a glimpse of the young woman who had captured his attention.

March

London

Hargrove House, Tewksbury Crescent

“Will you be dining in this evening, Your Lordship?” asked Farthing, the butler at Hargrove House, the family's London residence.

“Most probably, Farthing, but please reassure Cook that Lord Ludlow and I are happy with a plate of cold cuts.”

“Very good, My Lord,” said Farthing, bowing before he moved away.

“This house runs like clockwork,” said Colin. “You’re lucky to have Mr. Farthing. I’m wondering about making him an offer to come and work at our townhouse.”

“That, my dear cousin, is a ridiculous idea. You always stay here when you are in town. Why would you want to poach Farthing to work at a house that you never visit?”

“You’re right of course, though maybe I’d stay at Canoncliffe Square if Farthing was in charge of the household.”

“Colin, we’re only here in London because you decided it’s time you got married.”

“That’s not entirely true Marcus,” protested Colin. “Your father asked you to spend some time in London society in the hopes of finding a bride as well.”

“You’re right of course. The duke is keen to secure the succession and talks of little else but my finding a duchess.” He sighed deeply, “Mama would be delighted if I made an offer for Lady Cressida Lantham. She’s been pushing me toward Lady Cressida since I returned home from Italy.”

“You could easily scare Aunt Elizabeth off by hinting that you might marry an Italian Contessa.”

“Sad to say, Colin, that I would have married an Italian Contessa. I even proposed marriage, but she refused to have me. I tell you, I was in my cups for days when she turned me down.”

“I can’t believe she turned you down.”

“Turned me down and called me a boy. I believe she has become engaged to an elderly Bourbon prince and good luck to her.”

“Well, I’ll be glad of your company this season,” confided Colin. “You know I dislike going to these events alone although I always enjoy them once I’m there.”

“Well, I doubt very much I’ll last the whole season. I’ll attend a few balls and recitals. I don’t want to upset father while his health is still so fragile. I can attend balls and inspect the young ladies who are seeking a husband, but that doesn’t mean I have to make a match.”

“Quite true, cousin. Now, tonight we attend our first ball, and don’t panic it isn’t at the Almack’s assembly rooms with all those tabbies of the ton eyeing you up. No, it’s a small event, at the home of the Marchioness of Throxley and your neighbor, from Buckinghamshire, the Viscountess of Leighton plans to be there.”

“Now that will be interesting, I’ve never made her acquaintance and we are neighbors.” His thoughts drifted away to the northern boundary of his estate and a forest glade where Leighton property met Hargrove land.

He smiled affectionately at his cousin, whose light brown hair had been trimmed and arranged in something approaching the Corinthian trend in fashion. Marcus suspected it had taken Colin hours to perfect that casual, only just tied in a simple knot look.

He’d lent Colin his valet James Cartwright, to help him gain confidence in London fashion. James had done a good job, as Colin looked every inch the fashionable Corinthian Viscount of Ludlow.

Marcus retreated to his bedchamber, smiling at the excitement on his cousin’s face at

the anticipation of flirting with debutantes and searching for a bride.

Now which boots shall I wear ... and can I think of an excuse to avoid attending this ball tonight?

“James,” he called. His valet appeared almost instantaneously “My Lord?”

‘Help me out of these boots and then I need to dress for this ball at Throxley House.’

His eyes widened as he noticed his trunk already unpacked and his dressing room full of neatly organized frock coats, linen shirts, cravats and breeches. “You’ve been busy, James. I had no idea I had so many clothes.”

“Most are still in Italy, My Lord. If you choose to remain in town for the season, then we’ll need to call in the tailor. You’re short of breeches and shirts, My Lord.”

“Whatever you think best James. As for this shindig tonight at Throxley, I leave myself in your hands. Unlike Lord Ludlow, I’m not searching for a bride, so something somber and restrained perhaps.”

Marcus generally preferred to dress himself, except when attending a society event, and then he allowed James to choose his clothes.

In no time at all Marcus was dressed in the suave Italian style he preferred. “Almost there, My Lord.” James held up a dark green frock coat and a midnight blue version. “Any preference?”

“Preference? If I could choose, I’d wear my leather coat, the one I bought in Florence, but it won’t do for Throxley. I’ve a mind to choose the green.” All the colors of the forest. Oh, to spend an hour in a woodland glade, discussing literature, while looking into fine, bright eyes.

Lanterns shone outside the steps leading up to Throxley Place.

“If this is a small ball, I wonder how many people the Marchioness invites to a grand ball?” commented Colin.

“Lots of young ladies are arriving,” joked Marcus. “Perhaps your true love is arriving in one of those carriages.”

“I know you think this is funny, but I do want to marry.”

“Too much poetry. It’s turned your head to love,” said Marcus, laughing.

“You could do to settle down yourself. You’re hardly young anymore,” retorted Colin.

“Enough. I concede. The point is yours. Shall we fence at the club tomorrow?”

“If I don’t drink too much tonight. I need to be on top form to fence with you, Marcus.”

Marcus bowed and nodded to the Marchioness as they were announced and descended into the ballroom.

“I like Throxley Place,” said Colin. “It has the feel of a country house in the middle of the city. A perfect place for a spring ball.”

“She may have the terrace open, the weather is unseasonably good for March. Now, you go fill up some dance cards and I shall search out a game of whist or cribbage. I have no desire to dance,” said Marcus.

Marcus turned round to see Colin staring at a new arrival.

“Colin, you’re not listening. Ah, smitten already I see.” joked Marcus.

“Who is she?” whispered Colin. “That lady with the brown hair in the shimmering ivory gown.”

“I don’t think I know her,” responded Marcus. “But you can’t dance with her as you’ve not been introduced.”

“Total tosh and balderdash. I’m with the most eligible bachelor of the season. I’m sure I’ll be introduced immediately.”

“The most eligible bachelor?” Marcus looked around. “You don’t mean ...you can’t mean me.”

“I can and do,” said Colin, propelling the Earl of Hatfield in the direction of the mysterious lady.

Sure enough, they did not have to wait long to be noticed by her sponsor and chaperone, the vivacious Lady Leighton.

“Lord Ludlow and Lord Hatfield. How delightful. Let me introduce you to my protégée Lady Jocelyn Sherwyn. Jocelyn, my dear, come and be introduced to someone who seems keen to have his name on your dance card.”

Marcus watched, eyebrow raised quizzically as his cousin stammered a greeting to a very personable young lady of the ton . Lady Jocelyn Sherwyn smiled brightly at his cousin, her brown ringlets adorned by ivory silk ribbons. Lady Jocelyn bobbed a curtsy, clearly putting his cousin at ease with her engaging manner.

He caught sight of a familiar face at the other side of the room. Lady Cressida Lantham, daughter of a French émigré and, if his mother had her way, the future Countess of Hatfield and, on the death of his father, Duchess of Hargrove. Lady Cressida nodded in recognition and so Marcus began to make his excuses and move to join her.

He realized Lady Leighton had spoken to him and seemed to be introducing him to another young lady. It would be discourteous to walk away, so he turned to bow and smile at yet another debutant.

He stood still, rooted to the spot. Could it be? Cendrillon at the ball? He must be mistaken.

He saw the immediate flash of recognition in those aquamarine blue eyes. The lady from the forest glade, dressed in a dusky green silk gown, dark hazelnut tresses, intricately looped and bound with green ribbon.

“Marcus, Earl of Hatfield, this is Lady Olivia Sherwyn,” came the voice of Lady Leighton. “Do you know each other?” she continued, full of curiosity.

“Yes, well no,” came the contralto voice that he recognized from the glade.

“Curious. You can tell me later, Olivia,” said Lady Leighton. “I’m going to introduce you and leave you together as I have promised this next dance to my Viscount, and I see Charles is coming toward us.”

Charles, Viscount of Leighton joined them, nodded at Marcus. “Hatfield, good to see you, we must catch up soon. If you’re in town a while let’s fence. Now, come my dear, it’s the Scottish Reel we danced at our first ball, and I don’t want to miss it.”

Olivia and Marcus were alone, in the middle of a crowded ballroom. Marcus noticed

the elegance and poise of the woman he thought of as Cendrillon. Her gown fell around her, flowing like gossamer, a very different look from the plain dimity gown she had worn that day in the forest.

A voice sounded loudly in his ear. "Marcus, Lady Sherwyn and I are going to dance the next set together. I suggest you ask Lady Olivia to dance, before someone else signs her dance card." He smiled engagingly at Lady Olivia. "Please forgive him. He isn't one for balls. He'd always prefer to be in the country with his horses and dogs."

"I believe I have no option but to ask you to dance." Marcus caught the fleeting look of hurt in Olivia's eyes and re-phrased his words. "I do apologize, it is a long time since I attended a society event and I admit I am a little stunned to meet you here."

She nodded, "And I you, My Lord. I thought you to be a farmer, albeit a gentleman farmer."

At her words he burst out laughing and the tension was broken. "Did you, by Jove? Well, it's not too far from the truth. I'd rather be on my estate here or in Italy than dancing at a ball. Would you care to dance?"

"If I'm honest, I'd prefer a glass of lemonade and some fresh air on the terrace." came her reply. "It is quite a surprise. Perhaps after some refreshment we might dance?"

"Very well, let's find a glass of lemonade." and he guided her across the room.

The terrace outside made a beautiful setting, under a clear starlit sky. Benches and tables made it a pleasant place to talk, away from the cacophony of voices and orchestra in the ballroom.

"So, Cendrillon, you have come to the ball," he began.

“Cendrillon?” she queried. “The tales of Charles Perrault?”

“You know them?”

“Indeed, but in translation. I believe it is Cinderella?”

“Exactly so. I had a French nanny, who had escaped the revolution, and she would read me stories from her homeland in French. I loved to listen and I’m sure it’s why I’m fluent in French. It was very useful to the government in the war,” he added. Marcus continued, “I’m no handsome prince, but you did rather appear, trespassing on my land.”

“Trespassing?”

“Well, the grove is in Hargrove land, and you had wandered away from Leighton Manor that day.”

“Ah,” she responded, “then I was indeed a trespasser.”

“You also disappeared suddenly. One minute you were there, the next you were gathering your notebook and blanket and racing away up the forest track.”

“I cannot deny it,” she said. “I can’t even explain it. Except to say that we broke a lot of the rules of society that day, we had certainly not been introduced, and, however pleasant, it was not reality.” She took a sip of her lemonade before continuing. “I risked my reputation, Your Lordship. If we had been discovered, I could have been ruined.”

“I never think of these things,” he admitted. “I can see your predicament. I enjoyed our day together and hoped to see more of you, then suddenly you were gone. So, to me you will always be Cendrillon.”

“I like it,” she laughed, and he found he loved listening to her laughter. “You know my dear friend, Lady Leighton?” she continued. “I stayed a month at Leighton with her.”

“I hadn’t met her, though my cousin Colin, Lord Ludlow, knows Lady Leighton, and my mother has called on her. I tend to avoid social occasions, unless I am forced to attend.”

“Yet you are here tonight?”

“Under duress, believe me. My cousin is seeking a bride. He is keen to fall in love. I am honor bound to accompany him to events.”

“Ah, I understand entirely.”

“You do, how so?”

“My niece, Lady Jocelyn Sherwyn, is looking for love too. It’s her first season. She will be presented at court later this month.”

“And you, Cendrillon, is it your first ball too?”

“Indeed not. I am almost on the shelf. I had my first season five years ago but have rarely been in town since then.”

“How unusual for a young lady to admit to being on the shelf.”

“I see no need to mince words, Your Lordship. I have no desire to make a match.”

“I see. Well I shall enjoy your company this evening.” He looked toward the ballroom and noticed that Colin still danced with Lady Jocelyn.

“I suspect Lord Ludlow has formed an attachment for your niece.”

“And she seems happy in his company,” added Olivia.

“I wonder?” said Marcus, thoughtfully.

“You wonder?” queried Olivia.

“I wonder if we might facilitate the process of them getting to know each other. I have an ulterior motive and am happy to declare it. The sooner Colin is settled and offers for a young lady, then the sooner I can return to my estate.”

“I too long to be quietly at home writing, erm, I mean reading a book.”

“Colin certainly seemed struck by your niece the moment he set eyes on her. He seems entranced by her conversation. I predict he will want to meet her again, and often.”

“If Jocelyn likes your cousin, then I see no harm in our plan. I’ll need to tell Lady Leighton, who is sponsoring Jocelyn.”

“Of course. I shall also enjoy building on our friendship. I have few true friends and so enjoyed our conversation that day in the woodland glade.”

“I did as well,” she said, and he could swear that he heard a gentle sigh escape from her lips.

His gaze fell on her hazelnut tresses, falling around her face in such a becoming style. Lady Olivia Sherwyn, or his Cendrillon as he thought of her, stood out as an individual character in a sea of sameness.

He planned to get to know her better. He had been truthful in telling her he had few friends, certainly few friends who enjoyed reading. He was not short of friends who enjoyed matching their skills against him in a bout of fencing, but none of them had any interest in discussing literature. Or, for that matter, taking a picnic next to a shady pool in a forest glade.

He knew he did not want this moment to end. Thoughts of Cendrillon had stayed with him a long time after their meeting in the woodland glade. He had tried to find her, to no avail. He smiled to himself at the idea that she thought he was a local farmer. He liked that.

He had enjoyed her company, but he had also been captivated by her smile, her mellow voice and the way she listened so thoughtfully. He also knew that he had wanted to kiss her while they were picking wild strawberries. On that day in the woods, he had been bewitched by Cendrillon and felt very alone when she had raced away so suddenly.

He bowed suddenly. “Lady Olivia Sherwyn, I am instructed by my cousin to invite you to dance with me.”

“I’d be delighted sir,” she responded, slipping easily into the language of the ton.

Tonight, on the starlit terrace he had the same compulsion to reach down and place his lips on hers. The orchestra had paused, and the next dance would begin soon. He offered her his arm and they made their way to the dance floor.

Ah, a quadrille, he thought, perfect. I’m in no mood for a reel.

He noticed Colin and Jocelyn were still together and gestured for them to join him and Olivia as the other couple in the square.

He needed to remind Colin that dancing more than two dances with the same young lady could be seen as a commitment by some of the matronly tabbies of the ton . However, seeing the look of devotion on his friend's face, he suspected his cousin was well on his way to falling in love.

As they twirled in the square dance, he noticed how his heart seemed to miss a beat when he held Cendrillon's hand in his. The sensation was disquieting, but he knew he wanted more of it and this time he determined that this lady would not disappear. In fact, he planned to call on her the very next day.

As he guided Olivia back to Lady Leighton, he noticed Lady Cressida and her mother had joined their group. He sensed Lady Cressida was less than happy about his disappearance out to the terrace with Lady Olivia Sherwyn.

He bowed at Lady Cressida. "I don't believe you have met my friend Lady Olivia Sherwyn. Let me introduce you." He saw Colin's eyes widen as he called Olivia 'his friend'.

"An honor to meet you Lady Sherwyn" said Lady Cressida, before turning to Marcus.

"Your lordship has forgotten that we are engaged for the next dance," she purred.

Marcus knew this was not the case but nodded anyway. His mother had befriended Lady Cressida and no doubt this had given rise to expectations of romance. He needed to be kind, as he had no intention of proposing.

He reluctantly offered his arm to Lady Cressida and left Olivia and the group and joined the dance floor for a cotillion. His partner did her best to draw him into conversation, gazing up at him with her beautiful gray eyes and her rouged lips. She was very beautiful, but he didn't feel his heart skip a beat when he anticipated their hands touching in the dance.

I shall be polite, but I do wish you would stop flirting with me, he thought. He remained solicitous, but aloof, as he talked with her when the steps of the dance allowed. I've never given you any encouragement in the past and there is no connection, no spark between us.

Every so often he caught a glimpse of Olivia dancing with another partner, green gauze floating around her, ribbons bobbing in the air. This morning, he had no idea that tonight he would be dancing with the mystery lady he had met, in the autumn, in a woodland glade. His heart felt glad that Cendrillon was back in his life.

Her face stared back at her from the mirror, eyes glowing dark in the candlelight.

He should have proposed by now. If I have to spend much more time with his insipid mother, then I swear I shall collapse with boredom. I have no interest in tapestry or delivering baskets to elderly villagers.

She peered at her reflection, liking what she saw.

I have no scars. My face is perfect. I am the belle dame. She is nothing.

Fury coursed through her veins at the memory of Olivia Sherwyn, dancing in the arms of Lord Hatfield.

How can he be so captivated by a young woman with such a disfigured face? I will not tolerate this.

The cold, blue sapphires in her platinum blonde hair sparkled in the candlelight. She felt no emotion, only cold, hard determination.

Olivia Sherwyn is my rival now. I swear that she will not land Lord Hatfield as a catch. He is mine.

She measured the herb, confident the charm would enhance her beauty and draw in her intended suitor.

I think we will be married in September, then an extended honeymoon in the south of France. I long to visit my homeland. Now the Emperor Napoleon is defeated, I can travel south again. How I long for the hot sunshine of Antibes, instead of this dull, gray climate.

She poured more liquid into the bowl, adding wormwood the way that her grandmother had taught her. She inhaled the scent of absinthe. Something sizzled as she whispered ancient words of the love charm to the Goddess Venus.

She tossed her head back laughing and drank her potion. Soon, very soon, she would be Lady Hatfield, and once the old duke had died, and he couldn't last much longer, then she would be Duchess of Hargrove, reigning as one of the highest ladies of the land.

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Chapter 7

“They’re so beautiful,” whispered Jocelyn, as she bent and buried her nose in the flowers to inhale the fragrance.

“You must have an admirer,” said Olivia. “Ellen, Was there a note? What did Mrs. Jennings say about their arrival?”

“Just that a carriage pulled up outside the house and a footman handed them to Mrs. Jennings.”

“No note or letter with them?” Olivia asked.

“No, nothing. Shall I put them in water, Lady Jocelyn?”

“Yes please, Ellen. Let’s keep them in here, in Mama’s morning room.”

While Ellen went to collect a vase and water, Jocelyn looked excitedly at Olivia. “It’s him, isn’t it?”

“You mean Lord Ludlow?”

“Of course. He has sent a note saying he will call this afternoon and would I like to go for a carriage ride.”

“It seems you have made a conquest my dear Jocelyn. I’m delighted for you.”

“And I believe you have good news too.” said Jocelyn.

Olivia blushed, assuming her niece meant the Earl of Hatfield. Jocelyn was busy looking at the flowers and didn't notice.

“You've sent it to the publisher. How long before you hear back?”

Her niece meant her finishing her novel and sending it to Bertram & Stead, a publishing house in London.

“I don't know. Perhaps in a week or two.”

Jocelyn waltzed around the room, handing a rose to Olivia. “I can't believe you've written a whole book, and it's a compelling story. Lady Leighton and I both loved the twist at the end. You'll be famous soon.”

“No I won't. I used a pseudonym. No one will know it's written by me.”

“A disguise. What name did you choose? Something romantic like Guinevere de Montford?”

“Absolutely not. I used the name Mary Newnham. I did wonder about just M Newnham.”

“You used Mama's name. I like that,” said Jocelyn. “I wish she were here Olivia, for my coming out season. I miss them so much.”

“I know dearest Jocelyn. I miss them too. Everyday.”

She took Jocelyn in her arms to give her comfort.

Soon the flowers were in the vase, and they awaited the arrival of Lord Ludlow.

“Jocelyn, I don’t believe you’ve settled down since those flowers arrived,” said Olivia in exasperation.

“But he might come to call at any point,” insisted Jocelyn.

“We’re not sure those flowers came from Lord Ludlow,” said Olivia, reminding her that all was not always what it seemed.

“Oh, look at the sunshine Olivia,” said Jocelyn, apparently not hearing a word of what Olivia had said. “It’s a perfect day for a carriage ride.”

If we are going to have many more of these afternoons of agitation and anxiety, I shall have to take up embroidery. I can’t just sit here while you stare out of the window.

Olivia called for Ellen to bring tea. “Earl grey, I think, with that citrus flavor to wake me up whilst we wait.”

“Jocelyn, I recall that Lady Leighton suggested the latest fashion plates from Paris were a little different. I think that puff sleeves might have made a return.”

Anything, anything to detract her from standing there for hours.

Soon Ellen joined them with the tea and together the three of them looked over the patterns.

“My sister says there are a lot of changes this season,” said Ellen, sorting through the plates with enthusiasm.

“I told you, Jocelyn,” said Olivia. “Look at the detail on this dress.”

Jocelyn was drawn into half an hour of fashion plates and planning. “I think this style will suit you Lady Jocelyn,” said Ellen. “The sleeves are shorter.”

“Thankfully I was wrong, the trend is not for puffed sleeves,” commented Olivia.

“Most seem to have a lower neckline. I like this one, with the lace edging. The color would suit you Olivia,” said Jocelyn.

“I don’t think Uncle Harold will allow me another gown this season. However, he has assured me we can buy whatever you need to shine at court, balls, and recitals,” Olivia replied.

“I believe, Lady Olivia, that it would be easy to convert that peacock-colored silk dress to this design. It always seemed a little plain to me,” said Ellen, who, knowing her mistress well, added another incentive. “It’s a difficult neckline for me to iron straight and a change would in fact make it easier.”

Olivia wasn’t fooled for one minute but went along with her maid’s kind plan. “Very well Ellen. Ask Madame Beauchamps, the seamstress, to make the changes. Now, Jocelyn, do you prefer this coral or this rosebud pink shade?”

“Rosebud,” said Jocelyn decisively, and Olivia knew the color would suit her complexion and brown locks.

“Coral would suit you. I think it is a color which would complement your skin tone,” Jocelyn added.

Olivia looked at the sample of coral silk and sighed.

Such a beautiful color. I love it and always seem to wear gray, restrained colors nowadays.

“It is beautiful. The crushed silk seems to shimmer in the light, but Uncle Harold is already scrutinizing our bills,” Olivia reminds Jocelyn

Jocelyn turned to Olivia with a look far older than her years. “Olivia, we need to have gumption and grit where our uncle is concerned. I have an inheritance still, even if we are all confused as to what has happened with regard to yours. Uncle has told you to marry, and yes, I do know, the whole household knows, because he does not have a quiet voice when he is berating you.”

“Josie, please,” Olivia replied, using the familiar childhood name Jocelyn’s parents had called her.

“He expects you to marry this season?” Jocelyn asked her.

Olivia nodded.

“Then he must pay for your gowns. This color and cloth are perfect for you,” Jocelyn said with certainty.

Olivia could see Ellen discreetly pretending to be busy with the color plates as the conversation took place.

Jocelyn squeezed her older cousin's hand. “Truly, Olivia, if you are to escape this house, then your only route is through marriage. Think of all the expense you will save the addle-pated miser in the long term. All those helpings of pot pie and chicken fricassee you won’t eat in the years ahead, because you are married and gone from Swanbourne Place.”

Olivia began to laugh. ‘You can’t call Uncle Harold an addle-pated miser. It isn’t appropriate,’ she said, nodding at Ellen to remind Jocelyn they were not alone.

“Hmm. I will remove addle-pated, though I do consider him foolish. But can you tell me truthfully that he is not a miser?” She peered at her cousin. “I thought not.”

They collapsed in laughter. Ellen began to collect the fashion plates when Jocelyn spotted something different. “What’s this?” she asked curiously.

“My sister told me about these. It’s a petticoat which is firmer and makes a dress stand out a little. You know how some of the muslin dresses can cling to a figure. This keeps the muslin in place all evening.”

“Just the thing for a ball which lasts all night,” said Jocelyn. “We can’t be the only ladies of quality not wearing the new petticoats. Add them to the list, Ellen.”

A knock startled them, as Mrs. Jennings put her head round the door. “It’s a gentleman asking if Lady Jocelyn is taking callers,” she said.

Looking at the fashion plates and pieces of fabric spread out across the table she continued, “I’ll tell the gentleman to return another day, shall I?”

Jocelyn stood up in alarm. “Is it Lord Ludlow?”

Mrs. Jennings nodded.

“He’s here. Olivia, I told you he would call today.”

“As you seem to be expecting him, I’ll tell him you are available,” Mrs. Jennings said, smiling. “I’ll put him in the morning room for a few minutes while you tidy in here.”

After a scurry of activity, Lord Ludlow was shown through and bowed stiffly. Olivia acknowledged him and indicated he should sit.

“Would you care for a cup of earl grey tea, your lordship,” she asked, “and we have honey cake today.”

He nodded and they all settled to tea and cake and the conversation flowed.

Listening to Lord Ludlow, Olivia realized he was quite a conversationalist. He was very polite and the stories he told about his life on his country estate at Granville were not in the least bit boring. Olivia realized that Marianne must know him as they were neighbors.

“Do you prefer town or country Lord Ludlow?” she asked.

Without a momentary pause, or hesitation, he told her. “That’s easy, the countryside. I’d always prefer to be home in the Chiltern Hills.

He looked a little apprehensive, as if he wanted to say something, but wasn’t sure if he could.

How charming . I really rather like Lord Ludlow. He could be perfect for Jocelyn.

“I wondered if you would care to take a ride in the park?” he inquired, looking longingly at Jocelyn.

“Oh yes of course,” she said. “Olivia, can we go riding in the park?”

“I see no reason why not,” agreed Olivia “It’s a fine day. If you go to the mews, and prepare your team, have your coachman bring your carriage round to the main door, then Jocelyn and I can join you in ten minutes.”

“I’ll go and do that now,” he said, with an over excitement Olivia found authentic and natural. “I brought the landau, so we have the roof in case there is a shower of rain.”

After Lord Ludlow had gone to speak to the groom in the mews at the back of Swanbourne Place, Jocelyn could hardly contain her excitement. “He came to call and now we’re going to ride in the park.”

“You must look demure and not too enthusiastic Josie,” Olivia warned her.

“I know. I know. But a carriage ride, and in a landau.” She rushed over to the window, peering out. Do you know Olivia that the sun is shining, and there is actually a rainbow in an arc across the sky?”

“Go and get your velvet redingote. I think that will be warmer than a pelisse,” suggested Olivia.

Olivia called for Ellen. “We are going carriage riding Ellen, and it’s an open topped landau. What does Lady Jocelyn need in her hair? And does she need a bonnet?”

“Come quickly upstairs and I have just the thing,” Ellen replied.

As they rushed across the hallway the study door opened for a moment and a dour-faced Uncle Harold stared at them both before retreating back into his study without making a comment.

An elegant lady in a blue bonnet with a turquoise feather, and a younger lady in a straw bonnet with a rose-pink ribbon, soon left Swanbourne Place, stepping into an elegant landau with a pair of handsome bay horses. The sun was shining as Lord Ludlow’s coachman set off for Hyde Park.

Conversation continued much as it had in the drawing room, but in the glorious

sunshine as the coach trundled towards the park.

Olivia smiled to herself, remembering the trivia of courting conversation.

He'll ask her what her favorite flower or color is in a few minutes. Or whether she prefers Bath or London?

As chaperone she could sit back, enjoy the ride, and smile and nod occasionally.

And there it was. "Do you prefer Brighton or Bath, Lady Jocelyn?" asked Lord Ludlow.

Well, I was almost right in my prediction.

The carriage slowed down as they entered the park gates with the four hundred acres of rolling green fields and little groves of trees in the distance.

"Oh look," whispered Jocelyn, "I think that's the Duchess of Dilmouth. She's a great friend of Princess Charlotte."

"Indeed, she is. She looks fierce, but it's all an act," said Lord Ludlow, indicating for the landau to slow down as they approached the duchess' carriage.

He bowed to the duchess as their carriage stopped, a small queue beginning to form behind. "Ludlow," she said, in a grand and haughty tone. "Delighted to see you, dear boy. Didn't know you were in town. You must call this week. Introduce me to your friends?" she commanded.

And so, Jocelyn and Olivia had a brief introduction to this grand and gracious lady, well known in London society.

“Hatfield's here somewhere, though on horseback. Can't imagine him on a carriage drive somehow. We passed him back there somewhere,” she said, and with that she was driven off for another circuit of the Ring, the circular road around the park.

Lord Ludlow instructed his coachman to continue towards the Serpentine Lake. “I don't think there will be a duel near the Serpentine at this time of day,” he said, with a smile.

“I shall make sure that I avoid the lake at dawn then,” said Olivia, laughing and noticing the glint of water in the afternoon sun.

And there he was. A lone man, standing with his horse, looking out over the Serpentine Lake in the middle of central London. The Earl of Hatfield looked round, clearly surprised to see his cousin enjoying a landau ride around the park.

Olivia's heart skipped a beat.

It's the sunshine. I'm not used to the brightness and the warmth. She certainly felt it as heat spread throughout her body.

Lord Hatfield nodded in her direction, and he looked at her, his eyes making that intense contact with hers. Then he raised an eyebrow quizzically, and she looked away as she felt her cheeks flushing pink.

“May I join you?” he asked, and walked towards them to open the door, reaching out a hand to help Olivia step down from the landau. Colin was doing the same for Jocelyn on the other side of the carriage, the pair racing off towards the water.

Olivia felt the fire from the touch of his hands, gently helping her down to the gravel path. The tiny flicker of warmth grew steadily into a burning flame as he offered her his arm.

They walked towards the Serpentine, and he pointed out the moorhens dipping their heads under the water and swimming down in their search for food.

“Did you enjoy the ball?” he inquired politely. “You enjoy dancing?”

“Indeed, I love to dance. I believe dancing and the rhythm of the music is worth the tedium of the social contact.”

He stared at her in surprise. “That’s an unusual thing for a young lady of the ton to say. I like that spirit of honesty. It’s refreshing. Although I’m not sure I appreciate being included in the tedium of social contact!” He said laughing.

“Oh, I didn't mean...” Olivia wondered if her feet would move forward and take the next step on the path. The flame of warmth spread down her body, through her stomach and down her arms to her fingers.

Am I on fire? If this continues, I’ll be jumping into the Serpentine to cool off, the thought led her to let out an inadvertent giggle.

Lord Hatfield looked towards her in intrigued surprise.

Oh no, he’s going to ask why I giggled, and I really can’t tell him.

“Erm. I was thinking of the lake at my home at Silverton and how we used to swim in the lake in summer,” she improvised.

That was a close call. I’m having such a strange reaction to Lord Hatfield. This can’t go on.

They stopped to gaze at the Serpentine, the shallow, man-made lake in Hyde Park. In the afternoon sunshine it sparkled as if it were scattered with diamonds.

“So beautiful,” she said and then gasped as a man on a horse came up close behind them and leaned down and pulled the turquoise feather off her bonnet.

She stood in awestruck surprise as the rider, dressed like a dandy with a bright yellow frock coat, waved the feather in the air with a flourish and trotted away.

She turned to speak to Lord Hatfield, but he had disappeared. He’d already reached his horse, and she gazed open-mouthed as he almost jumped into the saddle in one fluid movement. Then horse and man set off in pursuit of the dandy who’d stolen her feather in such an audacious fashion.

Jocelyn and Lord Ludlow raced to join her. “Olivia, are you all right? What happened?” asked Jocelyn.

“A strange man, wearing the brightest yellow coat I’ve ever seen, rode up to us, and he ripped the feather from my bonnet, waved and rode off.”

“Ah, from your description I suspect you have been a victim of the honorable Guy Pritchard. Every day one of his set is dared to do something outrageous. I suspect Olivia that you have been the victim of a drinking club dare.

After being dazzled by the earl riding off in pursuit, a cold grip of fear had washed over Olivia. He’d taken her feather, and she breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn’t pulled off her bonnet. Ellen had dressed her hair, as always, to cover the scars. If her bonnet had been ripped off, then her hair would have been in disarray and her scars on display to all.

At that moment Lord Hatfield cantered towards them, her feather in his hand.

He bowed, waved the feather in a flourish, and returned it to her. “Your feather My Lady,” he said with humor.

“Thank you kindly, sir.” She laughed, “Such a gallant knight.”

Looking more serious he asked, “Are you all right. I dashed after that blighter, and I should have stayed to make sure you were unharmed.”

“I’m perfectly fine and grateful to my cavalier.”

“He was heading off towards Rotten Row, and his group of friends who were waiting to see his trophy. The honorable Guy Pritchard offers his sincere apologies. I don’t think he will be stealing any more feathers today. If he does then I shall have him banned from my club and all other gentlemen's clubs of distinction in London,” Lord Hatfield declared with a smile.

After they climbed back into the landau, the sun sinking in the sky there was a definite chill in the air. As Lord Hatfield had helped her into the carriage the heat rose again in her body.

That was a strange and unusual afternoon .

Strangest of all is the total, annoying, reaction I have to Lord Hatfield every time we meet. And... somehow, I don’t think I’m going to forget the sight of him jumping onto that horse and riding off to retrieve my feather.

As darkness fell, Cressida stared into the mirror and the candle flame reflected in the glass.

She poured the scented oil, made to her grandmother’s recipe, into the crystal bowl on the polished walnut table. The walnut came from a sacred grove near their home in France. Everything in her home was symbolic, and designed to create an illusion of

power which gave her confidence.

She chanted the words, feeling the sensation of the rhythm through her body, before gazing into the surface of the water.

Nothing. No images. No guidance.

What she did see was the image from Hyde Park. She had been there, some distance behind Lord Ludlow's carriage. Cressida had seen Marcus, her Lord Hatfield join them. She planned to meet him by chance in the park, but instead she saw him lured to the Serpentine by that conniving Lady Olivia Sherwyn.

Overcome by fury she had watched Lord Hatfield racing to his horse to retrieve that stolen turquoise feather. Was there a spark of attraction between those two? She sensed something between them. It would end in tears and distress for her rival in love. I will prevail, I always get the man I want.

In a few days it will be the opera and I know I will be close to Lord Hatfield all evening.

Start your tears flowing now Olivia Sherwyn. You won't have to wait long to feel the pain of sorrow and loss.

Chapter 8

“Colin, I suspect you have fallen in love with Lady Jocelyn Sherwyn. We do not need to leave for the theater for another hour and you are already dressed and ready to go.”

Colin smiled sheepishly at his cousin. “You may be right Marcus. I kept telling myself I ought not to rush into anything. I met Jocelyn that first night and there were many other young ladies whom I hadn't met. Yet everywhere I go I see only Jocelyn.”

“I thought so. You’ve definitely fallen for her. James, is there anything we can do to bring him out of this state?” Marcus asked his valet.

“I suspect not, My Lord. There is no cure for being, erm... lovesick,” James replied.

“If you decide to offer for her then good luck with speaking to her Uncle Harold. I know the old miser from my club, and I can only describe him as a prize nincompoop. I like that word, it makes me smile, and there is little about the Earl of Riversmead to bring a smile to my face.”

“It’s early days, but I enjoy her company, I look forward to her conversation, and when we are together then I don’t want to part,” confessed Colin.

“Then I wish you joy as you get to know Lady Jocelyn,” said Marcus.

“The family has had much tragedy,” said James. “The house at Silverton is still being rebuilt, but I gather it will open again later this year.” He handed Marcus his linen shirt to put on.

James continued, "I have a cousin who worked for the Sherwyn's at Silverton before the fire. He doesn't think he will return to the estate."

"The fire?" asked Marcus. "I hadn't made the connection between Lady Jocelyn, Lady Olivia and the Silverton Hall fire."

"I know, Jocelyn lost both her parents in the fire. She told me about it when I called earlier in the week. It isn't easy for her to talk about it, and it sounds as though she almost lost her life in the fire," said Colin.

"What caused the fire?" asked Marcus.

"They think a housemaid forgot to extinguish a candle and it somehow fell over. No one is sure," Colin answered.

"It was devastating," added James. "The wing with the family rooms was totally destroyed. They think the earl and countess were asleep upstairs and never woke up. Jocelyn lost her parents and her nanny, who lived up in the attic in the nursery. A tragic loss."

"How did Jocelyn escape?" asked Marcus.

"Her aunt Olivia, Lady Sherwyn, had been reading late downstairs in the library and saw the smoke as she began to climb the stairs. She alerted Mr. Jenkins, the butler, whose pantry was on the ground floor, and he evacuated all the servants, including my cousin. Silverton had two back staircases which meant they could rescue everyone except those in the family wing.

"Lady Sherwyn rescued her niece," added Colin. "She went up the backstairs and made her way through a smoke-filled landing to Jocelyn's room. I don't know the rest of it, except life has been especially difficult for Olivia since that day. I get the

impression the uncle is not the most loving of guardians.”

Marcus listened carefully, processing the information about Olivia’s bravery. “I think it is generally known that Harold Sherwyn is a very rich, but miserly, miserable man,” he commented.

“Colin, you may be lucky. You may find he is quick to agree to you taking the hand of Lady Jocelyn to reduce his expenses,” Marcus said with a grin. “Now, how do I look James?”

“Elegant, but restrained My Lord,” came the response.

“Perfect. Thank you again. Come Colin, time to join our guests at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden. As they are our guests it would be churlish to arrive late.”

“Late?” said Colin in a panic. “Are we late? Surely not?”

“Relax my friend. I’m jesting and it wasn’t fair. We will arrive in good time.”

Marcus loved opera but had always attended the Opera House in Florence or Rome with the Contessa. He still missed Lucretzia Fiorella, with her wit and ability to laugh at convention, and determination to enjoy life.

The outside of the theater shone in the dark, brightly illuminated by sconces on the wall. After the conversation with Colin, he couldn’t help but think of the risk of fire, ever present in buildings like this.

Olivia, not thinking of herself, but only of the need to save her niece.

No wonder the young women had such a close bond between them.

The party gathered in a private function room, arranged by Marcus. Light refreshments, including a new wine, developed in one of his neighboring vineyards in Champagne.

Madame Clicquot had used a technique of putting the bottles down for their second fermentation period and the result was very different. The wine, studded with sparkling bubbles, was refreshing on the tongue and palate. He hoped his guests would give him an honest opinion, and he'd also arranged a red burgundy from his new vineyard to be served alongside the experimental wine.

Soon Viscount and Lady Leighton, Lady Sherwyn, and Lady Jocelyn gathered in the function room. He had invited their guardian, but he had declined with a curt reply.

Lady Leighton declared herself an immediate supporter of the white sparkling wine. Everyone gasped in surprise when a footman opened the bottle, and the cork came out with a large pop. Laughter filled the room and Marcus knew he'd make the right decision in serving the champagne.

He needed to decide whether to produce Mrs. Clicquot's new wine in his own vineyards near Troyes.

"It's got bubbles," giggled Jocelyn to Colin. "Look, it is bright and clear, and I can see bubbles."

"I've never tasted anything like it," said Lady Leighton. "But I can imagine those bubbles keeping me going at those all-night balls."

"It is quite potent," warned Marcus, "in the same way as any other white wine."

"Really?" asked Olivia in surprise. "Our cook makes something similar with elderflowers, but that isn't inebriating."

“I do love that elderflower drink,” added Jocelyn. “I’d forgotten all about it.”

“I must get the recipe,” said Lady Leighton. “I do like the tingly, sharp taste of the bubbles.”

The evening had started well. It was almost time to take their seats for the performance.

He found himself standing close to Olivia. She smiled at him, and he wondered what those dark blue eyes reminded him of. He suddenly realized she was speaking to him, and he had been miles away, thinking only about her eyes.

“Do you know this opera, Lord Hatfield?” Olivia had been asking him.

“The opera? It’s my favorite,” Marcus replied. “So many operas are serious. I love the music of Mr. Purcell, as you know,” reminding her of that day in the woodland glade. “But his operas are so tragic and sad.”

“You’re right,” she agreed. “Beautiful but so sad.”

“This opera has comedy. Mozart produced a masterpiece with the Marriage of Figaro or more correctly Le Nozze di Figaro . We have an Austrian Theater group performing here in London, and this is their opening night.”

He did not mention that he had sponsored the performance and brought the company to London for a week.

“Will they sing in Italian?” she asked him.

“Indeed,” he answered.

“Then I shall welcome your translations of the Italian. I know French and Latin, but not Italian,” Olivia informed him.

“I’ll be glad to. It’s a comedy and a love story. Susannah, the heroine, evades seduction by a Count Almaviva. The music is superb,” explained Marcus.

As they walked to their box, one of many lining the sides of the auditorium, he found Lady Cressida Lantham, and her mother, directly in his path.

She curtsied as he passed, and he knew he needed to acknowledge this friend of his mother.

“Lady Lantham, Lady Cressida, what a delightful surprise,” he said. “I did not realize you enjoyed opera.”

Lady Cressida’s voice, high and tinny, seemed to always grate on his ears. He had been captivated by her classical beauty, when he had first met her, but she had an unfortunate tendency to ask question after question and laugh in a high-pitched style.

Here we go, he thought as he saw her open her mouth. Before Lady Cressida could speak, he continued, introducing her to his party. He noticed that when he introduced Olivia, the other woman’s eyes had narrowed, and seemed almost black in the lamplight in the corridor. Something made him think of a lizard basking in the sun, ready to pounce on a butterfly, but he pushed the thought away. He must miss Italy more than he realized.

Olivia, who had been walking with him to their box, stepped backwards, leaving him alone with Lady Cressida. He smiled, and tried to feign an interest as she asked him question after question about Mr. Mozart and his opera. She continued asking if he would be attending a ball later in the week? He nodded absently, glad when Lady Leighton joined him, and suggested they take their seats.

As they made their way up the grand staircase, he decided to suggest to Olivia that they conspire to let Lady Jocelyn and Colin sit together for the performance. She nodded her agreement, and it clicked suddenly that Olivia's eyes resembled cornflowers in a meadow on a summer's day.

"It's so beautiful," gasped Olivia as they entered their box and he saw how she looked around the theater with delight.

"We have a good view of the stage from here too," Marcus added.

"I can't believe how high up the ceiling reaches. It's like those pictures of the Pantheon in Rome," continued Olivia.

Marcus looked at her with curiosity. "You've seen paintings of the Pantheon?"

"Yes, I'd like to visit it one day. I doubt I ever shall, but it must be an amazing spectacle."

"It is indeed," he told her.

"You've been there?"

"Yes, many times. I lived several years in Italy and though my villa is near Florence in Tuscany, I've been to Roma many times."

"How exciting," she almost whispered. "To see the sights of ancient Rome."

"I think the curtain is about to rise," said Marianne. "Colin and Jocelyn can take those seats over there. I have a headache, so Charles and I shall sit at the back of the box, which means that you, Marcus, and Olivia can sit at the other side. Does that suit everyone?"

They took their seats as the overture started and were soon lost in the music, the arias, and the humorous comedy, which had them laughing out loud on several occasions.

As the story unfolded, with moments of tender love between Susanna and Figaro, he found his gaze drawn to Olivia's profile and the obvious joy she found in the music. There were breaks between each interval for scenery to be moved and this gave him time to talk with the young lady at his side.

"This isn't going well," she said with concern, "I don't like Count Almaviva at all."

"Don't worry. I don't want to give the ending away, but it is a romantic comedy."

He noticed Olivia looking at Lady Leighton with concern. "Marianne hasn't felt well all day, and she does suffer with the migraine."

At the second long interval, Lord Leighton told Olivia and Marcus that he was going to take Marianne home. Their friend looked pale, and Olivia told Marcus she knew these headaches could last for several days.

"Look after her, Charles," Olivia said. "Are you sure you don't want me to accompany you?"

"No need for that Olivia. I'll send the carriage back for you and Jocelyn." He turned to Marcus, "Can I ask you to escort these two young ladies to the carriage when the performance ends?"

"Of course," said Marcus. "I trust Lady Leighton will recover soon."

As the final act unfurled, Marcus was conscious of Olivia so close to him.

Olivia dropped her fan and they both bent to pick it up. His fingers brushed against

hers in the darkness and for a moment, in the eerie illumination of the torches, his eyes met hers, and he could not pull away, imagining those cornflowers in that summer meadow.

At the end of the show, they left their box to find the theater director waiting outside to speak with Marcus as patron of the performance.

“Colin. I do apologize, can you take the ladies to their carriage. It seems that I am needed backstage. I’ll join you in a few minutes,” Marcus asked him.

“Of course. Ladies, let us find your carriage,” called Colin.

Marcus did not wish to leave Olivia. as he tried to work out what was happening to him. The connection between them strengthened each time they spent time together.

After meeting with the conductor and main performers he hurried to the foyer.

He stopped suddenly as a figure stepped in front of him, blocking his route forwards.

The figure bobbed a curtsy in greeting. Ah, Lady Cressida.

“Lord Hatfield. I’m so glad to see you again,” she gushed, looking around her in agitation. “I’ve lost Mama. Well, I can’t find her anywhere.” She sniffed, seemingly near to tears.

‘I’m sure she is here somewhere,’ he reassured her, looking around in an attempt to locate Lady Cressida’s mother in the crowd.

“Please, My Lord, would you help me to the entrance of the theater. I think that’s where Mama will wait for me.”

He sighed inwardly, but in true gentlemanly fashion offered her his arm and guided her through the crowds to the foyer. As they made their way she stumbled and fell against him. One moment Lady Cressida was walking next to him, and the next her blond hair lay across his chest as she held on to both his arms in almost embracing him.

Oh for...

“Lady Cressida, are you hurt?” he asked, forcing himself to sound concerned.

“I don’t know. Oh Lord Hatfield, I’m sorry, I don’t know what happened,” she said, moving her head to look up at him, her arms still holding on to him tightly.

Marcus felt intoxicated for a second or two by the overpowering fragrance of jasmine and sweet vanilla. He breathed in the scent as the woman in his arms looked up at him making eye contact. Deep brown eyes, almost a shade of violet and black with huge, dilated pupils, looking into his.

He became aware of her fingers moving against his arm in an almost rhythmic pattern, and he forced himself to gently move her hands and help her to steady herself again. All this time her voice continued chattering in her high-pitched assault on his ears.

She’d asked him a question, but he had no idea what. “Lord Hatfield,” she laughed in that grating tone. “I don’t believe you were listening to me.”

“I do apologize,” he began, and to his relief noticed her mother just ahead of them.

Another question assaulted his ears, something about his preference for a polka or a waltz. He thought wistfully of the melodious voice of Olivia and wondered how soon before they met again.

Chapter 9

“And I believe dear Lady Leighton has been taken ill?” Lady Percival asked with a note of concern. “I said to Jane,” and she gestured towards her daughter standing beside her, “that I thought I saw her leave before the final Act.”

Olivia nodded as she looked around for a route to the door of the theater.

There must be another exit , at this rate we could be here all night.

Instead, she saw the Earl of Hatfield looking down into the eyes of Lady Cressida. She drew in a sharp breath, prompting Jocelyn to look at her with concern.

Lord Hatfield seemed to be struggling to disentangle himself. It would have made her laugh, except Olivia felt a sudden stab of jealousy.

Lady Cressida radiates an impression of flawless perfection, with smooth, almost alabaster skin, unmarked by any ugly scars . Her Ladyship looks so intent and interested in the earl. In fact, she is hanging onto his arm as if she has staked a claim of ownership.

Lady Cressida looked beautiful and somehow triumphant.

Olivia felt foolish for imagining she had felt something from Lord Hatfield during their time in the box, when his hand had brushed against hers, and he had murmured words so indistinct she had struggled to hear.

Obviously, she had imagined the sensation, because the earl appeared to be very close to Lady Cressida, and they looked made for each other.

I feel so weary, I just need to get out of here. Jocelyn is in no hurry, talking with Lord Ludlow. They are all in pairs except me. I shall never be a pair.

As a wave of desolation threatened to overwhelm Olivia, she remembered her resolve to take on the veneer of confidence of the Contessa Allegra Fortuny. She stepped into the role, making her head rise high as she listened to Lady Percival.

It works. I'm so much more confident as Lady Allegra. She has no need to be in a pair. She is happy with her own company.

And then they were out, in the cool, evening air. After taking her leave of Lady Percival she climbed into their waiting carriage. Only then did she realize that she had indeed been holding her head up high and for once had forgotten about her scars.

The next morning, Olivia and Jocelyn were in the drawing room, expecting a visit from the dressmaker for a fitting of their gowns for Lady Leighton's ball. This ball was special, as it would be held for Jocelyn's coming out. As much as Olivia disliked her uncle, the look on his face at the realization that he would be expected to hold a coming out ball at Swanbourne had been almost painful. Lady Leighton had taken pity on him, and suggested she host the ball at her Maybury Crescent townhouse.

Marguerite looked longingly out of the window at the grassy circle in the middle of the square.

"We can't go out yet," Olivia told her. "You have to wait until Madame Beauchamps, and Ellen, have worked their magic with our gowns for a very special ball in a few

days' time."

Mrs. Jennings knocked gently and put her head round the door. A parlor maid followed her carrying a huge bouquet of flowers for Lady Jocelyn.

"These arrived a few minutes ago, the same as before, with no indication of who sent them," explained Mrs. Jennings.

Jocelyn dashed across to look at them. "Olivia, the fragrance of these roses is lovely. Come and look."

Olivia peered at the arrangement of pink damask and centifolia roses, touching the petals gently with her finger. A scent of fragrant honey with a woody depth. She closed her eyes, imagining moss growing near a waterfall.

"They are superb. Kew Gardens could not produce finer roses," agreed Olivia.

"It must be Colin, erm, Lord Ludlow I mean," said Jocelyn.

So, it's Colin now. This romance is progressing at a faster pace than I realized.

Madame Beauchamps arrived in a flurry of silk and velvet, rushing straight to the flowers and declaring them the most beautiful she had ever seen.

"Mon dieu, ce sont les plus belles fleurs que j'ai jamais vues!"

"Aren't they wonderful," exclaimed Jocelyn.

"You have an admirer I think— un grand amour ?" said Madame Beauchamps.

Jocelyn blushed and giggled.

“I see that I am right,” said Madame Beauchamps, “and so we must make you even more beautiful.”

“Is Lady Leighton joining you?” asked Ellen. “I think that’s her carriage arriving.

“Yes, she insisted as Jocelyn’s sponsor for the season,” confirmed Olivia.

Lady Leighton came into the room, followed by her maid, carrying a pile of bonnets.

“I found these old things,” she told them. “I thought Madame that they could be refreshed for Lady Olivia or Lady Jocelyn.”

Jocelyn clapped her hands in delight. “Oh, look at this color. It matches that feather which Lord Hatfield rescued for you from that dandy.”

“That’s news to me,” said Marianne. “You’ll have to tell me the story Jocelyn.”

Jocelyn recounted the events in the park.

“Hmm...” Marianne said to Olivia “Have you made a conquest my friend?”

“Absolutely not,” spluttered Olivia in protest.

“I have noticed he watches you a lot of the time,” commented Marianne looking at Olivia curiously. “Very interesting. He ran off, jumped on his horse and pursued the ruffian. I always miss the exciting things.”

Marianne turned her attention to the dressmaker. “Well Madame, I’d like you to make a stunning ballgown for my friend here. Do you think crushed apricot silk or forest green velvet? I think Olivia can get away with a stronger, more striking color.”

“But Marianne. I’ve already ordered one new dress,” protested Olivia.

“And you need several more. If necessary, I shall speak to Lord Sherwyn. He wants you to find a husband, and that won’t happen if you look like a dowdy frump.”

“I don’t look like...” Olivia started to object.

“Well, no, but your uncle’s knowledge of fashion is non-existent, and he is insisting you have this season. If I should pull a little wool over his eyes, then so be it. I shall brook no opposition on this Olivia, so there is no point arguing with me.”

Olivia recognized the glint in her feisty friend’s eyes and decided it would be easiest to just agree.

An hour later the ball gowns were arranged, and Olivia admitted that she did feel excited at the color and design. There were also several day dresses and the bonnets to remodel. Olivia’s wardrobe of dove gray cambric and bombazine was about to change considerably.

Countess Allegra would approve, she thought to herself.

Jocelyn went to have her hair wanded into ringlets by Ellen, a process which could often take longer than half an hour.

“Marianne,” began Olivia tentatively. “Can we go for a walk around the square? There is a matter on which I very much need your advice.”

“Of course. Is it about the earl?”

Olivia blushed brightly, exclaiming, “No!”

“I’m not convinced Olivia. I’ve never seen you blush like that before. I suspect I am right.”

“Oh no Marianne, you are quite wrong.”

As they left the house a warm, southerly breeze greeted them, and they walked towards the central park. Marguerite trotted happily alongside Olivia.

When they reached the central circle, it was covered with tiny blue forget-me-nots, purple heartsease and violas. Olivia suggested they sit on a bench, and once seated she handed Marianne a letter.

“This looks formal,” said Marianne, taking out the contents. “Ah, I see.” An expression of rare irritation clouding her face.

Olivia watched the clouds drift past in the sky, feeling the warm breeze on her face.

“I wish I had a publishing house,” said Marianne. “I’d publish your book immediately and make a lot of money too.”

She re-read the contents. “So, they like your writing and think their readers will enjoy reading it. Mr. Snodgrass says he finds it an engaging read.”

Olivia nodded.

“But they cannot publish because you are a woman. I’d like to put Queen Elizabeth the first in a room with them and see what she says about that. They would get short shrift from the greatest Queen of this realm.”

“I know, but we are talking about fuddy duddy publishers, who are stuck in their ways. I can’t throw them in the Tower of London for refusing to publish my book.”

“Now that is an excellent idea,” agreed Marianne. “Mr. Snodfellow”

“Erm... it’s Snodgrass.”

“Very well, Mr. Snodgrass would soon come to his senses with a night or two in the Tower.”

Olivia laughed and wondered how her friend had this special skill of being able to make others laugh in the face of adversity.

‘I suspect this is the end of my career as an author.’

“I disagree. This, Olivia, is a minor setback. In fact, the solution is obvious.”

“It is?”

“What name did you give them?”

“Mary Newnham.”

“I like that, by the way. What did the writer we enjoyed reading so much last winter call herself? It had to be a woman who wrote those stories.”

“The story about the mother and sisters who are disinherited and go to live in the southwest in a cottage? One of them had your name?”

“Indeed. Miss Marianne Dashwood. One of the reasons I loved that book so much.”

“I preferred the story about the misunderstanding between the proud hero and the lively young lady who has four sisters. One of the characters, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, rather reminded me of Uncle Harold.”

They both began to laugh uncontrollably and attracted a stern glance from a gentleman strolling past.

“Seriously Olivia, what was she called?”

“By a Lady.”

“I remember now. And look how successful her books have been. Mr. Snodgrass is a nincompoop.”

“I don’t disagree, but what’s the solution?”

“Submit to a different publishing house, but this time as a man. You were using a nom de plume anyway. I don’t see the difference.”

“You can be Giles, erm, Manley, or even G. E. Manley. Do it Olivia. I have a feeling this will do the trick.”

“Your idea gives me some hope. Thank you,” Olivia said, and squeezed her friend's hand.

“Now, you’ve reminded me. There are two books which we haven’t read by the Lady. One is about an orphan who goes to live in a large country house, and the other is about a young woman who is always trying to match make for others.”

“The second story sounds like it might be written about you Marianne,” Olivia said laughing, and they collapsed in a fit of giggles again, and then laughed even more as the disapproving gentleman walked past them again.

“Come along. My carriage is waiting. Let’s go now and retrieve your novel from the offices of Mr. Snodgrass and take it to another publisher. Hembsby, my driver, can

take the package in and not attract any attention. All you need to do is write a covering letter.”

“This is all very sudden. I’m not sure...” Olivia was taken aback by the suggestion.

“Nonsense let’s do this today. Now who shall you be, Mr. Giles E. Manley or Mr. Oliver Sherwood? Let’s decide on your pseudonym. I have to say I prefer nom de plume, it has quite a flourish. In fact, how about Mr. Featherby. I believe plume is a feather in French.”

And with that Marianne pulled Olivia’s arm to hurry her along as they walked back to Swanbourne Place. Marguerite trotting along beside them.

It didn’t take long for Olivia to write the letter to a different publishing house, signing herself under the hidden identity of Mr. N.P. Featherby.

“That’s so funny,” said Marianne laughing conspiratorially. “NP for non de plume!”

By midafternoon the manuscript of Olivia’s book was safely deposited with a different publishing house.

“I’m part of this project,” said her friend, “so if they say it needs to be published ‘on commission’ at your financial risk, then I will be prepared to stand surety. I see no problem though. I loved reading it, as did Jocelyn. We both loved the story and your style of writing.”

“I am so grateful,” whispered Olivia. “I don’t like the idea of your having any risk, but I hope this might give me independent means to leave Uncle Harold’s household.”

“I know. I believe your book will be a success,” said Marianne full of confidence.

She then continued, “However, I also believe you may still find a beau and marry this season. So, tell me more about Lord Marcus Hatfield. I know his mother, as we are neighbors, but the earl is always seen as something of a recluse, and rarely attends social events in the country.”

Should I tell her about our meeting in the woodland glade? Olivia almost did, but something made her hold back.

“I believe he is becoming a friend, that’s all. Nothing more.”

Marianne looked at her with suspicion in her eyes. “I don’t believe you Olivia Sherwyn,” she said simply.

After a lengthy silence Olivia spoke quietly, with heightened emotion in her voice.

“Marianne, look at me. there is no use pretending this doesn’t exist,” she said, and pointed to the side of her face. The jagged, puckered scar ran down her head, close to her right temple and on the hairline of her cheek. As she held up her hair to reveal the scar tissue the small patch where no hair grew was evident.

“I hide this every day. I live in fear of my hair blowing upwards in a strong wind. When that dandy stole my feather the other day, my first thought was what I would have had to deal with if he had stolen my bonnet. Ellen does a wonderful job of hiding it with intricate hairstyles and ribbons, but would a man choose a woman who is disfigured in this way? I think not.”

“I can see how you feel. I was there, remember, in the early days, and when the doctor removed those bandages. Yet, I truly believe you are a remarkable person and character is as important as looks.”

“Marianne, you are my closest friend, but even you must admit that my chances of

finding a husband with these scars and no fortune are limited.”

“I will not and cannot believe that,” said her friend in her spirited way.

“Look what happened with Jonathan. He didn’t even wait to see me with the bandages removed.”

“I know and he behaved in a despicable manner, but from what you told me he was more concerned about your loss of fortune than anything else. I still find it hard to believe that he jilted you on the evening of your brother, sister-in-law and the nanny’s funerals.

“I loved him so much, Marianne.”

Marianne twirled her handkerchief in her hands, rolling it into a tight ball. “Sir Jonathan Ellington is and was a weak man, who never deserved you.

“I have one more thing to say on this subject. Your bravery saved the life of Jocelyn and possibly several of the servants. If you had been unable to raise an alarm, then more would have died that night.

“Your actions resulted in that cruel scar on your head and the others on your body. However, would you have preferred to live without those scars, knowing you might possibly have been able to save others, but chose to stay in safety?”

“You know the answer. It isn’t a difficult question,” admitted Olivia.

“You lived with the pain, and the disfigurement, and you are a strong young woman. The stark reality is that without your bravery, Jocelyn would be dead. You have the scars as a result, and I can say with certainty that none of us would choose to have that scar on our face. Yet there is something very noble and honorable in the way you

put others before yourself that night.”

Lady Leighton paused, drawing breath. “I have said too much, I hope I haven’t upset you, but, as your friend, I cannot believe that the scar you received that night is going to prevent you from finding love and happiness in life.”

Olivia took her friend's hands in hers, tears streaming down both their faces as her generous hearted friend took Olivia in her arms and held her close.

As she lay in bed that night Olivia remembered her friend's words and they helped.

Marianne was right, I’d rather live with this scar than know I could have tried to save my family and chose to walk away unscathed.

Is it really three years? It seems like yesterday. I can accept the loss of my family and I am grateful that I have Jocelyn who is more like a sister than a niece.

I still see Jonathan’s face, as clearly as I did the afternoon when he came to call and tell me he could no longer marry me. How did I recover from that pain and anguish?

He never mentioned my changed appearance, but it must have been a factor in his decision to call off our engagement.

During the dark days of desolation, she had hoped against hope, that one day he would return and tell her he loved her, and he needed to marry her and spend his life with her.

The pain from the healing of her physical scars had masked the emotional pain of loss of her family... and her fiancé Jonathan.

Chapter 10

The sound of horseshoes clattered out from the mews and into the lane leading towards the park. Marcus welcomed the freedom of riding so early in the morning, and longed to be back at Hargrove in the countryside again.

He hoped they would reach Hyde Park early enough to enjoy the peace and tranquility and late enough to miss the aftereffects of any duels, which still occurred occasionally despite it being outlawed, near the Serpentine lake. Marcus could never understand what possessed men to hold their lives in such low regard that they would throw their life away at dawn in a London Park.

Any man who had been on a battlefield in France or Spain knew the value of life and how easily it could be lost in an agonizing death.

Colin rode beside him, and Marcus was glad of his company on this early morning ride. Behind them, at a distance, rode James.

He envied his cousin Colin. He knew what made him happy and had a devotion to family, and those he cared for, which made him a perfect son. Marcus smiled, knowing that any children of Colin's would have a father they could love, and who would be proud of them.

“Are you still planning to offer for Lady Jocelyn?” he asked Colin, bending his head close to his friend's.

“Marcus, I believe so.”

“You haven’t declared yourself yet.”

“No, though I feel a love for Jocelyn which makes me glad to be alive.”

Marcus smiled at his friend's declaration of happiness.

“I’m very aware that this is her first season in London. Her coming out ball hasn’t even taken place yet,” said Colin.

“It’s in the next few days I think.”

“Yes, they are busy with preparations, so I haven’t seen her as much this week. It’s to take place at Maybury Crescent, home of Lady Leighton’s house.”

“What’s holding you back?” Marcus asked. He was curious as to why, if Colin had made his choice, his best plan would be to declare his affections and get out of town as soon as possible.

That’s what I’d have done, he mused.

“Perhaps it’s the loss of her parents, Marcus. She lost them at such a young age and in such tragic circumstances. She has a guardian who must be one of the most grim-faced, miserly men in the ton. I guess I don’t want Jocelyn to imagine that she is in love with me just because she sees it as an escape route from her past and her great uncle Harold.”

“I see your logic. I have to say that my impression is of a young woman who knows her own mind and has a genuine affection for you.”

“You’re right in that estimation,” agreed Colin.

“I hope she doesn’t get swept off her feet by another suitor while you are being caring and considerate and holding back from making an offer of marriage.”

“I hadn’t thought of it quite like that, by Jove,” said Colin. “I think maybe I have taken her affections for granted and held back from moving things on during these last ten days.”

“It’s only a random thought. Lady Jocelyn seems equally smitten with you, so I think it unlikely.” Marcus looked ahead, seeing the Serpentine glistening in the morning light. “I like her, Colin. I do believe it is about personality, rather than age and experience,” he added.

He bent down to pat his chestnut horse and looked up at Colin with an expression of pure mischief. “Let’s pretend for a few minutes that we’re hellions and race down Rotten Row.”

“I’m up for it,” said Colin. “James, his lordship and I plan to race down Rotten Row and back again. Can you count us down so it’s a fair start?”

“Very well, My Lord.” The valet raised his arms in the air and began to count. When he reached down from five. “Five, four, three, two, one.” James lowered his hand to signal the start of the race, as he said, “Go!”

They raced down an empty Rotten Row, horses gathering speed and enjoying the canter after weeks of sedate walking along the city streets.

Marcus felt the wind in his hair and the cooling sensation of the chilly morning air on his body.

I’ve missed this .

Beside him Colin raced neck and neck, both enjoying the exhilaration of a morning ride.

“How about a swim across the Serpentine,” he yelled to Colin, who nodded.

When they arrived at the banks of the lake they could see James, standing down by the water and seemingly unaware of their arrival.

“That’s odd,” declared Marcus. “I thought he’d be up here waiting for us.”

“He seems to be moving a sack of something,” said Colin. “Let’s tie up the horses and see what he’s doing.”

Marcus broke into a run as they approached James, who was taking off his jacket to lay across something lying on the ground.

“James, what have you there man? Is it what I think it is?” Marcus asked.

“Aye, My Lord and there’s no hope of saving him. He’s long gone.”

“Why the hell did they leave him here alone like this, and make no effort to summon help?”

“A duel, then fear of the constables I expect,” suggested Colin.

Marcus knelt down beside James and felt for a pulse in the young man’s neck. Nothing.

He felt his stomach turn. All those times on the battlefield it had been just the same, the waste of life, and the slow pain of death.

“Colin, find someone to fetch a surgeon. We’d better go through the process.”

“He’s so young, James,” said Marcus, a catch in his voice. “He can’t be more than twenty. Last night he was probably playing cards and placing wagers and this morning he’s gone, there’s nothing left.”

“His poor family,” said James. “This dueling is such a needless business, a waste of life.”

“Looks like this was a sword fight, rather than pistols at dawn. That’s unusual these days.”

“If they catch the other man then he faces prison, transportation, or worse. The authorities have tightened up on what used to be considered an ‘affair of gentlemen’,” James predicted grimly.

“Here’s the constable coming now, My Lord. I believe I may recognize the young gentleman.”

“You do?” said Marcus, unable to break his gaze away from the young face lying on the ground. “He does have a familiar look.”

“I believe he’s the Earl of Carstairs, son of the Duke of Cattersby.”

“Hell, James, I believe you’re right. His grandfather died at Waterloo with Wellington. That poor woman. The duchess lost her father, and now her son in such a wasteful, unnecessary way.”

After the body had been taken away the three men walked back together to their horses.

“Life is too precious to waste,” Marcus mused. “Somehow one dead earl in Hyde Park has affected me more than some of the battles I’ve been in. It is such a waste of a precious life.”

He looked at Colin with intensity. “If you love that girl then offer for her. Don’t let anyone else sneak up and overtake you in that race to the altar.”

“You might just be right. I was beginning to think that way myself. And you Marcus? Back to Italy to track down the Contessa?”

“I think not Colin. I suspect my chance of happiness is here in London.”

Colin gazed at him, eyes narrowing in thought. “I can’t see you and Lady Cressida together. I know Aunt Elizabeth hopes you will make a match, but I just can’t see it.”

He stopped to throw a stone into the water and watched it skim across in a rise and fall motion.

“Of course, it’s obvious. I just didn’t see it, I’ve been so focused on Jocelyn to see another romance developing in front of my eyes.”

“I wouldn’t put it quite like that Colin. Merely that I’m interested in seeing more of the lady and working out the feelings I experience when I’m close to her.”

“I knew it,” laughed Colin “You’re smitten as well!”

“I most certainly am not!” denied Marcus. The trouble was, he was unsure if he believed his own words. “Now I believe we have time for that swim.”

“I thought after finding Carstairs...” said Colin.

“The opposite in fact. I suggest we go for a swim and make the most of the day. Well after I call on the Duchess of Cattersby to offer my condolences, and reassure her I believe he died a painless death. It’s the least I can do.”

“I’ll join you in that visit, Marcus. You’re not doing that alone.”

“I’d rather neither of us needed to pay that visit, but I admit that I’ll be glad of the support.”

He stared off into the distance. A pall of sadness had fallen on the day. The life of the Duchess of Cattersby would never be the same again. Such a sad waste of a young man’s life.

Chapter 11

In the days leading up to Jocelyn's coming-out ball, excitement began to build, both at Swanbourne, and Maybury Crescent, the London townhouse of Lord and Lady Leighton. Although Jocelyn's ball would take place at Maybury Crescent, Uncle Harold had proven unusually generous in allowing his household to flow between establishments.

"Uncle has a soft spot for you, Marianne," said Olivia. "Don't you think so Jocelyn?"

"Well, he always agrees to anything you suggest. There's been no difficulties with any of the gowns or bonnets you recommended, yet whenever Olivia asks for gowns for me, he is always very reluctant."

"Well, if you say so," Marianne said, ticking something else off her list. "Mr. Parker is delighted to have the support of your very experienced household staff." She twirled around the room. "We're going to make this ball a society event of the season."

"And Uncle Harold told me he is considering attending my ball, and he hardly ever attends social events. In fact, I don't ever remember him attending a recital, let alone a ball, before.

"Now, Jocelyn, I need to go through some of the final arrangements with you," said Marianne. "I haven't put in a sit-down dinner as there are too many guests to do that comfortably, so there will be refreshments all evening, and a hot buffet as we approach midnight."

Marianne continued, almost without pause. “The orchestra is booked, the household and outdoor staff are organized. It’s my first ball at the townhouse since I married Charles last summer, but his mother has hosted many balls and the staff are very experienced at what is needed,” finished Marianne, having completed summarizing all the arrangements.

Olivia and Jocelyn could only stand there, bemused and in awe, as Marianne then moved on to the next thing on her list.

“So, my dears, we can discuss themes and decorations now, which are the nice parts of planning a ball. Do you both know what you are wearing?” she asked. “That might help with deciding on a color theme for the decorations. Jocelyn, have you decided which dress? I know you couldn’t make up your mind.”

Jocelyn looked a little quiet for a second or two before announcing her choice. “I think Mama would want me to look traditional and wear white for my first ball. So, I think that simple white muslin gown which Madame made for me.

The only thing I’ve asked Madame to do, which is individual, is to add a diaphanous overskirt, embroidered with silver thread, which will be open at the front. I shall wear Mama’s sparkling diamonds in my hair, rather than plain ribbons, so in a way, she will sort of be there with me. I’ll have something of Mama’s to wear that day.”

“I remember Aunt Mary’s diamonds,” said Olivia. “I think you will look beautiful in white with a silver threaded overskirt.”

“Good, that’s settled, and we can have silver themed decorations in the ball and support rooms. It’s your ball Jocelyn, so I want it to be based around what you wear,” pronounced Marianne.

“Could we have starlight as the theme? Papa used to tell me the names of the stars,”

asked Jocelyn.

“Astronomy was certainly one of Frederick’s interests,” agreed Olivia. “It is why you are called Jocelyn Andromeda Mary Sherwyn. He wanted you to have a name linked to the stars.”

“Well then, we shall have a silver stars theme for your coming out ball. That’s settled,” said Marianne. “Now Olivia, what have you chosen to wear?”

“My honest answer, Marianne, is that I don’t know. I think either my new coral colored silk or my green muslin dress with diaphanous sleeves and bodice. I can’t decide.”

“I am going to suggest the green, because you can borrow my emeralds to go in your hair and the pendant will look lovely with that dress,” proposed Marianne.

“But Marianne I can’t possibly borrow your emeralds.”

“Why not? I shan’t be wearing them. I shall be in blue for the ball. I think the sparkle will draw attention from your face and that self-consciousness.”

Olivia lost herself in thoughts about a forest glade and a strange meeting with a mysterious stranger.

All the greens of the forest. It seems appropriate somehow.

The evening of the ball was warm and pleasant, so the terrace doors of Maybury Crescent had been thrown open to allow guests to use the terrace.

Jocelyn and Olivia were staying with Marianne, and Olivia was delighted at seeing her niece's excitement as the decorations went up, and the furniture began to be moved around.

“Marianne, I don't know how to thank you for what you have done to make this evening so special for Jocelyn. Truly, you are a special friend.”

“You know I enjoy planning events and I love being Jocelyn's sponsor, though I'm not old enough to think of myself as one of those ‘tabbies of the ton,’ a chaperone of advanced years!”

Olivia began to laugh at the very idea.

They were interrupted by Mrs. Jennings, who was on loan from Swanbourne the day.

“Can I check that you both have all you need? And very importantly that you have eaten since breakfast time. I can easily bring you some bread, cheese and cold cuts.”

“I'm fine,” said Marianne “How about you Olivia?”

“I think I will eat about 4 o'clock, before I dress for the evening,” said Olivia.

“I'll make sure you have a plate of food brought to you,” Marianne said, “Everything seems to be in order for this evening.”

The first guests began to arrive around 6 o'clock. Mrs. Jennings put them in the music room until they could be greeted by Jocelyn and family.

Olivia and Marianne waited at the bottom of the staircase with Viscount Leighton and

Uncle Harold as Jocelyn descended the staircase.

Olivia's breath caught in her throat, and Marianne reached out to hold her arm, as they exchanged glances. Jocelyn was a vision of loveliness in her white gown with a silvery, floaty, sheer overskirt. Her Mama's diamonds sparkled in her hair, and a large pearl drop diamond, simple enough for a young lady to wear, nestled around her neck.

In the way things in life are often unexpected, Uncle Harold, Lord Sherwyn, rose to the occasion like a truly genteel aristocrat. He'd greeted Olivia with a kiss on her cheek and complimented her on her gown.

"You look very elegant, my dear," he told her. "I believe my brother, your father, would have been very proud of you." He rather spoiled it by adding, "I'm sure you will manage to find a husband if you try hard enough."

However, as it was Jocelyn's special evening, Olivia merely curtseyed and thanked him for his compliments.

It happened again as Jocelyn reached the bottom of the stairs. Uncle Harold stepped forward and offered her his arm.

"My dear great niece," he said with formality. "You look a vision of beauty. Let us go and greet your guests." And they set off to walk to the place where they would greet those attending the ball.

"What have you done to him Marianne?" asked Olivia in a whisper. "Are you an enchantress with a book of spells? He is almost likable this evening."

"Hush Olivia," said her friend, "just be thankful he isn't being a miser this evening."

As the orchestra played for the procession to the dance floor, Olivia felt the happiest she had felt since the night of the fire. It brought a tear to her eye to see Uncle Harold leading the procession out to the dance floor with Jocelyn. She followed on the arm of Lord Leighton, as Marianne had stepped back to allow the Sherwyn's their moment in the spotlight, at this ball for Jocelyn.

There was a slight break in tradition as Uncle Harold refused to dance the quadrille (which he called a new-fangled dance) and insisted the first dance was a traditional reel. Olivia stared open mouthed as he guided Jocelyn through the steps.

After the first dance, the floor filled with their guests and Olivia, Jocelyn, Charles and Harold re-joined their hostess Marianne, who had lemonade and madeira wine ready for them in a quiet corner of the room.

Charles beckoned Lord Ludlow and Lord Hatfield over to join them, introducing them to Uncle Harold.

"I'd consider it a favor, Hatfield, if you joined our party for the evening. Marianne and I have duties as host and hostess, and I don't want Lady Olivia and Lady Jocelyn to be left alone."

"I'd be honored," replied Marcus, nodding his assent.

"Now Lord Sherwyn," said Marianne. "I know you are not at your best on these social occasions, so I have arranged for the Viscount's study to be available for you to rest or take time out from the fray, should you desire it."

"That is most kind, dear Lady," said Uncle Harold, bowing to Marianne.

"Of course, you will have to return sometimes, and I warn you that I intend to claim that dance which you promised me," Marianne informed him.

Olivia felt the air stir beside her and knew immediately who was standing at her side. "I am in awe of Lady Leighton's abilities as hostess. This is one of the finest events I have attended," Lord Hatfield said.

"Marianne seems to be in her element arranging social events," she responded.

"I hope that you will do me the honor of dancing with me," he asked her.

Olivia's heart skipped a beat as she nodded an assent. "Gladly," she murmured, her voice stuck in her throat as she recognized the now familiar wash of warmth and excitement which flooded her body whenever she was close to Lord Hatfield.

He offered her his arm to lead her out to dance a cotillion, and as she placed her hand under his she stopped and stared at her niece.

An elegant Corinthian had engaged Jocelyn in conversation.

"She's clearly made a conquest there," Olivia said aloud, without thinking.

"He looks smitten," responded Lord Hatfield. "I know Lord Ludlow had planned to ask Lady Jocelyn for this dance, but he's been beaten to it by a rival for her affections."

"Who is it? she whispered.

"That is Ethan, Marquis of Hastings," he whispered back, and she could smell the scent of sandalwood on his skin, and she breathed in the heady masculine aroma.

"He seems to have caught my niece's attention. Where is Lord Ludlow?"

"There, he's been dancing with Lady Leighton, look they are returning to join us."

“It seems Lord Ludlow has been pipped at the post. There are plenty more dances, but it seems my niece has a serious suitor in the Marquis of Hastings.”

As Olivia and Lord Hatfield whirled around the dance floor, she was conscious of two things. The first was that this connection, the physical reactivity of her body when she was close to the earl, was not fading over time. If anything, the connection grew stronger every time they met.

The second was that as she danced a cotillion, she closed her eyes and felt the warmth of his breath and that fragrance of sandalwood, making it difficult to focus on where to put her feet.

When she did open her eyes, she noticed Jocelyn with the Marquis of Hastings and the intense looks he gave her niece made it clear he admired her with a passion.

When the dance finished, and the earl led her back to their group, she looked out for Jocelyn. She didn't need to wait long. Jocelyn rushed up to her, face flushed, and grabbed her arm. Lord Hatfield nodded and moved to one side to give them privacy to talk.

That really is so considerate of him, Olivia thought, turning to her excited niece.

“It's him, Olivia, it's him,” said Jocelyn excitedly.

“Slow down Jocelyn. I have no idea what you are talking about,” Olivia replied.

“The flowers,” Jocelyn persisted. “You remember the flowers arriving?”

Olivia nodded.

“Well it wasn't Colin who sent them. Ethan, Marquis of Hastings arranged for the

flowers. He has a hot house in his garden in Sussex and he grows roses there.”

“Truly?” Olivia answered.

“He’s very charming. We’re going to dance again and next time it will be the waltz. I’ve never met anyone as romantic as the marquis.”

“And Lord Ludlow?” Olivia asked Jocelyn.

“Oh I care deeply for Lord Ludlow, but I don’t know his intentions. I just know that the marquis will ask me to marry him. I rather like his style of courtship.”

“He’s certainly swept you off your feet,” agreed Olivia.

She looked around the ballroom at the constellation of silvery stars hanging from the ceiling. The orchestra played another reel and to her stunned surprise, she saw Uncle Harold dancing with Marianne.

“I can see Lord Ludlow heading this way. Do you want to speak with him? I can divert him if you’d rather not.”

“I’ll speak with him and dance if he ever asks me,” Jocelyn muttered, with a note of irritation.

Oh how complicated this quest for a husband can become . I should be out there, mixing and hoping I catch the eye of a man of good fortune and character. I have no desire to do that, but I suspect I will have to make that effort very soon.

She closed her eyes momentarily and wondered if she imagined the scent of sandalwood and cedar of Lebanon. She looked up into those honey brown eyes and saw a look of humor.

“My dear Lady Olivia, I am going to suggest that we defy convention and dance the next two dances together. What do you think?”

“I think it is a very good idea indeed,” she responded, smiling brightly. “I care not for convention and,” she paused briefly before making the decision to continue, “I find I rather enjoy dancing with you, My Lord.”

“Then let us away to the dance floor and waltz,” Marcus said, taking her hand.

As they walked together, he whispered in her ear. “You look stunning in that green dress. I keep looking at you and wondering if you are Lady Olivia Sherwyn, or a dryad or mysterious fae creature, who is wearing all the greens of the forest. Beautiful... Breathtaking...”

She held her breath. Had she imagined those words? Her body was alive with a thrill of excitement.

He thinks I look beautiful. She felt the pressure of his arm holding hers as they moved together.

Then a dose of cold reality. This can't last.

If only he knew my secret; knew the truth.

Olivia was aware that their conversation was different tonight. His style, the way he spoke to her had somehow changed. This new, lightly flirtatious tone brought a lightness into her life that she had thought lost. Could she dare to hope there was a future for her?

And then, stepping into the waltz, he held her close, her feet barely touching the floor, as the rhythm of the music grew stronger with every beat.

I could stay here forever, absorbed by the music and wrapped in a strong pair of arms.

As soon as she saw Marcus leading Olivia onto the dance floor and into a waltz, she felt anger and rage course through her veins.

All around her she could hear the complimentary comments about the couple.

“Don’t they look like the perfect couple.”

“He’s been in the war, then away in Italy. Now he’s found his bride.”

“Such a brave young woman, saving her cousin in that fire.”

“A perfect couple at a perfect ball.”

“That green dress is so lovely. It suits her complexion.”

Everywhere she turned she heard small talk about Lord Marcus Hatfield and Lady Olivia Sherwyn.

Cressida escaped to the terrace, away from the stifling air in the ballroom.

It’s better outside, she thought. I couldn’t breathe in there. Watching those two twirling about made me feel physically sick. What’s happening? Are my powers waning?

This ends tonight. No more Marcus and Olivia. Let me think of the best way to drive them apart.

She called on the stars in the constellations above; Andromeda, Cassiopeia and the planet Venus to rise up and vanquish this trollop and her paramour.

She knew the familiar words, which she had learned at her grandmother's side as a child.

If only he had wanted me, then none of this would have been necessary. His mother wanted me to be the next duchess, then that milksop Lady Olivia Sherwyn appeared on the scene.

If I can't have Marcus, Then I will make sure that no one can.

As she closed her eyes, the pathway before her became clear in her mind's eye.

I swear to the ancient ones, the moon goddess, that by the time this ball is over Marcus will know the ugly truth. The absolute ugliness that is Olivia Sherwyn.

As she silently willed these words, deep within her mind, a group of indigo clouds appeared in the sky, obscuring the light from both moon and stars.

Cressida looked at the sky, feeling satisfaction that her decision had been made, her course was set. She had much to do, she wriggled her body, feeling power spreading through her veins and arteries.

I feel better. So much better

Now I need to get to work. I have much to accomplish this evening. By the time this ball ends I will have scattered drops of slanderous poison, which will ruin Lady Olivia Sherwyn.

Chapter 12

Immediately after the waltz, Marcus had taken his leave of Olivia to search for his cousin. The arrival of the dazzling marquis of Hastings must have taken Colin by surprise. He did not doubt the attraction Colin felt towards Lady Jocelyn.

The difficulty was that Colin was new to the polite society of the ton and he had met Lady Jocelyn on his first night of the season. He was right to be cautious and take his time. Jocelyn was young and not yet presented at court, and if Colin had declared himself too early, there was potential for Jocelyn to agree to a match and then have second thoughts.

Yet the arrival of the marquis, and his clear agenda of wooing and offering marriage to Lady Jocelyn, changed things considerably. Colin may have to act quickly and declare his intentions to Jocelyn or risk losing her to another.

Being so preoccupied with Colin he did not immediately notice the change in atmosphere in the ballroom. He suddenly became aware that there had been a change, and he had a feeling that the air had become emotionally charged, as if some scandal had been revealed.

Something strange was happening. He didn't mean his private feelings for Olivia. No, this was something else. He noticed as he walked up to Lady Percy and her party that they all stopped talking immediately and looked embarrassed.

As he walked through the ballroom he noticed tabbies of the ton, murmuring behind their fans and avoiding eye contact with him.

This was one of the few times when he wished his mother had been there, as she would have found out what they were talking about.

He stood back in a corner to watch what was happening. He noticed that it went further than him. Olivia seemed unaware, but the same thing was happening as she walked past groups in the ballroom.

Lady Cressida was behaving oddly too. She seemed to be making a point of moving between groups in an almost planned way, staying only a short time to talk before moving to another group.

I shall ask her to dance. That way I might find out what they are talking about.

He made his way across the room, noticing the strange reaction as he approached people. The startled expressions, and the sudden cessation of conversation.

He smiled brightly at Lady Cressida as he joined a group where she held the limelight, talking in confidential undertones.

“She does so well, poor dear. Most of us would retreat to the country if we had the same disfigurement. I do wonder if she has made the right decision, in being part of society and risking ridicule, rather than living quietly and discreetly at home,” Marcus heard Lady Cressida saying.

“What do you mean, Lady Cressida?” asked one of the older ladies in the group. “I have seen no sign of anything to blemish Lady Olivia’s beauty.”

“She is doing a great job at concealing the reality of her situation. She hides it with her hairstyle and perhaps some rouge from Paris,” explained Lady Cressida.

This last comment caused shocked glances among the women. They all wore rouge

on their cheeks but would never admit it publicly.

And so the tongues tattled. There had been no secret about the Sherwyn's losing their family in the fire at Silverton Hall, but Lady Olivia's Sherwyn's changed appearance was unknown to Marcus, and it appeared had not been common knowledge, but that was changing tonight.

Marcus wondered why Lady Cressida had suddenly turned into a spiteful, malevolent force.

He finally found Colin and alerted him to the scandalmongering taking place before their very eyes. Colin spent some time wandering around, talking to various young ladies and their mamas, and came back to report that the stories were being embellished, and becoming more extreme as the rumor mill ground the gossip.

"Anyone would think that Lady Olivia is purposefully deceiving the ton, rather than simply living with disfigurement," Colin reported back to Marcus.

"There is something very distasteful about the way this is spreading," Marcus declared.

"Lady Cressida had set her cap at you Marcus, and tonight it became evident that your affections were engaged elsewhere. I believe it's green jealousy turned into vicious revenge."

"What do you mean, Colin?"

"Anyone who saw you and Lady Olivia waltzing together must have seen the spark between you. Lady Cressida has seen her hopes of being a duchess dashed, and she is lashing out at Lady Olivia."

Marcus nodded. He suspected Colin had worked out the motivation for the cruel scandal spreading.

“I just heard Lady Connaught telling Viscountess Springford that Lady Olivia Sherwyn has a permanent limp. Anyone with a modicum of sense would know that is utter bunkum. Lady Olivia just danced a waltz at high speed, and showed no sign of disability,” said Colin.

“Even if she had that disability, there is no need to be cruel, and make her into a talking point. Shame on Lady Cressida.”

“Well, I hope she gets her comeuppance very soon,” added Colin. “Oh no, looks like the Sherwyn’s may have heard the rumors. There’s quite a rumpus developing over there.”

Marcus and Colin approached the group, just moments too late to prevent Olivia choking back a sob and leaving the ball. Jocelyn hurried after her. The glint of satisfaction in Lady Cressida’s eyes was unmistakable.

Olivia had left the scene, but Lady Cressida continued and this time she told the avid listeners that Lady Sherwyn’s fiancé, Sir Jonathan, knew the truth and he’d ended their engagement days after the fire at Silverton Hall. Marcus almost saw spittle flying from her mouth as she continued her venomous words.

“I suspect she may be a little, err, unhinged, shall we say after the accident. Sir Jonathon certainly escaped from their betrothal as soon as he could,” Lady Cressida was telling her latest group of listeners.

“I’ve heard tell that Lady Olivia is penniless now. Some issue with the inheritance arrangements,” Lady Cressida continued. “She must be desperate to be here for a season, trying to find some deluded buck to offer marriage.” She paused and looked

at the faces which were lapping up her every word. “I mean, who would marry a woman with such ugly scars?”

Marcus could bear this no longer, so he took a breath and stepped forward. As he made eye contact with Lady Cressida, he felt a sensation of cold fear at the emptiness in her eyes.

“Your words are at best thoughtless, and at worst designed to hurt and wound another. Everything which you have said about Lady Olivia is in no way admirable. She lives with scars through no fault of her own. She is trying to make a life for herself and live with her own people in her own society. In order to do that she hides the scars with her hairstyle.

What, Madam, is there to laugh about and spread rumors in any of that?” Marcus said, confronting Lady Cressida. “The way you are spreading these rumors is not the behavior which I would ever expect from a lady of the ton. ”

Lady Leighton had approached and stood next to Marcus. She placed a gentle hand on his arm.

“I have no wish to make a scandal here and ask you to leave my home. I do however expect you to work hard at refuting the rumors you have spread about my dear friend's character,” she told Lady Cressida.

“I don’t think any of her friends pay any attention to her scars. Her character and beauty shines out despite any disfigurement,” Lady Leighton continued. “However, none of us would want to live with a scarred face, and I applaud her bravery in continuing in society and not retreating to the countryside. She lives every day in courage, and you are the opposite, and in spreading such rumors you are showing your true character.”

Lady Cressida stepped back as if she had been struck. Indeed, she has, thought Marcus, struck by the truth.

“I must go and find my friend,” Lady Leighton whispered to him.

“No, this is your event and as hostess you need to be here. I saw Lady Jocelyn had followed her. I’ll go and see if I can find them.”

He met Mrs. Jennings in the hallway, “If you’re looking for her ladyship, then she will be in the library. I don’t know if she will want to see you, a gentleman or not. Lady Jocelyn is with her.”

Mrs. Jennings eyed Marcus with curiosity. “I believe you are genuine in your affection for my lady. I hope that affection helps her deal with this latest cruelty.”

He nodded, unsure what to say.

“If you could suggest Miss Jocelyn returns to her coming out ball that would help. People will miss her, and she will only have one coming out ball,” Mrs. Jennings asked him.

Marcus knocked gently on the library door. Jocelyn came out into the hall and spoke to him in hushed tones.

“She’s very distressed, My Lord. Those words were vicious and cruel. Olivia has been so brave and now the trauma has returned with a vengeance.”

“I’ll speak with her and try to reassure her if I may,” Marcus told her.

He smiled at Lady Jocelyn. “I’m told to tell you that you need to return to your guests and that you only have one coming out ball in life. I believe there are dejected

gentlemen waiting to dance with you.”

She smiled gently at him. “Very well. Look after my friend.” And she returned to the ballroom.

He entered the library quietly. There were only a few candles lit and their shadows flickered on the walls. Otherwise, the room was cloaked in darkness.

It took him a few seconds to locate Olivia standing by a doorway leading to the terrace. He could see that she gazed up at the moon, and she was bathed in the glow of moonlight. He drew in a breath; Olivia was the most hauntingly captivating woman he had ever met.

Hearing him she turned to peer into the darkness. “Jocelyn?” she called gently.

“It’s me, Marcus,” he replied gently.

“I’d prefer to be on my own, My Lord,” she responded.

He took a step forward. “No one should be alone to deal with the hurt which you experienced in the ballroom.” He felt the weight of the heavy door pulling it closed behind him.

“What Lady Cressida said was cruel and clearly untrue. You are one of the most beautiful women I have ever met.”

“Oh the words were cruel, but not entirely untrue,” Olivia said in a voice which sounded close to tears.

He moved slowly towards her, uncertain what to say but determined to listen.

As he approached her, he held his hands out, hoping she would take and hold them.

She moved towards him, the moonlight illuminating her face in its soft glow. In a single movement she touched her hair and moved it away from her face, then lifted it up above her head in the moonlight. He heard several heavy pins clatter as they fell on the floor.

The scar ran down the side of her face, a raised crimson line from her forehead down to her ear, with skin puckering around it. He wasn't sure, but he thought there was a puckered section of skin moving back into her hairline where she had no hair.

"There, Lord Hatfield, my secret scar." she laughed a hollow laugh. "I live with disfigurement and have accepted my changed appearance. Why should it be necessary, as Lady Cressida seems to think, for me to display my scars to the world?"

He waited for her to continue, hoping she would tell him more.

"They are personal and private. I thought it might be possible to live a life with some semblance of normality by disguising them. My maid, Ellen, dresses my hair and uses ribbons and bonnets to give me confidence to go out into society, without the feeling that I am attracting attention and being talked about incessantly," Olivia confessed.

"Why has she done this to me tonight? On Jocelyn's special day. What have I done to provoke this reaction?" She added.

"I suspect you have done nothing," he said quietly. "Lady Cressida is perhaps jealous."

At this Olivia burst into loud laughter. "A fine lady, with wealth and connections envious of me? Surely not."

He took a deep breath before continuing. “She saw us together. She watched us waltzing.”

“But that’s ridiculous. It is quite usual for men and women to dance together, even if it is a waltz.”

“I believe she sees something more than friendship developing. There is, I believe, a connection between us, and she could see that.”

Olivia looked at him and he could see that he was right.

“Can you tell me what happened? Or is it too painful to share?” Marcus asked her gently.

“You have seen my scars. You may as well hear my story.”

“I shall listen. However, I have lived through wars and turmoil, and as I have grown older, I know the importance of comfort and care. Please Olivia, and I am going to assume I can call you Olivia and not Lady Olivia while I listen to your very personal and private story. I have heard some of the story from others, but would like to hear from you what actually happened. Please sit and be comfortable.”

She made her way to a wingback chair. “You’re quite right. I do feel a little fatigued, though far from a fit of the vapors,” she added with a hint of a smile.

“I am also going to find a maid, and despite the fact that there is a ball out there and everyone is drinking either wine or iced lemonade I am going to secure us a pot of hot tea.”

This time she laughed and agreed.

He returned with a tray of steaming hot tea and placed it on the table between their chairs. “Now that’s better. Everyone seems to be dancing and having a good time at the ball. I believe the Viscount has quietly suggested that Lady Cressida and her mother leave the premises.”

Olivia leaned forward to pour the tea.

Marcus stopped her. “Absolutely not, Olivia,” and the sound of her name felt strange, yet wonderful on his lips. “I’m sure I can manage to pour a cup of tea.”

When he’d finished pouring, he said, “Now, my dear Olivia, tell me your story.” and he held his breath, waiting for her to continue. He instinctively sensed this was a difficult moment for her, and that Olivia was a woman who coped with whatever life threw at her with quiet dignity.

The fire flickered and he wondered if the sight of a fire caused her anxiety. It didn’t seem so, he saw her gazing into the embers of the fire as if trying to decide where to start.

“Three years ago I lived at Silverton Hall with my brother Frederick, Earl of Riversmead, his wife Mary, and of course my niece Jocelyn.

“I was happy. Frederick and Mary were generous people who put love first in our family. There had been a large house party at Christmas, and we were settling back into a quieter routine and looking forward to spring again.

“I was to be married in the early spring. The date was set and preparations underway.” Olivia paused and took a sip of tea, before continuing.

“My parents have been dead many years, and although the estate is entailed to the male line, I had a settlement in my name and no financial concerns. I mention this

now as it is pertinent to my story.

Then one night it changed. I think a maid forgot to snuff out the candles in the drawing room, and one must have fallen over and set the curtain alight.”

“The worst possible place for a candle to fall. I’ve seen curtains aflame and the fire spreads quickly up the wall,” interjected Marcus.

“Yes, and in this case, in an old building, the smoke crept through the floorboards and made it difficult to breathe on the upper floors.

My brother’s room was directly above, and it is thought,” Olivia paused to compose herself. “It is thought that Frederick and Mary were overcome by smoke and died in their sleep. I hope so. I truly hope that was the case.

“My brother was older than me, but still young and should never have died so soon. Jocelyn lost both her parents that night.

“I had been reading in the library and when I left the room, candle in my hand to go to my bedchamber I saw the smoke coming out under the drawing room door and rising up the staircase to the first floor.

“I can’t remember it very well, but I do know that I raised an alarm. The butler, Mr. Jenkins, managed to evacuate the household staff using the backstairs. All escaped to safety.

“By this time the smoke was thick on the first floor, and I could see the first tongues of orange flame on the landing.

“I didn’t think. I knew my family were up there. I made my way up the backstairs, a scarf around my mouth. Somehow, I managed to wake Jocelyn and open the sash

window and help her down to the roof of the stone porch, directly under her bedroom window. The household servants helped her down to safety.”

“I cannot imagine it,” Marcus whispered.

“It seems I turned around and went back to try to save my brother and his wife, and also our nanny who still slept in her rooms in the attic. The beams in the ceiling were on fire and the air was so hot it was almost impossible to breathe.

“There was no way I could get to them and the route down the stairs was blocked too. I do remember looking up and seeing a beam falling to the floor. No, it didn’t hit me, or I would not be here today. However, it splintered as it fell, and some hot wood flew upwards and caught my face and set my clothes on fire.”

Marcus gasped as she said this, amazed at the bravery Olivia had shown in putting her own life in danger.

Olivia continued her story. “I managed to get back to Jocelyn’s’ room and knew to roll on the floor to extinguish the flames on my clothes. My father had taught me about fire when I was a small child.

“One of the gardeners had climbed onto the stone portico below the window of Jocelyn’s room and climbed up the ivy and wisteria to Jocelyn’s window. He found me and rescued me.

That’s it really. I’m as you see. My brother Frederick, my dearest sister-in-law, and friend, Mary and the nanny all perished,” finished Olivia.

“And the house?” asked Marcus.

“Oh, there was significant damage to that part of the house, but the other two wings

were untouched. Uncle Harold tells us we can visit again when renovations are completed in the spring. I suppose I both dread and long to return to my childhood home.”

He looked at this young woman in stunned admiration at her courage and bravery. There had been no concern for her own safety or wellbeing as she tried in vain to rescue her family.

There was something else though. She had been engaged. He remembered hearing Lady Cressida talking about Olivia’s fiancé and how he had ended their betrothal.

“I believe there’s more, Olivia. Will you tell me what heartbreak followed in the days after the fire?” he asked tenderly.

She looked at him and he noticed how she pushed her hands through her hair. He’d noticed the same thing that first day in the forest glade.

“Ah, my engagement to Sir Jonathon Ellington. My attention was focused on Jocelyn, who, though unharmed by the fire, had the emotional scars of losing her parents. The funeral was on a bitterly cold day in the middle of January. We could see our breath before us in the frost chilled air. Our tears were for their loss of future and our knowledge that we would miss them so desperately.

“I thought it strange that Sir Jonathan did not come to stand with me at the graveside. Our wedding was mere weeks away, and I missed his support. He was there, but at the back of the group of mourners with his parents.

He came to see me that evening. I don’t know and still don’t know how much was due to my injuries. He told me, however,” and she paused to draw breath, “he explained that my Uncle Harold, who was now earl after the death of my brother, being the only male heir to the estate, had told him that I was penniless.”

Olivia looked at Marcus, and he thought she seemed more confident now they had moved away from the deaths in the fire.

“It’s all somewhat complicated, but it seems I did not have the fortune which my father had put into trust for me.

“So, it’s all a little mundane. My fiancé said he loved me, but needed to marry for money, to shore up his family finances. His mother had suggested he tell me this on the day of the funerals, so I could have all the sadness on the same day—get it out of the way—were the words he used.”

Marcus wanted to say something supportive, but was lost for words and could only nod as he listened.

“That is perhaps the only part of my story that I feel could have been different, or handled more sensitively.”

Marcus reached forward and took her hand in his. “Thank you for trusting me enough to share this story,” he told her. “It means more than you could know that you told me.”

He wanted to keep holding her hand, but knew it wasn’t seemly and instead he raised it to his lips, kissed the top of her hand and let it go.

To avoid any embarrassment, he focused on pouring, and handing her, a second cup of tea.

“I can only say again that what you did that night was heroic. Many would not have attempted to try to save others in the face of a raging fire. It’s a wonder that you weren’t killed yourself.

“Why on earth does Lady Cressida think there is anything scandalous, or even worthy of gossip in this tragic story? If anything, you are a heroine in society.”

“Thank you for those kind words, and I agree, it makes no sense,” replied Olivia.

Marcus lost himself in a strong rage towards the man who had left this beautiful, brave, amazing woman, in her hour of need. Was it the scarring or the money? He struggled to comprehend how any man would have broken off an engagement because of a scar. The only ugliness here was in the actions of a despicable fiancé, who had in effect abandoned her.

He held out his hand to help Olivia to her feet. She looked so vulnerable, but he knew now that this woman was as brave as the soldiers he had seen on battlefields on the continent.

He took a step forward and without a word he drew Olivia into his embrace, holding her close, and wishing he could take some of the hurt away. He would do all he could to protect and comfort her in the days ahead. She rested her head against his shoulder, and he inhaled the fragrance of *rosa damascena* in her hair.

When she finally stepped back, he looked at her with gentle eyes.

“I don’t know quite how we got here, or where we are going to, my dear Lady Olivia Sherwyn? I do know that there is a connection between us, and we should explore that and find out more.”

She looked at him, a half-smile on her lips, saying nothing.

“I know that you have haunted my thoughts since that first day in the forest, and now I don’t want to let you out of my sight. It’s a curious feeling,” Marcus confided.

She took his hand in hers and held it for a second, and he felt his nerves firing and sparks moving throughout his body.

“Now, Cendrillon, let me escort you back to the ball and claim another dance. Let’s give those tabbies of the ton something to talk about.”

Olivia laughed and his heart lifted at the sound. “I believe I do have my very own Prince Charming this evening,” she said.

As they left the library, and crossed the hall, going back toward the music and dancing, neither noticed the figure in the shadows.

She stepped even further back into the shelter of a tall pillar, as they passed close by her. White hot, seething rage filled her. She had been humiliated first by Lord Marcus Hatfield, and then Viscountess Marianne Leighton in the ballroom, and at some time in the future both would pay a price for that.

Despite her grandmother’s ancient magic, the romance between these two seemed to have strengthened. Lord Hatfield leaned close to Lady Olivia, and he brushed a lock of hair across her face, then rearranged her hair, pulling it forward, so any trace of the scars in her hairline were hidden.

This should not be happening. He should have been in her arms now, out on the terrace, gazing at the stars and the moon.

Chapter 13

Olivia's head was in a whirl, thoughts and feelings waltzing around her mind in circles. Was this real or had some of it been a dream?

The despair she felt when she heard the gossip circulating around the ballroom. When she had run out of the room she had been determined to hide away and never return to society again. However, within an hour, her horizons had changed again.

Lord Hatfield, Marcus, had listened so intently to her story. Others had said similar things to her in the past, but somehow hearing him say the words had a profound impact.

Had he really held her close and told her that she was beautiful? He clearly remembered that day in the woodland glade, and she'd believed him when he told her that she had haunted his thoughts since that day .

We danced, we waltzed, and I know he wants to see me again soon. He makes me laugh too. That's so important in life. I'm not sure Jonathan ever made me laugh about anything. How strange to think of that now?

The sheets felt cool against her skin as she climbed into bed in her room at Maybury Crescent.

I'm exhausted, she thought, snuggling down under the comforter, glad of the hot brick which warmed the bed.

I feel lighter too, as though a heavy weight has been lifted from my shoulders. I've been carrying a weight around since the fire, never relaxing and always feeling anxious. Uncle Harold hasn't helped. He seemed so kind tonight, but that was unusual.

Olivia pulled the eiderdown around her, feeling warm and cozy, and ready for sleep. It was almost six o'clock, and in a few hours, she would be rising again. She would spend the day with her friend and Jocelyn, and not see Uncle Harold again till the next day.

She fell asleep. No dreams. Only a refreshing, reviving, deep sleep.

Dear Journal,

Today I woke with a sense of excitement and realized that it was optimism for the future. Something changed yesterday. I thought there was no hope of love, marriage, or ever having a child of my own. I thought I would be happy to be a maiden aunt to Jocelyn and Marianne's children, but I do want that chance of a family of my own.

I thought it would happen with Jonathan, but he left me. I know now that yes, he did abandon me when I needed him most.

Last night Marcus, (can I call him Marcus now?) showed me such care and consideration when he listened. He looked at me with those gentle, brown eyes and I knew he cared.

I'm not speaking of love. I hardly dare hope for love. No, what I mean is that when he looked at me, scars and all, he did not flinch away. I believed him when he said that he didn't notice the disfigurement.

Where will this go? I don't know and can't predict. I am going to take each day at a time, each moment at a time. But the difference is that I have hope in the future.

Until next time,

Olivia

Olivia put down her quill pen and felt the puckered scar tissue. Today she felt strong, there were no tears, and she knew things had changed.

Ellen joined her to help her dress. "Ellen – I didn't expect to see you this morning," Olivia said in surprise. "Have you had any sleep?"

"A little My Lady, but I'm fine. After the ball, Mrs. Jennings and Mr. Parker arranged breakfast for all the household staff. The house is almost back to normal. No one would know that the last guests left only four hours ago."

"Well, I'll be glad of your help in dressing my hair."

"I talked to Lady Leighton's French maid yesterday, and she showed me all the new styles from Paris. I have an idea for how I can twist your hair a little differently at the sides."

"I'm in your hands Ellen," Olivia said, laughing.

Ellen laid out a pearly gray silk dress on the bed.

"I don't recognize that dress, Ellen," Olivia commented.

"It's one of the new ones, My Lady. Lady Leighton insisted you had several for your season in London."

“Oh dear, I don’t think Uncle Harold will be pleased to find that out.”

“Oh, apparently Lady Leighton told him it was essential if you were going to look as if you were top drawer of the ton , and it was worth the investment.”

Olivia laughed. “She convinced him that a new trousseau would get me off his hands.” And she collapsed in giggles.

“It’s good to hear you laughing, My Lady,” said Ellen smiling before pausing and looking at Olivia curiously. “And maybe there was some truth in Lady Leighton’s words. I believe you may have made a conquest last night.”

“Oh no, Ellen, that was Lady Jocelyn. She has a second suitor, a Lord Hastings who is, it seems, the mystery admirer who keeps sending flowers.”

“And Lord Marcus Hatfield, heir to the Duke of Hargrove?” queried Ellen.

“Oh, well...” said Olivia.

“Ah yes, My Lady. I heard it from two of the junior footmen that his lordship was unable to take his eyes off you, and that you danced three dances together, including a waltz.”

“Well, that’s true but...”

“And a young lady only dances two dances unless there is a serious attachment,” Ellen continued.

“Well yes but...”

“He would be a fool not to fall in love with you, and I’ll leave it there,” Ellen

concluded.

“And there’s been no other gossip?” asked Olivia.

“Oh, quite a bit of gossip, there always is after these events. If you mean that business with Lady Cressida, then she hasn’t come out of it very well. Everyone knows she was jealous of you, and how his lordship was clearly entranced by you. She set about spreading rumors about you and was trounced soundly by Lady Leighton and the Earl of Hatfield.”

“Everyone knows then, about the disfigurement?” Olivia asked nervously.

Ellen stopped twining a strand on her hair and looked intently at her mistress. “I think they always knew, your Ladyship. Your hairstyle changed quite dramatically after the fire. There would have been talk at that point. The thing is, and Lady Cressida will never understand this, your personality always shines through, and no one notices the scars.”

Olivia felt tears welling up and she felt a warmth and affection for Ellen, who had grown up with her at Silverton Hall and become her maid when she came of age. The difference in social standing was irrelevant; Ellen was her friend as well as her maid.

“Now, I’d better get on and finish your hair. I believe Lady Leighton has plans for this morning and breakfast is already laid out in the morning room.”

After more twirling of strands of hair, Ellen finally stood back and said she was satisfied with the result.

She held up the glass for Olivia to look.

The new style suits me, it hides the scar, but somehow isn’t as far forward as my

usual style.

“I like it, Ellen, very much. Thank you.”

“It was Minette, Lady Leighton’s French maid, who showed me the technique, but I agree, it works very well.”

As Olivia entered the morning room for breakfast, she was surprised to find that she was the last to arrive. Marianne, Jocelyn and Charles were already at the table. Uncle Harold had already returned home to Swanbourne Place the previous evening.

And for once Olivia felt hungry, and accepted the porridge, followed by braised chops as well as her usual bread and butter.

“I thought we could go together to Swanbourne Place to sort through your wardrobes this morning. We need to choose which events of the season we will attend, and yesterday Uncle Harold reminded me of another event on the horizon,” Olivia told Jocelyn.

“He did?” said Jocelyn in surprise. “Uncle knows our social calendar?”

Marianne laughed, her beautiful soprano voice drawing a look of admiration from her beloved Charles. “I think that would be too much to expect. No, it is an event which we had all quite forgotten.”

Olivia looked at her friend in confusion. Did she mean Jocelyn’s presentation to Queen Charlotte?

“Lord Sherwyn, or Harold, as he has asked me to call him...”

There was a pause while Olivia and Jocelyn spluttered in disbelief.

“You have certainly charmed that old curmudgeon,” said Charles. “You’ve made another conquest my dear Marianne.”

“I must say you are all rather unfair about dear Harold,” Marianne berated them.

More spluttering laughter came from his nieces.

“As I was trying to say, Harold has reminded me of another event which should be on our social calendar.”

“I think you are going to have to end this anticipation my dear,” Charles urged her.

“Very well, my love. Harold tells me that although the work has been delayed a little by the bad weather this winter, that the renovations of Silverton Hall will soon be completed.”

“Of course,” said Olivia.

“I have persuaded him there should be a party or ball to mark the re-opening,” said Marianne. She looked at Jocelyn. “I know it will be a bittersweet occasion for you my dear.”

“No, no Marianne, far from it. I grew up at Silverton Hall and all my wonderful memories of Mama and Papa are of our life there. I’ll always miss them, and nanny too, but they would want me to be happy in our home again.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. Silverton is a beautiful place,” Marianne said sounding relieved.

“It’s too early to plan, but I shall look forward to organizing an event for—” She paused dramatically and looked at Jocelyn, then Olivia. “Dear Harold, Lord

Sherwyn.”

Olivia felt a pang of longing as she thought of walking in the woods at Silverton once more. Everything is changing, she thought, and an image of honey brown eyes floated into her mind.

They arrived back at Swanbourne to find that ‘dear’ Uncle Harold had already left for his club. Marianne took over the drawing room, and soon there were piles of dresses, pelisses, redingotes, and bonnets covering every surface. Ellen and Millie, one of the parlor maids, carried clothes up and downstairs.

Olivia was glad her uncle was out, as she thought this chaos might have tested his amicable relationship with Lady Leighton to its limits.

It wasn’t long before Mrs. Jennings joined them, bringing tea and honey cakes and her eye for the latest fashions.

“I’m so sorry Lady Jocelyn, because I only arrived back at Swanbourne this morning I quite forgot. We had another delivery of flowers for you early this morning.”

Millie entered the drawing room carrying the largest bouquet of flowers they had ever seen. It was so huge that it was difficult to see Millie behind the bouquet. Jocelyn rushed across to help her carry the flowers.

“Oh, those are so beautiful,” declared Olivia.

“Now Millie, let’s go and put these in a vase in the dining room,” said Mrs. Jennings. “There’s nowhere in here to display them.”

“Are they from Lord Ludlow?” asked Marianne.

“No. I discovered the identity of the sender last night. It’s Lord Hastings,” replied Jocelyn.

“I saw he was quite taken with you. He danced with you twice I think?” said Marianne.

“Yes, and told me that he would call soon and that he’d like me to meet his mama.”

“He sounds a serious suitor,” mused Marianne. “How do you feel about that my dear, if you don’t mind me asking? I know Lord Ludlow has been visiting and I wondered if he might propose.”

Jocelyn blushed bright pink. “I know. I really thought it was Colin, err, Lord Ludlow who had sent me those flowers.”

Jocelyn walked to the window, back to the piles of clothes, and then back to the window again, clearly agitated.

Olivia spoke gently. “Come and sit with us over here and tell us what’s troubling you.”

“I just feel so confused. I love being in town and the recitals and soirées. My ball was one of the most magical evenings ever,” Jocelyn said, looking with grateful thanks at Marianne. “Then I met Colin, that first night of the season. I really, really like him. I think, well I’m pretty sure I’ve fallen in love with him.”

“I suspect he loves you and is also surprised at the intensity of his feelings,” Olivia told her.

“Ah yes, even though he came to town in search of love and a bride, it is still quite a shock for these men when they realize that they have fallen in love.” Marianne smiled

at Jocelyn. “Even the Viscount, my own dear Charles, has said as much about those first few weeks when we first met.”

Olivia handed Jocelyn a cup of tea. “Here, drink this. You’re all a-tremble with nerves.”

Jocelyn began to sip her tea and whispered, “Thank you.”

“Now, I’m wondering whether Lord Ludlow has proposed yet,” Marianne questioned Jocelyn.

Jocelyn shook her head. “No, no he hasn’t.”

“And you like Lord Hastings?” asked Marianne.

“I don’t know. He seems perfectly charming, and I enjoyed dancing with him last night.”

“There is nothing wrong with being courted by more than one gentleman,” said Olivia. “And you haven’t promised anything to Lord Ludlow.”

Marianne handed Jocelyn a plate with a honey cake on it. “You know, I’m quite glad I didn’t meet Charles during my first season. It can be such fun to go to soirées, recitals and balls. I enjoyed choosing gowns and bonnets, ribbons and lace. It’s about being young, and enjoying no longer being in the school room. I’m going to say now that, with what happened three years ago, I think that’s especially important for you Jocelyn.”

“Yes,” added Olivia. “Marianne is right. You need to enjoy the experience and see what happens. It’s an adventure.”

“Thank you,” murmured Jocelyn. “I don’t know what I would do without the two of you.”

“We’re here for you, you know that, and if we should decide to go on a tour of Europe then you have, erm, dear Uncle Harold to give you counsel,” Marianne said laughing.

“As we’re talking of good counsel, I know you talked with Lord Hatfield last night Olivia,” said Jocelyn.

Marianne raised her eyebrows in surprise. “You did?”

“Oh yes, I was in the library with Olivia, and he came in and told me that I could return to the ball, and he would stay with Olivia.”

“Did he? This is an interesting development,” said Marianne in a quizzical tone.

“All right. I shall tell you both what happened.”

Well not quite all that happened.

“I was hoping you would say that. Pray continue...” said her friend.

“He listened while I talked. He’s quite a good listener.”

“Is he indeed?” commented Marianne.

“I felt so much better after talking with him.”

“I can imagine,” said Marianne.

“Marianne, stop this now. It was just a friendly conversation, nothing more.”

“Olivia, I do not believe that for a minute. However, I shall pretend to, if it makes you feel happy.”

“I told him about the fire and, I don’t know why, but I showed him the scars.”

“Ah!” said Marianne.

“But you never show anyone those scars,” added Jocelyn.

“I know, and I can’t explain it. All I can say is that it made a difference. I felt better after spending time with Lord Hatfield. I no longer care about Lady Cressida and her lies.”

“Lady Cressida is a vicious and dangerous young woman. She scented something between you and Lord Hatfield. I believe she set her cap at him a long time ago, and expected to secure a proposal this season,” Marianne proclaimed.

“Will he call soon?” asked Jocelyn. “Perhaps he’ll call with Lord Ludlow.”

“I’m in no hurry to see him again. It was traumatic to hear those evil words circulating around the ballroom, and then feel better after talking with Lord Hatfield. I would prefer not to see anyone for a day or two while I work out how I feel about it all.”

“You need to see him again soon, Olivia. He might fall in love with you,” said Jocelyn.

“Josie, stop that now,” protested Olivia.

“If he hasn’t already,” Marianne added quietly. “I suspect he is another who is coming to terms with, err, unexpected feelings.”

She walked over to the clothes and picked up a redingote and held it up in front of her. “I love these new coats, but I admit my preference is still for a warm woolen hooded cloak.”

The rest of the day passed pleasantly, and the piles of clothes gradually reduced long before Uncle Harold returned.

As the candles were lit for the evening, Olivia felt exhaustion creeping in. The ball had lasted all night, she had slept for no longer than three hours, and was now struggling to keep her eyes open. A knock on the door made her jump and Millie entered, offering her a silver tray with two letters.

“Mrs. Jennings says these arrived this morning but got missed with all the upheaval after the ball, my lady.”

“Thank you, Millie. I hope you’re not too tired.”

“No, my lady, it’s all been very exciting.”

Olivia smiled as the maid left, turning the letters over in her hands.

She knew that one must be from the new publisher, and it must be a rejection, as it was only a few days since the manuscript had been left at the publishing house.

This is ridiculous. If it is a rejection, then you can try again and write other books in the future.

She took off the seal, the bright red stamped sealing wax glinting in the candlelight. She looked down expectantly.

No, far from it. They want to publish my book.

She stood up and took a deep breath, feeling a little dizzy with the excitement.

They want to publish my book. ..the words were still there on the page.

A contract for Mr. N.P. Feather would follow within days.

How much easier it seems to be for a man to get a book published than a woman, she thought with irritation.

If necessary, she could ask Viscount Leighton to sign the contract in proxy for her at the publisher's office.

Her heart was light as she held the letter close. Her book in print. It was not only a dream come true, but a possible route to independence from Uncle Harold and his continual pressure to find a husband.

I wonder if Jocelyn has retired to bed yet. I must go and tell Marianne and Charles my news first thing tomorrow.

She put the other letter in her bureau, intending to look at it in the morning. It looked like a routine letter from Crabtree and Watts, her family solicitors.

She pulled on her robe with Belgian lace edging and went to find Jocelyn. She simply had to share her news with someone.

Jocelyn and Mrs. Jennings were sitting together in the housekeeper's parlor sewing.

Although a housekeeper, Mrs. Jennings was a distant cousin and had spent long summers at Silverton while growing up. She had taken on the mantle of housekeeper after a short marriage and the loss of her husband at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.

“Olivia,” called Jocelyn. “I thought you’d retired for the night.”

“I had, but then Millie brought the letters and... my book is to be published.”

“That’s wonderful!” cried Jocelyn.

“Exactly the sort of good news we needed to hear,” said Mrs. Jennings. “I’m delighted for you.”

Both looked at the letter and wondered how long it would take for the book to be published.

As she took a cup of tea from Mrs. Jennings, Olivia noticed her exchange a glance with Jocelyn.

“Is there something you need to tell me about?” Olivia asked, “I can see there is something.”

“I was going to tell you in the morning,” said Jocelyn. “We only found out an hour ago.”

“Found out what?” Olivia asked with impatience.

“The weekly rider from Silverton Hall arrived today with the usual letters and reports for your uncle. Cook gave the lad a good meal and he gave her all the local news. It seems Sir Jonathan Ellington has returned to England, after being on the continent for three years,” Mrs. Jennings informed her.

Olivia, stunned, simply said, “Thank you for letting me know, I doubt we shall ever see him again.”

After she returned to her bedchamber, she thought it through objectively.

She gripped the wooden windowsill and peered out into the darkness. No stars or moonlight tonight.

I realize now how unrealistic that was, but nevertheless, I came to believe that after he walked away from our engagement that I would never need to see him again.

Then it came to her that she could use the same approach and step into the role of Contessa Allegra Fortuny if she eventually met Jonathan again.

Cressida knew deep depths of rage after seeing Olivia with Marcus at the ball. She realized with anger that Lord Hatfield would never propose to her, and she planned to have her revenge. She would enjoy destroying this fledgling relationship and wasted no time in putting her plan into action.

She had called that afternoon on Lady Elaine Frobisher, a notorious society gossip. Over a cup of fine China tea, she confided her concern at seeing Lady Olivia Sherwyn with Lord Marcus Hatfield during the ball at Maybury Crescent. They had come out of the library with their clothing disheveled and what’s more Lady Olivia had proceeded to lead the earl upstairs towards the bedrooms.

It was a rather ridiculous story, and the chances of anyone taking such a risk during a ball were slight. But Cressida was a convincing storyteller and the story spread, at first slowly, then gathering traction in the ton.

Within two days the news of the gossip being circulated reached Swanbourne Place. Marianne arrived holding a scandal sheet which specifically mentioned an incident at a recent ball at the home of Viscount Leighton where a Lady Olivia Sherwyn had been seen in a state of undress in the arms of a certain Marcus, Earl of Hatfield, who had an estate in Hertfordshire.

Marianne's face was ashen. "I'm so sorry to show you this, but you have to be aware."

Olivia read the words and they began to swirl before her eyes. "I can't believe this," she whispered. "I'm nobody. I'm not rich. I hardly engage in any social activities. Who could write this?"

As they talked it through Marianne told Olivia she was quite sure of the identity of the scandalmonger. The same person who had been engaged in spreading unkind rumors at Jocelyn's coming out ball.

"Surely no one will believe this. It's such an unimaginative story. I don't care about myself, but I don't want Jocelyn tainted by connection with me," said Olivia.

"Oh, Olivia! That sounds noble, but if this continues then you are ruined," Marianne warned her.

"I've lived through so much that I am not scared of idle chit chat." Knowing that she was being far from truthful, she continued. "I'm going to put it out of my mind for now."

"I think that's best," said her friend, taken in by Olivia's positive manner. "Hopefully the story will fade away as quickly as it began."

“Let’s hope so, and I’m not going to let this spoil the joy of my book being published,” stated Olivia

She continued, “At least I have the book contract. I don’t have to marry to please Uncle Harold, or anyone else. I’m sure there must be a cottage somewhere, where I can live out my days quietly. I was going to seek work as a governess or companion, and I hardly dare dream, but it looks as though I might be able to support myself independently.”

She knew she could write. It was her essence, her identity, and it was going to be her escape.

“Well, I don’t think that is something you need to worry about at the moment,” Marianne reassured her.

“I’m not going to leave society quietly though. I am a gentlewoman of quality, and I will fight this scandalmonger. I have no idea why she hates me so much that she would try to destroy my reputation,” said Olivia, with more confidence than she felt.

Yet even as she said this, she saw the face of Marcus, bending close to hers, and knew that the green claws of jealousy were responsible for this situation.

We’re at sea in a storm and poor Jocelyn and even Uncle, Marianne and Charles have been dragged into this maelstrom. We will find safe harbor. I know we will.

Marianne touched her hand gently “You looked as if you were lost in a world of your own. Are you sure you’re alright?”

At that moment there was a knock on the door and Mrs. Jennings entered. “Lord Ludlow and Lord Hatfield have called. Shall I show them through?”

For a moment Olivia longed with all her heart to see Marcus' face. It was so difficult to know he was in the house and wanted to see her... and yet she couldn't bring herself to invite him to stay.

She looked at Marianne. "Jocelyn is out at the milliners. I cannot find the energy to greet Lord Ludlow or Lord Hatfield this afternoon."

"Very well," decided Marianne. "I will be leaving soon anyway, and you would be without a chaperone." She looked at Mrs. Jennings. "Please tell their Lordships that we are not at home to visitors this afternoon, but we hope to welcome them again very soon."

"Very good, my Lady," said Mrs. Jennings.

As Mrs. Jennings left to relay the message, Marianne looked at Olivia strangely and she knew her friend did not believe her. "And Lord Hatfield? I see your breathing change and you look flushed in color. My dear, is there anything you wish to share about Lord Hatfield?"

Olivia looked away, stammering. "I erm, I ..."

"No, no I do not believe for a minute anything on that scandal sheet. However, I have noticed that Lord Hatfield looks at you often and seems to listen to your every word. I have wondered if he admires you. Now I see this distress, and I wonder if you might have an affection for him?" Marianne paused, holding her friend's hand, and looking directly at her.

"My dear. Are you in love with Lord Marcus Hatfield?"

Olivia couldn't believe she had let her emotions show. She shook her head in denial, while finding it hard to say anything.

Then she saw Marianne's kind and concerned face, and remembered this was her friend who had been with her through the darkest days of her life.

"I believe I do," she whispered. "But I'm damaged physically. I'm no longer beautiful. And now, it seems my reputation may be ruined." She pressed her friend's hand in quiet thankfulness for having such a caring confidante. "Don't say anything. Please forget we ever had this conversation."

"As you wish my dear friend," said Marianne, rising to go to her carriage. "Look after yourself. We are in uncharted waters, and I fear there are some unknown enemies around us." She kissed Olivia gently on her cheek. "You never lost your beauty. You are one of the most beautiful people I know, both in appearance and spirit."

And with that Marianne was gone, leaving Olivia exhausted, but content to know that she had friends and family who cared for her.

Chapter 14

“Colin, you’ve been in high dudgeons all day. You haven’t been able to settle to anything.” said Marcus with frustration.

“Do you think Jocelyn doesn’t wish to see me anymore?” said Colin in despondent misery. He put down the book he was supposedly reading with a loud thud and stood up to go over to the window.

“Of course not. I suspect Lady Jocelyn was merely out this afternoon,” Marcus assured him, unable to admit that he felt a frisson of fear that the real reason might be that Lady Olivia had chosen not to see him.

He pushed away that fear, locking it tightly away. His emotions around Lady Olivia Sherwyn were proving to be a tumult of tempestuous uncertainty.

I feel adrift in a stormy sea. I’ve no idea where this is going to end up.

I dislike being in London, he thought in passing. Everything seems so complicated.

“It’s raining so heavily we can’t call and suggest a carriage ride,” Colin continued despondently, totally unaware he had lost his listener to his own thoughts.

“And yesterday they didn’t want to see us.” Colin picked up the book and put it down again. “I just know that Hastings, with his smooth manner, and his so-called romantic gifts of flowers, is succeeding in winning Jocelyn’s favor.”

“Colin, you might stop to reflect for a moment that ladies like flowers, they search for romance. That’s the whole point of a society season. Everyone is searching for love. You found Lady Jocelyn on our very first evening in town. Maybe you should look around at other eligible debutantes?”

This time the book fell to the floor, a loud clatter echoing around the room. Marcus decided he needed to properly listen to his friend, who seemed more distressed than he’d realized.

“Look around at other young ladies? Marcus, why on earth would I want to do that? I’ve found the most beautiful, kind and considerate young lady in London.”

Marcus looked at his friend intently. He could see Colin was serious. He must be head over heels in love with Lady Jocelyn.

And I believe he has a fair chance of remaining so for the rest of his life, mused Marcus.

“Colin, if you feel that way then my advice is to woo your Jocelyn and woo her well. Treat Lord Hastings as a rival and play him at his own game. You can send flowers or bonbons. Arrange a picnic at Kew Gardens or take her a boat ride. If it helps, then invite her to stay with us at Belvedere Abbey. I know my mother would be delighted to have guests.”

Colin stared at his friend and mentor as if everything had just clicked into place.

“You’re right, by Jove,” he shouted. “I need to treat this like a tournament. Lord Hastings is my rival in love. I want the fair Lady Jocelyn to choose to wear my favor. I need to be her knight in shining armor, the one she admires, and not Lord Hastings.”

There was a knock on the study door and James Cartwright appeared, holding a piece

of paper.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, my Lord. One of the footmen brought this, erm, gossip sheet to me. I thought you needed to see it as you are mentioned by name, and you know the lady concerned.”

Marcus took the sheet and read it. He sat back in his chair, reading the cruel words. Anger rose like a red mist as the consequences of the allegations sank in.

He didn’t care about his own reputation, yet he had been portrayed as a callous womanizer and it rankled. This gossip was designed to ruin Olivia. When a young lady was observed in such a compromising position, then she lost her reputation immediately.

His hope was that, because this was a rumor based on no facts, people would discount the information. Yet he knew society could be cruel.

What could he do to help? He felt so powerless.

For a moment he found himself back in the library on the night of the ball, listening to her story which had given him insight into her suffering.

Colin came up to him, sensing something was amiss. “Marcus, whatever is wrong?” he asked. “Is it your family?” he persisted, getting no response as Marcus just stared at the sheet of paper.

“Marcus?” he repeated.

“Sorry Colin. This is despicable. It is slander of the worst possible kind.”

Colin reached forward and took the paper from his friend’s hand. He scanned the

words and shuddered. Colin knew this meant a ruined reputation and Lady Olivia Sherwyn would be ostracized from the ton.

“This is evil. Pure evil,” muttered Colin. “How can they write such dreadful lies?” He turned to Marcus. “Your reputation can stand this, but Lady Olivia will be ruined. Those tabbies of the ton will have their talons in her by the end of the week.”

“I believe I know who is responsible for this,” said Marcus through gritted teeth. “Lady Cressida Lantham.

“I want to confront her, but I have no proof—and until I do, I can’t do anything. If I talk about this matter, then it will fuel the fire and could make it worse.

“I want those who believe and spread the gossip to understand the pain they have caused. Yet at this moment there is nothing I can do. I can’t even go and visit Olivia, as being seen with her might make it worse. Yet every bone in my body is telling me to go and find her and tell her that this will pass, and that everything will be alright in the end.”

He stood up and walked around the room. He couldn’t settle and knew he was preventing himself from doing all the things that he instinctively wanted to do. This included confronting a certain blond-haired lady, whom he was very certain had lit the touchpaper and set fire to this rumor.

“I can’t think, Colin. My thoughts are stuck in a spiral of anger about this scandal sheet. Lady Olivia could be ruined by this.”

“I know,” agreed Colin, “and Lady Jocelyn isn’t going to escape unscathed either. How can anyone spread such lies and not be brought to account?”

“What’s more, there’s nothing I can do. Someone has paid for that to be circulated,

Colin. Someone is determined to cause Lady Olivia misery.”

“I’m going round there to see Lady Jocelyn,” said Colin. “You clearly can’t go as that might inflame the rumors which are flying around town. I can visit discreetly and it’s important that their friends don’t desert them at this time.”

“I want to come with you, but you’re right, I can’t,” agreed Marcus. He looked at Colin with anguish in his eyes. “Colin, if you get the chance, please tell Lady Olivia that she is in my thoughts.”

“I have to ask. Do you care for Lady Olivia? Were you thinking of offering for her hand in marriage.”

Marcus stayed curiously still, as if he was in another world for a few seconds. He spoke slowly and hesitantly. “In all honesty I don’t know. I did spend time with Olivia, that night of the ball. Nothing happened. Those scandal sheets are a disgrace. However, I suspect Lady Cressida saw us leave the library. She showed her true colors by starting that rumor at the ball. Viscountess Leighton almost demanded that she leave the house, but we decided to be compassionate. I regret that.”

“You think she saw you with Olivia, she must have followed you,” suggested Colin.

“Colin, I’m certain of it. I can’t prove it, but I plan to make life very difficult for Lady Cressida.”

“If what you say is true then it should be Lady Cressida who is driven from society.”

“I agree, but it’s how to fend off these allegations, without bringing further attention to Lady Olivia. If I do anything too obvious it would only reinforce the rumors. Damnation, this is so difficult!”

“I will give you any support in bringing down Lady Cressida. Just tell me when you’ve thought of a plan.”

“Although I am sure she is the instigator of the rumors without proof, there is little I can do, but I’ll think of something.” He patted Colin on the back. “Now, have you thought further about Lady Jocelyn?”

“I have. I’m going to visit today and make my intentions clear. I’m not going to let Lord Hastings beguile Jocelyn with roses and lilies. I thought I should take my time, as it is Jocelyn’s first season. It all started off so well and I saw no reason to propose so soon. I was wrong.”

“Go off and see your Lady Jocelyn,” said Marcus. “Our mothers will be ecstatic to have a wedding.”

At that moment the door opened. It was Marcus’ butler, Mr. Farthing. Both Marcus and Colin could see that something was very wrong from the look on Farthing’s face.

“Is it father?” asked Marcus, before Farthing could speak.

“No, your Lordship, but it is bad news and urgent.” He turned to Colin. “It’s your mother Lord Ludlow. An express just arrived from Granville Hall to say she’s had an accident. The message says it isn’t life threatening, but she still unconscious.”

Colin looked stunned so Marcus stepped in immediately to organize things. “Colin, do you want to ride or take the carriage?”

“Ride, I’ll get there sooner.”

“Farthing, tell James Cartwright to pack saddle bags ready for Lord Ludlow to leave for Granville with all speed.”

“Very good, my Lord,” replied Farthing and he set off to find James.

“Sit down man. Here’s a brandy,” Marcus told Colin.

“Mother is never ill. And if she is then she never asks for me. I do need to get there as soon as possible.”

“You’ll be there by nightfall. James Cartwright can ride with you and make sure the horse changes at the posting inns go smoothly.”

“And to think I was about to go to Jocelyn and ask her to marry me. Lord Hastings will seize my absence as an opportunity, I’m sure.”

“We can’t let that happen. Use my desk. Write a letter explaining you’ve been called away urgently. I’ll make sure she gets it,” urged Marcus.

Colin took the quill pen that Marcus offered him and began to scribble a note to Lady Jocelyn. He stumbled over the words, which did not flow. He paused and looked up at Marcus. “How do I sign it? We’re not engaged, but I need her to know that I care.”

“Oh, ‘ever yours,’ would seem appropriate,” said Marcus. “Maybe add that you are eager to see her again on your return.”

He scribbled the final few words and signed the letter with a flourish. He handed it to Marcus. “There, I just hope she realizes this is an emergency. I have to return to Granville, but I need her to know I will return and long to be with her again.”

After Colin had left Marcus sat by the fire, still and thoughtful, as the shadows crept into the room. He listened to the rain drumming on the windows and felt the dismal, dreary evening fitted his mood perfectly.

He wanted to go to Swanbourne Place to see Olivia. He wanted to be there so much it was almost physically painful.

Soon, he thought. Very soon, I shall see her again. If the attention on Swanbourne Place doesn't die down, then I'm going to be forced to don a disguise and visit Lady Olivia.

He realized he'd been banking on Colin visiting and returning with news. There was no way of knowing how she was coping with the rumors circulating. His fear was that, because he was named in the scandal sheet, Olivia might never want to see him again. He could only wait and hope to hear news the next day.

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Chapter 15

Olivia awoke the next morning to faint rays of sunshine. Exhausted, she struggled to lift her head from the pillow and go through her routine before starting the day.

What is the point? Every time things look a little brighter, I feel like I am broken down again.

All night the relentless rain had battered the windowpanes. Olivia had slept fitfully, tossing and turning. She felt hot, then she felt cold. She felt sleepy, then she felt wide awake.

She had tried to maintain a brave face at dinner the previous evening. The rumor had been ignited and she could almost feel it spreading minute by minute.

When she saw her uncle's dismal, scowling face she knew that he had seen the content of the slander in the scandal sheet.

If she were rich, she would fight back. She could confirm her suspicions about the perpetrator of these lies. As it was, all she could do was stay at Swanbourne and hope that the storm would pass.

Am I ruined? I truly don't know.

Olivia's main worry was how this might affect Josie and her marriage prospects. She felt her own chances of finding a husband were always slim at best.

The face of the Earl of Hatfield floated into her thoughts. She forced the image of his face out of her mind. Love was not for her.

Uncle Harold had summoned her to speak with him after the meal, and she had literally run away, pleading a headache as she raced up the stairs.

She knew that this morning there would be no escaping that conversation with her uncle.

If only she had independent means. She realized she was going to have to agree to whatever her uncle suggested or possibly be made to leave immediately. She knew she couldn't leave Jocelyn.

Suddenly, and to her own surprise, she touched her cheek as silent tears fell. For years she had been coping with her disfigurement and loss of fortune. Today, she struggled to find the courage to be brave.

She could cry for a little while, nobody would see her and know .

However, a tap on her door made her look up as the white cap of Mrs. Jennings entered her room.

"I'm sorry to disturb you this early in the day, my Lady, but his Lordship is requesting you join him in his study," said Mrs. Jennings quietly.

As she delivered the command, Mrs. Jennings looked towards Olivia and saw her distress.

"Oh, my dear girl." Eyes widening, she moved quickly across the room to Olivia. "This isn't something we see very often. I don't think I've seen you cry more than a few times since you were a little girl—apart from when we had that tragedy at

Silverton.”

Olivia looked at this kind woman, who had been a source of friendship and support for many years. “I don’t feel brave today. It all seems too much. What can I do?”

“There, there my dear,” said Mrs. Jennings and opened her arms to hold Olivia and give her the strength of loving support. “You’re the bravest of brave young women.”

She handed Olivia a lace edged laundered handkerchief.

“Now, wipe your eyes and then I’ll have Ellen come and help you dress.”

“Does everyone know?” asked Olivia, struggling to speak the words and knowing she was scared of the answer.

“Best to be truthful, is what I always say,” said Mrs. Jennings. “Whoever is orchestrating this, and there has to be an evil mind behind this, is very methodical. The rumor is flying around town and that scandal sheet is everywhere. So, whoever is doing this is not without funds.”

She looked at Olivia with wisdom in her eyes. “But, and it is a big but, your uncle is not without influence.”

Olivia let out a sob as Mrs. Jennings continued. “Hush my dear, yes I am fully aware that the two of you do not always see eye to eye, but he is a good man at heart.” She guided Olivia to a chair near the fire and sat opposite her. “Then there is your strength of character, and quiet dignity, which will mean that many people won’t believe what they read.”

“You think that’s possible?”

“Of course, it is inevitable, and works in our favor,” asserted Mrs. Jennings.

“There is one more thing, which carries a heavy weight in this matter. The ball at Lady Leighton’s was a busy event, full of people, and you were supposedly cavorting around the hallway with the Earl of Hatfield... a ridiculous and impossible situation.”

Olivia nodded. There had been a quiet, sensitive, interlude between herself and Marcus, but even if they had been observed it would not have created this level of scandal.

“Now, dry those tears. I’ll get a tray brought up for you, so you have some breakfast, and then you can go and see your uncle.”

Olivia nodded, sniffing her thanks, through the handkerchief.

“Lady Jocelyn has been asking if you are up, and she will come and sit with you. And the viscountess has already sent a message from Maybury that she will be visiting with you and Lady Jocelyn all day.”

Olivia took a deep breath and thought of all the people who cared about her, including their housekeeper, who had known her since she was a child.

I can do this, she assured herself. I’ve lived through much worse than this.

She reflected with bitter humor that the one positive in this situation was that there was no risk of meeting Sir Jonathan Ellington at a ball or recital. She knew that she would have been unhappy married to him, but he had held her heart, and they had planned a future together. His coldness, and withdrawal from their engagement, in the aftermath of the fire was cruel. However she looked at it, he had inflicted damage and hurt at a time when she needed love and support from her fiancé.

She felt that the fact that she was dreading meeting him was ridiculous. However, the fire, the deaths and his abandonment were tied together so closely that she was not sure how she'd react when she did finally see him.

When she was ready, she made her way downstairs to the welcome news that her uncle had tired of waiting for her. He had business elsewhere, but would return around midday, and expected Olivia to be waiting for him. Marianne and Jocelyn were settled in the drawing room, quietly embroidering and both came to hold her close when she entered the room.

It soon became clear that the usual flurry of calling cards was non-existent today.

Jocelyn showed them the letter she had received from Lord Ludlow the previous evening.

“He’s been called away to his estate. His mother’s been taken ill. He doesn’t know when he’ll return.”

“He writes that he looks forward to seeing you again,” commented Marianne. “Can I ask, has there been any sign or indication of a proposal?”

“Not as such, but he has made it clear he admires me greatly, and he’s talked about his future as though I’m there with him in it.”

“That’s important. It shows he sees you in his life. Don’t underestimate the importance of that,” Marianne reassured Jocelyn.

“I know, and I won’t,” replied Jocelyn.

“Have any more flowers arrived?” asked Olivia, realizing she had been too preoccupied to keep up with what was happening in Jocelyn’s romantic life.

“Yes, a tray of white lilies, which have a beautiful fragrance and a book of poetry,” Jocelyn informed them with a smile

“Hmm. Lord Hastings certainly knows how to romance you,” said Olivia. “Either that or he has a farmer on his estate growing cut flowers!”

“He does seem to genuinely care,” said Marianne. “I know I’m prying, and you don’t have to answer but my question is this. Do you feel a spark of affection, any connection with Lord Hastings?”

Jocelyn looked thoughtful before replying. “No, not really. I like him and he is good to talk with, but it isn’t the same as when I talk to Colin, erm, Lord Ludlow, I mean. If Lord Hastings didn’t call, then I wouldn’t notice. There have been days when I’ve just kept looking out of the window, hoping that Colin will arrive.”

Marianne’s eyes met Olivia’s over Jocelyn’s head. It seemed they shared the opinion that it was very likely that Jocelyn had fallen in love with Lord Ludlow.

Olivia knew they were both hoping that the reason given in the letter from Lord Ludlow was genuine, and not due to him hearing the vicious rumor. It seemed unlikely that Lord Ludlow would withdraw his courtship of Jocelyn for that reason, but they were in uncharted and stormy waters.

Marianne went to the door and called to a parlor maid in the hallway, asking for tea and honey cakes in the drawing room. She returned and took a seat before gesturing for Olivia and Jocelyn to sit near her.

“Now, my friends, this is going to be difficult, but I think we have no alternative but to discuss the rumors and scandal sheet,” said Marianne.

“Uncle Harold knows now,” Olivia informed them, her voice faint. “Mrs. Jennings

tells me he wishes to see me as soon as he returns. That's probably any minute now."

Olivia felt her hands tightening at her sides, curling almost into fists. She consciously stretched and loosened her fingers, trying to relax her body. The conversation with her uncle was not going to be easy. Even a conversation about the weather could prove problematic with Uncle Harold.

She felt intense bitterness building inside her towards the person who could devise such an evil scheme to ruin the lives of others.

There was still a tendril of fear and dread curling in her mind that this slander spreading across the ton might also ruin Jocelyn's chance of making a match.

I'm convinced the culprit is Lady Cressida. But why would she do this? Surely it can't be due to her observing Lord Hatfield and I together? This feels like a vendetta and we're powerless to stop it.

"Olivia, you look to be in a world of your own," came Marianne's voice, penetrating her thoughts.

"Sorry, I was many miles away," admitted Olivia.

"Are we agreed that the person most likely to be behind this rumor is probably Lady Cressida?" Marianne asked them.

Olivia and Jocelyn nodded.

"Look how she behaved at my ball," said Jocelyn. "You and Lord Hatfield unmasked her spreading that unpleasant rumor about Olivia. It's unlikely that two people are slandering Olivia, so unless evidence arises to the contrary, I think we should assume she is the culprit."

“I agree,” said Marianne. “I wish I had ordered her from the premises, and made it clear to all who were attending the ball that she had behaved despicably.”

“You weren’t to know she would escalate,” reassured Olivia. “It was kind of you to let her stay.”

Olivia paused, looking thoughtful. “I suspect she had set her cap at Lord Hatfield. We spent time together that evening, and then when she spread the rumor, he comforted me. I believe she must have been hiding in the shadows when we left the library and returned to the dancing.”

“There’s definitely a spark between the two of you,” mused Marianne. “I believe you have made a conquest there.”

“That might have been the case, but that must have changed now. He’s named as the man with whom I am having a liaison. I doubt he will ever want to be seen with me again.” Her breath caught in her throat and her voice faded away.

Jocelyn came over to her aunt and knelt in front of her taking Olivia’s hand in hers. “Livvie, I know there’s something more to this. I’m worried about you.”

“I’m just tired and a little out of sorts,” said Olivia, almost inaudibly.

“I agree with Jocelyn. There’s something which you’re not telling us. It seems to be the day for sharing secrets and we are your friends. If you’d rather not, then you know we are both here for you,” prompted Marianne gently.

Olivia stood up and walked over to the window. The door opened and a maid brought tea in and set it out on the table near the fire. She took slow and steady breaths, and her thoughts went spinning back to a day by a pool, the taste of wild strawberries, and the closeness of a man who made her heartbeat faster.

She returned to her friends and took a cup of the hot China tea swirling the cup around in her fingers. “You’re both quite right. I can’t easily hide anything from either of you.” She smiled and looked at Marianne, then Jocelyn in turn.

“I am going to share a story with you now. It’s an intensely private tale of a strange meeting in the Chiltern Hills.”

Marianne gasped. “When you were staying at Leighton Manor?”

Olivia nodded. She hesitated for a moment and then began to tell the two people who were closest to her, the tale of the first time she had met Marcus, Lord Hatfield.

They both listened intently and stared at her in disbelief.

“You didn’t know who he was?” queried Marianne.

“I thought he was a Mr. Brandon, a local farmer.”

Marianne laughed out loud. “Oh Olivia, I’m so sorry. It’s not that I think any of this is funny. I’m just imagining Lord Hatfield, who has always seemed a little haughty and aloof to me, as a local farmer.”

“I know, but I truly thought he was Mr. Brandon.”

“I think it’s romantic. You met in a forest glade. It’s like a novel by Mrs. Radcliffe. I just met Lord Ludlow in a house at a ball. How dull is that in comparison?” said Jocelyn.

“None of this matters anyway. We just spent time together and became...” Olivia hesitated before continuing, “I guess we became friends for a day.”

“You really didn’t know each other’s identity?” Said Marianne, bemused.

“No. I only realized when we met again in London. I never expected to meet Mr. Brandon again.”

“It is quite romantic,” persisted Jocelyn.

“Not really, but it was a pleasant day and I remember that I didn’t want it to end,” Olivia said, pausing again before revealing more of the story.

“He did call me Cinderella, well, Cendrillon in French. You know the character who disappears at midnight in Monsieur Perrault’s mysterious tale. I did disappear rather quickly that day.”

Marianne busied herself pouring them a second cup of steaming hot green China tea. She made a point of insisting they all take a honey cake.

“This really has been a day for sharing confidences—and that’s what these are. I’m delighted my dear that you had an adventure on a woodland walk. How strange that you should meet again several months later as Cendrillon and her handsome prince.”

“This story isn’t finished yet. There must be a happy ending,” insisted Jocelyn.

Olivia almost choked on her honey cake. “Jocelyn, that’s not the case at all.”

“I’ve listened very carefully to your story and that’s what I think. You deserve a fairy tale happy ending. We seem to be a long way from it at this point in time.” Jocelyn took a bite of the rich, buttery honey cake, savoring the taste.

“Now, what’s this I hear about Sir Jonathan Ellington reappearing in society. I hope he stays in the country and doesn’t make an appearance in town. Odious man,” said

Marianne.

They heard voices outside in the hallway, and Olivia's heart sank as she realized that Uncle Harold had returned home.

However, the meeting was not what she had been expecting and dreading. He entered the drawing room and Marianne sprang immediately into action to sweeten him with her usual charm.

"Your Lordship," she said. "We were expecting you. We've just had tea and I shall ask for another pot."

"Thank you, that would be very welcome," he responded.

"You look a little tired," Marianne continued. "I believe we all feel exhausted and rung out by this dreadful business with the scandal sheets, and the horrible and untrue rumors flying around about Olivia. Everyone knows there is no truth to it, but how do we stop the tongues tattling?"

He looked at Olivia, and she sensed a concerned kindness in his eyes. "I was going to speak with you privately Olivia, and I believe I am right in assuming there is no truth in this rumor whatsoever." He pulled one of the scandal sheets out of his pocket and waved it around.

"No, Uncle," replied Olivia. "I did spend time with Lord Hatfield at the ball, but I was never in a state of undress with him and have never been with any man."

Marianne drew in a breath and Uncle Harold put his head in his hands. "Olivia, I know we often have, what I consider, differences of opinion and our conversation can become heated, but I really do not need to be reassured on that point. In fact, I'd much prefer we didn't discuss states of undress. Please remember that Jocelyn is

present, and that sort of talk is quite inappropriate for her young ear.”

Olivia heard a strange noise as Jocelyn tried to stifle a giggle. Olivia was worried that, if Jocelyn continued, she would also start giggling herself.

“I believe we know who instigated these evil scandal sheets, but it is going to be nigh on impossible to prove her guilt,” said Marianne to Uncle Harold.

“The Lady Cressida Lantham I assume?” said Uncle Harold, surprising them all with his level of insight.

“And there is nothing we can do,” said Jocelyn.

“I have a suggestion,” said Marianne. “I propose we continue to be at home to callers here, and at my home. We do not go out to any parties or recitals for the next few days. That will give us a chance to evaluate this situation and work out the severity of the damage to reputations.”

“That, my dear Viscountess Leighton, is a sensible plan. I’m not hopeful. I’ll be honest that it is my experience that once these rumors begin there is little that can be done. The ton has a long memory.”

He turned to Olivia. “However, I am not without influence, and I have a plan we can put in place if these rumors continue. Never fear, no niece of mine will be ruined by a vindictive woman who is jealous of you. This is the effect of that green eyed monster called envy.”

“It seems as though we have agreed on the way forward,” said Marianne. “There is honey cake, your Lordship.” Marianne offered Uncle Harold the plate.

“Why thank you, I am rather partial to honey cake,” he said, taking one and smiling

graciously at Marianne.

Olivia couldn't believe she had avoided a difficult individual conversation with Uncle Harold. She had been dreading the expected meeting in his study, knowing that they invariably deteriorated into cold anger.

She then listened open-mouthed as Marianne told her uncle all about a mutual acquaintance, who planned to travel to Greece, then Constantinople. She even heard her uncle chuckle at one point which was a very rare occurrence, even on those days when he was in a good mood.

Olivia tried to understand just how Marianne managed her uncle. She just had a way with him, and it was as if he relaxed when Marianne talked to him. I can't work it out. She isn't flirting with him, but she flatters him and appears to take him seriously, while challenging his most outrageous ideas.

"I believe the Marquis of Cleebury is an addle-pated buffoon," stated Marianne.

"Always has been lily-livered; his father showed weakness and lost a treasure trove of money at the tables," agreed Uncle Harold.

"Really? I had no idea," said Marianne. "That may be why Cleebury Towers is on the market."

"Undoubtedly the case," replied Uncle Harold.

I think she is boosting his spirits and almost teasing uncle in an affectionate way. She certainly makes him feel important, and he is a different person when he talks with Marianne.

And so it continued, and the pattern was set for several days of quiet living at home.

Marianne would spend time with them most days and they would look at fashion plates or embroider or stitch tapestries. The pace of the days suited Olivia. Often, far too often, the countenance of Marcus, Lord Hatfield, entered her thoughts. There was no word from him, and he must know about the slander, so she could only assume he had pulled away from her.

After she told her story to Jocelyn and Marianne, she had felt lighter and less anxious.

I suppose it's possible that if the rumors had not happened that I would have gotten to know Marcus more and he would have known me better.

Uncle Harold took the carriage to Silverton to oversee some of the final work on the property. Olivia had listened as Marianne had included this suggestion in her conversation with him. He immediately caught onto it as a plan and by the next day he was gone.

Olivia felt confusion about her feelings for her uncle now. He certainly had fixed ideas about how things should be done, always in his preferred way, and he was as miserly as one could be. Yet he had shown kindness and commitment to Jocelyn at her coming out ball. Now with the rumors around Olivia he seemed calm and determined to protect her and her good name.

Olivia thought that it was probably due to the influence of Marianne, or possibly, now that Silverton had almost been restored, he could relax a little as that had been a significant investment. Who knew? It was certainly a welcome change.

As they spent their time at Swanbourne there were a few callers, but nothing like the stream of guests they'd previously entertained. No one spoke about it.

On the third day the realization struck that Lady Cressida's plan to ostracize Olivia from society had gained momentum. The usual invites to supper, or soirees had

dwindled to nothing. No gilded invitations for grand balls arrived at Swanbourne Place.

“She’s managed it, hasn’t she?” said Jocelyn with bitterness.

“It looks as though she has,” agreed Olivia. “My reputation is ruined, though that doesn’t mean yours is as well.”

“Oh, we have to face facts Olivia. The whole family has fallen out of fashionable society. I rather miss the balls and recitals. I still can’t believe that one small-minded person can create such chaos.”

“It might only be temporary. It’s always possible things will change when the dust settles in a few days,” said Marianne, trying to maintain an optimistic outlook.

“It is her, isn’t it?” queried Jocelyn.

“Oh, I think that’s beyond doubt,” said Marianne. “We caught her in the act at the ball.”

“There’s a carriage arriving,” said Jocelyn “It’s Lord Hastings.” They watched as the Marquis of Hastings descended from the chaise, with a footman carrying a display of pink roses so big that his head disappeared. Jocelyn giggled.

Perhaps Lord Hastings was a little more distant towards them than previously. Olivia made herself scarce after greeting him, leaving Marianne to chaperone the visit.

Maybe he does care about Jocelyn. He is still visiting, despite our being banished by most of the ton. He is still visiting and actively courting Jocelyn.

The mood plummeted that afternoon when Marianne shared a letter she had received

that morning from Lady Golightly, her sponsor at Almack's Assembly Rooms. The suggestion was that it would be best if the family delayed attending any events for a while. She was sure she would be able to welcome them again in a few days, and thanked the viscountess for her understanding in this matter.

"They really believe that on the occasion of my niece Jocelyn's coming out ball, in the house of my best friend, that I spent time in a liaison with Lord Hatfield. Indeed, that I would embarrass myself by appearing half dressed and disheveled in the hallway?" asked Olivia.

"No, I don't think they believe it. They just have such intricate unwritten rules that they can't openly disregard the scandal."

"We're ruined then," complained Jocelyn. "I'm ruined by association with this fallen woman, who cares for me so little that she cavorted half clothed with her paramour during my coming out ball."

Marguerite began barking loudly, sensing Jocelyn's distressed tone.

"That's it little Marguerite. You can defend us against this wicked lady," said Jocelyn to the little dog.

More barking and Marguerite licked Jocelyn's hand as she lifted her up on her lap.

"I'll have to tell Uncle Harold about Lady Golightly," said Olivia. "This situation is getting worse. I'd hoped by now it would have settled a little. This is so unfair."

As she entered his study, Uncle Harold looked up towards her with a tired smile. He'd come back from Silverton and arrived just as Marianne was leaving. He read the

letter from Lady Golightly and immediately called his manservant to get the smaller phaeton ready and drive off into the city. He didn't tell them where he was going.

"Sit down Olivia. I am so sorry, but it seems we must talk about this matter," he said to her in a tone of despair.

She nodded.

"I'd hoped rumors would die down, and you and Jocelyn could continue with your season unaffected."

She nodded again.

"This is a difficult conversation, as I know we often have a difference of opinion." He smiled and she noticed the weariness in his face and felt a pang of guilt that he was dealing with the fallout from this unpleasant situation.

"I consider that we are alike. We are both forceful personalities and it is inevitable."

Olivia couldn't believe her ears. She realized that he thought they were alike. Possibly he thought that Olivia took after him. Olivia thought that this was balderdash, but accepted that, if it made him happy to see it that way, she could accept it. She certainly felt warmer to her uncle than she had a few months earlier.

"I'm alarmed by how this has escalated. I had already asked Rawlings, my solicitor, to look into this matter. He sent a man to the printers and discovered another order, for more sheets with more extreme content, was about to be distributed. He advised the printer of the legal situation, and thankfully we prevented the flyers being sent out. But there are other printers and if the perpetrator is determined then there is little we can do."

“It seems very personal to me. Yet it has directly affected Jocelyn, and to some extent the Viscountess Leighton.”

“Exactly. The viscountess is convinced she knows the identity of the instigator of the scandal, but there is no proof.”

He took a sip of dark, amber colored, brandy and Olivia had the impression that he was reluctant to continue.

“If we let this continue then Jocelyn will be ruined alongside you. I don’t believe that’s what you would want.”

Olivia shook her head. “No, sir,” she murmured.

“There is only one course of action open to us which will counteract the scandal.”

Olivia looked confused. One course of action? What did he mean?

“You must marry Lord Hatfield.”

Olivia gasped, staring at her uncle in bewilderment.

“It’s the only way to stop this escalating further. Hatfield is the son of a peer of the realm and powerful. He’s eligible too. I plan to speak to him about this tomorrow.”

“I can’t Uncle Harold. I won’t marry Lord Hatfield. I doubt he’d agree to have me anyway.”

She hadn’t seen Marcus since that evening at the ball. There had been no note, no enquiry about her wellbeing.

“Olivia, I’ll leave you to think about this, but I can see no other solution which will bolster your reputation, and prevent Jocelyn being ruined too.”

“I can’t marry Lord Hatfield. It is out of the question.” She looked at him with determination in her eyes.

“I’m not going to get angry and tell you that you have no choice and have to comply. I’ve realized that doesn’t help anything. And I’m sorry it’s come to this, but I can’t see another way.”

“I could become a governess, or a companion,” she suggested.

“My dear girl, think this through logically. Which fine lady is going to want a notorious young woman, working in her household in proximity to her husband? And yes, that is unfair and untrue, but it is the reality we face.”

He was right. She had a tarnished reputation. No employer would want her now.

Olivia felt tears beginning to well up. She took a dry swallow and a long, slow breath through her nose, trying to gain control of her physical responses. She needed her brain to be clear to think.

“Surely there must be another way?” she said.

“If you can think of one then bring it to me. Apart from mounting legal challenges where possible, I can see no other option.” Uncle Harold looked at her with sadness in his eyes.

He stood and went to the side table to pour himself another drink. He returned and handed her a small glass of cognac. “Drink this for the shock. I fear I’ve caused you distress, but it really is the only way.” She took the crystal glass and sipped, unused

to the heat of powerful spirits.

Her thoughts were with her niece. She would do anything to prevent Jocelyn being ruined alongside her. She heard her uncle's words echoing in her head.

“Lord Hatfield must marry you, and soon. I’ll speak with him tomorrow.” He bent his head towards his papers, then looked up again.

“Oh, and by the way... I forgot to mention Rawlings says that he wrote to you recently, and has had no reply.”

And that was it? The business of her marriage was concluded and on to another matter, involving a solicitor. Her uncle really was quite an individual character.

For the first time since the fire she had no energy to continue. She felt exhaustion closing in. The closure of her escape route to becoming a governess or a companion was an unexpected, heavy blow. Since the fire, she had known it was a way out of her uncle’s household. It seemed that door had slammed shut.

Chapter 16

Nothing seemed to help Marcus. He'd never felt that distractible, or unfocused, in his life. He tried to concentrate on some business papers, but his mind kept drifting to the evil scandalmonger, and how powerless he felt to do anything about the situation.

He knew that those in the ton would treat him no differently, but the impact on Olivia and Jocelyn would be catastrophic as they could easily become social outcasts.

He missed his cousin Colin, who was still in Buckinghamshire. Colin's mother, Marcus' Aunt Lydia, was recovering well after a fall from her horse. She'd been briefly knocked unconscious, and no one had been sure initially about the severity of the injury. It had been a relief to hear that all was well with his aunt at Granville House.

He'd been for a swim in the Serpentine, he's ridden Hector up Rotten Row, cantering past the other riders, but nothing helped him concentrate. He thought he might go to Angelo's Fencing rooms, but it was getting late.

A knock on the door, and Mr. Farthing, his butler, entered with a serious expression on his face. "The Earl of Riversmead is here, and says it is imperative he speaks with you."

"Riversmead? That would be Lady Olivia Sherwyn's uncle?"

"Indeed, that is the case, My Lord."

“Well, you’d better show him in. I suspect I know what has prompted this call.”

Except he didn’t, and what the earl had to say shocked him to his core.

The elderly Lord Riversmead took a seat opposite Marcus. “Lord Hatfield,” he greeted Marcus.

“Call me Marcus. I’m very aware of the untrue rumors circulating about your niece and myself, and assume that is why you are here?”

“Despicable lies. Olivia denies anything untoward happened and I believe her,” said Harold.

“She is a very special person, and I have spent time with her, and enjoyed her conversation. However, I can assure you there has been nothing untoward between us.”

“I’ve had my lawyer looking into this matter and the trail dries up. I’m sure you are aware of the identity of the chief suspect?”

“Lady Cressida Lantham?”

“Exactly. She was caught in the act of spreading slander at Jocelyn’s coming out ball. However, my solicitor’s enquiries have come to a dead end.”

Marcus nodded for Lord Riversmead to continue.

“Whoever began the rumors lit the fuse and stood back. The powder keg of lies has exploded across the ton . My niece, and my great niece, face ruin,” explained Lord Riversmead.

“Surely it can’t be that serious?” Marcus replied.

“They have had no invitations, and no callers, with the exception of the Marquis of Hastings, for several days.”

Marcus winced at the mention of Colin’s rival in love.

“Even Viscountess Marianne Leighton, who is Jocelyn’s sponsor, has been cut dead by several acquaintances. Thankfully she is a true friend to Olivia and will take no notice of these fair-weather friends.”

“I had no idea it had escalated this far,” Marcus with surprise.

“We had hoped it would be a storm in a teacup, but the rumors are still circulating and becoming embellished as they pass from mouth to mouth,” Lord Riversmead told him.

“And these scandal sheets?” asked Marcus.

“That’s one place where I have had some success,” confided the earl. “Rawlings, my solicitor, tracked down the owner of the press and we prevented a further circulation of more extreme gossip. In fact, I take that word back. I refuse to call this gossip, because it is evil... criminal slander.”

“Please let me know if I can assist with your enquiries in any way,” said Marcus. “If it is a case of finance or manpower ...”

Harold shook his head. “I very much fear, and I have thought this through from every angle, I very much fear that the only way to retrieve my niece’s reputation is through matrimony.”

“Marriage?”

“A marriage is the only way to prevent long lasting damage,” explained Lord Riversmead. “I see no point in beating about the bush. I am here to ask you to do your duty and marry my niece, Lady Olivia Sherwyn.”

Marcus stared into space. It was as if he hadn’t heard the words, but they were slowly sinking in. The elderly aristocrat opposite him was deadly serious.

His brain raced through the possibilities.

There was logic in the earl’s plan. It might be that he was the only man who could marry his niece. The spurious rumors, still spinning around town, were ruining Olivia and Jocelyn by association.

Maybe I should marry Olivia?

The difficulty was that Olivia had been haunting his thoughts for the last week. He felt his pulse beat faster, and a strange connection between them whenever they met. It was almost as though there were a fine web of gossamer thread spun around them.

It felt right though, and every time he left, he knew he wanted to return and see more of Olivia. He wanted to lose himself in her mesmerizing blue eyes and gaze at her face for hours. He trembled, though no one noticed, as he felt the thrill throughout his body when she was close to him.

He realized he was in the middle of trying to sort out his own feelings, his emotional and physical reactions, to this wonderful young lady. It is very possible he would even have considered marrying her. He just was not ready for that today.

He was angry too, angry that Lady Cressida could manipulate lives to such an extent

that he and Olivia could be forced into marriage.

If this crisis had not happened, then I would have called on Olivia after the ball. In effect we've been prevented from getting to know each other by this scandalmongering.

"Your Lordship?" came the Earl of Riversmead's voice.

"I'm sorry," he responded., "I was lost in my own thoughts. This is heavy information and a life changing proposition. I'll be honest with you, you've taken me by surprise. I can't say yes or no this evening."

"But..."

"No, wait, your Lordship, I'm not saying 'no' to your plan. I admit I feel trapped and coerced into this by the scandalmonger. Whatever happens I'm determined that she will get her comeuppance.

"I have to consider this plan and I need time for that. I hardly know your niece. I like her, but I had not yet thought to offer for her hand in marriage."

Even as he spoke the words, he knew that he was not being honest with himself. He'd known Olivia, his Cendrillon, since that strange meeting in the forest glade. He did not need to share that with her irascible uncle though.

I should be allowed to have some control over my own life . He smiled at the earl and offered to refill his glass with fine Madeira wine.

"Stay for supper," suggested Marcus to the Earl of Riversmead. "We have much to discuss, and I want to know everything that Rawlings' men have uncovered." He stood and went to the door, calling to Mr. Farthing to set an extra place at the table in

the dining room.

As they ate together Marcus found he rather took to the very individual Earl of Riversmead. He knew, from what Jocelyn had shared with Colin, that her great uncle was prone to bouts of temper and watched every penny in the household expenses. The word miser had come up more than once and Marcus could believe it.

Yet at the ball he had stepped out with his great niece in fine style, even though it was clearly outside of his comfort zone. He had to admire the man.

They talked about the renovations at Silverton while eating white soup and moved on to roast pheasant with creamed celery.

“I do apologize, I told the cook to prepare a lighter meal this evening, so there is limited choice.”

“It’s a pleasure to have good, fine country food,” replied the earl, clearly enjoying his dinner.

Marcus signaled his footman to bring in beef pot pies. He noticed the earl’s eyes light up, and knew he’d made the right decision asking him to stay and take supper.

“Tell Rawlings that I’ll provide money and men to further his investigations. Let’s give him whatever he needs.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I’m meeting him tomorrow at 11 o’clock. Would you like to join me?”

“Absolutely. I’ll be there.”

As the dishes were cleared, and sweet wine poured to accompany a light lemon

syllabub, the earl took conversation back to his plan for a marriage.

As soon as he mentioned the need for a match, Marcus felt his stomach tighten. He knew that his reluctance was due to feeling forced into a marriage by an unscrupulous young woman. There was also a feeling of excitement at the possibility of seeing Olivia again. He hadn't seen Olivia for a week, and he knew he needed to see her face again soon.

He needed time to think and let the gossip recede. At this moment it was a simmering cauldron of vicious rumors.

"I need to think about this, Your Lordship. It's all very sudden. However, I'm not ruling this out, but I do need time to think. I have a proposal."

"I'm listening," said the earl, sipping his wine and sitting back to hear Marcus' proposal.

"I'll ask my parents to invite Lady Olivia and Lady Jocelyn to stay at Belvedere Abbey. I suggest we arrange this very soon. I don't feel I've had a chance to get to know Lady Olivia, and let's be honest, marriage is a big step, and I'm sure Lady Olivia would value time to get to know me, and my family, too.

The earl looked at him and nodded. "Very well. Invite my niece and great niece to stay at Belvedere. I'll assume that, unless there are specific reasons for you not to, which come up during this visit, you will make an offer for Olivia. It's clear that these rumors are false, but that unfortunately many people still believe them."

The earl looked intently at Marcus, and Marcus knew he meant to fight for his family honor, and rescue Olivia and Jocelyn from this predicament. "We both know Olivia is innocent and she has already gone through considerable trauma in her life. Jocelyn, it seems, is at risk of being ruined simply by association. I cannot stand by and see my

nieces ruined.”

On the other side of town, Lady Cressida prepared to retire for the night. Yesterday she had enjoyed a soiree, and tonight there had been dancing at Almack’s Assembly rooms.

That was where she began to feel triumph that her plan to discredit Lady Olivia Sherwyn had been successful.

Gossip flew around Almack’s that Viscountess Leighton had been formally asked by her sponsor, Lady Golightly, not to attend any functions at Almack’s.

Cressida gazed into the mirror and knew she was beautiful. She had no disfigurement. She hid no scars.

There was no need for any of her grandmother’s charms tonight. Everything was in place and working well. Soon Lady Olivia Sherwyn would be back in the shadows, hiding away in the country, and no one would see her disfigured face in society again.

She held her head high and laughed, before blowing out the candle and retiring to bed.

Chapter 17

“I can’t believe he’s doing this. How dare he go and speak to the Earl of Hatfield and insist that he marry me.” Olivia looked toward Marianne with anger in her eyes.

Olivia continued, “I am confused and bewildered how this situation has developed so quickly. This gossip, which has no foundation in truth, has spread through all levels of the ton . It’s as if someone, and we believe it to be Lady Cressida, has planned this and is working hard to make sure the rumor mill stays running all the time.”

Marianne looked at Olivia with concern. “I’ve never known anything like it. Even though your uncle prevented the last scandal sheet from being circulated, there is a new aspect to this story that emerges every day. Someone is working tirelessly to ensure your complete ruin.”

“What are they saying now?” asked Olivia.

“Oh, Lord Hatfield has purchased an estate in France, which indeed he has, but the main purpose of this estate is to set you up as his mistress. The estate will be a sort of love nest for the two of you,” Marianne told her.

“Marianne, this is ridiculous.”

“I know,” said Marianne, with anguish.

Olivia stood and walked around the room unable to hide her agitation. “I still don’t quite comprehend this. I seem the most unlikely person to be the victim of gossip and

slander. And yet it appears there is nothing I can do. I hide here and know that these lies are circulating, and some people must believe them. Lady Golightly clearly did.”

“I’m not sure about that. I think she excluded us because it was ‘the right thing to do’ according to their unwritten rules. I’ve known her for years, and she is not an unkind person. I can only reinforce to you my dear, that these rumors have a strong force behind them. Your uncle had hoped they would die down. Instead, the opposite has happened.”

“It is incredible how my reputation has been ruined and I’ve done nothing, nothing at all,” said an exasperated Olivia.

“I know you have a stormy relationship with your uncle, but I can see the logic in his actions. He did the right thing in setting investigators to track down the source of the scandal sheets. He had the right motives in speaking to the Earl of Hatfield. There is little else he can do,” reiterated Marianne

“I should go and speak to Lady Cressida myself. I long to tell her just what I think of her,” snarled Olivia.

“Oh no, Olivia, that is the one thing you cannot do. I beg you, do not consider that plan a moment longer,” Marianne responded.

“I know. Don’t worry. I’ll be a dutiful niece and get ready for a visit to Belvedere Abbey,” Olivia reassured her.

“Charles and I will return to our estate at Leighton Manor, and it is less than 5 miles from Belvedere, so I shall be close to you. As soon as the house party finishes you and Jocelyn will join me at the Manor.”

“It will help to know you are there. I can only be honest in saying that I dread this

visit to Belvedere. It isn't just the scandal. It's more than that. Before this happened, I felt something, a sensation of close connection, when I was with Lord Hatfield.

"Now I feel embarrassed and uneasy about seeing him again. How will it be when we meet, and we don't just continue where we left off? He's been pretty much ordered to marry me by my uncle."

She continued walking around the room, unable to be still, but she stopped to gaze out of the window. "Oh Marianne, It's such a mess and I'm so confused."

"I don't think you can be otherwise. We're all bewildered by events. You mustn't worry about meeting the earl again."

"I started to hope there might be something between us, yet now I'm not sure I can bear to see him."

Marianne beckoned her to come and sit beside her on the velvet chaise longue. Olivia sat down next to Marianne, and she patted Olivia's hand. "I've seen you together and there's a strange sort of natural chemistry between you. There is an affection there. You must not worry."

Olivia smiled at her friend. "We've been cooped up here for so long that I'm losing all perspective. I can't continue this way. After Ellen's packed for the journey tomorrow, I believe I shall go into town and visit Grove's haberdashery. I have some riding gloves to collect."

"It will do you good to get out. You're right, you've been hiding away too long."

"And there is good news about my writing. Mr. Claxton at the publishing house has accepted Mr. NP Featherby's book for publication, and I shall receive an advance any day now. I thought I would have to pay for publication, but he's changed his mind. It

seems that being a man makes quite a difference in these matters! The money won't be enough to give me independence now, but it is a step in the right direction. I can see a day when I will have some autonomy over my life."

"That Mr. Snodfellow, Snodgrass, whatever his name is, is going to kick himself when your book is successful."

"I know. It sounds arrogant, Marianne, but I know that Garden of Lilies is going to be a success."

"I enjoyed every word, and you made me laugh out loud at times. I just hope your Uncle Harold doesn't recognize himself in Uncle Onslow Wilbury," said Marianne laughing.

"Perhaps that's one of the advantages of having a nom de plume," replied Olivia.

They fell about in a fit of the giggles and for a moment forgot the sea of troubles around them.

As their laughter subsided, Olivia's thoughts once more returned to her niece. "I hope that Jocelyn will marry. My fear is that this scandal has ruined her alongside me."

"I do not believe that you need worry on that score" said Marianne with confidence. "Lord Hastings continues to visit, and I believe Lord Ludlow will return as soon as he can. His family estate is also not too far from Belvedere Abbey, and I know the family.

"So, try to enjoy your visit to Belvedere Abbey. The Duke and Duchess of Hargrove are kind people, and that's unusual for those in the top drawer of the ton. The Abbey is one of the great houses in England, and the sculptures and artwork are second to none. I believe there are Roman and Greek statues on display."

Marianne kissed Olivia's cheek as she prepared to leave. "Enjoy the visit. Despite your reluctance to leave, I'm convinced that it will do you good to be away from London and the gossip."

Half an hour later, Olivia was gathering her reticule and waiting for Ellen to bring her pelisse when Lord Hastings arrived to visit Jocelyn. She suggested Jocelyn take Lord Hastings for a walk in the garden, and there would be no need for a chaperone as Mrs. Jennings was there.

She took the small carriage into town. She would usually have walked, but she felt a certain apprehension about being out and about on the streets, while the gossip circulated.

If Mrs. Groves had heard the rumors, she showed no sign of it. Olivia and Ellen were welcomed with warmth, and Mrs. Groves brought out bolts of lace and ribbon in the latest style from Paris. Olivia bought a yard and a half of a sumptuous apricot silk ribbon. Ellen suggested some lace edging in a curious shade of dark green.

"It's from Belgium where they are using a new technique for dyeing their lace. You won't get better quality," Mrs. Groves informed them.

"I really like the color," said Olivia, wondering if she was spending too much of her miserly uncle's money. She decided that, after the way he had behaved with Lord Hatfield, she would go ahead and buy the lace.

She bought the same lace in dusky pink for Jocelyn and a yard of Nottingham lace for Ellen and Mrs. Jennings.

Uncle can afford this, and he is the one who insisted on me taking part in a London

season, against my wishes.

As they walked to the door of the haberdasher, they stood back to allow Lady Clara Jackman, and her daughter the Honorable Priscilla Jackman, to enter the shop. The expression on Lady Jackman's face would have been hilarious in other circumstances. As soon as she recognized Olivia, she took a step backwards, pulling Priscilla after her.

Olivia curtsied a welcome, and the expression on Lady Jackman's face showed an agony of indecision. She could hardly cut Olivia, but it was obvious she wanted to. After a few seconds she nodded curtly in recognition and pulled her daughter away from Olivia and Ellen.

Ellen opened the door and as they made their way back to the carriage.

"I am ruined," said Olivia, feeling strangely calm, even though she had now experienced being cut by an acquaintance she had known for many years.

"I don't think I quite believed it till today," she continued as much to herself as to Ellen. She was lost in a world of her own and didn't hear the voice at first. Ellen nudged her arm and Olivia returned to reality with a jolt. She looked up and gasped with surprise.

Jonathan ... Sir Jonathan Ellington ... stood before her on the pavement.

The one person she had hoped never to see again stood in front of her.

She felt a moment of satisfaction as she noticed that Sir Jonathan Ellington looked as shocked as she did.

She nodded and curtsied in greeting.

At the same time she became aware that her hands had begun to tremble and her palms felt sweaty with panic. A wave of nausea swept through her body.

I don't want to be here. I never wanted to see Jonathan again.

All the time she maintained a polite, yet distant expression on her face.

"Olivia, you look well," he said. "I hadn't expected to see you in town."

Does he mean that he didn't want our paths to cross, or that he didn't expect me to be out and about due to the scandal?

"Thank you, so do you, Sir," she murmured indistinctly in response, noticing that he was not making eye contact with her. Instead, his eyes were fixated on her hairline, the side of her face where the scars were hidden.

She took a deep breath. "Are your family well?" she enquired with politeness.

"They are all in good health," he replied and then he smiled that familiar smile, where the dimple in his chin stood out.

I used to find it so endearing, she thought. And now?

I certainly feel strange. There is a tug of something within me. I feel that pull towards past memories. If nothing else we are old friends with a shared past, we grew up in the same part of the country. We planned a life together. There was something between us, once, long ago.

"It was a pleasant surprise to see you, Olivia. I'll bid you good day as I am expected elsewhere within a half hour," said Jonathan, excusing himself as he continued on his way.

After she had said farewell to Jonathan, she climbed into her waiting carriage and the feelings of agitation diminished. She felt her feet firmly back in the present day.

Next day Olivia and Jocelyn were back in the barouche carriage, traveling to Belvedere Abbey. Uncle Harold had wished them well and disclosed to them that he was taking the household staff, including Mrs. Jennings to visit Silverton Hall to see the renovations and begin to make plans for the re-opening.

“Did you have a pleasant time with Lord Hastings when he visited yesterday?” asked Olivia, with a gentle smile. “I admire him for continuing to visit our family, when so many appear to have ostracized us.”

“Yes, I did have a pleasant time. He is a very genteel and solicitous gentleman. I agree with what you say. We had a steady stream of guests calling before the gossip began. Now we have few visitors and Ethan, the Marquis of Hastings, is the only man who now calls regularly.”

“Is there any news of Lord Ludlow?” Olivia asked with interest. She noticed that Jocelyn’s cheeks flushed at the mention of that gentleman’s name.

“He is still out of town,” Jocelyn said quietly.

“Has he written at all?” Olivia continued.

“No, not after that first note.”

She saw an expression, almost of pain, cross Jocelyn’s face and knew instinctively that something was wrong.

“Josie, what is it? I can see there is something troubling you?” Olivia said.

Jocelyn fidgeted and shifted her position on the long bench in the carriage. After a few seconds’ silence she spoke in a hoarse voice, so quiet that Olivia struggled to hear her words.

“He proposed. He made me an offer of marriage.”

“Colin? Lord Ludlow?” Olivia asked in surprise.

“No, the Marquis of Hastings. Yesterday, while we were walking in the garden. He told me that he loved me and hoped I would agree to be his wife,” clarified Jocelyn.

“Oh Josie. A proposal of marriage,” Olivia said, clapping her hands.

“Indeed. I was taken quite by surprise.”

“Has he spoken with Uncle?” Olivia asked.

“I’m not sure. Uncle hasn’t said anything,” Jocelyn replied.

“I don’t like to pry, but I have to ask if you accepted his offer.” Olivia couldn’t hide her curiosity.

“I told him I needed time to consider it. I feel warm towards Ethan. He has kept seeking out my company, despite all the gossip swirling around about our family. I never expected any proposals in view of the impact of the scandalmonger.”

“That seems sensible, to tell him that you needed time to think about it,” agreed Olivia.

Jocelyn nodded. The carriage had slowed down, and they could hear rain drumming against the roof of the barouche.

“It’s so strange. I’ve often thought about the day when someone would propose to me. He tried to make it romantic and special, and I should have felt joy and happiness. Olivia, I expected to feel thrilled and excited at the prospect of marriage and we both know the Marquis is rich, considerate, and he must admire me a great deal.”

“And ...?” prompted Olivia.

“I felt numb and uncertain what to say. I don’t love him. But, in view of this scandal, I know I may never receive a better offer, and I do not wish to spend my days living in uncle’s household. My choice may very well be between being Marchioness of Hastings, with my own establishment, or living quietly at Swanbourne Place and Silverton House,” admitted Jocelyn.

Olivia felt tears welling up in her eyes at this sad, sorry state of affairs. Although she was in no way responsible, she somehow felt that she was the cause of Jocelyn’s predicament.

“You don’t love Lord Hastings?”

“All I know, Olivia, is that when I was with Colin... Lord Ludlow, that I felt an excitement. I looked forward to his visits and I felt an emptiness when he left. I hoped, I expected that he would propose. He had certainly hinted that he wished to be with me forever. Yet he left so suddenly and I’m in a strange sort of limbo, wondering if he will return,” confessed Jocelyn.

“Of course he will return. His mother had an accident, and it was thought she was near death. As soon as he can leave her I’m sure he will return to London,” Olivia

reassured her.

“I know, and most of the time I believe what you say. His letter was brief, but he was about to set out on a journey, and he couldn’t have known if his mother would be alive or dead when he arrived at Granville Hall.”

“Then keep believing that,” asserted Olivia.

“The trouble is... my difficulty is that he may have left because of the gossip. Look what happened to you with Sir Jonathan. You were in love and engaged and one day, in the midst of our grief, he called and jilted you,” said Jocelyn.

“It really isn’t quite the same. You mustn’t worry. Remember, I had also lost my fortune and my looks. He knew about the scars, and I believe my disfigurement was a significant reason for him withdrawing from our engagement,” replied Olivia.

As Olivia was speaking, she was feeling a wave of disappointment as she had been certain that Lord Ludlow was a perfect match for Jocelyn. She knew she mustn’t let that color her advice to Jocelyn.

“The difficulty is that I can’t know. All I could think was that I needed time and space to think. I explained we were due to visit Belvedere Abbey and I would give him my decision on my return.” Jocelyn paused briefly. “I may accept him. I am truly confused about what to decide.”

“You should have time to think at Belvedere Abbey. It sounds as though that’s exactly what you need at the moment. You can settle your feathers at the Abbey.”

“I have something to share with you too,” confessed Olivia. “I saw Jonathan yesterday.”

“Really?” gasped Jocelyn “Did he call?”

“No, I don’t believe uncle would welcome him at Swanbourne Place. I met him in the street outside Grover’s haberdashery. It was pure chance.”

“What did he say to you?” Jocelyn was now the one who was curious.

“Very little. Formal greetings, followed by enquiries about our families. It was all over within a couple of minutes,” Olivia told her.

“How did you feel?” Jocelyn continued her questioning, obviously eager to know all.

“Very strange, if I’m honest. For a second or two it was almost as though I stepped back in time. I soon realized, though, I no longer felt the same way about him.”

“I’m glad. He caused you immeasurable distress, at a time when you needed love and comfort from your fiancé,” said Jocelyn.

“What I can share, is that he never once looked at me, he could not take his eyes away from my hairline and the place where I have the scars,” Olivia told her.

“That’s dreadful,” exclaimed Jocelyn.

“I’m not sure he was even aware of what he was doing. It does reinforce what I always believed about his reasons for abandoning me after the fire.”

“It’s brave of you to share it with me,” said Jocelyn, taking Olivia’s hand and holding it.

As the carriage trundled out of London, and along the turnpike towards Longhamsted, Olivia experienced a mixture of anxiety and excitement. She remembered the journey

last autumn, and as always, her thoughts went back to the day she had spent with Marcus in the woodland glade. Cendrillon. He'd called her his Cendrillon.

Jocelyn cried out with excitement as she saw the tower of Belvedere Abbey. "It's said that the view from the tower is the best in the county and that's why they called it Belvedere. It used to be a monastery in Medieval days, I believe," she said.

"There are lots of legends in this land. You'll love the story about Lady Matilda and her Plantagenet King," Olivia informed her.

"And somewhere deep in that forest you had a magical day with your own handsome prince," Jocelyn teased Olivia.

"Jocelyn, no, you must never mention that. Certainly not while we are staying at Belvedere Abbey," demanded Olivia.

When the carriage pulled into the circular driveway in front of the Abbey, Olivia took a sharp inward breath. She was certainly in uncharted waters now.

They were bundled into the house, under the cover of an umbrella, as a light drizzle fell. Olivia held Marguerite close to her as they climbed the steps leading up to the main door.

Once inside the house she saw Marcus standing in the great hall with a woman, whom she guessed must be his mother, the Duchess of Hargrove.

The woman stepped forward to greet them. "Welcome to our home. We're delighted to have you here at the Abbey. I'm the Duchess of Hargrove, Marcus' mother."

Olivia's gaze rose up to the huge, vaulted ceiling, and the oak paneling which must have been there since the Middle Ages. The sound of their voices echoed around the

room, and it really did resemble a fairytale setting.

The Duchess bent over to look at Marguerite and comment on the little dog's beautiful face. "I believe you have met my son's dog, Hera. She's here somewhere. We let the dogs stay in the house and not the stable. That's never been our custom at the Abbey.

"Now, Mrs. Kirkland, our housekeeper, will show you to your rooms. You're on the second floor, and in the morning you should have a view of the lake. Your maid will be in the other wing, and I'll ask Mrs. Kirkland to make sure she knows where everything is. It won't be that dissimilar to your own household I'm sure," the duchess reassured them.

Olivia felt at ease with Marcus' mother. She had greeted them warmly and even though the duchess must know about the gossip, and the possibility of marriage, she showed no sign of this.

"Now, my dears, I'm hoping that after you've refreshed yourselves that you will feel able to join us for supper. The duke is resting but is looking forward to meeting you later."

Olivia assured her that they would be happy to join the family for dinner. They had made the right decision, coming here.

The duke was clearly delighted to meet them and began to tell them about the history of the house. Jocelyn asked him about the legend of Lady Matilda, and he insisted on taking her to see a painting of this mysterious scene in the woods close to the Abbey. Jocelyn gave Olivia a knowing look at that point as if to say that there were more modern adventures in the Hargrove Forest.

So far, Olivia had only spoken briefly with Marcus, when he had assured her he was

pleased to see her, and he was sorry for the anxiety and distress which she must have felt during the last week.

Now he spoke to Jocelyn and Olivia. "I'd be delighted to take you both on a tour of the Hargrove estate in the morning. I believe you both ride?"

They both assured him they could.

"I'd join you, but I have an appointment in the village in the morning," said the duchess. "Let's hope for a sunny morning. There's nothing better than a ride around the estate. Marcus, you must take them into the woods and down to the lake."

"Of course, Mama," he agreed. At that moment his eyes met Olivia's and she felt hot, then cold, then hot again as she felt sensations of fire then ice and fire once more.

Oh no. It's happening again, she thought. Why does Marcus always have this effect on me? I must get a grip. If I am to stay here, then I must maintain control of my emotions.

Next morning did indeed dawn bright and clear. The sun was shining, and the early morning mist broke into strands like ribbons and floated away into the blue sky.

Ellen came to dress Olivia's hair and to tell her that Jocelyn felt very tired. "She fears that she may be coming down with a chill. She doesn't feel up to a ride around the estate, My Lady."

"Oh, poor Jocelyn. Should I stay in case she needs me?" asked Olivia.

"I'm here and can tend to her. There is no need for you to stay, and I believe it would

distress her to know you had called off your tour of the estate for her. I think she is exhausted and needs a rest, that's all," said Ellen reassuringly.

Ellen helped Olivia dress in her riding habit of green velvet with a hat with matching green feather.

"You look lovely, my Lady," said Ellen. "You have a glow around you. If I didn't know otherwise, then I'd say you were in love."

Ignoring Ellen's comment, Olivia said, "I'll leave Marguerite with Jocelyn, that will help cheer her up."

The horses were saddled and waiting for them in the stable courtyard.

"Moonbeam is a gentle mare," said Marcus, "I think you'll enjoy riding her. Don't be deceived though, she can gallop faster than most horses."

"She is a lovely horse," agreed Olivia.

"Come, let's set off," said Marcus. "It's a long journey around the estate, we may not complete the circuit today."

After trotting, then cantering across the parkland, they broke into a gallop and raced across the wilder downs.

When Marcus slowed to a walking pace, they moved toward the northern woods in companionable silence.

"The countryside here is beautiful," Olivia told him. "I love the contrast between the heathland and the hills."

“I suspect you will recognize the scenery soon. We’re close to Viscount Leighton’s lands.”

“My mother insisted that you see the forest and the lake, and we’re almost there. The horses can take a drink and rest.” He paused before adding, “While I show you the hidden glade and the lake, Cendrillon.”

Olivia drew in a breath, of course they were approaching the place where they had met for the first time on that autumn day.”

Marcus led the way down a pathway along the valley side. Olivia heard the stream and knew they were nearing the hidden glade.

Her memories of that first meeting had stayed with her throughout the winter. Since they had met again, she’d often imagined herself back in that glade, far away from the real world in a cocoon of fairy tale romance.

As she wrote love scenes in the book she was writing, Marcus was her inspiration. She knew all the heroes she wrote about in future would be based on the Earl of Hatfield. When they were together her eyes followed him. When he spoke, she listened to the timbre of his voice and knew she could listen all day. When he touched her, sometimes by chance, her heart raced, and she could think of nothing else.

She heard his voice, the smooth, deep tones bringing her back to the present moment.

“We can let Hector and Moonbeam rest for a while,” said Marcus.

Marcus came round to offer Olivia his assistance in dismounting from Moonbeam. She felt dizzy when his arms enfolded her, to lift her gently to the ground. Held close against him, she longed to lean closer to his long, lean body. As he let go of her, she put her head close to Moonbeam, as she recovered from the extreme dizziness she felt

after being lifted down by Marcus.

“Come,” he said gently and took her hand to lead her into that familiar forest glade. Olivia raised her eyes to his, feeling suddenly shy as she remembered that first day when they had met. She gazed into his eyes, and he spoke so quietly that she almost didn’t hear his words.

“I could drown in those blue eyes every day,” he whispered.

They looked at each other, their eyes locked.

Olivia smiled. She relaxed into the moment as he took her into his arms. “Cendrillon,” he said. “I’m still convinced you are a creature from the land of fae.”

Her fluttering nerves calmed, and she felt safe. As she looked up into his eyes, she had the sensation of leaving the real world a long way behind her.

I think I’ve stopped breathing, she thought. Maybe this is enchantment and we’re in a fairytale world where I’m Cendrillon with her handsome prince.

When he spoke the words were muffled at first, and it took her a few seconds to return to reality. He offered her his arm and she felt the spark of warmth spreading throughout her body.

“Let’s walk by the lake,” he said, moving apart from Olivia and offering her his hand. They walked together and he showed her the glistening, silver lake and how it merged into the horizon.

“I love to swim here,” he told her. “It’s what I was doing on the day that we met. Why didn’t you tell me you were a lady?” he asked.

“I didn’t say I wasn’t a lady,” she responded. “You didn’t tell me you were an earl. In fact, I remember being convinced that you were in fact a local farmer.”

“A local farmer?” he asked in surprise, “Olivia. I think that may, in fact, be a compliment.”

Chapter 18

Marcus watched Olivia as they made their way around the lake path. He'd been impressed with the way she had ridden Moonbeam and held her own as they galloped across the heathland. Few women he knew were as skilled at riding. Olivia rode because she enjoyed riding and not because it was expected of a young lady.

He'd laughed out loud when she had told him that for many months she had thought he was the son of one of the local farmers. He'd been honest when he told her he thought that was a compliment.

Olivia made him laugh and said exactly what she thought. How refreshing to spend time with someone who treated him as an equal, an ordinary person, and not the heir to a Dukedom. She had liked him when she thought he was a farmer, and it made no difference to her whether he was a farmer, an earl, or a duke. The contrast with Lady Cressida, and the other young ladies whom his Mama had invited to Belvedere Abbey over the years, was clear.

There was something different and special about Cendrillon.

His thoughts drifted to Contessa Lucrezia Fiorella and how he had been drawn to her for several years. Looking back he didn't recognize himself. The man who had loved the Contessa seemed young and insecure. He was a very different man now, confident and secure in his own identity.

"I think we need to speak about what your uncle wants," he said, as they made their way to the far side of the lake.

“Please, let’s not spoil today,” Olivia said. “I have spent the last three years hiding away and adjusting to loss and my changed appearance. I want to feel like an ordinary person, just the same as everyone else, and to be treated normally,” she said with quiet forcefulness.

“Impossible,” came Marcus’ immediate reply.

He immediately noticed her crestfallen expression and knew that he’d been clumsy with his words.

“Olivia, I can’t treat you the same as everyone else. You are far too individual. You are brave and strong. You have lived through traumatic loss, and supported your niece, helping her overcome her own loss and grow into a delightful young woman. I look at you and see Olivia, dearest, brave Olivia. I told you that night of the ball, your scars are something I don’t notice. Your character is so bright that it scatters the scars into the shadows.”

Olivia gasped as she listened to Marcus.

“We both know what your uncle has asked. I was angry about feeling forced into marriage by an evil woman, spreading slanderous gossip. You might have noticed that I like having my own way, and I don’t like being told what to do.”

Olivia laughed, “I am so surprised to hear that,” she joked. “I had no idea.”

“You can laugh, but we both know it is quite true. What I’m going to say now is that I don’t want your first visit here to Belvedere Abbey to be just about your uncle's demand that we marry. Let’s just forget that and get to know each other as we were before the scandalmonger struck.”

“I like that idea,” said Olivia. “I felt we were just getting acquainted when the scandal

sheet was circulated, and we've been unable to meet since that time."

"Exactly. Let's spend time together and enjoy each other's company."

"I must tell you, my Lord, that I have plans in place to make my own living. I intend to set up my own establishment, close to our family estate at Silverton, and live quietly there. In short, I have no intention of marrying you or anyone else, no matter what my uncle wants."

Marcus stopped walking and looked into Olivia's blue eyes.

"You certainly have that independent spirit. Thank you for being honest and telling me that you have no intention of marrying me. I'd like to kiss you, Cendrillon, but it would be quite inappropriate in such an isolated place. So, as you have told me that you have no intention of marrying, I shall hold back."

He noticed how her eyes widened as he spoke of kissing her. He smiled to himself, knowing that there was a closeness, a connection between them and it grew stronger every time that they spent time together.

"Now let's walk a little further and see if we can spot a kingfisher. I've often seen one at this part of the lake."

"A kingfisher. I've always wanted to see a kingfisher." He offered Olivia his arm and they made their way around the lake path.

As the days passed, Olivia fell into a routine of going out for daily rides with Marcus and then spending the rest of the day with his mother. Jocelyn, and sometimes his mother, accompanied them on the rides and Marcus was sorry that there was no

opportunity to spend time with Olivia alone again.

The Viscount and Viscountess Leighton also joined them several times and Marcus reflected that it was the best type of company, and why would anyone want the formal society events of a season in London.

They had seen a kingfisher that day. The ethereal blur of green feathers flying at high speed over the water close to the bank of the lake. The look of wonder on Olivia's face was a memory which he would carry with him for a long time.

Then one day it rained, and Marcus suggested that he show Olivia the house. Jocelyn had expressed a wish to look at some fashion plates with his mother, who had a French maid, and a keen eye for fashion trends. His mother had suggested they spend the afternoon emptying some old chests, and seeing if the garments could be re-worked. It looked to be a project which would last several days.

He was delighted when Olivia smiled at him and said that she didn't want to turn down the chance of a tour of the Abbey, and she would join Jocelyn and the duchess later.

Marcus guided her to the long corridor which ran the length of the house, and served as an art gallery. He pointed out portraits of his family, including the duke who had been a manservant of King Henry the Eighth.

"We are unsure how he managed to keep his head," laughed Marcus. "Somehow he evaded the axe."

"And that's my grandfather," he told her, pointing to another portrait.

"I do see a family resemblance," she told him. "You have the same eyes."

When they came to the more recent section of the gallery, Olivia gasped in surprise to see several portraits of Marcus and his parents.

After the long walk through the gallery, Marcus was pleased to see Olivia show her delight at the library. There they found themselves joining his father, who showed Olivia some of his precious historical books.

Marcus relaxed into his chair as Olivia read his father passages from Gulliver's Travels. He listened as they shared their ideas, and found they were in agreement in their views on the need to see people as individuals, and not let differences lead to pointless battles.

"Mr. Swift does a good job of helping us see the absurdity of some very strongly held opinions," said his father.

"He writes in a way which is easy to understand too. I enjoy his work very much," added Olivia.

Olivia asked what side the family had taken in the English Civil war. They were close to Oxford, and she knew there had been many battles in this region.

"Oh, they were always changing sides," his father told her. "I don't condone it. They survived and kept the estate in the family. One of my uncles left to live in France in exile."

As they left the library the duke took Olivia's hand. "My dear you have made me laugh on a wet and dreary afternoon. While you are staying with us I hope that you will visit the library many times and read to me."

"Of course," she smiled. "I'd love to."

After that Marcus noticed that Olivia found time every day to join his father and read to him. They debated philosophy and talked about history. Both seemed interested in the new field of archaeology, and he thought to himself that he would not be surprised if they didn't start excavating a strange shaped earthwork that existed in the park.

He came across them one day having an in-depth conversation about Shakespeare, and whether he might have visited Italy.

"I don't believe he could have written those plays without being in Italy," said his father.

"The source material is very detailed," said Olivia. "I can't make up my mind. He does make me imagine that I am standing in Verona or Venice."

"Venice is truly beautiful," said the duke.

"You've been to Venice?" she asked in wonderment.

"Indeed, I have. In the days before that wretch Napoleon filled in some of the canals and destroyed their monastery cloisters. It is safe to return there now, but I fear I am too old."

"Nonsense," she said. "It will do you good to visit a warmer climate."

Marcus smiled and felt a surge of warmth for Olivia, who seemed to give his father energy through their animated conversations.

It struck him, as he watched them, engaged in a lively debate, how seamlessly Olivia had slipped into not only his life, but that of his family. He knew the visit was coming to an end and there were decisions to be made, but for now he just wanted to relax

and enjoy the remainder of her visit.

If he had to marry, then he could not think of anyone he would prefer to Olivia. He'd been growing closer to her before the gossip began. In some ways her uncle's demands had slowed down their courtship, as he'd been determined not to be backed into a corner and forced to marry.

She'd told him that she planned to retire into seclusion and live life quietly, where she could write and enjoy the countryside on her family's estate. He felt a moment of fear at the thought of never seeing her again. He couldn't let her be ruined by vicious, wagging tongues, and he made his decision to ask Olivia to marry him.

Later that evening, when Olivia and Jocelyn had retired to bed, his mother came to find him in his study, where he was catching up on estate business.

"Marcus. I've brought you something," and she handed him a wooden marquetry box. The box looked very old, and when he lifted the lid he saw a ring with a glistening silvery moonstone.

"It was your grandmother's ring. I never wore it because she was very much alive when your father proposed to me. However, it is a very special ring, and I know she would want you to give it to your future bride.

"I know a little of this complicated situation, but putting that aside, you really do seem to suit each other. If you decide to make her an offer of marriage, then it would be a decision which makes sense in every way."

Marcus stared at his mother open mouthed. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean," he said uncertainly.

"I've seen you with Olivia, I can see that you are drawn to her, and she clearly has

feelings for you.”

“Mama, I know you mean well, but I have never had so many people telling me who to marry in such a short space of time. No doubt Papa will join in soon.”

He jumped when his father spoke. He’d clearly come in close behind his mother and had been standing in the shadows.

“I will certainly add my two pennyworth. You’d be a fool not to marry Olivia. I don’t remember ever meeting such a thoughtful, cultured, and intelligent young lady. I can’t believe she is the subject of such unscrupulous gossip and, as it is about time you married, and she is perfect for you, then I hope you will make her an offer.”

“Dammit,” said Marcus. “This isn’t one of your Shakespeare plays, father. It is up to me to decide who I marry and when I marry.”

His mother and father stood together, arms linked. “Very well Marcus. We’ll leave you to make your own decision, but we know that we are right,” said his mother.

“And you’ll realize it soon,” added his father.

Chapter 19

Olivia knew that spending time away from London was doing Jocelyn good. Soon they would stay with Marianne at Leighton Manor for a few days before returning to town.

One day Marianne drove over and spent time with them at Belvedere Abbey. They climbed to the top of the tower and stood together on the battlements, gazing out across the county.

“It’s an awesome sight,” said Marianne. “Look there’s Leighton Manor, over there. I can see the river, and the church spire in Longhamsted.”

“Jocelyn, you’re very quiet”, said Olivia “Are you feeling faint?”

“Oh no, I was just wondering which direction is Lord Ludlow’s Granville estate. I think it is too far away to see.”

“I believe it is to the southwest,” said Marianne, “so over in that direction.”

“You’re still thinking about Lord Ludlow?” asked Olivia gently.

“Oh yes. I think of little else if I’m honest,” Jocelyn disclosed. “I’ve been thinking about this a lot, as I know Uncle Harold would be delighted if I accepted the Marquis of Hastings’ offer.”

Marianne gasped in surprise and looked at Olivia, who nodded.

“The difficulty is that I know what I want, and it may not happen, but I must wait and see. I’ve been watching you and the earl, Olivia, and you and the viscount, Marianne and I can see what love is,” said Jocelyn.

Olivia stared at her niece in obvious surprise. “I had no idea. The earl and I are not engaged. He hasn’t proposed.”

“Oh, that’s all irrelevant,” said Jocelyn, very seriously. “It’s clear to anyone that he loves you and that you love him.”

“Jocelyn, stop this now,” said Olivia.

“Oh, very well Olivia. I won’t say any more, but I shan’t change my views. Anyway, it’s made me realize that I don’t want to marry Ethan, the Marquis, just so Uncle is happy, and I have a comfortable home, and a doting husband. I need to marry for love,” explained Jocelyn.

Marianne stepped in. “You’ve obviously been doing a lot of soul searching.”

“I have. I know that even if Lord Ludlow never proposes that I can’t marry Ethan. I like him, but I don’t love him. When I’m with Colin it feels warm, like being at home, and I don’t think about anything but being with him. I love Lord Ludlow, even if he can’t love me back.”

“Listen Jocelyn,” continued Marianne. “Lady Hargrove told me this morning that Colin’s mother had a dreadful accident, and they thought she might die or be paralyzed. She is an accomplished rider, but something went very wrong, and she fell from her horse. It’s exactly as we heard. Lord Ludlow must have been beside himself with worry, but Lady Hargrove tells me that Lord Ludlow will return to London within a fortnight.”

“I was never sure,” said Jocelyn. “I should have known he was telling the truth. It’s just that Jonathan jilted Olivia, and I thought Colin might have done something similar.”

“You know, Granville Hall is not far from Leighton Manor. Perhaps he could come to dinner while you are staying with me. I’ll ask Charles to ride over and find out how things are at Granville.”

“Oh Marianne, Would the viscount do that?” said Jocelyn, with excitement.

“Of course he will. Now let’s go back down. I need to take my leave of the duchess and return to Leighton Manor. I’ll send the carriage for you the day after tomorrow. Enjoy your last day here.”

She looked curiously at Olivia. “I hope the earl proposes. And yes, I know that you don’t want me to say any of this, so I’ll stop there.”

Next morning, Marcus was waiting for Olivia at the stables, and they set off together riding Moonbeam and Hector. The horses had got into a routine and easily moved from trotting to galloping across the heath. Olivia didn’t realize that her hair had fallen loose from its ribbons and was streaming out behind her.

Somehow, when she spent time with Marcus, she never thought about those scars. As they drew close to the far side of the lake, where they had seen the kingfisher, Marcus stopped Hector and tethered him to a tree, then helped Olivia down from Moonbeam.

As usual her body longed to fold against his, and this time she almost thought he pulled her a little closer. It was most probably her imagination. As they walked together by the lake he stopped and stood staring across the shimmering lake.

“Olivia, enchantress of the forest, you’ve bewitched me since the first time I set eyes

on you. Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Olivia felt a pang of sadness as he said the words. Her heart raced and she felt excitement coursing throughout her body, but she knew she must say 'no'. They should not be forced into marriage by malicious gossip. She believed that Marcus only proposed through a sense of duty and to retrieve her from ruin.

As she wondered what to say she saw a flurry of green feathers and a kingfisher flying down the bank. She recalled their first meeting in this same woodland grove and how she had felt a connection with Marcus that very first day.

When she turned back, she found herself gazing, into the earl's intense honey-brown eyes. It was impossible to look away.

What was it Jocelyn had said about Lord Ludlow? That when she was close to him that it felt like home. As she melted into Marcus' gaze, she knew she had found her safe harbor and refuge from the stormy seas of life. This feeling that she had come home.

"Marry me," he said. "I can't live without you."

Before she knew it, she smiled and said simply, "Yes."

Olivia gasped with surprise as she heard the words come out of her own mouth. She had fully intended to say 'no'. Yet her answer felt right, and Marcus drew her into his embrace.

"Dearest, delightful Cendrillon" he murmured, as she felt his breath close to her ear. "I've dreamed of this day for so long."

His lips found hers, and everything spun around as her lips tentatively responded to

his. They stood alone together apart from the world around them.

All that mattered to her was the need to be held close in his arms. She clung to him, wondering if she would ever feel steady again. She reached for his hand, and he responded by stroking her palm gently, before lifting his hand and running it through her hair. She gasped as she felt the tiny kisses along her forehead and hairline.

“You’re so beautiful, and I mean that all of you is beautiful,” he told her. She gasped as she felt tears of joy forming in her eyes as he kissed the damaged skin to the side of her face.

Olivia felt a warm, melting sensation spreading through her mind and body like soothing balm, as she relaxed in a safe haven of love.

When they arrived back at the Abbey, Marcus raced into his study and re-appeared with an antique wooden box.

“I’m not going to give you chance to change your mind,” he said laughing and took her hand and slipped an exquisite, glistening, moonstone ring onto her finger.

“It was my grandmother’s ring,” he said. “Do you like it?”

“I do, very much. It reminds me of the shimmering surface of the lake.”

They ate a quiet supper with the duke and duchess, and Jocelyn. Jocelyn was so excited she could hardly sit still.

“We’ve decided not to discuss our engagement in public yet. It is partly because we do not want Lady Cressida to gloat about forcing us into marriage. We’re going to

leave it a fortnight before making the announcements,” said Marcus.

“I’ll tell Marianne, and Uncle Harold,” Olivia said. “It isn’t a secret. We just don’t want to announce it formally yet.”

“And I’ll visit and speak to him as soon as I get to London in about ten days’ time. I plan to travel to town with Colin,” said Jocelyn.

“We’ll be in London before you then,” said Olivia. “And it makes sense to announce this when we are both in town.”

“My dear Olivia, we are both delighted to welcome you into our family,” said The Duke of Hargrove.

“And I am so looking forward to having a daughter,” added the duchess.

Olivia felt tears welling up in her eyes and embraced them both. She could hardly believe that Belvedere Abbey would soon be her home.

After a few days at Leighton Manor, they returned to London. Olivia had been glad to have the time with Marianne, and the chance to walk quietly on the Leighton estate. She felt content, yet exhausted, after all the emotion of the last few days. Marianne held back from discussing wedding plans, and limited herself to looking at Olivia’s ring and saying it was one of the most beautiful that she had ever seen.

As soon as they arrived back in London, Olivia spoke with Uncle Harold. He surprised her by kissing her on the cheek and telling her that he hoped she would be happy. “Marcus, the Earl of Hatfield, will come and speak with you as soon as he returns to town.”

He soon began to talk of Silverton Hall and his visit there. Olivia listened to all he had to report about the new furniture, and artwork, which he was purchasing for the newly rebuilt wing.

When she settled by the fire in the library to go through her correspondence, she was surprised to find at least six messages from Mr. Rawlings, the family solicitor. She vaguely remembered her uncle had mentioned that Rawlings had been trying to contact her.

There had been a letter too. She had pushed it into a drawer and forgotten all about it and so she went to find it.

Jocelyn and her uncle had retired to bed. The house was empty with candles casting shadows around the library.

After Olivia opened the letter, she spent many minutes staring at the candle flames around her, unable to move.

There was a gentle rap on the door, and she called to enter. Mrs. Jennings smiled and asked if she needed anything, before she retired for the night.

“I know not,” said Olivia. “I am in a state of total confusion. I’m glad you’re here Mrs. Jennings because I don’t particularly want to be alone.”

Mrs. Jennings came over and took a seat across from Olivia. “What on earth is the matter?” she asked. “Olivia, I’ve known you for many years and I can only say that you are behaving very oddly.”

“Here,” said Olivia and handed the torn envelope and its contents to Mrs. Jennings.

“Oh, my dear. This must be the arrangements that your papa talked about. He always

stipulated that he had made very specific arrangements for your future. He said there would be a sizable settlement. That's why we were all so confused when your uncle said that you were penniless."

"I know. I was surprised too. I even wondered at times, if uncle were mistaken or had absorbed the money into his own purse."

"It looks as though you have a sizeable fortune, which has been left in trust, until you are twenty-four years of age."

"And why twenty-four? It's so strange. Why did Papa and Frederick cloak this in secrecy?"

"You look exhausted," said Mrs. Jennings. "I shall send a footman tomorrow to summon Mr. Rawlings here as soon as he can."

"Now go to bed and get some rest. There's a hot brick in your bed so you should sleep well."

Olivia stared in disbelief as Mr. Rawlings went through the details of her inheritance.

"But Mr. Rawlings. I've been under the impression for the last three years that I am penniless. Does Uncle Harold know about this?"

"No, Lady Olivia. The instructions were very specific. No one was to know about this bequest, except your brother Frederick. I don't believe your father ever thought that Frederick would die so young. When your family perished, I wanted to tell you about the settlement, but the terms were legally watertight, and I could not reassure you about your future."

“Why the secrecy?” asked Olivia.

“It seems your father was a romantic. Yes, I know, it seems strange to believe that such a successful businessman should believe in love. It seems he did though. He had loved your mother and felt strongly that love was the most important thing in life.

He was concerned that, if it was known that you were an heiress, you might attract suitors who were only interested in your money. He believed that the inheritance should be shrouded in secrecy until you were twenty-four, or you were married. He trusted Frederick to ensure you were protected until then.”

He paused and shuffled through various papers. “If you had married Sir Jonathan Ellington then you would have received your inheritance after your wedding day.”

“I see,” she said faintly.

“If you reached the age of twenty-four without marrying and that will happen in a few weeks’ time, then you would receive the full settlement at that point. It seems your father didn’t want you to have to rely on a husband and you should have enough money to live a comfortable, and independent life, should you choose to do that.”

“I truly don’t know what to say. I’m stunned by this news and this amount of money.”

“You’re a very wealthy woman,” said Mr. Rawlings.

“Yesterday I thought I was penniless, and totally dependent on my Uncle Harold. Today I’m an heiress.”

“If you don’t mind me saying Lady Olivia, you will know that I am fully aware of this gossip, this cruel scandalmongering. I set the enquiries in motion which located

the printer and prevented the second sheet from being circulated.”

“I am aware, and indeed, I am truly grateful for your efforts.”

“I hope this inheritance means that the gossip no longer has the same impact,” Mr. Rawlings continued. “In my experience those in high society put money before most things. I believe you will find that some of those who cut you from their acquaintance will be keen to include you in their circles again.”

“I suspect you are right Mr. Rawlings. However, I may not be quite so keen to admit them to my circle of friends and acquaintances,” replied Olivia.

Soon after this meeting Jocelyn—who had also now returned to London—Uncle Harold, and Marianne gathered in the drawing room at Swanbourne Place to listen to the news and celebrate together.

Uncle Harold was stunned that he’d had no knowledge of the terms of the inheritance. “I’m delighted for you, my dear niece, truly delighted.”

Within a couple of days the callers had returned. The gossip didn’t seem to matter anymore. A steady stream of calling cards piled up on the silver salver in the hall.

Marianne laughed out loud when she received a letter from Lady Golightly informing her that they were welcome again at Almack's Assembly Rooms.

“I almost wish I’d kept this quiet for a while, I didn’t realize word could travel so quickly,” Olivia told Marianne.

“Absolutely not. You and Jocelyn should never have lost your place in society,”

replied Marianne.

“I feel sorry for some of these men. They are forced to marry into wealth to save their crumbling family estates. I know what it’s like to be penniless,” Olivia said compassionately.

She looked at Marianne with a sense of bewilderment. “No one seems to even consider me disfigured anymore. What a difference being a wealthy woman makes to so many things in life.”

“Some always saw beyond the scars and inheritance,” commented Marianne.

“I’ll be glad when my engagement is announced. I can’t tell these young men that I am already engaged to Marcus.”.

Olivia was eager for Marcus to arrive in town, and for word to spread about their betrothal.

After Marianne had left, Olivia settled to read poetry to Jocelyn who was embroidering a linen cloth.

They were interrupted by Mrs. Jennings, and as soon as Olivia saw her face, she knew that something was wrong. She stood and went towards the housekeeper, who looked as if she was in need of strong smelling-salts.

“Jocelyn, run and get my salts,” Olivia called. “Mrs. Jennings, what on earth is the matter, you look faint.”

“There is another caller Your Ladyship, and this one refuses to leave his card.”

A tall, dark figure loomed behind Mrs. Jennings, and without being invited he entered

the drawing room.

“Olivia. I heard that you had returned to town. I came immediately. I simply had to tell you that I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since we met that day in the street.”

“I have come to ask you to give me a second chance. There has been nobody since you. Let’s resume our engagement and marry. I’ll go speak with your uncle now,” Sir Jonathan said, seemingly certain of Olivia’s answer.

Here she was, listening to the words which for almost three years she had longed to hear. Now she felt strangely empty. Sir Jonathan Ellington’s words meant nothing. She just wanted him to leave the premises and leave her to some peace and quiet.

Behind her she saw Jocelyn staring in disbelief. However, her niece surprised her by stepping into action. “Ah, Sir Jonathan,” she cooed. “How pleasant of you to call, but did Mrs. Jennings not tell you that we are unable to accept callers today? “

Mrs. Jennings moved her body between Jonathan and Olivia and together with Jocelyn they shepherded the baronet to the door.

“I must ask you to leave. Please feel able to return and present your card another day.”

Olivia sighed with relief and sank into a chair. Oh for a quiet day!

Chapter 20

Marcus took a different route to London for the last part of his journey back to Tewkesbury Crescent. He abandoned the Great North Road, choosing instead to canter and gallop across the fields, and enter the city close to the royal parks. Hector enjoyed the journey, and they often stopped at the streams wending their way down towards the river Thames.

Every time he sat by a stream, gazing at the flowing water, his thoughts carried away to his enchanted Cendrillon, and the day they met. Now he had further memories, and a contentment about the engagement he had been unsure about. He remembered when the Earl of Riversmead had called to demand an immediate engagement.

I wonder when we'll be married. Late summer perhaps? Or maybe linked to the Harvest celebrations?

Marcus assumed the wedding would be in the chapel at Belvedere Abbey, but there was a possibility it might be at Silverton Hall. The earl had told him the renovations were nearly complete, and the family planned a grand re-opening.

I must remember to ask Olivia where she would like the ceremony to be.

He noticed a red squirrel daring to come close to him, hoping for a crumb of bread perhaps? The blue sky promised the warmth of a summer day, and he laid down on the grass, smelling the heady fragrance of the summer's day, while the sun warmed his face and body.

I miss the sun and the light in Tuscany. As soon as we are married then Olivia and I can travel to Tuscany to the villa.

For the first time in many years his heart felt light, and he savored the pleasures of a ride through the countryside on a summer's day.

Lord Ludlow was due to arrive at Tewkesbury Crescent later in the day. He's going to be stunned to find I'm betrothed before he is.

As he arrived at the mews behind his townhouse, he insisted on helping the grooms care for, and cool down, Hector.

Leaving Hector and walking round to the house he heard a welcome bark, and Hera appeared, bounding towards him and then sitting expectantly, tongue lolling out. Reaching down, he ruffled the spaniel's ears and felt its raspy tongue licking his hand.

"You and James got here before me then," he said to the dog. Sure enough James followed Hector out from the garden door of the house.

"We were looking out for you, My Lord. We arrived a couple of hours ago."

"With Lord Ludlow? All's well with him?"

"Yes, we took the turnpike south to London, and it proved to be a speedy journey."

Farthing, the butler, ran out to greet him, accompanied by two footmen. "Welcome back My Lord. There is a meal prepared to serve as soon as you are ready. Cook has prepared a beef wellington to celebrate your return."

"Cook knows my favorite meals. I'll be down very soon. I'll just change out of my

riding gear.”

As James helped him out of his riding boots and leather coat Marcus felt the first signs of muscles tightening after the long ride. “I think I’ll take a hot bath after supper,” he told James.

“I’ll get that set up for you, My Lord.”

“Thanks James. I feel the need of a hot soak in a tub. Have you heard anything more about the gossip which was circulating about me and Lady Olivia?” he asked.

“It’s not good. There’s been no new gossip, but the original slurs are still circulating. Cook told me that the baker’s boy had mentioned it when he delivered the loaves yesterday.” He paused before continuing. “Rumor has it that someone paid a great deal of money to make sure this gossip reached the farthest corners of the city .”

Marcus took a deep breath, and shared his news with his valet and confidante. “I’m to be married James.”

James almost dropped the clothes brush he was using on Marcus’ velvet frock coat. “Married?”

“Indeed yes.”

“May I ask the name of the fortunate young lady?” he continued.

“Of course. Lady Olivia Sherwyn,” he confided. “She’s a strongly independent minded young lady, who has already faced much tragedy in life. I can’t leave her facing ruin in society.”

“I think you will be happy,” said James, and Marcus knew he was sincere.

“I suspect you may very well be right there James. It isn’t what I planned, but I think she will make a wonderful countess.”

“We all liked her at Belvedere Abbey. That’s only true of a few guests,” he laughed.

“We need to set a date, but it will happen very soon.”

Next morning Marcus and Lord Ludlow set off to call at Swanbourne Place.

“You’ve been on tenterhooks all morning,” Marcus joked to his friend.

“I had to leave so suddenly, and all I could leave was that letter. I don’t know how Lady Jocelyn felt about that,” replied Colin.

“Your mother had an accident and was close to death. She will understand you had to leave immediately. We’re all glad she made a full recovery.”

“It’s remarkable,” confided Colin. “Though I’m not sure she should be mounting a horse again this soon. I had to hold my breath while she walked her horse around the paddock this week.”

“I don’t believe your mama could live without her ride every day. She’s a renowned horsewoman in the county.”

“I know. I’m still concerned she will take another fall. But as she said to me, the last time she fell was in her twenties and she hasn’t fallen since.”

“Lady Jocelyn will understand about the accident. And you’ve written to her since that first letter?” asked Marcus

Colin grew quiet and looked away. "I haven't been in touch since I left London." he said almost inaudibly.

Marcus spoke automatically, and without thinking. "Colin, you idiot, you mean you didn't write or send a note once?"

"I didn't, and even when I knew she was at Belvedere Abbey, I held back. I thought she might wonder why I had written but didn't come to visit. I can't explain it. Now we're talking about it, I can't see any logic to my actions. I think I was more distracted by Mama's accident than I realized."

"Of course you were. Aunt Eleanor was unconscious for several days. You were distraught. We all thought she might die."

Marcus clapped Colin on the back. "Come on, let's go and find your Jocelyn. We're invited to stay for dinner at Swanbourne Place."

As they walked along the pavement, in the warm early summer sun he felt a spark of excitement at seeing his Olivia again. His Olivia sounded so right.

"Olivia and I are engaged," he told his cousin.

Colin stopped walking and stared at him. "Engaged? To Olivia?"

"Why does everyone find this so hard to believe?" replied Marcus.

"I don't find it hard to believe, I'm just surprised it hasn't been announced. Is it because of the gossip? You're doing the truly decent thing, and marrying her to save her from ruin," suggested Colin.

Marcus knew that had been the impetus for his offer of marriage, but he knew it was

far more than that.

“It’s true that her uncle, the Earl of Riversmead came and asked me to consider marrying Olivia. I told him I wasn’t sure. The reality is that nothing happened between us, well nothing of the magnitude of that gossip sheet, and I refused to be forced into marriage in that way.”

“Go on,” encouraged Colin.

“I always felt something for Lady Olivia, from our very first meeting I’ve felt drawn towards her. I love her. I didn’t realize it was love, but I love her with all my heart, all my being,” continued Marcus.

“Then congratulations cousin. I am already looking forward to the wedding. Your father and mother will be delighted, I’m sure.”

“Mother hoped I’d marry Lady Cressida.”

“Thank the stars that you didn’t. We all know she is the gossipmonger,” replied Colin.

“And I suspect frustrated ambitions and jealousy to be the motivation behind her trying to ruin Olivia,” added Marcus.

“We’re almost there. Here we are, both going into the same house to meet the young ladies who have stolen our hearts,” said Colin with a grin.

A footman showed them in and then Mrs. Jennings came to greet them with a wide smile of welcome. “Lord Hatfield and Lord Ludlow. How pleasant to see you both. I hear your mother is fully recovered?”

Lord Ludlow nodded. “We were extremely concerned, but Mama has rallied and proved the doctor wrong.”

“The Viscountess Leighton, Lady Olivia and Lady Jocelyn are at home. The earl is out on business but will return for dinner. I’ll show you through.”

And there she was ... hazelnut locks with a scattering of tiny strands of ribbon, like colorful cobwebs, draped through her hair. Her day gown of coral pink swayed around her body as she came to greet him.

He took her hands in his and felt that connection, and he knew he had been missing her, ever since he took leave of her at Belvedere Abbey. They were back together again, and he felt as if he had returned home.

She bobbed the formal curtsy, he bowed, and her eyes met his with a welcoming smile.

Lady Leighton came to welcome him, and she took Colin aside to enquire about his mother. Lady Leighton took Colin’s hands in hers and led him to sit beside her, to tell her about his mother’s recovery. She beckoned Jocelyn across to join them.

Olivia suggested they go across to a window seat, pointing out the view of the roses, scrambling over an arbor, blooming in the garden beyond.

“Your uncle has invited us to stay for dinner,” he told her.

“I know. Cook has been busy all day, and understands you enjoy beef wellington, so she has prepared that especially for you.”

“I must tell her how much I appreciate her kindness,” remarked Marcus.

He glanced across at Colin sitting with Jocelyn and Marianne. “He’s nervous about meeting your niece again,” Marcus whispered. “He had to leave at such short notice, just when they were becoming close.”

“She will be glad to see him again.” She paused, and fiddled with her pearl grey feathered fan before looking up at him. “We have had many visits, and gifts of flowers from Lord Hastings. I believe he has the intention of offering marriage. So many friends abandoned us when the gossip mill started to spread false information, but Lord Hastings has been steady in visiting throughout.”

“I gather the gossip is still circulating,” Marcus told her.

“It is indeed. Whoever is stoking the fire of hatred against me is still working very hard. However, I find that the situation has changed considerably since we returned from Belvedere.”

“News of our engagement?” asked Marcus.

“No, My Lord, I’ve kept that secret close, as we agreed. I believe only our close family are aware of our betrothal. It is an entirely different and totally unexpected development,” said Olivia.

The door opened, and Mrs. Jennings ushered in four gentlemen from the top drawer of the ton, including Sir Jonathan Ellington, whom he recognized with a gasp of surprise.

“I’ll explain later,” whispered Olivia, “but I am surprised how quickly news of a large fortune can spread. For some weeks we had no visitors, and now it is as though Mrs. Jennings is never off her feet showing suitors through to our drawing room.”

Marcus sat in stunned silence while the gentlemen formed a group around Olivia.

They were each vying with each other in trying to be entertaining in their conversation. This was serious wooing. He'd been in society long enough to recognize it when he saw it.

I thought I was visiting my fiancée to talk, and begin to plan a wedding by the fall. Instead, I've walked into some circus ring of suitors vying for Olivia's attention.

He took an unusual dislike to Sir Jonathan. He knew the man by sight and considered him as veering toward being a dandy. His cravat was so intensely ruffled that it must take his valet several hours to dress him each morning.

He gazed at Olivia with what resembled total devotion, and compliments dripped off his lips one after the other.

"You must not say that to our dear Lady Olivia," crooned Sir Jonathan. "I know for a fact that she prefers to take tea at Fanshaw's Coffee Emporium, rather than Drake's Cafe."

Can this conversation become any more inane? I cannot believe I am sitting here listening to this drivel.

He stood, bowed, and took his leave to join Lady Leighton, who had left Colin and Jocelyn to talk.

"You're surprised to see so many gentlemen callers?" she guessed. "I saw the look on your face."

"I'd anticipated a quiet conversation with my betrothed, and instead I find myself part of a group of lovesick clowns," replied Marcus.

A giggle escaped the Viscountess's lips. "That description is very apt. We have had

about twelve suitors so far this week.”

“The ones today are fashionable and rich. They all seem intent on wooing Olivia. I wish we had announced our betrothal last week.”

“You must be wondering what has changed,” remarked Lady Leighton.

“I admit to being somewhat perplexed. Please, Lady Leighton, enlighten me. How has my betrothed, who last week was ruined, suddenly become the catch of the season?” enquired Marcus.

Lady Leighton gestured for Marcus to sit with her on a comfortable velvet covered sofa. He relaxed, glad that he had escaped from the circle of suitors. Lady Leighton reached forward and poured him a cup of steaming hot tea, then poured herself the same. The delicious scent of fragrant yellow China tea, rose from the delicate porcelain teapot. He held the cup close to his nose and inhaled the fragrance.

“Thank you. I needed some refreshment,” said Marcus.

“I shall tell you about my dear friend’s change in circumstances. It’s come as quite a surprise to us all. You will be aware that we thought Olivia had little fortune. She had expected to be comfortable financially but after her brother Frederick’s death she was told she had nothing but a small stipend,” explained Lady Leighton.

He nodded, encouraging her to continue.

“She will tell you herself later, I’m sure, but she discovered a few days ago that she does indeed have a sizeable inheritance which had very specific conditions. It seems she could only be made aware of it on her twenty-fourth year,” continued Lady Leighton.

“Very individual and unusual arrangements,” commented Marcus.

“Indeed. It seems her father didn’t want what we see today,” she lowered her voice even quieter. “At the age of twenty-four he knew she would have enough experience to make her own decisions.” She smiled at him warmly. “Your betrothed has a considerable fortune.”

“I’m delighted for her. It does indeed give her wider choices.” he said with genuine happiness that Olivia was no longer penniless.

At the same time, he became aware of an arrow of fear that she might no longer need their engagement. He had been uncertain, and felt reluctant at almost being forced into marriage. Yet once he had proposed, and Olivia had accepted, he had felt pure joy.

I don’t want my engagement to end, he realized. It’s what I want more than anything. He closed his eyes for a second, I hope I will still be discussing wedding plans with Olivia after the other guests have left.

He felt a little disoriented during the remainder of the visiting hours. He snatched a word with Colin as he passed. “Is all well with your Jocelyn?” he asked.

“More than. I believe she has had a proposal of marriage from Lord Hastings, but she has not accepted him yet. You were right, I should have sent letters and kept in touch while I was at Granville. I am so lucky that nothing has changed. I know she feels the same.”

“I’m glad,” replied Marcus, wishing he could be certain that things were unchanged between Olivia himself . Seeing her surrounded by serious suitors was not what he had expected today.

He watched her smile encouragingly, responding with comments to keep the conversation flowing. Olivia sparkled as she smiled, nodded, and listened attentively. Although he felt a small pang of envy about her attention to these suitors, he found himself in awe of the way she spoke with them. The reserved Olivia, always self-conscious of her appearance had transformed into a confident hostess.

Supper was pleasant, formal but with a small group. Viscount Leighton, and the Earl of Riversmead, joined them. Marcus was relieved none of the gaggle of suitors joined them for the meal.

“I must thank your cook for this beef wellington,” he told the earl. We used to call it something else at Belvedere Abbey, but I like this acknowledgement of the duke.”

“The house staff here likes you, Marcus. They don’t yet know of your engagement, but they know you tried hard to protect Olivia’s honor. That means a lot to them,” replied the earl.

Marcus looked across at Olivia, and she caught his gaze and smiled, lips rosy and her eyes sparkling in the light of the sconces and candle flames. He watched as she chatted animatedly to Viscount Leighton and the earl. Something had changed from when he first met Lady Olivia Sherwyn. She shone somehow, looking poised and confident, and he felt another sudden pang of uncertainty

They dined on Uncle Harold’s favorite white soup, Cook’s special beef wellington, followed by mutton pot pie, and a light elderflower syllabub. He looked at the amber liquid in the crystal glass, sipping the cognac, and hoping against hope that he might finally get to spend some uninterrupted time speaking with his fiancée.

Finally, he strolled onto the terrace with Olivia next to him. “The scent of the roses is lovely,” he commented as they walked along the winding garden path.

“All credit to my mother. She extended the rose collection at Silverton Hall and brought many of her specimens here to the townhouse.” Olivia reached to touch the velvet petals of a white rose, which looked ethereal in the moonlight.

“I don’t know if your mother realized she was creating a sheltered clair de lune garden. It is truly lovely.” As are you, he thought, but somehow he was unable to tell her that, uncertainty holding him back . I’ll have the gardeners at Belvedere create a rose called Olivia. I think a dusty coral pink with a heady, scent of cloves permeating its petals.

“I’d put the letter from Mr. Rawlings to one side. My head was filled with the gossip sheets, and the vindictive attempt to oust me from the ton. Lady Cressida, or whoever it was drove that campaign, succeeded. I have no doubt that without my sudden, unexpected good fortune that I would still be hiding my face, wondering what had happened to me.”

“Even then, as Lady Hatfield, you could hold your head high in society,” remarked Marcus.

“I know,” she replied.

“And Sir Jonathan? I saw him this afternoon, I admit to some surprise,” asked Marcus.

“Our families go back many years. The estates neighbor each other and we grew up together as children. I cannot hold a resentful grudge forever. He had his own reasons for ending our engagement,” explained Olivia.

The pang of fear magnified as Marcus wondered if Olivia had been holding a candle in her heart for her ex-fiancé. She is reconciled with Sir Jonathan? He’s gained her favor.

He looked at the moon shining brightly above, illuminating the garden with an eerie light. He glanced at Olivia's face as she continued to tell him her reasons for forgiving Sir Jonathan for abandoning her.

I need to leave. I need to release her and give her freedom from her obligation to marry me. We did the right thing holding back on announcing our betrothal to society.

He took an inward breath, reluctant to speak, listening to Olivia telling him the extent of her fortune.

“So much has happened in such a short time,” he said at last. “I am delighted to know about your inheritance. It gives you freedom and independence in life to make your own choices.”

“I know. I would not even be here today if Uncle Harold had not insisted I take a season in London.”

“I think it is important that you have space to consider your direction in life. We didn't declare our betrothal. There are very few people aware of our, erm, arrangement. I believe it only right and proper to offer to release you.” He bowed with forced formality, while his pulse raced, and his thoughts spun around his head.

“We were forced into our engagement by the gossipmonger's atrocious actions. I want to be fair, and let you take your time to think and look around you. You might find someone else with whom to share your life.” Marcus could feel a stab of sadness as he continued saying the words he felt he needed to say.

He saw Olivia flinch and take a sharp inward breath.

“Very well, My Lord, if that is how you want it to be. I'll tell uncle that we are to

carry on with keeping our betrothal a secret for now,” she replied, her tone seeming preoccupied and distant.

He felt his breathing ease. He’s been aware of a racing fear, coursing through his body, tightening his muscles as he expected their betrothal might end. He remembered his resistance, when Olivia’s uncle had insisted he make the proposal. He’d felt pushed into a corner, and determined not to be forced into making an offer due to circumstances beyond their control.

Marriage was for life. There had to be love, passion and desire. He’d never believed in the coldness of those formal, arranged marriages where enough of love might follow to make the arrangement tolerable.

The irony was that he hadn’t realized the depth of the connection, that pure, flowing love between them, because he had been angry about the gossipmonger forcing the path to marriage. The scandal was irrelevant, he’d already been on this pathway to a lifelong love with Olivia.

Sitting in the drawing room he’d felt true fear that the engagement might end. The situation might have changed, now that Olivia was rich. Overnight she had become a catch of the season for every eligible bachelor in town. Yet they were engaged, and he determined that they would stay engaged. He knew that moment in the woodland where he had proposed to his Cendrillon and she had accepted was filled with love and desire on both parts.

The evening had not gone as he hoped. He’d thought there would be happy, shared planning of their new life together. Instead, a continued secret betrothal, and he felt relief that they were still bound together in that formal arrangement.

As long as the engagement continued, they could spend time together most days, and he had to believe that with continued contact the feelings between them would only

strengthen.

For a few minutes he'd thought Olivia might walk away from him that very day. As long as they were engaged there was a chance that they would marry, and he knew now with certainty that this was what he wanted more than anything else.

As they walked back to Hargrove House, he shared with Colin how the evening had not gone as planned.

"I felt I was honor bound to give her the option to choose elsewhere," Marcus confided.

"I see your reasoning, but I've also watched you and Lady Olivia together. There is a spark between you. You both seem to come alive in each other's company. I truly believe this will come right in the end," Colin reassured him.

"We said we would talk again in a week's time. Until then I need to stand back while Olivia is surrounded by simpering suitors who ostracized her before she became rich. Now her disfigurement is irrelevant."

"An agonizing wait," agreed Colin.

"And your proposal to Lady Jocelyn?"

"I've given her every indication that my intentions are honorable, and I'll propose as soon as a suitable time and place arises," confirmed Colin.

"Shall we go for a swim in the Serpentine?" suggested Marcus. "Sometimes it's the only thing that revives my mood. If I can feel cool, cold water covering my head and body and swim across the lake it might help me shake off this mood."

“It’s always been your way of getting rid of anger. That and galloping across the heath at a furious pace. I wish I had your stamina.”

“We’re trained as gentlemen to keep our feelings in check, under tight control, but today I knew I was near to letting my true feelings show. I wanted to take each and every suitor by the scruff of the neck and eject them from that drawing room.” He took a sharp inward breath. “Especially that obnoxious Sir Jonathan Ellington. He reminds me of a weasel, you don’t notice them until there is carnage in the chicken coop.”

“Well, I could do with some fresh air and a swim myself. Let’s return and collect James, he’ll appreciate a dip in this heat.”

Marcus was determined to carry on, and forget about the turmoil and thoughts spinning around in his mind. He would continue to meet Olivia whenever possible and hope the connection that he knew was strong between them would continue to strengthen.

A dip in the icy water of the Serpentine lake seemed the right way to end the day.

Chapter 21

Olivia found her way back to the moonlit terrace and garden later that evening, Marguerite, sensing her mood, stayed close by her side.

Since the night of the tragedy at Silverton she had determined to be strong and keep going. She'd focused on supporting Jocelyn, knowing her niece had lost both parents in horrific circumstances.

Olivia often told herself to put one foot in front of the other, keep walking and you will get there eventually. It often worked as a strategy for coping. She'd learned the importance of distracting herself from melancholy thoughts, circling in her mind. She missed riding across the heathland. Riding in London rarely took her above a canter, and she usually needed to keep her horse at a walking pace.

Sometimes she just wanted to tear off her skirts and run, so she could feel the air against her face and sense the breeze blowing around her body. As a child she'd loved running through the forest at Silverton Hall, without the encumbrance of petticoats.

She reached out and lifted the tiny spaniel onto her lap. If Ellen had seen her then she would no doubt be admonished, yet the little dog loved being close to people, and tonight she needed closeness and someone to talk with. Her thoughts were too tumultuous to talk with Marianne or Jocelyn. She didn't even know if her impressions were right. Perhaps she had imagined Marcus' coldness.

Since her engagement, Olivia had felt a quiet contentment. A still, small place of

calm inside her had given her confidence and optimism for the future.

She was engaged to be married, and it might be a marriage of convenience, forced upon her by the gossipmongers, but in her heart, she knew there was no man she would rather marry than Marcus. She still did not quite understand the feelings she experienced when close to him, but the connection was strong, exciting, and strangely comforting... all at the same time.

Once they had become engaged, she had relaxed with a feeling of intense relief and happiness.

Tonight, all the insecurities had returned. Olivia looked around the terrace, remembering where Marcus had stood, replaying the words he'd said to her. Each time she went back over the scene her confusion grew stronger.

I had to tell him about my inheritance and the return of Jonathan. I don't want to hide anything. It was a surprise to have so many sudden admirers, in spite of the gossip, but I know it is only due to my fortune. They never even looked in my direction before. Maybe I was a little flattered?

Her fear was that he was trying to break off their engagement.

"Oh Marguerite, when he arrived I felt so happy, with an intense joy which is hard to describe. When he sat beside me on the settee I felt as if I had returned to my safe harbor in life. Then, within hours, he told me I could find another suitor and he could release me from the betrothal.

"I thought we would be naming a date for the wedding. Instead, I don't know what to do or say. Why, oh why, does life have to be so complicated?

"If he doesn't wish to marry me after all, perhaps he is hoping I find someone else, so

the arrangement can be ended, quietly and discreetly. He can breathe a sigh of relief and walk away.”

Tears formed in Olivia’s eyes. Tiny drops, which felt damp on her cheek. She wiped one away realizing her whole cheek was wet. As she let them flow, she held Marguerite close and let them fall. When she heard herself sob, she stood, still holding Marguerite, and began walking backward and forward along the terrace.

What do I do? Is this the end of our engagement? Why did I ever think anyone could love me? I’m ugly.

The little dog whimpered, and the sound broke into her thoughts and back to reality.

“I have you, little friend. I’ve got Jocelyn and Marianne and my good friend Mrs. Jennings. Even Uncle Harold seems to have mellowed in the last few weeks.

“I need to remember the things I have. There is so much that I can be grateful for.”

In her mind a plan started to form. She wanted to go back to Silverton and didn’t want to live in town anymore. She needed to feel the countryside around her. She wanted that freedom to move around, without feeling as though there were people all around her.

She wanted to take off her stockings and cool her feet in a stream. She longed to look at the woods in the changing seasons.

It’s time. I’m not scared anymore. I can return to Silverton Hall. The renovations are almost complete now. As soon as Jocelyn is settled and engaged then I can leave this townhouse.

She could either live in the house or have one of the properties on the estate

renovated. The Dower House is empty, and she might live there. She could walk, ride and write. She believed that over time she'd heal.

I was foolish to think I had a chance of happiness with the Earl of Hatfield. It's time to put that behind me. I won't end the engagement yet, but soon, very soon I'll set Marcus free.

A cool breeze whirled around her, leaves of sweet honeysuckle and rambling roses rustling high above on the pergola frame.

She wiped away the remaining tears, and welcomed a feeling of determined resolution, that she could be strong and make a life in her own place.

A haven, a retreat to be alone. She would write and share her stories and maybe others would read her books and it might help them to be strong in facing adversity.

In my next book the heroine is not going to be perfect. She is going to be scarred; I don't know how yet, but she will face adversity and overcome it.

Olivia placed Marguerite on the terrace and walked with her through the deserted garden. Her footsteps echoed on the pathway, and she reached out and picked a white rose, which stood out in the moonlight garden. Rosa Alba, her mother had planted it there long ago. She held it to her face and inhaled the warmth of the spicy clove scent. One by one petals fell to the pathway, but the scent remained.

She picked a second bloom and held it in her hand as she walked back to the house.

I can do this. I can be strong. I've loved and lost before, and this is no different.

There was no word from Marcus in the next few days. Lord Ludlow visited Jocelyn every day, and Olivia's spirits lifted to see the happiness they had in each other's company.

Lord Hastings also continued to visit, and she would always be grateful to him for continuing to visit during those dark days when they were ostracized from society. Jocelyn did not love him. She'd almost considered marrying him when Colin had left for Granville Hall, and she'd heard nothing from him.

When news of Olivia's good fortune started to spread, and suitors returned, Jocelyn had expressed no interest. Conversation just seemed tedious. Lord Hastings continued to press for an answer to his proposal, until one day, when Jocelyn had quietly explained that she could not love him. Something about her manner had been resolute, and there was no misreading the clear message. After that Lord Hastings had not returned.

Marianne heard he had quickly transferred his affections to the Honorable Miss Jane Livingstone. They all missed the deliveries of flowers. "His gardens at his country estate must be wonderful," laughed Marianne. "Jocelyn, are you sure you don't want to change your mind?"

"I am sorry to disappoint you. It's clear to me that I only want Colin. He's hinted at a proposal but hasn't made it formal yet."

When Uncle Harold asked her if the earl would be joining them for supper again, Olivia avoided his questioning gaze.

"I think he might be out of town for a few days," she muttered.

"Well, I miss his conversation," said her uncle. "I've a good red claret waiting for him to try."

“I’m sure he’ll be here soon,” replied Olivia.

“We need to start planning your wedding. I’m sure the parson at Silverton will do the honors. I wonder if that young beau of Jocelyn’s is ready to make an offer. You could have a double wedding and save me a lot of money,” said Uncle Harold with a twinkle in his eye.

Olivia smiled, rather glad that the skinflint streak in her uncle hadn’t totally disappeared. Uncle Harold wouldn’t be the same without his penny-pinching ways.

“Hopefully soon, he’s clearly smitten with Jocelyn.” She deftly steered conversation away from discussion about the earl.

“It will be good to have a wedding at Silverton Hall. Bring the place to life again,” he said, startling her with his words.

“And when are you going to announce your news?” he continued. “You’re both shillyshallying at telling people about this betrothal. The sooner the news is out, the better. It will stop this constant stream of fortune hunting suitors who are parading through the house each and every afternoon.”

“Oh Uncle,” was all she could think of to say.

He had a point though. This steady stream of admirers needed to stop. She had no interest in any of them and it was unfair to keep them hanging on.

Later that day she began to speak gently to the bevvvy of suitors and tell each that she expected an announcement soon.

“Surely not?”

“Give me another chance ...”

“I’m sure I can make you happy ...”

“I know we are meant to be together ...”

By the end of the second day. Olivia felt exhausted by the sadness and disbelief of her circle of suitors. When several new hopefuls arrived, she instructed Mrs. Jennings to tell them that she was not at home.

There was a final poignant scene in the late afternoon. Sir Jonathan had continued to call, and she enjoyed his conversation and the shared childhood and memories which drew them together.

He smiled at her across the fireplace as she poured him a cup of rich orange pekoe tea. He took it, reminding her of the first time she had poured tea for him at Silverton Hall.

Yes, they went back in time a long way. Their families had been friends and they had spent many hours at each other’s houses.

And... she had loved him. One day, when she was nineteen and in the middle of a season in London, she had looked around at the young bucks who were vying for her attention and just wanted a conversation with Jonathan.

They had begun to dance together, walk together, enjoy carriage rides and taking tea in the garden. Olivia had begun to see a life with Jonathan, which was close in style to that of her brother and his wife, and her dear parents. That was love, with a comfortable, predictable pattern of engagement, marriage and continuation of tradition. Olivia imagined a contented life with children gathered around them.

The suddenly it was over. Life changed within a week.

His return in the last month had allowed Olivia to step back into familiar conversation, laughter about their neighbors, and the community near Silverton Hall. When he'd offered his arm on a walk through the park she had found it a pleasant experience.

Jonathan clearly wooed her with focus and determination. He had brought her a garnet and pearl brooch and given it to her in the garden. The same garden where she had listened to Marcus, telling her she was free to find another, if that was what she preferred to do.

Yet there was no connection, no feeling of anticipation, or checking though the window to catch sight of him arriving. When he held her arm it was pleasant, but there was no shallow breathing, or sensation of light headedness. She had never wanted to lean close to him and feel the warm of his arms holding her close.

I think we were friends and I liked him. I suspect I believed that meant love. I know now there is something more to love. I know how it feels to be with Marcus. I don't love Jonathan and I never did.

Even so, she hadn't expected the words he spoke now.

"We've known each other for many years. I value your friendship very highly," he began.

"And I yours..." she responded.

"I see the suitors surrounding you and cannot wait. I would be devastated if you found another suitor before I've had chance to tell you how I feel."

Olivia started at him open mouthed.

“We have wasted so much time. I don’t want to wait any longer,” he said.

I’ve wasted time. I would have married you long ago...

“I never stopped loving you, Olivia. I don’t know what happened. Perhaps it was my own grief for your brother and sister-in-law.”

That does it. How can he use his own grief at the death of Frederick and Mary to explain why he ended our engagement. He told me at the time, very clearly, that it was due to his mother’s influence and financial uncertainties.

She took a sharp breath and continued with politeness. “My brother was a special person and I know he was a good friend to you.”

“I know I behaved abominably, due to a misguided duty to prioritize the family finances. I was wrong, immature and scared.”

He took her hand in his. “I never stopped loving you.”

He took her hand and kissed it.

For a brief moment Olivia found herself transported back in time. A young Olivia, eager to experience love, believing herself madly in love with her childhood friend took her place.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said stumbling over her words. “I need to think.”

“Say yes,” he cried. “Make me the happiest of men. Let’s make our families happy and plan a life together.”

Looking back on that scene, she had wanted to tell him she would give him an answer soon. She remembered the words started to form. Then something stopped her.

I'm already engaged to another. He may not want me, but today I am betrothed to the Earl of Hatfield. And ... I want to be engaged to the earl. It may not work out, but I can't give up on it yet.

“Jonathan, you are a dear friend. I've enjoyed seeing you again this past week, but it is friendship, not love.”

“You used to love me. You will love me again. I know it,” he said urgently.

“I hear what you say, but I know I cannot love you. I realize now that I never did.”

He stared at her, crestfallen.

“After the fire ...” she started to say.

He interrupted. “I was wrong then, so very wrong in what I said and did. Please Olivia, give me a second chance.”

“Jonathan,” she removed her hand. “We're not children anymore. I believe that if you had not broken off our engagement then I would have married you. I'd never have questioned my love for you.”

She looked past him at the dull, grey sky and thought how it reflected her mood perfectly.

“I'd have been wrong and missed out on so much in life. You would have missed out too. I do not believe you feel the kind of love for me which is needed for a long and happy marriage.”

For a split second the look of cold rage which crossed his face made her fearful. She shivered, then told herself that this was her old friend Jonathan and she had imagined it.

“I am convinced that I would not make you happy, and I do not believe we are right for each other,” she added.

“There is someone else?” he asked

Olivia looked at him in exasperation. “Jonathan, it is 3 years since you broke off our engagement...”

He began to speak, but she put up her hand to stop him.

“You may feel differently now, but in effect you jilted me. You humiliated me, in front of all our acquaintances, when you chose to end our engagement.” Scenes of the aftermath of the fire and how he had stayed away when she had needed him most flashed through her mind. The haunting memory of him telling her that he had changed his mind on the day of the funeral, before the bandages on the scars had been removed.

Time had passed and more importantly she now knew what true love felt like. The way it took over your thoughts, the way your body responded when the one you loved came close, and the longing to see them again when you were apart.

She would never understand how Jonathan could have been so cruel. Even if he had needed to end their engagement his timing had been brutal in its impact. She could tolerate Jonathan and bear to be in the same room as him, but she could never love him.

“Please believe that I could never marry you,” she said with certainty. ‘It’s really very

simple. I don't love you."

She gripped the arm of the green velvet settee. There, I've said it. Please go and leave me alone.

She thought of Marcus and the slim possibility of marriage with him. Then she remembered her plan to live quietly at Silverton, writing and being content with life.

She had pathways to choose, and none led to marriage with Sir Jonathan Ellington.

Chapter 22

“Marcus, where are you? You seem in a world of your own,” said Colin.

“Sorry Colin. Did you say something?” came Marcus’ reply.

“You’ve been distracted all day. It’s most unlike you. Could it be the lovely Lady Olivia causing you to show this Friday face to the world?”

Marcus turned to stare at Colin. “No, well maybe, all right yes, it’s Olivia.”

“But you’re engaged to her. You just need to set a date,” said Colin.

“Oh, if only...” replied Marcus.

“Cousin, you are one of the most straight-talking men I know. This is unusual because I’m totally confused about what you’re saying.”

“I don’t think she wants me to marry her,” confided Marcus.

“That surprises me. Are you sure?” replied Colin.

“No, I’m not sure,” Marcus stood up and began pacing around the room.

“Well, she has certainly made you seem like a bear with a sore tooth. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the household staff are giving you a wide berth today.”

“Really? I had no idea,” Marcus responded.

“Believe me, everyone is walking on eggshells around you cousin,” confirmed Colin.

“Now tell me why you think she doesn’t want you.”

“Well, she’s rich now. Look at all those men who have suddenly begun to call at Swanbourne Place, including that odious Jonathan Ellington. It seems it is different if you are ruined but rich. That house is full to the brim of fortune hunting suitors. She could have her pick of them.” Marcus said with sudden passion.

“That doesn’t mean...” Colin started to say.

“But Colin, I only offered marriage because she faced ruin. That’s no longer the case,” added Marcus.

“Your emotions are clouding your thinking. I’ve seen nothing to suggest that she is encouraging any of those suitors. She can’t turn them away, society is built on the politeness of afternoon calls. Let’s think about this logically. Has she ended your engagement?” Colin asked.

“Not exactly,” said Marcus.

“Right. So, what did you say to her?”

“I told her that if she no longer wished to continue with our engagement, and would like to find another man, then I would understand.”

“You did?” said Colin bemused.

“I thought it best to let her know that I wouldn’t press her into maintaining our arrangement,” Marcus clarified.

“So, Marcus. Did you tell her that you would be, erm, sad, maybe heartbroken, if she decided to do that?” asked Colin.

“No, why would I?”

“Well, so that she knew you cared and would be sad to lose her,” elucidated Colin.

“Ah I see,” replied Marcus the penny dropping.

“I have never used this word to describe you before cousin, mainly because you are far more intelligent than me, and you are better at fencing. However, I have to say you are behaving like a nincompoop,” said Colin with feeling.

Marcus almost roared. “A nincompoop?”

“Absolutely. You love her. It’s obvious. Does she know that? Well, we’re not quite sure. You’ve given her the impression that you would be happy for her to find another man.” He looked at his cousin with an exasperated expression. “Has it occurred to you that she might not realize that you actually care for her?”

“When you put it like that...”

“You need to tell her that you care about her and want to marry her,” Colin spelt it out. “This is most unlike you, and I suspect it’s all part of coming to terms with loving Olivia. You can be very restrained, maybe a little proud sometimes, and it’s important to keep saying you care.”

“It’s all such a mess. I started to think there was something between us, right from the first moment I saw her. Then, just as I was beginning to court her, the gossipmonger began to spread scurrilous rumors. I agreed to marry her to save her from ruin. It’s what her uncle asked me to do,” explained Marcus. “The trouble is that as I proposed

I suddenly knew that I loved her.”

“Yes, if the gossip mill hadn’t struck, you would have still wooed her anyway. However, I’m not sure, from what you say, that you’ve ever told her how much she means to you,” said Colin.

Marcus put his head in his hands. “Maybe. I think she knew I loved her on the day I asked her to marry me, but I don’t remember if I actually said that. Since then, maybe I have been a little pre-occupied. Oh Colin, what have I done? How can I make it right?”

“I would suggest that you already know what to do, and that is why you have been in high dudgeons all day. Now, I suggest we go for a ride and get rid of some energy.”

“That is something that I can do,” agreed Marcus.

“And then I suggest you go and call on your betrothed and tell her how you feel,” added Colin.

“I never took you for an expert on romance, given your lack of insight with Jocelyn, Colin,” Marcus teased him.

“A man on the verge of a proposal of marriage is an expert in terms of romance. I plan on offering for Jocelyn any day now,” replied Colin.

“I’m sure she will accept. You look made for each other,” Marcus reassured his friend.

When they returned from their ride, James came to show them another gossip sheet.

“I thought you would want to be aware of this My Lord,” he said, and handed him a

sheet of crumpled paper. “These are all over town.”

Marcus read the words and as he read them, they began to merge and blend together. He collapsed into an armchair and Colin took the sheet from him.

“Lady Olivia Sherwyn, who recently caused a stir in society by her shenanigans with the Earl of Hatfield. You may recall, dear reader, how this lady was recently observed emerging from a room with the earl in a state of undress. I can report that she has now transferred her affections to another gentleman in the ton. An engagement between Lady Olivia Sherwyn and Sir Jonathan Ellington is to be announced imminently.

They were, of course, engaged before, and Sir Jonathan left the country in disappointment. It seems this fickle lady has changed her mind again.

This writer wishes them happiness in their future life together.”

“I saw him visiting there. Sir Jonathan has returned. That much is true,” confirmed Marcus.

“But Marcus, we know this gossipmonger is vindictive. There is an intent to hurt Lady Olivia in everything written so far. This is more derogatory defamation of her character.”

“I must go and speak to her,” declared Marcus.

“You should go now. I am going to tell you cousin, that I do not believe a word of this scandal sheet,” affirmed Colin. “James, fetch His Lordship’s coat and ask for the carriage to be brought around.”

As Marcus stared to protest and suggest he walk, Colin continued. “No cousin, you

were already distracted before this happens. If you walk there, you will probably step in front of a carriage or something. Listen to what she has to say. Remember you can't believe what you read in these gossip sheets."

Mrs. Jennings showed Marcus into the drawing room, and he breathed a sigh of relief that Olivia was alone.

She stood to greet him and offered him a chair. "Will you take tea, My Lord?" she asked. "I didn't expect to see you today and it's late. Is something wrong?"

He noticed the concerned expression in her lovely eyes. He usually had no problem knowing what to say, but he found himself tongue tied.

"I wondered if you were engaged?" he finally said.

"Yes, My Lord."

He stood up. "Then I shall trouble you no longer and take my leave."

He saw the look of total confusion on her face. She stood to face him and placed her hand on his arm.

"I am engaged to you, My Lord. It seems you may have forgotten," she said quietly.

"I meant are you engaged to someone else?"

"I don't think it is possible to be engaged to two gentlemen at the same time. However, if it was possible, then please believe that I would be polite enough to end one engagement before embarking on a second."

She looked at him and he noticed a slight flush to her cheeks. "I am very confused and not sure I like this conversation," she added.

"Yesterday you told me that if I no longer wished to continue with our engagement that you would understand and release me." She took a sharp breath. "I had planned to tell you, when we next met, that I do not plan to marry anyone other than you."

"But?"

"Please listen My Lord. This is very difficult for me to say. I have indeed received a proposal of marriage from another gentleman and turned him down. I could not, of course, divulge that I was already betrothed, as it is a secret. I can tell you that I had no desire to accept this proposal, even though I am sure it caused the gentleman pain," explained Olivia.

"Would this be Sir Jonathan Ellington?" Marcus asked.

She looked surprised and nodded. "I am going to speak candidly. When he proposed I realized that I had never, in fact, loved this gentleman. I had been engaged to him, as you know, and he broke this off on the day of my brother and sister-in-law's funeral. Whether due to my disfigurement, or lack of fortune I have never been sure."

She put her hand to her face, and he saw her touching her hairline and the scars.

"I never loved him. I know this because now I do love someone. It is a very different feeling. I may never marry this man, but I could not marry another."

"You mean there is a third man?" he asked in further confusion.

"No, My Lord, and I've said this is difficult to say. I only want to marry you," Olivia said.

He saw her sit down, pale and clutching at the sides of the chair.

Had she just told him that she loved him?

He knelt down beside the chair. "I don't want to marry anyone else either. I planned on coming here tonight to tell you I didn't want you to end our engagement. What I said the other day ... I was trying to be noble and release you, if you wanted it. You're rich now, and don't need my protection. But Olivia, I would be devastated if you ended our betrothal."

He looked at her intently. Her green eyes shone up at his. He stood and helped her to her feet. He felt her trembling as he took her into his arms.

"I love you," he confirmed.

His lips reached hers, a tender gentle connection, which sparked a trail of fire through his body. He knew that however long he lived, that he always wanted to be with Lady Olivia Sherwyn.

He moved away and held her chin gently in his hands, kissing her forehead gently. "I only want to marry you too. It seems we are still betrothed."

He held her hand gently and helped her sit on the settee. He went to the door and opening it called to a footman to bring tea for her ladyship.

He returned to sit beside her and take her hand in his. "I think you should begin wearing my ring and we should announce our engagement," he suggested.

Olivia nodded her agreement.

"I need you to know, dearest, loveliest, Olivia that I was propelled into this

engagement earlier than expected due to the gossipmongering. But I know I would have asked you to marry me in the course of time, please believe that.”

Olivia smiled at him, and he felt that tug at his heart, that connection between them, pulling them together, growing stronger and giving strength.

“I’ve been desperate all day, because I didn’t tell you this yesterday,” he confessed.

“It’s hard talking about these things,” said Olivia earnestly. “I found it hard just now to tell you that I loved you.”

“I know. I love you too. It seemed so hard to say those words and now I want to say them over and over. When I found out about your engagement to Sir Jonathan, I came over straight away.”

“I’m sorry,” she said in surprise “My engagement to Sir Jonathan?”

“I thought you wanted to marry Sir Jonathan. I came straight here when I read about it,” he explained. “Ah, you don’t know. I am sorry, this isn’t easy, but I need to tell you that I read this in yet another gossip sheet.”

She paled, and he was sad that the happiness of a few seconds ago was stripped away but knew he could not hide the truth.

“Are your family here? Your uncle and the Viscountess?”

“Yes,” she answered, and he sensed the fear in her voice.

“Let’s bring them in here and I’ll explain to you all together. I don’t think it changes anything. Truly Olivia. We carry on as we planned. We just all need to be aware that the gossip mill is still grinding away in the background.”

Soon they were all gathered together in the drawing room; the Earl of Riversmead, the Viscount and Viscountess Leighton and Jocelyn. The Viscount and Viscountess had been staying to supper.

Mrs. Jennings brought in glasses and Madeira wine, and Olivia asked her to stay and join them. “You’re a friend Mrs. Jennings, please stay.” Uncle Harold nodded his agreement.

When everyone had settled, Marcus began to tell them about the latest development with the gossipmonger.

“I’d hoped this had ended. We found the original publisher of the scandal sheets, but it seems the person behind this has persisted, and found alternative ways of distributing their vile gossip.”

“There has been another gossip sheet about Olivia?” asked Uncle Harold, with tired frustration evident in his voice.

“Yes sir,” said Marcus and handed him the sheet of paper. Uncle Harold frowned and then handed the paper to Lord and Lady Leighton, and then to Jocelyn, and Mrs. Jennings.

“This is a never-ending nightmare,” said Lady Leighton.

“Surely no one could believe this,” added Jocelyn.

“Erm. I did, for a while,” said Marcus. “I should have realized it was more lies, but it brought me here to ask Olivia if she had decided to marry Sir Jonathan.”

“It’s true. I think it has had the effect of bringing us closer together,” said Olivia and she smiled at Marcus.

“We will ignore this gossip, and instead make the formal announcement of our engagement. As soon as that happens then Olivia will have greater protection with the association with my family name. My father is a peer of the realm and that adds weight in terms of law and society,” explained Marcus.

“We are sure who is behind this campaign to discredit Olivia and besmirch my family name too,” he added.

“I’m going to ask your opinion on something which has occurred to me,” Marcus then told them.

He paused and looked at the group, all listening intently.

“How does Lady Cressida know about Sir Jonathan’s proposal to Olivia?” he asked. “Who knew about the proposal?”

“Well, I didn’t,” said the earl. “Olivia, I know you wish to be independent, and I respect that, but it would have been helpful for me to know you had turned down Sir Jonathan.”

“I’m sorry Uncle. I meant to. I planned to,” Olivia apologized.

“Well, I can only say that I applaud your decision. He treated you despicably after the fire. I wouldn’t have wanted to give you away in marriage to that man,” added the earl.

“I knew,” said Lady Leighton, “and Jocelyn. I didn’t tell Charles though.”

“Anyone else?” asked Marcus.

“I don’t believe any of the household staff were aware,” said Mrs. Jennings. “I

certainly wasn't. However, there is a general suspicion that there will be an engagement between you and her ladyship," she added.

"Very well. That leaves those in my household. My parents are not in town. Colin knew of the engagement, and my valet. I cannot see that any of these people would share their knowledge."

"I agree," said Lady Leighton. "Even for an offer of money." She turned to Mrs. Jennings. "Could someone have overheard anything?"

"I can't rule it out, but I believe it to be highly unlikely. All our staff have been here for many years, many used to work at Silverton Hall and are devoted to My Lady and Lady Jocelyn."

"That leaves one possibility," said Lord Leighton. "It occurred to me a few minutes ago and the more I mull it over, the more I think it very likely."

Marcus nodded in his direction. "I think we may have come to the same conclusion."

"I think it was Sir Jonathan himself, and what's more I think he must have worked out the identity of the scandalmonger and made contact with her," said Lord Leighton.

"Of course," said Lady Leighton. "It must be Sir Jonathan."

"But why?" asked Olivia. "Why would he do that?"

"Oh, many reasons," said Jocelyn. "But I'd put envy high on that list."

"He never expected you to turn him down my dear," said the earl. "He's always had an over inflated sense of his own importance. Despicable man."

There was a knock on the door and Mrs. Jennings went to open it. She had a brief conversation with a footman who had handed her a letter. She brought it into the room with a look of concern on her face.

“I’m not usually fanciful, but something concerns me about how this letter arrived. Jason, the junior footman, tells me it was found on the doorstep, tied to a bouquet of dead roses and addressed to Lady Olivia. The flowers are saved in the kitchen if anyone wishes to examine them.”

“Can I see the letter?” asked Marcus. He turned to Olivia “I know it is addressed to you, but I cannot believe it contains anything pleasant. Let me open it and tell you the message it contains.”

The room fell silent as he cut open the letter and unfolded the foolscap paper.

His expression turned grim.

“As we thought, it is not a pleasant letter. How predictable and boring our gossipmonger is.” He turned to Olivia. “It seems you must not marry me. You should immediately return to a life of seclusion, which is where this poisonous writer believes you should stay. If you marry me then there will be dire consequences for members of your family.”

He moved across to his fiancée and took her hand. “I gather this is the first time that she has addressed you directly?”

“Yes, it’s always been via the scandal sheets. We know that Lady Cressida also spins lies and spreads gossip as she did it here at the ball.”

“Someone may have seen this being delivered. I’ll set the investigators I have working on this to look into that too. It seems clear the letter is designed to make

Olivia fearful of marrying me.”

“She doesn’t know me very well,” said Olivia with gritty determination.

“So, you still wish to marry me?” he asked with a wry smile.

“I’m more determined than ever,” she asserted. “We can start planning the wedding tomorrow.”

The earl stood, and clapped Marcus on the back in thanks. “We’re all grateful for your efforts my boy. I’ll be glad to welcome you into the family. Stay to supper.”

Later Marcus went to examine the letter and felt sure it was written by a woman. The message it contained was blunt. There would be dire consequences if Olivia became engaged to him.

Your plan has backfired Lady Cressida, he thought. You have made us all more determined to press forward and announce the engagement.

Chapter 23

Cressida looked into her mirror, pleased at what she saw. Her complexion looked good, and her maid had dressed her hair into an elaborate coiled arrangement.

She hoped that simpering baggage, Lady Olivia Sherwyn, was already on her way back to that country estate where she belonged. She'd wondered if a direct letter of warning might be a step too far, but it could not be traced back to her, and would reinforce the message on the gossip sheet which was circulating around the drawing rooms of society.

I don't believe I'd want Lord Hatfield now, if he was offered to me on a silver salver, she laughed, almost a cackle.

A new development in the form of Sir Jonathan Ellington had been a surprise. When the poor man visited, he had been seething with anger at Lady Olivia's refusal of his offer of marriage. She listened, and worked out that beneath his calm appearance, lay a desperate man who faced ruin if he didn't find money soon.

As he'd shared his story, she had realized this would feed the gossip mill. Poor little Olivia would be finished this time.

If all went to plan, she might end up marrying Sir Jonathan and he would pay Cressida for her time and effort in manipulating the situation.

He faced ruin and humiliation in the ton and access to Olivia's fortune would allow him to settle his debts. He owed money to many people and some of the names he'd

mentioned were unsavory characters, even in the seedier corners of the underworld. Cressida's web of influence spread far into the criminal underworld, and Sir Jonathan seemed to have got himself into a scary corner.

She detected a rage towards Olivia which even she thought was excessive. He'd jilted Olivia and now he complained that she refused to give him another chance.

She had supported him in his determination to drive Olivia and Marcus apart, and the gossip mill was turning at top speed, spreading lies about Olivia and Jonathan. The letter had been a stroke of genius, a flourish on her part. And the dead roses? An effective message instilling fear, and making Olivia pull away from the Earl of Hatfield.

Once she had wanted Marcus for herself. That time was long past. It had become a personal vendetta.

Her only slight concern was that Sir Jonathan had been able to work out her identity.

If he could locate her then so could others? She had no intention of being caught, as the consequences for her position in society could be devastating.

She liked the feeling of having this power over the lives of others. Maybe she did take after her French grandmother, who had known how to make love potions, and cast spells changing the direction of the lives of others.

Also, she was having far too much fun.

Chapter 24

“He’s here,” called Jocelyn.

“I could ask who ‘he’ is,” laughed Olivia. “But I suspect there is only one person.”

Jocelyn had been looking out of the window for the last hour.

“Is anyone with him?” asked Olivia.

“I’m not saying,” said Jocelyn. “You have been laughing at me for looking out of the window, and now you are asking me if the Earl of Hatfield is calling.”

“Soon after Lord Ludlow arrives, Mrs. Jennings will come and ask if we can go and confer with your uncle. That means we can give Lord Ludlow the opportunity to propose to Jocelyn,” said Marianne.

The door opened and Mrs. Jennings announced Lord Ludlow.

He smiled widely and openly at Jocelyn, who gazed back. Marianne greeted him and asked him if the Earl of Hatfield would be visiting later.

“Indeed. I’m tasked to tell you that he will be here as soon as he has finished a meeting with his solicitor.” He paused and looked at Olivia. “And might I offer you my congratulations, Your Ladyship, on your betrothal to my cousin. Welcome to the family!”

And so the news of her engagement to Marcus was out in society. True to his word, Marcus had made the announcement and was working on the news spreading throughout the ton. She was formally engaged to the Earl of Hatfield.

“I happen to know he sent an express to Belvedere Abbey, so we expect the Duke and Duchess of Hargrove to arrive very soon to congratulate you both,” said Colin.

Of course, I should have realized that there would be appearances and parties linked to our engagement s he thought.

She hoped they could keep those events to a minimum, but the duchess and duke would want to be involved in celebrating their son’s betrothal.

Mrs. Jennings appeared and requested that the Viscountess and Lady Olivia join her to consult on an issue with the cook in the kitchen. Olivia touched Jocelyn’s arm, gently, for reassurance as she walked past.

Everything went like clockwork. Lord Ludlow and Jocelyn went out on to the terrace, and then for a walk around the garden.

Marianne watched them out of Mrs. Jennings’ window, which faced the garden. “They are going down to the rose garden,” she said with excitement. “Oh my, he’s kissing her.”

“Marianne, come away,” urged Olivia.

“I certainly will not! I began this chaperonage to see Jocelyn through to a proposal of marriage and it is happening now. It is my duty as chaperone to make sure this happens.”

“Oh, very well. Has she accepted him?” asked Olivia.

“I believe so,” said Marianne. “They are out of view now. No wait... I can see Lord Ludlow coming back to the house. I believe he is going to speak to your uncle.”

“And Jocelyn?”

“Heading this way.” Marianne opened the sashwindow and waved frantically at Jocelyn.

“Let’s go back to the drawing room. Come and join us for a cup of tea Mrs. Jennings, and some honey cake. I believe you and I have another wedding to plan,” Marianne said.

“At Silvertown Hall?”

“Yes, at the newly re-opened Silvertown Hall. It’s going to be a joyful celebration for the village,” confirmed Marianne.

Jocelyn appeared, her face beaming with joy. Olivia felt tears welling up in her eyes at the sight of her niece looking so happy.

“Come, my dear. Let’s go to the drawing room where we can take tea and you shall tell me all about your proposal of marriage,” said Marianne.

Marianne smiled and took Jocelyn’s hand in hers. “I trust you are accepting him?”

Jocelyn giggled and nodded. “He’s gone to see uncle. I hope Uncle Harold is in a good mood today.”

Soon after they began their tea and cakes, Lord Ludlow and Uncle Harold joined them.

“Come and join us. I believe congratulations are in order,” said Marianne. “And, Lord Ludlow, I am going to defy tradition and give you both a small kiss. I am delighted that you are to marry Jocelyn. I have met your dear mama, and look forward to meeting her again very soon.”

She stood and went over to kiss Colin on his cheek.

“Well, my dear Harold, you have both your nieces engaged and soon to be married,” declared Marianne.

“All thanks to you Lady Leighton, as chaperone during the season,” said Uncle Harold, smiling broadly. “I believe I might retire to Silverton soon. I find it peaceful when I visit. I’d like it to be a place for family to visit in the future.”

“We are still in choppy waters, as we can’t be certain the gossipmonger will stop distributing those sheets now the engagement of Olivia to the Earl of Hatfield has been announced. The next week will be interesting. However, today we have much to be grateful for, two weddings on the horizon and Olivia’s fortune restored,” added Marianne.

Lord Ludlow departed, assuring Uncle Harold that he would return with Marcus, and his parents, for a family meal that evening.

After he’d gone Olivia spoke quietly with her uncle, asking if she should give him any money towards her and Jocelyn’s expenses. “You took us in and have acted as guardian. I know you have been conscious of the expense at times. I have the means now to make that right.”

The elderly gentleman looked at her with an affectionate gaze. “I believe I have not always been fair or kind to you and Jocelyn in the past. I believe I realized—when the rumor mill began grinding out that vile gossip, and you faced ruin—that I cared for

you both, as a fond uncle.”

He poured her a glass of his fine Madeira wine and topped up his own glass before continuing. “ I hope I have acted differently since then my dear. I have tried to mend my ways. What was it you called me? A miser?”

Olivia blushed. “I’m so sorry uncle. It wasn’t polite to use that expression.”

“I shall always count the pennies, Olivia. I haven’t changed my character totally.”

“I’m not convinced,” she said, smiling. “You seem to me to be very much changed uncle. I am grateful for your kindness and feel we are good friends now.”

“Absolutely dear niece.” He offered her a plate of ratafia biscuits, and she took one, enjoying the crunch as she took a bite of one of Cook’s delicacies.

“I know we had our fiery exchanged in the past, but as I’ve said, I believe that may be because you take after me in temperament,” added her uncle.

Olivia had to reach for her glass of wine as she began to choke in stunned surprise. He really does think I resemble him. If it makes him happy then I shall not disagree. She took a deep breath and regained her composure.

Their guests arrived soon after, and when Marcus walked into the drawing room with his parents Olivia’s eyes met his. He smiled in the loving way she had begun to recognize as special between them, and her heart glowed with the warmth of contentment.

He walked across and took both her hands in his. “You are well today?”

“I am. Very well indeed,” she replied. “It’s been an exciting day here with news of

the engagement of my niece to Lord Ludlow.”

“And now you must come and meet my parents again. They are delighted at our news,” said Marcus, as he offered her his arm, and guided her to meet his parents who were talking with Marianne and Charles.

“Olivia. We set off for town as soon as Marcus sent word of your engagement. We’ve been hoping he would find a young lady to bring home to Belvedere Abbey for many years now. I began to think it would never happen. And now we have you joining our family as Countess of Hatfield,” said the Duke of Hargrove.

The duke took her hand and told her how happy she had made them both and they looked forward to the wedding.

“Have you decided on a date yet?” asked the duchess. “I hope it will be soon. There is still time for a summer wedding. Marcus told me he thought you might be married at Silverton Hall?”

“I think it likely Your Grace,” replied Olivia. “My uncle is hoping there can be a celebration of the re-opening after the renovations at the hall. It would be lovely to combine that celebration with a wedding. I’m sure the whole village would join us.”

“It sounds excellent. You must tell me if I can help in any way. I’ve always longed to have a daughter.”

Olivia felt touched by such kindness. When the duke and duchess moved on to talk to other guests, she found herself alone with Marcus. “Your mother is so kind,” she said quietly. “I’m looking forward to getting to know her better.”

“I’m glad you like her. She likes you very much,” replied Marcus.

“She is keen to know more about the wedding. She thought I might want it at Silverton Hall. It’s a lovely idea, but I truly won’t mind if we don’t,” said Olivia.

“We can decide this week. In some ways I’d rather we married sooner, to give you greater protection against the gossipmonger.”

“I think Jocelyn will choose to marry at Silverton Hall. Uncle does seem keen to combine a wedding with a celebration of the re-opening after the fire,” added Olivia.

“I’d like to see your childhood home. However, my immediate priority is to offer to take a turn in the garden with you, before we are called into supper,” said Marcus smiling.

Olivia nodded, and took his arm, as they walked out onto the terrace and down into the sunken rose garden. The scent of honeysuckle hung in the air as they walked together, just enjoying each other’s company.

Chapter 25

Cressida's maid came to tell her that she had a visitor.

"Who is it, Eloise?"

"That gentleman who visited last week, Sir Jonathan Ellington."

"Ah, he must have news for me. Let's hope my plan is working." She drew her shawl around her shoulders. "I'll see him in the parlor. Can you ask Mr. Johnson to bring us some tea and fine cognac?"

"Very good, your Ladyship."

Her skirt rustled around her as she entered the parlor to greet her visitor. "You return again, Sir Jonathan. You have news for me? Good news I hope."

She waved for him to sit opposite her and smiled encouragingly. It is so easy to bewitch these poor deluded Englishmen. Yet the one I wish to entrance seems to have fallen for that mawkish Lady Olivia Sherwyn. This one is a bore, but he's useful for now.

"I'm afraid there is no good news. Olivia refused my offer of marriage a few days ago. I'd hoped to speak to her uncle and enlist him to make her see sense. However, news reached me this morning that she is engaged to marry the Earl of Hatfield."

Fury fired through Cressida's body. She almost snarled as she spoke. "Lady Olivia

Sherwyn is engaged to the Earl of Hatfield? Why would he offer for that milksop of a girl with a scarred face?" She stopped, remembering that the man before her had hoped to marry Olivia himself.

"She rejected you?"

"Yes, turned me down flat, then within days this announcement is made."

"I believe it is a marriage of convenience to protect her reputation," declared Cressida.

"She is rich now and her uncle, the Earl of Riversmead, has influence," replied Jonathan.

She stood and began pacing the room. "I'd go to see her, but I know they suspect I am behind the gossip sheets. It was very unfortunate when I was overheard talking about her at that ball. I don't think they would invite me for tea if I called at Swanbourne Place."

She stopped and spoke calmly and directly to Sir Jonathan. "We need to re-double our efforts. I shall write to Olivia and pour out my heart. She may not believe me, but her feathers will be ruffled. That's all I need. I plan to sow seeds of doubt about her betrothed."

"And if that doesn't work?"

"You have staff you trust? Your house is secure?" Cressida enquired of Jonathan.

"I do," he confirmed.

"Then we abduct her before her wedding. We can spin a story about how she changed

her mind and decided she wanted to be with her first love. Whatever happens she will be ruined for good, after spending time at a bachelor's home unchaperoned."

"Are you sure? I don't want to end up in the Fleet Prison for kidnap," replied Jonathan nervously.

"Trust me, Sir Jonathan. I can see how we can make this work. Of course, after she is ruined then it will be your choice whether to marry her or make her your mistress. She will certainly be shunned by society by the time I've finished with her."

"My dear Lady Cressida, your skills in scheming and intrigue are astounding. If it wasn't that I needed access to Olivia's fortune, then I would make you an offer of marriage myself."

"And I would most certainly reject you," she laughed in her menacing low pitch. "You are not for me. However, I rather enjoy your evil mind, and you are welcome to take supper with me, while we finalize our plans."

He nodded his agreement. There was a certain risk in this plan, but very few people cared about young ladies once they were ruined. Olivia already had gossip flying around town about her loose morals. This plot would build on that gossip and secure her downfall.

Chapter 26

Marcus stared at the letter in his hands.

“It’s clearly all lies,” he said calmly. “I received something similar from Sir Jonathan yesterday. Apparently, you were, erm, very close to him, and he thought I should be aware of this before our marriage.”

“Jonathan wrote to you?” Olivia was astonished.

“He did, and I cannot show you the letter as I burned it in the hearth. His plan was to make me doubt your virtue, and presumably, when I ended our engagement, you would be so distraught that you would need comfort, and he would, I am quite sure, be waiting to give you solace,” explained Marcus.

“That’s despicable,” replied Olivia.

“As is this letter from Lady Cressida to you. I have to say that her letter is far more elegant, detailed, and if I’m not mistaken, she has written using ink perfumed with lilies. Would you like me to tear it up. or burn it in the grate?”

Olivia stared at Marcus, unsure how to respond. Ever since the letter arrived earlier that afternoon, she had been unable to stop reading it over and over again.

“Olivia, please sit down,” said Marcus. “You are making me dizzy the way you are pacing the room. What did the viscountess say?” he asked, trusting that the eminently sensible Lady Leighton would give the letter little attention.

“She hasn’t seen it. I waited to show you. It’s, er, rather a sensitive topic.”

“I’ll say, and this time she has signed it, and it proves that she is guilty of slander,” agreed Marcus.

“She says that you promised to marry her, and that’s why she spread gossip at the ball. She tells me of her acute distress that night and hopes I can forgive her,” said Olivia.

“Total codswallop. There is no truth in that at all. My mother hoped I might court her once, but I never had any interest in her romantically.”

“And the mistresses? The past affairs? She is very specific,” Olivia asked, nervously.

“Olivia, please, come and sit with me and I will talk with you,” Marcus tried to reassure her.

He sighed with relief as she sat beside him on the settee. He took her hand, and she began to pull it away.

“Please, listen and hear me out,” Marcus asked.

Hera and Marguerite took that minute to come and sit at their feet, almost curled up together. He smiled when he saw the look of pleasure on Olivia’s face at the sight of the dogs.

“They like each other,” she said, reaching down to tickle Marguerite’s ears.

“They are a good judge of character as well. I think little Marguerite would know if I were a cad, though reading this letter I believe ‘cad’ isn’t a strong enough word. I think she is saying I am a bounder and a rake,” Marcus said with a grin.

He waited, considering his words carefully. “I have a past. I can’t hide it. However, I never had the string of mistresses which Lady Cressida specifies in this letter. This lady, the Comtesse Olivetti, is a matron of good character with five children to her beloved Conte. We are acquaintances and nothing more. And this lady is in fact a dowager duchess, in mourning for her husband, who died two months ago.” He paused and took a slow, steady breath.

“I was in love with the Contessa Lucretzia Fiorella. She does not even get a mention in this letter. I loved her very much and hoped to marry her. She turned me down and now spends much of her time at the court in Naples.”

Olivia gasped.

“Olivia, beloved Olivia. It is not unusual for gentlemen to have a past. I did love Lucrezia, but since she turned me down, I had been in a state of melancholia, until I met you.”

She looked at him, eyes wide, sparkling in the sunshine.

“You bewitched me in the woods that day. Since we met again at the ball, I’ve been unable to get you out of my mind,” he continued.

“She writes so eloquently, and in such detail. I didn’t know what to think,” explained Olivia.

“You need to believe that she is evil. Look at how she began those rumors, and almost ruined you and Lady Jocelyn. This letter arrives immediately after our engagement is announced, and on the same day I receive a shorter, unpleasant letter from Sir Jonathan.”

“Perhaps they are in league with each other. It is too much of a coincidence,” she

gasped. "I cannot believe I took it so seriously."

"I'm no saint Olivia, but I believe Viscount Leighton had a liaison before he married Marianne. Yet he is devoted to his wife. No one more so. Their joy in each other's company is evident to all," Marcus reassured her.

"I believe you. I have no idea why I believed any of it," she told him. "I read it, read it again, and I began to believe there must be some truth in the allegations."

"It is because you have been through so much, and you are close to exhaustion." Marcus stood, raising her to her feet, and then stunning her by lifting her up into the air. She giggled and looked down at him smiling. When her feet were firmly flat on the ground again, he took her hand in his and kissed it gently.

"We should marry next week," he said decisively. "I'll get a special license. After the wedding we shall travel to the Villa Montefalconi, and you shall rest under cypress trees in the warm Italian sunshine. Let's escape for a few months, just you and I together.

She nodded her agreement, and once more he lifted her up high and spun her round in a circle. "Marcus, stop. My uncle might walk in. I'm going to be so dizzy that I won't be able to stand up," Olivia declared, laughing.

He placed her gently on the floor, but not till after he had spun her round twice more.

Chapter 27

Wedding plans took over every aspect of daily life in both households. The Viscountess Leighton and the Duchess of Hargrove enjoyed overseeing arrangements. This wedding would be arranged in less than two weeks.

Cook calmly accepted the need to cater for guests at a supper party to be held after the wedding in her stride.

“Are there any further scandal sheets being distributed?” Lady Leighton asked Marcus. “I somehow do not think that this has finished. The sheets are targeted directly at you and Olivia, and everything is planned to drive you from society.”

“There is nothing new circulating, but I do not believe this is over,” agreed Marcus.

“But we have no proof it is Lady Cressida spreading the gossip,” said Olivia.

“You caught her red handed, spreading gossip designed to hurt you at the ball. In my view that’s proof enough,” added Marcus.

“Oh, I know she is the instigator of this vicious campaign,” said Marianne.

“One day we’ll prove it, and I vow that I’ll find a way to humiliate her,” said Marcus.

“Marcus, no,” said Olivia, touching him gently on his arm. “We must walk away from this with our heads held high. Let’s forget about her.”

“I can only try. I intend to keep the investigation open and locate evidence, even if we do not act on it.”

“They deserve public humiliation,” said Marianne. “Look at the hurt they caused you and Jocelyn.”

“Before we change the topic, I will add, that I suspect she has been in contact with Jonathan,” said Olivia. “He sent a letter to you at the same time that I received mine. That seems too much of a coincidence,” she added.

“They have to be in league with each other. The letters were orchestrated,” insisted Marianne. “Now we must bid you farewell Lord Hatfield, as Olivia has a fitting for her wedding dress.”

Marguerite followed him to the door and turned around looking sad. “I don’t believe it. You’d think that dog knew about the betrothal,” said Jocelyn.

“Have you and Colin decided on a date for your wedding, Jocelyn?” asked Olivia.

“I think it will be in August, and we’ve definitely decided to hold it at Silverton Hall. It’s a shame we can’t have a double wedding, Olivia. It could be such fun, and of course it would save uncle some money,” replied Jocelyn.

They all laughed. “He’s being very kind at the moment. No one could ask for a sweeter uncle,” said Olivia.

They all went through to the blue room where Ellen had set out maid and matron of honor gowns.

Despite limited time, Madame Beauchamps had insisted on making new gowns. “It is a wedding ma petite , and so it is a very special occasion. I shall make you a gown

which makes you look like a fairytale princess.”

True to her word, she had been working with Ellen and her sister on the dresses, and she had made excellent progress.

“I can hardly believe this is true,” said Olivia. “I’m trying on my wedding dress, and I’ll be married within the week. I like the pale lemon muslin you have chosen for my dress and the deeper mustard for Marianne’s. Both colors and fabric are perfect.”

“Now stand still Lady Olivia, while we adjust the bodice. Madame is going to create a silk bodice and then wrap a gauze like fabric over it to create a shimmering, almost luminous, effect,” Ellen instructed her.

“I like the material very much. Long and flowing with simple puffed sleeves,” added Olivia.

“I have to make you a train to flow behind you as you walk down the aisle. I wondered about it being diaphanous and floating, rather than heavy silk?” said Madame Beauchamps.

“Madame, I am in your hands. Please make all the decisions. I am happy with anything,” replied Olivia.

I never thought to marry. Now here I am preparing to marry the man I love. I can hardly believe it’s happening.

“Will the duchess lend you a tiara? Or is it best to plan for flowers in your hair?” asked Marianne.

“I have no idea, we must ask the duchess when we see her tomorrow,” said Olivia.

“Ouch,” said Jocelyn. “I’ve got a pin stuck in my arm.”

“If you stood still, then you would be safe,” murmured Madame in frustration.

The midsummer sun shone brightly until late in the evening. They all retired early, exhausted by the relentless schedule. The flowers would arrive the next day, and they would need to collect their silk gloves and Olivia’s veil.

I’m tired, but I can’t sleep. I believe I’ll write for a little while. She settled to write in her journal, waiting for the words to flow.

Dear Journal,

Soon I shall be married and to the man I love. We met in a woodland glade and that is where our fairytale romance began.

We love the same authors, and he knows the stories of Monsieur Perrault in the original French. He calls me his Cinderella or Cendrillon, and I think of him as my handsome prince.

We are in love. After the fire, and when I lost Jonathan, I thought I would always be alone. Little by little, we have discovered each other during the last ten months.

He cares nothing for the scurrilous gossipmonger. He trusts me and I trust him.

Very soon, we shall be joined together, and another volume of our romance will begin.

I heard today that my book will be published in the next two weeks. I’m so excited and have already started writing a second book.

And Jocelyn is to marry her handsome Lord Ludlow.

How my life has changed. I'm glad to be alive.

Yours truly,

Lady Olivia Sherwyn (soon to be Olivia, Countess of Hatfield)

When she finished, she stared at the page, realizing something had changed. She'd kept going since the night of the fire on sheer will power and determination. The last few weeks dealing with the gossip mill and uncertainty about her relationship with Marcus had further drained her energy.

Yet now she felt those depleted stores of energy replenishing. I'm seeing the world differently . All my senses seem heightened, whether it is smelling a rose in the garden or the sensation of rain on my skin.

I've recovered. I feel excitement about the future. In less than two days I will be married, and I have found my safe harbor in life.

Chapter 28

The morning of the wedding

Olivia kept to her usual pattern on her wedding morning and began by taking Marguerite to the small park adjoining the town house. It was only when the Lady Leighton arrived to oversee final preparations that her absence was noted.

Marcus and Colin arrived while the house staff searched every corner of the house trying to find her. He worked out that his bride was missing and had been for more than two hours.

“She should have been backages ago,” said Ellen. “I know she’s felt tired in recent days, so I let her sleep. I just went to wake her, and she isn’t there.

“She’s gone? Ellen, listen this is important. Do you think she has been missing since early morning?” asked Marcus.

“Since the time of her early morning walk in the park. She’s disappeared and so has Marguerite,” replied Ellen.

Lady Leighton slumped down in a chair. “Send a search party out to the park. Jocelyn, can you search her room. We have to find her and every second counts.”

Lord Riversmead sat opposite, grave concern etched across his face.

“Mrs. Jennings, please arrange for a message to be sent to Tewkesbury Crescent to

alert the party there to a delay,” Marcus commanded.

“Where is she? This is so unlike her.” said Jocelyn.

“She can’t just have vanished into thin air.” said Marcus.

They heard voices in the hall and an ashen faced Mrs. Jennings came in carrying Marguerite in her arms. “Look who they found, in the park, wandering round on her own.”

“Somebody has snatched her from the park,” said Marcus with certainty.

A quiet knock on the door, and a footman handed a letter to Lord Riversmead, who tore open the seal and read the contents, before handing it to Lady Leighton.

“This says that Olivia is sorry, but she has called off the wedding, because she cannot go through with marrying Marcus, when her heart belongs to Sir Jonathan Ellington,” read Lady Leighton.

Looking at Marcus she continued, without taking a breath. “Marcus, I am going to tell you now that knowing my friend, I do not believe a word of this utter tripe, this gobbledygook.”

Jocelyn seized the parchment, scanning the words. “She didn’t write it.”

“What do you mean?” asked her uncle.

“Look, this is not how Olivia writes her letters. She always puts a little flick on her O’s and a flourish on her F’s. She’s always been a stickler for her signature being individual. That’s one thing.

“Also, when I was little, we spent ages devising a signature for me, so I could write Jocelyn in a unique way. Olivia always uses that signature when she writes my name. It’s a special thing between us. This looks nothing like the way in which she writes my name. Even the ‘J’ lacks any flourish,” she continued.

Jocelyn kept staring at the content of the letter.

“She never calls uncle, ‘the earl’, she always calls him Uncle Harold. It’s a small thing, but it’s significant,” she added.

“And finally, she dislikes Sir Jonathan intensely since he wrote that letter to Marcus, where he claimed she still loved him. Even if she called off her engagement with you Marcus, there is no way she would go back to that weasel.” Jocelyn took a deep breath and looked around the group.

“This letter,” and she held it up in the air, “is absolute poppycock. This, however, written a day ago says what she thinks. It is very private, and I hesitated before looking in her journal, but she may be in danger.”

Jocelyn handed the diary to Lady Leighton who began to read, while Jocelyn continued. “She loves you, Marcus. It is clear that she is in love and looking forward to the wedding day.”

“I believe I can share this with you,” said Lady Leighton, giving the book to Marcus.

He took it and went over to the writing desk to read the words alone.

As her indignation drained away, Jocelyn looked scared. “Someone has taken Olivia. She’s been seized on the street, or in the park. She goes there every morning, so it would not be difficult to set a trap.”

Marcus returned, cold rage etched on his face. “We have to find her. Time is of the essence. I agree with Jocelyn. Olivia has been kidnapped and the chief suspect has to be Sir Jonathan. He showed his true colors in that letter he wrote to me, claiming that she still loved him.”

Lord Leighton stepped forward. “Mrs. Jennings, send one of the footmen, no, better send two of the footmen, to keep watch on Sir Jonathan’s house. He is not an intelligent man, so in all likelihood he has taken Olivia there.”

Mrs. Jennings nodded and rushed away.

“Marianne, my love, you and Lord Riversmead must call the authorities. The constabulary need to begin questioning and investigating this abduction. Someone must have seen something.”

He turned to Marcus and Colin. “I suggest you get your weapons in case we need them, and the three of us go to Sir Jonathan’s house.

“What about Lady Cressida?” asked Jocelyn. “Could Olivia be there?”

“I suspect not,” continued Lord Leighton. “She is most probably the brains behind this scheme, but she would be careful to distance herself from an abduction. Lady Cressida is far too clever to risk being caught by the authorities.”

“I’d like to see her thrown into Bridewell Prison, with the keys thrown into the River Thames. She has purposefully maligned Olivia and worked to ruin her reputation. She is like an evil puppeteer, pulling the strings in secret, confident that no one will ever prove her involvement,” said Jocelyn.

“You’re right, my dear,” said Lord Riversmead. “But for now we need to concentrate on finding Olivia. I agree that it is most likely she is held by Sir Jonathan at Lancaster

Crescent.” He stood and asked Mrs. Jennings to send his valet downstairs with his outdoor hat, coat and pistol.

“I believe I am the one most likely to gain entry to the house in Lancaster Crescent. I’ve known Jonathan since he was a lad,” said Lord Riversmead. “Never liked him, as he wasn’t kind to his dogs, but the fact remains that I can gain entry with the excuse of that letter.” He pointed at the letter where Olivia purportedly claimed she loved Sir Jonathan. “That letter gives me the perfect excuse to call and ask if he has my niece staying with him.”

He paused. “He won’t want to let me in. However, under the circumstances I believe he has little choice. If he refuses me entry, then it looks as though he has something to hide.”

He looked towards Lord Leighton. “I’d be glad of your company my boy. I could go alone, but I’d like someone with me.”

Lord Leighton nodded in agreement.

“While we talk with Sir Jonathan, my suggestion is that you enter the house via the kitchen back door, Marcus,” he continued. “Take two men with you. In fact, if you take Cook with you, I suspect you may even be invited in for lard cake and tea,” he added with a smile.

“I believe it might work, by jove,” said Marcus. “Come Colin, we have much to do and no time to lose.”

Everything proceeded like clockwork. At the end of a long day, they gathered together at Swanbourne House, and compared their stories.

Lord Riversmead started with his account. “When we knocked on the door a somewhat surprised Sir Jonathan greeted us. We shared the contents of the letter from Olivia, telling how she had ended her engagement to the Earl of Hatfield as she loved Sir Jonathan.

“He responded by saying he was surprised and had not seen Olivia. He then added with, I might say, suave confidence, that he had offered her marriage recently, but she had turned him down.

“I told him I was perplexed. It is as though she has disappeared from the face of the earth.”

Lord Leighton then joined in. “I told him we’d alerted the constabulary as I sensed that Jonathan was starting to show signs of being in a state of panic. I said we were now working on identifying a carriage seen close by the park.”

Lord Riversmead continued the story. “We kept him talking and it became clear he had already been drinking heavily. Then we heard voices in the hall and contained him in his study while you searched the house, Marcus.”

Marcus looked at the earl with admiration. “You look quite fearsome with a pistol sir. You had him pinned in that chair, with sweat pouring from his body.”

“It was a pleasure to hand him over to the law,” said Lord Riversmead. “I never expected to be wielding that pistol again.”

“Again?” queried Jocelyn.

“That’s a story for another day. For now, let’s hear Lord Hatfield’s story,” he replied with a grin.

“You were quite right in assuming the Cook, Mrs. Bolton would let us in. It seems she is a distant relative of Mrs. Maltby, your cook. We were all invited in, though I think there was some surprise at two Lords and two footmen joining her in her kitchen,” said Marcus.

“Our job was made easier because Mrs. Bolton told Mrs. Maltby all about the house being at sixes and sevens, with the young lady being kept locked in the guest bedroom on the first floor,” added Colin. “And by the way I do believe one of us should offer Mrs. Bolton a position, as her apple pie is the best I’ve ever eaten.”

“Colin, you’ve wandered off the point, but you are quite right about the pie,” said Marcus. He continued with the story.

“We soon discovered that Mrs. Bolton did not like her employer and was preparing to leave, hoping in fact, that there might be employment at the newly re-opened Silverton Hall.”

“She thought something was amiss with the young lady, who had arrived unexpectedly that morning and was locked in a bedchamber. Mrs. Bolton had already sent one of the scullery maids to fetch a constable. Who arrived soon after we had located Olivia.”

“And took Sir Jonathan away for questioning. He protested his innocence as they loaded him into the prison wagon,” said Lord Riversmead with a smile.

“How is Olivia?” asked Marcus, with concern.

“Exhausted. She’s resting but insists she will join us after supper.” said Lady Leighton. “Today should have been her wedding day, and instead she was abducted by a man she once loved.”

“We must begin to plan a second wedding day for her. I’d like to marry her tomorrow, but she deserves a special day.”

“And she should be married at Silverton Hall,” said Lord Riversmead. “It sounds as though I may have a cook in residence by then. What was the name of this cook and where do I find her?”

“She is with Mrs. Maltby in the kitchen here,” said Lady Leighton.

“Excellent. I shall go and thank her for calling the constable and offer her the position of cook at Silverton Hall.” He looked around the room, smiling brightly. “I shall also tell her she has a wedding feast to plan.”

Chapter 29

After supper, they gathered as a group on the terrace, with glasses of madeira wine or cognac. Everyone wanted to be in the open air after a long, anxiety-ridden day. Olivia came to join them, looking poised and refreshed after her ordeal.

Marcus took the seat beside her and reached for her hand. She smiled up at him. “We should have been married today,” she said.

“It won’t be long before we are married, and it gives time for a special celebration at Silverton. Time will fly by,” he told her.

“I still think you should be resting, but as you insist on joining us. I confess I am desperate to hear your story,” said Marianne.

“Where’s Marguerite?” Olivia asked.

“Playing in the garden with Hera. Our two dogs seem to get on very well together,” Marcus replied.

“She tried to save me. She barked so loudly and tore a strip off Sir Jonathan’s pantaloons,” Olivia told them.

“He was there then?” asked Marcus

“Yes, but not alone. He had too burly accomplices with him. He gave them money when we arrived at his house,” said Olivia.

“Tell us what happened,” urged Uncle Harold. “We’ll listen and then ask any questions.”

Olivia proceeded to tell them what had happened. “Jonathan approached me while I was in the little park with Marguerite. He told me that Marianne had been taken ill. I suppose to be credible it had to be someone who lived in another house. I was wary, but it sounded plausible, so I began walking with him to his carriage. Looking back, I was foolish, as it would have made more sense for him to come here to find me, and how would he know Marianne was ill.”

“Despicable wretch,” murmured Marianne.

“When we were near the carriage I changed my mind, and tried to leave him, but one of the henchmen took my arm and bundled me into the chaise. I still can’t believe my foolishness,” continued Olivia.

“He wrong-footed you. By the time you saw through his story you were in his clutches,” reassured Jocelyn.

“The rest is quite mundane. He told me that if I made a scene when we arrived at Lancaster Crescent he would find and harm Jocelyn. He locked me in that room, where I spent two or three hours working out how to escape.

“He is quite mad. He seems to have fallen on hard times and desperately needs money. What did he think he could do? Lock me up forever in his townhouse or country estate? He can’t know me well, because it would never have worked as a plan,” Olivia told them.

“I believe he thought that if he had access to your wealth, then he could have a doctor certify you were insane and commit you to an asylum. As your husband he would have had power to do that,” said Marcus.

Olivia shuddered. "I think the cook had called for the constable. I must thank her as she was prepared to give up her livelihood for me."

"Erm, she has already found another position. I've taken her on as cook at Silverton Hall," said her uncle. "It seems there is one small positive to come out of today's events."

She smiled and continued her story. "I would have escaped. The room he locked me in was above the portico roof, and I had begun to knot sheets and curtains together for a makeshift rope, to tie to the bedstead and climb down. I planned to go immediately to St. George's for the wedding ceremony. How dare he make me late for my own wedding!"

She left out the part where Marcus had burst into the room, Colin close behind and swept her into his arms. His obvious fear at losing her had made her heart tremble. In the end Colin had patted him on the back and told him to stop kissing her, as the constables had arrived.

"And I hear you held a pistol to Sir Jonathan until the constabulary took him away. Thank you, Uncle."

"We all played our part in rescuing you," her uncle replied. "I'm just sorry you didn't get your wedding day. However, we have already started planning a very special day at Silverton Hall."

As darkness spread around them, and the moon began to shine in the night sky Marcus and Olivia took a walk in the garden. "The moonlight is so strong that it could almost be daytime," said Olivia.

"It's a full moon. Have I told you how beautiful you look in the moonlight?" said Marcus.

She shook her head and looked up at the night sky. “There’s the first star. It shines so brightly.”

“It’s Venus, named after the Roman Goddess of love.” He cupped her chin in his hands and gazed into her eyes.

“By the time of the next full moon you will be my Countess Cendrillon,” he added.

“And I’m not going to miss my next wedding day. I’m determined to dance under a starry sky with the man I met in a woodland grove, not so very many months ago,” Olivia replied smiling up at him.

“Your eyes sparkle even in the moonlight,” he whispered softly as he drew her into a kiss.

Chapter 1

Lady Emmaline Moreau had always had a head for business—her father had made certain of that—but this latest deal had her most concerned. Having been the one to hear the whispers of a large ship that would be traveling from India with a great deal of valuable cargo on board, Emmaline had suggested their investment to her father.

And having done such a good job of educating her, he trusted her—or perhaps trusted himself—in making the investment that might well be the very thing to see her and her closest stepsister reach the ultimate prize. An advantageous marriage that would see them safe for the rest of their lives.

But the trip from England to India and back again was a mighty long time by ship and Emmaline chomped at the bit so hard she thought her teeth might break.

Much to her stepmother's disappointment, she had bitten down her fingernails to nubs in anticipating the outcome of her investment.

The burden lay heavily upon her. It had most decidedly been her father's wealth and good name placed upon the line, for as an unmarried lady she had nothing to invest. But it was she who had found the opportunity and suggested it to her father. She who had encouraged him to stake his wealth.

If there were to be failure and shame, they would be her own, though their entire family would pay the price for it, and with four step-siblings, and four half-siblings, it would be a high price to pay indeed.

And so, each and every morning, Emmaline found herself outside the giant oaken door of her father's study, lingering in the shadows and unsure of whether or not to disturb him.

“Emm, are you coming to breakfast?” Jane, her younger yet closest stepsister by only eight months, called from the far end of the hallway. She stood close by the door that led to the breakfast room, radiant in a patch of sunlight that shone through the window close by. Oh, how beautiful she was and yet nobody would see her beauty if Emmaline's investment failed. All they would see was the family's ruin.

Emmaline gulped hard.

“I shall be there shortly,” she called back, straightening up. Clearly her hiding in the shadows hadn't been successful. Perhaps it was best to hold her head high and get on with it. “I must speak with Papa first.”

Jane looked at her with that same look her own mother gave Emmaline, the one that said they were worried yet supportive.

They worried because Emmaline was not the typical lady. Yes, she was lady-like and tried her hardest to always look and act the part, but her father had placed a great deal of ideas in her head. They were ideas that many members of the ton would suggest had no business being there. And that was just what they were about... business. The education her father had given her was not typical of a lady, but she was grateful for it all the same, even if it did cause others to look at her as if she had grown a second head.

“Don't be causing any bother, Emm,” Jane warned before disappearing into the breakfast room, where the sounds of her family were already buzzing.

Sebastian and Victor would likely be there with sore heads after a too long a night

spent at whichever gentleman's club they had chosen. Her older stepbrothers were rebellious, thanks to the fact they were the sons of a widow and heirs to nothing.

Unlike Emmaline whose birth left her the eldest daughter and sole heir to her father's fortune. At least until her twin half-brothers had come along when she was just eleven years old, only a year after her father had remarried. Since then two more half-sisters had arrived, only making the burden greater.

Her eldest stepsister, Violet had not made matters any easier. She had married after only her first Season out in society, at 19, setting the precedence for Emmaline herself. And with Emm's first Season fast approaching, she felt the weight of the world on her shoulders. Not only were her father and stepmother relying on her to continue the family's good fortune, but she had Jane, as well as her two young half-sisters, Elizabeth and Nancy, only two and three, whose future matches could all be determined by the value of her own.

If her investment idea were an utter failure, her family would face ruin, and then who might take her to marry then? She could already imagine the laughter of her older stepsister when she became the disgrace of the family, the only one set to be safe from their shame due to having already been married off.

Bile rose in Emmaline's throat. She did not wish to be married off. This investment had to work for it would bring the necessary funds and reputation for her to marry well, maybe even for her to have her pick, though she hated to think of it in such a way.

Her husband would not be a prize for his wealth or title or what he could offer her, save for one thing. Emmaline wished to marry for the rarest treasure of all—love.

Having spent far too long lingering in the hallway, thinking on all that could go wrong, she stepped up to the door with her fist raised to knock.

But before she could do so, her father called from the study, “Emm, do come in already before you wear out the carpet.”

Emmaline could not stop from smiling as she entered the room. “You know me too well, father.”

“It is no grand feat when you have been at my study door every morning for the past three weeks,” her father pointed out, looking up from behind his spectacles. Leaning back in his chair, he gestured her forward, “Read this for me, would you, my dear? My eyes are not what they used to be.”

“Of course, Papa,” Emmaline said, hurrying forth. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. Her father had asked her to read letters to him before, that was no new thing, but somehow, she couldn't help but wonder if this one might be special. Perhaps it was a report from the India Rose .

Taking the letter from her father, she began to read, disappointed when it turned out to be a friendly correspondence from a distant cousin in the countryside on matters of no real import save the continued good health of a growing family.

Emmaline sighed deeply upon ending the reading and dropped the letter back down in front of her father. With a sad smile, he leaned across the table and took hold of her hand, squeezing gently.

“My dearest Emmaline, I find it best to put thoughts of valuable cargo crossing the ocean from my mind until I have a report in hand,” he explained to her softly, meeting her gaze. His large brown eyes were cloudy, and Emmaline could see why he was having trouble reading. He was no young man anymore and it only made Emmaline's anxiety stronger. How could he cope with failure of this magnitude should anything go disastrously wrong?

“How am I to do that when it is all I can think about?” Emmaline asked, squeezing her father's hand in return. How greatly she loved him, even more so now that he had placed his trust in her.

“Do you not have a Season to prepare for?” her father asked. He released her hand and leaned back in his chair. Regarding her with a raised eyebrow, he did not miss the way she cringed. “A young lady your age should be all abuzz with the prospect of such a thing.”

Emmaline lowered her deep green eyes at his words, unable to meet his gaze. “I am excited, Papa, but how can I allow myself to think on such things when we have no idea what we truly have to offer?”

The Earl of Monrith was a kind and gentle man when it came to his family, and as such, he rose from his seat and skirted around the desk.

Taking hold of his daughter's hand, he led her to a nearby couch and encouraged her to sit. Dropping down onto the seat beside her, he continued to clutch her hand and when he squeezed quite firmly, Emmaline was forced to meet his gaze once more.

“Emmaline, this investment, should it succeed,” her father explained in a tone that only made Emmaline more anxious, “will ensure the dowries are secure for both you and Jane.”

“And that is entirely why I am so nervous!” Emmaline blurted in a most unladylike manner. Were he anyone else, Emmaline might have been mortified but this was her father, and they did not keep anything from one another.

Smiling with fatherly affection, Richard took both Emmaline's hands in his and cradled them as he might have cradled her when she was a babe.

“Emmaline, my sweet girl, I apologize to you wholeheartedly for this,” he said, sighing deeply.

Taken aback, Emmaline’s eyes widened, “Apologize, whatever for? Is there news?”

The earl, chuckling, shook his head. “What I apologize for is the fact you were exceptionally lucky in that you got your mother's beauty but that you have clearly inherited my nature. Your head for business might well even be greater than my own but you do yourself a huge injustice worrying as you do. You ought to be preparing yourself, not troubling yourself with these matters.”

Emmaline gulped hard. “I fear I shall never be prepared.”

Again, she could not look her father in the eye. She had strived to be a fine, upstanding daughter for his sake and for the sake of the family, and yet at every turn she feared failure.

When her father lifted one hand to cup her chin, she instinctively met his eyes once more. “So long as you know your worth and what it is you are looking for, you shall always be prepared.”

His words, though encouraging, were enough to make Emmaline tremble. “What if what I am looking for does not exist?”

She saw how her father's gaze darkened, how he grew concerned. When he dropped his hand from her chin, she wished she hadn't spoken at all.

“What exactly is it that you hope to find, my dearest daughter?”

Emmaline’s breath caught in her throat. She closed her eyes and thought on all the stories she had heard growing up before her father had remarried, the stories that had

ceased the moment he brought another woman and her children into their home. But she remembered them still and might recite them from memory if she were asked.

Trembling, she opened her eyes and looked at her father as she admitted, “I wish to find what you and Mama had.”

Her father's face paled at her words. She saw the way his Adam's apple jumped, heard how he swallowed.

“What you mean to say, Emmaline, is you wish to marry for love, am I correct?” her father asked, holding her gaze.

Emmaline nodded slowly. She barely dared to breathe. She and her father had rarely talked of such things, especially lately, and so she had no idea what his response might be.

She was surprised when he said, “I can only hope you will have the opportunity to do so, my dear, and I shall do all in my power to make it so but in order to find love, you must be prepared for it.”

And with that he stood, pulling her to her feet with him. Emmaline already knew what was coming as he shooed her from his study. “Off with you. Quit your fretting about our investment and focus on what you are able to do in the here and now. Prepare yourself for the ball this evening.”

Emmaline, smiling, leaned forward and placed an affectionate kiss upon her father's cheek. “Thank you, Papa.”

What she thanked him for she didn't truly know but he did not ask. Instead, he watched her go with a smile.

Almost the second she closed the door behind her again, Emmaline felt the nerves clawing at her insides once more. There was still so much for her to do and yet everything hung in the balance with the success of one shipment determining the fate of an entire family, her family, and she had been the one to set the very thing in motion.

Chapter 2

Alexander Black, the Duke of Westmarch, sat in the back office of his club with the heels of his black boots rested upon the surface of his mahogany desk. Head thrown back with his eyes closed, he groaned. In the efforts of making sure that all had a good time and spent well within the club, he had perhaps had one too many the night before.

Yet, it was a small price to pay in order to dig them out of the hole that he and his most trusted friend found themselves in.

“How did we do, Sean?” he groaned through gritted teeth, laying a damp cloth upon his forehead. “Please, tell me we at least made a dent in things.”

Sean, sitting on the chair across from his desk, cleared his throat and looked at the ledger in his hands again before making any comment. “We took a good amount yesterday. The Lords Berbanks and Greenway were very generous.”

Alex did not dare to remove the cloth from his forehead and instead pulled it down over his eyes. He did not need to look at his friend’s face to know that the last evening’s takings would not be enough.

When he remained silent, Sean said, “Did I see your uncle in here last night?”

Alex stiffened. He had hoped not to have to have this conversation just yet. “Yes.”

He felt the tension grow heavier in the room. Opening one eye, he lifted the cloth and

looked at his friend. “He says another of my father’s debts has come to light.”

Before he could see his friend’s reaction, he dropped the cloth back down again.

“You’re jesting with me!” Sean exclaimed incredulously. “Another?”

Alex simply nodded though it was hard to tell if his friend had seen it for the cloth. With a gesture of his hand, he told his manservant standing beside the door, “Please, fetch me something to take the ache from my head. Have one of the maids fix up one of those god-awful concoctions, would you?”

Mr. Benedict dipped his head and was gone from the room without a word.

Finally, Alex pulled the cloth from his face and dropped his feet from the desk, leaning forward in his seat.

Though he trusted his valet entirely, with his life and everything else besides, he did not wish to have such matters discussed before him.

“How bad is it this time?” Sean asked, his face pale. The man brushed his fingers through his chestnut hair and looked Alex in the eye.

“Let us just say it shall make our pocketbooks tight for the next month or so, but we should manage it,” Alex stated, his throat tightening. He did not have the heart to go into any more detail.

Sean raised his brow and pursed his lips. The suspicious expression on his face was undeniable and Alex’s jaw clenched. He had seen that look more and more frequently upon his friend’s face of late.

“Are you quite certain of this?” Sean asked, closing the ledger on his thumb to keep

his place.

“Of which part?” Alex asked though deep down he knew exactly what his friend was insinuating.

“That this debt is in fact your father’s and yours to pay?” Sean said, looking Alex deep in the eye. Alex opened his mouth to argue but before he could do so, Sean continued, “Alex, I only say this as your friend. You and I both know that your uncle isn’t exactly the most trustworthy of men. Just look at how he and your father built this place!”

Alex gulped past the hard lump in his throat. There was no denying all the dark and disgusting things that had led to the very club they now sat in, the place that had come to be known as The Devil’s Lair , a secret club that only the most elite were aware of. Gambling, drugs, drink and sex were among the main points of the club, but the entire place had been built upon fear, extortion, blackmail and all other kinds of other foul things.

“Yes, my father and uncle did all manner of unimaginable things to build this place,” Alex said through gritted teeth, “But my father always trusted my uncle and so shall I. Neither of them was ever perfect, and my father was a fool when it came to racking up so much debt. But one thing he always insisted upon was being able to trust Frederick.”

Sean continued to look him in the eye without blinking as he asked, “Are you quite certain?”

Nausea rose in the back of Alex’s throat. He knew that his friend only meant to try and protect him. He was likely the only man who would ever face him and tell him nothing but the truth. And yet, he hated to be questioned, especially when it came to family.

“I am.”

Alex glowered at his friend, leaving no room for argument. Though he and Sean had been friends since they were small children—ever since Sean’s father, Lord Seymour, had sold him to Alex’s father to pay his own debts to the club—Alex would not sit idly by and allow him to talk ill of his uncle.

The man was a scoundrel, a drunkard and a gambler, but one thing was always certain, the Black brothers had always been about family and Alex and his younger sister Lorraine were the only family his uncle had left now.

“Besides, the shipment from India should be coming in shortly and that shall change all of our fortunes,” Alex pointed out.

“The sooner it arrives, the better,” Sean scoffed. He pulled open his ledger again and glanced down at the pages. “With our own investment and that of the loan you gave the Earl of Monrith our debts shall be more than covered.”

Alex nodded agreement, flinching at the reminder that they were not yet entirely out of the loaning business. It was a business he would rather not be in, especially with his father having earned the title of The Devil Lord — which Alex inherited—thanks to the dark ways in which his father and Frederick had gone about seeing their investments and loans returned.

Violence and blackmail had been his father and uncle’s main resources, and though Alex had used the threat of such things often, he very rarely had to actually use them.

When he closed his eyes, he could still see how easily his father and uncle had ordered their men to crack heads or set property alight. He still heard the screams of women and children as they paid dearly for the debts of their husbands and fathers.

“We shall all be much more comfortable once the shipment comes in,” he agreed. At that moment, Mr. Benedict returned, knocking quietly before he entered.

“Your grace, your tonic,” the man said, dipping his head even as he offered Alex a silver tray. Upon it sat two glasses. Alex took one of them and waved the valet away. The man turned and offered the second glass to Sean. “My lord.”

Sean wrinkled his nose and waved the glass away. “No, thank you, Benedict. I would rather deal with the sore head than feel nauseous for the rest of the day.”

Alex chuckled at his friend. He had never had much of a strong stomach. Though Alex could understand his turning down such a drink. The raw egg and shredded garlic mixture wasn’t the most wonderful tasting concoction in the world. In fact, he held his nose and drained the glass as quickly as he could.

Benedict simply dipped his head again to Sean, bowed to Alex and then retired back to the edge of the room with the tray still in hand as if he thought Sean might change his mind.

Grimacing with the aftertaste of the tonic, Alex closed his eyes and groaned, placing the glass on the desk in front of him. When he opened his eyes again, Sean was looking at him with a questioning expression. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

He heard Sean take in a deep breath. His friend averted his gaze before he said, “I was merely wondering where we stand on the matter of your father’s letter?”

It was Alex who inhaled sharply this time. He hated any mention of that damned letter. Having worked so hard to see substantial returns on his business, and working even harder to pay off the debts of his father that still racked up, he hated any mention of the letter containing his father’s oddest request upon his deathbed. It was one his uncle hadn’t wished to give him until he had recovered from the enormity of

his grief.

“What of it?” Alex asked, turning his attention to the papers on his desk. He could no longer bring himself to meet his friend’s gaze when Sean lifted his head and looked at him again.

“Time grows short, Alex,” Sean warned, and Alex’s chest tightened. He most definitely did not need his friend to tell him that. With each day that passed, he felt his twenty-seventh birthday growing closer. “Do you truly believe that Frederick would stand any chance of being a good duke?”

Alex cringed. The thought had never crossed his mind when he had been a child. Even when he had been a young man, he had never imagined anyone but himself following in his father’s footsteps.

When he had read the letter signed by his father that stated if he did not marry by his twenty-seventh birthday in order to produce an heir for the estate, the dukedom would pass to his uncle. He had been unable to believe what he was reading.

In fact, he had read the letter over and over for what felt like a million times before it had begun to sink in. He even had his uncle and Sean read it aloud to him several times in order to fully understand what his father wanted of him.

It was one thing to know that he must one day marry and have children in order to do his duty to the dukedom and his family, but it was quite another for his father to have put such a deadline upon such things.

For the late duke to have put this weight upon his shoulders made him feel sick. He had always been prepared to do his duty to his family. A large amount of his finances that didn’t go toward the betterment of the estate went toward paying for his half-sister’s education in France. It was a price he was willing to pay for his sister’s health

and welfare. He loved her a great deal. To have it all put at risk due to his father's deadline upset him.

“I need not answer that question,” Alex said through gritted teeth. “Frederick shall never be duke.”

The scowl that had taken over his expression deepened and tugged upon the tight scars that covered ninety percent of the left side of his face. Though the scars were years old and finally faded to silver, they were still uncomfortable and caused a great deal of people to stare at him like he was some kind of monster.

There was only one benefit to the wounds: they aided him a great deal in the mystery of The Devil Lord that allowed him to induce fear without even needing to act.

What they did not help with was his willingness to enter into the public eye and search for an eager bride. Nor did he believe he was going to have any great chance of finding one with such an appearance.

“Then you have a plan?” Sean asked, pulling Alex out of his thoughts

“I plan to find a wife,” Alex stated, groaning deeply, he added, “I merely do not know how.”

Sean cleared his throat and pointed out, “The London Season begins this evening. Lord and Lady Beaufort’s opening ball is set to be the biggest and best yet.”

Alex flinched. Another thing he did not need pointed out to him. There were a number of unopened invitations upon his desk, ones he had not yet had the courage to open for fear he could not decline them.

He had lived the life of a recluse for near on two years since his father’s death, only

meeting with the gentlemen and nobles who entered his establishment, and generally keeping his face covered with a hood in the darkness of the club. But remaining hooded within ballrooms and dining rooms was not something permitted in proper society and masks made his scars itch terribly. So, he had avoided all he could.

Yet, the rumors surrounding him were growing more and more mysterious and not a one of them would help him to find a bride. Besides, those who would have him simply for his assumed fortune and his title were of no interest to him.

If he were to live the life of a recluse with a wife at his side, he wished to at least get along with her.

“Maybe it is time I open these,” Alex sighed, laying his hand upon the pile of unopened invitations. Sean nodded silently and leaned forward with encouragement.

As expected, when Alex opened the many invites that had been abandoned on his desk, he found that chief amongst them was an invitation to the Beaufort Ball.

“Shall we attend?” Sean asked when Alex sighed and handed him the invitation.

Every fiber of Alex’s being screamed at him to decline the suggestion, but he was all too aware of his father’s letter burning a hole in the top drawer of his desk.

Biting the inside of his lip, he turned to Mr. Benedict and sighed, “Please return to Westmarch House and have my bath drawn and my best clothes set out.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw excitement unfold upon Sean’s face. It took all he had in him to turn his attention back when Benedict bowed and removed himself from the room.

“You are not jesting with me, are you?” Sean asked, looking as if he were attempting

to temper his excitement.

Alex was tempted to say that he was, and call Benedict right back. Instead, he gritted his teeth and nodded. “I have held it off for long enough. It is time I showed my face in society again.”

Just saying the words in such a manner—knowing the horrid state of his face—Alex shrank back. Yet, the elation on his friend’s face was evident, helping calm his nerves on the matter.

Sean jumped to his feet, looking almost as excited as he had when Alex announced his friend’s freedom. It had been his first act as the Duke of Westmarch. Having been a servant of the late duke for near on eighteen years, Alex thought his friend more than deserved it.

Though he was grateful and relieved when Sean had agreed to stay on as his business partner and friend. He wasn’t sure how he might have handled what was to come without him at his side.

“Oh, Alex, I never thought this day would come!” Sean exclaimed, holding his ledger to his chest, his thumb removed from between the pages as though all thoughts of business had left his mind.

Alex raised one hand to silence him, rubbing his temple with the other as he warned, “Sean, do lower your voice.”

Though the tonic had begun to take effect, he was not yet prepared for raised voices.

Sean laughed at that and leaned over the desk, “Perhaps that shall teach you not to drink so much while on the floor of the club.”

Alex scoffed in return. They both knew that would never happen. Alex needed the liquor to dull the pain of the patrons' stares, containing fear or curiosity or even outright horror. Whichever it was, it did not matter, for they never looked at him as if he were anything but a gruesome curiosity in some kind of circus act.

Though a part of that was his own doing, by his playing the part of The Devil Lord ever since his father's demise, it still pained him to feel the effects of it. At any time, he could put down the mantle of The Devil Lord but the same could not be said for the scars that had become somewhat of a mask, hiding his true nature.

"I shall try to remember that for next time," Alex growled at his friend. "Why don't you go and get yourself prepared. I am certain we both need to bathe and have a shave after these last few weeks."

He had been taking his title of devil lord to extremes of late, and he suspected his current appearance would not help him in finding a bride, which he had little hope of doing as it was.

"Indeed," Sean agreed, crossing the room to put the ledger back inside the safe. It was only once he had locked it that he turned to Alex's desk and promised, "Have no fear, Your Grace, for we shall find you a bride tonight!"

Alex scoffed at that, wishing that he could have such confidence. Too many were dependent upon him to find a bride: Sean, Lorraine, the charities he supported. He had taken to donating half his wealth to help those who suffered at the hands of gambling, drugs and all other manner of horrendous things—things his father had a huge part in.

"I shall not be proposing upon the floor of the Beaufort ballroom!" Alex called after his friend even as he hurried from the room to prepare.

Sean paused at the door and said over his shoulder, “Be that as it may, you can certainly set your sights on the lady.”

He winked devilishly and Alex wondered whether it ought to be him with the title of devil lord.

Sean dipped his head. “Your grace.”

And then he was gone from the room, leaving Alex to wonder, what have I set in motion?

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:20 pm

The ball that Emmaline's father had made mention of was the very first of the Season—Emmaline's very first Season—which for many young women was a time of excitement and joy.

All Emmaline felt as she prepared for the evening in her room, was nerves. They churned in her stomach until she felt sick right to the back of her throat. It was only the knowledge that Jane would be at her side, on her first Season out in society too, that gave her any sense of relief at all.

“How do I look?” Jane asked, standing before the full-length mirror. Twisting this way and that in her peach gown, she was stunning as ever. With pale blonde hair much like Jane’s mother and sisters, she was beautiful and fair. Emmaline wouldn't be surprised if she turned out to be the belle of the ball just as Violet, her sister, had been at her debut.

“You look just like Violet,” Emmaline said, meaning it as a compliment but it only made Jane's face wrinkle in disgust.

“That is the last thing anyone should wish to look like!” Jane protested, turning to face Emmaline with her hands tightened to fists at her sides. “Do you think I should change? The last thing I wish to look like is a sour-faced old trout!”

Emmaline bit back laughter and rose from the edge of the bed where she sat to allow the maid to help her on with her shoes. The blasted things were mighty uncomfortable, and they pinched her toes terribly, but as her stepmother assured her, they were the height of fashion and so they had to be worn.

Every woman must follow society's standards, fashions and trends, and the heavens help them if they didn't. Emmaline had long since learned not to argue on such matters no matter how uncomfortable. There were other things to fight for, like her right to do the business that her father had instilled within her from an early age.

Crossing the room, she said, "Violet is only a year our senior and she is your blood sister. It is only right you should look like her."

She stopped before Jane and laid her hands upon her sister's shoulders. They might only have been sisters by marriage but to Emmaline, Jane was the closest thing she truly had to a sister. They had shared a room for as long as she could remember and with only eight months between them, they had always been close.

"She is still a sour-faced trout even if she is not old!" Jane insisted, wrinkling her nose again. "Do not compare me to her Emm, for I shall never live up to it."

Emmaline cupped her sister's face in her hands and sighed, "I only meant that you look beautiful, my darling little sister, and you shall surely be the belle of the ball."

"Not if you steal away the attention," Jane insisted. She pulled Emmaline's hands from her face and held them out so she could look Emmaline up and down. "The purple of your gown does wonders to bring out your eyes!"

Emmaline blushed at that. She often received compliments on just how green her eyes were, especially when she wore purple which just so happened to be her favorite color.

"I could never compare to you, darling Jane," Emmaline insisted. She lifted Jane's hands to hers and kissed them. "Besides, with Violet already wed, everybody shall be looking to you to make the next match."

"And you!" Jane insisted, nudging her playfully with her ankle before she turned

back to regard herself in the mirror once more. “You are far too smart not to have some gentleman or nobleman snap you up at the first chance he gets. Just look at you!”

Jane pulled Emmaline into the view of the mirror beside her and twisted one of Emmaline's curls around her finger before letting it drop once more to frame her face.

“I fear the men of the ton are not all that interested in brains,” Emmaline pointed out grimly. She had seen the hounds at the door the day Violet first stepped out into society. Many of them had been fortune-hunting nobodies or second sons looking to make an advantageous marriage with the stepdaughter of an earl.

As the true-born daughter of one, Emmaline imagined her prospects might be slightly higher, but she had met enough gentlemen already, and heard enough of Violet's whisperings and gossip a year earlier to know what men really looked for in a woman. They wanted beautiful trophies on their arms and in their beds, women they could use to gain the envy of all other men. Brains meant very little compared to breeding, beauty and behavior where a wife was concerned.

“I shan’t imagine there are many men who would be willing to take a woman to wife who has a better head for business than he,” Emmaline said, mimicking her stepmother who had so often said such things that Emmaline could recite entire speeches on the matter.

“Oh, don't listen to Mama!” Jane insisted, waving the matter away. “Any man shall be lucky to have you and if they cannot see past their own foolishness, then they are not the one for you anyway!”

Emmaline smiled in agreement though deep down she wasn't quite so certain. To hear her stepmother talk in private, she was practically unmarriageable thanks to her father's insistence on putting a clever head upon her shoulders. And to be looking for love? That might well be just as foolish, considering one simple question: who could

love a woman whose head for business outmatched even most gentlemen's'?

Having been born a woman had only made Emmaline more determined to learn all there was, spending hours reading by candlelight while the rest of the household slept, or questioning her father whenever he was in a mood to answer.

Perhaps she had set herself up for failure, but one thing she had always been determined of... if she were to fall in love, she wished for that person to love her back for who she was, not someone that she pretended to be, as she so often saw the other young ladies of the ton do.

Many of them were quite as dim as they were made out to be but a number of them, Jane included, she had seen a spark of intelligence in. And she feared that spark might be extinguished in any number of them before the Season was over.

She had seen how the light had been dimmed already in Violet and many of her friends once wed. And the thought of it terrified Emmaline.

She thought, perhaps, she might prefer to be a lone spinster, content to find a way to live through business if she must, though she was certain nobody would do business with her without a wealthy male patron. Without her father, a husband would be needed, and though she hated to think of a world without her father in it, she was no fool to believe he would live forever. He had reminded her so himself many times during their lectures together.

"Emmaline, are you quite well?" Jane asked and Emmaline realized she had been staring at herself in the mirror, considering her options or lack thereof. Jane only ever used her full name when something was the matter.

Blinking heavily, Emmaline cleared her throat and said, "Yes, though I wonder, Jane, would you promise me one thing before we begin this horrid charade?"

Jane paled a little. "I'm quite certain it won't be that bad, Emm."

Emmaline smiled sadly at her sister and took hold of both her hands again. Squeezing, she held her hands to her chest and said, "Promise me, Jane, promise me that no matter what this Season brings we shall always look after one another, even if one of us shall be married by the end of it."

"Especially if one of us shall be married by the end of it!" Jane corrected her, squeezing her hands in return. "Always, Emmaline. You need not even ask!"

Emmaline felt a hint better as she and her stepsister embraced, the promise committed between them.

"Mama told me not to talk about it, but I overheard her and Violet talking about how The Duke of Westmarch will be in attendance this evening."

Emmaline cringed at the mention of the duke, not because she knew him but because she sympathized with him. Just as those closest to her always discussed how brainy she was, they discussed how horribly tragic the Duke's life had been—and how horrendously disfigured he was.

"I am sure there will be many nobles in attendance," Emmaline pointed out. It was, after all, the first ball of the Season and Lady Beaufort was well known for her soirees.

"Yes, but none so lacking in choice than Lord Westmarch," Jane said. "They say he means to take a wife this year but that he shall have trouble finding one, what with his scars and all."

"We all have scars, Jane," Emmaline snapped back at her sister, most disgusted that Jane should talk in such a manner when she was the sweetest of their entire family. "You have spent far too much time with Mama and Violet."

She shook her head, removing her hands from Jane's to pick up her gloves from where the maid had laid them out on the vanity table beside the mirror.

“A scar on your elbow from falling off the tree swing in the back yard is hardly the same as the duke's burns,” Jane protested, crossing her arms over her chest. “And I resent that you should say such a horrid thing, Emmaline!”

“Perhaps, then, you ought not to be so horrid!” Emmaline said, cringing as she pulled on her gloves.

“They don't call him the scarred duke for nothing, Emmaline! Mama says nobody in their right mind would have him even if he is the most eligible bachelor in London... on paper.”

Emmaline's stomach twisted. She couldn't help but feel as if she had lost her sweet sister to the sickness that was society.

“How can anyone speak to that when society has not laid eyes upon the duke in heaven knows how long?” Emmaline demanded. In all the talk of him, she had never heard an eyewitness account, only whispering that never quite seemed to add up.

One thing was certain: though she had no interest in the duke with regard to marriage—as she would not consider anyone for marriage without first having laid eyes upon them and having gotten to know them—she did have an interest in learning the truth. It was a downfall of hers, always and forever to be intrigued by mystery and with a determination to get to the bottom of it.

There were many rumors on the Duke of Westmarch: that he had been in a carriage accident; that he had fallen from his horse and been horribly disfigured; that a candle had been knocked from his nightstand and that his entire house had almost been burned to the ground. But she did not have any true connection to the duke, so she took everything she heard with a pinch of salt. One thing was sure, she would be

pleased to lay eyes upon the man if only to dispel the rumors she had overheard over the years.

“Every duke has family, Emmaline, and friends,” Jane countered, furrowing her pale blonde brow. “Besides, since his inheriting the dukedom, he has far less chance to hide as he once did.”

Emmaline thought it an odd image. To imagine a mighty duke hiding from anything was an odd thing indeed. The Duke of Westmarch might well be the most interesting member of the ton and not a one of them would realize it for the simple fact they could not see past his scars.

Though she had no real scars of her own, Emmaline empathized with the man; all they ever saw in her was the daughter of a widower, a poor young girl whose mother had perished during her childhood when a girl so needed a mother. That was her scar to bear, and she bore it as bravely as she was able.

Closing her eyes, she sucked in a deep breath and attempted to change the subject. “Sebastian and Victor shall be there this evening also. We must do our best to keep an eye on them and ensure they don't dance with anyone Mama and Papa might deem unfit.”

Jane scowled at her as if she knew exactly what she was trying to do. “Seb and Vic can take care of themselves. It's us I worry about. They have been to a hundred balls by now and not a wedding bell amongst them. The fate of the family lies with us!”

Emmaline flinched. No, dear little sister, it lies with me.

Though she knew well it did not lie with her in the way Jane assumed.

It mattered not who they intended to marry if their father had no dowry to offer. No duke would even sniff in their direction were she to bring shame upon their

household in the form of a fruitless investment.

And with fewer reports coming, and those that did were further apart, Emmaline couldn't help but fear the worst.

She had promised her father to put it from her mind and for the most part that day, she had, but now as she prepared to leave for the ball with only a glove button to do up, she couldn't stop the thoughts from coming.

What good is searching for a husband when tomorrow we might wake up penniless?

The Beaufort Ball, just like any other ball, was just as one would expect. Emmaline was bombarded with people making her acquaintance and young gentlemen asking her to dance.

Ever the good daughter and always aiming to offer herself to society at the highest standard—as her parents expected of her—she accepted the dances willingly. It would not be at all appropriate for her to decline even a single offer without good reason.

And though she loved to dance, as she loved all things movement and fun and freedom, she did not like every dance partner that crossed her path.

As they so often liked to do, each of her brothers took her for a turn about the dancefloor first, she and Jane sharing the two of them in order to get a feel for their surroundings.

And then came the hunt. From the second the younger of her two brothers released her, Emmaline felt like prey. Her dance card was quickly filled with names, and she felt as though she might never be free again.

By the time the third dance had finished, she detested the idea of a fourth thanks to

the youngest Beaufort son having stomped on her toes so many times she thought she might not have a single one that wasn't sore.

Then the elder Beaufort son took his turn, parading her about the floor as if he wished to show off his prowess on the dance floor to everyone who might look. He had always been a bit of a dandy and Emmaline found it quite laughable.

Dance number five made her wish she had never come at all. As Mr. Denstone, the second son of Viscount Denstone, began by asking her if she liked needlework and flower arranging, before he moved onto such topics as how many children did she hope to have and was she amenable to living with her husband's family, and did she like the name Robert for a boy or Roberta for a girl?

Mr. Denstone had never been very bright and though he was quite likable, Emmaline disliked him greatly that night.

By the time she managed to find a quiet moment at the edge of the dance floor, half-hidden behind a freestanding marble flowerpot, she was quite exhausted.

She would have been content to remain by herself for the rest of the evening with only shadows for friends if it were not for Jane joining her. And her sister looked almost as disheveled as she felt.

“How was your dance with Mr. Penwick?” Emmaline asked when Jane slipped into the shadows behind her.

“About as well as yours with Mr. Denstone, I suspect,” Jane sighed. “If these are the men on offer to wed this year, I fear we shall still be on the marriage mart next year.”

Emmaline chuckled. So far, the offerings had been poor indeed, but she was determined to remain hopeful, even if only for duty's sake, “The evening is not over yet and if I know Lady Beaufort she has arranged twice the number of dances we

ordinarily partake in.”

“ That woman would have us all dance until dawn and wed to partners by breakfast if she had her way,” Jane pointed out and Emmaline couldn’t stop from laughing. She could imagine it all too easily.