



A Lady Trapped in a Lustful Storm (Lust and Love in High Society)

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Category: Historical

Description: Lydia Carter, the eldest daughter of the Marquess of Briarwood, cared more about seeking justice for tenant farmers than ball gowns and the marriage market. Yet, as the seasons biggest social event approached, Countess Winstones ball, she found herself unable to avoid attending. To her surprise, a chance encounter with a half-dressed trespasser, who turned out to be the Countesss eldest son, Joseph, ignites a sizzling passion within her. As a storm traps the guests in the manor, dangerous secrets begin to unravel, along with burning desire.

Would Lydia risk her familys reputation by pushing the boundaries of propriety?

Lord Joseph Penton knew his mother would insist he find a wife this season. Yet, all he could think about was the feisty green-eyed nymph by the spring who had ignited his deepest desires. When he finds her again at his familys ball, he devises a scandalous plan: offer Lydia a compelling reason to agree to a fake engagement in order to stop his mothers meddling. However, as their scheme unfolds, Lydia makes her own sinful requests and Joseph realizes she is more than meets the eye.

Will he be trapped in his own lustful deal?

As Joseph and Lydia navigate their growing passion behind closed doors, other notorious guests, also trapped at Winstone House, take a devilish stand, determined to destroy their romance. Lost among unspoken secrets, family scandal, and the relentless pursuit of a cunning woman, Joseph and Lydias worlds are stretched to a breaking point. Will they find the road to each others hearts? Can they fight against lies and schemes, or will they become pawns in their own game of seduction?

A Lady Trapped in a Lustful Storm is a historical romance novel of approximately 60,000 words. No cheating, no cliffhangers, and a guaranteed happily ever after.

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Chapter 1

Cheltenham, England

1818

“You do realize that these ridiculous balls are a complete waste of a woman’s time, right?”

Lydia Carter planted her hands on her hips and furrowed her brow. How could her younger sisters rattle on about something as trivial as the bloody Winstone ball when so many working class families around them struggled to survive?

Who cares about pompous parties when others are suffering so?

“Now, Lydia. Even you cannot deny the excitement of handsome Viscount Winstone finally returning from his travels. And just in time for the biggest event of the season hosted by the Countess Winstone herself!” Middle sister Eleanor studied her reflection in the full-length mirror as the family’s seamstress hemmed her newest formal gown of silver, adorned with delicate embroidered white flowers.

Lydia huffed in reply, then paced back and forth in her white linen shift around the large dressing room. The three sisters often shared this private room for fittings and alterations.

“The return of Lord Joseph Penton has no value to me whatsoever, Eleanor. He’s just another titled man with no concern for society beyond the privileged ton. Besides, we

all know that his mother, the imposing countess you so admire, loves any opportunity to pretend to be queen.”

The gasps that filled the room stopped Lydia’s steps. She turned around to see both of her sisters’ mouths agape and the seamstress wide-eyed with shock.

“Lydia! If Mama heard you speak those scandalous words, she’d have such a fit it would burst her corset strings!” Youngest sister Charlotte admonished the eldest with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. She held two jewel-encrusted necklaces in each hand and shook them for effect.

“You just helped prove my point, Charlotte. Women in society aren’t allowed to have their own opinions, much less share them without the risk of ruin. Marrying a viscount would only silence me more. So why would I ever consider that fate?”

“Because the rest of us would savor the peace?” Eleanor smirked at Lydia, then winked at Charlotte.

“An excellent quip for someone with such grace and poise, Eleanor.” Charlotte winked back with a smile.

“I learned from the best, dear sister.”

“Oh, would the two of you stop? I wish to never waste my time explaining the plights of others to you again.” Lydia pulled on her robe and stomped toward the dressing room door.

“Rest assured we share that wish, sister! And one less woman competing for Lord Penton’s attention does not ruin our day!”

Charlotte’s retort echoed in the hallway as Lydia left the dressing room and slammed

the door behind her.

Back in her own bed chamber, Lydia's frustration only grew. But she knew what would help ease her mind, even if her sisters didn't understand the things that mattered to her the most.

Lydia tucked her long chestnut hair into a loose bun and pulled on her most comfortable country dress. It was moss green, well-worn, and didn't make anyone think the wearer might be the eldest daughter of a marquess.

While her sisters longed to stand out, Lydia preferred to blend in with the background, especially during her many walks in the beautiful landscape surrounding their country home.

A walk is just what I need to clear my head. And maybe make a difference in someone else's life.

After donning her plainest-looking cloak and bonnet, Lydia dismissed her maid for the afternoon. Walking quickly through the house, she peeked around every corner as she made her way through the floors and hallways leading to the basement steps.

Once below ground, Lydia hesitated a moment to build her confidence, then entered the vast kitchen as if she belonged there.

However, the cook's pinched face that greeted her did not reflect a sense of welcome.

"Another one of your extravagant picnics, I presume, Lady Lydia?" Mrs. Tate raised an eyebrow and continued beating a large bowl of eggs.

"Yes! Thank you, Mrs. Tate. Is the largest garden basket where it usually..."

“Right where you left it yesterday, m’lady.”

“Ah, good! I’ll pack it myself again, thank you.”

Lydia lifted the large handled basket off the bench inside the back door, then waved at Mrs. Tate with a painted-on smile. She was always self-conscious during these visits to the kitchen and worried her true intentions would one day be discovered.

Fortunately, she could pack her basket alone. Most of the foods she sought were stored in the root cellar and the ice house behind the house.

But Lydia wasn’t naïve. She knew the cook suspected she was giving food away, though she never outright accused her of it. Perhaps Mrs. Tate secretly supported Lydia’s efforts to help those in need among the tenants on their land.

Or maybe she just didn’t want to risk being an accomplice by learning more.

“You sure do have a hearty appetite for such a petite young lady.” Mrs. Tate wiped her hands on her apron and grinned.

Lydia smiled in return, this time with sincere gratitude. “I suppose I’m still a growing girl, Mrs. Tate. Thank you again for the wonderful food.”

She grabbed a loaf of sourdough bread from the many loaves cooling on the kitchen counter, then made her way outside.

Alone with the food stores in the ice house, Lydia added a steak and ale pie, plus cheese and butter to the bread in her basket. From the root cellar, she collected onions, potatoes, carrots, and a jar of gooseberry jam.

After stuffing her basket with as much food as it would hold, Lydia lugged it through

the main garden and out the back gate on the other side. Every ten minutes or so during her walk through the neighboring fields, she had to set the basket down to stretch and switch arms. Yet the walk was still enjoyable despite the heavy load.

Lydia knew this area so well she was certain she could navigate it while blindfolded. However, the many trees, meadows, ponds, and mineral springs were too lovely to experience with closed eyes. Her father's land and this entire region were a natural treasure to behold.

The farms on her family's estate were also magnificent sights, with rolling fields of wheat and other crops next to green pastures where many sheep grazed.

It wasn't long before one of her favorite tenant farms came into view. But the sight of it also filled Lydia with sadness. The Musgrove family was struggling to keep their crops healthy on nutrient-depleted soil. Their requests for assistance had thus far been ignored by the Marquess of Briarwood, Lydia's father.

Unfortunately, Lydia's pleas to her father and even her older brother, William, were also denied. She'd spent several evenings over the past year interrupting their conversations in her father's study to try to influence their decisions about the farms in their care.

Her last attempt a fortnight ago had not gone well.

"Father, as you know, most farms have three fields so as to let one recover while the other two are sown. But the Musgroves only have one crop field to themselves! Can we not spare more land for their expansion? Surely our estate would benefit from every farmer's success."

Lord Briarwood had wrinkled his nose and sneered at his daughter. "A young lady has no business getting involved in these affairs! You tire me with your frivolous

questions, Lydia. The Musgroves are struggling because John isn't efficient or skilled at farming. If he does not meet his quotas for the fall harvest, we will not renew his lease at the end of the year and that is final."

When Lydia had started to protest, her father slammed a ledger onto his desk with great force. "William, remove your sister from this room before I have her banned from the entire house!"

William had done as he was told and escorted Lydia out of their father's study immediately. Though her only brother was usually forgiving of Lydia's passionate speeches in the name of justice, even he had been losing patience with her relentlessness.

"Sister, you're forgetting one of the golden rules. You get more bees with honey than with vinegar. Stop pushing Father to do your bidding and realize the only movement forward will happen if he thinks it's his idea."

Lydia had grabbed her brother's hands to get him to listen to her one more time before the subject was dropped. "Please come with me to visit the Musgroves. When you see the hungry children and the father's broken spirit, you will not be so dismissive if you have a beating heart in your chest."

But William had seemed too distracted by private matters lately to concern himself with yet another tenant farmer's complaints. So, Lydia convinced herself that all men of society must be the same. Even the estate managers, like her father, seemed to care less about the challenges their tenants faced than their own social obligations.

Noblemen with political influence who turned their backs on the people they represented were not the kind of men she wanted to be around. Much less marry!

The fact that her father and brother were among those men was hard for Lydia to

reconcile. Because of their lack of concern, she took it upon herself to secretly support the farmers in any way she could.

When she reached the Musgrove family cottage by late afternoon, four-year-old Elsbeth and eight-year-old Clarissa were helping their mother plant seeds in a small flower patch by the front door.

“Mama, Lydia is here!” Clarissa ran toward Lydia while Elsbeth toddled close behind. Their mother stood and waved, then hunched over for a few seconds to catch her breath. Emma Musgrove was eight months pregnant and looked as tired as she probably felt.

“Oh, Lady Lydia. Have you brought us more food? You know we don’t expect that of you. I worry your father will be terribly angry if he finds out.”

Lydia set her basket down in the grass and gave Clarissa and Elsbeth each a big hug. “You let me worry about my father, Mrs. Musgrove. We have much more than we need. It would just go to waste if you don’t enjoy it. Please, I insist.”

Mrs. Musgrove thanked Lydia for her kindness and reached for the basket. “Oh my. You filled this one to the brim! We are grateful for your generosity.”

Lydia saw how much the woman struggled to hold the extra weight in her condition, so took the basket back and offered to bring it inside.

The Musgrove cottage was small and sparsely furnished, but always clean and cozy. Emma gave her girls each a small slice of bread with jam from the basket, then lit a fire in the fireplace and put a kettle on for tea.

“Please, have a seat, Lady Lydia. You must be tired from your long walk and I enjoy the company. Mr. Musgrove is in the field most of the day right now. He’s been

adding as much manure as he can find to the soil and comes home smelling of a barn!”

Lydia laughed. She was nestled in a creaky old rocking chair made comfortable by Emma’s handmade cushions. “I’m glad for the company, too. Though I love my sisters, we don’t seem to have much to talk about these days other than how different we are.”

“Enjoy your sisters while you can. Mine live so far away now we rarely see each other anymore.”

Lydia nodded as she accepted a hot cup of chamomile tea, but her thoughts didn’t match her outward agreement. She wasn’t sure spending more time with her sisters could bring them closer as friends these days. There were too many topics that caused their relationship strife.

Similarly, Lydia avoided certain topics during her visits at the Musgrove house, too. It was fruitless to complain with Emma about how bad things had become for the Musgroves and other farmers. The women preferred instead to focus on enjoying their time together with chats about their shared interests, like books and gardening.

Emma hadn’t owned many books until Lydia started sharing ones from her family’s library. Now the Musgroves had a shelf overflowing with gifted books.

“I just finished the Lady of the Lake story and adored it. Magical legends are such a fun escape from ordinary life.” Emma pulled the book from the shelf and handed it to Lydia.

“Then please keep this one, too, Mrs. Musgrove! I’m so glad you enjoyed it. The King Arthur stories are some of my favorites and I have plenty more at home to read.”

Emma replaced the book on her shelf and thanked Lydia for yet another gift. “You spoil us, m’lady. And please call me Emma. We are friends, are we not?”

Lydia smiled. “We are indeed, Emma. I am glad for it.”

After playing with the Musgrove girls in the sun for a while, Lydia waved goodbye and promised to visit them again soon.

She had to tear her eyes away from the skinny little girls in dresses that hung loosely on their bodies. If it was the last thing she did, she would make sure these girls grew up strong and healthy and well-fed.

And somehow help more farmers across their land and beyond it along the way.

On her walks home, Lydia loved to take a slightly different route to visit a beautiful mineral spring surrounded by trees. It was a magical oasis near the edge of a meadow where every flower seemed to bloom brighter and longer.

Years ago, when she discovered it, she’d named the spring “Fairyland Spring” and spent hours there lying near the water and daydreaming about fantastical things. It was the only time and the only place where Lydia allowed her imagination to run wild.

In her younger days, she’d indulged in dreams of handsome princes and crystal castles. Now she dreamed of more practical things, like having the power to turn freshly plowed earth into a cottage full of gold.

Lydia could smell the sulfur of the Fairyland Spring long before she reached it. As soon as she passed the first clutch of oak trees, she would enter the secluded area that led to the water.

It was at this point during most visits that she would start peeling her clothes away from her body. Though Lydia knew the importance of being careful about bathing in a hot spring, this one was the perfect temperature for a quick and therapeutic dip.

She hung her cloak and bonnet on a bare branch of one of her favorite trees in the small clearing. Her windblown bun of wavy chestnut hair came loose easily before she kicked off her muddy boots, then slid her stockings off.

Soon she was down to her linen shift, which felt so freeing under the dappled sunlight slipping through the tree canopy above her head. Her anticipation to feel the hot spring water melting her cares away grew by the second as she walked around the last length of trees to where her secret oasis awaited.

When Lydia rounded the corner, she got the shock of her life.

A man was bathing in her private spring! And he was naked!

Lydia completely forgot about her own state of undress as she stomped toward the edge of the spring and shouted at the intruder who was facing away from her.

“Sir! You are trespassing on private property! I demand that you leave at once!”

The man turned around with his hazel eyes opened wide and gaped at Lydia from the water. But his shock turned to amusement within seconds and his opened mouth spread into a grin.

“Well, hello young maiden. I beg your pardon. I didn’t realize anyone lived in these trees to guard this spring.”

Lydia glared at the stranger, then looked away when it was impossible not to study his strong jawline and broad naked shoulders. “I’ll ask you again, sir, to please leave

these premises and never return.”

She saw his pale tunic draped over a bush near the rest of his clothes. Still fueled by anger, Lydia grabbed the tunic and threw it toward him into the spring.

“Here. Please get dressed and go.”

The naked stranger slowly stood until the water level was just below his navel. Lydia gasped but couldn’t tear her eyes away from his muscular torso. She followed his fine dusting of body hair down to the clouded hint of his anatomy that was hidden below the water line.

“I’ll get dressed if you do, miss. Or is it my lady? Either way, it wouldn’t be proper for me to join you on the bank of any spring while you’re wearing that.”

The handsome stranger pointed at Lydia’s clothes and kept on grinning. She finally looked down to see her shift and squealed with surprise. Full of new panic, Lydia covered herself with her arms as best she could and scolded the naked stranger once more.

“Oh, you are a beast! Stop looking at me!”

The stranger averted his eyes as Lydia stared at his physique with the strongest feeling she almost didn’t recognize, like the release of a thousand butterflies in her belly and a storm between her thighs.

The awakening of desire.

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Chapter 2

Joseph prided himself on always being a proper gentleman, but this shocking predicament was turning into a highlight of his year.

“I didn’t see a thing, miss. I promise you.”

But that was a bald-faced lie. He’d immediately noticed the young maid’s flawless skin and silken hair floating in the subtle breeze. And he’d enjoyed seeing the obvious shape of her breasts pressed against the inside of her shift.

Joseph enjoyed gazing at her so much that it was not possible for him to leave the water yet. She would witness my lust, become irrevocably compromised, and I’d be forced to marry the nymph straight away.

As Joseph pondered his options, the young woman breathlessly side-stepped her way back into the trees while clutching her arms about her body. Once safely hidden, she demanded again that he clothe himself immediately.

“This is the most improper encounter I’ve ever experienced, sir. And you are the most disgusting man I have ever come across!”

Joseph chuckled at her exaggerated outburst, but her fiery response made his lust for her awaken all the more.

“My lady, if that’s true I cannot imagine you’ve come across many men at all yet.” Joseph reached for his drenched tunic before it sank to the bottom of the spring.

Pulling it back on wasn't easy, but he managed to yank it down over his body before the angry nymph returned to berate him some more.

This time she was clothed in a dark green velvety dress that looked as soft to the touch as her loose and lovely hair. Though he couldn't quite tell at a distance, it appeared her eyes were nearly the same color green.

Appreciating the emerald eyes of a hot-headed beauty made for a much happier welcome home from Joseph's long travels than he'd expected.

But I'm never getting out of this river if she keeps looking at me like that.

"Well? I'm waiting." The young woman tapped her bare foot against the wild grass and crossed her arms beneath her full bodice.

"I encourage you to return to your hiding place while I emerge from the water, my lady. You see, despite your claims that I am disgusting, I am a gentleman and mean you no harm. And a lady should not witness my body in this state."

She huffed out a laugh and rolled her eyes. "I will grant your request for privacy, sir, because I am a lady. But you don't scare me. The male body is just a body like any other. I'm sure this will bruise your ego, but I am entirely unaffected by it all."

Amused, Joseph held his hand up to shade his eyes. "Please, miss. You are not ready to see the likes of me. And you won't be unless you finally stop talking. That spirited voice of yours is making things much worse."

"What a surprise! Yet another gentleman who wants to silence a woman's voice! You think yourself so different, but you are clearly like all the rest who only care about..."

Joseph had had enough. Not only did he need to get away from this angry woman, but

it was time to teach her a lesson. He pushed through the warm water toward the bank. His wet tunic clung to his form as he emerged from the spring.

He didn't wait to see the maiden's full reaction to the view he'd just provided her, yet her astonished gasp was clear as he walked directly to the bushes where he'd dropped his clothes.

She said nothing as he dressed as quickly as possible. When he turned back around, she whirled in the opposite direction and ran.

“Wait! Do you need a chaperone to walk you home, m'lady?”

No answer. Joseph chuckled to himself again as he slowly followed the path out of the hot spring clearing toward his carriage and footman waiting on a nearby road.

The young woman had long disappeared when he discovered what she'd left behind. A cloak, a bonnet, a pair of boots, and two long white stockings topped with ivory ribbons that once wrapped around her thighs.

The Winstone Estate was bustling with servants preparing for the ball when Joseph finally returned from his outing. Several hours, a real bath, and a set of fine clothes later, he felt like a new man.

Though his meeting with the young woman at the hot spring would be one he'd never forget, he was certain he'd never see her again.

She claimed to be a lady, but what lady of society would have spoken with such unacceptable insolence? No, she wasn't a lady. She was a fiery nymph from a wild and chance encounter he'd best forget.

Joseph's valet brushed the lint from his jacket and straightened his collar for the hundredth time.

"Benchley, I think that's enough. You've done a fine job making me look regal this evening. Let's see if I can pull it off among the ton, shall we?" Joseph ran a comb through his sandy blond hair and checked his attire in the mirror again. "I think even the countess will be pleased if that's possible."

"Is my son speaking highly of me or should I send him back out into the world to learn more manners, Benchley?" The Countess Winstone pushed through the doors of her son's bed chamber and immediately threw open the drapes. "There, that's better. It's time to show the world that the Viscount Winstone has returned to find a wife! Benchley, that will be all."

The countess shooed the valet away. Joseph frowned at his mother.

"By all means, enter my bedchamber at your leisure, Mama! You seem to mistake me for breeding stock. I did not return home just to find a wife. That's your mission, not mine."

"Then I am here to scold you for ignoring my wishes and your duty to family! You know very well that my ball this evening is the finest showcase of debutantes in England every year. And my son will have the pick of the best of them!"

Joseph sighed and fastened his own cufflinks since Benchley had been sent away. "Mama, are you sure this is a ball and not a marriage market you're hosting?"

The Countess Winstone smiled as she straightened the long white gloves pulled high on her forearms. "Are you saying there's a difference?"

She winked at her son, then combed his hair again so it was more to her liking.

The countess was a formidable force in London society and wielded her power with great joy. She'd risen through the ranks of respected ladies over the years one hard-won step at a time.

Joseph had watched it happen as he grew older and more aware of his mother's influence. She'd gossiped and galivanted with the best of the best, eventually becoming the lady who hosted the most coveted event of the season.

And she'd married off his two younger brothers in the process.

"Where are Oliver and Henry this evening? Are they excused from your extravagant affair because they're no longer eligible bachelors you can parade around like peacocks?"

Lady Winstone gently pushed her son away from his long mirror so she could admire her elegant gown of purple French silk and the feathered combs in her hair.

"They will be here, Joseph. But try not to shrink with embarrassment that you're the eldest of my sons and still unwed. There's still hope for you yet, my dear." The countess turned to pat her son on the cheek, then motioned for him to follow her out of the room. "Come, I have something to show you."

Joseph hesitated, not wanting to leave his room yet to get swept up in party preparations, but his mother waited outside the door until he relented.

He followed her down the main staircase, wrapped in fresh flower garlands for the occasion. Lady Winstone barked orders to various staff members along the way until she reached the drawing room and pointed at the portraits on the walls.

"Now who do we have here, Joseph?" His mother lightly touched the gilded frame of the first portrait and waited for his answer.

Joseph frowned. “This is not a fun game, Mama. Of course I know who these people are. What is your point?”

Lady Winstone put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes. “Fine. That’s my brother, Oliver, and his wife, Sophia.”

Joseph’s mother smiled and pointed at the next portrait without saying a word.

“And that’s my youngest brother, Henry, with his wife, Maria. Are you growing forgetful, Mama? You might consider giving your sons name tags this evening so you can keep them straight.” Joseph laughed under his breath as his mother’s face reddened.

“I am not amused by your disrespect, Joseph! I am merely pointing out that you have yet to find your place among the family portraits, which is growing more unacceptable by the year. We have a reputation to uphold. Your father is the distinguished Earl of Winstone! It is time for you to secure an excellent bride who will strengthen our family’s place in society and provide you with an heir.”

Joseph opened his mouth to protest, but his mother was suddenly called by their housekeeper to taste test the custard or some such thing.

He watched his mother as she sashayed out of the drawing room like she ruled the world, which wasn’t far from the truth. But he had no intention of playing her game just to fill a space on her portrait wall. Or to impress the aristocracy by being a model heir to the Winstone legacy. Joseph was far more interested in intellectual pursuits that opened the mind and deepened a man’s understanding of the world.

He would attend his mother’s ball tonight as promised. After that, he planned to chart his own course whether the Countess Winstone liked it or not.

Although it was probably a good idea to steer clear of mineral springs in the future. He couldn't risk more than one spicy maiden taking his bathing rituals to task.

Joseph smiled to himself at the memory of the young woman shouting in her shift that afternoon. She filled his thoughts as he took a few moments to walk through the gardens behind Winstone House.

In particular, he looked forward to some moments of peace in the orangery where he'd loved to spend time as a child. Its high walls of tall glass windows made it seem like another world where the trees were constant sources of various juicy fruits.

"Son! What are you doing out here? Shouldn't you be following your mother around while she plans every moment of your future?"

Joseph's father, Lord Edward Penton, the Earl of Winstone, was lounging at the back of the orangery smoking his pipe and sipping a glass of sherry.

Joseph smiled at the sight of him, knowing full well they were both in the orangery to avoid the madness of their pre-ball household.

"I could ask you the same thing, my lord. Are you hiding from Mama?"

Lord Winstone sighed. "It's the only place I can smoke where Victoria doesn't admonish me for the smell. Have a seat, Joseph. We're both better off if we don't go back in there for a while. Tell me something about your travels this past year."

Joseph pulled up a chair next to his father and accepted his offer of a drink. "I think Italy was my favorite stop. The food, the art..."

"The women?" Lord Winstone laughed at his son's shocked expression. "I'm teasing you, son. But I sincerely hope you got the wanderlust out of your system, because we

need you here now. I know your mother is dragging you to the altar by the scruff of your neck, but she's not wrong to say it's time to live up to your title. The Viscount of Winstone cannot sow his wild oats forever."

"But he can hide out with the Earl of Winstone in the orangery until the lady of the house calms down?" Joseph clinked his glass to his father's and grinned despite wishing he could avoid more parental lectures today and every day to come.

"If you marry soon, son, you'll have many more hiding days ahead of you! Learning how to stay clear of your wife is a husband's rite of passage."

The two men laughed and shared another drink. Before long, Joseph felt lighter from the alcohol and much more capable of heading back inside the main house to fulfill their roles of hosts for the evening.

But that didn't mean he had to enjoy it.

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Chapter 3

Lydia was out of breath when she ran into the Carter family library and closed the door as quietly as possible. She'd never make it to her bedchamber unnoticed and had to think for a moment about what to do.

Her hair was knotted by the wind. The sleeves and hem of her dress were torn from an unfortunate tussle with a bramble bush. And the balls of her feet were scratched and dirty from running across the wild terrain without any shoes.

“That horrible man! Why do men ruin everything?”

Fortunately, Lydia was able to ring for her maid, Jules, from the library. And there was plenty to occupy her mind while she waited.

This was the perfect time to peruse one of her father's books on human anatomy, kept on the highest shelf for as long as Lydia could remember. She'd never looked at it before because to do so would have been against her father's rules.

Ladies weren't supposed to know such things as how the human body was made. Today, however, Lydia had had a lesson in human anatomy that she'd never wanted but now would never forget.

She rolled the library ladder all the way to the end of the longest wall of books and slowly climbed to the top. When she found the dusty manual she was looking for, she pressed the heavy book against her bodice and crept down the creaky wooden ladder to take a seat at a long table.

This room had always been Lydia's favorite and one of the few places where she felt she fully belonged. As she skimmed through the illustrations of her father's anatomy text, she remembered some of the other books she'd dared to read without permission over the years.

She'd spent many hours in this room reading political pamphlets and the poems of Lord Byron by candlelight. Lately, she'd been secretly browsing through her father's farming books, like *Systems of Husbandry of Scotland* by Sir John Sinclair.

But the anatomy book was a whole new world. Lydia was so engrossed in the illustrations of the major organs that she didn't hear Jules tiptoe into the library to ask her mistress if she needed assistance.

"My lady? Did you need me?"

Lydia leaped out of her chair and pressed a hand to her heart. "Jules! Oh goodness, I didn't hear you come in!"

The maid apologized and looked with concern at her appearance. "Have you had an accident, Lady Lydia? Do you need a doctor?"

Waving her hand to dismiss the suggestion, Lydia sat back down to catch her breath from the fright. "No, I am quite well, thank you. I fell into some brambles during my walk, but I was unharmed. Would you please bring me a cloak and slippers so I might retreat to my room without attracting attention? No need to worry anyone else about my haggard appearance."

"Of course, my lady. I'll do so right away, as we need to prepare you for the ball this evening." Jules curtsied and turned to leave the library.

"Ah, yes. The Winstone ball. One shouldn't miss out on that event since there's so

little else of value in the world.”

“I beg your pardon, miss?” Jules turned back around with her eyebrows knitted together in confusion.

“My apologies, Jules, it was nothing. Thank you for bringing the cloak and slippers as soon as you can.”

With her maid out of the room again, Lydia flipped the thick science book’s pages more quickly to locate the most important details of her research—the male anatomy.

She gasped for the second time today when she discovered the detailed illustration she sought. It depicted the strange dangling appendage that hung from a man’s groin.

Strange and oddly enticing.

Lydia gazed with shock and quite a bit of awe at the secrets a man held in his trousers that she had never witnessed before.

But there was something different about the illustration compared to the body of that arrogant stranger in the spring.

Though hidden by his tunic, the intruder’s appendage could not have been more apparent in its shockingly rigid state. It had pointed directly at her, like the finger of a giant that poked against the surrounding fabric like it desperately wanted to escape.

Lydia swallowed hard as she stared at the flaccid version in the book’s illustration. Then she read every word about its physiology with rapt attention.

Perspiration beaded on her brow by the time she was done learning what all a man’s penis and its companion organs could do. How wonderful was its function! Lydia

pulled her father's magnifying glass out of the library desk drawer and pored over the information more closely, riveted by all the new knowledge.

Then she read the words that described the purpose of its engorgement. Lydia's green eyes flew open with surprise and she slammed the book shut.

Her mind spun as she came to understand the cause of the stranger's physical state when he'd revealed his nearly naked body to her at the spring.

Stimulation. Blood flow. Arousal!

"Was that horrid man thinking impure thoughts about me?"

Lydia's dizziness increased as the image of his body slid back into her mind. He was so wet and muscular. So handsome and full of himself while standing proudly erect in front of a lady!

She held the closed anatomy book against her breasts and hurried to return it to the top of the shelf before Jules discovered her mistress blushing and sweating and panting from the heat rising beneath her dress. Lydia slid the library ladder far away from the location of such an eye-opening book and sat near a window so the breeze could cool her flushed face.

When Jules returned with her cloak and slippers, Lydia was never so relieved to leave the library behind and push thoughts of stimulated trespassers out of her mind.

"Admit it, Lydia. Even you look magnificent tonight. How can you not love wearing such finery for the biggest event of the year?" Eleanor Carter stroked a beaded sleeve of Lydia's gold gown and swished the skirt of her own elegant silver dress.

Charlotte, radiant in a bronze beaded frock in the same style, playfully batted away the hand of her maid who attempted to adjust the tiara on top of her head. “I agree! Isn’t this much more fun than burying your nose in a book?”

Lydia giggled at her sister’s mention of a book and felt the same embarrassment from her afternoon reading heat her cheeks again. “You’d be surprised what a book can teach you, sisters. Far more than spending all your hours tightening corsets and painting your face.”

“You could benefit from some paint on that face of yours, eldest sister. You’re practically ancient by now!” Charlotte looped her arm through Eleanor’s as the two younger sisters laughed at Lydia’s expense.

Lydia sighed and walked a few paces in front of them. She hoped her siblings’ dance cards would fill rapidly this evening so she wouldn’t have to suffer through their babble much longer.

As the three sisters descended the stairs of Briarwood House together, Lydia tried to muster up some frivolity for the evening. Unfortunately, it was no easy task. All the things she enjoyed doing were off-limits, like reading in a corner or having debates about the state of the world.

Though escaping a ball is my favorite pastime of all.

“Promise you won’t try to join the men for brandy and cigars tonight, Lydia! I wish to avoid the gossip your unseemly behavior might bring.” Lady Margaret Briarwood, Lydia’s mother, shouted that request from the bottom of the steps as she wrung her hands together. “And try to be polite to the gentlemen, dear. Trust that a man who asks you to dance isn’t doing so to question your intelligence.”

Eleanor and Charlotte giggled while Lydia frowned. “I’ll do my best, Mama. But I’ll

have you know that men sometimes have secret intent that might shock you.”

Though you might not notice his secret if he is clothed.

“Whatever you say, dear. Now make haste. Being late for the Winstone ball simply will not do.”

Lord Briarwood and Lydia’s older brother, William, escorted the ladies to their finest carriage out front. Once settled inside, the ride to the Winstone estate was pleasant enough, despite all the excited chatter from the two younger Carter sisters who talked on and on about the return of Viscount Winstone, the season’s most eligible man.

When their carriage arrived at the grand Winstone estate, even Lydia was impressed by the exterior of the main house and the magnificent gardens surrounding it.

William and Lord Briarwood exited the carriage first and offered their arms to help the Carter women emerge with widened eyes. Though her parents and brother had been here before, tonight was the first visit to Winstone House by all of the Earl of Briarwood’s daughters.

While standing on the front drive covered in loose stone, every member of the family gaped at the gothic columns, expansive wrought-iron balconies, and so many enormous windows Lydia couldn’t count them all.

Lord Briarwood took his wife’s hand and instructed his children to follow. “Make us proud tonight, children. Every eye is upon us inside these walls.”

Lydia frowned, then felt an elbow poke her side.

“Ow! What did you do that for?” she chastised her brother in a hushed tone so her parents would not turn around and scold her before they’d even crossed the Winstone

threshold.

“Every time you scowl tonight, this elbow will find you.” William teased.

“All the more reason to scowl at the back of your head.” Lydia elbowed him in return as the two siblings smiled at each other.

He was Lydia’s protector and often helped keep her in line, but William also had a rebellious streak that he kept well-hidden most of the time. As they walked the many steps between their carriage and the front entrance, William noted that the weather seemed to be shifting.

“The air is heavy and wet tonight. We may be in for a storm.”

“I prefer storms that arrive before a ball. Especially those that cancel a ball altogether.” Lydia lifted the skirt of her dress to keep it free of mud and wondered if she’d ever see again the muddy boots that she’d left behind at Fairyland Spring.

“I daresay I agree with you on that point, sister.” William laughed until his mother stopped walking and turned to face him.

“A bachelor of six-and-twenty years should not be avoiding balls, William. This night provides just as much opportunity for you to find a proper mate as it does your sisters. You are the only male heir of your father’s estate, are you not?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Then I wish to hear no more of storms. Your main concern is to secure a bride and soon provide an heir of your own.” The Marchioness Briarwood waited for her son’s nod of acknowledgment, then returned to her husband’s side and led the family into the grand foyer of Winstone House where their hosts waited to greet them.

Lord and Lady Winstone exuded warmth with their beaming smiles as they welcomed their guests.

“We’re so happy to see you, Lord and Lady Briarwood! And your beautiful family, of course!”

Eleanor and Charlotte immediately started giggling again from excitement and nerves. Lydia cast them a warning glance. She hated how much attention her younger sisters attracted because it meant people looked more often at her, as well.

“Thank you, Lord Winstone. Lady Winstone. We appreciate your excellent hospitality! Our daughters were just saying how excited they are to meet your son, Viscount Winstone. We hope he enjoyed his many travels this past year.” Lady Briarwood bowed to Lady Winstone in a gesture that Lydia felt looked more like her mother was about to kiss the countess’s ring.

“You’re in luck, girls. Viscount Winstone is right here.” Lady Winstone reached around and tapped the shoulder of a tall man with sandy blonde hair behind her. “Joseph, dear. This is the Marquess and Marchioness Briarwood, and their children.”

When Lady Winstone’s son swiveled his body to face the Carter family, Lydia cried out as if she’d seen a ghost.

“You!” Lydia forgot all about her current company as her jaw dropped open and her gloved hands balled into fists at her side.

Lord Joseph Penton’s face filled with just as much shock, but he recovered more quickly. “Yes, it is I, Viscount Winstone! Were you expecting someone else?”

The viscount’s sly grin made it clear that he recognized Lydia and enjoyed every second of her obvious discomfort at seeing him again.

Then William's elbow found Lydia's ribcage just in time to snap her out of the unbecoming rage filling her chest.

"You... are the talk of the town, Lord Winstone! It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance!" Lydia bowed and felt herself talking too loudly and forcibly, but it was all she could do not to punch the handsome scoundrel in the gut for his scandalous display at the spring. "These are my parents, Lord and Lady Briarwood!"

Once she'd introduced her parents at the top of her lungs, Lydia slipped back behind her family members to fight her feelings with more privacy. Unfortunately, the viscount was so bloody tall he could still see her face.

Her parents introduced her sisters to Joseph, but he kept peeking back at Lydia as everyone exchanged pleasantries. What was even worse was how the Countess Winstone seemed to be enjoying that her son couldn't keep his eyes off of Lydia.

As hard as she tried to shrink, she seemed to be even more noticeable on a night when every young eligible lady out in society was fair game. When she tried to catch William's eye for his sympathy, he was exchanging smiles with a blonde, blue-eyed woman standing near the viscount and a man that looked a lot like him.

"...and this is my middle son, Oliver, and his wife, Sophia," Lady Winstone bragged as the blonde woman blushed and broke William's gaze. "You'll see some of Sophia's paintings in the grand hall. She is one of the gems of our family, to be certain. Do any of your young ladies paint, Lady Briarwood?"

The air between the Carter and Penton families suddenly shifted from the breeziness of pleasant greetings to the static of marriage mart negotiations.

"Indeed! My youngest, Lady Charlotte, has been painting since she was a child." Lady Briarwood motioned for Charlotte to step forward, who tripped on her gown

and nearly landed in the viscount's arms.

"I do enjoy painting! Chipmunks and squirrels, mostly. Would you agree they are the cutest creatures, Lord Winstone?"

Eleanor giggled and Lady Briarwood let out a frustrated sigh.

The viscount looked at Charlotte with amusement but aimed his grin and response at Lydia. "Feisty woodland creatures are some of my favorites, Lady Charlotte. In fact, I had a chance encounter with one just this afternoon."

Lydia rolled her eyes at the viscount and sent as much anger his way as possible while standing where her family couldn't see her face.

When she tore her eyes away from Joseph to look for the closest escape, she locked gazes with the Countess Winstone, who was grinning from ear to ear.

"And what of the talents of your eldest, Lady Briarwood? She seems like a young woman with a lot of... spirit, is she not?"

Lady Briarwood turned to look at Lydia and pulled her to the front of their group again, right in front of the Viscount Winstone.

"Lydia is indeed my most spirited daughter, Lady Winstone. Yet she is also kind, courteous, and obedient."

Lydia wrinkled her brow at her mother's comments just as the viscount started coughing uncontrollably. As his father patted his son on the back to help unblock his congestion, Lydia thought Joseph Penton's cough sounded awfully close to laughter.

"Courteous and obedient, you say?" The viscount spoke through a few final sputters

that made his hazel eyes water. “Those are fine qualities for a lady, indeed. So fine, in fact, that I must insist on having the first dance tonight, Lady Lydia.”

Lydia once again looked up at Joseph Penton with a mix of shock and anger. “A dance? With you?”

Before the viscount could respond, Lydia felt her brother’s elbow make contact with the small lobe of her liver, if her father’s anatomy book could be trusted as to the location of the human organs.

“Yes, with me, my lady. Or are your feet hurting this evening for reasons utterly unknown to me?”

Lady Winstone launched a quizzical look at her son, who returned it with an innocent smile. Lydia watched the exchange with the eyes of an investigator taking notes about her enemies for future use.

“She would be delighted, Lord Winstone.” Lydia’s mother struck the deal without her consent, thereby solidifying her daughter’s fate.

Lady Lydia Carter would have to prance about a ballroom with a man whose erect appendage had recently singled her out and was still pointing at her in her head.

Much to her chagrin, Lydia’s heart beat wildly at the thought of dancing with the man whose body had clearly shown at the spring that he desired her.

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Chapter 4

The first quadrille was underway, but Lord Winstone's dance partner hadn't spoken another word. At first, he was amused by Lady Lydia's haughty pout as they spun around, changed partners, and came back together again.

But soon he missed her vivacious way and couldn't resist stoking her fire.

"Would you happen to know where a gentleman might sell a pair of lady's stockings? I find myself suddenly in possession of an extra pair."

Joseph could swear he saw steam coming from Lydia's ears as she glared at him with contempt before she was whisked away and spun around by another man. When she returned to him in the dance again, the nymph had plenty to say in a hushed and angry tone.

"How dare you speak to me in such a manner! And about a woman's private garments that you have apparently stolen! You continue to puzzle and repulse me. Why would a viscount bathe naked in a spring on someone else's property?"

"Viscounts aren't allowed to bathe? I know you think me a dirty fellow, Lady Lydia, but I wash behind my ears like everyone else. By the way, you look very clean this evening. So sparkling clean that I can't take my eyes off you. Or maybe I'm just unaccustomed to seeing you fully clothed." Joseph chuckled as Lydia was pulled away from him again and another lady took his hand.

They spun and changed partners over and over again. Every time Lydia rejoined

Joseph, she lobbed a new insult that only he could hear.

“You are the stench of pond scum on a hot summer day.” She stepped and spun and leaned toward him for more. “You’re the sting of a bee on a horse’s behind.” And finally, when her hands met Joseph’s again, she spoke with a most venomous tongue. “You’re a rake whose nakedness does nothing for me.”

Joseph stopped dancing and pulled Lydia hard against his chest. They stood in the middle of the circle as the confused dancers around them kept going after a few seconds of falling out of line.

He stared into Lydia’s eyes as her breasts heaved each time she took a breath. “Then why did you stare with unguarded eyes at my nakedness, little nymph? You practically begged me to show myself to you as you stood there in next to nothing yourself.”

For the first time since they’d met that afternoon, Lydia seemed speechless. “I... I wanted... I’d never seen a man before. I mean, not like that.”

Joseph was perplexed by her honest answer. No more barbs, just innocent curiosity. He was intrigued to probe more into this side of her but knew they could not stand together like this for long.

However, letting go of her yet was unthinkable. He’d caught a wild nymph and might never catch her again.

Joseph could smell the soothing lilac soap in Lydia’s chestnut hair and could almost see clear to the bottom of her abundant cleavage inside her beaded gold dress.

“Are you saying you were merely curious? I find that hard to believe.” Joseph pulled away from Lydia and spun her around once, then pulled her to his chest again. If they

seemed to be dancing their own made-up steps, he might keep her close for longer without others becoming overly suspicious.

Lydia's breathing grew harder with what Joseph guessed might be either fright or longing. He hoped for the latter.

"Yes, I was curious. I'm a curious person, Lord Winstone. I wish to know how things work." She fluttered her eyelashes, but not in the coy way of most young ladies. Lady Lydia was trying to hold back tears.

Noticing her emotional state softened Joseph's hold of her waist.

"And what did you learn about how I work, Lady Lydia?" He spun his dance partner around one more time and waited for her answer.

"I fear that is a private conversation for another time, my lord." She pressed her hands against his chest and pushed him back. "In the meantime, I suggest you learn how to speak to a lady with respect. And return my things at once!"

Lydia rejoined the dancing circle as if nothing untoward had just happened. Joseph did the same with his eyes shining brightly.

The nymph from the spring was vexing, but she was also an enticing woman and fun to tease. She was so enticing, in fact, that he would have to find a way to have that private conversation she had alluded to before the night was through.

After Lydia made a hasty exit from the dance floor, Joseph joined his two brothers by the refreshment table just outside the grand ballroom.

“Enjoying your big party, brother? It’s a grand affair that Mama has thrown for you.” Oliver slurred his words and bowed to Joseph with a sarcastic salute.

“This isn’t my party, Oliver. And your overconsumption of port this early in the evening makes it seem more like your party instead.” Joseph steadied his brother when he tipped to one side as their youngest brother, Henry, laughed.

“He’s been pontificating in the corner as if a single soul were listening. Trust me, Oliver is less embarrassing while he’s drinking than when he’s talking to thin air.” Henry smacked Oliver on the shoulder, stole his drink, and finished it off with a loud smack of his lips.

“Hey!” Oliver swung his arm at Henry, but he missed and spun himself around, nearly falling into the table full of his mother’s prized crystal glasses and serving dishes.

“Whoa, brother! I think we need to find your wife so she can keep watch over you.” Joseph righted Oliver again and looked around for Sophia’s pretty blonde hair in the sea of women coming and going through the entrance hall.

“My wife? My wife? As if she bloody cares for the likes of me!” Oliver grabbed a crystal goblet and raised it above his head while his brothers worked to retrieve it and prevent its demise.

Joseph felt their mother’s glare on the back of his neck before she appeared by his side.

“What is the meaning of this, Oliver Penton? We agreed that you would not indulge in any drink at my most important event of the year!” Two imposing footmen flanked Lady Winstone and waited for her instructions as she quietly chastised her middle son.

Joseph wanted to handle his brother himself, but he knew their mother would have the last word, as she always did.

“Jenson and Rogers will escort you to your room now, so you can sleep it off. When you are behaving like a gentleman again, you may return to the party. I’ll let Sophia know where you are.” Lady Winstone nodded at her footmen, who each took one of Oliver’s arms.

“If you can find her, be my guest,” Oliver mumbled as he hung his head and accepted his fate.

The footmen escorted him out of public view with as much dignity as possible, while Lady Winstone distracted the nearby guests with her exuberant chatter. But whispers and judgmental stares from some of the guests followed Joseph’s brother out of the room nonetheless.

“If Oliver doesn’t change his ways, he’s going to be the death of our family’s prominence and legacy.” Joseph leaned toward his youngest brother’s ear to quietly utter what he knew was his mother’s biggest fear.

“We cannot know what Oliver suffers behind closed doors, Joseph. But you are right. I am at a loss for how to help.” Henry looked down and spoke toward the floor for fear of anyone reading his lips. “It seems his wife keeps disappearing when he needs her the most.”

“And where is your wife, young Henry?” Joseph brightened his mood to keep from wallowing in worry about things he couldn’t change during a party. He ladled lemonade into two crystal glasses and held one in each hand.

“No lemonade for me, thanks. It gives me terrible stomach upset. Can you imagine that following up Oliver’s scene at mother’s ball?” Henry chuckled and pointed

across the room. “Maria is just there, speaking with Miss Underwood.”

Joseph followed Henry’s gaze to see the two women conversing by a table full of elaborately decorated cakes and pastries. As usual, Henry’s wife looked graceful and sophisticated. Maria glanced toward the men and waved a friendly hello to her husband and brother-in-law, but her companion was not as cordial.

Miss Wilhelmina Underwood nodded at the men, let her eyes linger on Joseph, then turned away. Since the moment she’d come out in society, Miss Underwood had developed a notorious reputation for being ruthless in her pursuit of status and wealth on her own terms. Many times, Joseph and his brothers had watched her from afar at various social events while betting on which gentlemen would earn her favor.

Miss Underwood had jet-black hair and a sinful figure she liked to flaunt. She also had a great deal of family wealth for a woman born without aristocratic blood. She was exotic and sexy in a dark way that Joseph couldn’t quite describe, but he knew that getting close to a woman like her was similar to building your house over quicksand. Sooner or later, she’d swallow you whole.

Though it might be worth the tragic end to bed her just once. Even the most proper of gentlemen were sometimes enticed by the dark side. Or so says every man who’s ever met her and then stayed far from Miss Underwood’s clutches, just in case.

“Go save your wife from that spoiled rotten vixen, Henry. And this lemonade isn’t for you.”

Joseph made his way back into the ballroom and spotted Lady Lydia standing with her two sisters against the wall. He quickly returned to the refreshment table to retrieve a third glass of lemonade, then walked again toward the Carter sisters, carefully balancing the three full glasses in his hands.

“Ladies, for you. Are you enjoying the evening thus far?”

Eleanor and Charlotte Carter beamed at him and each accepted a glass. Lydia, however, waved his offer away.

“I’m not thirsty. Thank you, Lord Winstone.” She curtsied and moved across the ballroom to where her parents were laughing with the Duke and Duchess of Binghamton.

“Well, then. I guess this one’s for me. I wonder if you could help me win a bet with your sister, ladies. She insists that lilies are her favorite flower, but I think she looks like a woman who prefers roses. Which is it?” Joseph leaned slightly toward Lydia’s younger sisters to show he meant to keep their confidence from the rest of the guests. Though he was lying that he had a bet with Lydia, he thought it might be a nice gesture to return Lydia’s belongings soon along with a beautiful bouquet.

It worked. The young ladies were instantly giddy and forthcoming.

“It’s neither, Lord Winstone! Lydia is one of those bookish sorts of girls who can’t be bothered with glamorous blooms. I’d say she’d much prefer dandelions,” Lady Eleanor whispered to Joseph with her hand shielding her mouth, then lapsed into a fit of giggles with her sister.

“Oh, yes! Lydia loves garden weeds, especially when pressed inside a stuffy, boring book!” Lady Charlotte threw her head back and howled with laughter as her sister started hiccupping between very inelegant guffaws.

Joseph shook his head and wished he’d never asked.

“Thank you for the insight, ladies. Enjoy your evening.” He bowed and took his leave of the younger Carter sisters, headed for the back entrance of the ballroom.

He vowed to be gone only momentarily, but it was time to get some fresh air after only one dance. That one dance had exhausted him, and it also seemed to drain him of any want to seek another woman's hand on the dance floor. The eldest Carter sister was all he could think about as he strode through the house and out to the back garden, bound for the orangery for a few moments of peace.

But it was Lady Lydia herself that blocked his path near the cutting garden.

"Lord Winstone, may I have a word, please?" She stood with her arms crossed and a very unfriendly scowl on her face.

"Lady Lydia, this is impertinent. We should not be alone together out here. Go back inside, little nymph, before either of our mothers discover us." Joseph looked over his shoulder at the entryway, hoping not to add to his mother's embarrassment after Oliver's removal from the party.

"Please do not call me that! I am not here to speak to the intruder from the spring. I am a concerned citizen who needs to ask an important question of an esteemed viscount. Could you manage to behave like a proper gentleman for one moment?" Lydia threw her hands up in the air and seemed to be talking to the heavens.

"Very interesting, my lady. By all means, ask your question. But only if you answer mine first." Joseph crossed his arms and spread his legs slightly apart to appear more in command than any man could possibly feel in this feisty nymph's presence.

Within seconds, he'd forgotten all about embarrassing his family. Having another moment alone with his hot spring nemesis was too good to pass up.

"Oh, for the love of King George! Fine! What is your question?" Lydia rubbed her arms below her short sleeves in the chilly breeze.

“Did you truly feel nothing when you looked at me in the spring?”

Lydia’s jaw dropped open again as Joseph kept his expression flat and undecipherable.

“First you scold me for being impertinent and then you ask a question like that?” Lydia turned and walked with haste in the direction of the orangery. “I told you, I was merely curious about your anatomy, you pompous beast! Good evening, Lord Winstone!” Joseph followed her with the same sensations of lust tugging his body awake as had happened with her that afternoon. “Wait, my lady! You dare to seduce me at the spring, but won’t answer a sincere question from a simple man?”

Lydia’s spirited laughter caused the ducks floating on the nearby pond to furiously flap their wings and fly away. “A simple man? You are a beast, but you are not simple. A simple man wouldn’t know how to insult a lady as brilliantly as you!”

She turned to face him again a few steps from the orangery and slammed her hands onto her hips.

“If you must know, I watched you walk out of that spring not with desire but with the curiosity of a scientific mind. I am an unmarried lady and therefore not privy to all the ways a man’s anatomy differs from mine. Or I wasn’t until today.”

Joseph watched her shiver again and removed his jacket. He offered it to her from a few feet away. This time she accepted his gift and pushed her arms into the overly long black sleeves.

“And what did you learn about my anatomy today, my lady?”

Lydia hesitated, then stood straight and pushed out her chin with confidence. “I learned that you have a rather awkward appendage between your legs that seems to

have a life of its own. I also learned that your appendage grew erect because you... desire me.”

Joseph took in a breath. In all his days, he could never have predicted that he would be spoken to by a lady in such a way as that. So bold and without filter; her words hadn't even a hint of flirtation or denial.

In one day, Lady Lydia Carter had surprised him over and over. And caused his sex to stiffen again with more want for her than he knew how to contain.

“My awkward appendage, you say? That's actually not the scientific word for it, you know.” Joseph took a small step toward Lydia, which caused her to take one small step backward.

“Yes, I know. I looked it up.”

Joseph released a long breathy laugh. “You looked it up? What does that mean?”

“My father has anatomy books in our library. I told you, I like to know how things work.” She took another step backward as Joseph inched his way forward again.

“Well, then you know that it's not called an awkward appendage. I believe the formal term for it is the Buckingham Bone.”

Lydia froze and cocked her head to one side. “The what? That's not... you're making fun of me.”

“Or if it's a noble appendage, the Princely Prick.”

“Have I mentioned what a beast you are? Stop talking, please.” Lydia removed his coat from her body and dropped it on the lawn between them with a sneer on her

lovely face.

“The Mayfair Manhood? The Cornwall Cane!” Joseph kept his hands in front of his groin as he teased the lady because removing them would have put them in nearly the same predicament as their first encounter at the spring. “I’m attempting to make you smile, my lady. Is it not working?”

“Oh, I understand your meaning, Lord Winstone, but your humor has missed its mark. I stopped you just now to ask your knowledge of the rights of tenant farmers and how to help a friend. But you have turned my lust for knowledge into a joke. All because your penis gave your desire away and you can’t handle how that makes you feel. You see, it is you who desires me, Lord Winstone. But I am the one woman in all of England that you cannot have.”

Joseph stood in silence and swallowed hard as Lady Lydia kicked his jacket on the ground and proceeded to walk toward him like she was about to attack.

“Besides, I obviously cannot comment on whether or not your awkward appendage made me feel anything out of the ordinary, my lord. I could not fully see it under your tunic.”

She dared to reach out and press her hand against Joseph’s chest before locking eyes with him one more time. “So, if you want to know the real answer to your question, you’ll need to show it to me in all its natural glory someday. For science, of course.”

Lydia stomped toward the main house as Joseph felt any sense of control he had left over his heart, mind, and body go with her.

Chapter 5

Having been lost and circling through the halls of the Winstone House for the last ten minutes, Lydia was grateful to see her mother and sisters entering the art gallery with other guests.

“There you are, Lydia! Come join us for a tour around the gallery.” Lady Briarwood waved her toward the entrance and linked their arms together. “My goodness, your skin is cold! Have you been walking outside again? Lydia, you cannot just roam around other people’s property studying plants and architecture all day. This is a party, dearest.”

“Yes, Mama. But how do we ever discover new things if we do not read and inquire and explore?” Lydia shivered again and leaned into her mother’s warm arm.

“You don’t,” Lady Briarwood whispered into her ear. “You behave like a lady and busy yourself with ladylike pursuits.”

Lydia sighed and thought about her exchanges with the viscount thus far. They were as unladylike as they came.

“And what of paintings like this one, Mama? Is that a ladylike pursuit?”

All four Carter women stared up at a strange oil painting of a man and woman framed in gold. The woman was sitting in an elegant drawing room while reaching her hand toward something outside the border of the painting. Her feet were bound together on the floor with many pretty ribbons, while the man faced away from her with his eyes

closed.

“Very strange.” Eleanor looked away and walked on.

“Too modern.” Charlotte frowned and joined her.

“It’s heartbreaking.” A wave of nausea rippled through Lydia’s stomach and she pressed a hand over her belly. “There is something foreboding about this piece, no?”

Lady Briarwood stared at the image with her eyebrows knitted together. “How very unusual. I rather prefer Charlotte’s chipmunks.”

Eleanor and Charlotte giggled with their mother and moved on to view the sculptures, but Lydia couldn’t yet tear her eyes away from the painting.

“The woman is trapped and the man is her captor. It’s clearly a statement about a woman’s lot in high society. She has no choices. There are only his choices.”

“Are you talking to yourself, sister? I knew these balls would someday drive you to madness.” Lydia’s brother, William, peeked over her shoulder and broke her concentration.

“Oh, what would you know, brother? You’re exactly the kind of man portrayed in this painting. Privileged to a fault and unwilling to listen if the voice of reason is female.”

Lydia turned around to hear what she assumed would be her brother’s silly response, but he looked down and mumbled his reply.

“I am not the man in that painting. Nor will I ever be.”

William walked away and disappeared into the hallway. She thought about following him to ask if he was quite well but decided against it. Lydia had her own feelings to wrestle with today, and William had brushed her off or told her to mind her own business more times than she could count.

Today she would take his advice and keep the rest of her thoughts to herself. It was the best way to get through a night surrounded by every soul from Mayfair in the same building. And as long as she could avoid the Viscount Winstone for the rest of the evening, she just might survive it.

A few minutes later, a parade of pretty debutants with glasses of punch in their hands walked past the art gallery, followed by the Countess Winstone. Before Lydia could duck behind a statue, Lady Winstone noticed her and called her name.

“Lady Lydia, join us! We’re hosting a contest for the young ladies and eligible gentlemen in attendance tonight. Please tell your sisters!”

Despite preferring to be a wallflower, Lydia’s interest was piqued. “A contest? What kind of contest?”

“Come and see!”

Many people followed her down the long main hallway back toward the ballroom. Lydia heard the orchestra stop playing and Lord Winstone asking for the attention of his guests.

Without finding her sisters first, Lydia left the gallery and returned to the ballroom, but she stood just outside the main doors to listen in.

“Esteemed guests, we’re honored by your presence tonight at what I think we can all agree is the event of the season, hosted by the incomparable Countess Winstone!”

Cheers and claps filled the ballroom as Lady Winstone took a bow at her husband's side at the back of the room.

“This evening, the countess has outdone herself by creating a trivia contest between the eligible gents and fine unmarried ladies! The questions will cover various topics from proper etiquette to history and more. If you would like to participate in the contest, please write your name on the cards being passed around. Then drop your card in the proper bowl for a random selection of each lady and gentleman who will compete with one another!”

Lydia watched some of the young ladies nearly tackle the footmen to the ground in order to grab a name card from their hands. The eligible gentlemen were thankfully more orderly. They dropped their completed name cards into the bowl held by Lord Winstone, while the ladies placed their cards in the bowl held in Lady Winstone's arms.

When every name card had been gathered, the ballroom filled with rumblings of anticipation for which men and women would compete against each other.

“We're about to begin!” Lord Winstone shouted over the buzzing crowd. “Do we have any final contestants for our game?”

Everyone scanned the room to see if anyone else would volunteer. Then Lady Winstone stepped out onto the dance floor and studied the faces of the men who had already added their names.

“Wait a moment. Where is Viscount Winstone? Joseph?”

Lydia stayed in the shadows at the ballroom entrance while people inside searched the crowd for the viscount.

“Are we both hiding from my mother’s blatant marriage market game or is it just me?”

At the sound of Joseph Penton’s voice behind her ear, Lydia felt her skin prickle with goosebumps. Will this man forever unsettle me from now on?

“It seems this avoidance is the one thing we have in common, my lord. Though I doubt you could best me in a trivia challenge, I have no interest in competing for a gentleman’s attention in front of Mayfair’s elite.”

“Is that so, Lady Lydia? Maybe you should prove it.” Joseph stepped out from his hiding place behind Lydia and waved toward his mother from the ballroom entrance.

“I’m here, my lady! Don’t forget to include the very eligible marquess. Briarwood’s eldest daughter, Lady Lydia. She was just saying how much she loves trivia games.” Joseph pointed at Lydia and grinned.

“Excellent, Lady Lydia! We will add your name to a card for you. Come, both of you, and join our contest. Lord Winstone, please explain to our guests how it works.” Lady Winstone approached Lydia with a smile and waved her into the room as Joseph joined the line of men competing in the game.

“Of course, my lady!” Her husband drew one card from each bowl and held the cards high over his head. “We will choose one gentleman and one lady to start our contest. The first person of this pair to answer three questions correctly wins and goes on to face the next name we draw from the bowl. So it’s quite possible that none of you will compete, but the final couple standing will surely be a grand match to watch this season! We encourage the other contestants to mingle and get to know one another in-between rounds, of course.”

Lord Wintone handed his wife the two name cards he drew for her to read out loud.

“Our first contestants are the Viscount of Wheaton and Lady Liza Newcastle!”

Lydia crossed her arms and sighed. Could this night get any longer and more ridiculous?

“Contestants, here is your first question. What year was our Prince Regent, King George IV born?” Lord Winstone bellowed the question across the ballroom and waited.

Lydia’s ears perked up. She knew the answer but assumed everyone else in the room would know their current king’s date of birth, too.

Lord Wheaton offered the first guess. “1760?”

“Sorry, that is incorrect! Lady Liza, do you know the answer?”

Lydia suppressed the urge to shout out the correct date as Lady Liza chewed her thumbnail and shook her head.

“I am certain that Lord Wheaton’s answer was much closer than I could care to guess.” Lady Liza peered up at Lord Wheaton through her long lashes as she returned her coy gaze with a toothy grin.

“Is she really choosing not to guess at all in order to impress that bloody dolt?” Lydia didn’t realize she’d said the words aloud until two young women standing near her gasped and moved away.

She rolled her eyes and mumbled under her breath. “Well, he is a dolt and she’s making a laughingstock of us all.”

Remembering her brother’s promise to elbow her every time she was out of line made

Lydia instinctively pull her arms close to her body to protect her ribs, but William was nowhere in sight.

“The answer is 1762! We have no winner yet, but your next question is an easy one. Which hour is the most popular for promenade with eligible gents and ladies such as yourselves in Hyde Park?” Lord Winstone looked up from his question sheets and peered at the contestants over his round reading glasses.

Lord Wheaton winked at Lady Liza. “You guess first this time, Lady Liza.”

She curtsied and beamed at her handsome opponent. “I dare say the best promenade hour would be the one of your choosing, Lord Wheaton.”

Lydia sighed heavily and caught Viscount Winstone’s expression as he studied the contestants and scowled. At least I’m not the only one who thinks these people are buffoons.

“Perhaps I should extend an invitation and we could find out together, Lady Liza.” Lord Wheaton extended his arm and the two of them walked away from Lord Winstone as if he’d just arranged their courtship himself.

“The answer is the five o’clock hour, but it looks as though even losing answers can lead to a match in this game! Please draw two new names, Lady Winstone.”

The contest worked its way through six more couples until Viscount Winstone’s name was called to face Miss Wilhelmina Underwood. As Miss Underwood walked past Lydia, she bumped into her with such force that it felt quite on purpose.

“You’re in the way,” she said to Lydia without a word of apology, then walked on.

“And you’re bloody rude,” Lydia whispered behind Miss Underwood’s back, but the

stunning black-haired woman stopped and turned around.

“I beg your pardon? Did you say something to me?” Wilhelmina looked down her elegant nose at Lydia, who stood several inches shorter.

“Nothing of note, miss. Best of luck with the viscount.” Lydia kept her gaze steady on the rude woman she’d never met before. She’d only just learned her name when Lord Winstone called it.

“Oh, I won’t need any luck winning with the viscount, whether I lose this game or not.” Miss Underwood seemed to bare her teeth through an eerie smirk at Lydia, then walked away.

Lydia rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. What in the world was that about?

“Ladies and gentlemen, we only have two eligible ladies left for this competition! Miss Underwood, welcome to you. Please stand here. Now for the first question between Lord Joseph Winstone and Miss Wilhelmina Underwood.”

Lydia looked at the ladies standing around her and realized she was the last female contestant who hadn’t yet had a turn. That meant if Joseph won against Miss Underwood, Lydia would face him next.

Unless I slip out of this room now and escape to the garden again!

She considered this option for a few moments but was too interested in the trivia questions and seeing how this competition turned out.

Joseph and Wilhelmina each got two questions right, then came the tiebreaker that would determine which of them would move on to the next round.

Thus far, Lydia was impressed by the viscount's correct answers to some fairly challenging trivia questions about world history. Though it wasn't really fair to ask such questions of the ladies of polite society who weren't often taught such facts or encouraged to know them.

"According to Lady Pennington's book *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to Her Absent Daughters*, what should be a person's highest goal? Miss Underwood, you may answer first." Lord Winstone's enthusiasm for the game seemed to wane as his voice grew hoarse from shouting so everyone could hear.

Wilhelmina nodded and answered with a smug grin. "The answer is perfection. One must pursue perfection. Would you agree, my lord? Or would a viscount be required to read such a book of conduct meant for fine ladies?"

Miss Underwood's voice was laced with sarcasm, probably because she assumed this question was purposely used in her favor. After all, Lady Pennington's book was written to teach proper conduct for girls, not for boys.

But Joseph looked confident nonetheless. Lydia watched a smile spread across his face as he winked at his mother, who had a clear expression of pride on her own.

"That's where you'd be incorrect, Miss Underwood. As luck would have it, our mother read that particular book to my brothers and me so we would know the proper conduct of a proper spouse. Therefore, I must disagree with you. The correct answer is virtue. Lady Pennington's guide encouraged the pursuit of perfection only so one could also achieve the highest goal of virtue."

"My son is correct! Bravo, Joseph! Virtue is the right answer. I fear this means you will not continue on, Miss Underwood. Thank you for your participation. You've been a strong and worthy rival for the viscount, to be sure!"

Wilhelmina stood perfectly still for a moment as if she intended to challenge the Earl of Winstone's decision. Then she quietly accepted her loss, curtsied, and walked out of the ballroom with her head held high.

Lord Winstone's energy bounced back as he called the final name from the bowl of young lady contestants. "Lady Lydia Carter, please join us for the final round!"

Startled by the sound of her name, Lydia reluctantly moved to stand across from Joseph as his father selected another question from the sheets of paper in his hands.

"Joseph and Lady Lydia, here is your first question for the final round of this contest. True or false: A woman should not discuss religion or politics in polite company. Joseph, I'll have you answer this one first."

Lydia's right eye started twitching upon hearing such an absurd question based on the rules of polite society that she loathed. But the viscount seemed to enjoy her discomfort so much he pretended to need extra time to determine the correct answer.

Joseph ran a hand through his hair and folded his arm to rest his chin on his fist to think. "What a fine question, Father! However, answering it might prove tricky. You see, a woman with a brilliant mind and spirited wit might attempt such conversations without considering her place. But would she be wrong to do so, given she is a creature prone to overthinking, after all? It's perplexing, is it not?"

Lydia's every nerve was on fire as she bit her lip to keep from scolding the viscount in front of both of their families and everyone else.

"Stop playing the fool, son. You just established your knowledge of a lady's etiquette, so what is your answer?" Lord Winstone's stomach growled like rumbling thunder, then actual thunder boomed with tremendous force outside and shook the walls of Winstone House.

Surprised gasps filled the room as Lady Winstone clutched the glittering amethyst brooch on her purple French silk dress. “Oh my! Should we break to check the weather, my lord?” She touched her husband’s arm as some of the men in the ballroom headed toward the exit to do just that.

“Yes, my lady. Good idea. We will resume our game after a short break, everyone! Please enjoy more dancing until then!” Lord Winstone signaled for the musicians to play and followed some of his guests out to the entryway of Winstone House to assess the state of the sky.

Joseph checked his pocket watch, then snapped its gold lid closed and glanced at Lydia. “It appears you avoided the agony of defeat, Lady Lydia. At least for now.”

“Forgive me, my lord, for I’m only a woman and therefore should not be permitted to speak for myself.” Lydia narrowed her eyes at the viscount and turned to leave the ballroom.

Joseph’s hand on her arm made her pause.

“My lady, you cannot truly believe that I do not value the opinion of a woman, do you? I think you need to work on growing a thicker skin or these games of ours will become quite vexing for you.” He chuckled and released his hold on Lydia’s arm.

“These games will not continue, Lord Winstone! Upon my word, you have wasted more of my time in one day than any other person I’ve ever known.”

“Ah, but it’s all for science, is it not, Lady Lydia? I’m happy to be your experiment, no matter the consequences to us both.”

Lydia’s cheeks flared red as Joseph’s eyes twinkled. She curtsied in front of the most exasperating man she’d ever met, then went looking for her father to insist that they

leave at once.

She'd had enough of the Winstone House and everyone who occupied it. Thank goodness she would soon be asleep in her own bed and never have to speak to the Viscount Winstone again.

Lydia strode down the great halls of the first floor, looking for her parents, and came upon the Winstone library. When she ducked inside, the vast walls of full bookcases took her breath away.

The library seemed to be split into two rooms. Once she'd admired the first for a few minutes, she approached the second door that was left ajar and heard voices coming from within.

"Are you quite well, madam?"

A woman was crying inside the second room where a man was asking about her health.

"Just go, please. It's no use." The crying woman's voice sounded muffled, as if she were pressing a handkerchief to her mouth.

When Lydia dared to discreetly peek around the corner through the open second doorway, what she saw made her jump back.

Sophia Penton, Joseph's sister-in-law, was crying into the chest of Lydia's brother, William.

"William!" Lydia cried out from instinct, knowing that if her brother and another man's wife were caught like this they would all be ruined.

William's head jerked up when he heard his name, and Sophia pushed away from his body and turned toward the wall.

"Lydia, you frightened me! I was simply consoling Lady Sophia after I found her crying alone in this room. You have disturbed a friend comforting a friend, nothing more."

Sophia turned back toward him and looked into his eyes, then began crying again. She didn't say a word other than wail with sadness as she ran past Lydia and disappeared out of the library.

"Brother, we must leave here at once. I'm beginning to fear that our connection with any Penton, male or female, might lead to our demise. This house and this family are dangerous to our family's reputation!"

William grabbed Lydia's arms and gave her a strong shake. "Stop these hysterics at once, sister! I told you, I was merely consoling the distraught woman. The Pentons are a fine family and we are staying for an exclusive dinner this evening that is just as important for our family's connections in society as this entire event. So calm yourself. Our relationship with the Pentons is strong and untarnished. Go back to the ballroom and behave like a lady. I will hear nothing more on this matter."

Lydia stared up at her brother with frustration and disbelief. "Behave like a lady? You dare to chastise me after holding a married woman in your arms, and while unchaperoned? William, you have been my closest ally in our household since I was a young girl. But I no longer understand the man you have become. My beloved brother would not speak to me in such a way as to belittle my existence!"

"You are too dramatic for your own good, Lydia. We grow up and we change. You are changing, too. And I have grown tired of this conversation. I will take my leave of you now. Don't follow me."

William pushed past Lydia and disappeared out the same door that Sophia had just rushed through.

The wave of nausea she'd felt in the art gallery filled her gut again as Lydia took some deep breaths and collected herself. When she finally forced her legs to take her back through the main room of the library, a low voice rose from a dark corner between two bookcases.

"It seems to me the Carter family is just as capable of causing their own ruin as any of us Pentons could."

Lydia jumped with fright and slammed into a marble pedestal holding a tall blue Wedgwood vase. She felt the vase topple over behind her back and somehow reached out and caught it before it crashed to the floor.

She hugged the vase to her chest and panted through panic as Lord Winstone emerged from the shadows.

"Are you mad, sir? Explain yourself!" Lydia's long chestnut hair had loosened from its pins in her wild dash to save the vase. It now tumbled down her shoulders and a long curl dipped between her breasts.

"I think you need to take your brother's advice and behave like a lady in my home. I am your host, am I not? I do not need to explain my presence in my own damn library. But I fear your brother cannot say the same." The viscount quickly bridged the space between himself and Lydia without invitation and pulled the priceless vase from her arms.

"What can you mean? My brother and I were discussing a private matter that has nothing to do with you." Lydia tried to tuck her hair back into her stylish chignon, then gave up.

Even though they'd only met that afternoon, Joseph Penton was the last person she felt the need to impress or prove herself a proper lady. That pretense dissolved the moment I spotted him soaking all of his alluring appendages in the mineral spring.

Still, there was no denying Joseph's physical appeal. His broad shoulders, strong jaw, and piercing eyes made her heartbeat quicken so much she felt faint. It was shocking how strong her urge was to reach out and stroke his cheek. Instead, she fixated on fullness of his lips as he scolded her, wishing she could grab onto the cravat around his neck and tug him close enough to kiss.

"Now who's the mad one in the room, Lady Lydia? I saw your brother holding my sister-in-law as a husband holds a wife! You just stopped them before I did because you seem to take ownership of every space you inhabit. I stepped to the shadows because I could not accuse a man of impropriety with a young lady poking about and opening any doors she pleases in someone else's home, as apparently your brother feels entitled to do as well. And then you dare to insult my family when your own has behaved so badly, as witnessed by us both! No, my lady. It is you who should explain yourself. Unless you'd rather explain what just happened with his wife to my brother, Oliver, instead?"

Lydia's breathing grew more haggard as the flutters of her attraction to him were replaced by stabs of panic that rose through her chest. She pressed a hand over her heart and knew she'd have to say something to ease the tension between them before it was too late.

"My lord, I apologize. Please do not judge my brother for what you saw, but for what he says. I believe him, and so should you. He came upon Lady Sophia in distress and merely tried to console her as any caring gentleman would. I dare say I respect him for that. I hope you will, too."

Joseph placed the Wedgwood vase back on its pedestal, then pulled a pair of white

gloves from his jacket pocket and began tugging them onto his hands. Lydia watched him sheath his fingers and found herself wanting to feel them pressing into the flesh of her backside as he kissed across her clavicle at the base of her neck.

Damn that bloody anatomy book!

“I find it amusing, my lady, that you would admonish your brother with disbelief and then preach of his honesty to me.”

A powerful beam of light flashed through the library windows, followed closely by more booming thunder. Joseph’s whole body seemed lit like a spectacular firework for just a second. Seeing him look so dazzling sent a new shockwave of desire through Lydia’s bloodstream that awakened every nerve ending in the sensitive bud of her sex.

She breathed her way through that new feeling as if she were still panicking, but far from it. Lydia gained new strength with each pulse of awareness that she was capable of such magnificent arousal.

Though, she was also quite thankful that not a single one of her appendages gave her secret want for the viscount away.

“Lord Winstone, I’m sure you understand that siblings speak to each other with more intimate and protective language. In addition, I was reacting from shock and not thinking clearly.” Lydia folded her hands together and studied Joseph’s eyes with more confidence in her own. “I trust that we can put this matter behind us and move forward with mutual respect, can we not?”

A devilish grin played at the corner of Lord Winstone’s lips as he moved toward the library door. “Why start now?”

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Chapter 6

“Joseph George Jameson Penton, come with me at once!”

The Viscount Winstone was helping his father bid farewell to some of the guests as a light rain began to fall over the nighttime landscape outside their home. When his mother angrily whispered his full name in his ear, he had no idea what to expect after following her through the house to the second floor, and into his own bedchamber.

His valet, Benchley, stood in front of Joseph’s bed looking somber, as though he wished he could be anywhere else but here.

“Tell him what you found, Benchley! Tell him!” Countess Winstone curled her right hand into a fist and bit her knuckle as she paced beside the men.

“My lord, I was sorting your laundered clothing this evening and apparently did not realize that there were other belongings in the basket. I merely inquired of the maid why she returned these... items with your lordship’s clothes, and the news of it spread, I’m afraid, through the Winstone House rumor mill. And here we are.”

“Benchley, what are you talking about?” Joseph was becoming annoyed by the suspense of whatever Benchley and his mother were up to. But when his valet stepped away from the bed, Joseph could see the problem displayed on his dark navy quilt.

A woman’s brown cloak and matching bonnet rested next to a pair of women’s long white stockings with silk ribbon garters.

“Oh, that. Did you not find the boots? They could use a good cleaning, too.” Joseph laughed but his companions did not.

“I don’t know if I have ever endured such a perilous night! Your brother makes a drunken scene at my grand party, while our entire staff gossips throughout the house about your secret possession of women’s clothing? Joseph, what is the meaning of this?”

“Mama, you are overreacting to a perfectly innocent discovery. Those clothes were left by someone, presumably from our staff, in the garden. When I saw them earlier today, I bundled them up and brought them inside with my own muddied cloak and forgot to mention it. My apologies, Benchley, for the disturbance and misunderstanding.” Joseph reached out his hand to shake Benchley’s, which his valet accepted. “Now let’s get back to that grand party of yours, Mama. All is as it should be.”

“No, Joseph, all is not. Why would my son, the Right Honorable Viscount of Winstone, choose to bring an unknown woman’s clothing into his bedchamber instead of leaving them be and asking a footman to investigate? I am no fool. I know what young men do when they travel the world far from home. But I cannot support such scandalous conquests under my own roof, do I make myself clear?”

Lady Winstone stood without reservation between Joseph and his valet to scold her grown son for being a rake. And apparently a stocking thief, too.

“Perfectly, Mama. No such incidences will ever happen again. Under your roof.” Joseph winked at his mother, but she was not to be toyed with today.

“I have had enough of your wit and evasion, Joseph. The night is still young and you will find a suitable partner to court and marry before the end of it. You need a proper wife to help you become a more serious and responsible man. I should have seen this

coming when you were a child and I first noticed how much you resembled your father. He benefited from a strong partner, and so shall you.”

With that, Lady Winstone turned on her heel and marched out of Joseph’s bed chamber as her son and Benchley watched her go.

“I am truly sorry for the inconvenience, Benchley. Thank you for your discretion, despite the rumor mill.”

“Always, my lord.” Benchley bowed and made a hasty exit.

Joseph removed his right glove and ran his bare hand down the length of Lydia’s stockings, wondering how her bare legs would feel cinched around his waist.

Joseph rejoined his father in the entryway of their home as many of the guests were saying their goodbyes. Music still rang through the house as the ball continued with a smaller amount of dancers enjoying the merry eve.

He tried not to think about the lie he’d just told his mother, about how he found a woman’s clothing abandoned in their garden. Not that telling the truth would have been the right decision, either, but it still felt a bit disconcerting that an untruth had rolled so easily off his tongue.

But he was simply sparing his mother more peril on the one night a year when she worked so hard to shine.

He’d also spared her the news that while Oliver was sleeping off the liquor his wife was crying in the arms of another man. Whether that was merely coincidental or not was yet to be seen, but Joseph vowed to keep an eye on William Carter for the

foreseeable future.

As for Carter's sister, Joseph tried to put her out of his mind and failed. One day, just one day of knowing that vexing woman was already driving him mad. He had to admit that their instant level of intimacy caused by their meeting at the spring also made her the most interesting woman he'd ever come across.

But, as mother said, the night is young. And there are still many young ladies left at the ball for dancing the night away. I cannot allow Lydia Carter to dominate my every thought, no matter how much I'd like to lift her skirts, bend her over my knee, and swat her perfect bottom for being such a naughty nymph.

"What news, brother?" Henry startled Joseph when he smacked his back. "Have any special ladies caught your eye this evening? It's a sad day for you and all other men that my lovely Maria is already taken. She's beyond compare, if I do say so myself."

Joseph smiled at his youngest brother and nodded in agreement. "You chose well, brother. Of that there is no doubt. So when are you and Oliver going to make me an uncle? You'd think one of you would have grown an heir by now."

Henry's cheeks reddened and his eyes lit up. "Don't tell Mama because we plan to surprise her soon, but Maria is very recently with child. You will be an uncle before you know it."

"Henry, are you joking? Come here, you virile whipper-snapper! That is the happiest of news!" Joseph pulled Henry in for a hug and watched his mother enter the room with her party face back on.

Henry and Joseph's father came through the main entrance from outside and shook the rain from his coat just as their mother approached.

“My lord, please do not wiggle like a wet dog in our home!” Lady Winstone scolded her husband, then moved on to invite some of her remaining guests to join her intimate dinner party gathering soon. When he saw her extend a dinner invitation to spoiled and cunning Wilhelmina Underwood, Joseph frowned.

“What is Mama up to? Could she really be bringing her marriage market to the dinner table?”

Henry grinned. “You cannot hide, brother. If you don’t choose a wife on the dance floor, she’ll marry you off while the plates are passed.”

“I think my appetite just disappeared.” Joseph thought again of Lady Lydia, knowing that she and her family would be dining with them soon, as well.

Now there’s a dish I’d like to savor. Despite her completely untamable character, I’ll bet she’s as juicy at her pinnacle as they come.

“Thinking of someone special, Joseph? I’ll bet it’s that fiery Carter girl, isn’t it? Are you sure you can handle a gorgeous chit like that one?” Henry nudged his brother, then took off running in fits of laughter when Joseph tried to tackle him.

“Straighten up, boys, or your mother will hang us all from the rafters in the barn before the night is through. Where is Oliver?” Lord Winstone had returned once again from helping guests to their carriages. He was nearly soaked to the bone.

“Oliver is... indisposed. And Mama will find your state of dress unacceptable, so let us help. You go change into dry clothes and I’ll see to the guests until dinner.”

Joseph relished the distraction from the day’s events, but he wasn’t prepared for how much worse the rainfall had become. Footmen did their best to help keep guests’ boots and skirts from sinking into the mud, but the driveway out front was a disaster

by the time the last guests left before dinner had departed.

News of the worsening weather was spreading through the building, but Joseph knew that heading home before the Countess of Winstone's special dinner wasn't something anyone wanted to do.

Unless you're the sour-faced nymph with plump, pouty lips heading toward me right now.

"Have you seen my brother, my lord? We must make our leave but my family members seem to have scattered on the wind." Lydia looked tired and worried about the skies as she watched through the front doors as the Penton footmen pulled them closed.

Joseph was also growing weary and didn't have the energy to pretend that he wanted to speak to Lydia right now. Bed her? Yes. Listen to her self-righteous ranting? I'd rather clean my ears with an ice pick!

"Have you checked the dining hall, Lady Lydia? We are gathering there for dinner shortly. Run along now. You'll want to keep your brother from hugging the married ladies and your sisters from giggling over every little thing."

For a man who didn't want to hear more of Lydia Carter's tirades, Joseph realized at that moment that he couldn't seem to stop provoking them. She was so easy to rile and her fiery rages were sexy as hell.

But this time, Lydia merely blinked for a few seconds, then turned and marched off toward the dining hall near the grand ballroom. Standing in the wake of her silence, Joseph wondered if he had gone too far.

The truth was he didn't want her to leave the party yet. There was a very good chance

that once she walked out his front door tonight, he might never get a chance to spar with her again.

As luck would have it, Joseph was seated across from Lydia Carter at dinner, and next to Wilhelmina Underwood. He was surrounded by eligible ladies, no doubt his mother's doing. But the only one who didn't fawn over him was the one he craved the most.

Lydia was deep in conversation with the man to her left, Lord Triton, and both parties seemed to be getting more agitated by the minute. So much so that Joseph felt he might have to step in soon to keep her from throwing a punch at one of the most esteemed members of Parliament and a great friend to the Penton family.

"Lord Triton, there would be far fewer grand meals such as this one without the hard work of our tenant farmers. High society depends on their success and their success depends on our support, does it not?" Lydia spoke in a fairly hushed and steady tone, but it was clear her anger was festering under each word.

Lord Triton cleared his throat and glanced at Joseph with eyes full of annoyance before answering. "Lady Lydia, I believe your lovely head has been filled with the exaggerations of some whining members of the working class. Everyone is responsible for their own success. And those who do not succeed need only look in the mirror for the source of their demise."

Lydia's eyes widened with shock as she stabbed a piece of carrot with her fork. "I see. So, making the rich even richer is the bottom line? And the people who break their backs to make our opulence possible should quit complaining about their pathetic lives full of hunger, sickness, and strife?"

Lord Triton raised his glass and pretended to clink it with an imaginary goblet over Lydia's plate. "I'll drink to that!"

Joseph studied Lydia's reaction for any signs of pending violence, but she simply tossed her napkin on her plate and drained her own glass of port. She was clearly seething, but for the second time in a couple of hours, she managed to hold her tongue.

It surprised Joseph how much he preferred her rants to her resolve. He didn't want to think about how much Lydia and his mother were alike in this manner. Perhaps being raised by a headstrong woman made him drawn to the one holding back a tantrum right in front of him.

Wanting to bring a sense of merriment back to their end of the table, Joseph was about to suggest a change of topic when he felt a woman's hand trail down the length of his right leg. He nearly jumped out of his seat, but a muffled giggle from Wilhelmina Underwood cleared up any questions about who had made such a bold and private gesture.

"I beg your pardon, my lord. You had such an unsettled look on your face, I thought I'd cause a more pleasing diversion. You're welcome." A bawdy grin lifted the corners of Wilhelmina's provocative mouth, her teasing tongue licking her bottom lip.

There was little time to determine how to respond to such a blatant sexual advance before a drenched footman raced into the dining hall and whispered into Joseph's father's ear.

Upon hearing the message, Lord Winstone stood up with his eyes wide with surprise. "Ladies and gentlemen, I have some distressing news. The storm has washed out the bridge between our estate and the main thoroughfare and has apparently rendered the

roads beyond it unsuitable for travel. I fear you are about to become our guests for several days, if not longer, until repairs are possible once the storm subsides. But we have plenty of rooms for your comfort and are happy to have you with us! I'd like to ask the men to join me in securing your horses and carriages for the night. Lady Winstone, we'll need your expert guidance for organizing accommodations. Don't panic, everyone! We have it all in hand."

Most of the nearly thirty remaining guests sprang into action as the dining hall at Winstone House filled with anxious chatter.

Wilhelmina Underwood stood next to Joseph at the table and stroked his arm. "It looks like we'll have plenty of time now to explore our budding connection, my lord. Your mother will be pleased that we are getting on so well, will she not?"

Joseph gulped in an attempt to keep his gurgling stomach acid from rising up his throat. Though it was true that Miss Underwood was a tempting woman who would make a memorable lover, she was also the kind of chit who would stab a man in the back just for the fun of it.

Marrying Wilhelmina Underwood was out of the question and a match he had to prevent at all costs. Learning that his mother might be pushing him in Miss Underwood's direction made his gut churn even more.

As chaos ensued around them, Joseph glanced at Lydia again. She was still seated and nursing another glass of port while staring up at him.

Did she witness Wilhelmina's advance? Did it make her jealous or was she simply angry with all men now, including her unscrupulous brother?

It was then that an outrageous idea formed in Joseph's head as he returned Lydia Carter's gaze. Now that they would be stuck together for who knows how long, it

might be advantageous for them both to create an alliance.

A temporary solution to her brother's momentary lapse of propriety and my need to avoid my mother's schemes.

Joseph had to act at once to put his plan into place. Soon all of the guests would be tucked away in their rooms and further communication with Lydia tonight would prove difficult. Right now was perfect timing, while everyone was running around like the world was about to end.

He excused himself from Wilhelmina's side and made haste moving to the other side of the dining table. Joseph didn't care if anyone saw him. In fact, he rather preferred that at least some people did.

When he reached Lydia, he bent over her shoulder and whispered into her ear. "What I'm about to do will go against everything you want and believe in, but I need you to trust me that this is only temporary. I am suggesting a secret pact with you to offer protection for the reputation of both of our families, and to keep my meddling mother from controlling my future. I apologize in advance, but I beg you to comply with this pact only while we're confined to these walls for the next few days."

Lydia turned around and looked at Joseph like he had grown an extra head. "My lord, what on earth are you going on about? You are making no sense!" Fortunately, she said this quietly enough so as not to attract attention just yet to their conversation. Her words were slightly slurred from the alcohol, which Joseph hoped would make her more willing to do the preposterous thing he was about to ask of her.

Joseph crouched next to Lydia's chair and smiled. "Consider it the next phase of your experiment, my lady. If you do me this favor, I'll show you every appendage I own. For science, of course."

As Lydia's eyelids fluttered with complete confusion, Joseph dropped to one knee and raised his voice.

“Lady Lydia Carter, will you marry me?”

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Chapter 7

Lydia gaped at the viscount as word of his proposal spread like wildfire through the dining hall. She hadn't uttered a single word in response yet when both of their mothers appeared behind Joseph with expressions on their faces so full of astonished delight that Lydia's head started to spin.

"I... I wonder... my lord, could you repeat the question, please?"

Within a few seconds of Joseph's outrageous proposal, they were being watched by a growing number of guests all crowded around the table.

Lydia kept blinking and thinking, trying to convince her tipsy brain that this entire day wasn't all a very strange dream.

Joseph nodded slowly and gently took her hand in his. "Yes, my lady. I'd be happy to. I asked you if you would do me the pleasure of being my wife. To honor and cherish above all else."

It may have been the port in her bloodstream, but Lydia could swear she heard more than one young lady swoon. Lydia wasn't the swooning type, and she would never ever marry Viscount Winstone, much less any other bloody aristocrat with no sense of right and wrong.

However, when she saw her brother come into view, she considered Joseph's words a bit more carefully before responding. As everyone around her held their breath, she locked eyes with William and saw the slightest hint of pending doom in a split-

second vision she had of his fate.

As a woman, she could cancel her engagement with Joseph at any time without that decision causing scandal to her family. It was the one tiny shred of power that high society allowed her without fault or punishment, other than some awkward months of recovering from the broken agreement.

When she looked back at Joseph, his eyes pleaded for her answer. She had to admit she liked having him in this position—at her mercy. Lydia dared to imagine what she might get out of this temporary arrangement that could not only protect her family but help the farmers she championed.

As a viscount's betrothed, she might well get help from others for the cause, too. Even if only engaged for a few days, she might gain more attention on such matters before their ruse was through.

And as for Joseph's offer to show her his every appendage, she fully intended to make him keep that promise. She'd learned quite a lot about the marvels of a naked man for one day, but there was so much more to explore.

And touch and study and stimulate.

Oh, yes. This could be a worthy endeavor indeed if the viscount doesn't continue to anger me every second of every day!

Hopefully, it was a risk worth taking—because she was about to take it.

Lydia cleared her throat and laced her fingers with Joseph's, if only to keep from fainting dead away from what she was about to say.

“Yes, my Lord. I will marry you.”

Cheers rang out so loudly through the dining hall that Lydia winced, but the excitement around them was a sight to behold.

Joseph's face filled with relief. "Thank you," he whispered, then gently raised her hand to his lips and kissed her soft skin.

Above Joseph's head, Lady Winstone was hugging every person that came in her path. "My Joseph is engaged! The viscount is engaged!"

Lydia's mother was equally as excited as she embraced Lord Briarwood and the two of them pulled Joseph from his knee on the floor to extend their gratitude and good wishes.

Across the table from Lydia, Wilhelmina Underwood's eyes were stone cold above a ruthless sneer. The raven-haired woman glared at Lydia with so much contempt that it sent shivers down her spine.

When Lydia shifted her gaze to the side where Lord Triton had been sitting, she spotted her two sisters pressed together by the wall, shaking their heads.

"She had to have been faking her hatred of balls and viscounts this entire time," Eleanor said to Charlotte without taking her jealous eyes off Joseph.

"She wore no jewelry or paint on her face. And look how her hair has fallen loose like a harlot! All of that and she still gets the man? Why do we work so hard when a woman like Lydia, positively destined to be a spinster, gets engaged before we do?" Charlotte scanned Lydia up and down with a bewildered eyebrow raised high. "She runs through fields and talks to farmers. Her appeal is beyond understanding!"

Lydia felt the giggles coming on and pressed a hand over her mouth. She fully intended on breaking the engagement by the time they returned home again, but

seeing the reactions of her sisters made the whole charade worth it.

She only wished she had a ring to flash in their faces right now.

“I believe your game led to the finest match of all today, Lord Winstone! We have much to celebrate despite the storm, have we not?” Lady Winstone leaned into her husband and sighed heavily as if a tremendous burden had just been lifted from her shoulders.

“Indeed we do, my lady. Let us get everyone settled and then enjoy another round of dancing for the happy couple!”

More cheers filled the dining hall as Joseph held out his hand to Lydia and helped her stand. Though she teetered a bit, she welcomed the chance to get away from all of these people. There was just enough port in her system to take the edge off all the craziness and help her put it all out of her mind.

Tonight, she imagined herself a champion to those who needed her most. She’d accepted an offer she did not want in order to help the people she loved.

The fact that Joseph Penton was not one of those people was irrelevant.

And I will not carry on this farce of an engagement for long.

Joseph offered his arm and led Lydia around the room to hear more of the guests’ good wishes. When she looked around for William, he had disappeared again.

“Oh, Lydia! You have surprised your father and me, and made us so proud. We had no idea you were smitten with the viscount!” Lady Briarwood stood behind Lydia

and, with the help of a maid offered by the Pentons, returned her eldest daughter's hair to a beautiful chignon style. "It just proves there is hope for all of us, does it not?"

Lydia frowned. "Mama, women don't have to marry to be worthy of all that life has to offer."

"How you speak with such disdain, my dear. Maybe being married will turn you into a more amiable lady. And becoming a mother will show you just how much I have suffered your defiance all these years!" Lady Briarwood pressed her hands over Lydia's cheeks and kissed her forehead. "But look where you are now. Engaged to Viscount Winstone! It's miraculous!"

Lydia felt the air sucked out of her chest at her mother's suggestion that she would soon be a mother herself. She did want children someday, but not with that aggravating beast.

Thankfully, there was no need to worry about such things. She and the viscount would go their separate ways as soon as the bridge was repaired.

Although, Lydia suddenly wished she'd done some research in her father's anatomy books about how babies are made. Perhaps the Penton library had a volume or two that would enlighten her. No doubt hidden on the very top shelf.

Eleanor and Charlotte leaned against each other on the settee at the other end of the room, pouting and sighing. Their signature giggles had been silenced for over an hour, which made Lydia think her engagement had brought her luck already.

"Come, ladies. Let's return to the ballroom for Lydia's celebratory dance. What a special night this has become!"

Lady Briarwood shooed her youngest daughters out the door and held tightly to Lydia's hand until they'd reached the end of the hallway where Sophia Penton had just exited a storage room.

Sophia curtsied in front of the Carter women and smiled. "Congratulations, Lady Lydia, on your engagement. We are so excited to welcome you to the family."

Lydia nodded, but the looks shared between herself and Sophia were awkward. She was unable to get the image of Sophia crying in her brother's arms out of her head.

Lydia's mother answered for her with sincere joy. "Thank you, Lady Sophia. It will be wonderful to see our families bonded by such a strong match! Will you be joining us in the ballroom?"

Sophia shook her head and began to move on. "I'm sorry, no. Oliver isn't feeling well and I need to tend to him. But I look forward to getting to know you all better in the next few days. Enjoy your evening!"

As the Carter women walked in the opposite direction as Sophia Penton, Lydia heard rustling sounds coming from the storage room as if someone were still in there.

Instead of investigating, she looked straight ahead and followed her family downstairs. It could have easily been a maid or a footman in that room.

Whomever it was, I don't want to know.

The ballroom seemed even grander than before, perhaps because more candles were lit around the room, making the crystal chandeliers and other divine decor sparkle even brighter.

Joseph was already standing in the middle of the room, holding out his hand. "May I

have this dance, my lady?"

He winked at her with a smile that looked genuine and particularly handsome this late at night and with this much port in her system.

"I'd be delighted, my lord." Lydia played the quintessential lady with a slow curtsy toward the viscount before taking his hand.

More claps and cheering sounded around them as Joseph and Lydia moved into one of the more controversial dances of the day called the waltz. That they both knew how to do this more graceful dance than the common country dances was a testament to their privileged upbringing and exposure to newer and imported trends.

The waltz brought the dancer and his partner more intimately together than the typical country dances. This meant that she and Joseph would embrace on the dance floor and not change partners for a whole song.

The thought of it made her nervous. This whole night made her nervous! She tried to stay focused on the dance and remain upright in Joseph's arms so she didn't faint at his feet.

"You look lovely this evening, little nymph. Thank you for agreeing to this arrangement." Joseph was clearly the more practiced dancer between the two of them, as Lydia had no idea how he was talking to her without breaking their hold.

"I'm concentrating on my steps, my lord. Please be quiet."

Joseph huffed out a low laugh. "I would think you'd also express some gratitude for my generous offer to protect your family name in such a way."

Lydia looked up from their feet and glared at the viscount. "Oh, stop. You practically

begged me to help you avoid your mother's matchmaking. You and I both know I'm the only thing standing between you and a lifetime of licking the boots of Wilhelmina Underwood."

Chapter 8

Joseph poured himself a glass of spiced port from a cabinet in the library and settled into a comfortable lounge chair on the balcony. The rain had been relentless all evening but had decreased to a light mist over the past hour. He put his feet up on the stone bench inside the railing and enjoyed the late-night peacefulness.

As midnight passed beneath the hands of his pocket watch, he chuckled to himself. What a day this has been! He could never have known that his impulsive decision to take a quick dip in a secluded hot spring would lead to an equally impulsive marriage proposal to its outspoken nymph.

Lydia was brash and opinionated. She was fearless and forthcoming. And the woman was a mesmerizing beauty from head to toe.

Joseph laid his head back against the chair and replayed his first vision of Lydia as she'd scolded him from the bank of the spring. In his mind's eye, he could see her bare feet, her ankles, and a hint of her calves below her shift. The misting rain cooled his skin as he imagined what it would be like to slowly slide the fabric of Lydia's undergarment up her legs to reveal her soft and supple thighs.

Then he envisioned sliding the fabric higher still to marvel at the sight of her sex, where he might dare to dip a gentle finger into the warm juice of her desire and massage it along her slippery bud.

“Do you always sleep on balconies in the rain, my lord?”

Lydia's voice startled him so deeply that he yelped and leaped to his feet. His arms splayed out with such force that he nearly tossed his glass of port over the railing to shatter on the ground below.

"My lady, you should always give a man warning before you sneak up and disturb his quiet reverie!" Joseph pulled off his black vest and use it in an attempt to wipe the spilled port off his white shirt underneath.

"I apologize for the sudden intrusion, but I was distracted by the sight of you looking so vulnerable and, for once, completely mute." Lydia grinned, stepping across the balcony to gaze over the side into the dark.

She carried a leather satchel in her arms and wore the same golden ball gown she'd had on all evening.

Joseph gave up on his shirt and tossed his vest aside. "What's in the case? Have you brought a marriage contract banning me from ever bathing under the open sky again?"

Lydia laughed and placed the satchel on a chair. "We both know that there will be no marriage between us, my lord. Once the bridge and roads are passable again, I will dissolve our secret agreement by publicly calling off the engagement. Until then, I am grateful to have your protection of my family's reputation. And you may relax knowing that your mama has halted her pursuit of a wife for her eldest son. For now."

"I see. Then why are you interrupting my peaceful nightcap? If there will be no marriage, I hardly see the point of granting you a marriage kiss." Joseph crossed his arms and waited for the delightful indignance Lydia would no doubt provide in response.

She did not disappoint.

“Marriage kiss? You called it an engagement! And since we are officially engaged, I dare say I deserve one. Though it’s not you granting a kiss to me, it is I who grants one to you!”

“Shhh, please keep your voice down! Do you wish us to be discovered out here alone in the middle of the night? Engaged or not, this meeting is quite impertinent, especially since you seem so set on demanding that I kiss you.”

Joseph tried to keep a straight face, but he quickly broke into a smile as Lydia clenched her hands into fists and looked like she might use them on his jaw.

“Oh, you are indeed a beast, Viscount Winstone!” She clamped her hand over her mouth for a few seconds and breathed through her anger, then lowered her voice even more. “It is clear that you find great amusement in vexing me at every turn, but I am here merely for the sake of research and to ask an important favor.”

Joseph’s eyebrows shot up, as did his curiosity. “A favor? What kind of favor? We’ll get to your kissing research in a moment, if you insist.”

Lydia ignored his attempt to rile her again and clasped her hands in front of her chest. Joseph noted how this gesture pressed her full breasts upward to reveal more of her creamy flesh at the top of her enticing bodice.

“I need to know if there is someone on your staff who will get letters through to the nearest post on foot over the next few days. I would like to send a letter, if I may, via their efforts.” Lydia looked down at her hands as if this was an embarrassing request.

“Send a letter to whom, my lady?” Joseph knew what her answer would be but he couldn’t help poking at her yet again.

“That’s none of your business! My goodness, you are my betrothed, not my captor.

Can you do me this favor or not?"

Joseph scratched his chin and considered her words. "I'm afraid I am your captor quite by accident, since you are staying in my home with nowhere else to go. But that fact aside, I can grant you your favor at the earliest availability if you grant me one in return."

Lydia glared at him as the curls around her face loosened from her chignon in the breeze that was growing stronger by the minute. Joseph could feel a new storm brewing, though he wasn't sure if it was from God's own hand or caused by the wrath of the nymph on his balcony.

Whatever the source, Lydia's primped and proper style was losing a battle with her natural wildness. Her hair loosened and her skirts billowed in the wind. Her manners among the ton were all but gone when alone with him, and it made her all the more alluring.

Seeing the real Lydia, the one he met by the spring less than twenty-four hours ago, made his need to touch her in this moment suddenly unbearable.

"I've already granted you a favor, my lord. I agreed to our false engagement rather quickly on the spot. And I agreed to kiss you on this balcony tonight even after you attempted to insult my intelligence with your appeal to my thirst for knowledge."

"Fair lady, I would never believe that your unshakable intelligence could be so easily insulted. Though you must admit that my clever approach is what convinced you to see me tonight, is it not?"

Joseph held steady to where he stood on the balcony, but the scent of Lydia's wild skin growing wetter as the mist turned to light rain was awakening his every nerve. He could stand only so much of their banter before he would have to pull her into his

arms and feel her shapely curves pressed against him.

“Are you quite well, my lord? A vein in your neck is throbbing.” Lydia reached out a finger to point at Joseph’s neck.

He was in such a state of need for physical contact with her that he took Lydia’s reach as an invitation to clutch her hand and pull her close.

“That’s not the only part of my body throbbing right now, nymph. I think you discovered your power over me at the spring and now wield it without thought of the consequences. So, if you wish to study the effects of an engagement kiss, I suggest you do it now while you have me so stimulated that the results of the experiment will be undeniable.”

Lydia stared wide-eyed at Joseph’s parted lips with shock as she wriggled in his arms. “You forget yourself, my lord! I have entirely lost interest in this experiment!”

“Then tell me to let go.” Joseph pressed a hand against the small of her back where her waist sloped down toward her bottom. His breath quickened as he noted the delicate curve and dared to slide his hand just a little lower.

Lydia’s emerald eyes darkened to the color of moss on the forest floor. Her lips quivered, but she did not pull away.

“Tell me to let go of you and I will. Or kiss me now and put me out of my misery.” Joseph struggled to stay calm as his body reacted to hers more strongly by the second. He wavered between hoping Lydia didn’t feel the urgent pressing of his erection against her belly and hoping that she did.

“Are you truly in misery, Lord Winstone? What does it feel like?” Lydia whispered as she scanned his face for signs of distress. When she stopped trying to pull away

from his embrace, her eyes widened again as if she'd just discovered the physical signs of his arousal.

“It feels maddening. Please kiss me!”

Lydia pulled her hand from his and smoothed it over his lower lip. “I thought you were going to teach me how. I brought quill and paper to take notes.”

Joseph exhaled a laugh and ran both of his hands down below her spine to boldly cup Lydia's full ass cheeks and press her groin into his. “It would be my pleasure.”

He removed his hands from her backside and placed them on Lydia's face, then gently pulled her mouth to his. She kept her lips closed at first, but Joseph's urged hers open as he turned one kiss into many tiny kisses accompanied by light touches from his warm tongue.

“How does this make you feel, m'lady?” Joseph whispered between soft pecks followed by fully passionate caressing of her mouth with his.

“I'm... I'm getting woozy... and shimmery inside. Like starlight bursting through my veins,” Lydia responded as best she could between each pillowy kiss as her hands pressed against Joseph's chest and started moving down.

Joseph sighed against her lips and slid his fingers into her chestnut curls as the light rain played a staccato rhythm on their heads. “And what about lower inside you? Deep, deep down where your legs meet your body?”

Lydia didn't answer. Instead, she kept exploring and observing. Her teeth brushed Joseph's lower lip and her hands roamed further down his torso, feeling her way past the indentations between each of his ribs and ab muscles.

She boldly touched her own tongue to Joseph's as her hands reached the tent of his erection. Then she gasped and shoved his body away from hers with such vigor that Joseph tumbled backward over the side of the balcony and landed in the leafy boxwoods about six feet below.

"Oh no! Lord Winstone! Are you hurt? I'm so sorry!"

Joseph could hear her calling to him as quietly as possible as he moaned and tried to wrestle his way out of the bushes without tearing his clothing to bits.

"My lord, please say something!"

Still on his back in the boxwoods, Joseph looked up at Lydia as she leaned over the balcony with her hair falling around her face and her décolleté in full display.

"I fear you might one day be the end of me, little nymph. But you didn't end me tonight. Take your notes and go to bed. We will send your letter by foot, but you still owe me a favor. In fact, by the looks of the cuts and scratches you have caused me, you might owe me more."

Lydia bit her lip and frowned. "I really am sorry. But you ought to learn to control your anatomy, for it startled me as much as I startled you. Goodnight, my lord. I have many notes to make indeed."

When she disappeared from view, Joseph finally rolled himself out of the bushes and sat on the wet lawn to catch his breath. One thing was for certain, there was no controlling his anatomy around Lydia Carter. And it no doubt would find him risking more insult and injury as long as they shared the same roof.

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Chapter 9

Lydia crept back into the rooms she shared with her sleeping sisters and undressed quickly down to her shift. Extra clothing would be distributed among the ladies and gentlemen tomorrow, but most guests left behind by the storms had to make do for tonight.

To avoid disturbing Eleanor and Charlotte in their twin-sized beds next to hers, Lydia brought the satchel provided by the footman, plus a candle, into the adjoining sitting room. At a beautiful desk in the corner, she quietly sat and wrote out her notes from the evening so she wouldn't forget.

Physiological Observations: The Engagement Kiss

First impressions: Highly pleasurable with addictive tingling sensations throughout my body, particularly in the region between my legs as mentioned by the viscount, who seemed particularly concerned about my experience in this area.

Questions to Explore:

Would kissing any man feel the same? I cannot imagine that kissing a man like Lord Triton would produce the same results, but perhaps this hypothesis is worthy of more research.

Would kissing a man while naked produce even more sensations?

Why are the sensations strongest within the folds of my nether lips? Do I need to see

a doctor if it happens again?

Does a man's appendage always stand at attention when a woman is near?

Should I put my hands on a man's buttocks, too, or is that element of the kissing experience optional?

Kissing Likes:

His soft lips against mine

His wet tongue against mine

His apparent inability to continue being a horrid beast while kissing

Kissing Dislikes:

Results inconclusive. More experimentation required.

Lydia finished her notes, then moved on to write a letter to Mr. and Mrs. Musgrove to let them know of her whereabouts. Doing so would explain why she would not be able to visit them again soon. It would also explain why she would not be able to attend the next local underground meeting in support of tenant farmer rights, which was held monthly in the basement of a country church.

She'd only snuck into one of the meetings so far, but it had amplified the importance of their cause for her even more. Lydia was certain that if her family found out about her involvement in that movement, they would lock her away. And the scandal it would bring to her parents and siblings could cause their downfall.

But there were desperate people working Briarwood land and struggling to survive,

all the while filling her family's pantry with the fruits of their labor. Lydia felt strongly that attending the meeting, even while hiding in the back with her bonnet pulled low on her face, would help her determine the best actions to take to help those in need.

She didn't mention the meeting in her letter to the Musgroves in order to keep her secret involvement in such matters from being revealed. But the Musgroves would know from the dates of her family's confinement at the Winstone Estate that she could not be there.

"I hope Emma writes back so I know their family is safe." Lydia spoke to herself in a whisper as a way to ease her nerves. She worried about the state of the Musgrove farm and other tenant farmers in this weather. "I hope they are well and not in danger."

She finished her missive and made a mental note to ask for a stamp and wax in the morning to seal her letter closed. She left the quill and ink on the table and washed her hands in the basin by a set of windows, the wind howling against the panes.

I hope Joseph is well and inside by now!

Guilt crept like a spider through her body as she bit her lip and remembered pushing him off the balcony like he was a prowler on attack. But he was merely a man whose lust for her was so powerful that he could not hide it when she was near.

How can you punish a man for that?

She didn't yet understand the full meaning of his desire for her, but tonight she finally understood the allure of pursuing every lusty sensation until you simply had to push a man off a balcony or die of unending need for more.

Can desire end in less violent ways? What is the outcome if desire is allowed to run its course? Much more research is needed!

Lydia listened a few more minutes to the new storm rattling the shutters, then she tiptoed back into the bedroom and slid the satchel with her letter and notes under her bed. Tomorrow was another day for taking advantage of this unusual situation in every productive way possible, including combing the Winstone library for more information about human anatomy and its function.

And for hopefully enjoying every surprising discovery along the way.

“I can’t wear this color, Mama! Please send it back and ask for something in pink or mauve silk.” Charlotte tossed the simple blue dress onto the pile of dresses she’d already rejected, which were loaned to the Carter women by Lady Winstone’s maids. “Are we truly to wear the garments of maids all week long?”

Lydia plucked the discarded dress from the pile and pressed it against the front of her freshly washed shift. It was a pale shade of soft blue cotton perfect for lounging comfortably in a library all day. “I’ll take this one, if it fits. You should be grateful there are any extra day dresses for us to wear at all, Charlotte.”

Eleanor attempted to tug a cream and yellow dress up over her hips, then shouted with frustration when it wouldn’t budge. “This is unacceptable!” She tugged the dress back off her frame and plopped down on her unmade bed. “You’re one to talk, Lydia. You’ve already secured your match, so a dowdy dress does you no harm. Unless the viscount changes his mind about his proposal after seeing you looking like a working-class laundry girl.”

Charlotte and Eleanor giggled together as Lydia sighed.

“My dears, please do not bicker. I realize this situation is less than ideal, but we are guests here and should be grateful for the hospitality. I agree with Lydia. We need to make the best of it with smiles on our faces. Finer clothes will likely be available to us in a day or two once everything is sorted out. Now let’s hurry before breakfast is finished without us.” Lady Briarwood gazed down at her own borrowed cotton dress in acorn brown and smoothed her hand over the dull fabric. “Though a bit of lace would have been nice.”

The dining hall was still full of guests for breakfast, some in fancier clothes than others. At one end of the table the Penton family gathered together, including Oliver and Sophia. Oliver looked pale and haggard while Sophia seemed distressed. But the rest of the Pentons were jovial and greeting guests as they sat down to eat.

The viscount wasn’t in attendance, and neither were Lydia’s father and brother.

“Lady Lydia, good morning! I don’t believe we’ve met yet. I’m Maria Penton and this is my husband, Henry. We wanted to personally congratulate you on your engagement to Joseph. We’re excited to welcome you to the family!” Maria wrapped Lydia in a warm hug.

Henry Penton bowed and showed the Carter women places to sit next to the Penton family. “We’re excited to have all of you as our extended guests this week. And for however long it takes to get our roads repaired, of course. We hope your accommodations are to your liking.”

Eleanor elbowed Charlotte as the youngest Carter sister scowled. Based on their behavior, Lydia decided it was best to speak for them all. “Thank you. We are grateful for your hospitality. Our rooms are lovely and comfortable.”

“At least someone’s room is comfortable,” Oliver Penton mumbled under his breath, rubbing his bloodshot eyes. “Ours is an emotional wasteland.”

“Ladies, good morning! Please join me at the other end of the table where we can enjoy the sunlight streaming in from the windows.” Countess Winstone waved Lydia, along with her sisters and mother, toward the far end of the dining room, which happened to be as far away from her mumbling middle son as possible.

The countess was wearing a glamorous gown for breakfast, but she was known for being the quintessential host so this sight didn’t seem all that unusual. However, she looked so much dressier than nearly everyone else that it was a little bit suspicious.

As Lydia followed her to the other side of the room, she suppressed a giggle. There is not a single chance Lady Winstone offered up any of her fine clothes to the stranded guests today!

“My lady, have you seen Lord Briarwood and my son William this morning? I’m afraid I have lost track of them already.” Lydia’s mother accepted a chair from the footman as her daughters were all seated around her.

“Oh, yes, Lady Briarwood. Lord Winstone and some of the other gentlemen decided to walk through the nearest roads this morning to assess the damage. Your husband and son joined them, as did my Joseph. Poor dear, he fell off the library balcony last night and into the boxwoods! Apparently, his back is covered in scrapes and bruises but he insisted on joining the walk anyway.” Lady Winstone signaled to her servers to hurry their pace and leaned back in her chair at the end of the table.

Lydia gulped and twisted her napkin in her lap. She hoped she was the only one at this table or anywhere else who knew exactly why the viscount wound up in the bushes in the middle of the night.

She also hoped she’d be able to talk to him today to make sure he was alright. After all, there are more experiments to conduct.

“Oh dear! I hope the viscount recovers quickly. I’m sure he and Lydia have many plans to make for their nuptials.” Lydia’s mother patted her hand and smiled.

“Yes, indeed! Though I hope they take some time to get to know one another first, of course.” Lady Winstone lifted her cup of tea with her pinky high in the air, smiling with her lips but not with her eyes.

Lydia furrowed her brow. Is Joseph’s mother having second thoughts about the engagement this morning?

“Yes, of course.” Lady Briarwood sipped her tea in similar fashion and let the subject drop. “Thank you again for the use of the lovely clothing during our stay. I don’t think I’ve ever worn this shade of brown before.”

“Mmm, you are so welcome, Lady Briarwood. I think it suits you.”

Lydia stared at her cup of tea to avoid looking into either woman’s eyes. There seemed to be a subtle power play happening between Lady Winstone and Lydia’s mother that she didn’t understand and had no desire to decipher.

Perhaps that was just what proper married ladies did. Yet another reason not to become one.

Fortunately, her sisters were oblivious and quieted by the passing of scrumptious food. Lydia hoped they would fill their hungry bellies before their late morning complaints and general sour moods took hold.

As the meal wound down, a maid whispered in Lady Winstone’s ear. It must have been something exciting, because the countess’s eyes brightened and she clapped her hands together over her emptied plate.

“Good news, ladies! We have arranged a soiree for this afternoon with card games! There will be one for the ladies and one for the men. So rest up and wait for further instructions!” Lady Winstone leaped from her chair to tell the other guests, leaving the Carter women to entertain themselves.

Eleanor tossed her linen napkin on the table and let her shoulders slump. “Card games are positively provincial. When are we leaving here, Mama?”

“Perhaps you should focus more on behaving like an eligible young lady in want of a husband instead of a petulant child, Eleanor. We are still surrounded by distinguished and respectable men, are we not?”

Lady Briarwood gestured toward the table dotted with eligible bachelors just as Oliver Penton stood and released a loud belch before scratching his belly and stumbling out of the dining room.

His wife, Sophia, kept her eyes on her plate.

Charlotte and Eleanor sneered at the back of Oliver Penton’s head, as most of the other ladies in the room did the same.

“I would like to spend some time in the library this morning, Mama. Would you like to join me, sisters?” Lydia knew Charlotte and Eleanor would rather do anything else than sit in a room full of musty books, but she wanted to appear interested in spending time with her siblings at least now and then.

Gone were the days when the three girls were thick as thieves, playing with dolls and writing fantastical stories together. Once Lydia grew into her unique and curious brain, she withdrew from so many hours of whimsical play. It wasn’t until much later that her ideas and intelligence made her an outsider who became more and more isolated the harder she fought against injustice and for her own independence.

Her interest in learning more about the opposite sex had been blissfully lacking until a certain beast trespassed in her favorite mineral spring.

“Eww! No, thank you, Lydia. Books are the root of all evil. Right, Mama?” Charlotte picked at the egg on her plate when she wasn’t itching her skin below the scratchy fabric of a mauve housekeeper’s dress.

“I wouldn’t go that far, Charlotte.” Lady Briarwood sighed and turned to her oldest daughter. “Yes, that’s fine, Lydia. I think your sisters and I will take tea in the drawing room before perhaps taking a longer tour of this fine home.”

Once her mother and sisters left the dining room, Lydia practically skipped to the library, where she hoped she would be alone to explore through the bookcases. She had a plan for two different scenarios.

First, if she was alone, Lydia would search high and low for the kinds of books young ladies weren’t allowed to open for any reason. Second, if there were others in the library, she would pretend to be browsing for flowery tomes of poetry while actually locating the books that were off-limits in order to come back to them later. It was a trick that had served her well in her own family’s library for years.

Unfortunately, the second scenario was what awaited her when she arrived in the library occupied by at least four other people.

One of them was Wilhelmina Underwood.

“There you are, Lady Lydia. I was wondering when you would make an appearance in this very room.” Wilhelmina was dressed in all black, from her silk dress and gloves to the black lace entwined through her hair. It made her pale skin look ghostly or supernatural.

“Were you waiting for me, Miss Underwood? I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware we had any plans to meet.” Standing next to Wilhelmina, Lydia felt self-conscious in her plain blue dress for the first time since she’d put it on.

“No, we didn’t have a plan. I just wanted to give you a message before the day got away from us. Here you go. Have a lovely morning.” She handed Lydia a folded note and sashayed toward the door into the main hallway.

Lydia stared at the note, then watched Miss Underwood wink seductively at a gentleman who opened the door for her before she walked out of the room.

After saying hello to the other occupants in the library, Lydia took Miss Underwood’s note to a small round table in the corner to read it in private. When she was finished, she swallowed hard and crumpled the note in her trembling hand.

There is nothing so wonderful as a secret kiss with a man in the rain. Would you agree, Lady Lydia?

Chapter 10

Walking along the main road that led away from the house gave Joseph time to think about what had happened with Lydia last night. But it didn't bring him the same satisfaction as holding her while their lips embarked on a rare discovery of sensual compatibility.

Yes, Lydia was a virgin, and a rather clinical one at that. She certainly approached her new experiences with a curious mind. Yet that nymph had kissed and caressed him last night like a siren hypnotizes a sailor into a trance-like state with her irresistible song.

When she wasn't throwing him off the balcony, of course.

That was by far the wildest and most memorable kissing experience Joseph had ever had. He had the wounds to prove it.

But all thoughts of Lydia had to be put on hold for now as Joseph and Henry sat with their brother Oliver in their father's private study to talk. Something had to be done to prevent their middle brother from further bad behavior.

"Put the bottle down, Oliver. It's time to confess your sins." Joseph grabbed the decanter of port from Oliver's hand and pointed at a leather chair. "I will get you some water. Now sit and start talking."

Oliver collapsed in the leather chair and buried his head in his hands. "Sophia doesn't love me anymore."

Henry sat in the chair opposite Oliver's and poured himself a cup of strong tea from the tray a maid had delivered to the study. "Has she said as much or are you putting words in her mouth, brother?"

"I haven't put anything in that woman's mouth in ages." Oliver lifted his head as a smile tugged at his lips and threatened to spread across his face.

Joseph laughed, but Henry scowled.

"Don't be crude, Oliver. It's beneath you."

"Ah, but there hasn't been anyone beneath me in ages, either!" This time Oliver grinned, then he slapped his knee and slumped back against the soft leather cushion. "Henry, there is no point in you saying a damn thing. Your wife is an angel and a fine example of a pleasing partner. Whereas my wife is a frigid, weepy, soulless, empty—"

"That's enough, Oliver. We're not here to speak ill of Sophia. We're here to support you and help you get back on your feet. If that doesn't work, we're here to teach you a lesson for pure entertainment." Joseph handed his brother a tall glass of water, then took the third leather chair in the grouping of four placed around a center table. "It's your choice, but I warn you that I'm too sore from my fall to keep this up for long, so Henry will have to take the lead."

"My pleasure entirely." Henry mock-saluted Joseph, then glared at Oliver again. "I've grown tired of your whining, brother, especially when it happens in the middle of Mama's most important event of the year. It makes us all look bad. It also makes our mother much more difficult to ignore when the guests leave and the festivities are over. You can bet her anger will boil over soon, and right over each of our heads. That's the last thing my wife needs to be dealing with right now."

“Oh, well, pardon me, little brother, if my despair ruins your pretty life with your pretty wife. I’m surprised, though, as Maria doesn’t seem like a complainer to me. Other than when you bore her to death in bed,” Oliver growled, daring to goad Henry as he had done since they were kids.

“How dare you!” Henry bolted out of his chair and landed with his knees on Oliver’s thighs and his hands around his brother’s neck.

“Henry, stop!” Joseph managed to pull Henry away from Oliver before either of them got badly hurt, but it was clear their talk was going nowhere. He had to try a different approach or they’d all get their backsides kicked by their father before the day was through.

If they survived each other first.

“Oliver, our biggest concern is your addiction to drink, in addition to your dependency on self-pity. How can we help you, brother? Do you need some time away to clear your head?” Joseph handed him a cloth to wipe the thin line of blood trickling from his nose and pressed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“None of us are going anywhere with the roads destroyed, Joseph. I think we need a temporary solution within the confines of this household.” Henry felt the tenderness around his left eye that would likely be a large bruise by tomorrow.

Joseph shook his head and returned to his seat. However, he didn’t pity his youngest brother’s pain. He should have been prepared for Oliver’s legendary left hook.

“What I need is a wife who gives a damn, but I’ll take a room on the other side of the house for now.” Oliver hung his head again, then lifted it with a sudden burst of energy. “No, wait. She can move to a room on the other side of the house! This is the Winstone Estate, not the pitiful-wife-gets-whatever-she-wants estate. Her rejection of

me deserves an ejection from our little love nest, where I shall curse her name in my dreams.” Henry glanced at Joseph and smirked. “So much for the road to recovery. This has been fun, brothers. Let’s do it again sometime.”

Joseph sighed and took a long drink from his own water glass. Henry was usually the most even-tempered of the three Penton sons, but today he was abnormally cranky. Maybe Oliver’s behavior had finally made him snap, as had been the case for the rest of them for months.

He ignored Henry’s sarcasm and turned back to the brother that needed him the most. “I think separate rooms for now is a good idea, Oliver. We will make that happen as soon as we leave Father’s study. Do you want help speaking with Sophia about it?”

“Don’t bother, Joseph. Just have her things moved to the room farthest from mine and then congratulate her for her good fortune.” Oliver combed a hand through his disheveled dark blonde hair and groaned.

“Self-pity, indeed.” Henry scoffed.

Joseph pressed his hands together, closed his eyes, and ran through his mental list of mounting concerns. The roads were impassable, the Pentons were unprepared for taking care of so many guests for the long-term, Oliver was losing his mind, Sophia was caught speaking alone with another man, and Lydia Carter was driving him to distraction with their uniquely beguiling arrangement that was literally causing him physical harm. All of which collided together in just one damn day!

What else could possibly go wrong?

“Miss Underwood! What a surprise to find you out here in the muddy garden. Do you

need assistance?” Joseph had been headed to the orangery for a moment of peace when he’d come across Wilhelmina seated on a bench near a very large puddle.

“On the contrary, my lord. I rather enjoy the aftermath of a storm and the signs of its power over the vulnerable landscape.” Wilhelmina smiled and twirled a frilly black umbrella above her head.

She was dressed in all black as if mourning the loss of someone. Joseph hoped that someone wasn’t him. Since proposing to Lydia yesterday, he thought he’d detected a sinister shift in Miss Underwood’s intense dark blue eyes, but he was probably mistaken. There was no reason to think fickle and flirtatious Wilhelmina Underwood had fixated on him as her chosen mate, other than her forward behavior at yesterday’s dinner before he’d asked Lydia to marry him.

“How are you feeling today, Lord Winstone? I hear you had a terrible fall last night.”

“I wouldn’t say it was a terrible fall, but thank you for your concern. Apart from some scratches, I am well. I hope your stay with us has been comfortable so far. Is there anything you need?” The question tumbled out of his mouth before he considered the response he might attract from a woman known for her brazen approach to, well, everything.

“What I need, my lord, is tantalizing entertainment. And I believe I have already found it.”

Wilhelmina grinned wide enough that Joseph noticed for the first time that she had prominent canine teeth on each side of her mouth. At a quick glance, they looked like subtle versions of the fangs of a wolf.

“Well, then. I’m glad for your good fortune, Miss Underwood. Have a pleasant day.” Joseph bowed and turned to resume his path to the orangery. A few feet from the

door, he heard footsteps behind him and whirled back around.

Wilhelmina was following him, still twirling her black umbrella above her mass of jet-black hair wrapped in black lace and piled on the top of her head.

“Was there something else, Miss Underwood?” Joseph felt his nerve endings sparking throughout his body. The static air between himself and Wilhelmina felt full of electric energy, too.

“No, my lord. I was going to enjoy a stroll through the orangery. Oh, wait! Is that where you were going?” Wilhelmina fluttered her long black eyelashes and gave her umbrella another spin.

“Yes, but I am happy to come back later, as it would not be proper for us to spend time in there alone together. Enjoy your afternoon.” Joseph felt his mouth going dry each second longer he stayed in her company. In fact, he felt like a cornered animal and wasn’t sure why.

“Of course. Thank you, my lord. We all know the rules aren’t the same for orangeries as they are for balconies! Good day, sir. I wish you a much safer day today with far fewer missteps.”

Miss Underwood grinned and dragged her muddy hem through a puddle at Joseph’s feet without caring about the dirt she collected along the way. Then she disappeared through the orangery door.

Joseph’s heart raced as he squeezed his fists together and walked briskly back toward the main house.

There was no denying Miss Underwood’s message. She knew about Joseph’s rendezvous with Lydia on the balcony last night. And the entertainment she’d

claimed to find was no doubt about to turn his and Lydia's lives upside down.

Chapter 11

Lydia pulled back from the morning room window and pressed her body against the wall as she panted with fright. Luckily, there was no one else in the room with her to witness her troubled reaction and inquire about its source.

She'd just watched an exchange between Joseph and Wilhelmina in the back garden, though she didn't know what words had been said.

However, two things were very clear.

First, Wilhelmina had become a threat to her and Joseph's arrangement, though she wasn't sure how that woman had discovered them on the balcony. Was Miss Underwood lurking in the dark?

Second, Joseph had just discovered that threat himself, if Lydia had interpreted the shock and anger battling across his face correctly.

She had to speak with him right away. They had to find a way to silence Wilhelmina Underwood and avoid scandal of great magnitude while locked together in the Countess Winstone's house.

Lydia raced out of the morning room and ran right into Sophia Penton.

"Oh! My lady, I apologize! I did not see you there." Lydia collected herself and curtsied. "I've been so mesmerized by exploring your beautiful home that I worried I might be late for tea."

Sophia giggled and touched Lydia's arm to help steady them both. "I'm unharmed, Lady Lydia, thank you. I believe they are serving the midday meal now, so you are not late. I'm having tea with Henry's wife Maria on the terrace in a few moments. Would you like to join us?"

Lydia almost didn't recognize Sophia Penton because she looked so happy with a new rosy glow on her pretty cheeks. She had also changed out of her rather drab clothing this morning to a soft pink dress that complemented her lovely aquamarine eyes and white-blonde hair.

"Thank you for the invitation, but my sisters will be waiting for me. Perhaps we could have time together tomorrow instead?" Lydia found herself sincerely wanting to have tea with Sophia and Maria, but she had to speak with Joseph before the soiree.

"Of course. I'll see you soon for our card games!" Sophia walked on with a lightness in her step, humming a happy tune.

Lydia watched her go and felt a twinge of jealousy. I wish I could be so happy and carefree right now!

She tried to stay calm as she searched the common rooms for Joseph as people milled about. Her last stop before the dining hall was the drawing room, but he was nowhere to be found in there either.

"Pardon me, my lady. Are you Lady Lydia Carter?" A young maid with vibrant red hair and wearing a white apron tentatively approached Lydia as she exited the drawing room. The maid seemed quite nervous as she wrung her shaking hands together.

"I am. Can I help you, miss?"

“Oh, goodness, what a relief! I’ve asked that question of so many ladies and finally got it right! Forgive me, my name is Bridget Kelly and it’s only my second day at Winstone House. I was told by the viscount to get a message to you, but I didn’t know who you were. He said to look for the most beautiful dark-haired lady in attendance, but it’s alarming how many beautiful dark-haired ladies are floating around here today!” Bridget lowered her eyes and stared at her feet, perhaps thinking she’d said too much. “Anyway, I have a message for you from Viscount Winstone.”

The maid held out a small sealed letter to Lydia and waited for her to accept it.

“Thank you, Bridget. And I appreciate the viscount’s compliment, that’s very kind.” Lydia took the note and started scanning the drawing room for a private place to sit and open it.

Bridget looked up from the floor and smiled. “The viscount also asked me to serve you personally as your maid through the rest of your stay. He says the woman he’s engaged to should have special treatment. What a gallant gentleman!” Bridget giggled, then smacked her hand over her mouth. “Forgive me, my lady. I am still learning how to speak properly in a house such as this.”

Lydia giggled in response, appreciating Bridget’s forthcoming manner. “Your secret is safe with me.”

Bridget let out a nervous breath, then curtsied to indicate she was about to leave Lydia to read her note alone. “Oh! I was supposed to make sure a letter is mailed for you! Would you like me to collect it now?”

Lydia had almost forgotten about getting word to the Musgroves about being stuck at Winstone House indefinitely. “Thank you for the reminder, Bridget. Could you send a stamp and wax to my room and then collect the letter this evening? I could ring for you when I’m ready.”

“It’d be my pleasure, Lady Lydia.” Bridget curtsied again and walked into the hallway, only to turn around several times before heading off into whatever direction she hoped she was going.

Lydia wasted no time taking a seat at a corner desk in the drawing room. It was partially hidden from view by a set of thick drapes hanging from the tall window next to her chair. She ripped open Joseph’s seal and unfolded his note, but before she paid attention to his words, she noticed his handwriting for the first time. It was oddly exciting to learn another intimate detail about him in this way that she wouldn’t otherwise know.

To The Nymph and Stern Guardian of All Magical Springs,

Danger is lurking and scandal’s afoot,

Please take your pretty face out of your book.

But do not be frightened for I have a scheme,

Meet me at midnight where goddesses dream.

Oh, and Bridget is now your personal maid.

She has no idea what she’s doing, but then neither do you.

Lydia pressed Joseph’s note against her chest and beamed, then read it again and again. He wrote me a poem and a riddle!

She had no idea yet where in this house goddesses might dream, but she hoped he wasn’t referring to her own bedchamber.

Lydia refolded the note and tucked it deep into her bodice, where it would stay until she was in the presence of its writer again.

The soiree was in full swing when Lydia rejoined her family, though she still hadn't seen her father or brother all day. Because the men were playing cards in another room, she wasn't likely going to see either of them until tomorrow.

Lady Briarwood, Eleanor, and Charlotte were at a table with Maria Penton playing a game called Whist. Lydia's mother and Maria were on a team with Eleanor and Charlotte as their opposing team. Lydia stood and watched them play for a few moments without announcing herself.

"You're too late to join the game, sister." Charlotte studied her cards without looking up.

"How did you know I was even here?"

"The strong scent of your indignance."

Charlotte and Eleanor tittered as Lydia's mother suppressed a smile.

Thankfully, Maria Penton was much more accommodating. "Lady Lydia, please pull up a chair so we can chat. You can replace me in the next round. I'm not feeling all that well this afternoon and could use some rest."

"Thank you, Lady Maria. I'm sorry to hear you're not feeling well."

"Oh, it's nothing a nap and some sunshine won't cure. If we ever see the sun again!"

Lydia turned and put her hands on an empty chair to pull it over to the table when a large masculine hand covered one of hers.

“Best leave the heavy lifting for a man, miss.”

With instant irritation at being spoken to with such rude dismissiveness, Lydia pulled her hand back and turned around to admonish the man responsible.

“William, you brute! I almost smacked you!” Lydia pushed her laughing older brother away from her and grinned. She adored him so much that it was impossible to hide it. “Where have you been all day?”

“Shoveling mud, repairing fencing, and generally behaving like an overdressed stable boy. It was magnificent. And you?” William turned another empty chair around and sat in it backwards, with the back of the chair directly under his chin.

“Upon my word, William, we are honored guests at Winstone House. Please behave like a gentleman. And do not spend all your time playing in the dirt.” Lady Briarwood leaned to her right to see her son behind Eleanor’s head, then turned her attention back to her card game when she was certain he hadn’t entered the room wearing muddy clothes.

“I was helping the Pentons recover from the storm, Mama. The work is far too much for the Winstone hands to handle themselves.” William sighed and scanned the room full of card-playing ladies. “This doesn’t look like your kind of crowd, Lydia. No one is milking a cow or teaching one how to read.”

All the girls at Lady Briarwood’s table giggled except Maria Penton. Lydia noticed that Maria had become very quiet when William appeared.

“Very funny, brother. Your jealousy of a cow’s higher capacity for literacy is no

reason to stop trying to read on your own. I'm sure you'll be a natural someday."

"Oh, the hilarity! You are a wicked wench like no other, sister!" William was in high spirits today, proven by his boisterous teasing.

Much to Lady Briarwood's chagrin.

"William, please!" She glared at her oldest child. "This is a ladies' soiree. Please go join the men or find another amusement away from here."

William winked at Lydia. "Good luck winning a hand in this house, sister. I think the odds are against us all."

Maria Penton clutched her belly and moaned. "Oh dear. I fear I need to bow out of our game now, ladies. Thank you for the great company."

William reached to help slide out Maria's chair as she pulled her body upright. "Can I help you, Lady Maria? Do you need me to find your husband?"

She avoided William's eyes and refused the hand he offered to help her walk. "No, my lord. I think you've helped the Pentons enough, have you not?"

William let his hand fall to his side without a word as Maria slowly made her way through the maze of tables.

Lydia studied her brother's face after Maria's comment, but his flat expression gave no clues as to how that exchange affected him.

"I should take Mama's advice and find other amusements. See you at dinner, ladies." William locked eyes with Lydia for a few seconds, then walked toward a door opposite the one that Maria left through.

Lydia watched her brother leave and felt her belly fill with nervous butterflies.

First Sophia and now Maria? What secret uncomfortable connection does William have to the wives of Penton men? And what will happen if it is revealed?

“Lydia! Sit down and quit gawking like a curious child. Let’s start another game!” Eleanor, still as cranky as she’d been that morning when trying on borrowed dresses, scooped up the playing cards and dropped them on the table in front of Maria’s empty seat. “You deal, sister, but be careful. Your team could lose everything.”

Lydia stared at the cards and nodded. That truth was becoming frightfully clear.

Later, after a fine dinner of roast beef and all the trimmings with the other guests, Lydia spent her evening hours alone in the sitting room attached to her and her sisters’ bedchamber. She found the seal and wax that Bridget had apparently placed on the desk, then sealed her letter to send to the Musgroves as soon as possible.

When Bridget arrived to retrieve the letter, she brought a gift tucked in the small pocket of her apron.

“It’s a chocolate, my lady. They have a whole bowl of them in the kitchen! We were allowed to take two each, but I wanted you to have one of mine.” Bridget dropped the flat, round chocolate with white sugar sprinkles in Lydia’s open hand and smiled.

“Thank you, Bridget. That’s very sweet. Literally!”

The two young woman laughed as Lydia popped the chocolate in her mouth and enjoyed its rich, decadent taste.

“Is there anything I can get for you, miss? I mean, m’lady! I’m sorry!” Bridget chewed her thumbnail and cast a worried glance at Lydia.

“Bridget, I am probably the least ladylike lady you’ve ever met. Please don’t worry about being so proper with me. Where did you work before joining Winstone House?”

“This is my first job, my lady. I’m from Ireland, so I’m far from home. I miss it terribly, but many women in my family found work with the Winstone aristocrats, so here I am. My mother’s pride and joy!” Bridget blushed, making her rosy cheeks even rosier, then pointed at the desk. “Is that the letter you’d like to have posted?”

Lydia nodded and gave the sealed letter to her maid. “I hope you feel at home here soon, Bridget. Thank you for the chocolate and for helping me feel at home in this house, as well.”

“My pleasure, my lady! It’s nice to know someone as kind as you. Good evening.” Bridget curtsied and then nearly tripped over the rug as she slipped back out the door.

Lydia giggled, grateful for Bridget’s sweetness. She was one of the brighter highlights of the past two days.

As was Joseph’s poem, which was a shocking treat from such a beastly gent. But what about the clue in the poem’s ending? She must solve the riddle first before finding Joseph at midnight, when they could discuss his apparent scheme to keep Wilhelmina Underwood from ruining their reputations, if that indeed was her plan.

Lydia pulled Joseph’s folded note from her bodice and read it again.

Danger is lurking and scandal’s afoot,

Please take your pretty face out of your book.

But do not be frightened for I have a scheme,

Meet me at midnight where goddesses dream.

“Where in this house do goddesses dream?” Lydia wondered aloud as she paced back and forth in front of the sitting room desk.

The library? The garden? She mentally retraced her steps back down the corridors and through the common rooms, then the answer came to her.

“The gallery!”

The Winstone House art gallery was full of many marble busts and statues, including Greek goddesses. One particular life-size statue was of two goddesses sleeping among the flowers. It was a magnificent piece and had to be what Joseph was referencing in his poem.

Lydia would soon find out if she was right. She checked the time on one of William’s old pocket watches that he’d given to her years ago and decided to crawl into bed before her sisters returned from more card playing.

She would snuggle under the quilt fully clothed and get a few hours of sleep before it was time to sneak out and meet her beastly poet, who was becoming a little less beastly by the day.

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Chapter 12

Joseph was hidden behind the statue of the sleeping goddesses when Lydia entered the art gallery right on time.

That pretty nymph is an odd blend of wild and methodical. I cannot believe I find her quirky ways so beguiling, but I do.

“Psst! My lord, are you in here?”

Lydia stepped quietly across the art gallery floor as Joseph let his eyes roam over her alluring physical features. Her lovely skin, full breasts, and stunning green eyes were just a hint of her wonders worth exploring, especially those hidden under all the fabric of her crumpled dress.

Just an hour before, he'd been imagining those wonders. He had fallen asleep again on the library balcony as he'd been listening in the dark for possible prowlers below. He had found himself stealing intimate touches with Lydia in his dream and awoke with another uncomfortable tent protruding from the groin of his trousers.

I don't know how I'm going to survive the constant arousal this woman causes me!

“Did you like my poem, little nymph?” Joseph spoke in a hushed tone from his hiding place, still peeking out from behind the statue as Lydia's head turned in his direction.

“I must say I was impressed, my lord. Who knew a beast such as yourself could form such pleasing rhyme?” Lydia smiled as she slowly approached the goddess statue.

He chuckled and stood to reveal himself. His black waistcoat was unbuttoned and hung open over his white linen shirt, which was loosened at the neck. For some reason, it felt completely natural to be this informal with Lydia already.

Having met her while nearly naked in a spring probably had everything to do with their sense of ease with each other so quickly.

“I’ll have you know that I’ve been a fan of poetry since I was a young sprout. You could say I was a nursery rhyme connoisseur.” Joseph bowed with exaggeration, as if he were responding to imaginary applause.

“I see. So you’re familiar with the greats then? Little Jack Horner? Georgie Porgie?” Lydia grinned as she tucked a long loose curl behind her ear.

“Oh, indeed! Were you awakened from a deep sleep, my lady? You seem particularly rumpled by slumber. I must say, I rather like it.” Joseph scanned her body again, this time as she watched him do it.

“There’s the beast I’ve come to know and loathe. You’re looking rather rumpled yourself, my lord. Were you wrestling a great creature in your dreams?”

If she only knew.

“It seems we’re both in need of more sleep, so I will get to the point.” Joseph’s smile flattened out as he changed the subject to more urgent matters. He stepped out from behind the row of statues and took Lydia’s hand in his. “I believe Wilhelmina Underwood saw us on the balcony last night. She has hinted as much with a devilish tone that makes me fear her intent. It’s possible she will hold our secret over our heads for her own benefit in some fashion, but I cannot yet be sure. What I propose is a counterattack of sorts to protect us from scandal. Are you interested in playing a little game for that purpose?”

He smoothed his fingers over the palm of Lydia's hand and noticed how her breathing quickened from his touch.

"I don't know. That sounds quite risky, does it not? What did you have in mind?" Lydia stared down at their connected hands and seemed to study every movement of his fingers.

"Are you taking more notes of your body's reaction to mine, little nymph? I see you didn't bring your satchel this time."

Lydia pulled her hand back and scowled. "For your information, I do not go weak in your presence, my lord. Also, I left my satchel by the gallery door."

Joseph tipped his head back and laughed, though rather quietly to prevent detection from anyone outside the room. "So you did bring your note-taking supplies! What, pray tell, were you hoping to discover during this secret meeting?"

Lydia blushed and bit her lip. "I was hoping to sketch you, my lord."

Joseph stared at her as if she'd just said something preposterous, because that was exactly how it sounded to his ears.

"Sketch me? Whatever for?"

Lydia's eyes quickly dropped to his groin area, then slid back up to his face again. "To study a gentleman's form, of course. We already discussed this, remember?"

With his mouth dropped open, Joseph took a step back and gazed at her with utter shock and growing pleasure. "My lady, are you asking me to pose for you in the nude?"

He felt himself getting dizzy from Lydia's astonishing forwardness, which seemed to have no bounds. He had never in his life encountered such a bold and curious woman as she.

Lydia stuck out her chin and crossed her arms. "Yes, I am. But don't flatter yourself, Lord Winstone. I merely wish to know how—"

"...things work. I know, my lady. I know. But this is a most unusual request." Joseph's mind raced as his body reacted yet again.

He wanted nothing more than to strip naked for her as soon as possible, and he couldn't believe his luck in being asked. But to lie exposed in front of her for any length of time without touching her, discovering her, and tasting her every secret treasure? How was that even doable with a woman that enchanting gazing upon his appendage?

Lydia sighed. "I don't know if it's an unusual request, as I am a woman and women are kept in the dark about so many things. However, you and I have an unusual agreement, do we not? I assume that means we get to make our own rules. As your partner in this private arrangement, I believe I am just as capable of adding to those rules as you are. So I request that you hold up your end of the bargain and show me the rest of what I glimpsed at the stream. Much like da Vinci's anatomical studies, I intend to study you. That study begins with a sketch, my lord, if you will allow it."

Joseph took a deep breath and released it slowly before responding. He felt faint for the first time in his eight-and-twenty years, but his weakened state was decidedly due to how much he yearned for Lydia Carter.

"Da Vinci studied corpses, you know." His voice grew deeper the more he thought about the appeal of letting Lydia gaze upon his every naked detail. "Does that mean you are you planning to kill me first?"

Lydia giggled and placed her hands on her hips. “I wasn’t, but that could be arranged.”

He pointed at the door of the gallery with one hand and started untucking his shirt from his breeches with the other. “Get your satchel, nymph. The night is short and we have a scheme to discuss.”

Lydia hurried to retrieve her supplies as Joseph looked around for the best spot in the gallery to undress. And where we won’t be immediately noticed if someone walked in the room, heaven forbid.

He decided on the farthest corner from the door, which offered a bit of space behind a grouping of tall statues. It was merely coincidence that all four were of male nudes posing with limbs flexed.

However, those particular models all donned fig leaves over their private bits. So he was certain that asking Lydia to study their forms instead would be in vain.

When Lydia returned with her paper, ink, and quill, Joseph had removed his shirt, stockings, and boots. “This is as unclothed as I get until you listen to my plan. Understood?”

Lydia’s lips partly ever so slightly as she took in the sight of Joseph’s bare chest up close. But when she gasped it wasn’t due to his toned physical form, it was because of the wounds she had caused him.

“Viscount Winstone, you are covered in scrapes from my carelessness last night. Please forgive me. I hope you aren’t in too much pain.”

Joseph shook his head. “I am well and you are forgiven.

“Thank you, my lord.” Lydia’s response was barely a whisper as she fumbled with her pages of paper and nearly scattered them all over the gallery floor. “Is...is there a chair I might use?”

Joseph watched her change from a determined anatomy student into a clumsy blushing girl. He liked very much that his physique was the cause of her nervousness.

“We can’t create an impromptu studio back here, m’lady. Please find a way to do your sketching on the ground. While you get settled, let me tell you what I have planned for undermining Miss Underwood.” He chuckled at his own wording. “See there? A poet lives deep within me.”

Lydia rolled her eyes as she settled onto the floor in front of him with a stack of paper balanced in her lap and her ink and quill by her side. “Very deep, my lord.”

Joseph crouched down to smirk at Lydia from nearly eye level, then dropped to a seated position across from her. “As the days pass during our confinement at this estate, we will play up our engagement in front of the guests and our families. We will do so in front of Miss Underwood, making it clear that we are madly in love and planning our nuptials. That way, should she decide to spread rumors of our balcony tryst, we would suffer only the mild consequence of having to marry much earlier than planned.”

Lydia looked up from the notes she’d begun taking for her drawing and swallowed hard. “But my lord... we aren’t truly planning to marry at all.”

“Of course, but a scandal changes the marriage market game and its outcome. That cannot be helped.” Joseph saw the dark shadow of doubt slide like a veil over Lydia’s green eyes. “But worry not, as we will have our spy following Miss Underwood to uncover any of her secrets we might uncover for our use.”

“We will do what? Which spy?” Lydia dropped her quill on her page, which scribbled a squiggly line through her notes as it rolled away from her hand.

“A kind and red-haired lass who thinks you hung the moon.” Joseph winked and waited for Lydia to realize who he meant.

“Bridget? As our spy? That poor girl doesn’t even know the lay of this house yet! My lord, you can’t be serious. We cannot ask Bridget to spy on Miss Underwood. That would risk her position, her reputation, and her family’s proud legacy in service of the Winstone Estate.”

Joseph sat back against the wall and stretched his legs out in front of his body. His bare feet nearly reached Lydia’s knees. “I appreciate your concern for the staff of my household, but I assure you that Bridget would be handsomely accommodated should our plan fall through. She will also be handsomely accommodated for helping us, which is why she already agreed to do so.”

“My lord! You didn’t already ask her!”

“Oh, but I did. It is settled. Bridget is already keeping track of Miss Underwood’s whereabouts through this night. Do you know what that means?”

Lydia pressed a hand to her forehead as if suffering from a sudden headache. “I’m afraid to ask.”

Joseph pulled himself up off the floor and grinned down at his reluctant fiancée. “It means that though Miss Underwood may have seen us on the balcony, she will not have any knowledge of this.”

Lydia watched with widened eyes as he turned away from her, unbuttoned his breeches, and let them drop.

Chapter 13

Under normal circumstances, the sight of Viscount Winstone without any trousers would have probably made Lydia gasp. However, the moment Joseph's pants started sliding off his hips, she squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

"My lady, what are you doing?"

Lydia patted her hands on her papers, trying to find her quill without opening her eyes. "I'm getting ready to sketch you, of course." Panic rose up through her ribcage as second thoughts about this endeavor made her palms sweat and her heart flutter.

It's one thing to be bold when a man is fully clothed and another entirely when he is parted from all coverings!

"Open your eyes, little nymph. You will not be disappointed."

Lydia huffed out a laugh as her fingers kept searching and nearly knocked over the ink bottle by her hip on the floor. "That's rather presumptuous, my lord."

When she finally found the quill and gripped it in her fingers, she felt Joseph's hands gently smooth over her cheeks.

His unexpected touch gave her another fright and made her drop the quill again.

"Gentlemen wear cotton drawers under their breeches, Lady Lydia. My appendage and other masculine bits are not yet in view."

He pulled his hands away as Lydia squinted through one eye, then opened them both.

Sure enough, the viscount's cream-colored cotton drawers covered him from hip to ankle, revealing nothing more of his physique than she'd already seen.

"Ah, well. Thank you for that lesson in a man's attire, my lord. It appears I wasn't as ready as I thought I would be to see your... ah, your..."

"Stately stick? Winstone wood?" Joseph's hazel eyes flickered as he teased her in the shadows of the naked men around them sculpted from stone. "Well, then. Perhaps we should work our way up to that kind of comfort level first."

Lydia tipped her head to the side and squinted at him again. "After already seeing your erect state under only a tunic wet from the hot spring?"

Joseph's eyes darkened. "It's hard to believe so little time has passed since then, my lady. You are right, of course. We have found ourselves in very intimate contact from the start. What I suggest is that we approach our growing connection, and all its benefits, by first becoming friends."

"Friends? How on earth do you suggest we do that?" Lydia folded her pages and placed them on the floor with obvious disappointment.

Joseph pulled up his breeches and fastened the buttons, then sat on the floor across from Lydia again. This time he scooted close enough to her that their knees touched and he could hold her hands.

"By letting our plan unfold. We pretend to be planning our nuptials and all the while gain each other's trust. As a betrothed couple, we will play games and promenade through the gardens. We'll read poetry in the library and dance on the terrace. I'll learn more about you and you'll learn more about me, and I will kiss you every

chance I get.”

Lydia giggled as Joseph entwined his fingers with hers. “Friends don’t kiss, my lord.”

“Oh, but we do. We are friends who also explore the physical power of desire. For science, of course.” He leaned toward her until their lips nearly touched. “I like kissing you, little nymph. I want to do it again.”

The viscount’s breath was warm as it floated over Lydia’s skin. She closed her eyes again, then closed the gap between her mouth and his.

What he didn’t know was that Lydia had intended to kiss him again all along. After all, there was much more research to be done. And this time, she wasn’t as inexperienced. Kissing the viscount last evening had taught her some basics. Now she needed to go a step further.

Or two or three.

Lydia remembered that he had slid his hands in her hair the last time they kissed, so she decided to try that, too. She reached up toward the sides of his sand-colored locks, but she couldn’t quite reach due to their sitting positions.

“Wait, I can’t reach your hair, my lord. Just a moment, please.”

Joseph pulled back and looked puzzled, then threw his arms out to the side in shock as Lydia climbed into his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“There, much better. Please continue.” Lydia smiled, then slid her hands into her fiancé’s hair and planted her lips back on his.

The viscount chuckled into Lydia’s mouth and reached his strong arms around to

embrace her as their kissing intensified. Lydia got lost in the sensations bringing her body to life for a moment before remembering to do more experimentation. Though apparently having her hands in Joseph's hair was a pleasurable addition already. He was moaning softly as she slowly combed her fingers through his silky hair and on down to his neck where she slid her fingernails in a circular motion across his skin.

"Mmm, where did you learn to do that, little nymph?" Joseph whispered between soft passionate kisses, using his own hands to cup the cheeks of her buttocks again.

"From you, my lord. Am I a quick learner?"

"Oh, indeed. Let me show you more, like how kissing can tantalize more than just the lips." Joseph kissed his way across Lydia's cheek, then slowly worked his way down her neck and ever so close to the deep crevasse of her cleavage.

Lydia's entire body broke out in goosebumps as the viscount's mouth made her skin tingle as though from the touch of a feather. Only wetter and much, much better than any feather could do.

As Joseph held her from below and pulled her closer, her skirts rode up high enough on her thighs that she could wrap her legs around his waist. When she did so, the viscount's arousal was quite evident as it pressed into her covered groin.

Lydia froze for a few seconds, then realized there was no way his mysterious and erect appendage could get through the rest of their clothing. She relaxed and decided to see how pliable the appendage was in its current state, just for fun.

As Joseph kissed and licked his way along the slit at the top of her bodice, Lydia dared to press her pelvis into his groin again and again and again. Within seconds of her third gentle bounce against his clothed but protruding arousal, Joseph suddenly lifted her body off his. Then he pressed his hands against his groin and tipped to one

side.

“Lydia! You cannot toy with a man like that!” Joseph seemed to be in pain as he took some deep breaths and rocked back and forth on the floor.

“Oh dear! Did I hurt you?” Lydia, splayed out on the ground where he’d tossed her, sat up and yanked her skirts back down to her ankles. “I’m sorry, I thought you’d like it!”

Joseph grinned as whatever pain he’d been suffering subsided and he breathed a sigh of relief. “Forgive me, I was not in the frame of mind to explain my outburst, my lady. First, you should know that I liked it very much. Very, very much. However, there is only so much stimulation a man can handle while he is... still clothed. There is a... release... that happens when a man and a woman are... coupling... that should not be provoked until then. Do you understand?”

Lydia bit her lip and shook her head. “Not in the slightest, my lord.”

The Viscount chuckled and took her hand. “You will learn in good time, little nymph. For now, we should...”

“My lord and lady, are you in here somewhere?”

Joseph and Lydia gripped each other’s hands with alarm. The quiet but urgent voice coming from the doorway on the other side the gallery sounded familiar, but Lydia couldn’t yet place it.

“Oh dear. I knew we should have decided on a secret bird call for emergencies! Ca-CAW! Ca-CAW! Miss Underwood has left her room and is heading your way!”

Lydia peered around one of the statues that hid her and Joseph to see that the young

woman flailing her arms and making crow sounds had red curls sticking out of her bonnet and bright green eyes.

Lydia yanked hard on Joseph's sleeve. "It's Bridget! Hurry!"

As she and Joseph scrambled to gather their things, Lydia didn't know whether to panic or giggle as Bridget continued to flap and caw like a bird in danger.

"That's quite enough, Miss Kelly! We hear you!" Joseph's hushed but amused tone made it clear that he was struggling not to fall into panicked hysterics, as well.

He and Lydia giggled and bumped into each other several times on their way toward the gallery door.

"Goodnight, my lord! I'm going this way." Lydia pointed toward the hall that would lead to the main stairway and up to the guest rooms.

"Yes, goodnight. I'll go the other way. Miss Kelly, please accompany Lady Lydia to her room."

Joseph sprinted down the hall while Lydia and Bridget scurried toward the stairs. When they reached the first steps, Bridget pulled on Lydia's arm to stop her.

"My lady, we need an excuse ready in case we are discovered. Why would we be awake at this time of night and out of our rooms?"

Lydia's eyes widened as she tried to think quickly. "I... I will say that I was unable to sleep and went to the library to read with you as my chaperone."

Bridget nodded and looped her arm through Lydia's. "Yes, that is perfect! Let's proceed to your room!"

Fortunately, they did not encounter another soul between the staircase and the Carter sisters' bedchamber. After Lydia bid Bridget goodnight and thanked her for her help, she removed her shoes and slipped back into bed without waking either Eleanor or Charlotte, who were both snoring so loudly no other sound could be detected in the room.

Lydia pulled the bed linens up to her chin and smiled. She replayed her latest kiss with the viscount through her mind and couldn't wait to add more notes to her satchel about their latest experience that made her toes curl.

Then her body froze as she realized she had not brought her satchel back to her bedchamber. Lydia sat up in bed as all the color drained from her face and her heart rate accelerated rapidly.

I left my satchel in the art gallery—with my kissing notes inside!

Chapter 14

The next morning, Joseph leaned back in the washtub and let his thoughts drift back to Lydia and their time together. It was only the third day of knowing her and life had never been so exciting as when she was near.

For years he had been bored by the marriage market and the idea of being forever hitched to a proper lady who spoke of nothing but needlework and party planning. In just a few days, Lydia had already taught him that a romantic relationship didn't have to be a reason to yawn or escape.

Since the moment they met, he and Lydia had had such an unusual and stimulating connection. There was absolutely nothing typical or monotonous about her! It was so refreshing that, for the very first time, he allowed himself to wonder if he might enjoy taking a wife.

But it would have to be that wife. It would have to be someone like Lydia, because she had shown him in such a short time that no other type of woman would do.

“And as luck would have it, I'm already engaged to her.” Joseph said aloud, chuckling to himself as he smoothed the bar of soap over his limbs until the water filled with suds.

However, it was important that he got to know her better before he could let his heart follow the same path as his head. Lydia was interesting and arousing, to be sure. But she was also an odd enough young lady that she might not get along well with the ruler of his family, Countess Winstone.

His mother seemed excited by her eldest son's choice of mate, but would she remain so once she got to know Lydia better, quirks and all? That was another experiment he needed to conduct, and soon.

Joseph would have to get Lydia and the countess together to test their compatibility. For if a woman couldn't pass that test, his mother would put an end to the arrangement and find a more suitable match for her son.

"My lord, are you finished? You have a full schedule today." Joseph's valet, Benchley, poked his head into the door of the dressing room with eyebrows raised. "You know how Lady Winstone loves to punish me when you are late."

"Yes indeed, Benchley. Let's move forward. Speaking of the countess, please arrange a private tea this afternoon for Lady Lydia, my mother, and me. A shaded area in the garden near the fragrant apricot trees would be lovely, would it not?"

"As you wish, my lord."

Once dressed, Joseph took his breakfast with their house full of guests and noticed Lydia wasn't yet among them. However, he had sent word through Bridget that they should meet in the late morning for croquet on the front lawn, so he hoped to see her then.

The sun had finally appeared and dried the property surrounding the house, making it the perfect day for enjoying Lydia's company in the presence of others.

Especially Wilhelmina Underwood, to discourage her from ruining a happy couple's engagement.

Joseph was feeling so positive about how well the rest of this week would unfold that he was unusually pleased to be breaking fast with his family. Even the sight of Oliver

swallowing his sorrows with a great deal of jam and bread gave him cause to smile.

Henry and Maria were absent from the breakfast table, as was Oliver's wife, Sophia. That wasn't a cause for concern. Henry had confided in Joseph just an hour ago that Maria's new pregnancy made her feel too queasy for eating so early. And Sophia rarely joined the family for breakfast these days other than when pressed to do so.

It was his father's company Joseph most looked forward to at present. The two men rarely had time to converse lately, unless both escaped to the orangery for peace and quiet at the same time.

"My lord, what news of the road repairs? Is there an end in sight?" Joseph secretly hoped his father would say it would take much longer than expected, as he wasn't ready for the Carters to make their leave yet.

"Have some patience, son. We could all be here for a fortnight before the roads are passable again, including the bridge reconstruction. I'm afraid we'll all be quite familiar with each other by then." The earl glanced at the long dining tables full of his guests and sighed. "We'll also need to find more ways to occupy ourselves besides croquet and card games. Perhaps a hunt is in order. We might soon have want for more fresh meat to feed this lot."

"A fine idea, Father. But you know the countess will want for more marriage mart frivolity. She's a natural-born matchmaker." Joseph winked at his mother across the table as she smiled at the mention of her passion for bringing couples together.

"You are right, Joseph! It would please me greatly to have several matches made for the season before our guests depart. I do believe I have a few more romantic games up my sleeve!" Lady Winstone beamed at her eldest son, but her smile disappeared when she glanced at Oliver on her right. "My dear boy, there is no one in more need of sunlight than you. Meet us for croquet after breakfast. You will play on my team."

Oliver rolled his eyes and washed down a large bite of bread with the last of his tea. “Croquet is for children, Mama.”

“Rubbish! Croquet is a delight for all ages and you will enjoy it.” Lady Winstone dabbed her napkin to her lips and patted her middle son’s arm.

“Because you said so?” Oliver asked in a tone laced with his usual sarcasm.

“Precisely.” The countess lifted a small silver bell from beside her plate and rang it, which prompted the serving staff to bring the light morning meal to a close.

Joseph made note of how everyone around her, including his grumpy brother, did the countess’s bidding. It was all the more reason to get Lydia in his mother’s good graces from the start.

Plus, if there was a crack in the foundation of Lydia and Countess Winstone’s relationship, Wilhelmina Underwood might sense it and try to break it apart.

He scanned the room again for Lydia, but she was nowhere in sight, and neither was her family.

“Mama, have Lord and Lady Briarwood had their breakfast already? I hope you invited them for croquet as well.”

“Of course I did! The Carters dined in the breakfast room this morning and are likely relaxing on the terrace now where everyone is gathering to form croquet teams.”

“Excellent. May the best team win.” Joseph finished his tea and excused himself from the table. It was time to set his scheme in motion to win the support of the ton for he and his betrothed while Miss Kelly spied on Miss Underwood. He and Lydia needed to present themselves as a united front and the season’s most dazzling couple every

chance they could.

Sure enough, Lydia's family was where his mother assumed they'd be. All but Lydia.

"Good morning, Lord and Lady Briarwood. You and your family are looking well. It's a fine day for enjoying some fresh air, is it not?" Joseph filled his voice with enthusiasm but was growing concerned by Lydia's continued absence.

"Indeed, Lord Winstone." Lord Briarwood shook Joseph's hand and pointed toward the lawn full of croquet wickets. "The perfect day for some healthy competition!"

Joseph scanned the Carter family's smiling faces until he came to William's. The heir to the Briarwood title seemed in good spirits, but he didn't look Joseph's way.

"You seem to be missing one of your party, Lord Winstone. Will Lady Lydia be joining us for the game?"

Eleanor batted her eyelashes at him and giggled. "Joining Lydia for anything is a game, my lord. She's a constant source of challenge, which you will learn soon enough."

Lady Charlotte laughed at her sister's insult as Joseph smiled. He'd quickly learned not to respond to the Carter sisters' teasing about Lydia to prevent it from continuing on and on.

Lady Briarwood sighed. "Eleanor, please speak kindly of your sister, especially to her future husband. We wouldn't want the viscount to think Lydia is in any way less than the rest of us, now would we?"

Joseph shook his head and kept on smiling. "Rest assured, I would never assume such a thing, Lady Briarwood." He winked at the sisters who giggled and grabbed each

other's hands to keep from swooning.

“Lydia should be along soon, Lord Winstone. My apologies that the women in my family aren't known for giving straight answers.” Lord Briarwood smirked at Joseph behind the heads of his wife and children.

“Ah, very good, my lord. I shall go tend to other guests until she arrives. Enjoy the game.” Joseph turned and descended the steps of the terrace to talk to the footmen managing the croquet mallets and score cards. Only a few steps away from the terrace, he was stopped by the distant call of a disturbed-sounding bird from the side of the house.

“Ca-CAW! Ca-CAW!”

Joseph stifled a laugh as he nonchalantly walked toward the sound to avoid notice, then disappeared out of sight of the other guests.

He found Miss Kelly and Lady Lydia crouched down by a cellar door.

“Have the two of you gone mad? There is no reason to hide from everyone. We can have a conversation in public, you know.” Joseph pressed his hands on his waist and frowned. “What is it?”

Lydia opened her mouth but Bridget spoke first. “My mistress has lost her satchel, my lord! She left it in the art gallery!”

“Shhh, Bridget! Let's keep our voices down, please. She speaks the truth, I'm afraid. I forgot it last night and now we cannot find it. We retraced my steps multiple times. The satchel is gone.” Lydia bit her lip as her eyebrows knitted together.

“This sneaking around is all because of a lost satchel? We need not panic over

something so trivial. I am happy to replace it.” Joseph sighed heavily and gestured toward the front lawn. “Please wait a few moments before you follow me. The croquet game is about to start.”

“My lord, you don’t understand. The satchel had some private papers inside. Ones that may or may not reference a personal matter of which we would not want others to know.” Lydia blushed and looked at Bridget, who also blushed and looked down at her feet.

Joseph’s shoulders stiffened as his eyes grew wide. “Is that so? Well, which is it, my lady? Do those papers reference a personal matter or do they not?”

Lydia squeezed her eyes shut as if afraid of his reaction to her answer. “They do.”

After several seconds of silence between them, Lydia peeked through one narrowed eye at Joseph pacing back and forth with his hand pressed to his forehead.

“Am I to understand that Miss Underwood knows about our kiss on the balcony and now others possibly know about it, too? Or was this personal matter for which you noted in your satchel another encounter I have not yet mentioned?”

Bridget’s flushed cheeks grew even rosier as she pressed her hands against her ears to try and keep from learning more of her employer’s secrets.

Lydia opened both of her eyes and shrugged her shoulders. “It’s quite possible Miss Underwood has the satchel, so that would mean she’s the only one who knows.”

“Unless she has already shared this information, of course!” Joseph’s voice grew louder as anger born of fear filled his chest. “There is nothing to be done about it right now. Our absence from croquet would be noticed and unacceptable. Lady Lydia and I will join the game and you, Miss Kelly, will find a reason to get into Miss

Underwood's bedchamber to look for the satchel. As well as anything else you can find that might be useful for our cause."

"Yes, my lord. Right away!" Bridget curtsied and turned to run around the other side of the house but Joseph's stern voice stopped her.

"No, not yet! Please escort Lady Lydia into the house from the back garden first. That way she may join us on the terrace through the proper door." Joseph pressed his hands together over his mouth and sighed. His frustration was difficult to hide and he could tell Lydia had tired of it.

"There is no need to speak to so harshly, my lord. We are doing the best we can under the circumstances." Lydia jutted her chin forward and stared at him. "I don't appreciate your tone, so please change it before I get back."

She offered her arm to Bridget and the two women rushed together toward the back of the mansion.

Joseph harrumphed and turned in the opposite direction. He'd forgotten a very important lesson about women. Even if they were the most interesting creatures on earth, they would still sometimes make you see red.

The croquet match began with a rocky start when Lydia behaved as though she merely tolerated Joseph and was not pretending to be madly in love with him.

There were two matches happening at the same time with teams of two players each. As Joseph and Lydia took turns knocking their orange ball through each wicket, his mood soured even more.

“My lady, do you think you could replace some of your scowls with a smile? This plan of ours isn’t going to work if you continue to act like you’re unhappy at my side.”

Joseph rested his hands on top of his croquet mallet and watched Lydia concentrate on aiming for her next hit.

“You should have thought of that before you spoke to Bridget and me like fools.” Lydia scowled at him again.

“So punishing me is more important than trying to prevent our possible ruin?” Joseph smiled at guests as they walked by and played their turn, but he was not feeling the joy he displayed. “What can I do to make it up to you? Tell me how I might endear myself to you again, little nymph. Unfortunately, I cannot strip down for an anatomy lesson here on the playing field, so how about another poem? Would that do the trick?”

He was delighted to see that suggestion found the beginnings of a smile tugging at the corners of Lydia’s pretty mouth.

“Perhaps. Try me.” Her tone was still sarcastic, but a bit more playful now.

“Spendid! Let’s see. There once was a nymph with a mallet, whose tongue judged me swift as a ballot...”

“I believe you meant swiftly, my lord.” Lydia’s smile grew wider and her green eyes sparkled with amusement under the late morning sun.

“Whose poem is this, m’lady?” Joseph grinned and felt silly that his heart was soaring again under the spell of Lydia Carter’s happy gaze.

“You said it was for me, did you not?”

“Indeed, I did. It’s all for you.” He took her right hand and slowly lifted it to his lips and kissed it for all to see. He released her and sighed with relief that their tiff had subsided. The good feeling that replaced it was sweet and flirtatious and real.

Which was what he was thinking when he caught a glimpse of Wilhelmina Underwood having tea on the terrace and staring right at him. Though she was too far away to decipher the look in her eyes, they seemed cold and calculating from here.

Joseph turned his back to her and spoke softly to Lydia. “We have an audience. I hope Miss Kelly finds the satchel while Miss Underwood is scowling at me from the terrace as you were scowling at me moments ago.”

Lydia stole a peek around his arm and sighed. “Forgive me, my lord, but I don’t understand that woman’s fixation on you. She is wealthy and beautiful; she could have any man she wanted. I’m beginning to think she wants you just because I do.”

Joseph tilted his head with his brows furrowed as if he hadn’t heard her correctly. He took a step closer to Lydia as she continued to focus on their adversary on the terrace. “Did you just say that you want me, little nymph?”

Her eyes flew open wide and she took a step backward. “No, of course not! You must have... misunderstood, my lord.” She spluttered and blushed and looked down at her hands.

Joseph chuckled. “I think the rest of the poem is coming to me now, my lady. There once was a nymph with a mallet, who judged me as swift as a ballot, but somewhere in there, ‘tween her hips and her hair,” Joseph pointed at Lydia’s chest where her heart would be, “lived a girl with great want for my shallots.”

“Your shallots? My lord, that makes no sense!” Lydia giggled at his silliness with her gloved hand over her mouth.

Joseph laughed and offered his arm to Lydia before they walked on to the next wicket. “Oh, it will someday, my nymph. It will.”

The rest of the game found Joseph and Lydia joking and glowing from laughter. They recited more silly limericks and didn’t care that they were far behind in points compared to their opponents.

By the end of their match, Joseph had forgotten all about his scheme. He truly enjoyed his fiancée's company with not a care of who was watching or made note of their growing closeness.

At some point, Wilhelmina Underwood disappeared from the terrace when he wasn’t paying her any attention. As Joseph helped gather up the game pieces for storage, he hoped Miss Kelly had found Lydia’s satchel with all its contents intact.

But finding Bridget would have to wait. Joseph needed to check on the arrangements for the private tea with Lydia and his mother, where he hoped that his nymph wouldn’t fall prey to the Winstone lioness.

Chapter 15

“Where exactly is my invitation to this private tea?” Lydia followed closely behind Joseph as they walked briskly through the garden toward a cluster of beautiful apricot trees. “Or did you just assume that I would attend because all women do your bidding?”

Joseph rolled his eyes and kept moving forward. “Not this again. What exactly is your objection to tea with my mother on a beautiful sunny day in the country? Where we are caring for your family as if they are family of our own?”

Lydia stopped and waited for him to notice that she wasn’t at his heels. When he did and turned around, she untied the ribbon under her chin and removed her straw sun hat.

“My lord, I am very grateful for your family’s generosity, but there are more pressing matters going on around us that require our attention, are there not? We cannot spend every hour of our days here playing games and sipping tea. Bridget didn’t find the satchel in Miss Underwood’s bedchamber and we need to continue the search. I also want to talk to you about some matters involving people I care about who in great need. I would like a viscount’s advice about how to help them thrive. And, forgive the complaint, but the wool of this borrowed dress is too itchy and hot for more lounging in the sun!”

Lydia scratched her belly through the rough fabric of her dark brown frock, then smoothed a few strands of her damp hair back into her chignon behind her pretty neck. Joseph pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time, but Lydia was certain

they still had a few minutes to spare before they were due to meet his mother.

“M’lady, I promise to address all of those things once tea with the countess is complete. In fact, I just thought of a special treat that will bring you much relief if you can withstand the next two hours of pleasant conversation in the shade.”

Lydia sighed through her pout but eventually nodded with consent. “Very well.”

Joseph waited as she caught up to him again, then gave her his left hand as he carried her sun hat in his right.

Lady Winstone was already seated at the beautifully decorated table under a tall white tent. One of her maids was waving a fan at her side to keep her cool as another maid displayed lemon biscuits on a pretty floral plate.

There were gorgeous flowers at the center of the table and several blooming plants in pots scattered around their dining area. All of that natural beauty plus the fragrant apricot trees made the setting quite magical.

Lydia sighed again, but this time it was because she was impressed.

“Ah, there you are, children! Joseph, this was a grand idea. Please, sit, sit! I am excited to share this time with you both.” Lady Winstone was in good spirits despite the humidity, which helped Lydia relax and forget, momentarily, of her growing list of discomforts.

“Good afternoon, Lady Winstone. I wish to thank you and your family for taking such wonderful care of us during our stay.” Lydia curtsied and took the chair offered her by one of the Winstone footmen milling about and taking care of their meal.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noted how far the footmen and maids had to walk

from the house in order to make their tea possible. She instantly felt guilty and wished they had had this gathering inside.

Especially since my borrowed dress is going to be the death of me!

“It is our pleasure, my dear! Though I see that you were the next in line for one of the wool dresses we have to spare. I hope tomorrow you will find it’s your turn for one of the pretty cotton dresses Maria and Sophia have graciously offered to loan our guests. We simply don’t have enough extra clothing to go around for everyone to have more choices, unless you count the formal gowns.”

Lydia itched her thigh under the table and smiled. “All that matters is everyone’s safety, my lady. We are grateful to you for every comfort.”

Joseph smiled at both women at the table, then stood and offered to pour the tea. “It’s a pleasure to see my mother and my fiancée getting to know one another. That is my greatest joy at present, ladies. What shall we talk about?”

“Weddings, of course!” Lady Winstone giggled, which jostled her ample bosom inside her silk lavender dress with tiny white lilies embroidered into the fabric.

Lydia nearly choked on her tea at the mention of wedding planning. She really hoped that wasn’t what this tea was going to be about. After all, there wasn’t a real wedding to plan.

At least not yet.

If pressed to admit it, Lydia might say that the idea of marrying Joseph wasn’t as preposterous as she’d once thought. He was funny and intelligent, as well as shockingly open-minded about her desire to learn about the secrets of life through private experimentation.

And he isn't difficult to look at, either.

But even if she and Joseph decided to court beyond her stay at his home, they were nowhere near ready for talk of pending nuptials. Lydia couldn't see herself marrying a viscount or any other man until she had secured better conditions for the tenant farmers on her father's land at the very least.

She intended to get Joseph's help in doing just that, if Miss Underwood and the contents of her missing satchel didn't end up turning all of society against her.

"A wedding is a joyous affair to discuss, indeed, my lady! But I was wondering if I could ask you and the viscount about your incredible estate. Its lush gardens and vast farms are a credit to your family, I am certain." Lydia smiled and accepted a lemon biscuit from the plate Joseph passed her.

"The farms? Why would a young lady care about such things as farms? Those are subjects of men, are they not? I am thrilled to discuss our exquisite garden beds, which are full of my favorite blooms, as you see all around us."

Lydia nodded and admired the potted lupins and roses, along with the table centerpiece of peonies and foxgloves. "They truly are glorious, Lady Winstone! I'm sure your tenant farms are full of grand blooms, as well!"

Joseph caught Lydia's eye and frowned. "Lady Lydia, what is this obsession with farming? Are you in dire need of more vegetables in your diet?"

Lady Winstone laughed so loudly that it startled her maid holding the fan who lost hold of its handle and sent it flying into the coconut cake resting next to the floral centerpiece.

"Joseph, you scoundrel. But to his point, Lady Lydia, let's change the subject to more

important things. For instance, has your mother taught you how to run a household as magnificent as this one? A viscountess is responsible for far more than any farmer can claim.”

This time Lydia chuckled as she dusted biscuit crumbs off her increasingly uncomfortable dress. “Oh, I doubt that, my lady. Can you imagine? A viscountess working harder than a farmer? When a farmer is in large part responsible for a viscountess’s survival? Now that’s a funny jest!”

Lydia pounded her fist on the table and laughed so hard that the maid with the fan dropped it again.

It wasn’t until her laughter subsided that she realized she was the only one amused by her comments. In fact, both Joseph and his mother stared at her in shock as the staff around them froze with serving dishes held in mid-air.

“Young lady, are you mocking me?” Countess Winstone’s right eyebrow rose high into her forehead and her lips clamped tightly shut.

Lydia swallowed hard and glanced at Joseph, who looked down into his lap and slowly shook his head.

“No, no! My apologies, my lady, I did not mean any disrespect. I fear I misunderstood. Forgive me, please. My sense of humor is lacking proper context due to always having my nose in a book. I am grateful to spend more time with incredible ladies such as yourself to learn better manners. Thank you, Countess, for your kindness. You are an example of perfection and I am your humble student.”

Lydia stopped talking before her groveling seemed completely insincere. The fact was, she had no idea what she was saying other than just trying to compliment the countess enough to avoid more disappointment.

Fortunately, it worked. Another smile spread across Lady Winstone's face as Joseph looked up again with relief in his eyes.

"Silly girl, you are not at fault! It is clear that you haven't had the proper socialization that spending time with our family will certainly provide. I am happy to take you under my wing and teach you everything you need to know. It's my treat, my dear. I did the same for Sophia and Maria, and now I shall shower all of my attention on you. We will spend many hours together from this day on until your family departs!" The countess raised her tea cup and clinked it to Lydia's.

The staff around them started moving again and Joseph's face turned from disappointed to entertained as his hazel eyes glistened with what Lydia thought might be pride.

She wasn't sure if it was the dress, the heat, or the countess's words that made waves of nausea roll through her belly, but it was probably a combination of all three. She knew one thing for certain—joining Joseph's family wasn't anywhere near as appealing now as it had been an hour ago. And having a productive discussion about tenant farmers' rights with any of the Winstones, including Joseph, was likely not possible.

That alone made the thought of marrying Joseph one she might need to put out of her mind for good.

"I don't know how you did it, little nymph, but you managed to earn my mother's devotion by insulting her very existence." Joseph led Lydia away from their afternoon tea in the opposite direction of the main house.

"Yes, I astound even myself, my lord. Where are we going? Please take me back to

the house; I need to change out of this awful dress immediately.” Lydia sulked and itched and trudged behind the viscount toward God knows where. She wanted this frustrating day to be over already, or at least spend the rest of it in bed.

“Patience, little nymph! We are almost there. I am taking you to your favorite domain. To where nymphs like you can splash and scold to your heart’s content. It’s just past those trees...”

Lydia could smell it before she saw it. Her spirits lifted instantly as the familiar scent of a hot spring tickled her nose. She was so excited to find it that she sprinted past Joseph to discover it for herself.

“I told you it was a special treat, did I not?”

Joseph caught up with her just as Lydia entered the clearing overlooking a valley with a stunning hot spring that was much larger than her favorite one on her father’s estate. It looked to be much deeper, too.

“My lord, it’s spectacular! Is it cool enough for swimming?” Lydia ran down the slope to the bank of the spring, then sat on the ground and tugged off her shoes. As Joseph came up behind her, she slid her skirts up to her thighs and pulled her stockings down to her ankles one by one.

When she looked back at the viscount, he was staring intently at her naked legs like they were food and he hadn’t eaten in days.

“Yes, it’s cool enough for swimming.” His voice was barely a whisper as he watched Lydia pull her skirts back down again and stand in bare feet.

“Then what are you waiting for, Lord Winstone? Will you join me for a dip?” Lydia grinned at him, thoroughly enjoying how powerful she felt when he gazed upon her

with such desire.

She turned to the spring and slowly lowered herself into it while fully dressed. Her skirts soon floated at the surface as she moved toward the center, which thankfully was reachable by a gradual slope of the ground beneath her feet.

“How is it that you found yourself in my little spring when you have such a grand one all your own, my lord?” Lydia giggled and reached up to pull the pins from her hair, letting it fall loose into the soothing water.

Joseph kicked off his shoes and undressed down to his drawers without a second of hesitation. After he joined her in the spring and treaded water by her side, he reached under the surface, removed his drawers, and tossed them in a heap onto the bank.

“Should a man be limited to just one magical spring when there are so many to enjoy in our part of the world?”

Lydia stared at him wide-eyed, her mouth agape. “Not only is it unfair that you feel entitled to swim in every spring, but it is just like a man to swim naked next to a woman who must remain fully clothed!”

Joseph grinned and smacked the water to send a splash toward her face. “Nobody here would dare ask you to stay clothed, Lady Lydia. If you are asking for permission, it is granted.”

Lydia snorted and splashed him back. “I don’t need a man’s permission to do anything, is that clear?” She reached around to her back while trying to tread water but could not manage the buttons on the heavy wool dress on her own.

“Fine, you don’t need permission, but would you like a little help? Ask nicely, please.”

The viscount's eyes glistened with a look of mischief as Lydia glared at him.

"I think you have forgotten that I don't need to ask nicely when the only thing between a naked scoundrel and my bare skin are these horrid buttons. I would think that said scoundrel would volunteer his help."

Joseph's smile flattened out as he realized her point. "You are right, my lady. Help is on the way!" He swam over to her and carefully unfastened the buttons down her spine. Then he kicked his feet and moved away from her enough that she had room to pull the dress over her head without him seeing her nakedness below.

Lydia struggled with the dress and her shift, but finally had them both off her body and shoved onto the bank opposite where Joseph was watching her with those hungry eyes again.

"Keep your eyes averted, please. We are merely two souls in need of the restorative power of a spring and nothing more." Lydia closed her eyes and finally started to relax. The water made her skin feel tingly and refreshed as it slid between her legs, her arms, and her breasts.

Joseph dared to swim a bit closer to her and glanced at the surface of the water where her chest was almost visible. "We are so much more than that, little nymph, are we not?"

Lydia swam to a point where she could touch her toes on the soft earth below her feet again. Though he stayed several feet away from her, Joseph soon joined her where they could both stand with their heads above water.

"We have known each other for only three days, my lord. We are acquaintances at best."

“Ah, but what intimate three days they have been! I feel closer to you after three days than I have felt with any other woman in a lifetime.”

Lydia laughed and splashed him again. “Oh, stop! Your flowery speeches might make most young ladies swoon, but I am not most young ladies.”

Joseph took one step closer to her and sighed. “You are right about that. You are a wild heart and brilliant mind above all the rest.”

Despite her vow not to fall for the viscount’s romantic lines, Lydia’s breath caught in her throat from such glowing compliments. Her instincts were not to believe him, but the wild heart in her chest of which he spoke was suddenly taking control.

“That is very kind of you to say, my lord.” Lydia dipped her lips into the water to keep from wetting them on his tongue.

“Please call me Joseph. I want to hear you say my name.” He moved even closer as Lydia sank lower into the water until it was up to her nose. “Do not hide from me, little nymph. It is only fair that I get to study your form, too, and thoroughly admire it.”

Lydia considered his words for a moment and enjoyed making him wait. Then she pushed up from the ground again until she was standing at her full height. Her breasts bobbed at the surface of the water as she wiped her lips dry with the back of her hand.

“Are you going to kiss me again, my lord?”

“I will if you call me Joseph.” His eyes slid down Lydia’s neck and fixated on the water where her nipples skated along the surface. He could barely speak as he asked her again. “Please say my name, little nymph. I beg you.”

Lydia finally filled the space between them and pressed her chest to his. “Please kiss me, Joseph.”

The viscount needed no further encouragement to pull her into his arms and take her mouth with his. Lydia felt his hands slide down to squeeze the cheeks of her bum before they caressed their way around to her belly and up to cup her breasts and massage her nipples with his thumbs.

Lydia gasped from the intensity of these new sensations happening all at once. From the commanding dance of his tongue at her lips to the soft, circling motion around her sensitive peaks, she was losing all sense of control. And she loved every second of it.

She also loved feeling his sex pressing against her flesh again, knowing his arousal was at its height. She dared to reach down into the water and caress his shaft, not yet knowing what he looked like there but learning him by feel as the slippery spring water provided the perfect supple atmosphere for every stroke.

“My lady, you are breathtaking. You are so soft and lovely and exquisite. And you will need to unhand me in a moment or I will lose all control.” Joseph sucked Lydia’s bottom lip into his mouth and released it as he moaned with pleasure.

“Say my name and I will do as you ask, Joseph.” She kept stroking him slowly as her other hand smoothed over the hair on his chest and into the thicket at his groin.

“Lydia, Lydia, Lydia. How I want you, Lydia.” The viscount’s body tensed as he shoved her hands away and retreated while gasping for breath. “That was close, little nymph!”

Joseph laughed through what Lydia assumed was another round of pain caused by their kissing and touching and bold exploration.

“I’m sorry I vex you so, my lord.”

He floated quickly back to Lydia and wrapped his arms around her once more. “It is how you vex me that brings me back to life. I wouldn’t trade even a moment of your vexing for all the hot springs in the world. Even if my awkward appendage breaks because of it!”

Lydia laughed and hugged him tightly, then whispered in his ear. “I would not call your appendage awkward anymore. It has become much more of an appealing appendage now.”

Joseph smiled and gave her another tender kiss. “Then I look forward to when the two of you formally meet someday, little nymph. That day cannot come soon enough for me.”

Chapter 16

Back in her itchy wool dress, Lydia's mood soured again as she and Joseph walked together through the sunny field toward the gardens behind Winstone House.

But while she frowned and scratched at the fabric against her skin, Joseph was in grand spirits. He was so happy he felt like skipping, though he refrained from such boyish behavior in front of the woman making his belly feel like it was full of bubbles popping and bouncing about.

Not a single other woman in all of his eight-and-twenty years had ever made him feel the way Lydia did that day. First, she had managed to impress his mother by being her unique self. Then she had awakened his cravings for her even more by daring to swim naked with him in the spring.

Touching me, stroking me, and showing me more of her secret, stunning beauty without hesitation or embarrassment.

She was truly like no other woman of society. Her desire for physical exploration was as shocking as it was intoxicating. It was all Joseph could do to keep his hands to himself when his bold little nymph was near.

As they walked away from the most exciting swim of his life, he was consumed with the desire to taste Lydia's thick nipples and dip his hard and aching sex deeply between her soft nether folds. He barely noticed the many vibrant wildflowers in bloom along their path back to the house because of the sensuous images replaying in his head.

It was ridiculous to feel so strongly for a woman in such a short amount of time, but he wasn't the first man to fall for a feisty vixen so quickly. Already the thought of any other man having Lydia to himself made Joseph's throat constrict and his muscles stiffen.

Though he had no intention of admitting it to anyone yet, he knew his and Lydia's engagement was no longer a ruse. He had every intention of marrying her as soon as possible, then enjoy having his little nymph by his side for the rest of his days.

The only challenge now was helping Lydia feel the same way about him.

Yet they had time. With at least a week more to go before the roads and bridge were passable from his home, Joseph had time to woo her, romance her, and experiment with more thrilling touches and tenderness in stolen moments like they shared just now at the spring.

He couldn't wait to discover more of his fiancée's secret delights and welcome her into his world a little more each day.

"I have never seen a goofier grin on a man's face, my lord. Are you daydreaming or did you empty a bottle of port down your throat when I wasn't looking?" Lydia smirked at him as they passed the small grove of fruit trees where they'd shared tea with the countess hours before. The tent and all signs of their elegant gathering were gone and it was nearing time to get ready for dinner.

"I am dreaming of a naked nymph with soft hands and ample breasts ripe for suckling!" Joseph laughed loudly as he wrapped his arm around Lydia's waist, pulled her close, and planted a kiss on the creamy, delicate skin swelling above her bodice.

"My lord, where are your manners? I am a lady!" Lydia laughed as she playfully pushed him away and dashed out ahead of him on the path. She kept giggling as

Joseph reached to pinch her bottom from behind.

“You are a lady in society but you are my nymph when we’re alone. And you are quickly becoming the only woman I care to spend my time with outside of my family. Surely, you cannot deny that there is more than experimentation happening between us, Lydia.” He caught up with her again and looped her arm into his.

Lydia peeked up at him from below the rim of her sunhat and smiled. “I must admit you have a certain unexpected appeal, my lord.”

“Joseph, please.”

“But again, Joseph, it’s only been three days. There is much to learn about each other. For example, I might discover that we do not share the same passions, and then where would we be?”

Joseph stopped walking and held fast to Lydia’s arm. “My lady, we got very close to making love back there at the spring, whether you know that’s what was happening or not. So, I’d say we clearly share the same passions already!”

Lydia tugged on Joseph’s arm to move them forward again. “Yes, we share physical attraction, but what about our interests? What if we have nothing to talk about beyond our... anatomical discoveries?”

Joseph swatted a bug off his cheek and scowled. “Here you go vexing me again, Lydia. Husbands and wives need not have similar interests. They have different roles and, in many ways, separate lives—other than when they share a bed, of course.”

He stopped again and lifted the brim of Lydia’s hat to see her green eyes full of fire.

“Can you be serious, my lord? Do you expect me to marry a man who won’t talk to

me? Who doesn't share any of my interests or share more of life with me than the hours in my bed? That is the most preposterous thing I have ever heard. If that is what your mother taught you from all those proper etiquette books, she has done you a terrible disservice. It seems you haven't learned a thing about women at all!" She released her arm from Joseph's and ran quickly up the path through the apricot trees, disappearing beyond the many branches full of leaves.

"Lydia, wait!" Joseph ran after her until he found his way back out of the trees where she had stopped at the large iron gate that led into his family's vast gardens behind the house.

On the other side of the gate, Wilhelmina Underwood stood holding her hand over the latch and grinned from ear to ear.

"Hello again, Lord Winstone. I was just telling your little nymph about my passions, since that seems to be the topic of the day. Can you guess which passion is at the top of my list? My greatest passion is to be the Honorable Viscountess Winstone, married to the heir of this grand estate. I realize it's my fault for not making that passion clear before you and your harlot went for a swim, but I've had quite enough of your secret trysts. They end now."

Lydia gasped and turned beet red. Joseph stepped in front of her to shield her from Miss Underwood's vile speech, but she refused to be hidden away. She stood by Joseph's side once more and slammed her hands onto her hips in defiance as Joseph defended her honor.

"How dare you speak of Lady Lydia in such an undignified manner. I must ask you to step away from the gate and never speak to us in such a way again, Miss Underwood. You and I will never be married. By demanding such a thing, you have overstepped and forgotten your place. This is my home and you are a guest, so please act accordingly or you will be removed from the premises immediately. I'm sorry to be

so blunt, but this behavior cannot be allowed to continue. Lady Lydia and I are engaged, so whatever trysts you have witnessed are between a man and woman soon to be husband and wife. They are our business and ours alone.”

Wilhelmina threw her head back and laughed, completely unfazed by his scolding. “Is that so, Lord Winstone? You truly think that your mother would turn a blind eye to your secret romps with a young unmarried lady who lured you with her desire to marry a nobleman?”

Lydia scoffed and took a step closer to the gate. “I did no such thing! We aren’t even engaged for real!”

“Lydia! Please do not speak of personal matters!” Joseph grabbed at Lydia’s arm as she slapped a hand over her mouth, apparently just realizing what she’d revealed.

Miss Underwood cackled again and shook her head. “Well, of course you’re not, my dear. What respectable viscount would marry a woman he’d already taken liberties with in the woods? Wake up, nymph. You’re nothing but his plaything while we’re all stuck here together. Once the bridge is repaired, he won’t even remember your name.”

Lydia gasped again and stepped backward as if she’d taken a punch from Wilhelmina’s fist right in the belly. She doubled over and crumpled to the ground as Joseph crouched over her to put his hands on her upper arms.

“Lydia, don’t listen to this evil woman and her terrible lies. She doesn’t know me or my intentions.” He rubbed her arms up and down until she pulled away from him again.

“I don’t know you either, my lord! This whole thing has gone too far!”

“I couldn’t agree more, Lady Lydia.” Wilhelmina unlatched the gate and swung it open. “Which is why I have an offer for the both of you. Lydia will call off the engagement and the viscount will begin courting me instead by the end of this confinement. Then, after a respectable courtship, you will announce our engagement, my lord, and we will marry as quickly as possible. In return, I will keep your secret and never reveal to anyone the scandalous behavior the two of you have shared. But mark my words, that behavior stops now. There will be no further private contact between the two of you. You may behave as a respectable betrothed couple among the ton for now, but share even the quickest moment of privacy together and I will spread so many rumors that your ruined reputations will take your entire families down with you. Is that understood?”

Joseph stepped up to the gate and pushed his way through it as Wilhelmina walked backwards a few steps on the other side. “You cannot blackmail us, Miss Underwood. Remember, you are an outsider in my home and you have no proof. Nobody here will believe you.”

He walked around the gate and stood very close to Wilhelmina’s body, staring down at her with menace in his darkened eyes. She returned Joseph’s angry glare, then spun around and started walking toward Winstone House. She waved back at Lydia and Joseph as if she was walking away from dear friends.

“Oh, I have proof, my lord! And I think you know exactly where I found it. Good day!”

“She’s a horrible person! Just horrible! Do you want me to scatter her undergarments across the front lawn, my lord? Because I’ll do it!” Bridget paced back and forth in the library with her small hands clenched in fists as Lydia hung her head in the corner and Joseph kept watch at the door.

“Please sit down, Miss Kelly. And, no... do not go anywhere near Miss Underwood or her things until we have a new plan.” Joseph combed a hand through his blond hair thickened by the spring water. He needed to bathe soon to be ready for dinner in time, but they had to decide what to do about Wilhelmina first.

And try not to get caught doing so by Miss Underwood and anyone from the Winstone staff or guest list she may have employed to spy on them.

“Lady Lydia, I think the best solution is for us to get married much sooner. We should tell our parents that we don’t want to wait and ask if our special circumstances due to the storms would warrant a quick marriage license. It’s the best way to keep Miss Underwood from spreading lies that harm our families.”

Joseph took a few steps toward Lydia, then turned back again to make sure nobody was lingering in the hallway. He wanted so much to hold her and reassure her that all would be well, but she was still gazing at the floor and refusing to look into his eyes.

He also didn’t want to reveal too much about their relationship that would compromise Lydia’s reputation with Bridget. All Miss Kelly knew at the moment was that Miss Underwood had threatened to spread gossip about Lydia and Joseph being intimate together. Bridget didn’t need to know any of the details, or that some of Miss Underwood’s accusations were true.

“I’ll kick her in the shins! I’ll bloody her nose! How dare she threaten my mistress and, of course, you, my Lord. How dare she!” Bridget punched her fists through the air and danced around like a boxer in a ring. “That sorry lass has some dodgy porridge to look forward to in the morning, I can tell you that!”

Joseph nearly yelled at Bridget for taking things too far, but the silliness of her behavior tickled him too much to scold her further. He chuckled as Lydia lifted her head and watched Bridget punch an imaginary Miss Underwood over and over again.

“If only your flying fists could solve things in the real world and make this all go away, Bridget.” Lydia sighed, then wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. She finally looked over at Joseph to address his suggestion of a quick marriage. “My lord, I cannot marry you merely to silence Miss Underwood. And I don’t think rushing into marriage is a good idea in any circumstances. I appreciate your efforts to protect us, but there must be another way. Let’s get ready for dinner and think about other possibilities. Maybe Wilhelmina can be stopped with a more reasonable method. Come, Bridget. Let’s go find out which itchy borrowed dress I’ll be wearing tonight.”

Joseph stood next to the library doorway as Lydia walked through it. She avoided his gaze again and said nothing more, which made him feel even worse. As soon as she and Bridget disappeared, he leaned against the wall and closed his eyes.

He silently chided himself for suggesting a quick marriage to Lydia when he knew she was hesitant to marry at all yet. He also silently blamed his mother for inviting Wilhelmina Underwood to stay for dinner on the night of the ball instead of making sure she got home safely before the bridge washed out in the storm.

“Lord Winstone, I didn’t see you there. My apologies if I am disturbing you. I thought I’d browse for a book while waiting for the dinner bell. Your mother seems to have something special planned for tonight, does she not?”

Joseph’s eyes fluttered open to see Lord Triton standing in the library with a book on English agriculture in his hands. He was dressed for dinner in a fine black jacket and white silk cravat with perfectly starched shirt points visible above the silk.

“Lord Triton, I beg your pardon. I was resting my eyes for a moment. I’m honestly not certain what my mother has planned for this evening, so please enlighten me, if you would.” Joseph pinched the bridge of his nose to try and ease his growing headache, but it didn’t help.

Lord Triton smiled and scanned Joseph's crumpled clothing and stringy hair. "By the looks of you, Winstone, you'd best take your leave of me now to avoid your mother's notice before you become more presentable. I believe the countess has arranged for a special dinner in the orangery tonight where formal dress is required. An invitation was delivered to my room this afternoon."

Joseph's eyes widened as he pulled his pocket watch from his vest and checked the time. "Thank you, Lord Triton. I do believe you just saved me from the countess's wrath. I'll see you at dinner!"

He hastily bowed, then dashed into the hallway and swerved around various guests in fine attire as he headed to his dressing room on the second floor.

Benchley was waiting with Joseph's bath already warmed and his dinner clothes pressed. "Ten more minutes and I would have been forced to seek new employment, my lord."

Joseph tore at his sweaty tunic and trousers, and threw all the rest of his garments about the room until he was stark naked. Then he eased into the steaming tub of clean water and felt some of his worries ease instantly. "Come now, Benchley! Have a little faith! Have I ever let you down before?"

Benchley sighed and held a large towel over his arm a few feet from the bathtub where Joseph scrubbed his body with a thick bar of soap.

"Many times, my lord. Many, many times."

Joseph laughed and scrubbed the soap through his hair, then dunked his head in the water to rinse away the suds. When he came back up for air and wiped his eyes, Benchley was holding a brown satchel in mid-air.

“This arrived for you about an hour ago, my lord. It came with a note attached.”

Joseph stared at the satchel with wide eyes, then stood up in the bath as water sloshed over the sides. “Who delivered it?”

“A footman, my lord.”

Joseph stood naked and dripping in the metal washtub as he grabbed the note Benchley had found with the bag. He opened it, read the one sentence written within, and frowned.

I believe this is what you’d call proof.

W.U.

“Open the satchel, Benchley. And don’t tell me it’s empty.” Joseph stood in the soapy water of his bath and kept his gaze locked on the bag in Benchley’s hands as his valet pulled it open and peered inside.

“It is indeed empty, my lord. And you are late for dinner. The countess will be upset if you don’t join her soon.”

Joseph crumpled the note from Wilhelmina Underwood in his hand and let it fall into the cloudy water. He watched it sink and felt his spirits sink with it.

“Well, we know better than to disappoint a woman, don’t we, Benchley?”

“No man has ever avoided it yet, my lord. Let’s get you dressed and out to the orangery. The countess has given tonight’s dinner a fitting theme, by the way.”

Joseph stepped out of the bath and into the towel Benchley provided. “Which is

what?"

Benchley cleared his throat and smiled. "Athena, Greek goddess of war."

Chapter 17

Lady Briarwood and her daughters were finally in awe of the dresses delivered to their shared dressing room that evening. The Countess Winstone had personally chosen their attire for an impromptu gala dinner that evening, or so said the note delivered with the garments that was signed by the countess herself.

“Oh, Mama! I have never seen such beautiful fabric! These clothes are divine!” Eleanor twirled with her dress in her arms and nearly fell to the floor in mid-swoon. It was the color of ripe boysenberries, but in a Greek goddess style with flowing chiffon fabric, a gold belt, and an attached and sheer chiffon cape. “These dresses must be from a costume ball. Even Lydia will look grand tonight, whether she wants to or not!”

Normally Charlotte would cackle in response to her sister teasing Lydia, but tonight she was just as mesmerized by the fine dresses that looked to be the perfect fit. She was starry-eyed as she smoothed a hand over her plum chiffon gown that came with gold slippers and a gold leaf crown.

“All of them are different shades of purple, Eleanor! The Winstone signature color!” Charlotte squealed and jumped up and down.

Lady Briarwood smiled as she touched the golden laurel tiara that came with her gown and looked at her reflection in the full-length mirror. Her coordinating violet chiffon dress was gorgeous with a sheer violet cape attached above the sleeves and delicate gold trim. “Lady Winstone certainly spoiled us tonight, ladies. We must express our gratitude when we see her at dinner.”

Lydia sat on a cushioned stool with her dress draped across her lap. She loved hers, too, with its layers of lilac fabric and gold accessories.

The dress was exquisite, but her mood was still somber. Though she didn't regret her intimacy with Joseph, it was terribly unfortunate that Miss Underwood, of all people, knew about it and now held it over their heads.

Even more depressing was the fact that Joseph wanted to rush into marriage only to avoid scandal. Yes, he was willing to give up his independence to save his family's reputation, which was a noble thing to do. For that, she had great respect for him. But it was clear that, despite their closeness in such a short amount of time, Joseph did not yet have feelings for her as a husband had for a wife.

A few days ago, that would have been the furthest concern from her mind. But things had changed so quickly and she found herself reeling from it all. Joseph Penton, that beastly irritating man, had begun to grow on her. Even worse, he had suddenly become one of the few people in this world that she trusted the most.

How could I let that happen? And with a man who gives no value to knowing a wife's interests at all!

Lydia had so many conflicting feelings about Joseph that she had to lean against the wall behind the stool to keep from falling to the floor with dizziness. He was maddening and exciting. Protective and playful. Intelligent and so dashing and handsome that she could barely look away when he was in the room.

Or naked in the spring!

She wanted so much to share more about herself with him, but how could she when he seemed so uninterested in matters more serious than carnal pursuits?

As her sisters and mother chattered with joy around her and dressed for dinner, Lydia closed her eyes and dared to imagine Joseph working on a farm. She pictured him shirtless and sweaty. She could see his glistening biceps under the sun as he wiped his brow and drank from the glass of lemonade she brought him in the vision. Then he pressed her body into the soft side of a tall haystack, ripped her bodice open, and lifted her skirt up to her waist.

What happened next she couldn't quite visualize, but imagining his hands and lips all over her skin made her moan.

The sounds of her sisters giggling brought Lydia back to the present moment where she sighed and ran a comb slowly through her long, dark hair. Thankfully, Eleanor and Charlotte ignored her, but Lydia couldn't ignore the stirrings in her body that the viscount caused.

Yes, she desired Joseph. She may even be falling in love with him, as absurd as that sounded inside her own head. But how could he expect me to marry him before we are sure of each other?

A marriage was a lifetime commitment, not a simple solution to a temporary problem.

Plus, Lydia assumed that, much like their confinement at the Winstone estate, Miss Underwood would soon be a distant memory left in the past. Wilhelmina might be a threat while they were all at Winstone House, but she wouldn't always be, would she?

Then a new thought took hold in her brain as she watched her sisters pin their curls on top of their heads. If Wilhelmina did make good on her threat to spread vile rumors about the viscount, it wasn't likely that she would be able to marry him herself.

Wilhelmina's family would surely distance themselves from the Pentons until the scandal died down, and Joseph might decide to leave town or even the country for an extended stay. The chances of Miss Underwood having him all to herself under such scandalous circumstances were quite small.

Would Wilhelmina risk it anyway and tell their secrets, no matter the consequences that could destroy her own plans? Maybe. There was no way of knowing how far Miss Underwood would go to satisfy her needs. Or for pure entertainment.

Lydia and Joseph would have to take her at her word and assume they had until the bridge was repaired to at least publicly end their engagement.

And to stay far away from each other until then, if possible.

But Lydia did not see a separation between them happening. She couldn't let Miss Underwood control her life, just as she could not allow the aristocracy to continue to ignore the plight of their tenant farmers. She and Joseph would have to keep meeting in private to find a way to beat Miss Underwood at her own game.

And to continue our scientific experimentation, of course.

"Come with me, sister. You deserve as much glamour as the rest of us tonight." Eleanor held out her hand to Lydia and led her to the chair in front of the vanity mirror.

Lydia let out a long sigh as her sisters braided her hair and coiled it around her head, letting silky wisps of long dark curls frame her face and drape elegantly down her neck. They decorated her styled hair with the golden crown of laurel leaves that was delivered with her dress.

"You are stunning, Lydia. Truly a goddess this evening." Charlotte whispered in her

ear and kissed her cheek. “Now put on that pretty gown and let’s go have a night to remember!”

The orangery was already a magical oasis with tropical fruit trees, fountains, and sparkling chandeliers full of flickering candlelight visible in the gardens via the floor-to-ceiling windows. But that night, it was somehow even more breathtaking.

Lydia stood in the doorway with her mouth dropped open as her family and other guests walked around her. She scanned the enormous room filled with dining tables, Greek statues, gold-painted leafy garlands, extra flickering candlelight, and exquisite dishes and glassware.

And in the center of the orangery stood an enormous trickling fountain with a statue of the goddess Athena standing tall above its basin.

Most of the men were dressed in Greek warrior costumes that consisted of flowing white robes, gold sashes and capes, plus gold sandals and gold leaf crowns. Many of the women were in matching white and gold goddess costumes, if they hadn’t lucked into borrowing gowns made of more colorful fabrics like the Carters wore.

It was an incredible display that felt like everyone had stepped back in time or into the pages of Lydia’s favorite mythology books as a child.

The musicians from the orchestra that had played for the Winstone Ball were tucked in a corner and provided instrumental music that suited the setting perfectly.

“Apparently the orchestra has been stranded here for days, too,” Eleanor whispered in Lydia’s ear. “Maybe one of them has a secret fortune and a desire for dark-haired ladies with flexible physiques.”

“Eleanor!” Lydia nearly choked from the shock of hearing such language coming from her younger sister’s mouth.

“What? I’m built like an acrobat and it’s going to waste!” Eleanor winked, then followed her mother and Charlotte toward the dining tables to look at the place setting name cards.

Lord Briarwood, dressed in a white flowing robe with gold belt and sash, stayed next to his oldest daughter as Lydia continued to stare at all the splendor around them. “This will all be yours one day, my dear, as the Viscountess Winstone.”

He took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I know that we don’t see eye to eye on many things, Lydia, but I believe we are of the same mind when it comes to your engagement. You have done very well and made us proud. Lady Winstone personally thanked us today for helping her son find such a wonderful match. You must have done something special to impress her, because she seemed unsure of your union for the past day or two. Suddenly, she thinks the world of you, and I couldn’t agree more. May I escort you to our table?”

Lydia looked up at her father with tears in her eyes. To hear him speak to her with such pride and respect was new and wonderful, but it was also overwhelming. She didn’t deserve it because of all that was going on behind the scenes.

Soon, she would disappoint her family by backing out of the engagement, and possibly ruining their friendship with the Pentons altogether. It made her heart so heavy she could barely catch her breath. But she hid her turmoil the best she could to enjoy the splendid evening.

She squeezed her father’s hand and smiled. “I would like that, Father. Thank you.”

As she accompanied her father through the beautiful setting with a delightful scent of

citrus, Lydia spotted Joseph standing with his brothers near the orchestra. He looked so handsome in a gold Greek warrior costume complete with thick gold cuffs around his toned upper arms and a metal sword hanging from his belt.

It wasn't long before his piercing hazel eyes locked with hers from across the room. They gazed at each other with dramatic longing like they were characters in a fairytale. Except, in this instance, the handsome Greek god was a dashing viscount who had suddenly become a source of danger to her and her family thanks to threats from Miss Underwood. As I have become the same to his.

Lydia broke their gaze first and tried to put her troubles out of her mind. Soon enough, she and Joseph would devise a plan to make this mess disappear.

And the key to making that possible might just be the redheaded maid who wanted nothing more than to cause Miss Underwood a great deal of discomfort for threatening to ruin her mistress.

Dinner was just as divine as the decor, the music, and the company. Much to Lydia's surprise, she and her siblings got along beautifully and their whole family laughed together over silly inside jokes. Even William, who'd arrived to dinner thirty minutes late, was fully engaged with the family instead of in his usual state of distraction since the night of the storms.

Lord and Lady Winstone stopped by their table during the entree service. The countess put her hands on Lydia's shoulders and thanked her for their talk that afternoon at tea. "Lord and Lady Briarwood, your lovely daughter opened my eyes to something important and I want to express my gratitude."

Lydia looked up at Lady Winstone standing behind her and took in a deep breath of

anticipation. Was the Countess about to thank her for mentioning the tenant farmers and their hard work? Did she want to talk more about how to help families like the Musgroves?

“Is that so, Lady Winstone? Do tell!” Lady Briarwood dabbed the corners of her mouth with a linen napkin the shade of an amethyst crystal, then smiled at her oldest daughter.

“Your Lydia reminded me of how glorious our gardens look this season and it gave me some inspiration for another ball during your stay! We shall decorate our ballroom with magnificent blooms and host a flower-themed dance! It’s a marvelous idea, is it not?” Lady Winstone beamed from ear to ear as her husband and Lydia’s father exchanged looks that hinted of the eye rolls they didn’t dare display.

Lydia flattened her lips into a straight line to prevent them from curving into a frown as her sisters and mother clapped with joy. William looked down at his plate with his hand covering a very big grin on his face.

“How wonderful, my lady! My girls and I will adore such a beautiful event! Please let us know if we can help with arrangements in any way. And we wish to thank you for the splendid costumes this evening. We are very grateful for your generosity,” Lady Briarwood said as she reached for her husband and son’s hands and gave them each a warning squeeze to keep the men from embarrassing her with teasing looks in front of their hosts.

“It’s my pleasure, Lady Briarwood! We will make sure your family is dressed well for my flower ball, too. I know just the young lady I want as my special assistant for the event. Would you do me the honor, Lady Lydia?” The countess leaned down with her hands still on Lydia’s shoulders and whispered in her ear. “Unless you’d rather we have the farmers plan it instead?”

Lady Winstone giggled as Lydia's spine stiffened. That last thing she needed right now was the countess stealing her every waking moment, but how could she say no?

"I would be honored, Lady Winstone. Thank you for asking me." Lydia tried to sound enthusiastic and it must have worked because the table erupted in more applause and the countess kissed Lydia on the cheek.

"Excellent! We shall begin our planning for the flower ball in the morning. Who knows, it might become another annual Winstone event!"

Lord Winstone finally led his wife away from the table as William snickered in the chair between Lydia and his mother. Both women gave him stern looks, but they failed to diminish his joy.

"I can only imagine the conversation that brought on that idea, sister! Did you really just volunteer yourself to plan a ball? The only ball you would have any interest in planning would be one that required a lengthy dissertation on seed germination in order to get in!" William leaned his chair back and laughed so hard that he nearly tumbled backward into a potted orange tree.

"William, must you behave like a naughty child at every opportunity? I'm tired of repeating myself. Please, I beg you, take your leave of us again if you cannot be civilized in a formal setting." Lydia's mother looked to her husband for support, but he was already standing, about to step away from the table.

"Let the ladies enjoy their fancy dinner, son. The men's game room is open tonight and I need some refreshment stronger than the tea." Lord Briarwood waited for William to follow as Lydia folded her arms across her chest.

Why only the men get to escape any time they want to is beyond me. And I never asked to plan a stupid ball!

“Sorry, my lord, but I have plans with some of the other gents. I’ll join you tomorrow instead. Good evening, ladies.” William stretched, then stood over Lydia and kissed her on the nose. “I’m only teasing, dear sister, because you are such a good sport.”

Lydia took a swing at her brother’s head, but he pulled away just in time and laughed his way to the orangery door, then out into the night.

“Mama, I forgot to ask the countess where and when to meet her in the morning. May I be excused to find her and make those arrangements?” Lydia had no intention of seeking out chatty Lady Winstone, but she did need to find a way to talk with Joseph again. There was no time to waste toward outsmarting Wilhelmina’s schemes.

However, she had no idea where Miss Underwood might be lurking, so she had to be more cautious than ever.

“Yes, dear. But don’t disturb the countess for long. She has many guests to tend to this evening,” Lydia’s mother replied.

“I won’t. Thank you!” Lydia quickly rose from her seat and moved through the crowded orangery as the dancing flames from many candles led her way.

Unfortunately, Joseph and his family had vacated the head table already, but she spotted the viscount walking away from the orangery from her view through one of the tall glass walls.

Lydia also located Miss Underwood speaking with Lord Triton by one of the dessert tables decorated with more pretty cakes than she’d ever seen before.

“Good. They deserve each other,” she whispered to herself, then made her way out into the misty night made dreamy by the glow of the full moon above.

Joseph was walking many paces ahead with Henry and Maria. Lydia kept to the tall bushes at the side of the main garden as she followed them, getting closer by the minute and having no idea how to get his attention without being noticed.

Just as she was about to call out to him, a familiar crow song sounded from the other side of the bushes.

And it had quite a distinct Irish accent for a bird.

“Ca-CAW! Ca-CAW!”

Lydia peered into the dark bushes as a small, pale hand reached out and grabbed her arm, then pulled her through the shrubs.

“Please don’t scream, my lady! It’s just me, Bridget! I have a message for you!”

Lydia heard Bridget’s excited whispers as she crashed into her maid from the force of being yanked. The two women toppled to the ground together and formed what would have looked like a comical heap of upturned legs and exposed shifts had anyone witnessed it.

“Bridget, you scared me to death! Next time please wait for me to come to you, alright?” Lydia rolled onto her knees, then stood up again to brush the dirt off her silky lilac dress. She held out her hand to help Bridget up, then lightly swatted the maid’s hands away a minute later when Bridget attempted to brush dirt off Lydia’s backside.

“I’m sorry, m’lady!” Bridget’s whispers got louder as Lydia’s frown grew more severe. “Viscount Winstone said I must find you urgently after dinner and tell you to meet him at the stables! Please hurry!”

Lydia stopped messing with her mussed clothing and stared at Bridget with widened eyes. “When did you speak with the viscount? I was just following him!”

Bridget dared to reach up and pluck a tiny twig from Lydia’s hair, then retreated a few steps back and wrung her hands together. “We spoke earlier, but I could not get to you until now. The viscount said he has some information that must be shared at the stables and you are to meet him there post haste after dinner.”

Lydia threw her hands in the air with frustration and then propped them on her waist. “And the viscount assumed that I would know where at the stables we are to meet? Upon my word, that man can be so aggravating...”

“My lady, you must go immediately! I will lead you there!” Bridget touched Lydia’s arm again but this time didn’t dare yank her forward. “We can sneak through the dark behind the stables to where the viscount should be waiting. I’ll show you.”

Lydia had no time to respond before Bridget bolted past her and sprinted toward a group of buildings where the smell of animals got stronger the more steps they took.

She followed her maid through a side garden gate, through a large grouping of idle carriages, then finally to the darkest side of a massive building where Lydia could see faint shadows of stabled horses through the windows.

Sure enough, the viscount was waiting when they arrived. And though it was quite dark, she could tell that Joseph was angry. He paced back and forth in his Greek warrior costume, muttering to himself, until Lydia and Bridget drew near.

“Finally! Did you ladies stop for tea and biscuits on the way here? Thank you, Bridget. Please go back to the house and wait for Lady Lydia’s return.” Joseph dismissed Miss Kelly with a wave toward Winstone House and waited as the maid curtsied and dashed away.

“Is there no end to your rudeness, my lord? I am here, am I not? I’ll have you know that I was coming to find you when Bridget pulled me in the bushes and nearly ruined this beautiful dress that your mother kindly...”

“We have no time to speak of dresses, little nymph! While at dinner in the orangery, I accidentally overheard a secret conversation when I was standing among the fruit trees keeping my eye on you.” The viscount pointed at Lydia and scowled as he stepped so close to her there was no mistaking his wrinkled brow and flared nostrils.

“What are you saying? You were spying on me?” Lydia pointed right back at Joseph and wanted very much to snarl at him.

“No, not spying on you, protecting you. Miss Underwood’s threats are beyond alarming and I cannot allow her to follow you around to gather more damaging evidence that might lead to your ruin.” Joseph’s expression softened as he gazed from Lydia’s eyes to her lips and back again.

Her muscles relaxed a bit as the citrusy scent still lingering on Joseph’s skin wafted up to delight her senses. The inviting smell of him instantly rekindled her desire to experience more lusty experimentation, which made it much harder to continue scolding him for whatever they were doing together behind a stable at night.

Certainly he doesn’t expect to continue our intimacies back here!

“My lord, I am grateful for your protection, I am. But I don’t understand how that has led to me standing here with the hem of my dress sinking into the muck.” As she cocked an eyebrow and waited for Joseph’s explanation, she realized who he might be talking about. “Wait, I saw Lord Triton and Miss Underwood talking privately at dinner. Is that the conversation you overheard?”

Joseph shook his head. “I wish that were the case, Lydia, but it’s far worse. And if

what I heard can be trusted, you will be able to see who I overheard through a vent at the other end of this stable, though I haven't dared yet to check."

Lydia looked past Joseph, then back at his face. "What do you mean? They are in the stable right now?"

Joseph nodded and winced. "I believe so. They planned to meet here at this hour. Prepare yourself for a scandalous view that will upset us both."

Lydia put her hands on his chest and pressed her cheek against the side of his face so her lips were close to his ear. "My lord, I don't know if you are teasing me but you are definitely frightening me. Please stop stalling and either tell me or show me whatever it is."

The viscount pulled Lydia's body against his for a moment and buried his nose in the long curls of dark hair floating against her neck. "I'm sorry, my lady, for what we are about to see."

Then he pulled back and took Lydia's hand. He guided her behind him along the back of the stable until they reached a point where a small vent protruded from the exterior wall. He held his index finger up to his mouth to remind her to be as quiet as possible as he slowly pulled both of them down into a crouching position at eye level with the vent.

Joseph peered through it first, then jerked his head back and winced again. He scooted to the left to give Lydia a better position and see what he had just witnessed through the wooden slats that led into a back stall.

Lydia locked eyes with Joseph for a few seconds before daring to peek into the stable. When she finally focused on the scene inside, she quickly let out a yelp and fell back on her bottom in the dirt.

Inside an otherwise empty stall full of fresh hay were her brother William and Oliver Penton's wife, Sophia, kissing and pawing at each other's bodies with the urgency of forbidden desire.

Chapter 18

“Joseph, we need to run! They heard me!” Lydia kept her voice down and scrambled to her feet. She turned to go back the way they’d come but Joseph pulled her into his chest instead.

As she had done earlier to him, he pressed his face against Lydia’s and whispered into her ear. “No, they haven’t heard us yet. But we have to stop them. That’s my brother’s wife!”

Lydia pulled away from his embrace. “Please don’t! I cannot have my brother knowing I saw what I saw! Please, Joseph. If we confront them tonight, they will have to face the kind of consequences that will ruin us all. What they’re doing isn’t so different than what transpired between the two of us, you know.”

Joseph scoffed and balled his hands into fists. “Did you not hear me the first time? That is Oliver’s wife. The situations are very different. Though you and I aren’t married yet, we’re also not married to other people! Your brother’s behavior is inexcusable and it is my duty to protect my family, including the woman who’s betraying my brother as we speak. So you may run away, but I cannot. I’m going in there to put a stop to it.”

He hesitated only a few seconds before he stomped past Lydia, tripped over the leg she suddenly outstretched in front of him, and tumbled hard to the ground.

It was a good thing his costume robe was long or his appendage would have been quickly exposed from his fall. Joseph’s anger reached the boiling point, but before he

could get back on his feet and confront her, Lydia lifted her head toward the heavens and called out like a black bird in distress.

“Ca-CAW! Ca-CAW!”

Joseph stared in disbelief as she crowed again and again, then leaned down over him and whispered, “I protect my family, too.”

Lydia leaped over Joseph’s body and ran away from the stables as quickly as her strong legs could carry her, leaving him on his back in the dirt.

Joseph was so shocked by her behavior that he stayed still for several more minutes, suddenly unsure of what to do. By the time he was finally back on his feet, he could hear the sounds of Sophia and William scurrying away in opposite directions through the dark.

Nearly a week went by before Lydia agreed to talk privately with Joseph again. He couldn’t believe she had crossed him like she did at the stables, then hid from him like a naughty child.

Joseph was even more shocked that he somehow managed to keep William and Sophia’s secret against his better judgment. But he wouldn’t keep it for long. And Lydia’s avoidance was more than he could bear.

He’d first tried to corner her in the ballroom the next day, but his mother had walked in shortly after he’d found Lydia standing alone among sorted piles of floral print fabrics, pristine white candles, and freshly painted flower pots ready for planting.

“Lydia, I have our flower list! Oh, hello, Joseph darling. You know better than to be

alone in a room with your fiancée. Run along, my dear. We have a ball to plan!”

Lydia had pulled her eyes away from Joseph and studied her hands as he’d sighed.

“Shall we see each other at tea this afternoon, Lady Lydia? I do love your company and cannot imagine going a day without it.” Joseph had barely hidden the sarcasm in his voice, but his mother hadn’t seemed to detect the bite in his words.

“Aww, isn’t that romantic? You are a lucky young woman, Lydia, to have a gentleman such as my son so smitten with you. But I’m afraid I will need your attention all afternoon. We will have tea together and continue our planning. Joseph, please walk our roads again with your father and brothers. I’d like to know how the road repair is going in order to plan the timing of my flower ball.” Lady Winstone offered her hand to her son and waited.

“Yes, Mama.” Joseph kissed the back of his mother’s soft hand that smelled of lavender soap, then turned to Lydia, who was still avoiding his eyes. “Good day, Lady Lydia. I hope we can speak again soon. Very soon.”

The following day, he’d elicited Bridget’s help in getting Lydia’s attention, but the maid had returned with very little in the way of a reply from his betrothed.

“She said she’s pondering the predicament, my lord, and to give her some time.” Bridget hunched her shoulders and fidgeted with her apron until Joseph excused her with a grunt that sounded closer to a growl.

Pondering the predicament? What is there to ponder exactly? Is she contemplating William and Sophia’s demise or is she reconsidering her arrangement with me?

Every day, he watched Lydia stay glued to his mother’s side and avoid him. And every day, he tried to ignore his nervous gut by joining the other men stranded at

Winstone House to inspect the slow-but-steady rebuild process, enjoy many games of cards, and share a successful hunt that brought more meat stores for their dwindling supply.

William and Sophia had both been conveniently absent from every group meal service and outing since the night of the orangery dinner. Joseph wondered if Lydia had already told her brother about their discovery and advised him to hide away in his quarters until further notice.

But there was no way of knowing anything his little nymph thought or said, apart from the occasional comment about floral arrangements he'd heard her give his mother in passing. And though Joseph had every right and inclination to take charge of the situation, he couldn't bring himself to find and confront the people taking advantage of his good graces.

Truth be told, he was worried about what would happen once William and Sophia were forced to answer for their actions. It also weighed heavily on him what it might do to his chances with Lydia if he made the first move to expose the affair.

Four days, then five passed while Joseph avoided Oliver, stewed about Lydia, and secretly hoped William Carter would dare to cross his path. However, Miss Underwood was very visible and kept showing up around corners, behind pillars, and often just a few paces behind Lydia and Lady Winstone as they walked through the hallways chatting about ballgowns.

As the week passed, Wilhelmina seemed to notice the rift between Joseph and Lydia, which turned her attention even stronger toward him.

And with Lydia ignoring him at every turn, Joseph found himself noticing more of Miss Underwood's attractive features and her seemingly endless selection of black and red dresses with ever-increasing views of her creamy cleavage.

Alluring or not, though, he still felt his skin crawl when Miss Underwood was near.

“You’re looking well, my lord. Too bad I’m the only one who’s noticed,” Wilhelmina said to Joseph one afternoon on the terrace as he sat alone with a cup of tea watching Lydia and his mother picking flowers in the gardens along with several maids at their disposal.

“Spare me the insincere compliments, Miss Underwood. I wish to avoid your evil musings today and every day beyond it.” Joseph slurped loudly from his teacup and glared at his least favorite of the women making his life difficult.

Wilhelmina spun her black parasol above her pretty head and flashed her prominent canines inside her wide smile. “As you wish, Lord Winstone. But don’t judge an evil woman until you’ve learned of her treasures. I am certain your treasures are worth every evil step I take to make them mine.”

Joseph choked on his tea as Miss Underwood blew him a covert kiss and walked away.

After taking a breath and dabbing the tea stains on his vest with his napkin, Joseph looked up and locked eyes with Lydia from where she stood across the garden, knee-deep in colorful blooms.

He raised an eyebrow at her as if to say, “Well, come talk to me, then, if you don’t want Wilhelmina breathing down my neck!” But Lydia just stood there with her mouth tightly shut until his mother’s voice a few paces behind her pulled her gaze away again.

On the morning of the sixth day, Winstone House was aflutter with gossip and

excitement as plates of freshly baked apricot scones were passed around the long breakfast tables in the dining hall. Not only was it the day of Countess Winstone's flower ball, but word spread quickly among the guests that the repaired bridge would be passable in just a few more days.

It was also the first time Sophia came out of hiding and joined her family for another meal. She sat next to Maria and said very little, though she didn't avoid eye contact with Joseph. When they shared a glance, Sophia smiled as if she had no idea that Joseph knew she'd strayed from her marriage with his fiancée's brother.

Maybe she didn't know what Joseph knew, but how was he to conduct himself with his sister-in-law in any way without learning what Lydia might have revealed?

I will force that nymph to talk to me today or she can sleep in the stables herself!

Joseph made his way to the library after breakfast, hoping to find Lydia nestled there with a book. But the only person browsing the shelves was Lord Triton, who was also the last person he'd seen in this room back on the day of the Athena-themed dinner.

"Lord Winstone, we meet again!" Lord Triton grinned and shook his hand. Always the proper gentleman, Triton was dressed in full vest and jacket while Joseph was rolling up his shirt sleeves in the warm room and wished he could take a long, refreshing dip in any spring anywhere.

"Yes, Lord Triton, it seems to be so. We are fellow reading enthusiasts, are we not?" Joseph scanned the room for other guests—one in particular—but he and Lord Triton were alone.

"We are indeed, my lord. Though my tastes run far more practical and political than most, I do enjoy an intriguing story now and then. How about you, Winstone?"

Joseph smiled at Lord Triton as he wished the man would just pick a book and leave already. He had his sights set on finding far feistier company, like a little nymph he'd love to throw over his knee to paddle her bare bottom with his bare hand.

Then spread her supple thighs and dine on her juicy nether lips until she begs for more.

"Winstone? Are you quite well? You've gone somewhere far away again."

Joseph looked up from the lounge chair he'd been staring blankly at to see Lord Triton gazing at him with a furrowed brow.

"Yes, Triton, I am perfectly well. In fact, would you care to join me for some cold lemonade on the balcony? I am tired from aimlessly searching for my fiancée in this endless house. And the heat in this room is stifling. I'd offer you something stronger, but since it's only half-ten in the morning, I think the lemonade is a better choice."

He winked and rang the bell for a footman before leading Lord Triton out to the balcony chairs.

Though he'd rather find Lydia than listen to Triton drone on about his mundane interests, Joseph felt the heaviness of the past week's happenings sink into his bones. He was losing so much sleep from worry, and from wrestling with strong bouts of anger toward William, Sophia, Miss Underwood, Lydia, and maybe even himself.

"Is that girl of yours hiding from you, Winstone? That takes me back. I can understand the challenges of romance from my own experiences. My wife was an unruly woman, just like Lady Lydia, until I set her straight, God rest her soul. Until she died in childbirth, we were happy as can be. As long as she behaved like a proper lady, which I will admit took some time and plenty of discipline with a leather strap!" Lord Triton chuckled from his chair on the balcony across from Joseph, where they

took in the sunny view of the landscape in front of Winstone House.

Joseph stared at Lord Triton with shock for a few seconds, then stood from his chair and stared down at his guest. A vein in his forehead throbbed as he tried to manage his contempt. “Are you quite serious, Triton? Do you mean to say that you beat your wife like a helpless animal simply because she had a fiery spirit like my Lydia?”

Lord Triton stood up quickly with widened eyes. He was clearly shocked by the younger man’s disrespect. “I did not say I beat my wife. I merely did what a gentleman has to do to keep his family in line.”

Joseph rolled his eyes. “That is hardly the behavior of a gentleman, sir. Any man who is violent with his family doesn’t deserve to have one.”

Lord Triton puffed out his chest as if to make himself seem more of an authority than his host. “What passed between my wife and I was right and lawful in society’s eyes, Winstone, so I suggest you keep your opinions cordial or entirely to yourself. The fact that you plan to yoke yourself to that Briarwood chit is your own cross to bear, but you might want to have a sturdy strap ready. She’ll need her first lashing on your wedding night, to be sure. A woman like that needs to be trained from the moment she puts on your ring.”

The two men glared at each other for a few intense seconds, but only because Joseph was deciding which method to use to take the other man down.

Lord Triton didn’t move a muscle until Joseph’s fist was close to making contact with his jaw. But he ducked just in time as Joseph’s hard swing met thin air, fiercely tipped his balance, and found him stumbling over the balcony yet again to land on his back in the boxwoods below.

“Maybe it’s you who needs more discipline, my lord. And don’t you ever speak to me

with such disrespect again,” Lord Triton practically snarled those words with his reddened face peeking over the balcony railing, then disappeared from Joseph’s view.

A much prettier voice called out to him and made him sigh with relief.

“My lord! Are you hurt! Bridget, please bring help!”

Joseph groaned as Lydia’s worried face appeared above his own.

“Joseph, please talk to me!”

She looked so pretty with the sunlight glowing behind her angelic-looking head. Joseph reached his hand up to stroke her cheek as the branches of the shrub beneath him dug into his spine. “You’re the one who isn’t talking, sweet nymph. It appears I had to wound myself in order to earn your attention again.”

Lydia giggled softly and quickly pressed her lips against Joseph’s before Bridget and two large footmen drew near. “Perhaps a man who would throw himself off the balcony to turn my head deserves a second chance. But I fear you’ll be a terrible companion for the ball tonight with all the limping and whimpering you will no doubt do.”

Joseph began to protest but was interrupted by help arriving at his side.

“My lord, we came as fast as we could! The footmen will carry you inside and assess your wounds.” Bridget Kelly joined Lydia in leaning over Joseph’s splayed body on the row of boxwoods and bit her lip. “Oh dear, that must be so painful! You look like a broken doll from my childhood!”

Joseph’s eyes flew wide open as Lydia pressed a hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh.

“I am quite well, Miss Kelly, and not broken like a doll. Gents, help me stand and I should be fine to walk on my own.” Joseph tried not to groan with pain again as the footmen hauled him out of the bushes and propped him up against a pillar.

“What happened, my lord, to find you in the boxwoods again? At least this time it wasn’t my fault.” Lydia smiled but her eyes were wide with worry.

“Oh, you might be surprised, Lady Lydia. You weren’t present but it was very much your fault. I was attempting to defend your honor.” He dismissed the footmen and brushed the debris from his clothes. “By the way, that’s the second time in a week that I’ve landed on my back because of you. I think that’s payment enough for whatever you’ve been punishing me for, is it not?”

Lydia leveled her bright green eyes at Joseph and sighed. “Perhaps we should talk. Bridget, I will see you in a few hours to prepare for the ball. Until then, I’ll make sure the viscount is safe from all slippery balconies.”

Bridget giggled, then curtsied and followed the footmen back into the house.

“Do you need medical assistance, my lord?” Lydia stepped closer but didn’t dare touch him in front of so many house windows and the occasional person walking the grounds.

“I need to be somewhere alone with you.” Joseph shaded his eyes from the midday sun with his hand and let his gaze roam Lydia’s body.

She and her family had lucked into much finer clothing this past week, no doubt because his fiancée had won his mother’s favor. The peach dress she had on today looked soft and easy to remove should a hungry viscount wish to savor her every hidden curve.

“I’m not going to change my mind about protecting my brother. So don’t ask me to.”
Lydia crossed her arms and frowned.

Joseph pulled his aching body away from the pillar and flinched when a wave of pain slid down his spine. “There’s a small lounge on the second floor where I am going to go rest. It’s the fifth door from the top of the stairs on the right, the one painted green. If you want to talk, meet me there in an hour.”

As he began hobbling toward the front door, Lydia followed behind him.

“But what if I can’t get away? What if the countess needs me for final preparations for the ball?”

Joseph didn’t look back at the young woman at his heels who had ignored him all week long. “Follow your heart, little nymph. And I will follow mine.”

Lydia bolted in front of him and stopped so that their chests bumped into each other. “What does that mean? A woman can have more interests and desires than just those that involve the pleasures of private... collaborations. I can plan a ball or walk the fields or help a farmer’s family survive and still be a passionate woman, can I not?”

Joseph leaned to one side to ease a stiff leg as he felt his shirt sticking to what was probably blood on his back. Yet, despite his new aches and pains, he was still mesmerized by the green-eyed nymph spouting gibberish that he didn’t understand.

“Lady Lydia, I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I would be more than happy to sit still and listen if you join me in the upstairs lounge. Either meet me there or don’t, but I need to get out of this sun and tend my wounds. Yes, be passionate. Have interests. But don’t expect me to understand them all before I’ve had a bath and a glass of port the size of England.”

Lydia's eyes shifted from dark emerald to kelly green as her mood instantly brightened. "Of course, my lord. Please take good care of yourself. I will try to be there."

She turned and walked quickly toward the house entrance as Joseph leaned over and rested his hands on his knees. He suddenly felt years older and completely confused about the direction of his future.

As he collected himself and walked haltingly back into the house, he wondered if he had been too hasty in deciding that he and Lydia were meant to be together. When she turned away from him just as he was falling so hard and so fast for her, her rejection found him questioning his instincts.

Maybe she would never feel for him the way he felt for her. And maybe he was a fool for thinking that finally there was a woman who made marriage a worthwhile endeavor.

Once upstairs again, Joseph greatly appreciated Benchley's help in bathing and dressing his new scrapes, some of which required extra salve and swallows of port. Then he dressed in a fresh tunic and dismissed his valet to rest with a blanket on the comfortable settee in his private lounge.

"Your trousers, my lord?" Benchley held up a pair of clean breeches, but Joseph waved him off and yawned.

"Throw them over the chair and let me sleep a while. I'll ring you when I'm ready to get dressed for the ball."

Benchley laid the pants across a wingback chair covered in fabric with dark green striped silk, then bowed as Joseph's eyes fluttered closed.

“As you wish, my lord. Please do not bleed on that settee. The countess would make me reupholster it myself.”

Joseph chuckled sleepily as Benchley extinguished the candles and exited the room.

He drifted quickly into fitful dreams of Lydia running away from him, then falling into a mineral spring and disappearing into its warm depths. He tried to save her, to pull her close and keep her from leaving him forever, but she was too hard to catch. She wanted her freedom so strongly that she was willing to choose death over a life by his side.

Joseph woke some time later with a start, disoriented and rattled from the dreams. He tossed his blanket aside and stared at the ceiling with worried eyes until he drifted in and out of consciousness again.

“My lord, are you moaning in pain? Let me help you ease it now.”

Her feminine whisper so close to his ear slowly pulled Joseph back from more troubling dreams into a vision of Lydia’s long glossy hair and ruby red lips getting closer and closer.

Wait... Lydia doesn’t have straight hair...

Joseph’s eyes flew open and he pushed up against the chest of the woman standing over him out of sheer fight or flight instincts. When his vision completely cleared, he realized he had just shoved Wilhelmina Underwood and made her tumble backward onto the floor.

“Miss Underwood! What the hell are you doing?” Joseph leaped from the settee and scurried to locate his blanket and wrap it around his waist. “Now you have gone too far, evil woman. You will leave this room at once!”

Wilhelmina pulled herself into a seated position on the floor, combed her fingers through her long, shining hair, and laughed. “Or you’ll do what, my lord? Call for rescue? Or will you throw me over your shoulder and carry me into the corridor looking like that?” She pointed at the blanket covering his upper legs and laughed again. “You and I both know there’s only one way to leave this room now. And that’s as my husband-to-be.”

Joseph glared at Wilhelmina as if daggers were about to fly from his eyes and pierce her heart. It was then that he noticed what she was wearing. Or what she wasn’t wearing, since she had disrobed down to a pair of lacy pantaloons and a revealing corset with no shift underneath.

“Get dressed. You’re making a fool of yourself and a fool of me.” He pointed at her pile of clothing by the door and turned to face the wall behind him to give her some privacy to clothe herself again. “Though why you want to marry me is very puzzling, Wilhelmina. You’re a wealthy, independent woman. You don’t need my family’s fortune when you have a healthy one of your own.”

He heard her rustling about behind him and wished he’d grabbed his trousers instead of the blanket. If he were dressed, he could storm out of the room and lock her inside until he knew how better to handle their situation.

“It’s not money I’m after, my lord. It’s the Winstone title I crave and deserve. I certainly deserve it more than Lydia Carter, for God’s sake. She inherited her status, but I am a woman without noble blood and I aim to earn some of my own. Even if I have to drain every ounce from your body to get it.”

Joseph swallowed hard and felt more rage pressing up from his chest. “There is nothing you could do to earn a Winstone title. I will make sure of that myself. Are you properly dressed now, Miss Underwood?”

Wilhelmina giggled behind Joseph's back. "I am almost ready, my lord. Just one more adjustment to make."

He sighed, feeling thankful that she was being cooperative, then felt the blanket he was loosely holding together around his waist suddenly yanked away from his body.

Joseph cursed and grabbed at his tunic, which thankfully still covered him down to mid-thigh. He angrily turned around to see Wilhelmina wrapped in the blanket but obviously naked underneath it from the sight of the extra clothes on the floor and her bare breasts barely covered by the cloth.

"You might as well give me the ring now, Lord Winstone. If you don't, I will scream for help and let everyone know how you seduced me. How you begged me to lie with you and show you what it feels like to be with a real woman instead of a dirty little nymph."

Wilhelmina's lips spread open into a wide grin, showing off her canine teeth as if she meant to truly take a bite out of him this time.

As Joseph opened his mouth to tell her she'd never measure up to his cherished little nymph, the nymph herself burst through the door and slammed it shut behind her.

"I have had enough! Back away from my fiancé or suffer the brunt of a dirty nymph's revenge, Wilhelmina! The only noble blood you will ever earn is the blood from my knuckles as they make your pretty mouth's acquaintance!"

Joseph and Wilhelmina both stared at Lydia with shocked eyes and mouths agape. Neither one of them said anything as Lydia scooped Miss Underwood's clothes into her arms and held them against her chest.

"Joseph, put on your breeches and leave us. I will see you at the ball, which begins

shortly so please make haste.”

“Lydia, I... I can explain all of this. Please know that nothing happened...” Joseph stammered, feeling helpless and exposed.

“I know, my lord. I heard everything through the door. It’s alright. Please leave us now. Miss Underwood and I need to have a private chat.” Lydia narrowed her eyes at Wilhelmina as the woman in her sights smirked in response.

“I’m not frightened of you, Lydia. I can still scream and end this whole thing now.” Wilhelmina tightened the blanket around her chest, keeping her eyes locked on Lydia’s.

Joseph turned toward the wall and pulled his trousers up his legs as quickly as possible, which wasn’t all that quickly due to his many aches and pains. He didn’t know whether to pull Lydia into his arms or marry her on the spot, but his certainty in his decision to marry her had returned in full force. His nymph was a true goddess and a powerful woman he could not let go of if he tried.

“Oh, you won’t scream, Miss Underwood. In fact, all of your wicked shenanigans shall now cease. Because we have something you don’t. We have another witness who knows the truth.”

Lydia smiled, shoved Wilhelmina’s clothes into her arms, then turned toward the side door of the lounge and called out their witness’s name.

“Benchley, could you come in here, please?”

The side door swung open and Joseph’s valet peeked his head inside. Benchley uttered a few tsks and looked Wilhelmina up and down with a frown. “Please do get dressed, Miss Underwood. The countess will have my head if we mercilessly shove

you into the hallway looking like that.”

Chapter 19

Lydia ran into her bedchamber in Winstone House, rang the bell on the wall for Bridget, and collapsed onto her back on the pretty linens bearing the Winstone crest in dark purple.

Luckily, Eleanor and Charlotte were somewhere else, probably flirting from the terrace with Lord Arlington's eligible grown sons who had caught their eyes this past week. Lydia laid still to catch her breath from the exhilaration of finally getting the upper hand with Wilhelmina Underwood. She was cautiously optimistic that they would have no more trouble where that awful woman was concerned.

After Joseph and Benchley left the lounge earlier, Lydia had thoroughly enjoyed speaking freely with the wicked wench about what would happen from that moment on.

"When the bridge is repaired, you will leave this place and never receive another invitation from either the Winstone or Briarwood houses. And you will never speak to or try to harm anyone in our families again. We will not destroy your standing in society unless you do not abide by our conditions, Wilhelmina. Is that understood?"

"Our conditions? Oh, Lady Lydia, you are so na?ve. The moment that bridge is repaired, we will both be banished from this house for good. But I've seen the way the viscount looks at me. It won't take me long to earn his interest again."

Wilhelmina boldly dropped the blanket that had been covering her nakedness and grinned as Lydia's eyes widened with astonishment.

“Cover yourself this instant, Miss Underwood!” Lydia looked away, but not before she scanned Wilhelmina’s stunning voluptuous body and felt pangs of jealousy fill her belly.

Has Joseph seen Miss Underwood naked? Does he desire her more than he does me? So many questions raced through Lydia’s mind as Wilhelmina finally got fully dressed again.

“Maybe a few years from now you would have become woman enough for a man like Joseph Penton, but you can’t possibly do for him what I could, Lydia. You are so inexperienced and far too uncivilized to satisfy the viscount for long. He’ll tire of you and seek me out eventually, mark my words. And when he does, I will gladly make your life a living hell with his blessing.” Wilhelmina pulled open the door that led into the hallway, but Lydia moved to stand in front of her to have the last word.

“Say what you will about me, but Joseph is far too smart and honorable to ever fall for your devious schemes. Or to ever fall for you!”

Lydia chewed her lip after saying that but stood her ground until Wilhelmina swerved around her and stomped away. Lydia waited a few minutes before sneaking back into the hallway and escaping to her bedchamber with new confidence and hope for the future.

Not that she knew for certain what her future had in store, but at least it wouldn’t include a rushed wedding to Joseph or ruining her family’s reputation at the hands of Wilhelmina Underwood. That woman wasn’t fool enough to risk her own standing with the ton to do the same to Lydia, she was sure of it.

Lydia and the viscount could now resume their courtship, should Joseph be willing to continue getting closer at a slower pace. The idea of a slowly unfolding courtship with him made her happy and filled her with great relief.

Still, she needed to know that Joseph would be the kind of partner who supported her passions and pursuits. That he would be more than just the man of the house and father to her children. She had no interest in a marriage where she was simply expected to do a man's bidding and have no interests of her own.

Lydia would rather be a spinster the rest of her life than be a mere prop in a gentleman's life story. She wanted a life that mattered of her own. And that life would include fighting for the rights of tenant farmers so that their lives were much improved under her watch.

As for the other troublesome man on her mind, Lydia would deal with her brother William in her own way and her own time regarding his relationship with Sophia Penton.

Though that might be easier said than done. The few times she'd exchanged glances with her brother over the past week, Lydia had quickly looked away, too embarrassed and confused to even be near him for long.

"Are you quite well, sister? You haven't spoken to me in days." William had appeared again the day before as Lydia walked through the halls of Winstone House with her arms full of freshly picked blooms for the ball's decor.

"It's difficult to speak to a man who's nowhere to be found, William. I have barely seen you in days."

He had studied Lydia's eyes then as if he was trying to decide if she knew something she shouldn't. "You're right, I'm sorry. I haven't felt my best and didn't want to spread a possible virus around our host's estate."

Lydia shifted her focus from William's lying face to the flowers in her arms and nodded. "Then I wish you well, brother. I need to get these blooms to the vases in the

ballroom before they wilt.”

“Yes, of course. Good day, sister.” William bowed and walked on.

“Good day, William.”

As Lydia remembered their exchange from the day before, she squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. Is that how our relationship will be now? Secrets and forced cordiality?

Her relationship with Sophia, if you could even call it one, had remained unchanged. The two women had seen each other a few times over the past week and exchanged greetings, but little more than that. However, they both seemed to gravitate lately toward a secluded area of the Winstone gardens where a small gazebo provided the perfect shelter for reading or, as in Sophia’s case, weeping, out from under the sun.

One afternoon when Lydia had been hiding from Joseph in the gazebo, Sophia came rushing through the dogwood trees with tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Oh, Lady Lydia! I’m sorry to interrupt your solitude.” Sophia had wiped her eyes and backed away. “Don’t pay me any attention; I am merely having an emotional spell as we ladies are prone to now and again.”

Lydia had watched silently as Sophia curtsied and walked back into the trees again. She couldn’t help but wonder if Sophia’s tears had anything to do with wishing she weren’t the wife of a Winstone anymore.

A light tapping on her bedchamber door interrupted Lydia’s thoughts and brought her back to the present.

“Is that you, Bridget?”

“Yes! I have your new gown, m’lady. It’s a beauty!”

Lydia hopped up from the bed and opened the door to find Bridget nearly buckling under the weight of the dresses for her and her sisters. She gave the maid some relief by pulling the gowns into her own arms to spread them out across the beds. Lydia knew immediately which dress was which, especially since she had helped Countess Winstone select the fabric.

Eleanor’s dress had a pale green print with daisies and white irises. Charlotte’s had a sky blue print with purple hydrangeas and bluebells. And Lydia’s was a lavender print with pink peonies and roses.

Every dress was made from modern floral prints that Lady Winstone had been saving for a special occasion. A ball with a floral theme was the perfect chance to drape the dramatic fabric along the ballroom walls and windows, plus have new gowns made for the Winstone and Briarwood ladies.

Lady Winstone still kept a small selection of the floral muslin in storage just in case she was blessed with granddaughters someday.

“It’s such a shame that we don’t have children running through these halls anymore. And none of my sons have provided me with any grandchildren yet. Maybe you will change that someday soon, my dear.” The Countess had suggested this when her four—yes, four!—resident seamstresses were helping Lydia and Lady Briarwood choose their dress fabric.

“My Lydia would be a wonderful mother, Lady Winstone, would she not?” Lydia’s mother had beamed at her, so full of pride that Lydia was in such good graces with one of the most influential women in Mayfair.

“She would indeed, Lady Briarwood. I predict she’ll have two boys and two girls!”

Lydia giggled while remembering those words from Lady Winstone as she and Bridget smoothed their hands over the silky fabric of the finished dresses.

Though she wanted to wait to get married until she and Joseph were more sure of each other, it was fun to imagine her children running through Winstone House as the countess called after them to slow down and behave.

“We are running late, my lady. And you are a host of the ball, so let’s get you ready!” Bridget led Lydia into the sitting room that opened into the dressing room and adjoined Lady Briarwood’s bedchamber. Lydia’s mother was already dressed and admiring her gown as one of Lady Winstone’s personal maids, Mary, assisted her.

“I dare say it’s been far from a hardship being sequestered at Winstone House for nearly a fortnight! It just keeps getting better and better, thanks to your engagement to the viscount. I do hope you are happy, Lydia. It fills me with joy to see you so well matched. This grand house will soon be your home!” Lady Briarwood clapped her hands together in celebration as Mary attempted to clasp a pearl bracelet around her wrist.

Lydia and Bridget giggled as Lady Briarwood stood still so her maid could finish with the jewelry. “I’m sorry, Mary! I’m just so excited that the Winstones and Briarwoods will soon be one big family!”

“Well, not too soon, Mama. I hardly know the viscount yet, of course. But he is proving to be a worthy companion thus far and I am grateful for that.”

“And a handsome one, too?” With her beautiful accessories in place, Lady Briarwood reached out to touch her daughter’s cheek as Lydia blushed.

“I will admit that Viscount Winstone is as handsome as they come. But he still has more of my tests to pass.” Lydia winked at her mother as Mary and Bridget broke into more giggles.

“Oh, Lydia! I never thought I would say this, but I will miss your bold sense of humor and proud determination. What will I do without you?” Lady Briarwood embraced her daughter, taking the lace-lined handkerchief Mary offered to dry her watery eyes. “Even Eleanor and Charlotte have suddenly charmed the likes of Lord Arlington’s twin boys! Is it possible that all three of my daughters will be married and gone by this time next year?”

Lydia frowned as her mother eased herself into a soft chair in the corner of the room and dabbed her teary eyes again. “Mama, we will not all leave you at once. Besides, we would be fools to rush into marriage when there are so many things we still need to accomplish before leaving our Briarwood home.”

Lady Briarwood blinked a few times and tipped her head to one side in confusion. “What could you possibly need to accomplish? I made sure that my daughters are quite accomplished, did I not? Eleanor is gifted with needlework and baking. Charlotte excels at the pianoforte and has such a lovely voice. And you, my darling, are perhaps the smartest and most reliable Briarwood of us all.”

As Bridget helped Lydia into her dress and fastened the buttons down her spine, Lydia silently chided herself for saying too much. Especially mere moments before attending a ball, her mother would not want to hear that Lydia planned to make a difference in their tenant farmers’ lives before having children.

“We are forever in your debt for our many accomplishments, Mama. I simply meant we’d want to make sure everyone at Briarwood was well taken care of before we traipsed off to start new lives.”

Her mother's eyes glistened with tears again. "You have a heart of gold, Lydia. I could not be more proud of you."

Lydia felt her own eyes tear up, too. Moving away from her mother would break her heart, so that was all the more reason to be sure of her future before it happened.

Though the first order of business was to somehow prevent William's transgressions from causing the fall of them all.

Chapter 20

“Good evening, Ladies and gentlemen. You all look wonderful tonight.” Joseph stood at the entrance at the ballroom with strict instructions from his mother to greet the guests until she and Lydia made their grand entrance together.

Though he was still dealing with discomfort from his latest fall, he didn’t have any serious injuries and was in good spirits. Lydia was finally speaking with him again and that helped him feel better already.

With any luck, she’d also be kissing him again. And stroking him again. And finally becoming his lover by joining with him as only lovers could do.

Until then, he was sincerely happy to welcome their guests into the ballroom for another event meant to help them all forget that they’d been stuck together in this house for far too long.

Next to approach the ballroom were Lydia’s sisters, Lady Charlotte and Lady Eleanor, accompanied by Lord Charles Arlington and his twin, Lord George Arlington. Joseph and the Arlington boys, both barons, had grown up together and were still good friends.

Charles had a prominent cowlick that made it easy to tell which identical twin was which, and he was probably the best chess player in the Cotswolds. George was a spectacular cellist who hated nature and had never met an insect that didn’t make him retreat with disgust.

“Good evening, Winstone! Care to finish our game later? I believe your rook is still in grave danger of capture.” Charles winked at Joseph as Eleanor tugged at his arm.

“Lord Arlington, you added your name to nearly every line of my dance card. How dare you plan to strand me for a chess board!” Eleanor’s scolding was playful and flirtatious, but Charles got the message.

“Ah, you are right, my lady! Winstone, perhaps we will meet in the game room tomorrow instead.” Charles patted Eleanor’s hand on his arm, then leaned closer to whisper something he wanted only Joseph to hear. “Though you might want to visit the game room this evening to check on your brothers. We passed there moments ago and Henry and Oliver were having a bit of a row.”

Joseph frowned. “Thank you, Charles. I’ll look into it.”

Despite his mother’s earlier instructions, he knew his top priorities. She would agree that making sure Oliver didn’t cause another scene at one of her parties had to come first.

After greeting a few more guests, Joseph walked quickly to the men’s game room where he found Henry but not Oliver. His youngest brother was doubled over in pain and cursing Oliver’s name.

“The bloody bastard hit me and ran.” Henry stood upright, pressed a hand against his left cheek bone, and groaned. “He’s as drunk as I’ve ever seen him, brother. There will be no keeping him quiet tonight unless he passes out soon.”

“What happened? He’s been doing much better since he and Sophia moved into separate rooms.” Joseph held his breath, worried that Henry would say that Oliver had found out about Sophia’s involvement with William Carter.

Though Joseph hadn't told a soul about it himself, he was certain Oliver wouldn't be able to keep it to himself if he'd discovered the affair.

"He came running through here with all manner of spirits on his breath, asking me the way to Parliament so he could obtain a divorce tonight. A divorce! Can you imagine? I told him to quit talking nonsense and go sleep it off, but he's quite mad from the drink. So mad that he swung at my face when I suggested that he set up separate homes for himself and Sophia then take a lover instead." Henry straightened his cravat and winced with pain.

Joseph clenched his jaw and shook his head. "Are you mad? What a terrible idea, Henry. No wonder he punched you! For all of Oliver's faults, I think he's right that getting out of his marriage might be the best course for all involved. But I'm certainly not going to tell him that moments before our mother's bloody ball! Where did he go?"

"Where he always goes when he's impossibly drunk and craves a captive audience—out to the stables." Henry pointed toward that side of the estate and pressed his hand over his cheekbone again.

"Put something cold on that cheek to keep the swelling down. And when you see our mother, tell her I'm off to save her ball from her middle son. Again."

Chapter 21

The Countess Winstone took Lydia's hand as they stood together at the front of the ballroom and admired the work they had done together to make this night so magical. There were fresh and magnificent blooms paired with ornate candelabras, plus the exquisite floral fabrics decorating the walls and windows.

Everyone was in high spirits, especially since they would all be going home soon. The night felt like a special way to mark the near end of their confinement together and move forward with lovely memories of Winstone hospitality.

"We make a good team, do we not, Lady Lydia? Though it was not your responsibility to do so, I was quite impressed by how much you helped the staff with bringing our plans for the event to life. I daresay it was fun to make our own floral arrangements and add edible blooms to our pretty little cakes! I believe you are quite ready to be a viscountess, my dear."

Lydia squeezed Lady Winstone's hand and felt sincere gratitude for her compliments. She was also surprised by how quickly their bond had grown this past week and by how much the countess had allowed her to be involved.

"I appreciate your guidance, my lady. I agree that it was fun working side-by-side with you."

The two women embraced, then walked hand-in-hand together to the refreshment tables for glasses of punch and to admire again the petal-topped cakes they'd designed.

“Mama, you have outdone yourself! This might be the finest ball you’ve ever hosted!” Henry complimented his mother at the table, where he and his wife Maria were already enjoying the sweets.

Lydia noticed Henry’s red and swollen cheek, and the countess did, too.

“Henry, what happened to your face? Are you quite well?” Lady Winstone reached out to touch her son’s cheek. “Tell me you did not walk right into the sconces hanging from the hallway walls again.”

Henry chuckled and shook his head. “No, Mama. It’s nothing to worry about. But I have been instructed to tell you that Joseph is... ah, tending to Oliver at the stables momentarily. However, I also have much better news to share. Maria and I do.” He and Maria exchanged a sweet smile, then looked back at Lady Winstone’s face as her eyes narrowed and her smile faded.

“Oh dear. What has Oliver done now? Henry, please go help Joseph and ensure that my ball doesn’t end with a misstep of scandalous behavior,” Lady Winstone whispered, then stuffed a tiny cake into her mouth and vigorously chewed it.

“Mama, please calm yourself. Joseph has it in hand. While we wait for his return, we’d like to announce that Maria is...” Henry stopped speaking when his mother put her palm in the air in front of his mouth as she swallowed her cake.

“Do not dismiss me, Henry. I will have nothing, including one of my sons, ruin my night. Whatever you and Maria have to say can wait until...until...” The countess looked down to see Maria smoothing her hand over her belly with a barely noticeable bump. “Oh! Oh my! Maria, are you with child?”

“I am, my lady.” Maria smiled as Henry hugged her from the side and beamed at his mother.

“Oh, that is wonderful news! I’m going to be a grandmother! I’m going to be a grandmother!” The countess hugged her son and daughter-in-law, then pulled them both along with her as she announced the happy news throughout the ballroom.

After congratulating the couple herself, Lydia watched them walk away with the countess. She seemed to have completely forgotten about Oliver and Joseph.

But those brothers were all Lydia could think about as she searched the ballroom for William and Sophia. What if they were also at the stables? If so, would there be a terrible altercation between Oliver and William?

Thankfully she spotted them both, each standing on opposite sides of the room. William was speaking with Lord Briarwood against one wall and Sophia was dancing in a ring with other ladies, including Lydia’s mother and sisters, near the opposite end.

It was the perfect time for Lydia to slip away and check on Joseph. Plus, if Oliver had found out about William, she wanted to know. She cared deeply for Joseph, but she could not let him or his brothers plot to harm anyone in her family, even if William deserved to pay for what he’s done.

If she and her family could just get home again before William and Sophia were found out, maybe all of their troubles could quietly disappear.

Without incident. Without scandal. And without hasty accusations that could ruin the future happiness of a husband and wife.

Lydia snuck into the main stable through a back door and held the hem of her new dress high above her ankles. Though she assumed the stable hands kept it as clean

possible, the smell permeating through the dark building said otherwise.

How William and Sophia felt comfortable being intimate in a place that smelled like that was beyond her. Horses were beautiful creatures, but they did not make even a building as spacious as this one smell good.

“Is anyone there? Lord Winstone?” Lydia hesitantly called out in the dark and tiptoed a few more steps forward, hoping not to step in anything that would ruin her slippers.

She silently scolded herself for suddenly caring about such things. Since when did she become a woman who planned balls and cared for the state of her shoes? Her time at Winstone House had made her almost unrecognizable to herself, including all the ways in which she and Joseph had gotten closer.

That beast from the spring had morphed so quickly into her pretend fiancé and sensuous playmate. Then he’d stolen her heart having done very little to earn it.

Except for his surprising intelligence and sharp wit, of course. And his endearing playfulness and undeniable charm. Plus, his handsome face and solid, masculine physique with an impressive appendage when compared to the size of a young lady’s stroking hand...

“Over here, m’lady!”

Lydia jumped and called out with fright. “Oh! You scared me! Is that you, my lord?”

“Yesssssss! Come find me, missssss! Then drag me to the river where I might drown from the sorrows of an unwanted man!”

Lydia released a heavy sigh as she recognized that the voice in the dark was not Joseph’s. She let go of her dress and put her hands on her hips. “Oliver Penton, is that

you?”

“Indeed, my lady! Are you an angel from above? Have you come to take me to your heavenly bed and make me whole again?” Oliver’s slurred words were followed by loud laughter and the sound of liquid sloshing in a bottle as it was undoubtedly tipped toward his mouth.

Lydia shivered and took several steps backward. A drunken man who was shouting such things to a lady was an instant threat to her safety and reputation, no matter his family name. She had to get out of there, and quickly.

“I am a friend of the family, sir! I will leave now and get you some assistance.”

“Don’t leave me, my guardian angel! You are my only hope of redemption and eternal bliss!”

It sounded like Oliver had started crawling in her direction when Lydia decided to quit stalling and run. In other circumstances, Oliver Penton was probably a fine gentleman with impeccable manners. But that night he sounded like a madman who had lost all sense of reality.

“Heavenly angel, come back!”

Tears sprang to Lydia’s eyes as panic took hold in her chest. She was so disoriented in the dark that she stumbled on her hem and fell to the dirt floor, then hopped back up again, gasping and desperately trying to find her way back to the stable door she’d entered shortly ago.

“I can hear you, my angel! Please do not run away! There is still hope for us, is there not? I have cared for you the best I could, my darling! But what is left of a man’s spirit his dreams are stolen away?”

Oliver kept crawling and hollering as Lydia felt her way along a row of stalls where a horse touched its nose to her hand. The unexpected feel of its wet nose made her scream and stumble again, but this time her hem caught on something sharp on the stall door and ripped her dress open as she fell.

“Lydia! Where are you?” A different and welcome masculine voice shouted from the opposite end of the stable and turned Lydia’s head as she struggled to pull herself up again.

“Joseph? I am here! Over here!”

Lydia’s heart soared as she turned to see the viscount holding a lantern above his head while he walked quickly toward her. As he got closer, he slowed to hang the lantern from a hook along the wall, then sped up again.

So focused on each other, neither Joseph or Lydia saw that Oliver had collapsed in the path between them, about five feet from where Lydia was sprawled in the dirt. Despite the light Joseph’s lantern provided, the stable was full of dark shadows that made it all too easy for the viscount to trip over his brother’s unconscious body and land right on top of Lydia.

When Lydia screamed again from the impact, she heard her parents calling her name from outside the stable and thought she must be hallucinating. But as Joseph moaned and crawled forward to remove his face from the tear in her dress, she saw more brightly-lit lanterns dancing like enormous fireflies through the stable door.

“Did I hurt you, little nymph? Are you alright?”

Joseph’s voice was close to her ear as she felt the weight of his body lift off her back. She turned her head to see him on his hands and knees above her, then shifted her gaze back to the dancing lanterns that were accompanied by gasps and angry shouts.

“What is the meaning of this, Joseph? What have you done to Lord Briarwood’s daughter?” Joseph’s father stood over his oldest son and pulled him up by the arm. “Explain yourself!”

Joseph groaned with pain as he struggled in his father’s grip to gain his feet again. Lydia knew it was his second fall of the day and his body must be all the worse for it.

When he was finally face to face with Lord Winstone, Joseph seemed to finally notice that his father wasn’t alone. The countess stood at his side with frightened eyes and a hand clasped over her mouth as Lydia’s parents raced into the stable behind her.

“Nothing happened, my lord. I tripped over Oliver and fell onto Lady Lydia. I was trying to protect her from your middle son’s drunken behavior.” Joseph reached down to Lydia to offer her his hand. “Let me help you up, my lady.”

“Unhand her, you rake! Was it so difficult to wait for your wedding night, Winstone? This is a disgrace!” Lord Briarwood swatted Joseph’s hand away and crouched over his daughter as Lydia watched the misunderstanding unfold from below.

“Papa, he’s telling the truth! I was running to get help for Oliver after I found him out here!” Lydia rolled over to try to cover herself but the rip in her skirt revealed much of her legs no matter which way she turned.

“Her dress is torn! Oh, my poor Lydia. She is compromised, my lord! What will we do?” Lady Briarwood dropped to the dirt floor and hid her exposed shift the best she could while pulling her into her arms.

Lydia, still dizzy from the fall and all the frights that came with it, held tightly to her mother’s arms and tried to get her to listen. “Mama, Joseph and I both fell down. I ripped my dress on the stall somehow. It’s not Joseph’s fault. It’s because of Oliver!”

Lydia pointed to where he had passed out and then started to choke from shock. Oliver was gone.

How is that even possible? Was he pretending to be unconscious and then slipped away in the chaos?

“My dear, you are delirious from the attack on your innocence. Please quiet yourself and do not worry. I’m sure Lord and Lady Winstone will do right by us.” Lady Briarwood looked up at Lady Winstone, who was still shaking in disbelief.

Then Lady Winstone looked from Lydia’s mother to her son and spoke in barely a whisper, “You will marry her immediately, Joseph.”

“You can bloody count on that, son! Your mother is right. You will marry this girl before her family leaves our home.” Lord Winstone shoved Joseph away from Lydia and her mother, then turned back to his wife. “Victoria, make the arrangements. Lord and Lady Briarwood, I am terribly sorry for my son’s actions. We will make this right, if you are agreeable to immediate nuptials in our home.”

Lord Briarwood shook Lord Winstone’s hand and nodded as Joseph made one more attempt to set the record straight.

“Lord Briarwood, please trust that I would never force myself on a woman and especially never on Lydia. What you think happened here did not happen. If you cannot trust me, please trust your daughter. We are telling the truth.”

Lydia watched as Joseph tried to keep his composure and make them understand, but it was no use. Every one of their parents looked back at him with disgust and anger and, if she was reading Lady Winstone’s pained expression correctly, shame.

“I have never been so disappointed in all my life, Joseph. But you can make amends

as a much better husband to Lydia than you were a fiancé. Please do us proud by becoming the upstanding gentleman we raised you to be.” Lady Winstone bent down to help Lydia and her mother rise to their feet and lead them out of the stable.

“Wait! Lady Winstone, please! Joseph did not hurt me. He did not take advantage of me. Why is no one listening to me!” Lydia wriggled out of her mother’s embrace and stood her ground until her father stepped in front of her and commanded her attention.

“What’s done is done, Lydia. No matter the circumstances, you were alone with the viscount in a compromising position. The two of you were already engaged, so this should not be an issue for you. We are simply having the wedding immediately to keep any rumors of scandal at bay. Do not protest any further. The decision has been made.” Lord Briarwood stared into Lydia’s eyes until she looked down at her feet.

“Yes, my lord,” she whispered, not daring to look up at Joseph’s face as her parents escorted her out of the stable. She kept her eyes focused down at her torn dress, regretting ever having left the ball as a favor to William.

By following the Winstone brothers, she’d accidentally brought on the one thing she and Joseph had originally gotten engaged in order to avoid. An arranged marriage.

Joseph had asked her to join him in the engagement ruse to thwart his mother’s attempts at marrying him off to someone at her ball. But that was exactly what had just taken place. He would be forced to make Lydia his bride before he knew whether he loved her.

Lydia felt so ashamed that she had caused that to happen to them both. But what she knew with complete certainty, as she followed her parents back into Winstone House in deafening silence, was that the man who had just defended her in the stable was the only man she could ever want. Ever love. Ever need by her side, even though she did

not know yet if they were truly compatible.

Unfortunately, they would no longer have time to find out before committing their lives to each other. She only hoped Joseph would find a way to at least forgive her if he could never love her after everything that had gone so terribly wrong.

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Chapter 22

Joseph and Lydia were separated immediately following the incident in the stable, and would not be allowed to see each other again until they were wed. The wedding was to take place in two days, when the bridge was opened again to allow the vicar to attend.

But there were two men who might not survive Joseph's wrath by then—his brother Oliver and William Carter.

“Is everything arranged?” Joseph asked Henry as the two brothers stood together in the art gallery in front of an enormous painting of Winstone House.

“Yes, brother. Are you sure you want to do this in here? Seems like a terrible place to knock some heads together for the fun of it.” Henry looked around at all the fragile fine art pieces and frowned.

“It's not for fun, brother. And we're meeting in here so as to avoid swinging at each other, since that's exactly what I want to do. It's self-preservation, you see. I want to kill them both with my bare hands, but I am told that murder puts a damper on a man's wedding plans.” Joseph scowled and checked his pocket watch. He was happy that this confrontation was finally about to happen, but that didn't mean he wanted it to last for any longer than necessary.

Oliver and William had to face each other. And they both have to answer to me for their actions.

William arrived first. When he saw Henry and Joseph standing together, he smiled and reached out his hand. “Congratulations, my lord. We are excited to join our families with your marriage to my sister.”

Joseph looked down at William’s hand and ignored it. “I have invited you here to have a talk with my brother.”

William raised an eyebrow and looked at Henry. “Is that so? Is there something we need to discuss before the nuptials?”

Joseph chuckled and crossed his arms. “Oh, there’s plenty to discuss. But Henry’s not the brother I meant. You are here to talk to Oliver.”

William’s eyes widened as he gulped. “Oh? May I ask what this is about?”

Henry patted him on the back and smiled. “Whatever you’re willing to confess, my lord. That’s what it’s about. But if you don’t reveal your secrets to Oliver, we will.”

Henry stepped back and clasped his hands together behind his back. Joseph nodded at his brother and did the same.

“It’s time, William. Oliver deserves the truth.” Joseph stared at him with an intensity that he hoped would express how serious he was that Carter’s confession had to happen.

His fierce glare was quickly interrupted by the arrival of another Penton family member, but it wasn’t Oliver. His wife, Sophia, had shown up instead.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen. Thank you for meeting me here today.” Sophia walked boldly up to where the three men stood and curtsied.

Joseph and Henry exchanged confused looks while William breathed a sigh of relief.

“Sophia, what are you talking about? We asked Oliver to meet us here,” Henry said.

“I know you did. But Oliver and I talked about it and agreed that I would speak for us both. There are things I want to say and things you need to know before you judge us so harshly. For example, did you know that William and I were courting when my father promised my hand to Oliver?”

Joseph’s brow furrowed. “I did not, but—”

“There is no protesting the fact, my lord. It was so. William and I had already confessed our love to each other. What’s worse is that William found out that I was promised to Oliver, a man I’d never even met, before my father had the decency to tell me. It was finally revealed when William asked for permission to marry me, you see. And do you know what Oliver thought of that arrangement back then, gentlemen?”

Henry and Joseph shook their heads but didn’t dare to interrupt Sophia. She spoke with more strength and command in her voice than either man had ever heard from her before.

“Your brother was as devastated about the arrangement as I was. Oliver had no idea that Lord Winstone had promised him to me. If the rumors are to be believed, our two fathers had made the marriage pact during a card game. A card game! Not only was I refused a marriage to the man I loved, but your brother wasn’t given a choice, either. His dreams of a love match were just as lost as my own. So hold your judgment and your tongues until you know the full story next time.”

Sophia gazed into William’s eyes, took a deep breath, and continued trying to help Joseph and Henry understand. “Oliver and I tried, we really did. But he soon turned

to drink to drown his unhappiness and I finally found my way back to love again. Improper or not, Oliver and I... and William... are all victims of a society that often does not allow us to choose our mates. And in this case, the men involved were just as trapped as I was. So I hope you will show all three of us some mercy and respect, for we have all been suffering from the decisions that others made for us long ago.”

Sophia reached for William’s hand and held it as she stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. Then she curtsied before the Winstone brothers and walked out of the art gallery with her head held high.

William watched her go with sad eyes as Joseph cleared his throat and tried to think of what to say in the awkward silence Sophia had left in her wake.

It was Henry who spoke first. “I believe an apology is in order, William. I’m sorry that I didn’t know about your history with Sophia...”

Joseph cleared his throat again and interrupted his brother. “History or not, you are having an affair with our brother’s wife. That is unacceptable and must stop. Surely you can see that there is no other option. Whether we like it or not, we are bound by society’s rules.”

William aimed his sad eyes at him and sighed. “Is that what you said to my sister when our parents gave her no choice but to marry you?”

Joseph clamped his mouth shut and felt his gut churn.

“Maybe take a long look in the mirror, my lord, before the cycle of trapping a woman in an unwanted marriage continues.” William Carter bowed to him and then made his exit.

Joseph stood in stunned silence as he watched Lydia’s brother leave the gallery.

Henry patted him on the back and tried to ease his mind.

“Don’t let that man get in your head, brother. You and Lydia care for each other. We have all witnessed it. Your marriage will be a loving one that you won’t regret, I can feel it in my bones.”

Joseph nodded and thanked Henry for his encouraging words.

“I hope you’re right, brother. I dearly hope you’re right.”

During the final night before his wedding, Joseph tossed and turned, afraid that William Carter’s words might be true.

Does Lydia feel trapped and unhappy about having to marry too soon? Were she given the chance, would she choose not to marry me at all?

He had to see her, but every request he made to speak with his fiancée was denied. Lydia’s sisters avoided him altogether and both sets of parents refused to hear his reasoning.

Joseph didn’t even know where Lydia’s new bedchamber was at Winstone House, but Henry had heard that the countess herself had moved Lydia to somewhere secret to stay until the wedding.

And he wasn’t allowed to take part his wedding plans. Everything was being arranged by his mother and Lady Briarwood very quickly for the simple ceremony.

So, Joseph suffered his thoughts alone when not pacing the halls and hoping to run into Lydia because of it.

Though the bridge had been operational for hours, many of the guests stayed to witness the Viscount Winstone's wedding to Lord Briarwood's daughter. And, thankfully, not a word had spread about the incident between Joseph and Lydia in the stable so the ton's respect for them all was still intact.

The only person in the family who wouldn't attend the wedding was Oliver, who had left for London that morning with two responsible male cousins as his companions to help keep him in line.

Oliver would stay in town for the next few months and start the process of petitioning Parliament for a divorce. It was a rare thing for couple to be allowed such an out, but wealthy noblemen were often made exceptions to many rules. Though Henry was against it at first, the family agreed that letting Oliver out of his marriage contract might be the only thing to save him from drinking his life away.

As Oliver had relayed it to Joseph, Sophia was the one who had encouraged her husband to seek help for alcoholism while in London. And to dare to believe he could find happiness someday with someone he truly loved.

When he'd embraced Oliver that morning before his departure, Joseph had been shocked by his brother's clear eyes and apologetic tone.

"I'm sorry again for everything, Joseph. When I woke up in that stable and saw you and Lydia crumpled in pain, I had a sudden desire to disappear as if I'd never existed at all. I crawled into one of the stalls and buried myself in the hay, and then wept silently as father did to you what he'd also done to me. He didn't let you choose. Marriage must be damned, Joseph. We should always be able to choose."

He pulled Joseph in for a long hug, then released him and offered a weak smile. "I've

been a sad and selfish fool, but I never meant you or Lydia any harm. I wish you the greatest happiness, I really do. But know that you have a choice, Joseph. And so should she.” Oliver looked away and wiped his misty eyes with the back of his hand.

Joseph felt his own eyes grow watery, especially knowing now what his brother had been through since the moment his choices had been taken away. And now he had the responsibility of making sure that didn’t happen to Lydia. He wasn’t sure how, but he had to find a way.

“Take good care of yourself, Oliver. We are here for you and look forward to your return.”

Hours after watching Oliver’s carriage disappear, Joseph was nearly ready to make his last walk to the orangery as a bachelor. As reported by Benchley, all the guests were already seated inside and waiting for the wedding to begin.

“I haven’t spoken to her in two days, Benchley. It’s not normal to marry a woman you’re not allowed to speak to until your wedding night. There are things we need to say.”

Joseph suspected that his valet knew what happened in the stable, though he would never admit it. Benchley loved to behave as if he didn’t care to meddle with aristocratic drama, but Joseph knew he secretly loved it and had his ways of knowing all.

“Oh, you’d be surprised, my lord. Many men go to the altar knowing very little about their bride-to-be.” Benchley used a long brush with soft brown bristles to remove tiny bits of lint from Joseph’s formal black jacket and waistcoat.

“Did you ever wish to get married, Benchley?” Joseph watched Benchley’s reflection in the mirror as the older man standing behind him considered the question.

“Honestly, my lord, the answer is no. I decided long ago to be married to my work and that is good enough for me.”

Joseph smiled. “So does that mean you’re married to the Winstones?”

“I’m afraid so. For all eternity. Though the countess will surely banish me from the household if I don’t get you to your wedding on time. Make haste, my lord. Your bride awaits.”

But Joseph wasn’t so sure that Benchley was right. He pictured Lydia with her hands bound and her eyes covered as her parents led her to the altar. His worry about her marrying him against her will was too much for him to bear.

He had to see her before she walked down that aisle, even if it meant causing a very public scandal to get it done.

“Benchley, we need a distraction to delay this wedding for a few hours. How convincing of an actor are you?”

Chapter 23

Lydia paced in front of her sitting room window as her mother and sisters tried to soothe her nerves. She was dressed in an exquisite white silk gown, but wearing it didn't make her feel special. It made her feel like a fraud.

How can I do this to Joseph when he has been so kind? So protective? So bloody wonderful to me and my family?

To trap him like this was inexcusable. But her heart wanted so much to soar today because the man she was being forced to marry was the man who had stolen her heart while she'd been trying so hard to deny it.

"The two of you are meant for each other, Lydia! There's no reason to feel so anxious. Please sit down. You'll ruin your hem." Lady Briarwood sighed and looked at her other daughters for help.

"Mama is right, Lydia. The viscount adores you! Yours is an excellent match and you are a beautiful bride." Charlotte followed Lydia through a few of her paces to try to give her a hug, then gave up. "You're burning a hole through the floorboards, sister. I swear all that pent-up energy in your body is why you're so outspoken!"

Charlotte giggled and peeked at Eleanor for validation, but she didn't get it. Eleanor frowned and signaled for her to stop talking by pinching her own lips shut.

"If I were truly outspoken, Charlotte, I would not be pacing a hole in these floors. An outspoken person would stand up for herself, would she not? She would demand to

Speak with her husband before he became one! She would tell her parents and society that whom she married and when was not up to them!” Lydia stopped pacing and glared at her mother, then softened her expression when it made her mother cry. “Oh, Mama. I know you’re trying to do what’s best for me. And that this was likely more father’s decision than yours. But please understand how much it hurts that you didn’t believe me or allow me time to court Joseph before marrying him. If I wanted to marry him.”

Lady Briarwood sniffled and nodded her head. “You are right, my dear. But we didn’t just make this decision for you. Someday you will understand the tough choices that parents are forced to make, as well. We had your siblings’ reputations to protect, as well as yours. We had our livelihood and our rank as peers to protect, along with your father and I protecting each other, too. We protect our family, Lydia. Of all the things we taught you, I had hoped that lesson was clear. Right or wrong, we protect our family from harm.”

Lydia dropped into a wingback chair and looked at her mother with new eyes. She had said the very same thing to Joseph behind the stables when she was protecting William in whatever way she could.

We protect our family.

Before this day was over, Joseph would be her family. And his happiness deserved as much protection as her own.

“Mama, I have to see Joseph. It cannot wait.” Lydia stood again and rushed to the door as her mother and sisters rose to follow her.

“Lydia, no! You can’t!” Lady Briarwood called out as Eleanor and Charlotte tried to block the door into the hallway. But as Eleanor slammed her body against it, the door swung open by the hands of a very strong young maid with fiery red hair.

“My apologies for the interruption! Ladies, there has been an outbreak in the kitchen from soured food. Our cooks, plus several maids and footmen, have gone ill. Lady Winstone is beside herself! It seems the wedding will need to be delayed until we have time to give care to the sick and replace them. And ensure all food is safe to eat, of course! If any of you ladies would have a mind to console Lady Winstone in her hour of need, I’m sure she would be most appreciative of the gesture.”

“Oh my! How terrible! Of course, Bridget. Eleanor, Charlotte, and I will console Lady Winstone and offer our help. Lydia, you stay in this room and do not leave it, do you understand? There is no reason for a bride in her wedding gown to be out among others until we have the matter at hand.”

Lydia’s mouth dropped open and she stood frozen in place as her mother and sisters rushed out of the room. “Wait! Who all is sick? Are you certain I shouldn’t go with you?”

“I’ll make sure Lady Lydia has everything she needs!” Bridget called after Lady Briarwood.

She quietly closed the sitting room door and turned to Lydia with a big grin on her face.

“You’re about to have a visitor, my lady. And he looks just as fancy as you do.” Bridget winked at Lydia and squeezed her hand.

“Bridget, what have you done? Are people really ill?” Lydia felt a sparkle of hope despite Bridget’s shocking news about the staff that may or may not be true. She knew that Bridget was referring to Joseph coming to talk to her and she was so excited to see him before the wedding that she nearly burst into tears.

“Let’s just say they’re going to be ill as long as we need them to be.” Bridget giggled,

then raced to answer the door at the sound of gentle knocking.

The happy maid opened the door and made her exit as the viscount walked through it. Joseph closed the door behind him and quietly walked to stand in front of Lydia in a beautiful top and tail coat the color of an eggplant's dark purple skin.

“My lady, I need to speak with you before we are wed. I need to know that you have a choice. That marrying me or not is your decision to make, no matter what society or our parents or even the vicar might have to say about it. I cannot, I will not, force you to marry me or feel something for me under any circumstances. And I would relish the chance to get to know you better. To learn about your interests and support them. To be the kind of husband you crave and deserve, if you'll give me the chance.”

Lydia felt tears spring to her eyes as her heart raced in her chest. “Oh, Joseph. Forgive me, I am elated but confused by those unexpected words. I thought that...”

“I'm sorry to interrupt, Lydia, but there is something else. I cannot go one more hour without telling you that I love you. That I am completely devoted to you and your happiness because of how happy you make me by just by being you. From the moment you stood boldly in your shift and scolded me from the banks of your favorite spring, I have loved your vexing and mesmerizing ways of driving me mad with excitement and desire. I understand if you believe that I loved you too quickly, but I absolutely did.

“From our very first day together, you showed me that love doesn't have to be caged by rules or traditional expectations. Love with you is spontaneous and unique and... experimental. And I also know now that loving you would make me wiser and more thoughtful, if you have it in your heart to let this love of mine grow.”

Lydia hugged herself and started crying hard from the viscount's incredible confession. She was overwhelmed and trying to breathe through her tears of shock

and joy.

“My lord, I am so honored and happy by those words from you. And I am struggling with how to respond, so please give me a moment to collect myself. I fear I will drown us both with these tears!”

Joseph pulled a fresh handkerchief from his breast pocket and gently smoothed it over her wet cheeks. Then he handed it to her and kissed her softly on the lips.

“You have all the time you need, my lady. But there is one more thing I need to say.”

He dipped his hand into his breast pocket once again and pulled from it a tiny velvet box the same color as his dark purple coat. Then he knelt on one knee in front of her and opened the box so Lydia could see the beautiful ring inside it, made of gold and a delicate circle of pearls.

“Will you marry me, little nymph? It doesn’t have to be today or a year from today. I will wait for you and I will love you no matter what you decide is the right course for you to take. But it is your decision, my love. I will respect and accept whatever choice you make.”

Lydia’s heart was bursting and her crying became uncontrollable as she dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around Joseph’s neck. He held her close and sat back onto the floor where he could rock her in his lap as she cried it out.

“Joseph, I love you, too! I cannot deny it any longer! The way you vex me and excite me and humor my every whim, it all makes you the only man I have ever wanted with such immediate intensity. And such lasting adoration. But I am afraid, my lord! I am afraid of what I might have to give up in order to be a wife. Will you truly support my interests? Allow me my passions? Will you talk to me and be my friend, in addition to our intimate discoveries? Because I need you to be that kind of husband

for me, Joseph. I need to be your partner, not just your wife.”

Holding tightly to his neck, Lydia dared not look into the viscount’s eyes yet for fear of having just disappointed him by asking for what she needed. And by telling the truth of how she felt about marriage to any man.

But she need not have worried, for Joseph’s embrace grew even stronger as he spoke to her in a soothing voice to alleviate her worried mind.

“Lydia, I am glad to know your fears so I can help to ease them. Yes, I can be that kind of husband for you. With you. For you are my dearest friend, my little nymph. And I look forward to learning from you as we grow old together and share in each other’s passions as often as possible. Even if it means I have to pose naked for your sketches every day from this day forward. It’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.” Joseph chuckled with his lips pressed into Lydia’s hair.

She giggled against his neck and then pulled back to see his face again. The tears streaming down Joseph’s own cheeks made hers start up again, but this time she was feeling stronger and more sure of what she wanted to do.

“Viscount Winstone, I would be honored to marry you,” she whispered, then caught a tear that dripped from his eyelashes onto her finger.

“Your answer is yes, my lady?” Joseph studied Lydia’s eyes as though trying to make sure that she was confident in her choice.

“My answer is yes. But I want to make a small change to our wedding plans.” Lydia stifled, then sat up straight in Joseph’s lap and smiled. She finally felt confident in asking for what she wanted and was deeply grateful for the man she loved who made that possible.

Joseph smiled back at her, then lifted her left hand and slid his engagement ring on her finger. “Whatever you want, little nymph. Tell me and I will make it so. Today and every day forevermore.”

Joseph and Lydia spent the next few hours making plans, while Benchley and Bridget led the other staff members in bringing their lie about the spread of illness to a manageable inconvenience everyone could work around.

When all the guests, including both families, had returned to the orangery for the wedding to finally start, Lydia and Joseph walked hand and hand to the altar to make a surprise announcement together.

“Honored family and friends, we are so grateful for your attendance for our nuptials today, but we have decided to postpone the ceremony.” Joseph’s words caused a series of gasps and chatter through the building, but he smiled and waited patiently for it to die down before continuing. “My bride has requested an extra week to make our special day something unique to our relationship, and I wholeheartedly agree with her choice.”

Lydia held her breath as Joseph stared down his father, who was seated in the front row of chairs facing the simple wedding altar consisting of two lit candelabras on each side of an arch decorated with beautiful blooms from the Winstone gardens.

Lord Winstone sighed and nodded, but Lydia’s father leaped to his feet.

“There is no good reason to delay my daughter’s wedding when an altar and guests have already been provided on this day, my lord. You could be married within minutes from now, so please do not let a young woman’s whims change all of our plans.”

Lord Briarwood was about to say something more, but his wife suddenly stood up next to him and spoke her mind.

“Please forgive my husband, Lord Winstone, for he seems to have forgotten what it is like to be young and a woman. Oh, wait! He isn’t a woman, so he should not speak for one with such blatant lack of respect for her desires, should he?” Lady Briarwood looked up into her husband’s eyes with a stiff smile that made Lydia fear for the row they might have in front of all of these people.

But Lord Briarwood followed the lead of Joseph’s father by sitting down again with a heavy sigh. He nodded for Lady Briarwood to proceed and said nothing more.

“You have our blessing for the delay, Viscount Winstone. What are your thoughts, Countess?” Lady Briarwood looked over at Lady Winstone, who was seated next to her own husband with a surprisingly sweet smile on her face.

“I would have to agree that the Viscountess Winstone deserves every moment she needs to have the wedding of her dreams.” Lady Winstone blew her son and Lydia a kiss, then patted her husband’s hand as he sighed heavily again. “Let’s turn our delayed wedding into the final engagement party! Orchestra, please play something happy as we celebrate our soon-to-be bride and groom!”

The musicians off to the left of the makeshift stage where the altar was placed immediately launched into a country dance, as the guests rose and created a dance floor by pulling chairs away from the center of the room.

Lydia couldn’t believe her eyes and ears as everyone in the orangery not only accepted her wishes but wanted to celebrate them, too. Joseph squeezed her hand and kissed her cheek as they stayed under the arch a few moments more.

“Are you certain that a week’s delay is enough time, my love? We have the rest of

our lives to plan every celebration, including this one. I don't want you to feel rushed because of these people." The viscount looked out over the dancing guests swinging in circles to a country dance and filling the orangery with laughter.

Lydia watched them with him and giggled at the sight of her loved ones dancing arm in arm, including a few brief moments between William and Sophia whose love affair was still a well-kept secret among those who mattered most.

"I am certain, my lord. Though you and I will take this week to learn more about each other, agreed? Including a visit to one of my favorite families who run a farm on the Briarwood estate."

Joseph tucked a loose curl behind Lydia's ear and smiled. "I look forward to that. As long as it means a naked dip in your spring before the day is done."

Lydia grinned and hugged the viscount as the music played on. She had a fun surprise in store for him on their real wedding day that could end exactly as he wished.

Chapter 24

Joseph watched Lydia and her sisters run like small children through the corridors of Briarwood House as if they'd been away from their beloved home for years. He was there because he'd helped the Carters enjoy an easier ride from Winstone House by offering an extra carriage for their comfort.

William and Joseph were still rather awkward with each other as the viscount wrestled with his feelings about William's secret affair. So the two men steered clear of each other for now and rode in different carriages.

Truth be told, Joseph simply wanted a chance to spend more time with Lydia. And she wanted him to visit her home before the wedding, since he had never been to Briarwood House before.

Where Winstone House had bright white walls and white marble everywhere, Briarwood House featured comforting earth tones and lots of natural wood. It felt much more like a country home than what he was used to, and he loved it. Joseph felt at ease in the new surroundings as Lydia, Eleanor, and Charlotte took him on a tour.

There was no art gallery at Briarwood, but the art collection throughout the house included wonderful landscape paintings and many bronze statues.

And the library was something to behold. It was twice the size of the one at Winstone House. Joseph could tell Lydia was proud of this room most of all.

Eleanor twirled in the library and then plopped down on an overstuffed wingback

chair. “This is where Lydia disappears to a hundred times a day, my lord. Or perhaps she never leaves it?”

Charlotte smiled and hugged Lydia from behind before sitting next to Eleanor in a matching chair. “Lydia’s best friends have always been books and I’ve finally grown to understand that. Books never make you wait for a ring.”

Eleanor rolled her eyes. “You and George have only been courting for a week, Charlotte! A man needs time to develop regard for a woman, does he not, Lord Winstone?”

Joseph leaned against the doorframe of the Briarwood library and grinned. “Some of us fall in love much quicker than others.” He winked at Lydia, who blushed and tried to change the subject.

“My sisters are being unusually kind to me this evening, my lord. And they are right. I have retreated to this room, and to these books, more often than not over the years. I will miss it when I no longer live here anymore.” Lydia sighed and ran a hand along one of the shelves.

Joseph’s smile faded as more worry crept into his mind about Lydia’s feelings about marriage. “Then we shall make sure you are here as often as you want. Would you like that?”

Lydia turned toward him again and smiled. “There will always be more books to buy or borrow, Lord Winstone. But there is only one you. That is what I want the most.”

He felt his heart pound and his loins stir as Lydia batted her long eyelashes at him. The sounds of her sisters groaning in response made him laugh.

“Please spare us the romantic swoons, Lydia! I’m going to die of jealousy right here

in this chair!” Charlotte pretended to whine as her eyes glistened with what looked like true happiness for her sister’s good fortune.

“Yes, we need to distract these two lovebirds. Let’s have a card game before dinner! Beware, my lord. The Carter sisters are ruthless at Commerce!”

After a few rounds of the gambling game and a hearty dinner with the Carter family, Joseph was settled into one of the guest rooms when someone knocked on the door. He got up slowly to answer it due to the scrapes and bruises still healing from his recent falls.

A footman held up a silver tray with a sealed letter on it. “This just arrived for you from Winstone House, my lord, by carriage.”

Joseph’s eyebrows knitted together as he studied the outside of the letter, but it didn’t give any clues as to who it might be from. “Thank you. Is the carriage still here?”

“I believe so, my lord.”

Joseph dismissed the footman and cracked the letter’s wax seal to read the brief message inside.

Viscount Winstone, we have a terrible problem that needs solving quickly!

I have come by carriage to speak with you, if that is possible.

Please meet me by the hidden pond in the Briarwood gardens tonight if you can get away!

– B.K.

Joseph yanked on his boots and dashed out of his bed chamber door. He raced down the main staircase of Briarwood House as quietly as possible, then told a footman where he was going in case Lydia needed him. But there was no time to wake her and ask if she wanted to come with him to meet Bridget. He would take care of whatever the maid needed and then ask one of the Briarwood maids to find her a comfortable place to sleep for the night.

As he sprinted past the carriage Miss Kelly had arrived in, Joseph wondered where the coachman who drove her had disappeared to. He was probably securing a place for the horses at Briarwood stables for the night, and perhaps a bed for himself, too. It was far too late to take an unescorted young lady all the way back to Winstone House.

In fact, it was far too late to bring her to the Briarwood home in the first place, but he would have that conversation with Bridget after he learned whatever was troubling her.

With instructions from a footman as to where he would find the pond, Joseph carried a lit lantern and made his way through the back gardens until he saw a footbridge. “Miss Kelly? Are you out here?”

Joseph waited a few seconds, then smiled when he heard the familiar call of an excited crow.

“Ca-CAW! Ca-CAW!”

He laughed despite his frustration and concern about Miss Kelly’s late visit. He followed the sound of her voice into a clearing by the pond and then stopped in his tracks.

It wasn’t Bridget making those crow sounds. It was Wilhelmina Underwood. And

standing next to her, holding a lantern of his own, was Lord Triton.

Miss Kelly was nowhere in sight.

“Good evening, Lord Winstone. And many happy returns on your pending nuptials. Though I do believe you’ll change your mind about marrying Lydia Carter once you learn what we’ve come to tell you. You remember Lord Triton, of course.” Wilhelmina was dressed again in all black, which made her pale skin under the moonlight seem like that of a ghost.

Or a very wicked witch.

Lord Triton scowled at Joseph in the lamplight. “He remembers me, alright. I’m the man who threw him off a balcony for speaking ill of my late wife.”

Joseph tried to keep calm as rage boiled through his bloodstream. “That’s not how I remember it, Triton. But I don’t expect truth to come from either of your mouths, so there’s no point in listening to whatever you came here to say. You will leave at once or I will awaken Lord Briarwood and have you thrown off his land.”

Lord Triton stepped forward with his free hand in a tight fist, but Miss Underwood stopped him by touching his arm.

“Andrew, wait. Tell the viscount what you know about Lydia.” Wilhelmina gazed up at Lord Triton with softer eyes than what she aimed at Joseph.

“Andrew? Are you and Lord Triton so close that you’re on a first-name basis, Miss Underwood? And if that’s the case, why keep trying to separate Lydia and me?” Joseph set the lantern down in the grass and folded his arms across his chest. “You do know that Miss Underwood has propositioned me more than once, right Andrew?”

“Enough!” Lord Triton shoved Wilhelmina behind him after grabbing the papers she held in her arms, then shook the pages in Joseph’s face. “Your little hellion fiancée has been supporting a radical farmers’ rights organization in secret. She has been spreading foul propaganda about the Lords of Parliament and their alleged ill-treatment of tenant farmers working their estates. We have proof in these documents that Lydia Carter is a menace to society and a traitor against England. What do you say to that, Winstone?”

Joseph ripped the pages from Lord Triton’s hand and threw them to the ground. “How dare you make such ludicrous accusations about my soon-to-be wife, Triton! I don’t care about your so-called proof, because I know Lydia’s heart and I trust her actions, whatever they may be. So, your plan to divide us has failed again. And I expected more from you, Triton. To fall for whatever Miss Underwood has promised you makes you a hopeless fool. But not even she deserves the kind of treatment you reserve for your mates, so I hope the two of you will part ways immediately and never trifle with either me or Lydia again.”

Joseph didn’t wait for the unwanted guests to protest or try to convince him why Wilhelmina would make a better wife than Lydia. Or that Lydia should be punished for her efforts to help tenant farmers—which, if true, made him love her all the more.

He leaned down and scooped up the lantern handle in one hand and the clipped pages in the other before sprinting back through the gardens toward Briarwood House.

As Lord Triton hollered that he would be filing a formal complaint against Lydia, Joseph ran as fast as he could in case the man came after him. When he got close to one of the doors behind the house, he ran right into a tiny redhead who suddenly appeared from the bushes.

Joseph and Bridget tumbled to the ground, but he managed to keep his lantern upright and undamaged.

“Miss Kelly! What the bloody hell are you doing here? Did you ride with Miss Underwood and Lord Triton?” Joseph pulled himself up off the ground with a loud groan, then helped Bridget to her feet.

“Heavens, no! I rode in the back of Mr. Phillip’s wagon. He’s one of the gardeners at Winstone House and offered to bring me here when I told him what Miss Underwood was planning. I heard them talking, my lord. They were saying terrible things about Lady Lydia and I could not let them get away with it!” Bridget dusted off her plain gray frock and tucked a loose red curl behind her ear.

“I fear there’s nothing you can do to help, Miss Kelly, but it does my heart good to know how loyal you have become to Lady Lydia so quickly. We are both very grateful to you for that.” Joseph brushed dirt and grass off his own clothes and sighed. “Just when I think things are settled, we have Miss Underwood and her merry men to deal with again.”

Bridget started giggling, then broke into a bout of loud laughter that carried on the breeze.

“Miss Kelly, what has gotten into you?” Joseph’s puzzled look shifted from Miss Kelly to a shadow approaching from the house.

Lydia tiptoed in her robe to where Joseph and Bridget were standing. “I’d like to know, as well! What is going on out here?”

Joseph opened his mouth to answer, but looking at Lydia made him speechless. His eyes roamed up from her bare feet to the silky dark hair that cascaded down her shoulders. Her robe was opened at the chest just enough for him to see the shape of her breasts through her nightdress and how hard her thick nipples had become in the chilly night air.

“My lord, are you listening to me? Do you care to explain what we’re all doing in the garden long after dark?” Lydia gazed at him above the light of the lantern with the sparkle of amusement in her eyes as Joseph moved his focus from her body to her face.

“I think I can speak for the viscount while he collects himself, my lady.” Bridget giggled again, then launched into a recap of what had happened as if she’d been watching from the bushes. And apparently, she had.

When she finished, Bridget took a deep breath as Lydia’s eyes widened with shock and fear.

“Bridget, you sneaky little spy. She’s right, Lydia. Miss Underwood and Lord Triton have teamed up and were here to expose you for helping tenant farmers by spreading lies about their treatment. I told them that couldn’t possibly be true and that I supported you. Is it true that you joined a tenants’ rights organization?”

Lydia bit her lip and shivered in her thin robe and nightgown. “Joseph, please, let me explain. They are manipulating the facts to serve their purpose! I was going to tell you about the tenant farmers I have wanted to help, but I did no such thing as spread lies about the Lords of England. I merely wanted to raise attention to the plight of the farmers who are barely surviving on our lands.

“They deserve our help! I just wanted to find out what others were doing to make things right. So I attended one meeting and hid in the back. That is all, I promise you. But you should know that I did intend to get more involved, and I’m not ashamed to admit that I still hope to do so in the future. I cannot stand by while people in our care are suffering! Could you?” Lydia reached out to take his hands, and he held fast to hers.

“Of course not, my love. Thank you for telling me and for being the kind of person

who cares so much. I will help in any way I can with that cause, but for now, my biggest concern is your safety. I don't know why Miss Underwood and Lord Triton want to destroy us, but they seem determined to take their lies to Parliament and accuse you of traitorous activities."

Before Lydia could respond, Bridget started giggling again. "Oh, I wouldn't worry about Miss Underwood and Lord Triton, my lord. We've got them right where we want them!"

Joseph and Lydia both raised their eyebrows and exchanged a confused look.

"Whatever could you mean, Bridget?" Lydia shivered in the night air and wrapped her robe more tightly around her body, much to Joseph's chagrin.

"As I believe I told you, Lady Lydia, my family has worked for the Winstones for many years. We have mastered the art of collecting more information than income. I have listened at more thresholds and windows over the past fortnight than you care to know about, I'm sure. You might even be shocked by how many secrets people revealed when I was standing right beside them! But that's because people tend to think of the help as inconsequential. They'd be very wrong."

Joseph shifted from one leg to the other as his body aches started growing in intensity again. "Miss Kelly, though I agree that our staff members deserve the utmost respect, please get the point. What do you know that we don't?"

Bridget's grin was so wide her pearly teeth practically glowed in the dark. "Just yesterday, after your announcement in the orangery, I overheard a whispered conversation between Miss Underwood and Lord Triton that was so scandalous it will finally put an end to your recent troubles! I learned that Miss Underwood has been Lord Triton's mistress for years, but he refuses to marry her because her bloodline lacks nobility. But there's more." Bridget giggled again, then continued. "Miss

Underwood is with child—and it's Lord Triton's baby! She was desperate to marry you, Lord Winstone, before her pregnancy started to show. It seems Lord Triton refuses to take responsibility for the child, but he agreed to help Miss Underwood secure a match that would transfer that responsibility to another man."

Lydia's mouth had dropped open in the middle of Bridget's speech and her face was still full of disbelief. "Upon my word, I almost feel sorry for Miss Underwood if all of that is true. Are you sure you heard them correctly, Bridget?"

"Completely certain, my lady. Miss Underwood and Lord Triton have been scheming together to make her a viscountess and never have to reveal their relationship. I suppose harming Lydia's reputation was going to be helpful, but I have a feeling that was more about Lord Triton wanting to get under Lord Winstone's skin."

Joseph sighed and scrubbed a hand through his sand-colored hair. "I think you're right, Miss Kelly. And you have earned your pay and a very large bonus tonight! I think I can speak for both of us when I say how much we appreciate you and your help. Though we're going to have a talk later about your eavesdropping at Winstone House, I, for one, will never underestimate you again!"

Lydia grew teary and pulled Bridget into a long embrace. "I agree, Bridget! What would we have done without you?"

"I am at your service, my lord and lady! Always." Bridget sniffled as she and Lydia pulled apart. Then her big blue eyes popped wide open as she gasped. "Wait! We still don't know who stole your satchel, my lady!"

Joseph held up the bundled pages in his hands and gave them a shake. "We do, actually. Miss Underwood is the culprit. I know that because she sent the satchel to me without its contents, but I believe we now have the contents right here. I've only glanced at these documents, but I did see a page of notes about your discoveries,

Lady Lydia.” He winked at his fiancée and tucked the pages under his arm.

“Oh, that is wonderful, my lord! But what if Miss Underwood made copies of all of those documents?” Lydia bit her lip again and frowned.

“Do not worry, love. When I send a letter to Lord Triton to reveal what we know of his relationship with Miss Underwood, he will be forced to let all of these accusations drop. And Miss Underwood will no longer have any further opportunities to take what is rightfully Lydia’s—my beastly heart.” Joseph reached for Lydia’s hands again and hoped she would feel his undying support through his touch.

Lydia giggled and gazed lovingly into his eyes as Bridget clapped with joy beside her.

“Your beastly heart has proved worthy of much more than I have given it credit for, my lord. And I am grateful for it.” Lydia winked at Joseph.

“And I am excited for our wedding soon, my lady, because there are many more experiments I have been wanting to conduct with you for far too long!”

Bridget tilted her head with her eyebrows knit close together. “Experiments?”

“Never you mind about that, Bridget. And the viscount can wait until after the wedding to teach me more about how things work in his... private world.”

Lydia grinned at Joseph as he slid the stack of pages from under his arm to cover his awakened groin. It had been an achingly long time since he and Lydia had shared the kind of intimacy that made his awkward appendage strain from stiffness in his breeches. How he would last until their wedding was more than his entire tingling body could comprehend.

The three of them began walking toward the house, where they needed to secure Bridget a room and they all needed a good night's rest.

“Where are you having the wedding, my lady?” Bridget asked as she held the door open for her mistress.

Joseph took Bridget's place holding the door and followed the women inside. “Yes, where are we having the wedding, love?”

Lydia turned around and smiled at them both. “We will be married where we met, of course! But I suggest you wear more than a tunic this time, my lord, or our days of outrunning scandal are far from over!”

Chapter 25

Lydia and Joseph's wedding was decorated only by the beautiful landscape around them at the Fairy Spring where they first met. Though nobody but the two of them knew the story of their meeting, their family and small number of guests could see why that lovely area was so special to the bride and groom.

All anyone knew about the significance of the location was that the spring was a magical hidden oasis and one of Lydia's favorite places to be.

Lydia planned her wedding herself and kept it simple. Everyone walked through the fields together from Briarwood House to the spring, where there was no altar other than the canopy provided by the trees. Lydia, her sisters, Sophia, and Maria carried wildflower bouquets tied with long green ribbons, while Lady Winstone and Lady Briarwood wore pretty flower crowns to honor them as mothers of the bride and groom.

Even the vicar seemed to enjoy the non-traditional ceremony. He happily married the couple in the beautiful clearing, surrounded by the trees and flowering bushes in bloom.

Lydia's simple, comfortable wedding dress was made of light green cotton. Joseph, Henry, and William wore white shirts with no jackets, and the viscount's tunic was the very same one he'd worn that fateful day he'd been caught swimming in Lydia's favorite spring.

When their wedding was complete, Joseph and Lydia raced each other into the water

as some of their guests followed suit.

Lord Briarwood and Lord Winstone stayed on the bank where they rolled their eyes and agreed that their families were perhaps the silliest in all of Cheltenham.

“Maybe even the entirety of England,” Lord Winstone mused.

Bridget Kelly was invited to the wedding, too, as were Briarwood tenant farmers John and Emma Musgrove, with their two young daughters. Lydia had introduced Bridget to the Musgroves and their girls over the past week and they had become immediate friends.

It was the same day that Lydia and Joseph visited the Musgroves for the first time together, as well. Joseph had listened as John explained his struggles with overused farmland, crop pests, and needing farm equipment updates that his income from low harvests couldn't yet support.

Then Joseph had spoken with William and Lord Briarwood about how their estates might work together to make change for the farmers in their care. The viscount stayed at Briarwood House all week, which helped greatly in building his relationship with the Carter men.

The new friendship between Joseph and William was still strained, but Lydia continued to encourage them to spend more time together. And she finally talked to William about Sophia one afternoon when Lydia and Joseph invited William to join them for tea.

“I support you, William. And though I think you take great risk by sneaking around to be with your love, it's not an unfamiliar experience.” Lydia had looked over at Joseph with a smile, who winked in response. “I hope you and Sophia can be together out in society someday, dear brother. Whatever we can do to help make that happen,

please know that we shall do it.”

Joseph had raised an eyebrow at his betrothed for offering to get involved with William’s romance. “We will?”

Lydia gave him a stern look and nodded. “Yes, my lord, we will.”

William chuckled at them both and took his sister’s hands in his own. “And I am eternally grateful for such an understanding sister, despite your choice in husbands.”

Joseph had laughed at that remark and the three of them vowed to keep William and Sophia’s secret intact until the time that they might be together for good.

After Joseph and Lydia’s wedding ceremony and an impromptu swim in the spring, everyone walked back to Briarwood House, drenched and ready to celebrate even more. Wet clothes were changed to dry ones and the wedding reception began in the gardens behind the house.

Lady Winstone and Lady Briarwood had outdone themselves in planning the reception. The many serving platters full of magnificent food included sweet cakes decorated with edible petals like those served at the Winstone flower ball.

After filling their bellies with incredible treats and dancing the evening away, Joseph and Lydia snuck out to the secluded pond together, each carrying a lantern to lead them through the deepening dark.

No longer able to keep their desire at bay, the newlyweds pressed together on the footbridge and danced slowly in each other’s arms to the music the orchestra near the house was still playing for their family and guests.

“Are you sorry that we had to wait, my lord?” Lydia pressed her lips to Joseph’s neck as they swayed.

“It was the perfect wedding at the perfect time and place, little nymph. I wouldn’t change it for the world.” He slid a hand into her hair and pulled away the pretty clip that held it behind her head. Then he lifted a handful of her silky strands up to his nose and breathed deeply of her lovely natural scent with hints of lavender and spring water.

“No, I meant that we had to wait for more private experimenting together.” Lydia let out a slow breath against Joseph’s shirt where his buttons were open at the top. She could see glimpses of his chest hair and ached to slide her fingers through it.

The viscount pulled his bride closer to his body so she could feel his heat and his arousal. “You, my love, are worth the wait. But if you make me wait another night longer, I will surely go mad with want for you.”

Lydia giggled and wrapped her arms around Joseph’s neck while matching the rhythm of her husband’s swaying hips with her own. “We should have brought my notes about kissing with us tonight. I fear it’s been so long I may have forgotten how.”

“You just kissed me at the spring today, my lady. And you did so very well.” Joseph placed a gentle kiss on her forehead, and then another on the tip of her nose.

“Oh, I’m not speaking of that kind of kiss, you handsome beast. The kissing I want to revisit is much more seductive and scandalous. It’s the kind where you put your hands on my bottom and slide your wet tongue between my parted lips. Remember that one?” Lydia combed her fingers through Joseph’s blond hair at the back of his head and enjoyed watching his hazel eyes darken with desire.

“You need to stop talking now, little nymph, and give that pretty mouth of yours to me.”

“For science, my lord?” Lydia laughed as Joseph reached his hands down to cup her backside and bring his warm face to hers.

“For us, my feisty viscountess.”

Joseph’s lips tasted like cake and cherry port as he kissed Lydia’s lips with slow-moving tenderness. But it wasn’t long before she could feel his need grow stronger and more urgent with every touch of their tongues.

He dragged his mouth down Lydia’s neck, placing wet kisses along her collarbone and her chest. Then he moved his hands from her bottom to cup her breasts through the fabric of her dress.

Lydia smoothed her hands over Joseph’s shoulders and moaned with pleasure. “Your awkward appendage is poking my wedding dress, my lord.” She playfully bit his earlobe before letting her fingers slide from his back to his chest and tug at his shirt buttons until they had all been opened one by one.

“Perhaps you should take your wedding dress off, my lady. My aching appendage craves full access to your luscious nether lips.” Joseph gently tugged Lydia’s bodice with one hand to release her left breast from the fabric with the other. He and his bride both moaned with pleasure as he kissed his way down Lydia’s pillowy flesh to lick and suckle her pink peak.

Lydia gasped and held tightly to Joseph’s arms as she watched his tongue circle her nipple, sending waves of euphoric feelings throughout her entire body, but most especially between legs.

“What, here? On the footbridge? I cannot disrobe where our wedding guests might see us.” Lydia’s whispering voice was raspy with arousal as her legs began to weaken and shake. She had never in her life felt anything so tantalizing as what her husband’s mouth was doing to such a sensitive point on her body.

The viscount released her breast from his wet lips and passionately kissed her on the mouth again. “Tell me where you would want your first lovemaking experience to happen, my love. And please lead us there as quickly as possible.”

Lydia tried to think of where she wanted to go while Joseph massaged her exposed nipple with his stroking fingers and pressed his face between her breasts to smell and kiss her skin.

“I change my mind, my lord. I cannot bear to wait any longer, either! I think there is only one solution to our predicament, which was perhaps the answer all along.” Lydia ran her hands through Joseph’s hair again and pulled his face back up to hers.

“Which is?” He hesitated only a moment before covering Lydia’s mouth with his one more time. He pressed his groin harder against her belly, which Lydia instinctively knew meant he needed her more than ever.

“Let me show you.” She pulled herself out of Joseph’s arms and walked off the footbridge to the bank of the pond. She kept her gaze locked with her husband’s surprised eyes as she pulled her wedding gown over her head and tossed it aside.

She kicked off her slippers and rolled down her stockings as Joseph scanned his eyes down her cream-colored shift. Without further hesitation, Lydia pulled her shift up over her head and stood fully naked in front of the viscount for the first time.

The lamplight danced across her skin as she stepped into the pond until the water reached her thighs. She scooped handfuls of it into her cupped palm and trickled the

water over her body like a nymph wooing her mate in the most sensuous of surroundings.

Joseph took slow steps toward the end of the footbridge, clearly mesmerized. As he watched Lydia sprinkle water on her breasts and her belly, he tugged off his tunic and unbuttoned his breeches.

“You are the most beautiful woman I have ever beheld, little nymph.” He reached the bank of the pond and kicked off his boots, his stockings, and slid his trousers down his toned legs.

As he stood in the moonlight with fire in his eyes, Lydia could see from the protrusion in Joseph’s pale cotton drawers how much he wanted her. And she couldn’t wait any longer to see his erect masculinity in all its glory.

“We need to finish our experiment, my lord. Please come to me.” Lydia held out her hand, water dripping from her outstretched arm.

Joseph hesitated only a few seconds more before he lowered his drawers and stood naked in front of his bride.

Lydia gasped at the sight of him and couldn’t help but stare with wildly hungry eyes at his stiffened sex. His magnificent appendage had far more presence than the few illustrations of a naked man’s body that she had seen. He had the appendage of a Greek god, or as a woman with her wild imagination would expect one to be.

She giggled as she thought of his silly names for such a stunning physical attribute. His “Winstone wood” looked as sturdy as the trunk of an oak, and just as exciting to climb.

“Oh my,” she whispered, as Joseph walked through the water and sloshed his way to

her side. “My Lord, you are breathtaking.”

Joseph smiled, then pulled Lydia into his arms and gave her another sensuous kiss. When he released her mouth again, he smiled and smoothed her long hair away from her face. “Normally we would be doing this lying down in a soft bed, my love. Your choice of a pond coupling has its challenges, but we’ve never been a traditional kind of couple, have we?”

Lydia grinned and returned her husband’s loving gaze as she dared to touch his engorged sex and stroke its thick tip. “No we have not, my lord. What do you suggest as the best approach to whatever comes next?”

The viscount breathed heavily from Lydia’s touch and visibly struggled to keep steady on his feet through the experience. Then he suddenly lifted her up, wrapped her legs around his waist, and gripped her backside to hold her in place against him.

Joseph buried his face between Lydia’s breasts again, kissed his way over to her thus far neglected nipple, and gave it a full minute of attention with his wet tongue.

Lydia pressed the swollen lips between her legs against Joseph’s belly and threw her head back to release a few feminine grunts toward the moon. She felt primal and wild in a way she could never have guessed was possible as the wife of a nobleman. And she was certain in that moment she never wanted this kind of primal play with her husband to end.

Joseph finally came up for air and responded to Lydia’s question about how they would proceed. “We improvise, my love. Hold on tightly to me while I slide inside you as a husband fills a wife. There might be a little pain since it’s your first time, but that will subside quickly. Are you ready for me, little nymph?”

Her eyes widened as Lydia realized she and Joseph’s bodies were about to become

one in a very surprising way. She was both frightened and excited, and fully trusted him to take care of her through the experience.

“I am ready,” she whispered, then wrapped her arms more tightly around Joseph’s neck and tightened the grip of her legs around his waist.

The viscount kissed Lydia’s lips again, then lifted her body slightly higher and dipped his sex into her soft opening. He and Lydia both gasped as he slowly pushed deeper until he was fully buried inside her warmth.

“Are you quite well, little nymph? Look at me, please.” Joseph stayed as still as possible until Lydia opened her eyes and nodded.

“Yes! Please don’t stop, Joseph. You feel so good.”

That was all he needed to hear. He focused on Lydia’s expressions as he slowly thrust between her legs, testing her comfort level little by little. When she opened her mouth to gasp with pleasure again and again, Joseph quickened his rhythm, pressing ever deeper with each pulse of his hips into hers.

All other distractions in the world fell away as Lydia felt herself soaring with feelings she never even knew were possible. For if she had, she would have demanded that Joseph take her just like that back when they met at her favorite spring.

Had she known then what she knew now, she wouldn’t have wasted even a minute before riding him like a steed until her insides burst into a million brightly lit sparkles as brilliant as fireworks in the night sky.

“Oh, Joseph! I’m flying, I’m flying!” Lydia laughed at her own choice of words, but she had no other way yet of describing how Joseph’s thrusting inside her was making her feel. She was flying and bursting and panting and grunting and riding the

exquisitely titillating friction into a vast sea of stars.

Her heart soared just as high, knowing that all of those feelings were intensified because of the love she and Joseph shared.

As she felt herself nearing a pinnacle of pleasure so intense she might not survive it, Lydia's gratitude for having attended that first bloody Winstone ball made her appreciate how things turned out even more.

The water below their bodies sloshed and splashed as Joseph bounced Lydia into heavenly oblivion. Then it was his turn to grunt and gasp, and sail on his own waves of pleasure that Lydia could feel happening inside her as he shuddered and released.

Joseph hugged Lydia close and whispered against the nape of her neck as his breathing began to slow again. "My love, you have no idea how incredible that felt for me. I love you and need you more than you could ever possibly understand. How are you feeling?"

Lydia kissed the top of Joseph's head and smiled. "I feel glorious, my lord. And I love you so much, too. When can we do that again?"

Joseph laughed and continued to hold her close as he eased their bodies toward the deeper center of the pond where they could cool off. "As often as you wish, little nymph. Though let's try it in a bed next time, so you have at least one traditional mating experience."

"If you insist, Viscount Winstone. Though don't expect me to be a traditional lover or a traditional wife!" Lydia grinned and laid back in the water with her legs still circled around Joseph's waist.

He slowly spun her around as she floated on the surface with her arms outstretched,

feeling light as a feather and changed for the better.

“I wouldn’t dare, little nymph. I expect there will be a lot more experimenting in our future. Though maybe keep your notes under lock and key next time?”

Lydia giggled and splashed her irresistible husband, then let him pull her back up to nestle against his chest as the water around their waists swished between their limbs.

“Good idea. Or maybe I’ll publish my findings so other women can benefit from my discoveries. Especially those unsuspecting women who fall for a beastly man like you.”

Joseph released another laugh on a long, bliss-filled breath and kissed Lydia’s cheek.

“There is no other beastly gentleman as lucky as me, little nymph. And there never will be.”

Lydia sighed and kissed her husband’s lips again and again. She couldn’t wait to prove him right for the rest of their lives, and in every spring they could find.

Epilogue

Eight months later

The first eight months married to his new viscountess were so full of activity and changes that Joseph's head was still spinning from it all. And their extended stay at the Winstone townhouse in London was one of the highlights.

He and Lydia shared the home for a few weeks with Oliver, who had already taken up residence in London months before. Thankfully, Oliver was much improved and in high spirits, despite having struggled through the process of divorcing Sophia.

But that was all finalized now. Oliver was a single man again and had also been sober for the last six months, which was the greatest achievement of all.

"He's a completely different man than the one I met at Winstone House. I'm so proud of your brother for working hard to change his life!" Lydia had commented to Joseph in private.

"Indeed. It's miraculous and a wonderful gift to have the version of my brother I loved the most back again. Let's hope he can stay strong and find true happiness."

The main reason for their visit to London was also pretty miraculous, because it was the first time a woman had been allowed to speak to the House of Parliament about tenant farmers' rights.

Joseph was immensely proud of her that day when she'd bravely stood in front of all

those frowning lords and pleaded her case.

“I don’t know how much good it did, but it’s a start.” Lydia’s confidence had weakened after her speech, but Joseph didn’t allow her to question herself for long.

“You are making a tremendous difference just by speaking out, my love. And I get to walk proudly next to the bravest nymph with the biggest heart there ever was.”

Back in Cheltenham, Lydia worked side by side with the countess on learning more about running Winstone House “better than a farmer ever could.” Those were the words the countess loved to use to tease her newest daughter-in-law, but Lady Winstone had grown very proud of Lydia for her passionate defense of farmers’ rights.

That passion paid off in promoting change for both the Briarwood and Winstone estates. Lord Briarwood granted Joseph and Emma Musgrove’s request for more land, even loaning them the money they needed for better equipment.

And it turned out that the farms on the countess’s estate did have magnificent gardens, as Lydia had suggested to Lady Winstone months before at tea. Lady Winstone was so inspired by that discovery that she started working through her staff to organize weekly farm stands where the Winstone tenant farmers could offer vegetables, fruits, and beautiful floral bouquets to the community for extra profit.

The countess herself soon became every farm stand’s best customer.

As the days wore on, William and Sophia dared to bring their love into the public eye more and more. With their family’s support, the couple began to attend events together, including another ball hosted by Lydia and Countess Winstone in honor of William asking Sophia to marry him again. After so many years of being denied the hand of the only woman he’d ever loved, it was a joyous occasion indeed.

Their wedding was held in the Winstone ballroom, followed by much dancing as another rainstorm pelted down. Luckily, the new bridge held steady. Everyone felt that was a sign of a steadfast marriage ahead for the newlyweds, too.

Henry and Maria brought their baby girl, Sarah, to the wedding. She was the happiest baby Lydia had ever known, and it made the day all the more special that little Sarah cooed and giggled throughout.

Lord Triton and Miss Underwood pulled back from public events after Joseph threatened to expose their affair and underhanded behavior if they ever bothered him and Lydia again.

The last he had heard, Wilhelmina spent her confinement in the country with her parents, who'd insisted that she separate from Triton and raise her baby at home. And the rumors that circled through the ton claimed that Triton agreed to send monthly support checks in exchange for never having to acknowledge the child as his own.

"Some men are truly horrid beasts, my lord. Thank you for not being one of them," Lydia said to her husband one evening between tantalizing kisses that took Joseph's breath away.

Their sensuous experimentations had continued with increasing boldness and creativity. The two often made love with lusty abandon in the gardens, the springs, the Winstone art gallery, and even on the balcony off the library where Joseph was much more careful about preventing another fall into the still-recovering boxwoods below.

On one such night alone together on the balcony, with her legs again wrapped around Joseph's waist, Lydia issued a new warning that made his mouth drop open.

"Be careful, my lord. Don't shake loose the tiny new Winstone we made." She

beamed at her husband as his eyes grew watery with joy.

“Lydia, are you certain?” Joseph eased her down to the white marble floor of the balcony below and placed his hands on Lydia’s cheeks.

“Confirmed by the doctor this morning! You will soon be a father, Viscount Winstone. How do you feel about that?”

Joseph wiped his eyes with the back of his hands, then kissed Lydia softly on her sweet lips. “I’m overjoyed, my love. And I am so glad for that day you caught me half-naked in a spring, little nymph. Because it has led me to the greatest happiness with you.” He smoothed his hand over Lydia’s belly and whispered, “How do you feel?”

The viscountess placed her hand over his and sighed with deep contentment. “I feel rapturously happy and content.. And very accomplished, too.”

Joseph smiled and pulled Lydia in for another long embrace. “Because of your work championing the farmers?”

Lydia slid her hands down her husband’s chest and rested them on the impressive bulge at his groin.

“Because I seem to have become quite good at learning how things work. Would you agree, my lord?”

Joseph threw his head back and laughed. “Without a doubt, little nymph!”

Lydia grinned and licked her lips, then tugged his tunic up over his head. “Good! Because I’m nowhere near done studying you yet.”

THE END

Chapter 1

Lady Tabitha's breath gave a small hitch, her pulse jumping as Cassius closed the door to the parlour. She reached behind and curled her fingers over the edge of an ornately carved rosewood table. Cassius, the Earl of Fatherton, strode towards her.

He cut a handsome figure framed only by the shadows and silvery moonlight streaming through the windows. She drank in the sight of him with her eyes—the golden curls that framed his handsome face, sly blue eyes, chiselled jaw ...

Her face grew hot. She forced an easy smile, trying to feign nonchalance despite the maelstrom of heat and excitement stirring in her chest. His body was a work of art. He had broad shoulders that tapered to a trim waist that most men would envy, and Tabitha knew that no padding was involved to achieve his impressive physique—not with this man.

“At last,” Cassius said. “I feared we would never be able to sneak away unnoticed.”

Tabitha's lips curved into a small smile. “So impatient. There have been only three dances thus far. The night is yet young.”

“Each song felt like an eternity to me,” Cassius replied.

“Really? So long?”

He placed a hand on each side of her and smiled. Cassius was near enough that she smelled his cologne. The soft, intoxicating scent of Bay Rum filled her senses with

every breath.

“You look so lovely tonight,” he continued. “When I saw you across the room—your blonde hair threaded with those little blue flowers and your white gown—I was certain that I was gazing on the goddess Aphrodite.”

Tabitha’s toes curled in her shoes. “And are you Ares come to greet me?”

“If you like,” he murmured. “I will be whoever brings you the most pleasure, My Lady.”

Cassius raised a hand, the gesture nearly reverent. He caressed the base of her neck, the feather-light touch sending lightning curving down the path of Tabitha’s spine. Her fingers tightened around the edge of the table. She heard the faint rustling of fabric as his pants brushed against her gown.

“I should like to kiss you,” he murmured, his breath coming in a hot puff of air against her neck.

“Please.”

Their lips met, and Tabitha wrapped her arms around Cassius’s neck. With a strong arm, Cassius ensnared her waist and pulled her flush against him. Tabitha moaned into his mouth, savouring the scent and feeling of him. “I love you,” he whispered, trailing kisses from her jaw to her throat. “I love you so much. You are perfect.”

“I am not perfect,” she replied, her protestation coming in a nearly breathless rasp. “You praise me too highly.”

He chuckled, his lips a hairsbreadth above her clavicle. “No, my praise is well-deserved,” he whispered. “I can scarcely wait to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“I know,” Tabitha whispered, curling her fingers in his hair. “I feel the same way. I have wanted a love match my entire life and am so lucky to have found you.”

She gazed earnestly at him with her soft, grey eyes. He kissed her jaw. “We are going to be married soon, so it is no sin to have a more amorous congress.”

The muscles in Tabitha’s stomach tightened. She should not agree to that. Even appearing together unchaperoned and in a darkened parlour was enough to ruin a young lady’s reputation. Kissing was more scandalous, but Tabitha was willing to chance a few stolen kisses in the dark. She and Cassius had snuck away several times.

They had yet to be caught, but to Tabitha, it seemed inevitable that someone would catch them in a compromising position. She should not have let Cassius take her into the dark and empty parlour. It was unwise.

However, Tabitha could not deny the fissure of excitement that she felt all the way in her core when she and Cassius had their dalliances. His presence was intoxicating, and Tabitha found herself drawn to him despite the danger her reputation might suffer. His hands settled on her waist, then drifted lower.

“Wait!” she gasped against his mouth.

His lips pressed against her shoulder, and Tabitha’s whole body went rigid at the feeling of his lips on her bare skin. “Why wait?” he murmured. “It is apparent that you enjoy my affections. I can bring you pleasure greater than any that you have ever before experienced.”

A lump lodged in Tabitha’s throat. She uncurled her fingers from the edge of the table and tried to slip around it. Cassius moved with her, his hands roaming over her back, her waist, her shoulders—

The back of her knees struck something hard, and Tabitha fell backwards onto a settee, but Cassius did not cease his hot kisses even then. He straddled her waist and kissed her throat. His fingers fumbled with the sleeves of her gown, and Tabitha's heart beat so fiercely that its echo reverberated inside her head. This was too much and too fast.

He pulled down the bodice of her gown, revealing her stays and chemise. Tabitha curled her fingers over his shoulders as he leaned over her. He was so large and strong, and his weight against her body felt right. But everything was muddled together, the war of whether to relent or resist waging violently in Tabitha's mind. At last, something within her seemed to break. She planted her palms against Cassius's chest and pushed him back.

"Wait!" she gasped. "We—we cannot do this. We will be married, but we are not wed yet."

Her chest heaved, and her breasts strained against her stays. Cool air rushed over her bare skin, warring with the heat building in her core.

"It will only be another week," Cassius said. "No one will ever need to know about this indiscretion. I love you so much, Tabitha, that I cannot bear to be apart from you for another minute. Trust me, and I will make you so happy tonight. And you will make me so happy. Is that not what you want?"

"Of course, it is." Her breath came in an uneven shudder of air. "More than anything, I want us both to be happy, but—but this ..."

She became aware of the hardness pressed against her stomach. Tabitha had heard of such things before. Although her maidenhood was still intact, she knew well what transpired between a husband and wife on their wedding night. It was an amorous congress.

Cassius lowered his head to her breasts, trailing hot kisses against her chest. Tabitha shook her head and twisted beneath him. “We must wait,” she said. “It pains me to say it, but we must. We—”

The door opened, and laughter and music flittered into the room. Tabitha froze, her body going rigid beneath Cassius. “Oh!”

Cassius sat upright, his legs straddling Tabitha’s waist. Her heartbeat quickened, and she hastened to bring some order to her appearance. Tabitha pulled at her dress, but Cassius’s weight kept the fabric pinned in place, making it difficult to push the sleeves onto her shoulders once again.

“What are you doing here?” Cassius asked, his voice ringing with authority.

Something fell to the ground, accompanied by a peal of anxious laughter. A man stumbled drunkenly, silhouetted against the wall. Tabitha wilted against the settee, trying to hide herself. The room was dark, with furniture between them and the door. Maybe their visitor would not see them.

But Cassius had just spoken. What if their unexpected visitor had recognized his voice?

Cold dread traced the path of Tabitha’s spine, her mind whirling with what would happen if she were recognized. Even if she and Cassius were a love match and intended to be wed, they were not married yet. They were not even engaged yet; Cassius had told her he wanted a long romantic courtship and a special proposal. There would be a scandal if the ton learned about what they were doing and had almost done.

“Is that you, Fatherton?”

The drunk man stumbled and fell into the table. He laughed sheepishly and held out his hands for balance.

“Leave!” Cassius snapped.

“Fine! Apologies for interrupting you! Have an enjoyable evening, Fatherton. Lady Victoria.”

Lady Victoria?

Tabitha frowned, her mind racing. She knew Lady Victoria—very distantly. The pair seldom spoke, but they had sometimes attended the same soirees and balls. Their drunken visitor stumbled from the room, shutting the door with far more force than necessary behind him. The sound reverberated through the room.

“Ashmont,” Cassius said, sounding vexed. “He always arrives at the worst moments.”

Tabitha shifted beneath Cassius, managing to free herself from beneath him. “Lady Victoria,” she said tightly. “Why would he assume that I am Lady Victoria?”

“Well, he was obviously just mistaken,” Cassius said.

Tabitha awkwardly managed to slip over the side of the settee. She stumbled to her feet and tried futilely to return some order to her gown. Cassius remained on the settee, staring at her with a startled expression.

“You are lying,” Tabitha said.

She was not normally so forward, but when those words left her mouth, she heard and believed the truth ringing in them. That drunken lord—Ashmont, Cassius had said—would have no reason to suspect that she was Lady Victoria unless Cassius and

Lady Victoria had been involved with one another.

“Why did he assume I was Lady Victoria?”

Cassius flashed her a bright smile. “My dearest Tabitha, he was a drunk man! I am surprised he even recognized me.”

Tabitha shook her head. She wanted to believe him. Desperately wanted to believe him. But when she searched her heart, she could not manage it. “No!” she exclaimed. “No, you—you are not being honest with me.”

The more she thought about the situation, the worse she felt. Had she not asked him to stop when he tried to disrobe her and let his hands roam over her body? Tabitha shivered, her mind racing with so many thoughts that she could scarcely identify them.

“I swear I am faithful to you,” Cassius said, “and only you. I love you more than I have ever loved any woman.”

“Except for Lady Victoria,” Tabitha said, “who—who your friend assumed you would be with.”

Had Cassius dishonoured that other young lady? Had they been nearing engagement?

“How long has it been since you last saw her? Did you do this with her?” Tabitha asked, her hand sweeping towards the settee.

Her face felt hot. Some small part of Tabitha wondered if she was a hypocrite. She had enjoyed sneaking around dark places with Cassius and had delighted in it even, but the thought that he might have engaged in such behaviour with another young lady made her feel as if her heart were shattered into a thousand pieces.

“No,” Cassius said. “I have not done anything like this with anyone. Why do you doubt me?”

Tabitha shook her head. A strange numbness settled over her. She still did not believe him. “I am sorry,” she said, “but I—I need to think.”

She bolted for the door, just as it opened. Tabitha drew in a sharp breath of air as she stared into her mother’s wide blue eyes. “Tabitha!” her mother exclaimed.

Tabitha halted, trapped and caught entirely unaware. “I—I can explain,” Tabitha stammered.

But how could she? Her mother had just found her in a dark room with Cassius, and although Tabitha had straightened her dress as best as she could, she still suspected that it looked a little as if she had been doing something untoward.

Cassius cleared his throat. “I can assure you that nothing disgraceful occurred, Lady Mayhew.”

“And I am sure you are aware of how this appears,” Tabitha’s mother said.

“Nothing happened,” Tabitha said quickly, her stomach lurching so violently that she feared she might be ill. “There is no need to tell anyone about what has transpired. This was all just a misunderstanding, was it not?”

Tabitha’s mother, Lady Mayhew, gazed at her daughter with an unreadable expression. “I suppose it was.”

Chapter 1

This room belonged to the Duke of Hillsburgh, meaning it was far too late for Tabitha to flee. For a blissful moment, though, she imagined it. She could rise to her feet, scream with reckless abandon, and run from this magnificent townhouse.

That would certainly be a scandal, likely resulting in both of her long-suffering parents sending her to the country for a very long time. Perhaps that would be preferable, but Tabitha knew she could not hide away forever. Ladies of her status could not lead a single life hidden from the world.

Tabitha fidgeted with her gloves, picking at a loose thread near her fingertip. It was unwise to pick at her gloves, but Tabitha supposed it was preferable to fidgeting with her nails. She had the most dreadful habit of picking at loose skin with her nails and picking and pulling until she made herself bleed. It was not a habit that suited a young lady at all.

But then, young ladies do not act as I do.

That disgraceful night with Cassius still burned like a fire within her. It seemed impossible that it had only been two weeks since that terrible event. Tabitha felt like those few minutes had changed her life forever.

Tabitha's mother sat on the settee beside her and placed a hand over her daughter's. "Tabby Cat," she said. "Calm yourself. You act as if you have never had a suitor before."

Tabitha winced. Her mother was right; Tabitha had many suitors before. Often, those visits began with her mother, her father, and herself seated in the parlour together and waiting.

Her most recent suitor had been Cassius, and even though she knew that she ought to detest him—for making her uncomfortable, for seemingly dishonouring another young woman, for lying, for not even offering to hasten their wedding after that night together to stave away further scandal, and for fleeing to the country the very next morning after that terrible night—she found that she could not. Tabitha was too kind or weak and could not determine which it was.

“I apologize, Mother,” Tabitha said. “You are right.”

“You must be on your best behaviour,” Lady Mayhew said, her voice softening with sympathy. “We need to please His Grace.”

“I know.”

Tabitha forced a smile. It would be practice for meeting His Grace. This mess was one of her own making. Even though no one had yet spoken about the terrible night, Lord and Lady Mayhew had both noted that Cassius could still say something and if he did, Tabitha’s reputation would be in tatters.

It was for the best that she wed quickly before Cassius told anyone. Once Tabitha was wed, she would not need to worry about how to find a husband, and it would matter significantly less what Cassius might say.

Still, it was humiliating being sold off to the highest bidder and forced into such a quick engagement with a stranger. It was impossible not to feel like an animal being sold at the market, even if the potential buyer was a duke with a large estate in the country, a townhouse in London, and the most tastefully furnished rooms she had

ever seen in her life.

She wondered if they were decorated to suit his tastes or those of his mother, the Dowager Duchess of Hillsburgh, who was said to be a woman with impeccable aesthetic tastes.

“Well,” Lord Mayhew, her father, said. “You do still have the chance to refuse him.”

Tabitha glanced at her father. He said that. Perhaps he even meant it. Still, Tabitha knew that there were risks to remaining unwed, and she did not foresee Cassius doing the honourable thing and marrying her. She did not know she would accept such a proposal even if he had been willing. He had claimed that he loved her more than any other woman and had never felt such strong affection for anyone else, and yet when found in the parlour with her, it was not she who was his expected companion, but Lady Victoria.

“His Grace is a respectable suitor,” Lady Mayhew said.

“Indeed,” Lord Mayhew replied, casting his wife a stern look over Tabitha’s head. “However, it is also said that he is a cold man, and Tabitha has always desired a love match.”

That night with Cassius seemed to loom silently between them, and Tabitha saw a silent war of wills in her parents’ gazes. Tabitha suspected that her indiscretion with Cassius had resulted in a quarrel between them.

“Perhaps the duke will prove to be a love match,” Lady Mayhew said. “Ours was an arranged marriage, if you have forgotten.”

“I have not.”

“And we are both happy with one another,” Lady Mayhew continued. “Who is to say that our Tabby Cat will not also find happiness with His Grace? Besides, His Grace has reason to be cold. I am certain that any man would be made a little jaded by the loss of both his wife and daughter. I heard he was terribly distraught by their disappearance.”

Tabitha had only been a girl of eight when the Duke of Hillsburgh’s wife and daughter disappeared. She vaguely remembered the rumours, though, of the distraught duke. The ton suspected that the Duchess of Hillsburgh and their daughter had been abducted to extort ransoms from

His Grace, but the ransoms never arrived. After two years, the Duchess of Hillsburgh and her young daughter were declared dead. Since then, His Grace had become a recluse. He seldom left his estate and never attended the ton’s functions.

He was still a duke, though, and had a duty to produce an heir. Rumours had swirled that he might consider a marriage of convenience to obtain an heir, and while Tabitha had not expected that he would choose her, she found the prospect of marrying him beneficial enough to try. With a cold and reclusive man, there was no danger of her falling in love with him or developing feelings for him. She would never make another error like she had with Cassius.

“I am confident this will be a good match,” Tabitha said. “I am honoured that he would extend such an honour to me, given how many beautiful women there are in the ton.”

Women like Lady Victoria. A mingling of anger and despair swept over Tabitha when she thought of the other woman, and a small part of her knew that her fury was misplaced. Lady Victoria had likely only done as Tabitha had; she had fallen in love with Cassius, a charming and handsome man. Still, Tabitha could not deny that thoughts of Lady Victoria—with her doe-like brown eyes and thick, dark

curls—inspired the worst feelings within her.

The parlour maid entered the room and curtsied. “The Dowager Duchess of Hillsburgh.”

Tabitha straightened her spine. Her Grace had arrived, but what of the duke?

She and her parents stood, exchanging the proper pleasantries as the Dowager Duchess of Hillsburgh entered. She was a stately, severe-looking woman with sharp, aristocratic features emphasized by her grey hair, always pulled tightly back. She wore a fashionable green gown, which Tabitha gazed at admiringly.

“It has been some time since we last spoke,” Her Grace said, smiling at Lady Mayhew. “I am so glad for your visit today.”

She said that as if they were merely making a polite, cursory visit and not as if Tabitha’s entire future was to be decided for her. Well, not entirely decided for her. It was not as if Tabitha were unable to refuse. She could, but she was too aware of the potential consequences of rejecting the Duke of Hillsburgh.

“Indeed,” Tabitha’s mother replied, “although I always appreciate our correspondence. I have the deepest appreciation for a well-crafted letter.”

The Dowager Duchess of Hillsburgh’s expression brightened. It was known to everyone that Her Grace was of a literary inclination and took great pride in her penmanship and elegant phrases. Tabitha had heard that the Dowager Duchess of Hillsburgh agonized over every choice of wording; she never used a careless phrase or awkwardly placed word.

The woman’s sharp eyes turned towards Tabitha, who felt warmth flood her face. Although she was a well-bred lady and had been taught how to manage a household,

having this stately and proper woman gaze at her with such a critical expression was still intimidating. At last, something in Her Grace's gaze seemed to soften. "And this is the lovely Lady Tabitha."

Tabitha curtsied. "Your Grace."

They seated themselves—Tabitha between her parents and the Dowager Duchess of Hillsburgh opposite them. There was enough room for His Grace to seat himself beside his mother if he ever arrived. Tabitha resisted the urge to fidget with her gloves. Surely, he would be present here. They were to discuss his marriage, after all.

This was their first meeting before the wedding, and surely, His Grace did not intend to miss it. Tabitha thought about asking where he was but felt that would be impolite. After all, this was His Grace's townhouse, and he would join them when it pleased him.

"It has been some time since we hosted a ball," the Dowager Duchess said. "I must tell you that I have delighted in making all the arrangements."

"I am most glad," Lady Mayhew said. "Do inform me if you desire any assistance, Your Grace. I would be delighted to help your efforts, and I am sure my dear Tabitha would, also."

It was just a ball; at least, that was what the ton believed. Tabitha knew that if this meeting went well, though, that ball would be the occasion when His Grace announced their engagement to all of London.

Her heartbeat quickened at the thought. She wondered if Cassius would be in attendance and if so, how he would receive the news. Would he be regretful? Betrayed? Tabitha forced down the lump in her throat, her grey eyes darting towards the doorway. The Duke of Hillsburgh had yet to arrive.

What if he had changed his mind on the matter and decided that she was an unacceptable bride? Surely, that could not be so, or the Dowager Duchess would not spend her evening speaking to them as if everything were fine. She was a gracious woman and surely would have informed them very politely that His Grace had decided to forego the engagement after all.

“I believe I have the ball well-handled,” the Dowager Duchess replied, “but if I decide that I have not, I shall certainly tell you.”

Tabitha, whose eyes were on the door, saw His Grace before he even entered the room. He was an impressive, towering figure with broad shoulders and a narrow waist. Black curls of hair framed his temples, and his eyes were the green of springtime.

He was devastatingly handsome, dashing, and fit, which was especially impressive given his age. She knew he must be nearing forty, but Tabitha had always appreciated older men. They were wise and better-mannered than those young rakehells that comprised much of the ton.

As he entered, they rose. Tabitha’s heart hammered against her ribs; he was as handsome as Cassius, if not more so. She had assumed that the reclusive Duke of Hillsburgh might appear like a hermit, like a medieval illustration of a madman living in the woods, but he was certainly the opposite. She stepped forward in greeting and stumbled over the hem of her gown. A hot flush spread across her face as he took her hand and kissed her knuckles. His eyes never left her face, and Tabitha knew a mortifying flush must have spread across her countenance.

“Your Grace,” she said, her voice wavering beneath his intense stare.

She had never seen such green eyes in her entire life. They gave him a vaguely cat-like appearance, and she felt as if she were being scrutinized. It was as if His Grace

could see all the way down to her soul, and she had a sneaking, dreadful suspicion that he found her profoundly lacking.

Chapter 2

Matthew, the Duke of Hillsburgh, was hiding. Of course, if anyone had asked if he were hiding, he would have denied it. He would have claimed he was merely allowing his guests time to acquaint themselves with his mother, who loved company so dearly.

If he were to marry Lady Tabitha, a chit nearly twenty years younger than him, it would surely be worthwhile to allow his future bride and mother some time to become better acquainted. If Matthew were being honest with himself, which he was not inclined to do at the moment, he would admit that he was hiding.

“Matthew.” His mother’s stern voice came from the doorway, and he raised his head. “I am going to greet our guests.”

Why are you seated at your desk, acting as if you do not know they are in our parlour at this very moment? That question remained unspoken in the air, but Matthew nonetheless heard the sentiment of it.

“I will be down shortly,” he said. “I am merely finishing this correspondence. Regrettably, the matter is quite urgent.”

He gestured towards the letter on his desk. In truth, he was not answering any correspondence. Instead, he was looking over some letters that he had received from Jonathan Howell, a former Bow Street runner and an especially talented purveyor of information who had been willing to travel abroad for a rather sizable sum. At present, he was in France.

“Surely, it can wait until our guests have left,” his mother said, frowning.

“I wish, but I do fear time is truly of the essence.”

She did not look as though she believed him, and Matthew supposed that he could not be vexed by her doubts. Although he had agreed to entertain the idea of this arrangement, he had also not given the impression that he was especially excited about the prospect of marrying another woman.

“I shall entertain our guests until you are available, then.”

“I shall be down shortly.”

“Indeed,” his mother replied. “If you are not, I may have to give them a tour of your lovely townhouse. I am told that Lady Tabitha is a great admirer of books, and I am certain she would enjoy seeing the volumes in your study.”

Matthew arched an eyebrow, his eyes sweeping towards the volumes. “Most of them are Greek and Latin. I doubt Lady Tabitha would be able to read them.”

“Who could say? I am told that she has the mind of a scholar. Lord and Lady Mayhew evidently spared no expense in procuring Lady Tabitha all the most learned tutors they could find.”

Matthew hummed. Tutors? He would have expected Lady Tabitha to have a governess and nothing more than that.

“But even if she cannot, you must have something of interest in this room,” the Dowager Duchess said, the threat evident in her voice.

If Matthew did not join his guests promptly enough, she would bring them to him. Still, he refused to be cowed by his mother, especially after he had already generously

agreed to entertain her idea of an engagement. No one could fault him for being a little vexing, given the circumstances.

“I do have a fascinating set of legal texts,” he drawled.

“I shall see you shortly,” his mother said.

She turned on her heel and left. For a long moment, Matthew watched the door. Only when he was certain that she had truly left and had not paused just out of sight, trying to conspire some other means by which she might persuade him to greet their guests in a timelier manner, did he let some of the tension leave his tired muscles.

He had hoped this letter would have the answers he needed and the justification to end this engagement with Lady Tabitha. Howell was frustratingly vague, but to be fair, it was hard to be detailed when there were no facts to find. Matthew clenched his jaw and scowled at the missive as if he could make the words produce more desirable information with the force of his glare. Predictably, he could not.

He cast the letter aside, his mood as dark as a storm cloud. It would be unwise to answer Howell when he was in such a foul mood, especially given that the man was surely doing his best. Matthew reluctantly rose, feeling his impending engagement like a physical weight placed on his shoulders. Doubtlessly, Lady Tabitha would be some overly eager, lovely creature who only wished to wed him because of his title and wealth. What a prize that was!

Matthew left his study. The parlour was only a few rooms away, and as he approached, he heard his mother’s soft voice recounting all the details of ball preparations. It was ridiculous, all of it. He was marrying Lady Tabitha, hoping that she would produce an heir and for no other reason. His mother wished to host a ball to celebrate buying a broodmare. How charming.

As he approached the parlour, he caught the gaze of the young lady seated on the

settee between a regal-looking lord and lady. She had to be Lady Tabitha. Matthew had expected a beauty, but somehow—

Somehow, he still found himself caught unaware by how lovely she was. Her face was soft and pale, coloured only with the most delicate flush of pink over her cheeks. Soft, blonde curls framed her face. Lady Tabitha's eyes were so pale grey that they looked silver when they caught the light. Matthew sensed that he was not looking at a mortal woman, but some delicate and elfish lady come from Fairyland. His breath nearly shuddered.

“There you are, Your Grace,” his mother said, rising to her feet. “Let me make introductions.”

They were made, and when Lady Tabitha stepped forward, she trod on the hem of her gown. Although the lady recovered quickly, he still noted how she stumbled, her body jolting forward just a little. “Your Grace,” she said.

She looked young and fragile, and seeing her nearly fall against him awakened feelings deep inside. His trousers seemed suddenly too tight, and he felt his pulse quicken. Lady Tabitha had the sort of face that suggested vulnerability and fragility, a damsel who needed a chivalric man to protect her, yet there was something sharp and discerning in her gaze, something as bright as steel that said this woman could take care of herself if the need ever arose.

He did not heed the temptation to let his eyes linger anywhere save her face, giving only a cursory glance to her white gown and the delicately shaped body hidden beneath it. She was like a statue of Aphrodite with slender and softly sloping curves.

“Lady Tabitha,” he said.

It was unsettling how beautiful she was, and his reaction to her was—

Unwelcome. Unfathomable.

He dropped her hand and stepped back as soon as he could without appearing impolite.

“Now that we are all present, shall we discuss the terms of the engagement?” Matthew’s mother asked.

“That is why they are here,” Matthew said.

Lady Tabitha winced, and Matthew suspected the words had emerged more sharply than he intended. He did not startle her, though. Perhaps, if he made a poor enough impression, Lady Tabitha would abandon the idea of an engagement. Just because Matthew had agreed to indulge his mother’s suggestion at marriage did not mean that Lady Tabitha would comply. Perhaps he could warn her off before this whole mess became the knowledge of the ton.

And if not, at least he would not have to endure the guilt of having convinced Lady Tabitha that he was charming. She would know that he was cold, harsh, and disinterested from the start. They would have an honest marriage if nothing else.

“Right,” his mother said, rallying quickly. “It is such an exciting occasion! Why wait to discuss it?”

Matthew sat beside his mother, forcing away a grimace. His mother had a true talent for turning even the most impolite gesture into something polite and gracious. If the subject had not been his own marriage, Matthew would have likely been impressed with how well she had escaped the potentially uncomfortable situation.

“Yes,” Lord Mayhew said, “particularly given the ... unique situation we find ourselves in.”

Unique situation? Matthew raised an eyebrow.

No one had told him about any unique situation. He glanced at Lady Tabitha, but she seemed to consciously avoid his gaze.

“Indeed,” Matthew’s mother said. “I am sorry about that, of course, but it does seem as though it presents us with a suitably advantageous arrangement.”

Matthew turned towards his mother, but she showed no inclination to clarify anything for him. Perhaps this was his own folly. He had remained uninterested while his mother arranged all this, and if he had been even slightly involved, he likely would not have found himself seated in this room, entirely at a loss.

“This is true,” Lord Mayhew said. “Do you find the dowry acceptable?”

The Dowager Duchess smiled. “What did you think, Your Grace?”

Matthew nodded. “It is adequate.”

He did not know the dowry, but he was sure his mother would not have agreed to this unless the sum were substantial. She was a shrewd and powerful negotiator, and had she been born a man, Matthew strongly suspected that his mother would have created the largest business empire in the world.

“Good,” Lord Mayhew said, sounding uncertain by Matthew’s lukewarm acceptance of the dowry. “And once the engagement is announced, I am assuming that two weeks’ time for the wedding would be acceptable?”

At this, Lady Tabitha seemed to tense a little. She had not said a word since their greeting. Matthew wondered if her silence reflected a lack of interest in marrying him. Perhaps she was unwilling to wed and agreed only to please her mother and father. Or because of that unique situation. Matthew frowned. What could that be?

The situation could surely not be so terrible; he could not imagine his mother agreeing to this marriage if it were.

“What do you think?” his mother asked. “You would be wed by mid-May. That is a marvellous time to be married. Is it not?”

Matthew’s heart sank. He felt as if they were all holding their breaths and waiting for an answer, and worse, he could not even fault them for that. While this was an arduous arrangement to him, one which he would rather not be involved in, Lord and Lady Mayhew were about to wed their only child to him. This meant everything to them.

He wanted to refuse, but he knew that his mother would be displeased. Matthew had also given her his word that he would seriously consider this match, and he would not be able to live with his own conscience if he did not earnestly try to make this arrangement work.

“Yes,” Matthew replied. “It sounds agreeable.”

If only Howell had found something! Then, Matthew would have been able to end this all in an instant.

“Good,” Lord Mayhew said, sounding relieved. “We are very glad to hear that you find our beloved Tabby Cat an acceptable match. It brings great comfort to us knowing that she has such a good man as a husband.”

A good man, by which Lord Mayhew meant, a wealthy husband.

“I will take excellent care of your daughter,” Matthew said. “I am certain that she will make a splendid duchess.”

Splendid was, of course, the kind way of saying she will give me the heir I need.

It was not a love match, but it was advantageous. Perhaps that was the best possible outcome for the situation.