



A Wallflower's Wassail Punch (A Once Upon a Widow #8)

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Category: Historical

Description: An accidental female pugilist...

Lady Annette Page is twenty-four and ready to climb onto the shelf. Her first Season was a disaster after a duke's son pinched her by the punchbowl, and she walloped him in the nose. And broke it. After five years, she has yet to live down the scandal. Her father hopes to remarry, but his betrothed will not agree until Lady Annette is gone. With an enormous dowry offered for her hand, the earl hosts a house party at Christmastide. The men arrive, hoping to claim her fortune, while the ladies continue to dredge up the past.

A handsome viscount with a sense of humor...

Lord Weston has been a widow for twenty years. Now that his daughter is betrothed, he is ready to consider taking another wife. Invited to a house party by an old friend, he arrives to find the earl's daughter is the guest of honor, and the week of revelry is a ploy to marry her off. Weston is surprised the other gentlemen view her as a quiet, awkward female. The viscount, seeing a striking, intelligent woman with a dry wit only he seems to appreciate, comes to her rescue.

Add a walloping wassail punch...

When the two become allies, their partnership soon goes beyond friendship. But will Lady Annette's age and the viscount's interfering daughter keep them from a happy ending under the mistletoe?

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PROLOGUE

June 1815

Almack's, London

Lady Annette Page spied her oldest-older brother near the door, hoping for a quick escape. She narrowed her eyes at him— look at me, look at me, you coward —and their gaze connected from across the room. Shaking her head, she picked up her skirts and moved across the crowded room to cut off his exit.

With a wicked grin, Lucius, Viscount Page nodded back at her and slipped into the hall. Annette broke into a run, bumping into several gentlemen and almost colliding with one of the patronesses.

“I beg your pardon, Lady Jersey,” gushed Annette, leaning around the countess’s shoulder to see which direction her brother had fled.

“La, why in such a hurry?” asked the older woman, not budging from her place in front of Annette. “Your cheeks are flushed, child. Perhaps some lemonade? Ratafia?”

“No, ma’am, I-I must visit the necessary,” she whispered into the patroness’s ear. “Please, I do beg your pardon, but I waited too long and...”

“Heavens, Lady Annette, you really must be more subtle,” scolded Lady Jersey. “What would your father say?”

Her father, the Earl of Beecham, wouldn't care. After the loss of his wife, Annette had been raised by a family of all-males and indulgent servants, who pitied the poor girl's motherless state. As a ten-year-old, she'd been doted on by Papa and her four brothers. The oldest of whom was her chaperone this evening and had just escaped Almack's ballroom.

Her lack of response gave Lady Jersey the opportunity to continue the conversation. The patroness was called Silence behind her back due to her lack of it. As Annette listened to the woes of a young girl's upbringing without proper female guidance, how it wasn't her fault, how her father should have remarried to provide her with a lady's upbringing, her shoulders slumped.

Lucius would be long gone. And tipping his flask. If he didn't return before eleven, he wouldn't be admitted back into the ballroom. Almack's rules were strictly upheld. The drone stopped, and Annette looked up to find Lady Jersey waiting for an answer. Horse feathers!

"Whatever you think best, my lady," she answered demurely, biting her lip.

"Well, then. I'll introduce you after the next dance. Now, go attend yourself and hurry back. A quadrille is next," the countess said, her dark curls bouncing against her cheeks. "And splash some cool water on your cheeks to tone down that color."

"Yes, ma'am," Annette murmured, making her way to the door in the vain hope of catching her brother. She looked up and down the empty hallway, then flew down the steps to the next level. The hall here was shadowed, and she'd almost given up when she heard a stifled belch. Turning on her heel, she found him in an alcove, tipping his flask.

"You smell of whisky."

“Good whisky. Expensive whisky,” answered Lucius. “Less of a headache tomorrow.”

“Brother, why do you torture yourself so?” Annette knew he was lovesick, though he’d never admit it. “I miss her too. She taught me all the ridiculous, intricate rules I needed for my first Season. Not that I remembered them all. I so wish she was here to help me through it.”

A low growl sounded from Lucius’s throat. The lovely Lady Christiana had stolen his heart when he’d met her several years ago at a Christmas ball. But after university, Lucius’s best friend and ever-charming rogue, the Earl of Winfield, had wooed, then married her. A few months ago, the noxious rake had died in a scandalous accident, leaving his wife childless and alone. After the funeral, Lucius’s flask had come out.

“Have you tried talking to her again?” she asked, placing a hand on his arm as he tried to take another drink.

“She won’t see me when I call or answer my letters. At the cemetery, she told me that men had been the cause of all her sorrows. She would never allow another into her heart.” He put the flask away. “Got herself locked away on that country estate of her mother’s.”

Annette sighed. “I’m sorry, but I’m sure she just needs time. Winfield was a terrible husband?—”

“I tried to warn her. Of course, it only made me look jealous of the scoundrel.” Lucius snorted, then handed her the flask as if she were one of his friends from the club. “Take a nip. It will make the night pass faster.”

Against her better judgment, but also thinking of her upcoming introduction, she took a swallow and gasped at the heat pouring down her throat. “Heavens, how can you

drink this rot?"

"It's an acquired taste. It gets better with each swallow. Try again," he said with a grin.

She shook her head and handed it back with a shiver. "I don't care for spirits. You know that."

"The more for me, then," he mumbled.

"Don't get foxed."

"Only mellow," he promised.

"Papa says it's time you start looking for your own wife. She may never come around, Lucius." Annette reached up on tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "Lady Jersey is introducing me to... someone, and I must dance the next quadrille with him. Please make sure you're back before eleven. Please, Lucius. Don't embarrass me by leaving me unchaperoned."

He let out a loud sigh. "Of course. I'm your oldest brother. I will always protect you. Now go," he said, pushing her toward the stairs. "I'm crossing my fingers for you that he's handsome, plump in the pocket, and brave enough to face all of your brothers."

Annette gave a half-hearted sigh. Having four protective brothers had not helped her chances for a match. They had announced to anyone who would listen that there would be retribution against any man who hurt their sister. In any way. None of the suitors with the courage to come forward had been remotely interesting. She was certain they only braved her brothers for her generous dowry.

Annette hovered by a gilded column on the edge of the ballroom. The newly installed

gas lights in the elaborately cut chandeliers glittered with an unnatural brilliance. At the far end of the room, the musicians were seated on the balcony and just ending the last strains of a dance. She turned to see herself in one of the mirrors lining the walls at various points. Smoothing her plain dark-brown hair and tucking in a loose strand at her neck, she inspected her dress. It was pomona silk, one of her favorites. It had tiny roses embroidered along the cuff of her short puff sleeves and the hem, and the color brightened her green eyes.

Lady Jersey joined her, pulling Annette's hand through her arm. The woman had made it her mission to find the "poor motherless waif" a husband this Season. "Are you quite ready?"

"Yes, ma'am." Annette followed the countess to a group of debutantes and young gentlemen. She knew all of them, at least by name. No! Lady Jersey wouldn't possibly introduce her to?—

"Lady Annette, have you met Lord Frederick?" She curtsied and then extended her hand. While they hadn't formally met, she was quite aware of his reputation. He was short for a man, and according to her brothers, what he lacked in height he made up for in arrogance and provocation. His derisive comments often goaded others into arguments that led to physical blows, leaving Lord Frederick to take bets and make merry off the ensuing brawl.

"I understand you are in need of a partner for the next dance?" asked the duke's son, rubbing his weak chin. He wore his blond hair in a tall pouf, and his pale blue eyes never met her gaze, remaining on her square neckline. Though he wasn't a handsome man, it was his personality that made him unattractive. She didn't like arrogant men or mean-spirited Corinthians.

"If the request is out of pity, please don't feel obligated," she said, trying not to wrinkle her skirt as her hands fisted at her sides. "I won't be disappointed to miss a

dance.”

“ A dance? I hadn’t thought you’d been asked at all this evening.” He smirked. “My mother said I need to be more charitable, so you’ll be helping me out.” He held out his arm.

She laid her fingers on his sleeve, knowing it would be an insult to Lady Jersey if she refused. How did women not see Lord Frederick as he really was? “Then you owe me a favor.”

He laughed, showing a mouthful of crooked teeth. “I may not be the best-looking in the room, but I’m the only man brave enough to risk your brothers’ wrath. I shall be the hero at my club tonight.”

Annette rolled her eyes as they joined the line of dancers, then pasted on a smile. She couldn’t be seen as shrewish. She’d never find a husband. And she wanted a family of her own desperately. As Lord Frederick bowed to her curtsy and the dance commenced, she also realized she wasn’t that desperate yet.

At one point, as she and Lord Frederick touched palms and made a turn, he licked his lips, staring at her bosoms. The gleam of the chandeliers shone on his thick mouth . The man had no idea how unappealing he was. Some poor woman will have to kiss him, she thought in disgust, and pretend to enjoy it. That image almost sent her into giggles.

The quadrille finally ended, and Annette thought to escape, but his hand caught her arm. “Shall I escort you to the refreshment table? It seems I’ve put quite the blush onto your cheeks,” he murmured in her ear.

Annette’s mouth opened with a quick retort, then closed. It wouldn’t help to end the Season insulting this man or causing a scene. She clenched her hand to keep from

wiping his moist breath off her neck. Peering at the dais where the patronesses sat, she saw Lady Jersey smile at her encouragingly. “Yes, my lord, that would be lovely.”

“I knew I’d break through that ice,” he said with a waggle of his brows. His hand was a bit too heavy on her lower back as he guided her through the crowd. He fetched her a cup of ratafia.

“Thank you, I’m parched,” she said, sipping the punch. Each time Lord Frederick tried to lean in close, she took another drink to keep him at bay. Which meant the drink quickly disappeared.

“I’ll get you another,” he said with a chuckle. “Did you like it?”

“It has a different taste but not in a bad way,” she said, handing him the empty glass.

“I gave it a splash of rum,” he said in her ear, then turned away.

Her cheeks burned with the knowledge that she’d just imbibed at Almack’s. How dare he do such a thing without her permission. She looked about the crowd for Lucius, her ire growing when she couldn’t find him. It was nearly eleven, and he promised to bring her to supper. She could not stomach dining with Lord Frederick. Either he, the alcohol, or both had ruined her appetite. Although she didn’t mind the lightness in her head or the looseness of her limbs. The rum seemed to have a pleasant numbing effect.

Then she spied her brother’s golden-brown head, and he waved his hand in greeting. He’d made it. Oh, thank the heavens. A warm breath hit the back of her neck, and then a sharp pain nipped her backside. She blinked, her mind a bit fuzzy. Had someone just?—

The pinch came again, and she pivoted on her heel, swinging with all her might. Just as her brothers had taught her.

Crunch. Hard bone met her gloved fist. A wave of satisfaction roared through Annette, and a smug grin turned her lips. “Go to the devil, you lecherous lickpenny!”

Chaos ensued.

There was a loud collective gasp, then loud cries and shouts for help.

“Lord Frederick has been attacked!”

“Did Lady Annette plant him a facer?”

“Lecherous lickpenny? Such language!”

“She never did act a proper lady.”

“Between her brothers and that right hook...”

“She’s this Season’s social pariah now.”

The remarks echoed in her head like a swarm of bees.

“What the devil did you do that for?” screamed Lord Frederick. He held his hand to his nose, trying to staunch the flow of blood. “You broke my bloody nose, you rattlepate.”

Annette looked down at her white glove, now smeared with red, and looked back at him with wide eyes. “I’m so sorry. Someone pinched me.” She looked around for someone to confirm what had happened, but all she saw were people staring at her

with a mixture of amusement and horror.

One of Lord Frederick's friends came to the rescue with a handkerchief that was quickly soaked. Annette pulled one from her reticule and approached him with hers. "Here, my lord, let me help you."

He backed away, one hand palm out and the other holding his nose, his icy blue stare pinning her. "Don't touch me. Don't speak to me. Don't ever say my name again." He looked around at the guests and pointed at her. "Look at her with blood on her hands. This is what I get for taking pity on a-a wallflower. I was only doing a favor for Lady Jersey."

"Oh," cried the patroness from somewhere behind her.

That one syllable shattered her resolve. Annette knew she would go on the list and never be invited again. Which meant others would follow the patroness's lead, ending her first Season in disgrace.

The heckles and whispers enveloped her, taking away her breath. Annette blinked back tears. What had she done? Everyone stared at her as if she'd been the one to act inappropriately. Wasn't she the victim here?

Turning to her left, she beseeched a group of women who had welcomed her at the beginning of the evening. "He came up behind me and-and p-pinched me here." She touched her dress to indicate the spot and realized she'd used her right hand, smearing blood on the puce silk. "Oh, no, no, no." She looked at the women, imploring one of them to take mercy on her.

But they moved back and away from her as one body. She turned to her right, opening her mouth for support, but that group of females did the same. The men in front of her smirked, as if the scene had been the best entertainment of the evening. A

cold sweat broke out all over her body. Her hands trembled; her throat swelled as the back of her lids burned.

Then a warm hand gripped her elbow, and she looked up at her brother, tears swimming in her eyes. “I-I...” The tears fell, and she hid her face in his coat.

She felt the rumble of his deep voice against her cheek as he barked over her head, “I saw what happened, you disgusting cur. To think a lady could take you out, you deuced molly.”

“She’s no lady,” came the muffled response from behind a second bloody handkerchief.

“I will find you later and finish the job. Count on that.”

Her walk of shame out of Almack’s was the most horrendous few moments of her life. The crowd parted as they made their way to the door, indicating the need to distance themselves from the ruined lady and her brother. Her stomach roiled, and she clutched it as the room began to spin.

“I think I may?—”

Then the room grew dark, and Lucius swept her up in his arms.

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CHAPTER 1

November 1820

Beecham Manor

Suffolk, England

“O h, Papa, I’m so happy for you!” Annette hugged her father, noting his green eyes, so like her own, twinkled with pleasure. “You’ve been alone for too long.” Over a dozen years since her mother had died of fever. She had fond memories of Mama, but as the years went by, they became hazier. If it weren’t for the portrait and small cameo, her mother would be a foggy image in her mind.

“I wasn’t sure how you would take the news, but I’m pleased by your reaction.” He ran a finger through his thick, fading blond hair. “Alice fills a void I thought would be forever empty. We would like to wed in the spring.”

“Oh, how I love weddings,” Annette said wistfully, blinking back sudden tears. Two of her four brothers had married over the past few years, and the ceremonies and wedding breakfasts had been beautiful for both. Each time, she’d told herself that her turn would come.

“Papa—”

“My dear—” they both said at once, then laughed.

“Annette, my sweet daughter,” continued Lord Beecham, “there is a stipulation to her acceptance.”

“Yes?” Annette had liked Lady Henney from their first meeting. “Will she need my help with the planning?”

“In a sense...” the earl stalled. “You see, she... well, she wants you married first.”

“We all want me to find a husband.” Her eyes widened. “I must be betrothed before she will marry you?”

He nodded. “I realize it’s quite a burden to put on your shoulders.”

“Papa,” she pleaded, “is it because she doesn’t want another woman in the house? You remember what a dismal failure my second Season was after the calamity of the first. I’ve been ostracized by society for the last five years. How am I to find a husband by spring?” Annette put her hands to her flaming cheeks. Was it some cruel trick Alice was playing on her father? A way to avoid his proposal? No, the affection between them was too authentic, too obvious .

Her father blew a loud breath past his lips and sat on the large chair near the hearth. He reached up and pulled her down, so she was perched on the arm of the wingback. “She fears if we don’t do something drastic, you will end up a spinster. And she cares about you too much to let that happen. She sees the sadness in your eyes as well as I do.”

“Drastic is a fine word for my situation. I’m twenty-three and have not been back in London since The Incident. Please, don’t make me go back. I couldn’t bear the whispering and jeers again.”

“No, no,” he soothed her as he wrapped an arm around her back and pulled her close.

“We were thinking of a party here for Christmas.”

“There is no one near our estate who would be suitable unless I pursue Lord Greggson.” She wrinkled her nose.

“I would never allow you to marry a man even older than me. He’s going blind and can barely hear.” Beecham chuckled. “The man has taste, though. He always ogled you at gatherings.”

“Until he began losing his sight.” Her giggle turned into a groan. “What shall we do?”

“Keep an open mind. We will create a guest list with suitors who are amenable to marriage with you. You will get to know them during the Christmas party over, say, a week’s time and choose one at the end. I always wished for a love match for my sweet girl, but I suppose I’m a romantic. Still, I have not given up hope.”

“Papa, I gave up on love long ago. A good man I can share a life with, have children with, that is all I can hope for. One who is not afraid I will break his nose if we argue. Or one from another country who has never heard the on-dits.” She kissed his cheek. “While I am willing to try, I cannot guarantee any of the prospective suitors will even stay to the end. I’m not exactly a prize.”

“A dowry of 30,000 pounds is a prize,” he said softly.

She swallowed, her pride stinging. “What?”

He cleared his throat. “We thought a generous amount might help our cause.”

“Is it enough to help a lost cause?” Annette snorted, her usual cheer returning. “My original dowry was ten. I suppose the extra is for medical costs? If I recall, one of the

infamous broadsheets claimed I twisted his arm behind his back before I broke his nose. Heavens, imagine what I could do with the strength I've gained living in the country."

She chewed on her bottom lip, wondering what kind of man would claim her for that kind of money.

As if reading her thoughts, her father said, "We are being very particular about who will receive invitations. No rogues, gamblers, or men with broken-down estates. Instead of titled men, we are looking at the younger sons of the nobility." He paused and looked at her questioningly. "Are you agreeable to that?"

She nodded. "A soldier would be nice if I don't marry for love. He would be gone much of the time, and I could choose to stay here."

Her father laughed. "That's the spirit. In all seriousness, though, I could see you as a vicar's wife. There's Mr. Langston, who has a congregation in the next county. You do very well helping others. It seems to come naturally to you."

She blushed. "I must do something of worth whilst I hide away here at Beecham Manor."

"Your herb garden is quite commendable. The midwife says you provide her with many of the tinctures and ointments she needs. Perhaps a physician's wife?"

"It seems my options are much brighter when I step down the ladder. Let's hope I don't fall and hit bottom." Annette laid her head on her father's shoulder, and they sat in silence for a bit.

"None of it was your fault, you know," the earl finally said. "I was a horrendous parent, and your brothers raised you as if you were a fifth son, even pulling you into

the sessions with their tutor.”

“I had to take lessons with them, or I’d be illiterate.” She laughed. “They scared away every governess who had the audacity to apply for the position. Those poor creatures never stood a chance against my four musketeers.”

“Neither did any of your suitors during your first Season,” he mused, “ before The Incident.”

“I frightened them away by myself after that.”

“I’m so sorry, my dear. You’re a beauty, just like your mother was. You deserved better.”

She voiced a fear always lurking in the back of her brain. “Do you think my mother would be disappointed with... my situation?” The mother who was only a memory.

“I believe your mother looks down and smiles at everything you do. If she had survived, well, things would have been different. But she would always be proud of you, no matter the situation .”

Annette groaned. “If only Lord Frederick hadn’t put the rum in the punch, I might not have acted so rashly.” The fire popped, and an ember sizzled on the stone outside the hearth. “But when I felt that second pinch...”

“It was instinct. Your brothers taught you well. It was one reason I didn’t worry about some rake taking advantage of you. I knew you could defend yourself.” He shook his head. “The nodcock deserved a crooked nose. Could have done without the cursing, though.”

Annette shrugged. It was water under the bridge now. “If only all four of my

musketees were home for Christmastide.” She hadn’t seen Jeremiah—her second oldest-older brother—and his wife since the wedding four years ago. He was stationed in India but set to come home in the next six months, along with their two-year-old son, Little Henry.

“Ambrose is close enough that he can give his sermon Christmas morning and arrive with Hester by late afternoon. And William says he will be here a few days before Christmas to help collect the decorations and stay through Twelfth Night. He’s grown tired of London until the next Season. And of course, Lucius would never miss a party.” He shrugged. “If luck is with us, then we shall meet Jeremiah’s wife and son by Easter.”

A quiet knock on the door announced Lady Henney. “May I come in?”

Annette jumped from the chair and turned to face her future stepmother. She was a petite woman with auburn hair, huge brown eyes, and a wonderful sense of humor. As always, the viscountess was dressed in understated elegance. Her azure satin skirt and bodice, trimmed with Van Dyke points at the sleeves and hem, hugged just the right places and flowed gracefully to her toes. This was a woman who always commanded attention, and even her clothes seemed to listen.

“Congratulations! Papa told me, and I couldn’t be happier for both of you.”

The two women hugged, then Alice glanced at the earl. “Have you... Did you?—”

“Yes, he explained your condition to the marriage.” Annette was surprised to see the older woman blush. “And that it is out of concern for my future rather than wanting me gone.”

Alice squeezed Annette’s hand. “You aren’t upset? I truly could not bear to be happy with your father if you weren’t settled with a bright future.”

“In truth, I wish the two of you had married long ago, when I was still a girl. I would most likely have a brood of children by now.” She chewed her lip again. “Will I be able to see the guest list before the invitations are sent out?”

“You will have final approval. I insist on that,” agreed the viscountess. “In fact, I have jotted a few names down already.”

“Shall we go over them together?” She squared her shoulders, preparing herself for the task. “My only stipulation is that I’m allowed to be myself. The man must take me as I am, no false pretenses, no avoiding conversations not meant for a female, no?—”

“Lud, child. We’re not sending you to the front lines,” said her father. “Besides, London has had dozens of scandals since you’ve last visited. Surely, your escapade has been forgotten by now.”

Annette and Alice looked at each other and burst into laughter.

“My sweet naïve man,” said the viscountess, patting Beecham’s cheek.

CHAPTER 2

Kent, England

Weston Estates

“O h, Papa, he’s the most wonderful man in the world,” gushed Phoebe, twirling on her toes, her auburn curls bouncing.

Andrew, Lord Weston clasped his hand to heart. “You wound me, Daughter.”

She threw her arms around him. “Next to you, Papa, of course.”

“Of course.” He stepped back and cupped her cheeks in his hands as he kissed her forehead. “I’m happy for you. I hope Lord Kendall will make a fine husband.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind my going to London for Christmastide? I do want to get to know his mother better before we are wed.” She looked up at him, her coffee eyes filled with concern. “It will be our last holiday together.”

Andrew shook his head. “Nonsense, I look forward to many holidays with my grandchildren about me.” He smiled at her blush. “No, dear. Your aunt will be chaperone enough. I have plenty to occupy my time and...”

“And?” She gave him a sly grin. “A lady friend, perhaps?”

He snorted. “No, but I did receive an invitation from an old friend in Suffolk. I might

visit with him for a few days and catch up. He hasn't taken his seat in the Lords for several years, and I'm not much for correspondence, as you know. So, we'll have much to talk about." He waggled his brows. "Lord Beecham met my brother at Oxford. Used to come home with Phillip since we lived in town. They both took care of me when I started university during their last year. Oh, the antics we'll relive over some good brandy."

"Papa, I couldn't imagine you being devilish. But I hope you change your mind, for I will miss you dreadfully."

"You are a beautiful young woman about to start a new life with a family of your own. There won't be time for thoughts of me." He hugged her, blinking back emotion as images of her as a child hit him full force. "You know I will always be here whenever you need me."

He watched his daughter practically skip from the library. With a sigh, he leaned against the mantel, listening to the fire crackle. This was his favorite room. Filled with books and memories and decorated in strong, masculine colors. From the blue damask drapes on the floor-to-ceiling windows and the thick, patterned Turkish rugs to the carved oak desk and great wingback chairs, this was a place a man could relax in, think his problems through, find solace in the silence.

"She's made a good match, Aggie," he said to the portrait above the hearth. A young Agnes smiled down at him, her blonde hair upswept, the amber eyes as bright as the day they'd met. "With our Phoebe leaving, I've been thinking about being alone."

With a sigh, he strolled to the side table and poured himself a brandy. As he settled in one of the fine leather chairs, his gleaming boots propped before the fire, he swirled the amber liquid in the cut crystal glass. "I'm lonely, Aggie. What we had was... irreplaceable, but I'm no good on my own."

Andrew peered up at his wife, as if she would agree with him or give him permission. “I’m not looking for another love. Companionship, though, would be nice in my doddering years.” He chuckled. “Not that I’m old yet, but I need to look to the future. How will I deal with grandchildren without a woman by my side? You know how awkward I can be with youngsters.”

He took another sip of the liquor and leaned his head back. A dowager countess in London had warmed his bed for the past ten years but had made it perfectly clear she had no intention of marrying again. And the time between his trips to Town was getting lengthier. His visits with the countess satisfied his physical needs, but he left feeling empty, and that emptiness was growing.

“Funny thing, I don’t feel old. When the deuce did I make forty years? With a daughter grown? And how did I manage it without you?” Andrew ran a hand through his thick hair and blew out a breath. “But where does a man of my age find a wife who isn’t ancient or still half-child?”

Closing his eyes, he let his mind go blank. He wouldn’t worry about it tonight.

Life has a way of providing what one needs. You only have to pay attention and not let it slip through your fingers.

How many times had Aggie said that? Good advice. He would pay attention and wait for... her .

* * *

20 December 1820

Beecham Manor, Suffolk

Andrew glanced over his shoulder at the cumbersome coach. He was glad he'd decided to bring his new gelding. The horse had been auctioned for almost nothing because of his weight and dull coat. But Drew had seen the gleam in the animal's eye and knew there was potential. He'd taken the beast home, fattened him up, and began a daily exercise routine, naming him Fortunate.

Patting the horse's gleaming neck, he squeezed its sides with his calves and moved him forward through the small copse. Evergreens rustled in the chill breeze, sending a light spray of snow into the air. There was barely a dusting on the ground. Enough to brighten the landscape but not hinder transportation.

When he reached the manor, he paused at the iron gates and studied the long drive to the manor. It was quite a sprawling piece of architecture, made of limestone with multiple gables and four stories. Anxious to see his old friend again, he kicked the horse lightly and trotted until he reached the portico. He slid from the saddle and found a lad waiting for him before his boots touched the gravel.

"G'day, my lord," said the blond lad, reaching to take the rein. "Is the carriage far behind?"

"It will be here shortly." Andrew stomped his boots to send the blood through his limbs. The large doors opened, and a butler bowed to him as he climbed the steps. "Lord Weston," he announced himself.

"Yes, sir," answered the rotund, immaculately dressed man as he took Andrew's hat and gloves. He looked over Andrew's shoulder and announced the arrival of the coach. "I'll have your trunk sent to your rooms."

It had been years since he'd been here. A strapping lad of eighteen? The large entrance hall held the same large mirror, tapestry, and portraits on the wall. There was a drawing room on the right, and past that began the large circular staircase that

led to a balcony. As he gazed up, he saw a woman with deep-brown hair and brilliant emerald eyes watching him.

His heart thumped a little harder when their eyes met, and she smiled. Lovely. No, more than lovely. She was stunning, and his heart thumped again. A rusty, odd feeling in his chest. Attraction? Possibly. Nerves because he'd been thinking of taking another wife?

"Hello," she said in a rich, honied tone, interrupting his thoughts. "You must be here for the party."

"Yes, this is Lord Weston," informed the butler just as the door opened again and footmen came in carrying a trunk and a traveling bag. He turned back to Andrew. "This is Lady Annette."

That sounded familiar. Annette, Annette?—

An invisible pitcher of icy water doused him, and he blinked. Demmit, she was Beecham's daughter? He needed to get hold of himself, then, because he was no lecherous old man. But she was deuced lovely.

"Which room, Mr. Gibbs?"

"The green room, my lady."

"I'll show him the way." With a smile, she beckoned him to join her.

Without hesitation, he took the stairs and bowed when he stood before her. A day dress of light-rose muslin clung to her curves and showed off her ivory skin. He deliberately avoided her neckline as she held out a hand. A bare hand. His lips brushed the top. Yet a vaguely familiar heat sizzled through him.

He straightened, and she smiled again. A brilliance of white filled the shadowy hall. Her eyes sparkled, making him smile in return. Now that he was closer, he noted the tiny creases around those green orbs and realized she wasn't quite as young as he'd assumed. Perhaps she was even married already.

"You have your father's eyes," he said, attempting a sane conversation.

"So I've been told." She glanced over her shoulder, leading him farther down the hall. They climbed another flight of stairs, stopping at the second room on the right with a green door and a tiny brass knocker. "Here we are." Lady Annette turned the knob and stepped aside.

The green room was true to its name. Wool carpet the color of a dark forest covered most of the floor with matching drapes on the tall windows, opened to let in the dim winter light. Several landscapes showing off the Beecham estate hung on the oak paneling. To the left, a small fireplace was flanked by a side table with a pitcher and bowl and a dark walnut wardrobe. On the marble mantel was a miniature grandfather's clock, its delicate weights and pendulum intricately carved with a design he couldn't discern from the doorway. The four-poster canopied bed took up the right side of the room. A counterpane and canopy with the same lighter, brighter green and gold print that matched the two wingback chairs before the hearth.

"It's one of the more masculine rooms, so we thought you'd feel more at home here."

Andrew moved past her into the room, feeling the plush carpet beneath his boots. The scent of jasmine tickled his nose and made him think of warmer weather. Lady Annette lingered at the door. He could feel her eyes studying him as he walked to the windows and pulled back a sheer curtain. He knew the path below. It led to the stable.

"I haven't been here since I graduated from university," he mumbled, turning away from the window.

“Then your last visit was fairly recent?” she asked with a grin.

He chuckled. “If you are appealing to my vanity, you have succeeded.”

“Good. Let’s see how your memory holds up. Do you remember where the library is?”

Impertinent, adorable chit. “I believe I do. First floor, end of the hall.” He smirked. “Not bad for an old man.”

She snorted. He laughed. “I don’t believe you are old. Nothing about you shows the wear of years like I’ve seen on other men. Either you are exaggerating your age, or you’ve never had a care in the world.”

Andrew shook his head. “You are wrong on both counts, my dear, though such observations make me feel years younger.”

“Hmm,” she mused over her shoulder, turning to leave. “Challenge accepted.”

His mind buzzed as he breathed in the lingering scent of jasmine, wondering what challenge he had just issued. Watch your step, old boy. She’s a temptation that could lead to trouble.

CHAPTER 3

“Drew, I’m so glad you could join us.” Lord Beecham rose from his chair and quickly crossed the room, hand extended.

Andrew took the firm grasp and shook his friend’s hand. “It’s been too long, Henry.” He glanced about the room, disappointed when he did not see Lady Annette.

“May I introduce the Viscountess Henney, my betrothed? My dear, this is Viscount Weston.”

A petite woman with auburn hair and intelligent brown eyes rose from a chair near the hearth. “I’ve heard much about you, my lord. I hope your lodgings are comfortable?”

He nodded, not trying to hide his surprise. “You’re sure you want to marry this upstart? Has he told you of his university escapades?”

“Don’t frighten her away, Drew. It took me years to get the nerve to ask,” Beecham said with a chuckle.

“I am curious,” asked the viscountess. “You seem younger than Henry, so how did you two become acquainted at Oxford?”

“I met his older brother, Phillip, first,” answered Beecham. “Their family lived in Oxford, so by my second year, I often went to stay with them rather than spend so much time at the school. Once Drew turned thirteen, we brought him everywhere

with us. We gave him quite another kind of education.”

The men chatted and caught up over a glass of brandy while Lady Henney worked on her embroidery, adding a comment here or chuckling at something the men said. Andrew thought she was an attractive woman for her age. She was also practiced at pretending to be demure, but he’d seen the independence in her gaze. The Earl of Beecham wouldn’t lean into his doddering years with this female at his side. She would keep him lively. Eventually, the conversation came around to the holiday house party.

“How many guests are coming?” asked Andrew.

“We’ve invited the neighbors for the ball on New Year’s Eve and some of the activities leading up to Twelfth Night. The guests include family members and a short parade of young men.” Beecham caught his fiancée’s pointed glance. “Er, eligible men looking for a wife.”

“Parade? A wife?” Andrew repeated, rubbing his chin, then the reason struck him. “For Lady Annette?”

“Yes, she’ll soon be twenty-four,” explained Lady Henney. “Henry and I worry if she doesn’t marry before us, she’ll settle into spinsterhood.”

Andrew spit out the last sip of brandy, then choked, his eyes watering. Beecham jumped up to smack his back as the viscountess brought him water. “Are you better?” she asked after he’d gulped it down.

“Quite,” he said, wiping at his eyes with a handkerchief. “My apologies, but is this possible spinster the same Lady Annette I met earlier?”

“The same.” Beecham poured another brandy for both of them. “She ran into a bit of

trouble her first Season, which seemed to linger into the second Season. Nettie gave up after that, came here, and has not been back to London since. It isn't her age that worries us so much as her fear of returning to London."

"Well, she is a bit old for a Season at this point," added Lady Henney.

"She's a beautiful woman. Are you sure she wishes to marry?"

"With all her heart, but only to a man who can accept her as she is?—"

"And won't worry about getting injured should she lose her temper," finished Lady Henney.

"Lose her tem... injured?" Somehow, Andrew felt he'd lost the direction of the conversation.

Lady Henney gave him a short explanation of The Incident, which included a man, a punch bowl, and a broken nose. Then she switched the topic to Beecham's oldest son. He had been pining for a woman who had married his best friend, then was widowed early. "Since he was out nipping at his flask instead of acting the proper chaperon, Lucius feels responsible for his sister's dilemma. He insists if he had been by Nettie's side, the blaggard wouldn't have tried anything. But I believe he's using it as an excuse because he can't have the woman of his heart."

"He's also not married yet," Beecham explained. "It seems he won't enter the parson's trap until his sister does. And you know how important an heir?—"

The room went silent as the earl realized his blunder. They all knew Weston had only a daughter, never remarrying after his wife and newborn son died. But Andrew wasn't here for pity. That had been long ago, and he was quite content with his nephew assuming the title. He decided to fill the uncomfortable pause.

“So, everyone’s happiness is pinned on this young woman who must gain a betrothal over Christmastide?” Andrew asked. They both nodded. “Egads, no pressure on Lady Annette, then.”

Beecham and Lady Henney looked at each other, at the carpet, then at Andrew.

“Lord Weston,” began the viscountess, “Henry says you are the best judge of character he knows. So, we thought you might help us.”

Andrew’s brows rose. “You want me to choose a husband for your daughter?”

Beecham shook his head, then ran his hand through his fading light-brown hair. “No, no. We thought if she found a suitor she preferred, you might give us your opinion on him. The list has been thoroughly checked in advance, of course. But an investigator cannot tell us if the man is kind or patient or?—”

“If he wants a wife?”

“Oh, we already know that. We invited only men who attended the last two Seasons, are still not betrothed, and are not purse-pinched. Since Nettie has... moved on the edge of society the last few years, we feel a younger son of a titled family might be a nice fit. Someone not worried about the confines of London, you know.”

“Ah, settle her in the country with a sedate vicar.” Andrew was flabbergasted. The woman he’d met was a delectable creature. Could the young men of London really be put off by one mistake? The ton were fickle nodcocks. “Surely, the, er, incident would have been forgotten by now.”

“Most likely, but Nettie has not forgotten. After... well, she didn’t finish her first Season. And the second, she was treated horribly. She became a wallflower. It was heartbreaking. She will never put herself in a position to be ridiculed like that again.”

Lady Henney shook her head. “It would take just one mean-spirited gossipmonger to dredge it up.”

“Won’t she feel... self-conscious with a roomful of men ogling her?” The word parade had put a comical image in his head, dandies primping themselves and walking in a line before the wealthy earl’s daughter.

“Oh, they aren’t all coming at once. They’ll be trickling in,” exclaimed Lady Henney. “The vicar from the next county will come with his sister tomorrow and stay for two nights. After that, two more gentlemen, who happen to be friends with Lord Page, will arrive and stay a couple of days on their way... somewhere. I’ve forgotten where Lucius said.” She tapped her lips with her forefinger, then shrugged. “And our youngest son William, a barrister, is bringing one of his associates on Christmas Eve.”

Andrew realized the irony of the situation, and a deep rumble began in his chest. It turned into full-blown laughter, and he finally caught his breath. His hosts cast him curious glances.

“I apologize. It’s nothing to do with Lady Annette. It’s just...” He began chuckling again, feeling the heat spread in his cheeks. “I’ve been thinking of taking a wife now that my daughter is betrothed. So, this conversation?—”

“Is quite timely.” Lady Henney’s eyes flashed with mischief.

“I only wish you had added a few widows to your list. There might have been a double betrothal for the new year.” He threw back the rest of the brandy. “Henry, of course I’ll help in any way I can. Your daughter should have no problem enchanting one of these fellows, and I’m happy to give my opinion as to their character.”

That should put a barrier between him and the desirable wallflower .

* * *

Annette dressed with care for dinner, checking her reflection for anything amiss. She turned back and forth, letting the bottle-green silk swish and linger around her legs like a purring cat. The delicate tatting, creating a creamy web along the hem and sleeves, was her favorite part of the dress. She smoothed the cream-colored satin ribbon just under her square bodice. A jade pendant hung at her neck with matching bobs dangling below her ears. A simple matching ribbon was entwined in her upswept hair.

“Pinch your cheeks and add some color to your face,” instructed her maid, Jenny. “What is the sudden concern for your appearance when the guests don’t arrive for another few days?”

Annette shrugged and avoided eye contact with the woman who had been with her since she was fourteen. They had grown up together and, since moving to Suffolk permanently, had become confidantes. Jenny knew of her past, understood why she avoided London, and was a wizard at making Annette laugh.

The maid bent around her mistress, her round face and soft brown eyes appearing in Annette’s line of sight. “What are you hiding from me, milady?”

Annette straightened with a sigh and plopped back down in the chair in front of the mirror. “One guest has arrived.” She gave the maid a side-glance.

“His lordship’s friend, the viscount?”

“M-hm.” She wondered why she’d not seen Lord Weston’s name on the list. Perhaps he’d not been invited for “the selection” as she’d come to think of it.

An image of the handsome man danced before her. Thick auburn hair with only a

touch of gray at the temples and eyes the color of her father's coffee. His smile... Well, it had sent her belly tumbling. He had to be on the far end of his forties, yet his athletic build would indicate a younger man. Was Lord Weston's age the reason he hadn't been included as a possible suitor?

"He's nice to look at, certainly. But do you think he's a bit old for you?" Jenny busied herself with picking up the scattered clothing. "Or not..." she said, peering over her shoulder to see Annette's dreamy expression in the mirror.

"It's not like he's as ancient as Lord Greggson." If Lord Weston was as old as her father, there would be over twenty years difference in their ages. "But you're right, I am hopeful one of the younger men arriving will be agreeable."

"It's a shame it's come to this, miss," tsked Jenny. "You used to love parties and crowds."

Annette's heart twisted a little, and she wondered where that social creature had gone. Buried in the bowels of Almack's. Not that she was dreadfully shy. When with family, speaking with a small group of villagers, or mingling with friends of her father or Alice, she was her usual self. It was the large events, with people her own age who seemed to judge her, that sent her scurrying to the wall, hiding from the stares and whispers. Real or perceived.

"Then again, you've always been more comfortable with older men. Your brothers, your father's friends. A widower might make a nice match for you." Jenny stopped behind her, arms full of clothes, and locked gazes with her mistress. "You deserve to be happy. I've seen you with the little ones, the joy in your eyes. It will come to you, milady. I feel it in my bones."

Annette gave her a grateful smile. "Speaking of happiness, how is your courtship with the stablemaster progressing?"

The maid blushed, her cheeks almost matching the red curls peeking from beneath her cap. “He’s a fine man, my Georgie. We’re thinking once you’re married?—”

“Blast! Must the world stop turning until I find a husband?” She clenched her hands together and squeezed her eyes shut. Deep breath, deep breath. “I didn’t mean to sound harsh. It’s just that I seem to be the reason no one is moving forward in love. You could remain my lady’s maid if you were wed. There is no reason to wait for my betrothal.”

“Georgie would prefer I not work once we’re married. Wants to start a family right away.” The maid blushed again, then grinned. “Besides, I’m in no hurry to leave you or this fine house.”

Annette stood and took Jenny’s hands in her own. “We will work around the wishes of your future husband. Please, if you are in love, marry him.” She thought of losing her mother much too soon, her own future that had seemed so rosy at the beginning of her first Season, and her brother whose heart had been broken the day he’d introduced his beloved to his best friend. “Life is too fleeting. The winds of destiny can change in a breath. Take joy where and when you can find it and never regret your choices.”

“Grand advice that you should follow too.” Jenny arranged the gossamer shawl about her mistress’s shoulders. “Now, go to dinner and enjoy yourself. Consider it a rehearsal for when the rest of the guests arrive.”

Her heart stuttered at the thought of the viscount. Annette agreed she needed practice in the art of flirting. Lord Weston would surely be immune to the coquetry of an amateur. Why not indulge in a harmless pastime?

CHAPTER 4

“It seems I’ve been invited to a unique gathering, Bowman,” Andrew mused as he dressed for dinner that night.

“Christmastide, my lord? Will there be pagan rituals? Dancing around a bonfire?” His valet smirked as he attached the collar to Andrew’s linen shirt.

He chuckled. “Don’t ever leave me, Bowman. I’d miss your wit.”

“Thank you, my lord. I’ve no intention of going anywhere.” Bowman held up the waistcoat of striped spruce and cream that matched his butter-colored trousers. “What is so unique?”

Andrew put his arms out and shrugged on the piece of clothing. “The guest list is composed of possible suitors for our host’s daughter. It seems she had trouble in London, of the innocent sort, and refuses to have another Season. So, the suitors shall come to her.”

“Very expedient.” Bowman held a winding length of linen above his own ashen-brown head and slipped it over the viscount’s, then around his neck. “And convenient for you under the circumstances.”

“That’s the irony of this invitation. I’m not one of the proposed suitors. Beecham had no idea I’d decided to take a wife. He wants my opinion of the young men attending.”

“You are an excellent judge of character,” agreed Bowman. “But I wouldn’t take

yourself out of the running.”

“I’m too old for her.” Did he sound whiny?

“Nonsense. We’re of the same age, and I’m certainly not in my dotage. Men take younger women to wife all the time.”

Andrew lifted his chin as the valet finished tying the cravat. When Bowman held up the rifle-green coat, Andrew purveyed the room and turned back to his valet. “It seems we’re keeping to a theme tonight.”

“Yes, my lord,” answered his valet with a twinkle in his hazel eyes. “Green is the color of rebirth and renewal. Fortuitous since you are beginning again and will need to revive your courting skills.”

“Yes, well, I don’t know if the color of my bedchamber will help me in that area.”

“It is in the middle of the color spectrum, offering balance.” Bowman raised one brow at his employer. “The shade is also known to induce relaxation and relieve anxiety.”

“And you believe I am in need of more calm and balance in my life?” Andrew asked with a chuckle. He knew the valet always had a point but preferred the long route to a shortcut.

“Miss Phoebe is often the cause of indigestion for you, my lord. The wedding will be an ordeal by the time it is over. Aging is never easy, and you will be dealing with multiple young bucks trying to win the hand of a thirty-thousand-pound dowry. And if I am correct in my suspicions, you were very attracted to the female attached to said dowry.”

With a snort, Andrew scowled at his man. “How did you come to that conclusion?”

“I arrived just after she showed you to this room. The tone of your voice was different from conversations with your daughter and her friends. More charming, subtle. And you’ve mentioned her name several times this evening while preparing for dinner.”

“How do you know the size of her dowry?”

“A simple trip into the kitchen of any noble household is always enlightening.”

He shook his head. How did Bowman know... everything ? “Well, green it is, then. And thank you for the colorful lesson.”

“My pleasure. And of course, if you over imbibe at dinner, you need look no further than your suit of clothes to remember which room you are in.”

Andrew guffawed. “Demmit, but you caught me off guard on that one.”

“Thank you, sir.” The valet opened the bedchamber door for the viscount. “I do not believe you will be needing gloves tonight.”

“Thank the etiquette gods for that.”

“Speaking of the heavens, you might consider smoothing out that infamous charm of your youth. It might surprise you how easily it returns.” Bowman’s mouth twitched in one corner, but his expression remained blank.

“Good advice as always.” Andrew decided he would follow it and enjoy this festive visit, perhaps oil his rusty flirtations on Lady Annette. He could avoid being awkward when he returned to London for the next session of Parliament. Regardless of

Bowman's optimistic words, he could never consider himself a suitor for his friend's daughter. But if he told Phoebe of his intentions, she might have widows storming Westminster, telling her whom he should or should not choose. Blast! He'd rather take his time and let fate guide his path.

Andrew made his way to the drawing room and found his host and Lady Henney sitting on a small sofa, and Lady Annette seated across from them. The younger woman turned and smiled at him. The room seemed suddenly warm, and his finger tugged slightly at his cravat.

Beecham rose and offered him a drink, then made formal introductions. "You've met my betrothed. This is my daughter, Lady Annette. My dear, this is one of my oldest friends, Lord Weston."

"It seems our valet and lady's maid conspired before we dressed tonight," remarked Lady Annette.

Andrew's eyes traveled down the length of Lady Annette's gown, almost the same shade as his coat and trousers—and her eyes. He laughed. "I'll tell Bowman to check with your maid before our next dinner."

"Please do. My reputation is scandalous enough, without adding more wood to the on-dit fires."

He opened his mouth to disagree but saw she was teasing, a smirk turning up her mouth. A woman not afraid to make fun of herself. At least, not in private. Delightful. He took the chair next to Lady Annette. "So, what activities have the ladies planned for us over the next week?"

"There will be the usual parlor games, wassail, the villagers will be caroling. We'll decorate on Christmas Eve, of course." Lady Henney counted on her fingers. "Nettie,

er, Lady Annette will be busy for part of St. Stephen's Day. She so enjoys handing out the Christmas boxes."

"And don't forget the outdoor activities," reminded Beecham. "Skating, a game of bandy, perhaps, if we have interest enough."

Andrew remembered the estate was in the area of the fens, the shallow washes and flooded fields making quick frozen ponds for winter activities.

"Are you rested from your journey, my lord?" asked Lady Annette. "I saw you came on horseback rather than carriage."

"Yes, thank you. I prefer the fresh air whenever possible. I hate being cooped up." He turned to accept a glass of whisky from the footman. "I always have the coach follow with my trunks just in case the weather turns bad."

"Especially at our age, eh, Drew?" Beecham grinned. "I'm getting more creaks in these bones than I care to admit."

Andrew rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Oh, to be a youth of eighteen again." The men laughed, but Lady Henney blew out an exasperated sigh.

"Horse feathers! You both exaggerate." She flapped her fan at Beecham. "Do you think I'd marry a decrepit old man?"

"My dear, I'd be whatever you wanted me to be as long as you met me at the church." Beecham picked up her hand and kissed it.

"Do you see what I must live with, Lord Weston? This daily display of calf-love." This time it was Lady Annette who rolled her eyes. But the look of affection she cast over the couple told Andrew how much she approved of the match.

“Be it young and foolish or old and wise, it does not matter. The heart knows what the heart knows,” said Beecham.

There was a discrete knock at the door, and the butler appeared. “Dinner is served, my lord.”

“Thank you, Gibbs.”

When Lady Annette rose, he offered his arm. “My lady, may I escort you to the dining room?” Did he sound foolish or gallant? He rather thought the latter.

“I’d be delighted.”

Her smile was like honey on a warm slice of bread, pleasant and sweet, leaving one wanting just one more bite. He smiled in return and decided he’d be foolish more often if this was the result.

CHAPTER 5

Annette's fingers soaked up the warmth that seeped through Lord Weston's coat. She noticed how the material strained across his shoulders and wondered again why he seemed so much younger than her father.

And so easy to converse with. It wasn't just his looks, although she could drown in those chocolate eyes, but the energy about him. Strong, yet calm. Intelligent with a sense of humor. Annette found herself relaxing in his company, not worrying about what she might say or do. It could simply be the fact that he wasn't on the list of suitors, but she'd had the same feeling when they'd first met.

The meal was informal since it was only the four of them tonight. The Vicar Langston would arrive tomorrow with his sister and spend two evenings. So, this would be the last night before the "selection" began. Her stomach knotted at the reminder.

"Are you well, Lady Annette? You seem anxious all at once." Lord Weston was studying her, concern in his eyes. "I believe the next couple of weeks will be a journey of discovery for you. Enjoy the ride, regardless of where the coach stops, eh?"

Oh heavens! He knew. The knot twisted. But when he patted her hand, his touch calmed her. She felt... safe, secure. Yes, it would all work out as it should. She nodded gratefully. "You are right. And it's almost Christmastide, my favorite time of year."

“Ah, a lover of the revelry, then?”

She nodded. “I enjoy winter and the snow when we get it, the smell of pine and added color in the house. Do you mind the cold, my lord?” Her father had begun complaining it made his joints ache and avoided being outdoors for long periods.

“You saw me on horseback. I believe fresh air keeps the body fit and young.”

“If you are any indication, then I believe it too.” She grinned, relaxing with this kind man at her side. “How long will you be here?”

“Until you throw me out!” With a chuckle, he added, “Or until after the new year, whichever comes first.”

Annette took the seat next to her father, across from her soon-to-be stepmother. Lord Weston sat beside her. As the white soup was served, she listened to her father and the viscount recount an amusing story from Papa’s university days. She learned how Lord Weston had met his wife over the scalloped oysters. Her father shared a tale about the viscount’s brother while they dined on roasted venison and a savory pudding.

Annette enjoyed the multitude of expressions that passed over Lord Weston’s face as he recounted an escapade from his youth. His entire countenance took on the mood of the story, and he had a knack for holding his audience’s attention.

“I had no idea you and Papa were so close. Why have you not visited Beecham Manor before?”

“I did as a young man.” Weston glanced at the earl. “He helped me through the dark time after my brother’s death. Later, we used to meet at one of the gentlemen’s clubs after Parliament, but he hasn’t taken his seat for a few years. I’m not much for

writing?—”

“Nor am I,” added her father. “Men are different from women. We don’t need to share every detail of our lives to keep up a friendship.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Lord Weston grinned and raised his wine glass. “To friends.”

“To friends,” they all chimed together.

After dinner, they gathered in the parlor. Her parents often enjoyed whist when there were enough players, and this was no exception. She found the viscount an excellent player, skilled but not overly competitive. But they were no match for her father and Alice.

“I hate to claim victory when I’m the host but?—”

“You’ve never hated to claim victory,” interrupted Annette with a grin. “I’ve inherited his competitive nature. Never admit defeat, he used to tell me when we were playing some game with my brothers.”

“I meant you should never admit defeat to your brothers,” corrected her father. “They would never let you forget it.”

“Did your brothers tease you terribly when you were young?” asked Lord Weston as he settled himself next to her before the fire.

Annette was suddenly acutely aware of his large body, so close yet not touching. Nothing scandalous about the action itself, but her cheeks heated just the same. A tingle skittered down her arm when he crossed an ankle over his knee, and his forearm brushed against her. She picked up her glass of madeira and took a sip to hide the flush of her cheeks. At least, she could blame the alcohol.

“Annette?” asked Alice, waiting for her to answer the viscount.

“Oh, yes. I mean, no. I mean...” She was making a horrid mess of this. “Yes, they teased me. They were boys. But as the youngest, they were also very protective of me.”

“And still are.” Her father shook his head. “I’m sure you’d have had an offer at the beginning of your first Season if they hadn’t scared off so many suitors.”

“I must disagree.” Lord Weston leaned back against the brocade sofa and studied her, brown eyes narrowed. She saw the tiny creases at his eyes, telling her he laughed often. “If they weren’t willing to face your brothers, what kind of spine did they have? You would have soon been bored with any of them.”

A slow smile curled her lips. Oh, he was a darling man. A wise man. “Thank you.”

“A treasure is worth the adventure. Isn’t that right, Henry?”

“I couldn’t agree more,” agreed her father, giving Alice a sly grin.

The viscountess giggled before turning to Lord Weston. “Tell us about your daughter. She’s in London for Christmastide?”

“Yes, Phoebe is staying with her aunt and celebrating with her fiancé’s family. Lord Kendall invited me, but his family is quite... active.” He paused as searching for the correct wording. “I don’t believe they understand the meaning of a relaxing evening at home. When they aren’t out at some event, they invite a mob for a night of games and drink.”

“And Miss Phoebe?” asked Annette. “Does she like to go out as much as her in-laws?”

He nodded. “I’m afraid she has all the energy of a hound at the hunt and loves being entertained. Probably my fault. After my wife died, I kept her amused. Whether to keep her from grieving or me, I’m not sure.”

“Both, most likely,” said Lady Henney empathetically.

“It was a difficult time. A piece of my heart had been ripped away, and I saw my daughter as a way to mend it.” His umber gaze swept his audience, and he flushed. “This conversation took a morbid turn. I apologize.”

“How did you and your daughter spend your time together?” Annette swore his face grew more handsome—and wistful—as he spoke of the women he loved. He was a good man. A thoughtful one.

“We were always reading, playing games, pretending. I took her everywhere with me. Couldn’t stand the thought of leaving her alone. I wanted her to be independent and confident, regardless of how society thought I should raise her.” He shrugged. “And then in a blink of an eye, she was a woman, and another man took my place.”

Annette touched his arm without a thought. “No man ever takes the place of a girl’s father. No matter how wonderful her husband is.”

“That’s my girl,” exclaimed her father with a wink. “Listen to her, Drew. She knows her subject well.”

Lord Weston glanced down at her hand on his sleeve, then caught her gaze with a gratified half smile. “Thank you for that reassurance, Lady Annette. Coming from you, it eases my mind. If I’ve done my job, and I’m certain my dear Agnes would have come to haunt me if I hadn’t, she will have a happy life and surround me with grandchildren.”

“There’s the attitude.” Annette’s father slapped his knee. “Another drink?”

A yawn came unbidden, and Annette quickly covered her mouth with one hand. “Please, excuse me. I fear I was up too early this morning.”

Lord Weston rose. “It has been a long day. Perhaps we should both retire.” He held out his hand to help her up.

“Yes, and we have planned a full week,” agreed Alice. “Henry, could you have my coach sent round?”

“Of course, my dear. We shall see you tomorrow, Drew.”

“Goodnight, Henry, Lady Henney. And thank you again for inviting me.” Lord Weston bowed over the viscountess’s hand.

The older couple left the room, her father stopping to speak with the butler. She turned to the viscount. “I am also glad Papa asked you to come. You seemed to have calmed my nerves before the storm.”

Now he bowed over her hand, peeking up at her with a glint in his dark gaze. “Consider me the eye of the storm. Your center of calm should you need it.”

Her stomach tumbled but with excitement rather than nerves. Was it his touch? His words? “I appreciate that.”

As she made her way to the next floor, Annette felt his presence behind her. Glancing over her shoulder, she caught him watching her from the bottom of the stairs. He stood tall, broad shoulders straight, hands behind his back. He didn’t smile but winked instead. Her breath caught, and she turned away, hurrying up the steps and to her room.

Once safely inside, she shut the door and leaned against it. Her heart pounded, echoing in her ears. Then her legs gave way, and she slid to the floor, eyes closed, hands in tight fists. This man affected her in a way no other had before him. And he had offered to be her champion. His type of protection would be much different from what her overprotective brothers offered.

Was it the self-assuredness of an older man? One who had learned there was little to fear in the world? Or was it just the kind of delicious attraction she had always longed for? She feared he might be placating her out of kindness, seeing her as a girl. Not a woman who longed for love, longed to taste desire.

Keep an open mind. The words of her soon-to-be-stepmother echoed among the rapid heartbeats. Yes, she would listen to that advice. Perhaps she was only latching on to a man she considered safe, one not truly interested in her, so she couldn't be hurt. Hadn't Jenny said to practice flirting? He may be doing the same to help her prepare for the upcoming calamity. Because, though she hadn't breathed a word out loud, Annette knew this whole idea would be a catastrophe. But it would show Papa and Alice that she had tried.

The image of Lord Weston winking at her came to mind again. She sighed as her heart told her what she knew to be true. The viscount was everything she looked for in a suitor. Handsome, intelligent, kind, and a wonderful sense of humor. Why couldn't he be ten years younger? Why couldn't she be ten years older?

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CHAPTER 6

21 December 1820

She was in a tree, sitting on the highest branch. Her father was calling her to come down, but she was too frightened to try. So, Papa sent three of her suitors up after her. Each one settled on a branch below her, then they all called for her to jump.

“The one who catches you will be your husband,” called Papa.

“And what if no one catches me?” she asked in a trembling voice.

“Then I will, dearest,” he replied.

Obedying her father, she counted to three and jumped. The first suitor reached out but never touched her. She brushed against a limb, then fell toward the second suitor. He snatched at her spencer, but it ripped from his hands. Her hair caught on some twigs as she continued her free fall. The third suitor grabbed her arm but couldn’t maintain his grip. She screamed as she plummeted to the ground, only to be caught in strong arms. She clutched her father’s chest, but when she opened her eyes, it was Lord Weston, not Papa .

“I’ve got you, Nettie,” he said and leaned down to kiss her.

A knock on the door snapped her from the twilight of the dream. Her maid opened the door.

“Did you sleep well, milady?” Jenny carried the fresh pitcher of water to the washstand. “Do you have an idea of which day dress you’d like to wear?”

Annette pulled the counterpane over her head. “Do I have to face the day?”

“Yes, miss. Your first suitor arrives today. At least you know this one, been to one of his sermons.” Jenny pulled the cover back, grinning at her mistress. “He’ll be fine practice for the next two.”

She blew a loud breath between her lips. “Jenny, do you think it would be terrible to be a spinster?”

Jenny laughed. “Depends on what the other options are. It’s better than being with a man who beats you, or one so old he needs his food mashed up before he can eat it.” The maid pulled her lips back over her teeth and made a chewing motion.

“Very funny.” Annette swung her legs over the bed, thankful for the soft wool rug beneath her feet. “I suppose the indigo.”

“Very good, miss. You look tired. You didn’t sleep well, did you?” Jenny went to the wardrobe and pulled out the dress. “Not answering won’t erase the dark circles beneath your eyes.”

“I suppose I was restless.” She sat down and breathed in deeply while Jenny brushed her hair in long strokes to her waist. Lady Annette Page is not afraid of anything. Except ridicule. She tilted her chin up and stared into the mirror.

Jenny was right; she did look a fright. How dare these men test her confidence! She was no debutante. She was going on her twenty-fourth year. If none of these men were right for her, she would find another purpose in her life. Perhaps she’d open an orphanage and have the biggest family of all her siblings.

Well, now she felt better. "I've changed my mind. I'll wear the mazarine blue."

* * *

When she entered the breakfast room, Lord Weston was enjoying coffee with Papa. Both men stood, and Lord Weston pulled out a chair for her next to her father.

"You look lovely in that color, my lady," said the viscount.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Papa grin. "Thank you, my lord." Jenny had done a fine job covering up her puffy eyes. She poured herself a cup of tea and added a lump of sugar.

"What time will Mr. and Miss Langston arrive?" Stirring her tea, she tried to hold back a yawn.

"Early this afternoon, according to his note." Papa tossed back the last of his coffee and rose. "I have to meet with the estate manager this morning. I shall return in time to greet the vicar." As he passed Annette, he dropped a kiss on top of her head.

"Tell him I have a basket for his wife and not to hesitate to call on me if she has the babe early," she called after him.

"I will," he called back from the hall.

"You are a midwife?" asked Lord Weston, surprise in his expression.

Annette chuckled and shook her head. "Heavens, no. I have assisted, though. I've been declared second-best when the midwife is not available. Mrs. Jackson isn't due until after the new year, but babies rarely listen. The midwife in the village is gone until after Christmastide to be with her own daughter."

“There is no physician?”

She saw the alarm darkening his eyes. His wife died giving birth. Annette shook her head, her heart hurting for him. “Not close. The journey would take at least two hours, and most of the tenants cannot afford one. Our steward could, of course, but most women prefer the midwife. A physician isn’t called unless the situation is dire.”

“I see.” He took a sip of his coffee. “The villagers must trust you, then.”

She hadn’t really thought about it, but he was right. “I suppose I’m a familiar enough face. When it comes to female ailments, a woman would always prefer to deal with another woman.”

“Ah, sympathy versus empathy.”

“Exactly!” She watched him as he strode to the side table and filled a plate with eggs, ham, and toast. And two heaping spoonfuls of orange marmalade on each slice. Her eyes widened. “A little toast with your marmalade?”

He glanced over his shoulder, saw her grin, and laughed. “I like my sweets in the morning and found I don’t care for chocolate.”

“Oh, I don’t know if I could trust someone who doesn’t care for chocolate.” She arched a brow, issuing the challenge. Something about him brought out the imp in her.

“Hm, I don’t know if I could trust someone who wouldn’t trust a man for not liking chocolate.”

“Touché!” She stood and moved to his side, taking a plate for herself. A spoonful of eggs and two slices of toast.

“Dry?” he asked skeptically.

“Yes, when no one is looking I dunk it in my chocolate.”

He looked at the table. “What chocolate?”

At that moment, the butler entered with a tray. She beamed at him. “Thank you, Mr. Gibbs.”

“You’re quite welcome, Lady Annette.” The corner of the butler’s mouth turned up a tiny bit, as close to a smile as he usually came.

“Only a woman with an adventurous soul would dunk her toast in her chocolate,” said the viscount admiringly. “I like you even better.”

“You like me?” Annette gave him a coquettish glance. At least, she hoped it was, for she suddenly felt like her lashes were batting away something in her eye rather than tempting this man. She giggled.

“You find it amusing that I like you?” His thick dark brows arched. “Or is there marmalade on my nose?”

Later, she’d swear the devil sat on her shoulder, for she had no other explanation. Annette dipped her spoon in the marmalade, reached up and smeared some on the viscount’s nose, then licked the spoon with a wicked grin.

His eyes widened, then danced with humor. “Lesson one. Don’t start a game you’re not willing to finish.” He took her hand, singling out her forefinger, wiped it across his nose, then popped it in his mouth, and licked off the sweet jam.

Heat washed over her as his mouth covered her fingertip, her stomach fluttering with

a hundred pairs of wings. She'd never experienced anything so... so... intimate with a man. She was sure there was a rule against this, but she didn't care. The air cooled her skin as he released her finger, and Annette found herself staring at the digit as if it were magical. Then she peeked up at Lord Weston, who was grinning down at her.

"I apologize if I offended you," he said in a low voice. "I'm not sure what came over me."

Annette found her eyes locked on his lips as he spoke. She had the strangest desire to go on tiptoe and kiss him. Her father would have an apoplexy. Lord Weston might too. Or would he kiss her back? Instead, she blurted out, "I usually go for a ride in the mornings before breakfast, but I overslept today. Would you care to join me tomorrow?"

The merriment faded from his eyes as he held her gaze for a long moment. She'd been too forward. Her social skills really had suffered these past few years.

"I'd love to if your father does not mind."

She let out a loud breath and beamed at him. He'd only been considering. "Wonderful."

"Yes, wonderful," he murmured as his eyes scanned her face. "Now, shall we eat?"

* * *

Annette hummed as she walked along the shelves of books lining the wall. The library was one of her favorite places. Masculine like her father and brothers, she loved the dark paneling, leather furniture, and giant hearth. There was a large globe in one corner behind her father's desk and a map of the world on the other. There were pins marking everywhere the family had traveled, her brothers in particular.

She'd felt as if she were floating on a cloud of happiness all day. After breakfast with Lord Weston, he had rejoined her father, and she'd written to her brother in India. Now, she wanted a book to read, preferably a romantic novel where the heroine was saved in some dramatic way by the dashing hero. Who happened to be of similar appearance to a certain viscount.

Samuel Richardson was one of her favorites, *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* being one of the first romance novels she'd ever read. But today, she was looking for something with a bit more excitement. She trailed her finger along the book spines, reading the titles. The act revived the marmalade memory of this morning, and she shivered.

Her finger stopped at *The Adventures of Roderick Random* by Tobias Smollett. One of her brothers had read this. A man seeking his fortune on a ship... She pulled out the leather-bound tome and opened it, flipping the pages, stopping to read a portion.

Apologue

A Young painter indulging a vein of pleasantry, sketched a kind of conversation-piece, representing a bear, an owl, a monkey, and an ass; and to render it more striking, humorous and moral, distinguished every figure by some emblem of human life.

Bruin was exhibited in the garb and attitude of an old, toothless, drunken soldier; the owl perched upon the handle of a coffee-pot, with spectacle on nose, seemed to contemplate a news paper; and the ass, ornamented with a huge tye-wig, (which, however, could not conceal his long ears) sat for his picture to the monkey, who appeared with the implements of painting. The whimsical groupe afforded some mirth ?—

The sound of wheels crunching on gravel drew her attention from the book. The vicar had arrived. With a sigh, she picked up her skirts and left the library. Mr. Gibbs was

already at the door, of course, waiting to greet the guests.

Annette quickly checked the drawing room and found, to her relief, Alice rising from a chair. She set her embroidery on the velvet chair seat and smoothed her auburn hair.

“Are we ready?” she asked Annette with a smile.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” She followed the viscountess to the entryway just as the couple emerged from the coach. The vicar was a short man with a round, not unpleasant face, thin blond hair, and brown eyes. His body was thin except for his stomach, protruding slightly through his open greatcoat. Annette thought of a turkey, then immediately stifled her giggle.

His sister stepped down, clinging to her brother’s arm, and surveyed her surroundings with a stern eye. She was a head taller with a long face but had the same hair and eye color as the vicar. When she saw the butler and the women, she gave them a curt nod.

“Mr. and Miss Langston, welcome. I trust your journey was pleasant?” asked Annette.

“If you consider being jostled until my teeth rattled, and my fingers numb from the cold, then yes, the journey was fine,” Miss Langston answered as the two climbed the stairs of the portico. “But I will do what I must to improve my brother’s livelihood.”

“We’ll need to find her a husband if you choose this man,” mumbled Alice as they both stepped forward, pasting on smiles.

The vicar reddened. “Lady Henney, Lady Annette, it is a pleasure to be invited. We have looked forward to this visit.”

As Mr. Gibbs oversaw the trunks, Alice nodded to Annette, who suggested they

follow her to their rooms so they could freshen up from their journey. “We’ve placed you side by side if that’s agreeable to you both?”

“Of course, where else would we be but together.” It was more a statement than a question by Miss Langston as she studied the entryway with a detailed eye. Annette thought she saw the gleam of approval in the woman’s small eyes.

“That’s fine, just fine,” murmured the vicar. “Ah, a book.”

Annette had forgotten the novel in her hand. “Yes, I love to read. And you?”

“The bible, of course, and anything that improves my mind.” He tilted his head to read the title. “The Adventures of Roderick Random?”

“Yes, it is a?—”

“A very inappropriate book for a proper and moral lady to be reading,” finished his sister. “Please tell me this is not your choice.”

Annette’s cheeks burned. She was not off to a good start.

“Lady Annette fetched it for me, truth be told.”

CHAPTER 7

Andrew forced a smile. “Do you argue with my reading preferences?” He held out his hand for the book. “As a lad, I always wanted to take to the sea.”

He and Beecham had heard the vicar’s arrival. The voice that met them in the hall was like a scratch on metal. He knew this type of woman. He had hired a governess like her—once. An embittered old spinster. He’d fired her the first day when he heard her tell Phoebe that a lady should never appear too sunny. Unfortunately, one couldn’t fire a guest.

“Oh.” Miss Langston’s eyes grew wide at his declaration.

Lady Henney made the introductions and reacquainted them with Lord Beecham. “I’m sure your guests are in need of a rest before tea,” she said to Lady Annette.

“Of course, I’ll show you to your rooms.” Lady Annette ascended the steps, the couple behind her. The vicar’s sister mumbled something about high and instep and so many stairs . She was quite out of breath by the time they stopped at a blue door just past his own room. Wonderful.

“You will be in the blue room, Mr. Langston.” Lady Annette turned to his sister. “And across the hall is your room.”

“The yellow door?”

“We call it primrose.”

He grinned, watching Lady Annette take in a deep breath.

“How clever. Colored doors,” she sniffed. “At least it’s not green. I hate green.”

Demmed woman had only been in residence a quarter of an hour and was already a thorn in everyone’s side. He wouldn’t allow Miss Langston to bully this lovely creature.

“Yet it would be the most beneficial color for you, ma’am. It represents calm, known to soothe anxiety. It’s also in the middle of the color spectrum and provides balance.” He needed to give his valet a bonus later.

Lady Annette jerked her head around, her eyes wide as she realized he’d followed them. Her lips pressed together in a tight line. She was trying not to laugh. He wasn’t the host, so he grinned back at her. She scowled, a pitiful attempt to scold him since she was still holding back a laugh. “I didn’t realize colors could be educational and so important to our wellbeing.”

A footman arrived with a trunk. “Where does this go, my lady?” he asked Lady Annette. She looked at the vicar with a raised brow.

Mr. Langston shrugged, uncertain. “It’s both of ours, actually. My sister felt it unnecessary to bring two for such a short stay. Please”—he motioned to the servant—“bring it into the...” He cast a nervous glance at Annette, then his sister. “Put it in the yellow room. Once she’s finished unpacking, I’ll fetch the trunk myself.”

“No need, sir. Just yank the bellpull, and I’ll get it for you.”

Annette opened the primrose door, and the footman followed both women into the room. This interaction had informed Andrew that sister and brother resided under the

same roof. Lady Annette would wither away like a flower in frost if she were exposed to that mean-spirited woman day in and day out. Or become her.

Not if he had a say in the matter. Andrew decided the character of the vicar made no difference if his sister would be living with them. This suitor was already being crossed off his list.

At least when Miss Langston surveyed the room, she found nothing to complain about. When Lady Annette returned to the hall, he had already shown the vicar his quarters. After both guests had closed the doors, he held out his arm, indicating he'd follow her.

"Thank you," she whispered as they descended to the drawing room.

"The eye of your storm," he whispered in her ear. "Just come to the center whenever you need me."

She nodded.

"When do they leave?" he asked. "After dinner?"

"Perhaps she's just tired, and her mood will improve after a rest."

"Your tone is sarcastic." He could smell the jasmine in her hair.

"You are quite a perceptive man." Again with the humorous sarcasm. He enjoyed her wit.

Andrew studied her long, graceful neck as she moved down the stairs. A few dark curls fell against it, moving as she did. He wanted to reach out and touch one, to see if her hair felt as satiny as it looked. Another mystery of life, Drew, he told himself.

For he knew he should never touch her. This morning had been instinct, acting as if he were a green boy instead of a mature man almost her father's age.

They entered the drawing room to find Lady Henney and Beecham in a heated discussion. "Just give the man a chance. We can't hold his sister against him."

"Horsefeathers! If she pulls him around by the bull's ring, then Nettie will forever be in her shadow. Did you see the footman only bring up one trunk? She is lady of the house, and I doubt she has any intention of changing—" Lady Henney saw them at the door and rearranged her face into a smile. "Are they all settled, then?"

"Yes. And I don't think we should jump to conclusions. Perhaps Miss Langston doesn't travel well. Remember how William would get nauseated every time he rode in the carriage? Didn't we bring his pony along sometimes when he needed fresh air?"

"Yes," said Beecham, "but he was young and outgrew it. She's an adult."

"If my opinion counts," added Andrew, "I side with Lady Henney."

"Of course it does." Beecham pulled at his cravat and gave his fiancée a side-glance. "We must stick to the plan, though, and let Nettie decide."

"Thank you, Papa." Lady Annette plopped down onto a wingback chair.

"Who arrives tomorrow?" asked Andrew. There had to be better choices than this namby-pamby.

Lady Henney tapped her chin. "Lucius is accompanying the next two gentlemen. Mr. Fitzjames, fourth son of Viscount Fitzjames, is heavily invested in textiles but does not own property outside his London rowhouse. Which makes the dowry appealing

but not necessary, though Nettie would not enjoy moving to Town if he chose to remain.”

Andrew noted the grimace on Lady Annette’s face.

“Mr. Hawkesbury has just sold his commission and is returning to civilian life. It seems he acquired an interest in politics while serving and may pursue in that direction. Not ideal, but Nettie does have a keen mind and could engage him in some stimulating debate.” Lady Henney smiled at Lady Annette. “She has so many talents.”

This elicited a snort from the subject. “Resourceful would be a better word.”

“A talent that comes in handy more than you may realize.” Andrew didn’t mind humor, but he wouldn’t allow this woman to belittle herself. “Time in the army taught me that. Resourcefulness can save lives.”

The smile he received for his words warmed him. Here was a wonderful woman who had been scorned for a ridiculous reason. He wanted to pull her into his arms and tell her that all men weren’t idiots. She’d look at you like some old lecher. No, he’d stay with the kindly father persona and help her the best he could.

* * *

“Shall we retire to the drawing room, ladies?” asked Lady Annette after they’d finished dinner.

She’d changed into a flowing silk dress, a carmelite shade that matched her dark hair and made her eyes seem brighter, more of a sea green. Her thick tresses were pulled back in a tight bun, softened by the curls along her cheeks. Andrew realized she’d dressed for her guests, showing she could be a vicar’s wife with the muted colors and

hairstyle.

Mr. Langston had taken notice. He engaged Lady Annette in conversation, asking about her good deeds in the village. His face wore an almost happy expression, the nervousness fading as he drank the fine French wine. And with each glass, he noted his sister's scowl deepened. Andrew felt an inkling of respect for the man when he continued to ignore the viper. "Gentlemen, what if we forego the brandy and join the ladies?" asked the vicar, smiling benevolently at Lady Annette.

"I don't think—" began Miss Langston.

"Wonderful idea," interrupted Alice. "No reason to be so formal for such a small gathering."

Andrew wanted to laugh when Miss Langston huffed herself out of the chair and moved sullenly to the drawing room. He wondered if she'd planned to harass, er, question Lady Annette, and the vicar had foiled her plans. Good .

Once the men had their brandy and tea had been ordered for the ladies, Beecham made a suggestion. "I'm quite full from that delicious dinner. How about a game of Courtiers so we can move a bit?"

Andrew wondered what Miss Langston would do if he chucked her under the chin to rid her of that frown. He'd noticed her apparent disapproval when her brother had accepted a glass of brandy. The man was getting foxed. It definitely improved his personality.

"Splendid idea," exclaimed Mr. Langston. "I'll be the first king, but does anyone mind if I don't sit?" No one dissented, so the men set down their glasses, and everyone stood in the middle of the room, facing the vicar, who began with a brisk march. The others joined him, knees going up and arms pumping. As no one laughed,

he began the next movement, bending over and swinging his arms back and forth like an ape.

Lady Henney giggled, ending the game and sending her to the middle as the next monarch. She put her thumb to her nose and wagged the rest of her hand at the others, who repeated the action. When the viscountess pushed her backside out and wiggled it, Lady Annette broke into loud laughter, causing Miss Langston to gasp. Andrew wasn't sure if it was the unladylike guffaw or not wanting to wiggle her bum.

Andrew, on the other hand, was next to Lady Annette and was delighted with the movement. The viscountess resumed her place next to Beecham, who promptly kissed her cheek with a grin. "Thank you for the lovely view, my dear," Andrew heard him whisper into the lady's ear.

He was sorry to see Lady Annette move to the center of the room. When she took her place as the next queen, Andrew felt a distinct emptiness beside him. He'd wanted to grab her hand and pull her back. It was foolhardy, for he barely knew her. Yet there was some bond, some invisible tie that pulled at him, kept him near to her.

The dark-haired beauty pulled up her gloves, thinking of what to do. Then she fisted one hand, raised it above her head, and swung her arm toward the group. Disaster followed. Everyone but the vicar repeated the motion. Mr. Langston, however, shrank back and put his arms in front of his face, as if someone were trying to strike him. He looked around, his face turning red, and offered a sheepish smile as everyone stared at him.

"It was just that my sister told me..." He trailed off, but the damage was done. His sister glared at him, mumbling something about a long-tongued cad.

Andrew watched Lady Annette's face crumble, blinking furiously. She was valiantly forcing back tears, and his ire roared. "You worry that a woman, in the middle of a

game, might plant a facer on you?" he asked incredulously. "You are not man enough to court a woman of Lady Annette's stature. Apologize at once or you'll answer to me."

"And me," added the earl.

"I only... perhaps the wine..." Mr. Langston tripped over his words. "I am truly sorry, Lady Annette. Perhaps I should retire for the evening."

"Yes," agreed Beecham. "That would be best."

At that point, Lady Annette began to laugh. A laugh so hearty, she was soon wiping tears from her cheeks. She bent, her arms around her waist, shaking her head until a few rogue curls fell from the chignon.

"She is not fit to be a vicar's wife. I knew this was a fool's errand," shrieked Miss Langston. "If it wasn't for the dowry, I would never have allowed my brother to come."

"Dearest," pleaded the vicar, "don't insult our host."

She turned on her brother with vehemence. "I told you to avoid the liquor tonight, so you wouldn't act like a buffoon. See what you've done?"

"I believe it would be best for all to retire. A good night's rest will give us a fresh outlook in the morning." Lady Henney took charge of the situation as efficiently as any officer in battle, beckoning to her fiancé to follow. She got behind the Langstons and corralled them toward the door. "I'll have some warm milk sent to your rooms to help you sleep. Perhaps some biscuits too. Tomorrow we'll all have a fresh start."

"Yes, ma'am." The vicar sounded like a small boy who had been reprimanded.

Andrew tried without success to keep the sneer from his face. He looked over his shoulder at Lady Annette, now sitting with her head in her hands.

CHAPTER 8

Annette wanted to curl up into a tiny ball and hide under the chair, like a puff of dust that could be swept away and disposed of. But she was not, and she could not. When the vicar had covered his face, she knew immediately he'd heard of The Incident. And believed it. His had not been a comical reaction, but one of fear. When she knew she couldn't hold back the humiliating tears, she'd begun laughing instead. Hysterically.

The look of horror on Miss Langston's face had been worth it. Annette had refused to let that woman see her cry. She instinctively knew it would have made the woman happy. Now sitting in an empty room, she let the tears flow, cleansing her soul of the pent-up frustration. Annette wanted to scream, yell at the world for the injustice done to her, get revenge on a petty duke's son who had ruined her chances at love.

A warmth seeped into her side, and she realized with a jolt that she wasn't alone. An arm went around her shoulders and pulled her close. His scent, spicy yet sweet, told her it wasn't her father, but she let him hold her anyway. He rocked gently, back and forth, back and forth, until her tears subsided, and she hiccupped.

A handkerchief appeared in front of her face as she sniffed. "Th-thank you. I realized I must either laugh or cry in front of our guests. Laughter, maniacal as it sounded, seemed the better option. You must think I'm?—"

"A beautiful and underappreciated woman."

His low timbre soothed her frazzled nerves. Peeking up at him, he gave her a sad

smile and kept her close to his side. Without thought, she snuggled against his chest, soaking in his strength. Why couldn't Lord Weston be her suitor? Leaning into him, his arm around her, it felt so natural, so right.

“Don't let that spineless milksop prey upon your good cheer. He has no idea what an amazing woman he just lost.” With a finger under her chin, he lifted her head to meet his gaze. “You realize any man would be lucky to have you as a wife?”

Annette shook her head, acutely aware of his touch searing her skin. Her heart began to pound. Would he kiss her? Please, kiss me. She knew without a doubt that it would be the most incredible experience of her life. A moment to remember when she was an old, gray spinster. Or she might burst into flames from the heat of it. The heat of him.

But he did not kiss her. Instead, he gathered her into a tight hug and gave the top of her head a chaste peck. Then he disentangled them and stood, holding out his hand to her. “May I escort you to your room?”

“Yes, please,” she murmured. When he pulled her up, Annette found herself staring at his mouth, so close she could feel his warm breath against her forehead. A strange urge enveloped her, and she stood on tiptoe, kissed his cheek, then tucked her arm through his.

* * *

22 December 1820

The next morning came much too quickly. It was as if Lord Weston's embrace—no, it had really been only a comforting hug—had eased her heart and mind, and she'd slept soundly. Jenny was already laying out her steel-gray riding habit.

“... and then she ordered the carriage,” the maid finished, hands on her hips. “Your chocolate is getting cold, milady.”

“Who ordered a carriage?” she asked, blinking the sleep from her eyes and stretching her arms over her head.

“You didn’t hear a word I’ve said.” Jenny tsked. “The vicar’s sister had their trunk packed early this morning and asked the footman to order their coach. Told Lady Henney there was an appointment she’d forgotten about that the vicar cannot postpone.”

“They’re gone?” Annette fell back against the pillow, uncertain if this was good or bad news.

“They will be if you tarry over your chocolate.” Jenny grinned. “Good riddance, I say. Mr. Langston is nothing like your brother.”

True. Ambrose was a wonderful vicar with a lovely wife. His congregation adored him, and the feeling was mutual. Jenny and Lord Weston were right. She should not feel guilty or ashamed about last night. Neither the man nor his sister were worth another thought.

Annette was surprised to see another horse saddled along with her Welsh cob, Domino, whose dapple-gray color had reminded her of spots on a domino piece. A huge black gelding stood patiently next to her mare, waiting for?—

“It’s a fine morning for a ride. Thank you for inviting me.” Lord Weston emerged from the stable. He looked dizzyingly handsome in his snug riding coat and breeches. His Hessians shone from a recent polish. “The sun is out, there is little wind, and I have a lovely companion by my side. What more could a man ask for?”

Annette had completely forgotten she'd invited him to ride with her before breakfast. Her stomach did a tumble as he smiled down at her, her breath catching when his knuckle tapped her chin.

"You had a better night's sleep? Your eyes are brighter this morning." His gaze seemed to take in every detail of her face.

"Riches, and yes, thank you," she said to both questions, then grinned at his confusion.

"Ah, what more could a man ask for? But there are all kinds of riches. I have wealth, so more blunt does not tempt me. A friendship—with a kind and beautiful woman—would be worth so much more. Do you think that's possible?"

"It depends," she countered with a grin, "on whether the woman was the daughter of a close friend."

"I believe she is," he teased back.

"Then yes, I do think it's possible. In fact, I believe it's already in progress."

They stood facing each other, both with stupid grins on their faces, until the stable boy cleared his throat. "Do ye want me to come along?" he asked. The lad usually rode with Annette because her father refused to let her go alone.

She wanted to say no. She wanted to ride at a gallop, the wind in her face, with only this delicious man at her side. Her heart screamed, Go away. Her brain reminded her of her father and propriety. "Yes, please, follow behind us."

The viscount looked pointedly at her saddle, then cocked his head with a smirk. "Do you often reject the side saddle or only when you're in the country?"

“Does it matter?” she tossed back.

“Not in the least. Just getting to know you.” His gaze traveled the length of her riding habit, coming back to the high, fitted waist, then lingering on her lips before their eyes locked.

It was thrilling to be near this man. Her thoughts were always whirling when he was about, her stomach flipping like it had when she was a girl and had gone too high on the swing. Frightening but ever so exciting. She felt daring around Lord Weston and sensed he encouraged her.

“I’m a proper lady when riding with those outside my family,” she told him as he helped her mount her horse.

They did gallop side by side, laughing and racing and putting a good distance between them and the poor stable boy. Still, her small dapple-gray mare had no chance against the huge obsidian beast. There was a hedge near the end of the run. Annette had grinned at the viscount and cued Domino with a kick, taking the hedge in one smooth leap. They met on the other side, dragging in great breaths of cold air, little clouds of their breath floating between them. Lord Weston had won the race, of course, but she’d held her own.

“You have an excellent seat,” the viscount complimented. “I was a bit worried about that jump, but you handled your horse with skill.”

“Thank you, my lord. My brothers taught me to ride as a child. I believe I was all of three when they first tied me to a saddle.” She laughed at his horrified look. “My feet couldn’t reach the stirrups, so they had to devise a way to keep me secure.”

“They could have put you in front of them,” said Lord Weston.

“Oh, they’d been doing that since I was a babe. By three, I was demanding to ride alone.”

“Of course you were,” he teased. “Shall we head back?”

When she nodded, he motioned to the stable boy to return. “I take it your father doesn’t like you riding alone?”

Annette shook her head. “Papa believes I’m safe enough on foot. But he worries I could have an accident and be left injured, without any way to send for help. He’s right, of course.”

“He loves you very much.”

“He loves all his children. I’m glad he has found happiness with Lady Henney.” She glanced sideways at him. “Papa has been lonely for a long time. But of course, I’m sure you understand how he feels.”

There was a long pause before he answered, “When we lost Aggie, I vowed to raise Phoebe with as much love as two parents. I did consider a wife at first, someone with the maternal instincts I lacked. But Agnes’s sister swooped in like an angel sent from heaven. She had lost her husband a few years earlier and had no intention of marrying again.” He chuckled. “There are sisters—or sisters-in-law—that are not spiteful, bitter old hens. She was a godsend and helped fill the void for Phoebe that her mother had left.”

“They are close, then?” Annette asked.

“Very. She sponsored Phoebe for her first Season. Phoebe is with her in London now, acting as chaperone while she spends Christmastide with her fiancé.” His deep-brown eyes studied her. “Did you have a female in your life to help with the loss of your

mother?”

Annette shook her head, remembering the struggle to find one. “Mama died when I was ten. My father hired governess after governess, and my brothers sent each one running for the portico. I studied with their tutor instead. When did your wife die?”

“Over ten years ago, giving birth to our son. Phoebe was only eight.” He rubbed his chin, as if deciding his next words. “How long has your father been wooing Lady Henney?”

“Since my first Season. Papa had been confident that I would be betrothed by spring, and he began pursuing the viscountess.” She chuckled, but the memory was bittersweet, considering how long the two had been courting. “Poor lady had no idea how long the courtship would last. Five years later, she’s still waiting.”

“Why? What is the obstacle?”

“Me. Lady Henney thought it best to wait until I was married. But by the end of my second Season, it was obvious...”

“That the men in Town were fools?” he asked with a grin.

“Yes,” she agreed, grinning back. How did he manage to make an unpleasant memory seem not so devastating? Or make her feel as if none of it had been her fault? “I fled to our Suffolk estate, vowing never to return. Lady Henney lives on a neighboring estate—it’s how they knew each other—and followed Papa to the country. They worry if I don’t marry before they are settled, I never will.”

“Are they right?”

She nodded. “Probably. You saw what happened last night.”

“That man’s spine was made of pudding. He wasn’t good enough for you.”

Her pulse raced. Was he jealous? Don’t be a goose! “Thank you for saying that. I only hope the next few days will not be a repeat of the last.”

“I understand the men arriving tomorrow are acquaintances of your brother. I doubt they would do anything to cause you distress, or your brother would pulverize them.”

“Yes, I believe he would.” Annette laughed, wondering if Lord Weston would have liked to do the same to the vicar.

“Well, let’s have a hearty breakfast to prepare for round two, shall we?” He winked at her, kicked his horse lightly, and sent him into a canter. Annette did the same, lingering behind to watch his muscular form. She’d prefer a hearty helping of a certain viscount.

CHAPTER 9

They were just finishing breakfast with Beecham and Lady Henney when the butler announced Lord Page and his guests had arrived. Andrew was surprised to see Lady Annette bolt from her chair—which wobbled and would have hit the floor if Andrew hadn't caught it—and throw herself into the arms of her brother.

“Lucius, I've missed you so!”

Lucius had just made it from the entryway into the breakfast room when he caught Lady Annette and spun her around. “My sweet sister, I've missed you as well. And I've brought along some admirers.”

Two more men joined them as Page set his sister back on her feet. One was tall and lean with reddish hair and blue eyes. The other was of medium height but more muscular with blond hair and brown eyes. “May I introduce Mr. Hawkesbury,” Lucius said, indicating the taller man, “and Mr. Fitzjames. You've both met my father, Lord Beecham. This is my father's fiancé, Lady Henney, and his good friend Viscount Weston.”

Lady Annette's eyes widened. “You know Lord Weston?”

“Of course, we've met at the club with Father when the Lords are in session,” he answered, turning back to his friends. “And this is my lovely and inquisitive sister, Lady Annette.”

She held out her hand. “It is a pleasure, sirs.”

Andrew recognized the names. Hawkesbury's father was an earl, and Fitzjames's was a viscount. Both good families as Beecham had said they would be. So why did his jaw tighten as the men approached the table and bowed over Lady Annette's hand? Bollocks! He had no reason to be jealous. The men were here for the purpose of courting her. Get hold of yourself, nodcock.

Beecham had quit the table to give his son a slapping hug and shake hands with his new guests. "Welcome! Am I a day off or are you a day early? Doesn't matter, we've plenty of room."

"I wanted to send word but figured I'd get here on the tail of the messenger, so we thought to surprise you," Lucius explained, bending over Lady Henney's hand. "Ma'am, it's always a pleasure."

She blushed. "You get your charm from your father."

"That's why you love me so," he teased.

Andrew had seen the vicar and his sister leave early that morning. Observing the next parade participants, he had to admit they were an improvement. Both were fine-looking men and miles above the last would-be suitor. They would also know how close Lucius was to his sister and endeavor not to hurt her.

A tiny voice echoed in his ear. Mine. He shook his head and pushed the thought from his mind.

Fitzjames and Hawkesbury were shown to their rooms and would meet them later. The plan was to go skating in the afternoon. It had snowed overnight, providing a thin layer of white to cover the ground, the temperature just cold enough to freeze the water on the low-lying fields.

“I’m afraid I didn’t bring any skates. Is it safe to assume there are extra sets?” asked Andrew. He had hoped to avoid this particular adventure; it had been years since he’d tried it. But he’d be damned if he would stay behind with Beecham and his fiancée and look too old to participate.

“Of course,” said the earl. “We probably have at least a dozen pairs. We’ve always kept spares for visitors. I believe Alice and I will join you and watch from the carriage. Nothing like an afternoon with a hot toddy, warm bricks at my feet, and a spicy lady at my side.”

“Yes, someone needs to chaperone,” said Lady Henney. “We can’t leave her alone with three young gentlemen, even if one is her brother.”

“So, what am I? A left-over pocket pie?” Andrew realized how petulant he sounded as soon as the words came out of his mouth. He scratched at his neck, a half grin on his face, hoping they would take his words as a jest.

“Oh no,” said the viscountess. “You’re fresh from the oven. Piping hot and ready to be served.”

The woman winked at him. Winked at him. What was she implying with that vague comparison? Andrew cleared his throat and mumbled something about changing. He could hear his host and the lady’s chuckles as he made his way down the hall.

As Andrew left his room, he saw Lord Page and his friends ahead of him in the hall. He followed them to the billiard room, where Lady Annette was choosing a cue stick. She smiled shyly at the newcomers, then sat in a chair in a corner. She wore a light-green day dress of muslin that made her eyes appear the color of a forest, and her hair was caught up in a loose twist, dark curls spilling down her neck.

He stood against the door, watching the new suitors glance over at Lady Annette.

Hawkesbury chose a billiard mace and Fitzjames decided on a cue, like Lady Annette. Lord Page came to stand by Andrew, mischief in his green eyes.

“You look like a cat who just cornered a mouse,” Andrew said, wondering if the men would play each other or if one would ask Lady Annette to play.

“I have a bet going with both of them,” he answered, nodding toward his friends. “A guinea for every game they lose to Nettie.”

Andrew grinned. “She’s that good?”

Page nodded. “Beats me all the time. Not something I’d ever admit in public, but I’ll announce their losses with glee next time we’re in Town.”

Nice to know, Andrew thought. Men tended to be condescending whenever a woman entered the male game world. This should prove entertaining and show him who was a graceful loser and tolerant of a lady getting the better of them. One nice thing about his age—he knew not to assume the female always had the disadvantage. The question was, had these young men learned yet or would Lady Annette teach them that lesson?

Page cleared his throat, signaling the beginning of the game. Hawkesbury stepped forward with his mace and bowed to Lady Annette. “Would you care to try your luck at the table, my lady?” he asked gallantly.

She gave him a small smile and nodded. Her shyness was like a slap in the face. Where had the warm and social woman gone? Who was this docile wallflower?

“She’s gone so quiet,” Andrew murmured to her brother.

“Happens every time she’s with men she doesn’t know. Suitable men who might

judge her by her past,” Page answered back in a half whisper. “It’s the reason I arranged the billiards game. She’s confident here and won’t be a bundle of nerves once she gets started.”

His heart twisted a little at the change in demeanor. He hated to see her light dimmed by the present company. By anything.

“How many points for the win?” asked Fitzjames.

“How about 21?” suggested Page. Everyone nodded or spoke their agreement.

“A nice number for a beginner.” Fitzjames leaned against the paneling, awaiting his turn with an arrogant smirk. One of the many men who knew without a doubt that they could dominate a female.

The opponents hit their cue balls. Hawkesbury’s bounced off the far rail and rolled to a stop near the center of the table. Lady Annette’s barely tapped the rail and lay a finger’s width from the end of the table. Hawk shook his head good-naturedly, and with a bow, nodded to the lady. “Well done, my lady. It’s your choice.”

She gave him a thin smile.

“Would you like to go first, then?” Andrew smiled at the hope in the man’s voice. He watched the man wipe a palm against his trousers. Nervous all of a sudden too.

She shook her head, so Hawk placed the red ball on its spot and retreated to the end of the table, where he placed his cue ball within the D. He used a mace and smacked the solid white ball with the small, curved end. It hit the red ball, bounced off, and stopped at the left rail near the center pocket.

“Cannon. Two points for Hawk,” announced Page, the self-appointed scorekeeper.

Hawkesbury repeated the same stroke, claiming another two points, and then sank the red ball in a corner pocket. “Potting” was worth three points. He pulled the red ball from the pocket and placed it on its spot again. “Seven,” he murmured as he walked to the other side of the table where his ball sat at the far rail. This time he smacked his ball hard, just missing the red ball. His cue ball hit the far rail and bounced back, coming to a stop near but never touching the red ball.

“Foul of one point, total points, six,” tallied Page.

Hawkesbury bowed to Lady Annette and backed away, leaning against the wall beside Fitzjames. Annette peeked at her brother as she tossed her white cue ball—with one black spot to differentiate between the two players—up and down. After placing it within the D, she studied the other white cue ball and the red one. She walked around the table to judge each ball by its side and end view, rubbing the leather tip of her stick while she concentrated.

With a nod, she seemed to make a decision and returned to the top of the table. She lined up her stick with her cue ball, moved to one side, and smacked it hard at a slight angle. It hit both her opponent’s ball and the red one; the red ball shot into the side pocket, Hawk’s ball bounced against the side rail, over to the other rail, and came to a stop.

Fitzjames jerked his gaze from the lady’s backside to see the end of her play. His eyes grew wide.

“The devil,” murmured Hawkesbury, running a hand through his thick auburn waves.

“One cannon, one potted. Five,” Page said with glee.

Lady Annette fished out the red ball and replaced it. Fitz’s eyes returned to her backside, a faint smile on his face. This time, she aimed for the red ball and shot it in

the side pocket again with her cue.

“Eight points,” counted Page.

Lady Annette set her cue ball within the D, then aimed it for the side rail near her opponent’s ball. It bounced off and tapped the other white ball, which hit the end of the table, bounced off, and tapped the red ball. “Ten,” she murmured.

Fitz’s eyes were no longer studying her backside, but closely watching his future opponent.

The next play was another split. Her ball hit the red ball, then her opponent’s ball. The red went into a side pocket, the opponent’s ball stopped at the far end of the table. Andrew worried that she hadn’t smiled since they’d entered the room. Was she concentrating or out of sorts?

“What’s the score?” asked Hawk, shaking his head, his admiration evident.

“Fifteen.” Page adopted a pitying tone. “You look a little worried, Fitz.”

“Luck.” But there was concern in Fitz’s blue eyes.

On her next shot, Lady Annette bypassed the red ball, tipped her opponent’s ball against the rail, and back out into the center of the table for two more points. “Seventeen,” she murmured to herself. Walking back and forth, she rubbed the leather tip of her stick again as she studied the table. With concentrated aim, she hit the red ball into her opponent’s ball. The white ball rolled into the side pocket, and the red ball plunked into the far corner pocket. She straightened, and a tiny smile tipped her lips. “Game.”

Andrew restrained the hearty laugh that threatened to burst. He was proud of Lady

Annette when she took pity on the second man. "I'm quite tired, gentlemen. Would you mind terribly if we postponed this until after dinner?"

Fitzjames let out a loud sigh and agreed, "Of course. The skating will be quite strenuous. Please, take a rest if it's needed."

She nodded, gave them another small smile, and left the room. Andrew followed her out into the hall. "You were magnificent. Did you know your brother had a wager on you?"

She laughed, which made Andrew's heart lighten, and nodded. "He always does. But he's better than I am. I was his student."

"Are you really tired or only being kind to your guests?" he asked.

"I knew if I won, it would offend Mr. Fitzjames. I have a feeling he would be mortified to be beaten by a woman." She shrugged. "On the other hand, Mr. Hawkesbury seems much more confident in his maleness. I also assumed that was why Lucius had him play against me first."

Andrew shook his head. "The two of you are quite close."

"Yes, these days we look out for each other." She checked her sleeve, then looked reluctantly down the hall. "Oh, no. I left my handkerchief in there."

"I'll fetch it for you. Wait a moment." Andrew returned to the billiards room to find Page had left, leaving his friends to continue playing.

"She's an odd chit," said Fitzjames. "But I'll charm her, regardless."

"She doesn't talk much. I was hoping for more conversation." Hawkesbury was

bending over the table. “I thought he said she wasn’t shy.”

“I can’t imagine why Page set this up. Doesn’t help the chit’s image at all. She’ll have to learn to act the proper lady, learn her place with men.” Fitzjames chuckled. “I couldn’t care less if she’s mute or talks incessantly. I’ll teach her what she needs to know once we’re married, and words won’t be necessary.”

“Lady Annette is a beauty, but she seemed rather awkward, don’t you think?”

“As I just said, who cares? A hefty dowry, an earl for a father-in-law, and a soft body in my bed.” Fitzjames snorted. “What are you looking for? Love?”

“No, companionship. If anything comes of it, that would be a boon.”

Fitzjames laughed. “I have plenty of women for companionship . I need a wife to have my children and run my household.”

“What if she turns you down?” Hawkesbury glanced over his shoulder and froze when he saw Andrew.

“Won’t happen once she experiences the Fitz magic.”

“And how, exactly, will she experience that?” asked Andrew quietly from behind.

“I’ll take the innocent in my arms and kiss her senseless. She’ll be begging for more before I’m done.”

“And Page knows of your plan?” Andrew stepped farther into the room.

Fitzjames had just pulled his arm back to strike the ball when he stopped. He had the grace to look sheepish as he turned around. “My apologies, my lord. We’re just two

fellows talking. No harm meant.”

“What I heard said under your host’s roof was bad form. If I catch you trying any magic with Lady Annette, my fist will make some magic on your face.” Andrew walked to the corner of the room and retrieved the lady’s handkerchief. “Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” they both said at once.

CHAPTER 10

Andrew sat on a trunk containing the wooden blades, watching as Lady Annette and her brother got on the ice first. It was obvious how often they'd done this together. They glided arm in arm, taking the curve of the makeshift pond with such grace. Their legs crossed over in unison, then as they straightened, Lord Page took the lead, moving in front of his sister and skating backward.

I'll make a fool of myself, he thought. But then Mr. Hawkesbury put a tentative foot onto the ice, moved it back and forth, and returned it to solid ground. He looked about with a frantic gaze and locked eyes with Andrew. Thank you, Hawkesbury. You saved my arse.

He approached the man with a smile. "First time?"

"I'm afraid so," Hawkesbury said, running a hand through his wavy red hair. "I can do about anything in boots, but these..." He picked up one foot and stuck out the wooden skate strapped to his feet.

"If it makes you feel any better, I taught my daughter with a rope. Tied one to both ends of a patch of ice, so she was able to hold on and find her balance." Andrew shrugged. "Sorry, I don't have one with me."

"My pride wouldn't let me anyway." He tried again as Andrew strapped on his skates. Once the man had two feet on the slippery service, he grinned. "I think I've got iiiiiit." Splat.

The tall man was all scattered limbs. He leaned forward and brought his knees to his chest, hands on either side to boost himself up. It didn't go well. Andrew took pity on him. "Deuce if that didn't hurt me just watching it." Andrew laughed as he went to help Hawkesbury. "Don't try it on your own until you're steadier. Trust me, it will only make it worse."

Mr. Fitzjames stepped around his friend and onto the ice, made a perfect circle, then skated backwards, waving. "Guess I'll win this one, Hawk," he taunted. Then he turned around and slammed right into Lord Page. Both men went sprawling in opposite directions on their bums. Fitzjames rubbed his elbow while Page poked gingerly at the back of his head.

In the center of the ice stood Lady Annette with her gloved hands covering her mouth. A giggle erupted from her throat which turned into a laugh, then a guffaw. She hugged her stomach, peeked up at the three men lying on the frozen pond, and straightened, wiping her eyes with her gloved hands.

"Well, Lord Weston, you appear to be"—more giggles—"the last man standing."

"It seems fate is plotting to pair us up," he called back.

She placed her hands on her hips, pushing away the claret fur-lined cloak, and smiled at him. The sweetest gut punch he'd ever received. Her shining dark tresses, only partially pulled back under her matching deep-red hat, tumbled against her shoulders and framed her creamy skin. Pink tinged her cheeks and lips from the cold. Desire rumbled through him, and he cursed himself for wanting something he shouldn't have. Andrew made his way to her slowly, deliberately, vowing not to follow the path of the other poor wretches freezing their backsides. When he reached her, she held out a hand to him.

What if he grasped it and never let go? Stop! Why did he have such feelings for

someone he'd only known a few days? Yet, he'd known with Aggie at their introduction. Thoughts of her hit him like a sledgehammer of guilt. What would she think of Lady Annette's age? What would his daughter think?

The lady in question gripped his fingers and pulled him closer. The scent of jasmine tickled his nose; warmth seeped through their gloves. Thoughts of Agnes and Phoebe disappeared. He would enjoy the moment.

"You cretins let an old codger best you," yelled Beecham from one of two carriages on the hill overlooking the ice. He waved a flask through the window. "I raised you better than that, Lucius. No resting on your laurels today!"

"A point for the viscount," cried Lady Henney. "Show them how it's done, Weston!"

Andrew was shocked to see the woman also held a flask in her hand. The pair loved life, and he doubted they would ever have a dull moment in their future "dotage." Ha!

"What do you think your stepmother has in her flask?" he asked, pleased that they, too, crossed their legs in unison as they took the curve at the end. "She's quite a conundrum, isn't she?"

"It's spiced wine, essential for every outdoor winter event." Lady Annette waved back at them, her emerald eyes sparkling. "Lady Henney decided to live life to the fullest when her husband died, and she's taking my father along for the ride. Have you ever seen a couple happier?"

Not in many years, he thought. "Was she bereft when he passed?"

"Not at all. He was a terrible man, beat her soundly or ignored her altogether. She says his death was the best thing that ever happened to her." Lady Annette raised a brow and waited for his reaction.

“I’m surprised she wants to try again, then.” Andrew looked back at the carriage, seeing the viscountess in a new light. He’d been acquainted with her husband and never would have guessed the man was such a blaggard.

“Oh, it took years. And then she and my father stumbled upon each other at Hyde Park. He asked her to walk with him and... Well, they’ve been courting ever since.” Lady Annette sighed. “She says Papa is the kindest man she’s ever known. I only wish they’d met earlier.”

Perhaps a change of subject was in order. “What do you want? In a man, in a husband? Excitement or stability?”

“Both,” she answered without hesitation. “I know it’s impossible. But you asked what I wanted, not what I’d be content with.”

“Why? Two fine gentlemen fell head over heels for you just a few moments ago.” He reached over and squeezed her hand. “I think you should reach for the stars.”

Lady Annette sighed. “I lost sight of those during my second Season. But you are right about the eligible men here today. One in particular has caught my eye.”

“Who—”

“My lady, would you care to dance,” interrupted Mr. Fitzjames, who had regained his feet. He held out his arm, oblivious to his wild blond curls sticking in every direction. He was a stocky man, built more like a pugilist. Why were his frosty blue eyes lingering on her lips? Did he not remember the earlier warning?

“I’d love to, Mr. Fitzjames, but I’m afraid a cotillion is out of the question.”

“I agree,” he said as he looped an arm around her waist and pulled her away from

Andrew. "A waltz would be much better."

Andrew watched as the gentleman skated away with Lady Annette, moving her in graceful circles while she hummed a tune. Blast! He'd have to watch that one closely.

"A point for Fitzjames," called out Lady Henney. "Come join us, Weston."

Not an awful idea. He glided to the edge of the ice, nodding to Hawkesbury, now leaning against a tree. "Not up for another try?"

"I'm a man who learns by experience. And this one taught me to remember my limitations." He walked with Andrew to the trunk he and Lucius had carried down the hill.

They each sat on an end and removed their skates. Andrew tried not to glare at the young man skating Lady Annette in circles. She was laughing at something he'd said. A glittering diamond that only lacked the proper setting. He realized he wanted her to find a match that kept such joy on her face. Perhaps Fitzjames was all bark and had only been bragging to his friend. He'd had no problem laughing at himself when he fell on the ice.

Whether it was him or one of the other possible suitors, it really didn't matter. Her happiness, not her family's or his or these hopeful suitors, was the most important factor in this entire farce.

Glancing over at Hawkesbury, he saw the young man doing the same thing. "She's a beauty, isn't she?"

"I'm afraid I don't have a chance." The young man rose with a sigh. "But I won't give up yet."

“That’s the spirit.” Andrew clamped his shoulder. “Can you dance?”

“Better than I skate,” he said with a grin.

“That’s encouraging. She likes the outdoors. Do you have any hobbies in that area?”
Why was he helping this lad?

“Not really. I prefer a good history book and a fine brandy. I’m a good shot and more than adequate in fencing. I’m considering settling in Calcutta. My father has a house there, and there’s a newspaper for sale. I’ve always enjoyed politics but hated the thought of being a politician.” They had made the top of the hill, and Beecham opened his carriage door, flask in hand.

“That’s one way of being involved,” agreed Andrew. He liked the fellow but also knew Lady Annette would never live so far from her family.

Hawkesbury tipped the flask to his mouth and shook it. “I’m afraid it’s empty, Lord Beecham.”

“No worries, my boy. I have a spare,” he said jovially, reaching under his seat and feeling around for it. “Here we go.” The earl passed the new container to the men.

“Or two or three,” piped up Lady Henney with a giggle. “He said his usual amount would never do, considering the additional guests.”

“And how many did you bring, my lady?” asked Andrew, a smirk turning up his mouth.

“A lady never tells,” she quipped, then redirected their attention. “Don’t they make a lovely pair on the ice?”

As the four turned to look, they saw Lord Page making his way up to join them. “I figured she was safe enough with so many eyes upon them.”

He leaned into the carriage, reached under the bench where his father sat, and pulled out a third flask. “Brandy or whisky?”

“Deuced good brandy,” answered Hawkesbury, wiping his mouth with his sleeve and handing the container to Andrew. He realized too late his blunder. “Excuse my language, ma’am.”

She nodded politely.

“This will warm my fingers and toes.” Lord Page tipped back his head, taking a long draw. “What’s next on our agenda?”

CHAPTER 11

Annette rubbed her toes, willing the blood to flow back into them. She shouldn't have stayed out so long, but she'd been having such a wonderful time. The billiard game had been a bit tense, but the skating had broken the ice. She giggled at the pun. Between her brother, his two friends, and Lord Weston, she had felt like a princess holding court. She bit her lip, wondering how her fairy tale would end.

"The indigo tonight, milady?" asked Jenny.

"Yes, with the wine-colored shawl." Annette opened a box at her toilette and fingered the earbobs with the dark wine-colored carnelian stones. The ancient Egyptians had used the polished rocks as talismans. Could they protect her from insincere suitors? It couldn't hurt.

"Did you enjoy skating?" asked Jenny, helping Annette out of her day dress. "Did you learn anything about the two gentlemen?"

"It was a splendid day. I believe Mr. Hawkesbury is more studious than athletic. He attempted the ice, fell, and then observed the rest of the time. Mr. Fitzjames, on the other hand, is very strong and agile. He would enjoy any of the physical activities that I do." She grinned, remembering. "We danced the waltz."

"On skates? Oh, my." Jenny guided her mistress to the chair and picked up a brush. "Any preference so far?"

"Hmm. Mr. Fitzjames is very handsome and confident. Too confident, maybe? I

believe he does well with the opposite sex.” She handed Jenny a dark-blue ribbon. “Mr. Hawkesbury, on the other hand, is fair to look at but more intellectual and prefers a lively conversation.”

“If you combined the two, you’d have the perfect man.”

“Yes,” murmured Annette, thinking of Lord Weston who did seem to have all of those qualities.

“And the viscount? How was he?”

“He was the only man who did not fall.”

“Steady and reliable.” She threaded the ribbon into Annette’s loose chignon. “He also was taken with your wit. And he’s handsome.”

“True.” She and Jenny looked at each other in the mirror. Neither said what they were both thinking. Perfect.

* * *

“I need to stop in the kitchen and thank Cook. Dinner was stupendous,” said Lucius, rubbing his trim stomach. “And she made my favorite custard.”

“She’s always spoiled you,” said Annette, remembering all the secret rendezvous to the kitchen as children to raid the cupboards, only to find their favorites left out on the table for them.

“Funny thing,” mused Hawkesbury, a conspiratorial grin on his face, “but according to Page, it’s the other way around. You were always the doted-on sibling.”

“Me?” Annette rolled her eyes. “I suppose I did get most of the attention. In my defense, I was the only girl.”

“It’s a miracle you turned out so feminine, considering your childhood,” added her father. “Remember your pirate stage? Wore only William’s breeches for almost a year with some old tri-corner hat she’d found along the road, climbed the tree in the garden looking for any suspicious ships—not that there’s a large enough body of water nearby—and using that terrible shanty slang.”

“What was the name of the governess at the time?” asked Lucius, chuckling. “The poor woman about had an apoplexy the first time she saw Nettie in the outfit, threatening to make her walk the plank.”

Annette covered her eyes and shook her head. “William started it. Said he wanted to be Captain Kidd, and I could be his first mate.” She uncovered her face and reached for her wine, giving Lord Weston a side look. “Mrs. Feathersom. That was her name.”

“Yes!” Lucius let out a hearty laugh. “Ambrose snuck into a chicken coop in the village and gathered a basket of feathers. The stinkiest ones he could find. Then he’d leave one for her to find every day. I think the one he left in her teapot—after she’d had a cup—was the last straw.”

“Lucius always mispronounced her name.” Her father warmed up to the subject. “Mrs. Somefeathers, Mrs. Nofeathers, Mrs. Featherless, and the worst one was Mrs. Fartfeathers.”

“How she could screech,” reminisced Annette.

“It sounds like all of you needed a good thrashing,” Lord Weston teased.

“They did indeed,” agreed Papa.

“But look how well they turned out.” Lady Henney raised her glass. “To rotten children maturing.”

“I don’t know if I’d call Page mature ,” said Hawkesbury.

“Egads, no,” agreed Fitzjames, holding up his glass. “But he definitely grew.”

“Nettie, shall we retire to the drawing room and wait for the gentlemen to join us?” asked Lady Henney.

She nodded, and the men rose as they made their way out of the room. Once settled, Alice leaned forward and took Annette’s hand. “Well, what are your thoughts so far? Favoring anyone in particular?”

“I was thinking earlier that if only I could combine the best qualities of each man, then I’d have the perfect husband. But I really don’t know if either of them are interested.” She chewed her bottom lip. “Mr. Hawkesbury tempts me with his intellect, and Mr. Fitzjames has so much energy. He would join me in any physical pursuit.” Annette regretted saying the last bit as soon as the twinkle came into Alice’s soft brown eyes.

“Oh, I’m sure he would, dear. And I have it from your brother that they are both interested. So put your mind to rest on that subject.” Alice giggled, then arranged her face in a more serious expression. “I don’t like the fact that Hawkesbury wants to live in Calcutta. Ambrose is just returning with his family. We can’t have you halfway across the world.”

Annette gave an inward sigh. Although she knew Alice loved her, it was nice to hear she wanted her stepdaughter to remain close. “Then we should strike him from the

list. I would love to travel, but I don't want to make my home anywhere but England."

Alice patted her knee. "This is progress. Mr. H is crossed off. On to Mr. F."

"He's good-looking and active. I don't think he'd enjoy being gone from Town for long. He also doesn't seem to have any ambitions except to live off his father's income."

"It's a substantial sum." Alice tapped her chin. "He does have a small estate he will inherit from his maternal grandmother. He may be waiting for that."

"True. He's very charming. Almost..."

"Too charming?" asked Alice. "I was thinking the same thing. I fear he would consider a mistress as nothing unusual. What are your thoughts on that?"

She shrugged. "If it were a love match, I'd be devastated. But since that probably won't be the case, I'm not sure."

"Something to keep in the back of your mind."

"We can't forget the gentleman coming with William, another barrister." Annette leaned against the back of the brocade sofa, smiling.

"You're not thinking of either of those gentlemen now. Who's on your mind?" prodded Alice. "We haven't mentioned Lord Weston."

"He's not a suitor."

"He looks like one to me. Comforting you last night, an early morning ride, the last

man standing on the ice.” Alice cocked a brow. “Handsome, fit, intelligent, wealthy, and unattached.”

“And Papa’s friend.”

“What bothers you? The fact he’s known your father for years, or the fact he’s close to Henry’s age?”

“Close? I thought he was Papa’s age.” Annette sat up. Was he not as old as she’d thought? Those wings began a flutter in her stomach again.

“Weston’s older brother went to Oxford with Henry. Your father enrolled at a late age, for financial reasons, and was older than the late viscount, but they were very close. The family lived in the town, so Henry was a frequent guest at the Westons. He considered the present Lord Weston like a younger brother.” Alice pursed her lips in thought. “I believe Weston is seven or eight years younger than your father.”

Annette’s mind whirled. Still quite a difference in years, though not nearly as many as she’d thought.

“That makes Weston about forty-one or forty-two,” supplied Alice. “You’ll soon be twenty-four, so there’s a difference of seventeen or eighteen years. Not so bad.”

No, it wasn’t horrible. “What would Papa say?”

“He’d say whatever makes you happy. Are you considering it?”

“I will take your advice,” Annette said with a smile, “and keep an open mind.”

“That’s my girl.”

The men came in, and Lady Henney ordered chocolate for her and Annette. “Shall we play a game of charades?”

“I’m happy to join in, but I warn you I’m terribly slow,” admitted Fitzjames good-naturedly. “Hawk is the one to beat at any game needing a clever player.”

“Thank you,” said Mr. Hawkesbury with a nod at his friend. “I may be able to redeem myself after splaying myself across the ice earlier.”

“Wonderful. Let’s get seated.” A chaise longue had been added to the arrangement in front of the hearth to provide seating for the larger group. “Nettie, sit here with Lord Weston.” Lady Henney pointed to the chaise longue. “Beecham and I will take the sofa. Lucius and his guests will have the chairs.”

“I’ll begin,” said Annette, needing a distraction from the viscount—the not-as-old-as-she-thought viscount—who had set the butterflies flapping in her stomach as he settled next to her. His spicy scent tickled her nose as she searched her brain for a good riddle. Ah!

“My first is in harvest rarely known,

Nor would it welcome be.

My next in country or in town,

Each debutante delights to see.

And when drear winter’s dress is shown,

In joyous play my whole is thrown.”

“Harvest is a season,” said Fitzjames with glee, “and debutantes have a Season.”

“So, the word is season Season?” Lucius chortled. “Better let Hawk have a try.”

“Hmm, not welcome in harvest... blight, a frost... snow.” Mr. Hawkesbury tapped his heel. “What’s thrown?”

“A ball?” said her father.

“Snowball! That was brilliant,” cried Mr. Hawkesbury.

“Yes!” Annette clapped. “You come up with the next one.”

The red-haired man pursed his lips and tapped his heel some more. Then he smiled.

“My first a blessing sent to earth,

Of plants and flowers to aid the birth.

My second surely was designed

To hurl destruction on mankind.

My whole a pledge from pardoned Heaven,

Of wrath appeased and crimes forgiven.”

“The blessing to plants and flowers could be rain,” said Lady Henney.

“Destruction,” mused Lord Weston. “Fire? But does it hurl? No.”

“Water, floods,” murmured her father.

“Noah saw a rainbow after the floods.” Lord Weston snapped his fingers. “A bow is let loose to hurl toward its target. So, rain and bow. Very clever, Hawk.”

“Thank you, my lord. Your turn.”

Weston crossed his ankle on his knee and drummed his fingers on his leg. Annette watched the digits brushing his muscular thigh; her mouth went dry.

“My first is an animal’s coat;

Many trees in my next you may place.

My whole, to your grief, will denote

That time has made work with your face.”

“Fur!” shouted Fitzjames.

“Yes, Fitz, we’re all very proud of you,” said Lucius.

“Thank you,” he said, ignoring her brother’s placating tone.

“Row, the trees would be in a row,” added her father. “Furrow would be what’s happened to my face.”

They continued the game. Annette found herself challenged more than once and enjoying the company, at ease with younger suitable men. Looking at her brother, she realized he’d handpicked these men. Affection swelled in her chest for Lucius. He’d done a fine job of it, for if anyone had told her she’d be in this situation six months

ago, she'd have laughed. Or ran.

CHAPTER 12

23 December 1820

“How goes the chase?” asked Bowman as he helped Andrew undress for the night. “The other gentlemen leave tomorrow. Any progress?”

Andrew shrugged his shoulders. “As in the suitors that Page brought with him?” Fitzjames had made himself into an extra appendage, not leaving Lady Annette’s side. Hmph. “We were originally to go into the village by coach. I think the suggestion to take the horses was designed to discourage Hawkesbury from going.”

“I see.” Bowman brushed off the coat and put it in the wardrobe. He returned and removed the cravat and then the collar. “However, I meant progress with improving your charm.”

“You don’t think I’m charming, Bowman? I don’t give you enough compliments?” Andrew chuckled at his indignant valet. “Yes, I believe I’m doing quite well with my wooing skills.”

“Are we considering you as one of the competition yet?”

Andrew considered. “I believe so. Have you heard anything? Any trips to the kitchen?”

“The servants are saying both men are out of the running. One will live too far from the lady’s family. The other is flirtatious but not clever enough.” Bowman finished

his nightly ritual by pouring a glass of brandy and setting it on a table by the chair.

After his valet left, Andrew donned his banyan and sat by the fire. He sipped his brandy, thinking of the past few days and the possibilities of the days to come. Beecham and his fiancée seemed open to his courtship with Lady Annette. Hadn't the teasing been a way for Henry to give his consent? He would ask to be certain—if the lady was willing.

He thought back to yesterday when they went for an early morning ride.

"I have wealth, so more blunt does not tempt me. A friendship—with a kind and beautiful woman—would be worth so much more. Do you think that's possible?"

"It depends on whether the woman was the daughter of a close friend."

"I believe she is."

"Then yes, I do think it's possible. In fact, I believe it's already in progress."

He would meet her at the stable again tomorrow morning and hope they were alone, unlike today. He was also looking forward to seeing Beecham's youngest son, William, tomorrow. They'd met a few times in Town and seemed an honorable and ambitious lad. He was bringing the final suitor.

"Aggie, am I too old for this lady? Are you scowling down at me or smiling?" He finished his brandy and leaned against the soft, worn leather of the chair, letting the liquor warm his insides and the crackling fire warm his feet.

"Aggie, wait up!" Andrew saw her just ahead, beyond another group of pedestrians at Hyde Park. She was wearing her favorite lavender spencer and matching bonnet, her parasol flipping back and forth at her side. He was frantic to catch up with her,

wondering why she was out here by herself.

“Aggie, please,” he shouted. She turned slightly, waving at him, but he could only see the side of her bonnet. Panic clutched his chest; sweat trickled down his back. He knew this was his last chance. His last opportunity for... What? What did she hold that he was searching for so desperately?

Andrew pushed his way through the group ahead of him, not bothering to apologize, focused only on the lone figure ahead of him. Fear roared through him. He had to reach her. He had to grab that last chance at happiness. If he didn’t try to catch her before she disappeared, he knew she would give her love to someone else.

“Hurry, darling,” she called to him. “You’re not too old. You’ll never be too old.”

He broke into a full run, grabbed at her spencer, then at the ribbons of her bonnet, falling down her back. “Wait!”

“You must work for love if you truly want it,” she teased over her shoulder. “Show me how sincere you are.”

He lunged forward and grasped her shoulder. As he tried to catch his breath, sucking in air and turning her around, her face wavered and became Annette’s.

“You do want me.” She beamed. “I’ve been waiting for so long. I knew you’d come.” Then she leaned on her tiptoes, placed a hand on his cheek, and softly kissed his lips.

Heat roared through him, a potent thrumming that could only be stifled by her. Nettie. His arms went around her, and he pulled her close, the scent of jasmine sending desire rushing to his core.

He was not gentle. He was not soft. His kiss was demanding, claiming. A clash of lips

and tongue and teeth. Her soft curves melded against his hard muscle, and Andrew realized she filled that empty space in his heart created by the loss of Agnes.

“I’m sorry, Aggie,” he murmured against Nettie’s hair as she leaned into him after the kiss.

“She’s not,” whispered Nettie. “She’s happy for you. But you still must fight for what you want.”

He stepped back and cupped Nettie’s face. “I think I’m falling in love with you.”

Thud! Andrew jerked awake. He’d dropped his glass, and the flames in the hearth had died down to glowing embers. His hand shook as he leaned over to retrieve the glass. Rising, he moved to his bed and removed his banyan. But sleep would not come, and he tossed and turned, going over each part of his dream.

Was Agnes giving him permission to love again? And was he truly falling in love with Nettie? Yes, after that kiss, real or dream, he would think of her as Nettie. That kiss had been so real, so amazing. It woke his heart, his romantic heart, from a long sleep. Now, it pumped life back into him and pounded in his chest to be heard.

Sunrise was showing its rosy colors of pink and purple as Andrew finally drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Annette had stopped in the library, looking for something to read. A book always settled her thoughts, helped her drift into a peaceful sleep. After the past few days, she needed some peace. Her mind was peppered with so many different emotions, she couldn’t think straight.

As she reached for a book, a knock at the library door made her freeze. She looked over her shoulder to find Mr. Fitzjames leaning against the frame.

“Can’t sleep?” he asked quietly.

“I always enjoy reading a bit before bed.” Annette pulled down her selection and turned to face her brother’s friend. “And you?”

He pushed away from the doorframe and walked toward her. Annette wondered what he wanted. She doubted he’d come here to read.

“I always find a kiss makes me sleep better.” He stopped in front of her, gently took the tome from her hand, and let it fall to the floor with a thump . “Would you indulge me?”

Before she could answer, his hand was at her waist, trapping her against his length, the other hand moving up and down her arm as his lips smashed against hers. Annette held her breath, smelling the brandy he’d had too much of.

When he ended the kiss, he stepped back with a smirk on his face. His pale-blue eyes were half closed, and he reached out to take her fingers in his hand. Annette resisted the urge to wipe her mouth and pull her hand away.

She’d been kissed before. Chaste brushes of lips on lips. Nothing passionate to make her knees weak or her heart pound. Yet, here was a man full of desire, and she felt no more than she had with those first kisses.

“I bet you’ve never been kissed like that before,” he slurred, moving his head to the side and leaning forward as if he would try again.

Annette pressed her lips together to keep from laughing as she ducked to the side.

Fitzjames lurched forward, arms out to catch his fall, and landed on the thick Axminster rug with a thunk . He promptly began to snore. She didn't hold back the laughter now. The poor man couldn't hear her.

Lucius poked his head in, viewed his friend on the floor, and let out a laugh. "Don't tell me he tried to kiss my sister, and she showed him her right hook." He crossed the room and stood beside her.

Annette laughed at her brother's jest. "No, but he did kiss me." She wrinkled her nose. "I wasn't impressed. When he tried for a second, I sidestepped, and here we are."

Her brother guffawed, and soon, they were both doubled over, wiping the tears from their eyes. This was her second hearty laugh in two days. It was good to be with her brother, good to be wanted by a man in a romantic way. Even if his kisses left her... wanting.

"What shall we do with him?" she asked as they caught their breath.

"Leave him. He shouldn't drink so much when he's a guest. Let him wake up and wonder what the deuce happened." Lucius picked up the book from the floor, handed it to his sister, and put an arm around her shoulders as they left the library. "Blast, but the man has a snore that could wake the dead."

As they walked to their rooms, he kissed Annette on top of her head. "I'm proud of you, Sister. I've seen my old Nettie come back to us in the past few days. Could one of my friends be the reason?"

Annette smiled up at her brother whom she adored. "I think the fact that they are your friends and know my history, yet still wanted to come, set me at ease. I've enjoyed myself the past two days, and I thank you. But one will live too far away, and the

other really doesn't..."

"Make your heart go pitter-patter?" he asked, his thick brows wagging.

She chuckled and shook her head. "Not a pitter or a patter."

"Hm. What of Lord Weston?" He halted and turned to her. "I've seen you watching him. And I know that look. Saw it in our Ambrose's eyes when he met Hester."

The heat spread from her neck to her cheeks. "I... I?"

"Does he cause a pitter or a patter?"

"Both," she said too quickly and silently cursed. "He's also not as old as Papa." Why had she added that bit?

"It wouldn't matter. The heart doesn't have a calendar or follow age." His voice dropped to a whisper. "You know how long I have waited."

"Lucius, will you promise me something?" She wanted him to find love almost as badly as she hoped for herself to have it.

"Depends." His green eyes narrowed as the weak light from the wall sconces danced golden streaks through his light-brown hair.

Annette considered her brother handsome. And he seemed to grow more attractive with age. He couldn't continue to pine for some woman from his youth. "If I find a husband, will you open your heart to finding another to love?"

Lucius took in a deep breath. "I have committed myself to looking for a wife once you are settled. But love? I don't think another could steal my heart. Christiana is the

only woman who sparks my soul.”

She'd have to settle for that and hope he was wrong. Annette couldn't imagine the pain of unrequited love that her brother had endured for so many years. He hugged her outside her door, kissed the top of her head again, and wished her a good night.

As she wiggled under the counterpane later, Annette picked up the random book she'd taken from the library. It would take more than a chapter or two to put her to sleep tonight. Then she giggled, thinking of Mr. Fitzjames snoring peacefully on the library floor.

CHAPTER 13

24 December 1820

Andrew woke with an energy he hadn't felt in years. And with little rest. Who needed sleep?

Life has a way of providing what one needs. You only have to pay attention and not let it slip through your fingers. Agnes's words had been echoing in his head all night.

He threw back the counterpane and dressed in his riding clothes. Bowman was just knocking at his door as he pulled on his Hessians.

"Am I late?" asked Bowman, surprised to see his employer up and dressed.

"No, I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd just get up and start my day. I have much to do." He slid his arms into the riding jacket his valet held up. "I want to meet Nettie, er, Lady Annette for an early morning ride. Then I must speak with Beecham."

"I see. Any reason for the urgency?" he asked, taking out the clothes Andrew would need after his ride.

"Let's just say Aggie found a way to put my mind at ease. If Beecham doesn't mind my courting his daughter, then I'm pursuing her with all the enthusiasm of a hound after a fox." Andrew opened the door but paused at Bowman's words.

"Perhaps a bit more finesse than the average hound?"

Andrew chuckled as he took the stairs two at a time. At the landing, he paused. What if Nettie decided to skip the morning ride? He continued on with undiminished optimism. Then he'd work off some of this extra energy before breakfast.

Halfway down the path, he saw the same young lad leading Domino from the stable. The mare was saddled, and Andrew sighed with relief. "Could you saddle mine too, Joseph?"

The stable boy grinned and nodded, returning to the stable once Nettie's horse was secured to the tethering ring.

"I was hoping you would join me." Her throaty voice washed over him.

"I was hoping the same," he said, turning to greet her. She was wearing the same dark-gray riding habit with the claret fur-lined cape to protect against the cold morning air. "I wanted to talk to you."

"We're in unison with our thoughts, then. I wanted to talk to you." She smiled at the stable boy as he returned with Fortunate. "Thank you, Joey."

She led the mare to the mounting block, and Andrew held the rein while she mounted, a graceful movement that allowed him to admire her form. She leaned over and patted the horse's neck. "Shall we take the same route?"

"Anywhere your heart desires," he said. As long as it includes me.

They started at a walk, Joey far enough behind so he couldn't hear their conversation. "Have you ever met someone and knew, in that moment, you liked them?" Andrew grimaced at his awkward opening.

"I have. Many times, actually. I tend to believe a person's first impression is

authentic.” She tipped her head to study him. “I liked you right away.”

His heart hammered. Maybe it hadn’t been such a feeble beginning. “My pulse raced the first time I saw you on the landing, leaning over the banister while I stood in the entryway. You smiled at me, and I was mesmerized.”

She blushed. “I was attracted to you that first day. May I ask you a question?”

He wanted to finish his little speech, but he found it hard to deny her. “Anything.”

“How old are you?”

His heart plummeted. The age difference concerned her. “I’m forty-two. Is it a problem?”

“No. I thought you were older. Being the same age as my father, and being his friend, worried me. If he would disapprove, if you would think me too young. How old is your daughter?” she asked.

“Phoebe is nineteen, presents herself as a woman of the world, and is certain she knows so much more than her father.” He laughed. “She’s as strong-willed as her papa and just as outspoken.”

“I’m not much older than she is. Does that bother you?” Lady Annette asked in a cautious tone. “Or what she might think?”

“I love Phoebe with all my heart. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her. I’ve raised a compassionate, clever girl who wants her father to be happy. She wouldn’t deny me a wife of my own choosing.” He stared at Nettie’s profile, marveling at her beauty, her kind nature, her intelligence—his luck at finding her. “Would you count me as one of your suitors? Allow me to court you?”

Her smile lit up his world. “If we are to consider courtship, there is one other thing to determine first. Shall we have a gallop and lose our chaperon?” With that, she dug her heels into the mare and took off at a canter across the field.

Andrew grinned and followed, letting her determine the pace. When the hedge they’d jumped came into view, a knot twisted in his stomach. He spotted the fresh dirt ahead just as the mare stumbled in the hole. Lady Annette had just cued Domino to take the hedge, and when the mare went down onto her knees, the lady continued over the jump.

His blood froze as he pulled his rein back and brought his gelding to a stop. He leaped over the hedge and found her on the ground but sitting up. Rushing to her, he dropped to his knees beside her. “Is anything broken?” He could hear the panic in his voice.

To his surprise, she had the nerve to laugh. “We’re supposed to let the horses take the hedge, not go over on our own.”

Lord Weston stood and peered over the hedge. “Domino is fine, grazing and walking without a limp.” He sat back and laughed with her, relief replacing the fear that had gripped him. “No major injuries?” He got back to his knees, examining her with his eyes. “Did you hit your head?”

“I was lucky enough to land on my backside and then roll. Nothing broken, but I’ll be sore tomorrow.” When she leaned forward to try to stand, she grimaced. “Very sore, I suspect.”

“Stay where you are and catch your breath.” Andrew sat cross-legged so he could face her. “You scared the devil out of me.”

“That’s a good thing, eh?” She blew at a strand of hair that had come loose and was

hanging between her eyes.

Andrew reached over, held the piece of silk between his fingers, and tucked it behind her ear. It was as soft as silk, just as he had thought it would be. Nettie had gone still at his touch. Her huge emerald eyes stared at his mouth, then locked gazes with him. He felt desire stir low in his belly.

“You said there was one last thing to determine if I am to court you. What is it?” he asked in an almost-whisper.

“A kiss. We should find out if we are... compatible... in that way.”

Andrew’s self-control broke. He leaned forward, one hand cupping her cheek. His thumb stroked her satiny skin, her warm breath fanning out in white puffs in the chilly air. He brushed his lips against hers, a whisper of a touch.

* * *

Annette’s heart threatened to pound out of her chest. She closed her eyes and knew, with the first meeting of their lips, she wanted this man. Nothing had prepared her for the tempest spiraling through her body as his mouth caressed hers. When he pulled back, she blinked, drawing in a long breath, and stared into his dark eyes. She tried to make a jest but couldn’t remember what she had wanted to say, only wishing she could drown in the sweet pools of chocolate holding her gaze hostage.

“Nettie,” he murmured, the use of her nickname starting the spiral of heat in her again. “Does that feel compatible?”

She nodded, knowing her lips could not form a word. This time, Annette leaned forward, her hand on his chest, and kissed the corner of his mouth, then the other corner, and finally a full kiss. It was just as dizzying the second time. She heard a

little whimper as his tongue traced the seams of her lips and realized it was her own voice.

This seemed to be a signal of acquiescence, for Lord Weston pulled her onto his lap. Cradling her gently in his arms, he closed both of her eyes with his mouth, trailed kisses along her jaw, nipped at her earlobe. “We should stop this before the stable boy catches up with us.”

Again, she nodded. But first, just one more kiss. Her arms went around his neck, and he bent his head, covering her mouth with his, asking for her to part her lips, and she did. His tongue swept in, and the beating of her heart seemed to echo lower, in her most intimate place. Annette ran her fingers through his thick auburn hair and knew her world had just changed forever. When she stood up, the innocent girl she had once been would disappear. A wiser, greedier, happier woman would take her place.

CHAPTER 14

Andrew knocked lightly when he reached the library, then peeked around the open door. “Drew, come in. I was just finishing up. Ready for something to eat.” Beecham paused, his gaze taking in Andrew’s riding clothes. “Looks like you’ve already worked up an appetite too.”

“I thought I might speak to you before breakfast.” Andrew hated the tension in his voice. “It concerns Lady Annette.”

“It’s about time. I’ve been waiting for this conversation.”

Andrew couldn’t tell by Beecham’s expression whether he approved. He sat down across from the earl, took a deep breath, and gripped the arms of his chair. “I would like permission to court her.”

The earl steepled his hands and stared at Andrew. “Have you considered Nettie’s age?”

“Of course, that was one hindrance, but many couples have a greater age difference?—”

“I don’t care about that, you nodcock. I mean that she’s still of childbearing age and may want children. Are you open to more? She could give you a son.”

Andrew sat stunned. This hadn’t occurred to him. “I-I would be open to it if that is what she wanted. I’m not averse to increasing my family, though I thought that time

had passed.”

“Then you have my permission,” Beecham said easily.

Andrew opened his mouth, closed it, opened it, then closed it again.

“You look like a fish just pulled from my pond.” Beecham’s shoulders shook. “Are you so surprised?”

“I-I am. Happily so.” He closed his eyes, let out a relieved sigh, and draped his arms over the sides of the chair. “I assumed the speed with which this has progressed might make you leery.”

“Drew, you’re an old friend and a good man. My daughter hasn’t shown interest in courting, let alone enjoy the company of another man besides her family, in five years. I can see she’s willing.” Beecham blinked, wiped at an eye, then stood, a content smile brightening his round face. “I will speak with her later today. Unless she’s put on a tremendous performance, we’ll consider it official.”

“Official?” As in engagement? He swallowed, finding his throat had gone dry.

“Are you courting her without the goal of marriage?” Beecham’s bushy brows drew together. “Isn’t that how it goes?”

“Yes, of course. I just didn’t expect to announce an engagement this quickly. My daughter doesn’t even know I’m considering a wife yet.” He swallowed again, then the kiss they had shared came back to him.

The earl boomed out a laugh. “Only jesting you, Drew. The two of you will decide when the banns will be read. Now, let’s have a drink, shall we?”

“Henry, I can’t tell you how grateful I am. This entire visit has been so... unexpected. If you had told me a week ago that the Earl of Beecham would be my—” Bollocks!

“Your father-in-law! Love it, love it. All those young boys make me feel ancient. You’re a man who can hold his own with me. For the most part.”

Andrew grinned. He had been nervous, a greenhorn asking for a beautiful young woman’s hand. But it was over with, and Christmastide brought joy and mistletoe. “May I discuss the courtship with her today?”

“Whatever you feel is appropriate. We do have one more suitor coming with William today.” Beecham scratched his jaw. “Should we give the lad a chance?”

They stared at each other for a moment, then howled with laughter.

* * *

William arrived that afternoon as everyone was preparing to gather greenery and mistletoe. Annette hadn’t seen her youngest-older brother in weeks. “Willy!” she cried and threw her arms around him as he stepped from the coach. “Don’t you dare stay away so long again.”

He had light-brown hair like their father and brother Ambrose, but his eyes were hazel rather than green. Papa always said that his eyes were a mix of his own and their mother’s brown.

“I’ve brought you a surprise,” he said. “Charles, come meet my sister.”

Her brothers were considered tall, but this man towered over her. He had sandy-brown hair and eyes almost the same color. Not quite brown, not quite gold. When he smiled at her, she knew she would like him.

“Mr. Charles Wilkens, solicitor, associate, and friend. Lady Annette Page, my little sister.”

He bowed and removed his hat. “It’s a pleasure, my lady.”

Annette didn’t recognize the gentleman’s name. “I thought you were bringing...”
What was the man’s name?

“It didn’t work out. We’ll say it’s for the best and leave it at that for now.” Her brother put an arm around her shoulders, and they made their way up the portico and into the entrance hall.

“This is the surprise?”

“I thought you would be happy I didn’t bring another suitor.”

Her heart did leap. After this morning, between her fall and that kiss, she was relieved she wouldn’t have to pretend anymore. She had made her choice and was certain Lord Weston wanted to court her. He wouldn’t have kissed her in such a way if he did not.

“You are not with family this Christmastide?” she asked her brother’s handsome friend.

“I shall return before the new year. I’ve been invited to another party. The widow who sent the invitation owns a coal mine my uncle has been trying to purchase for years. We are hoping to convince her to sell it.”

William grinned. “The widow happens to be Lady Winfield.”

She gasped. “Does Lucius know?”

“He will soon enough.”

Charles’s brows furrowed, obviously not knowing the connection between her eldest brother and the countess. Annette grinned back at William.

“Good day, gentlemen,” called Lord Weston from the entryway. “Just in time to help us collect pine boughs and such.”

William shook his head and held out his hand. “It’s good to see you again, Lord Weston. Have you enjoyed your visit so far?”

The viscount beamed. “I don’t believe I’ve enjoyed myself so much in years.” He may have answered her brother, but his eyes never left Annette’s face.

Annette’s cheeks burned, and William arched a brow at her, glanced at Weston, then back at her. She shook her head ever so slightly, signaling for William to keep silent on the matter for now.

“Ah, yes. That’s... good,” William said, frowning at his sister. “Lord Weston, have you met Mr. Charles Wilkens? He’s a solicitor, and we’ve worked together often.”

“It’s a pleasure,” said the viscount, holding out his hand. He turned back to Annette. “Lady Henney ordered a wagon to be brought round. Shall we go ourselves?”

“Yes, please. I had thought to ride Domino and follow the wagon, but I find I’m a bit sore after this morning.”

At William’s insistence, she told him of her earlier fall. “No injuries, I just don’t feel up to the saddle today.”

“Of course,” all three agreed at once.

“Besides, it won’t be hard work.” William added, “Father pays some of the older tenants’ boys to collect plenty of pine boughs and mistletoe. We only go out ourselves and gather a bit to continue with tradition. It’s something we always did as children growing up.”

“It’s a ritual I uphold myself when I’m home,” said Lord Weston as the butler appeared carrying his greatcoat, hat, and gloves with Annette’s maid following with the same.

Once settled on the wagon bench, Lord Weston picked up the reins, gave them a shake, and clucked to the pair of bays. The wheels lurched forward, and they were off. A copse of pine was nearby, and they soon had the bottom of the wagon bed covered with freshly cut boughs.

Annette was longing to ask Lord Weston if he’d spoken with Papa, but she didn’t want to seem forward or assuming. As he held out his hand to help her into the wagon, Andrew pulled her close and whispered in her ear, “May I court you, my sweet Nettie?”

She gazed into those dark coffee eyes and could only nod. Their faces were so close his warm breath touched her cheek. He bent his head, their lips brushing, and when he deepened the kiss, Annette’s legs turned to butter. She gripped the lapels of his greatcoat as he tightened his hold to keep her upright.

“You taste so good, Nettie,” he murmured against her ear, then trailed kisses down her neck. That pounding began in her belly again, spreading lower. It was the beat of desire, she was sure. And now she would have a lifetime of this dizzying feeling, a lifetime with a man she cared for.

“You make me feel... tingly inside and out.”

He chuckled. "I thought I had become indifferent to finding love again, hoping to gain companionship with a woman of similar background and likes. Yet, meeting you, spending time with you, has convinced me I could never be happy with that." He cupped her face with both hands. "You have brought my soul back to life, along with all the possibilities life still offers."

Annette's eyes burned with happy tears. She swiped them away, overcome by a sense of belonging. Belonging with this man. They fit together like Christmastide and wassail, like a cup of warm chocolate and a crackling fire, like passion and desire.

She threw her arms around this wonderful man, thanking fortune, or fate, or destiny... whatever or whoever had brought him to her. Annette kissed him again, then hugged him tightly, her cheek pressed against his chest. She could hear his heart thudding beneath his greatcoat.

"Nettie!" called a voice in the distance. "Nettie!"

Over her head, Drew sighed. "It seems reality intrudes again. Your brother is joining us, and it appears to be urgent."

A moment of panic struck, hoping it wasn't bad news. But when she turned to find him galloping toward them, she spotted the grin on his face. "He's happy. I haven't seen him this excited in?—"

Lucius slid off his chestnut horse, dropping the rein and rushing to her. He was panting when he grabbed her by both arms, his face glowing. "Christiana is having a house party, and I have an invitation. I must leave, but I had to tell you goodbye and happy Christmas before I left."

"Oh, Brother, that's wonderful. She invited you for how long? When will you be back?"

The light dimmed briefly in his green eyes. “Oh, no. William’s friend, Charles, was invited. I’ve talked him into letting me go in his stead. I will call her bluff and pursue her like Wellington routing Bonaparte.” He pulled Annette close. “Watching your courage these past few days has humbled me. How can I not fight for my own happiness when my little sister has valiantly opened her heart again?”

“This is the brother I’ve missed so. With such an attitude, and a torch that has burned for so long, I have no doubt you will win her heart.” Annette glanced sideways at Weston, breathless with these recent events.

Lucius peered at his sister, then at the viscount. “You spoke to my father today. Congratulations to the both of you.”

“Thank you, Lucius. Now go! You have a battle ahead of you and no time to waste.”

He kissed her cheek, picked up the rein, and leapt onto his horse. “I will see you for the new year, Sister,” he said as he dug his heel into the gelding’s flank. “With Christiana by my side.”

CHAPTER 15

“Has it only been five days since you arrived Lord Weston?” Lady Henney had sections of pine on her lap. She and Annette were expertly weaving them together.

“It’s hard to believe, isn’t it?” he answered over his shoulder as he stood on a stool and arranged garland over the doorway of the drawing room. They’d already finished the dining room and parlor. He was like a young cove again, sneaking shared glances and little smiles with Nettie across the room.

The butler and housekeeper had done a fine job on the portico. There was a large wreath on the door decorated with ribbon, holly, and pine cones. Garlands of green laced up the steps and around the doorway with the same bright colors and winter scents. In the entry hall, the garland continued up the stairs, bringing the scent of the outdoors into the house.

“How are you doing, Mr. Wilkens?” Annette watched as the tallest man in the room used a stick to place garland along the window tops to trail down along the sides. The room smelled of pine, cloves, apples, and spiced wine.

“As host, I should sample the wassail to be sure it’s of good quality.” Beecham ladled some of the punch into his already used cup.

“Is that your second or third testing, Papa?” Annette tied the last pine cone to the garland intended for the hearth.

“I believe it’s his third,” said William, a smirk tipping one corner of his mouth. “Save

some for those of us working, eh, Father?"

"Balderdash! There's plenty more in the kitchen, Son," he replied, sipping at the warm drink. Then he winked at Lady Henney. "Is that mistletoe ready yet?"

"I'm working on it now," she said. "Be patient." The viscountess had tied a ribbon around a large ball of mistletoe, creating a loop at the top. She poked a finger through a basket that held the remaining decorations for this last project.

"Would you do the honors, Henry?" Lady Henney asked with a precocious glint in her eye.

"It will be the highlight of my day." He took the mistletoe and walked to the door of the drawing room. Andrew set the stool down for him, and he climbed up to hook the ribbon on a peg already in place. He plucked a berry before he stepped down and held it above his head. "Alice, love, I'm waiting."

She grinned and walked to her fiancé, stretching on her toes while he bent and gave her a sound kiss on the mouth. As she turned away, Beecham grabbed her arm. "Wait a moment, I believe one more berry just fell into my hand."

"How convenient." William rolled his eyes, but his tone was teasing. "Leave some berries for us too."

"Who do you have to trap under the mistletoe?" asked Annette. Was he holding on to a secret?

"One can only hope," her brother quipped back. "The trick is not letting the kiss lead to anything else. Right, Wilkens?"

His friend shrugged. "Truth be told, I've been considering the parson's trap lately."

“No, not you too,” grumbled William. “A week ago, my sister had no suitors, and no one saw marriage in their near future. Now everyone is pairing up with someone. Or trying at least.”

Andrew snorted. This evening of camaraderie was bittersweet. He wished Phoebe was here to share in his news and this most festive holiday. “Speaking of trying, how do you think Lucius is doing?”

“Driving the poor woman mad, probably. But he’s determined.” Annette poured a cup of wassail and offered it to Andrew. “Anyone else—besides Papa—ready for a cup?” A round of yes, please, and thank yous filled the room.

Everyone held up their punch and Beecham made a toast. “To old friends, new friends, and our ever-growing family. May we always be so blessed.”

Someone called for a game of snapdragon. A shallow bowl containing raisins and nuts was fetched from the kitchen, and brandy poured into it while Beecham doused the lamps. The flames danced brightly on the glassy surface, casting a golden glow across the faces surrounding the punch bowl.

The voices grew animated as each took their turn snatching a treat from the flaming brandy. Andrew chewed on a hot raisin, enjoying the mix of fruit and brandy. The lamps were lit again after the flames died down. William broke out in an energetic rendition of “Good King Wenceslas,” Lady Henney dashed to the pianoforte, and soon, everyone was singing.

After the third carol, Andrew saw Nettie stifle a yawn. “If no one else will admit it, I will say it first. It’s been a long day. Happy Christmas and good night, my friends.”

“Yes, indeed,” agreed Lady Henney. “I’m so glad I decided to stay, so I won’t have to make the trip tomorrow. Nettie did a superb job with the menu.”

“Ambrose and his wife will be here tomorrow afternoon. I don’t believe you’ve met him, Drew.” Beecham finished off the last of his wassail. “He stays close to his vicarage. Not much for the noise and commotion of London.”

“I look forward to meeting them both.” Andrew touched Annette’s arm as everyone left the drawing room. “Did you want to play billiards with your brother and Wilkens?”

She shook her head. “I’ve had enough billiards for the week. I?—”

Andrew held a berry above her head and bent to kiss her. Her lips were soft and warm and tasted of sweet wine and raisins. Mixed with her familiar jasmine, it was a heady combination. Straightening, he held out his arm, knowing she was tired.

“Keep that up, Lord Weston, and I’ll never sleep tonight.”

Andrew returned to his room. Bowman was waiting to assist with his undress. Andrew’s thoughts were on Christmas Day. He had given Phoebe her gift early. A new pair of leather riding gloves and a diamond hairpin. This new courtship had him longing to give Nettie something special. Symbolic.

“I’m afraid this development with Lady Annette has left me in a spot. I’d like to give her a token, but I’m at a disadvantage with Christmas already tomorrow.”

“I have an idea.” Bowman hung his employer’s trousers in the wardrobe. “I’m sure the ladies have silk thread in a multitude of colors. I’ll have the housekeeper procure some. You could make a?—”

“A lover’s knot!” exclaimed Andrew. “Zooks! You’re brilliant.”

“Thank you, my lord. And if you need something on the cuff, consider an apple.”

Andrew frowned. “An apple? Wasn’t it the fruit that destroyed the Garden of Paradise?”

“Yes, sir. However, the apple has long been considered the fruit of health, healing, knowledge, and affection. The apple tree is considered sacred in mythology, symbolizing good health, future happiness, and a place of rest and shelter.” The valet coughed lightly. “The goddess Aphrodite was given one as a symbol of love. It is also connected to eternal youth, long life, and renewal.”

Andrew snorted. “Quite the academic of random facts, Bowman. You never cease to amaze me.”

* * *

25 December

Annette woke with the sunrise, anticipation spurring her from her bed. It had not snowed overnight, but a sheen of white still glittered under the early rays of the sun. They would attend church, eat and graze like the cows and sheep all day, greet carolers, and remember how blessed they all were.

She, Lady Annette Page, was being courted by a man who held her with great affection. In turn, she had fallen in love with Lord Weston in a matter of days. Her future shone like the north star, her heart full, her soul at ease. A dream, a fantasy that had become reality.

Alice had spoken with her, pointing out there were a few issues Annette should discuss with Andrew. This was one reason for a courtship, to get to know one another. Should he tell his daughter about the courtship before Annette met her or after? Did he want children?

“Nettie, these subjects can be daunting, but if you wait, you could both end up disappointed. We must make sure you and Drew have the same outlook when it comes to your future together.”

What if he didn’t want to raise another child? She couldn’t imagine her father not asking that specific question before he gave his approval to court her. And Alice had pointed out he had no heir. Her cheeks burned at the thought of giving Drew a son.

Christmas Day shone bright. Everyone was up early and in the breakfast room. The smell of bacon and ham, eggs, warm chocolate, strong coffee, and tea filled the air along with the scent of pine. She’d worn her favorite day dress, a burgundy muslin with delicate Italian lace on the sleeves, hem, and under the high bodice. She wore a pearl pendant with matching earbobs and a bracelet of tiny seed pearls.

“You are stunning, Nettie,” Drew whispered in her ear. “I must get you under the mistletoe as soon as possible.”

She pressed her lips together to hold back the silly smile that threatened, letting the room know the viscount had said something not quite appropriate. “Happy Christmas,” was all she replied. He held out a chair for her, and she sipped her warm chocolate as her gaze swept around the table. Papa, Alice, William, Drew, and Mr. Wilken, who seemed quite at ease.

“I wonder how Lucius fares?” she asked the group at large.

William grinned. “Better question: How does Lady Winfield fare?”

“If anyone has the perseverance to win over the countess, it’s Lucius.” Her father shoveled a fork of eggs into his mouth, then talked around them. “Ambrose and Hester arrive this afternoon.”

As they spoke, the butler announced the arrival of a guest.

“There is no way Ambrose skipped his sermon, today of all days,” remarked Alice.

“No, my lady,” said Mr. Gibbs. “Her name is Miss Phoebe Weston.”

In burst a young woman, her auburn curls in disarray, brown eyes flashing with anger. The petite full-figured lady stomped across the room to the viscount. “Please pardon this untimely interruption,” she announced as all the men stood, “but I must speak to my father.” With that, she turned on her heel and returned to the hallway.

Drew rose from his chair, cheeks stained with embarrassment, and made his apologies as he followed his daughter from the room.

CHAPTER 16

“C onfound it, Phoebe. What has happened?” Andrew had never seen his daughter act with such rudeness. “Why are you not in Town?”

“I caught my fiancé in the linen closet with a maid. He... he...” She let out a growl. “I can’t even say it. He’s a scoundrel of the lowest lot, an obsequious lecher, a?—”

“And you are sounding like a scorned termagant. Your aunt would be appalled.” Andrew took her by the shoulders, turned her around, and gently pushed her into the parlor. “Now, sit and start at the beginning without the language used in the hallway.”

She poured out her story: catching Kendall with a servant, confronting him with his infidelity, his excuse she was only a distraction, and men had needs (emphasized with a sneer), and the fact he would not promise to bed another woman once married.

“Papa, how did I not know him? We’ve been courting for six months, and he’s a stranger to me.” Phoebe threw herself against the back of the rocking chair, and Andrew had to grab her ankle to keep it from falling backwards. He wouldn’t allow her to have a broken engagement and a broken head in one day. “I’ve ended our betrothal.”

“Does he want to cancel the wedding?” Andrew knew Phoebe was in a rage, but perhaps there had been a misunderstanding. His daughter could be a tiny bit overbearing, but her heart was always in the right place. Her heart... Why did she seem more angry than heartbroken?

“Of course not. With a beautiful, respectable wife and a generous dowry? If only I was a malleable, shy wallflower, he would be ecstatic. But I won’t be leg-shackled to a man who does not see me as enough woman to keep his bed warm.”

At the mention of “bed,” Phoebe blushed, overlaying pink to the angry spots on her cheeks.

“You do not have to marry if you do not want to. However, keep in mind that many men keep mistresses and do not consider it an affront to their wives.” Not that it mattered in the case of his only child. Andrew would find him after the holiday, perhaps invite him to Jackson’s. A friendly boxing match might remind him how to treat a lady. He agreed with Phoebe. Matrimony was a serious endeavor, and one which he considered should be monogamous.

“It’s insulting.” Phoebe crossed her arms over her chest and let out a deep growl. “I wanted to punch him in the nose.”

Andrew couldn’t help the chuckle that slipped out.

“That’s humorous?” She glared at him. “The scandal this will cause!”

“No, not your situation. But the host’s daughter, Lady Annette, was disgraced her first Season when she did exactly that. She might give you a lesson.” He saw the interest in Phoebe’s eyes. Ah, a distraction. “I’m only jesting about a lesson.”

Phoebe’s frown deepened. “It would make me feel better.”

“About that.” Andrew needed to approach this carefully. “I can understand the anger at first, but after time spent alone in a carriage with the opportunity to take in the significance of this incident... I admit I’m surprised you haven’t shed any tears. Or have you?”

Her wide-eyed look answered the question. She shook her head slowly, brows furrowed in thought. “Not one,” she admitted, looking at her father with trepidation. “What does that mean?”

“I’m not an expert, but either the sadness hasn’t quite caught up with you, or you never truly loved him.” Please let it be the latter, he thought, his heart hurting for Phoebe.

“I’m not sure. I thought I loved him. We were the perfect match. He and his family had everything on my list. How could I not love him?”

Andrew knew better than to laugh at the confusion on her face. “A list does not create love. A list is tangible where love... is ethereal. A feeling that comes over you, and you understand instinctively there is no denying it. Love is knowing that life without that person will never be as magical, as rewarding, as blissful as it might have been with them.”

Phoebe sat in silence, picking at an invisible thread on her spencer that she hadn’t yet removed in her haste. Now the tears fell. “Could I have imagined myself in love?”

“You wouldn’t be the first,” he said quietly, rising and pulling her into his embrace. She cried against his chest for a while, letting out her disappointment of a broken betrothal, her shame of not knowing her own feelings.

When the sobs subsided, he cupped her face in his hands. “Perhaps this was fate intervening, saving you from an unhappy future with an undeserving man. You are destined for real love, my sweet Phoebe. You deserve it.”

She nodded and gave him a watery smile. “I’ve made a fool of myself in front of Lord Beecham and his family. I’m so sorry.”

“They will understand if you don’t mind me sharing your story.”

“It will be all over the broadsheets by tomorrow, anyway.” Phoebe sniffed. “Please, could we go home?”

“I’m afraid we’d miss all of Christmas Day if we left now. There’s plenty of room for you here. I think you’ll like my friends.” Andrew wondered how the devil he would tell his daughter, recently un betrothed, that he was now courting Nettie. A woman closer to her age than his. Would Nettie understand the postponement of their news? This was deuced bad timing.

* * *

Annette almost blew out her sigh of relief when Drew returned, a forced smile on his face. No one had died or was injured, then. He quickly explained his daughter’s unannounced arrival, then asked them not to mention his courtship with Annette right away. He hadn’t been able to tell her, considering the circumstances.

“Of course not, it would be like rubbing salt in a wound. The poor dear,” said Annette, rising from her chair. “Is she still in the parlor? I’ll have the housekeeper ready a room for her.”

“That would be much appreciated. I’ll have her trunk put in my room for now. When she’s ready, I’ll have her join us in the drawing room.”

Annette had a tray sent up to the viscount’s room, assuming Phoebe had skipped breakfast on the journey from London. An hour later, Drew and his daughter joined them. The resemblance between them was obvious. Same thick auburn hair, same deep-brown eyes. When introductions were made, both William and Mr. Wilkens seemed to brighten. They had both agreed—sight unseen—to help keep the young lady’s thoughts from her recent betrothal. The fact Miss Phoebe Weston was

beautiful with a generous figure made the task more enjoyable.

The butler knocked, then entered with an envelope in his hand. He handed it to the earl, who opened it. "Seems Ambrose and Hesta won't be joining us. It was snowing heavily this morning, and they thought it best not to travel considering Hesta's condition."

"What condition?" asked Annette. "Is she ill?"

"I think this is our brother's way of telling us we shall have another niece or nephew," said William. "Congratulations to them!"

Wassail was passed around, then the group splintered off. William engaged Miss Weston in a game of chess. Annette played a set of whist with Mr. Wilkens against Papa and Alice. Before the second set, Wilkens gave his place to Drew. Again, Alice and Papa won both games.

"If finances ever become a problem, you could easily become sharpers on the side," said Drew as he rose from the table. "My ego calls for me to quit before I lose my dignity."

Alice needed little urging to play some carols on the pianoforte. After an hour of hearty singing, William and Mr. Wilkens decided to play billiards. Miss Phoebe decided she needed a rest before the evening festivities. Both men waited by the door, waiting for her to approach.

William plucked a berry and held it up. "A toll, my lady," he said with a grin, offering his cheek. She obliged with a smile and repeated the kiss for Mr. Wilkens.

Alice and Papa retreated to the library to exchange personal gifts. "We won't be gone long, so mind yourselves!" said Papa as they left the room.

“How fortuitous since I have a little token for you,” Annette said. “Because I didn’t expect... well, you, I had to be clever.”

“I have a feeling you always are. I had to be resourceful too.”

“You have a gift for me?” Her pulse raced. How exciting. Her first gift from a beau.

Annette went to a corner of the room and brought back a long thin item wrapped in brown paper, and a small gold box. As she returned to her chair, Drew walked to a bowl on a side table and snatched an apple. They sat opposite each other in front of the hearth. The yule log had been split, sprinkled with salt and scented oil, lit yesterday with the remainder of last year’s log. Now, its crackle added a cheerful background to their exchange.

He placed the apple on the table between them. She grinned. “In case I get hungry before dinner?”

Drew snorted. “No, my valet seems to be an expert on random fascinations. He told me this fruit has been a prominent symbol of affection and future happiness over the ages. So, I offer you an apple.”

“Oh! I love learning something new—and romantic.” Annette would never look at an apple the same way. She handed him the long, thin package.

When he unwrapped the arrow, he gave her a cautious glance. “Are you giving up your pugilistic ways and turning to archery?”

She gave him a mock frown. “It represents Cupid, how you’ve struck my heart.” She handed him the small gold box.

“I have a suspicion this arrow struck my heart first.” He turned his attention to the

box, lifting the lid to find a delicate white swan made of folded paper. He set it on the table beside the apple. "It's beautiful."

"Watch," she said, picking up the paper bird by each tiny wing and snapping them apart to make the figure wider. Now the swan was able to sit on the table, wings out. "Swans are a symbol for everlasting affection."

"Then the swan is truly a gift, as you are. I believe they practice monogamy." Drew picked up her hand, kissed her knuckles, and then flipped it over and pressed his lips to the palm. His warm mouth on her bare skin sent a jolt through her. She felt like an oil lamp freshly lit.

Drew stretched out his leg and pulled a small packet wrapped in tissue paper from his trouser pocket. "I'll have to thank Bowman later. If he hadn't told me about the apple, I'd be a gift short." He handed her the small gift.

Annette's stomach was in a jumble. She hadn't expected anything. The fruit had been such a lovely gesture and would have been enough. She peeled away the paper, a slight tremble in her fingers. Nestling inside was an enchanting braid of red, light rose, and white silk thread tied into a Celtic love knot.

"It's said that this particular knot is for lovers and represents no beginning and no end." He leaned over and tipped her chin up with his forefinger. "When I first saw you leaning over the balustrade, I knew you were special. It's beyond reason how this attachment happened so quickly, but I would be a fool to ignore it. I can't imagine going back to my old life, nor can I imagine my future without you in it."

Annette blinked back the tears. She wrapped the braid around her wrist and looped the ends with her seed pearl bracelet. "When I'm not wearing it, I will use it as a bookmark. Then I may always think of you when we are not together."

He stood and held out his hand. She took it, and he pulled her into his arms, giving her a long, lingering kiss. His lips were warm, his tongue hot and seeking, and her body was turning to jelly. Heat rushed to her core as she wrapped her arms around his neck, fingering the soft curls at his nape.

“What are you doing?” screeched a voice behind them.

They both turned to find Miss Phoebe Weston staring at them, her mouth dropped open. “Papa, she’s only a few years older than me. How could you?”

“Phoebe, considering your arrival, I didn’t think it prudent to tell you of our courtship. We were?—”

“Prudent? Prudent is not wooing someone half your age. It’s about an heir, isn’t it? You said you didn’t care if you had a son. I-I filled your heart, and you didn’t have room for another child. But it isn’t true, is it?” With that, Phoebe ran from the room.

“Phoebe!” shouted Drew.

Annette stood in shock with Drew’s arm still around her waist. She stepped away. Breathe, just breathe! How had the joy of one moment ago turned into a horrible ordeal in the next?

“She’s overwrought from the engagement.” Drew removed his arm, leaving her with a coldness that was quickly seeping through her limbs. “I’ll talk to her. She’ll come around.”

Annette nodded, her mouth dry, not knowing what to say. She watched him leave the room, then sank back into the soft leather chair. The fire seemed to taunt her with its once-comforting sounds. Her hand touched the bracelet she’d just fastened to her wrist. She blinked, trying to see the intricate knot blurred by her tears.

It had been too good to be true. A cruel joke of fate. Love... here and gone. He wouldn't go against his only child if she refused to accept their courtship. Annette wouldn't want to enter into a marriage with such animosity. They would be at an impasse.

She had to escape, just for a while, jump on Domino and ride until they were both exhausted. Annette yanked the bellpull, ordered for her horse to be saddled and her cloak fetched.

CHAPTER 17

Andrew knocked on the yellow door.

We call it primrose. He smiled, remembering the clash between Nettie and the vicar's sister.

"Go away!"

"Phoebe, stop acting like a child and open the door."

"If I'm acting like one, then you are courting one," came the muffled reply.

He sighed. His daughter could be difficult; he freely admitted he had indulged her throughout her childhood. But she was also fiercely loyal, and once given, she was an ally for perpetuity. "If you don't open the door, I won't be able to explain how your mother approved of this."

Silence. Ah, the cat was curious. The door cracked, and one chestnut eye glared at him. "How could that be?"

"You know I talk to her."

"Her portrait, yes. But it's at home above the hearth." The door opened wider.

"It was in a dream." Andrew knew dreams fascinated Phoebe. She loved interpreting them, whether it was hers, a friend, or one of the maids.

He stepped into the room, following her to the huge tester bed. She threw herself across it, her boots hanging over the edge. “First, I was sincere about not needing a son. How could you think such a thing? Second, Nettie and I haven’t even discussed it. I have a great affection for the lady, not her womb.”

He heard a muffled giggle. “I came here to see my friend, my tether to my brother—your Uncle Phillip. I had no idea I would meet someone who made me remember.”

“Remember what?” she asked, lifting her head from the counterpane.

“How the right person can make you feel whole, as if you’ve found a piece of yourself that’s been missing.” He didn’t know how to put his emotions into words.

“I thought you would love Mama until the day you died.” She sniffed but sat up.

Progress. “I will, sweetheart. Just as I will love you with all my heart. But this”—he patted his chest just above his heart—“is an amazing organ that can stretch as large as is needed. So, I’m able to hold on to my love for your mother and allow someone else into my heart again.”

“Tell me about your dream,” she demanded, back to her spunky self.

He told her most of it, leaving out the more intimate details.

“Oh, Papa, she is telling you that she’s fine with it. I don’t want you to be alone when I do find an honorable and trustworthy man.” Phoebe wiped her eyes. “I’m sorry, Papa. I will try to like her. For you. The past few days have been so horrid.”

“I know,” he said, squeezing her tightly. “I get lonely. I realized with your betrothal that I didn’t want to be alone the rest of my life. Nor did I want my only conversation

at the end of the day to be with a painting that cannot respond.”

She giggled, then stopped, her expression now serious. “It seems I’ve made another scene.”

“Only witnessed by myself and Lady Annette. I promise she won’t tell anyone,” he said, hoping it was true. “Why don’t you get some rest? We have a grand evening planned.”

As he left his daughter’s room and made his way back to the drawing room, he hoped Nettie would be waiting for him. But the room was empty. A maid was picking up teacups.

“Have you seen your mistress, Lady Annette?” he asked.

“Yes, my lord,” she answered with a curtsy. “I fetched her cloak for her. She ordered her horse saddled.”

Glancing out the window, he saw it had begun snowing. Not a light snow as they’d had during the week, but a wind-whipped swirl of white. Fear gripped his chest. “How long ago?”

“About an hour ago,” she said. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Yes, I need my horse saddled. Now!” He took the stairs two at a time to retrieve his greatcoat.

Running to the stable, slipping on the snow-covered path, he burst into the warm barn. Please, let Joseph be gone. It would mean she wasn’t alone in this weather. But the stable boy came out of a stall.

“Happy Christmas, my lord,” he said. “I was hoping you were Lady Annette. The weather took a sudden turn, and she hasn’t returned.”

“I’m going after her,” he bellowed, going straight to his horse’s stall. “Get my saddle.”

“Yes, sir.” The boy scurried to the tack room.

As he mounted, Joseph called, “Behind the stable, go to the right and follow the fence. Lord Beecham’s instructions anytime we’re caught in foul weather.”

“Tell the earl what’s happened. We need to find her quickly.” Andrew dug his heels into the gelding’s flanks, and they moved forward. The icy snow stung his face as they found the fence line. He could barely see past the horse’s head. Frustrated, he began yelling her name.

Andrew checked his watch. He’d been out only a quarter of an hour. His greatcoat and hair were covered in snow, his cheeks were numb, and his eyelashes were tiny icicles. While saddling the horse, Joseph had told him Nettie had run into the barn like she was being chased by the devil. He’d barely had the bridle on when she’d grabbed a bucket, used it as a stool, and mounted, riding the horse out of the stable. He cursed himself for leaving her alone, thinking he’d right things with the more volatile female first.

What was Nettie thinking? He’d forsake her because his daughter had thrown a tantrum? She’d have to get used to those. The fits weren’t frequent, but they happened. Or did she worry Phoebe would resent her? Nettie might not want to live with another female who showed daily animosity toward her. But that wasn’t the case. He had to make sure Nettie understood.

Ahead, he saw a dark shadow. As the distance closed between them, he saw Domino

with Nettie bent low over her neck, trying to maintain some kind of shelter from the blinding snow.

He yelled her name. Finally, she looked up, relief washing over her face. Andrew thought he might cry. He'd been so frightened something had happened to her, or he wouldn't find her. When he'd been so close to a happiness he hadn't even realized he needed. As they came face to face, he guided Fortunate, so both horses were side by side. Then he reached over and pulled her onto his saddle.

"I've got you," he said into her ear, barely able to hear his own words over the pounding of his heart. "I was scared to death I'd lost you before we'd had a chance to start."

"I'm f-fine, just v-very, very c-cold." Nettie leaned into him, sitting sideways in front of him, and buried her face in his chest. "M-my eye of the s-storm."

* * *

Annette woke in her bed, night rail on, fire blazing. Her father and Alice sat beside her, Papa quietly snoring, but Alice's dark eyes were fixed upon her. Beaming, she nudged the earl with her elbow.

"She's awake, Henry. Praise the heavens, she's awake."

Papa woke with a start and a snort, wiggling in his chair. His gaze landed on his daughter, and he leapt from his chair. "'Pon my soul, she is!" He took Annette's hand and kissed her fingers. "You gave us a scare, Nettie girl. How do you feel?"

Alice laid the back of her hand on Annette's forehead. "The fever is gone." She walked around the four-poster bed and sat on the other side. Leaning against the unused pillow, Alice took Annette's free hand. "You were delirious for a while."

“I—” Her throat scratched, and she began coughing. Her father held a glass to her lips. She sipped the cool water, then leaned back, drained. “I only remember setting out on Domino.” Her voice sounded like a rusty wheel.

“The physician said there should be no pneumonia if you recovered from the fever within the day, and it’s still Christmas. Henry, would you bring us another wet cloth?”

Papa took the cloth from the bedside table, dipped it in the bowl of water, then leaned over Annette to hand it to Alice. She placed it on Annette’s forehead.

Annette thought it silly, passing it back and forth, when she could have held it to her own head just as well. But it helped the ache in her temples, so she closed her eyes. “Tell me what happened.”

“You tell her, love,” said her father. “I’ll forget some important detail.”

“Of course,” agreed Alice. “Lord Weston said you must have been upset when Miss Weston caught you kissing. He went to calm her down, but when he returned, you had fled.”

“Fled? I went for a ride,” she croaked, her voice coming and going as she spoke. It seemed the more she spoke, the worse the ache.

“In a snowstorm? Really, Nettie. You have more sense than that.”

“Henry, now is not the time to reprimand your daughter. Wait until she’s out of bed!” Alice turned back to Annette. “Weston was terrified for you, of course, and went after you. He sent Joseph to tell us. If the boy were a dog, his tail would have been between his legs, knowing he should have followed you regardless of your instructions.”

“Then there would have been two of us down with a chill.”

“It’s not an excuse.” Alice continued, “The men were saddled and getting ready to join the hunt when Weston returned with you on his saddle and leading Domino. Fortunately, the neighbors’ son, a physician, was visiting for Christmastide and came over.”

“How is Drew, er, Lord Weston?” she rasped.

“No going backward, my dear, only forward. He’s still Drew,” Alice scolded. “The man has been pacing up and down the hall, waiting for you to wake. He’s been frantic.”

Annette turned her head into the pillow, wishing to hide the building tears, but she was surrounded. Her throat swelled with the threat of a good cry. She couldn’t swallow without pain. “Doesn’t matter. His daughter...” She blinked back the tears.

“Is blaming herself. She feels terrible about what happened. In fact, Miss Weston insists on taking your place tomorrow when we hand out the boxes to the servants and tenants.”

Annette shook her head. They were trying to make her feel better because she was ill.

Papa squeezed her hand. “We’re not saying she’s deliriously happy about her stepmother being so young, but she was more upset thinking she was being replaced.”

“By me?”

“No, by a boy. The lass thought her father had lied when he’d said he didn’t care whether he had a son. A misunderstanding that almost led to tragedy.” Her father stood and kissed her forehead. “Did you want to see him before you sleep?”

Annette was exhausted, sore, and could barely talk. She shook her head. "Tomorrow," she whispered.

* * *

26 December 1820

Andrew had barely slept. Her pale face haunted him, her fevered eyes, her delirious mumbling. She'd said she loved him as he carried her home. She'd also said she didn't want to see him last night. His chest hurt, worry pounded his brain, and his eyes scratched like chap wool.

He had taken a chair from his room and placed it outside her door at dawn. A maid whooshed past him, entering the room to tend the fire. He peeked in through the crack to see Nettie sleeping. Her color was back. He sighed and closed his eyes. Henry and Lady Henney had said she had made it through the worst, but he needed to see her to believe it.

"You can come in." A cracked, hoarse voice. Nettie !

Andrew pushed open the door enthusiastically, sending it banging against a wall. The maid startled. Nettie made a noise similar to a laugh, winced, then rubbed her throat.

"Apologies, ladies," he said, nodding to the maid and crossing the room in three long strides. On his knees by her side, he pulled her hand into both of his. "Perdition! I thought I'd lost you."

She shook her head, dark strands still plastered against her cheeks. He brushed them away gently with his thumb. Nettie was beautiful in any condition. She was alive. "I love you, Lady Annette Page. I want to make you my wife. I want to wake up every morning with you as the first thing I see. You've filled a place in my heart that's been

empty for too long. Please”—his voice cracked—“don’t leave it vacant again.”

A tear rolled down the side of her face. “I love you too. Phoebe?”

“My daughter can be a tart, but when she gets to know you, she will love you as I do. But you need to give her the opportunity. Such a brave woman as you cannot be afraid of Phoebe.” He kissed her knuckles, rubbed them against his own cheek. “Will you give us both a chance?”

She nodded and gave him a weak smile, and he thought his heart would burst. The maid left the room, so he picked Nettie up and carried her to the window. He set her on his lap as the dawn spilled pinks and purples onto their world. Together, his arms around her, her head snuggled against his chest, they watched the day begin together. As they would every day from this moment on.

He was never letting her go.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 3:30 pm

A week before Easter 1821

Annette tapped the croquet ball with the mallet, sending it across the lawn. The weather had been perfect the entire week. The sun shone through the trees, shadows dancing across the grass with its rays peeking through the leaves and glinting green. Tomorrow, her brother Jeremiah and his wife, Letitia, would arrive with little Henry. Just in time for Papa and Alice's wedding.

Her partner was excellent. They were winning. "What did you say about men being superior?" she asked Charles Wilkens.

His neck reddened. "I was only teasing Phoebe, although I did consider myself quite good at this."

Phoebe put an arm around Annette. "Nettie and I are a force to be reckoned with when we combine our strength. You'd best remember that. Both of you."

"Oh, I learned that lesson long ago." Drew winked at Annette.

How she loved him. How her life had changed in the past months. She and Phoebe had grown close. Annette had been firm, insisting she was not a mother, nor trying to be. What she'd needed was a friend. It turned out that was what Phoebe had needed too. Someone not her beloved aunt's age. A friend she could trust with any secret, tell her most ridiculous fears to, share her silliest moments.

Annette rubbed her belly absentmindedly as Charles took his turn. Her husband came up behind her, wrapping his arms around her. "Are you well, Nettie?" he whispered

in her ear.

“I haven’t had the sickness for two days now. I think it’s passed.” She leaned into him and turned her head to give him a quick kiss. “I was hoping to be over it for the wedding.”

“I still can’t believe it. Your father and stepmother should start a matchmaking service. Come for a Christmas romance at Beecham Manor.”

Annette giggled. It seemed Charles had been smitten with Phoebe the morning she’d barged into the breakfast room, hair frizzing, fire in her eyes, clothes rumpled. “They are a lovely couple, aren’t they? Do you think he’ll propose soon?”

“Before the end of the Season, certainly. He only needs one man to ask her to dance a second time, and it will all be over.”

“All over? Such a romantic.”

Drew nodded. “Your brother made sure Charles was made partner in that mine his uncle wanted. Lucius wanted to show his appreciation for letting him take Wilkens’s place. He made it part of the marriage contract with Lady Winfield.”

“Really?” Her eldest brother had ventured forth and conquered Christiana. Another Page in love. Like a book. Another Page in love. She giggled at the clever turn of phrase. “Three weddings, possibly four within a year. My, it’s been a good season for Cupid.”

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