



# A Widowed Duke's Second Chance (Lustful Lords and Ladies #8)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Miss Diana Fairchild never imagined the turmoil that would follow when her extended family moved into her home. Burdened with responsibilities after her parents tragic accident, Diana felt suffocated, with love being the furthest thing from her mind. Then, a fateful encounter with an unruly dog led her to the Duke of Blackwood, a man whose presence sparked a joy she had long forgotten.

Could this unexpected twist lead Diana to a life she had only ever dreamed of?

Mark, the Duke of Blackwood had devoted his life to his daughter Evangeline following his wifes death. While he sought a companion for himself and a loving mother for Evangeline, his mothers rigid standards left him doubtful. Yet, in Miss Fairchild, he found a woman who defied his mothers expectations and touched his heart in ways he never anticipated.

Can Diana be the mother Evangeline deserves and the partner he longed for?

Lady Elizabeth and Lord Starling, are used to always getting what they want, until the people they wanted found each other, leaving them feeling rejected and frustrated. Upset by the growing relationship between Diana and Mark they decide to make a risky bet. How far will they go to sabotage true love, and can Diana and the Duke overcome these challenges to forge a future together?

**Total Pages (Source):** 32

# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

There was a time when Diana didn't have to worry about things like where her money was going or how it was being spent because she had been the only person in control of such decisions.

The house awaited her, a warm white block that towered over her as she took the small pathway through the lawn. Before, the sight would bring her comfort. Now, she knew that a battle lingered for her inside.

She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the window as she approached the front of her home, a scowl on her face that did nothing to flatter her. Her strawberry blonde hair had loosened as she had marched all the way home. Her plump figure looked stiff and ready for a confrontation.

It didn't help that she was wearing her least comfortable stay. It had been washed incorrectly and sat just a little too tight, something she hadn't noticed in her morning rush. As a result, her chemise felt bunched up in all the wrong places.

She pulled the door open and marched inside, her steps on the wooden floors announcing her arrival.

"Diana!" her aunt called from the kitchen. "You're just in time to help me with this."

She followed the voice into the kitchen and stared her aunt down. She looked so little like Diana's mother, barely a resemblance. The only part of her mother that her aunt shared was how they kneaded bread.

She could smell the wood polish in the kitchen and shuddered to think of what a mess it would be once her aunt was done. The fire was burning, and flour was already everywhere.

Servants rushed around her aunt as they prepared bowls and stoked the fire. It was nothing short of chaos, which was normal where her aunt was involved. “What is all this for?” Diana asked. “I made bread yesterday; there should still be plenty left.”

“I’m trying a new recipe,” her aunt explained. “Something for the birthday dinner.”

It was perfect. Her aunt had mentioned her cousin’s birthday dinner, precisely why Diana felt so confrontational.

“I need to speak with you about the dinner,” Diana opened the conversation. “Alone.”

Her aunt brushed her away. “Not now,” she said. “This is a tricky part of the recipe. I need to do some calculations.”

It had been an act of kindness when she had invited her aunt and uncle to move into her home with her cousins. When Diana’s parents died, they left her their home, property, and fortune. The entirety of it.

At first, she didn’t want her home to be so filled with people, but her aunt had persuaded her that living alone was not the best option. That perhaps it wasn’t safe for her to be there alone with all those valuable items.

Little had she known that it would make her the mother and carer of what family she had left.

Diana nodded to the servants, and they understood the signal to leave. Within moments, she and her aunt were alone. And her aunt had a frustrated frown on her

face.

“You’re delaying the process,” she snapped.

“I’ve just been to the market to do some shopping,” Diana pressed on, ignoring her aunt’s request to discuss it at another time. “Every place I stopped at had an outstanding credit amount in my name.”

“Yes, it’s all for the dinner,” her aunt said.

“Are we feeding the entire town?” Diana asked. “It’s excessive Henriette. There is no need for so much just for a dinner.”

Her aunt sighed and stopped her kneading. “It’s Jane’s twenty-first birthday. You know how important those are.”

“For everyone else, yes,” Diana said. “Because they all get to enjoy extravagance on somebody else’s money. Her twenty-first birthday will come and pass, and she will have another birthday next year and the year after.”

Her aunt gave her an unamused look. “You promised we could have this dinner,” she said.

“I did,” Diana said. “And you promised it wouldn’t get out of hand. I also don’t remember agreeing to pay for the entire event.”

“Don’t be silly; I’ve paid for plenty of it,” her aunt said.

“Which parts?” Diana pressed, knowing that her aunt was telling a lie.

Her aunt had a telling sign when she was lying. She would scratch her eyebrow and

shrug. And that's precisely what she did when she told Diana she'd paid some of the bill.

"Don't be like that, Diana," her aunt said with a forced chuckle. "You're behaving as if it is entirely unaffordable."

That was precisely what had Diana so upset. Her aunt had a history of plundering through money until there was none left, and she was starting to do the same thing to Diana's fortune.

There was a time when Henriette and her husband, Jack, had been more than well-off. He'd come into some money, and as a family, they had spent every last cent of it until there was little left to spare.

Diana had been worried about that when her aunt and family had moved in with her. It was why she had initially not wanted to go forward with it. But her aunt had convinced her by saying that family needed to stay together during difficult times.

They were going to be there just for a short while. A short while had come and gone, and they were still there and still using her name to make purchases.

"No more, Henriette," Diana said sternly. "I will not make any more payments for this dinner. You have bought more than enough for it."

Her aunt sighed. "Don't be like that, Diana," she said. "You're so much like your mother when you're angry. Why don't you have some tea? We can speak about this when you're a little calmer."

Diana understood then why her mother and sister fought so often. But there was something her aunt was wrong about.

“I am not like my mother when I’m angry,” Diana said. “I am like my father. I will not stop until this is straightened out. Then I will have my tea.”

Her aunt’s shoulders dropped. There was nothing she could say to win that argument and she was starting to understand that. She sat down at the kitchen table, but Diana remained standing.

She listened for any sounds of her cousins nearby before they carried on with their conversation. It wasn’t those two sweet girls spending all her money; it was their mother. And in the background, it was their father pulling the strings.

“This money is not yours to spend,” Diana reprimanded her. “I’ve been more than accommodating with all of you. I agreed that we could have a dinner for Jane here, but this kind of spending is reckless.”

“It’s just one dinner,” her aunt pressed. “It’s not like we’re out living a lavish life.”

“No, you’re not,” Diana said. “Because there wouldn’t be enough money for that. Surely you understand the trouble with spending all this money so freely?”

It looked for a moment as if her aunt was going to roll her eyes but stopped herself at the last moment.

“I have paid for everything since you and your family came to live here,” Diana said. “And I have done so without a single complaint. You have all been fed and housed on my money, and I think I’m providing you a nice life here.”

“O-of course,” her aunt stammered. “And we’re more than grateful for all of it.”

Diana sighed. “Look,” she said. “From now on, you spend no money without consulting me about it first. If you’re not happy with that, then you are welcome to

return to your own home where you can spend your own money as you wish.”

She had never heard herself sound so harsh. Her words burned in her throat. Then she knew she really did sound a little like her mother.

“We’re just worried about you,” her aunt said. “You’re here all alone, and we thought that a warm and pleasant birthday might fill the house with some cheer. That’s all. I never meant to step on any toes.”

Diana filled the kettle and put it on the stove. She was almost ready to calm down. All she needed was to ensure her aunt got the picture.

“And we’re so grateful that you’ve let us live here with you on this beautiful property,” her aunt continued. “Your mother would have been so proud of you for doing this. It’s what she would have wanted.”

When her aunt brought her mother up like that, it left a bitter taste in Diana’s mouth. One that turned the corners of her lips downward and deepened her frown. Diana was too smart to be sweet-talked by her aunt.

The fact that her aunt had good intentions and was grateful did not change the fact that she was burning through money that wasn’t hers to spend.

“I’ve had my say,” Diana said. “That is the end of the conversation. There will be no more money spent without my consent, am I understood?”

“Of course, honey,” her aunt said. “As I said, I never meant to cause trouble.”

Diana poured a cup of tea for her and her aunt and placed one cup on the table.

“I’ll be taking my tea in the garden,” she said before leaving her aunt and the bread in

the kitchen.

Outside the kitchen was a small table where the mail usually piled up for Diana to take a look at. There was plenty she hadn't opened. They were likely from peers who wished to send their condolences after her parents' accident. She wasn't quite ready to read through those yet.

That day, though, she would pick out a few from senders she wished to catch up with. She paged through the envelopes and paused when she heard her uncle's footsteps enter the kitchen.

"What was all that about?" her uncle mumbled.

Her aunt sighed. "She's complaining about the money for the party. Diana thinks we're spending too much of it."

"As if that money will ever run out," her uncle said with a huff.

He sat down in the chair, and Diana wondered if she should listen any longer. After all, it was not her conversation to be part of. Then again, they were speaking about her, and she'd often wondered if her family had other motives for moving in with her.

"It's not fair," her aunt complained. "How could they leave her everything? We didn't get one single cent. Not even a piece of furniture!"

Diana leaned in a little closer to the door. Fury bubbling just beneath the surface for her.

"Don't worry about that," her uncle said. "All she needs is a distraction. Right now, she has nothing to do but take control of every part of her daily life. It's too much."



“And how do you suppose that will change?” Henriette asked. “Nobody can pull her away from her focus.”

“A husband,” her uncle said. “That’s what she needs. Then she can have a family. With a husband and children, she’ll be too busy to keep an eye on everything. In fact, she’ll be begging you to handle things here.”

“Then we could enjoy this money that should have been all of ours,” her aunt said quietly. “It’s not a bad idea.”

“Now we just have to find a man who can handle how stubborn she is,” her uncle teased.

“That can be arranged,” her aunt said in a sly voice. “Diana is nuts if she thinks I’m ever leaving here.”

Her uncle laughed loudly then. “We’re not going anywhere. She is family; this is our home as much as it is hers. Her cousins deserve a better life. It’s not our fault that carriage tipped and took her parents out of this world. We should not be punished for it.”

Diana didn’t want to listen anymore. She took her tea and mail and headed out of the house and into the garden. For as long as she could remember, the garden had been her place of refuge.

Out at the far end was a pergola with roses and jasmine, and she could hear nothing from the house when she was there. That’s where she liked to sit and escape.

That day, as she read through the letters from friends, she realized that one day she would be expected to have a family. After her parents died, that had been the last thing on her mind.

She missed them terribly. They had given her a good life. They had been truly good parents. Diana wasn't sure if she could be as kind as her mother was or as able as her father.

In the garden, at her one place of peace, her mind suddenly filled with an unsettling thought.

Diana had lived a simple life until her parents had passed away. Her parents had worked hard to buy some properties, so they had made their money through property rentals.

Their only daughter, Diana, had inherited everything. Their main stream of income included. Being their only child, her father had taught her everything about managing the finances and running the properties, and she did it with ease.

That made her the only person in the family eligible to take it all on when they died. Still, she would trade it all for the chance to go back and stop them from leaving in the storm.

Her entire life, she had believed that she had everything she needed to live a good life. Suddenly, at the age of twenty-four, she faced the prospect of marriage to make herself relevant.

It seemed somewhat inevitable. She would have to marry and be a mother, and she feared that she would never be ready for it. Or good enough.

## Page 2

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### Chapter 2

Mark's house was filled with feminine giggling as teacups were placed back in their saucers. His mother and Lady Elizabeth seemed to be getting along like a house on fire.

The two women had always enjoyed each other's company. In fact, his mother had voiced her fondness for Lady Elizabeth with an excited shimmer in her eyes. Then again, his mother had liked his first wife, too. And she had turned out to be an adulteress.

Mark pushed that thought from his mind as he stroked through his blond hair into place. He needed to focus on the conversation. He needed to be a good host for the tea party. After all, the Duke of Blackwood had a reputation to maintain. And, if there was a story to be spread, Lady Elizabeth was the one to do it. The last thing he needed was for society to believe that he, the son of the great Caroline Goldenthorn, the dowager duchess of Blackwood, had trouble socializing.

The sun filtered into the tea room, and the space felt warm. That didn't mean much to Mark, though. He knew that his mother wanted him to remarry. He wasn't entirely against the idea and didn't mind entertaining people at home.

He had a warm and welcoming home, largely thanks to his mother and his late wife. They'd spend hours choosing every item of decoration and colour to make it the most welcoming home possible.

It got many compliments, so Mark made sure to keep it just as it was.

However, Mark was not the kind of man to be forced into anything he didn't want to do or something that didn't feel like a perfect idea to him. He'd always been stubborn that way.

His daughter, Evangeline, stifled a yawn as she reached for another cake. He caught her eye and winked, causing her to break into a wide smile.

"I don't see how they could ever be finished with that by the end of the year," Lady Elizabeth said. "That construction has been at a standstill for months now. Rumour has it that they've run out of money."

Mark's mother shrugged. "There are always many rumours, aren't there?"

That was just like his mother. She couldn't be bothered by gossip, although she was always happy to listen. The women were discussing the construction of a large house down the street.

It had stalled construction some months ago. The builder was an Italian man, building a manor for himself where he could spend a few months on holiday. What the women didn't know was that Mark knew the truth.

"His mother died," he explained, and he bit his lip when his daughter winced.

"I beg your pardon?" Lady Elizabeth asked.

"The house, down the street," Mark said. "His mother died. So, he has halted construction and gone back to Italy to mourn."

A flicker in the lady's eye told Mark she didn't particularly enjoy being corrected. That didn't matter to him, though. Mark liked the truth. He valued that above all else. That was something his ex-wife, Violet, had changed in him.

She had lied to him many times during their marriage and caused him a lot of pain. He would do everything in his power to return truth to the world.

“He’s been back an awfully long time to mourn,” Lady Elizabeth said.

“He loved his mother dearly,” Mark said. “And she died rather unexpectedly. He was completely torn apart. It won’t surprise me if he never comes back.”

His mother shook her head. “That’s so sad,” she said softly. “Well, someone will complete the house one day, and I’m sure it will be magnificent.”

His mother then shot Evangeline a glare as she yawned loudly. That’s when Mark realized what about Lady Elizabeth bothered him so much. It was the fact that his daughter was bored.

Lady Elizabeth paid her no attention. She behaved as if Evangeline wasn’t even in the room. It was difficult enough for a three-year-old to sit still and behave like Evangeline was expected to around guests.

Most people would at least attempt to converse with the young girl or entertain them somehow. There wasn’t anything seriously wrong with Lady Elizabeth.

Mark just didn’t see what his mother saw in her.

“I suppose you could buy the property and complete it,” Lady Elizabeth suggested. “I mean, you clearly know the man well. I’m sure it would help him and dramatically improve your portfolio.”

“I could,” Mark agreed. “But that would take up a lot of my time. Time that I could be spending with Evangeline.”

Lady Elizabeth's jaw tightened, but Mark could not let his daughter struggle through boredom another moment longer.

"We like to go to the park, don't we?" he asked in her direction.

Finally, Evangeline lit up. Her face got colour, and she sat upright, her soft blonde curls bouncing with excitement.

"It's my favourite thing ever," she answered. "There's so much to do there. My father takes me every week."

"That's right," Mark said with a smile. "I wouldn't miss it for the world. And the new puppy certainly makes it more exciting."

"He's the best dog in the world!" his daughter cried.

"Dogs," Lady Elizabeth said with an unsatisfied smirk. "They leave fur everywhere. And paw prints, and they have to sniff everything, don't they?"

"They also make brilliant companions," Mark added. "It took some convincing, but Evangeline twisted my arm into getting one. I must say, the little guy is growing on me."

"That's lovely," Lady Elizabeth mumbled.

His mother smiled brightly at everything that Lady Elizabeth said. He had to admit that Lady Elizabeth was beautiful, with hazel eyes and brunette hair. She sat upright and slender. While her words gave a fair impression, her face hardly ever changed. She managed her expressions carefully.

She was a perfect lady. But something was missing from her. Nothing about her truly

enticed Mark. He didn't mind her company at all, but he didn't long for it either. Still, he knew the tea wouldn't last much longer, and the company would make his mother happy.

So, he made sure he stayed. Even if his mind was elsewhere and his mother had to carry the bulk of the conversation. By the time Lady Elizabeth left his home, everybody was happy.

Or at least so it seemed. Lady Elizabeth didn't smile often, so he had to rely only upon her words to make such assumptions.

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It was a perfect weather day at the park. The sun dappled through the leaves of the trees as Evangeline dragged her nanny and her friend along with her from place to place. Her friend's nanny followed closely, too, fussing over anything and everything along the way

"So, you bought her the puppy, but you're the one who has to walk it?" Hugh asked.

Mark chuckled. "She's three, Hugh. Asking her to walk a dog for longer than two minutes is a tall order."

The men laughed. "Well, someone once told me it was an excellent way to meet women. They can't get enough of the cute things," Hugh explained.

"In that case," Mark mumbled. "Julia!"

Evangeline's nanny looked up from where they were picking some flowers, and the two came over.

“Julia, I think it’s your turn for the dog, if you don’t mind,” Mark said. “Here, come get Spot.”

“Of course, Sir,” Julia said with a smile, taking the lead from him.

Hugh shook his head as they walked a short while further. “The Duke of Blackwood,” he said. “Mark Goldenthorn! Afraid of having to meet women in the park.”

“Don’t even get me started,” Mark said with a laugh. “You’ve been my best friend for the longest time. Surely this doesn’t surprise you?”

“Not in the slightest.”

The two men had been best friends since school. Hugh had been there for every major event in Mark’s life and had seen him through the best and the worst times of everything. And still, after all of it, they enjoyed each other’s company. Mark had always thought Hugh to be the more attractive of the two of them.

They were rather contrasted when they walked side-by-side. Hugh had dark hair and brown eyes that seemed to absorb light when one looked into them. While Mark had neat blond hair with icy blue eyes that did little to hide what he was thinking at any given moment.

The girls laughed and squealed loudly as a frog leapt out from one of the bushes and towards them. Mark enjoyed the quiet of the park and the sun on his skin. It was one of the few truly peaceful parts of his week.

While he was there, he didn’t have to worry about the house or his work, or his mother’s insistence that Evangeline would be permanently damaged if she didn’t have a strong female figure in her life soon.



“How was tea with Lady Elizabeth?” Hugh asked as if reading his mind.

“A little boring,” Mark answered honestly. “She’s a very beautiful woman, don’t get me wrong. But I don’t think she’s a good fit.”

“I’ve heard you say that a few times,” Hugh teased. “Is there going to be anybody out there who is a good fit for you and Eva?”

Mark smirked. “I like to believe that we’re just fine, the two of us,” he said. “But she’s not going to be this young forever. She’s going to get older, and I’m afraid there are just some things that I’m not equipped to deal with.”

“She has Julia,” Hugh said with a shrug.

“She does,” Mark agreed. “But I’d like her to have something a little more stable than that. My mother is right about that, at least.”

Hugh gave a quiet nod that he understood. It was a busy day in the park, but there was space enough for everyone. A pleasant moment of silence fell between them, broken only by the sound of two women who chattered up ahead.

They sounded cheerful and as eager for the day as Mark felt. He looked up to greet them. A small and curvy woman with strawberry blonde hair walked side-by-side with another woman who stood taller with darker hair.

“Good morning,” Hugh greeted them, and the women looked up.

“Good morning,” the taller one greeted in return.

The blonde woman’s golden-brown eyes looked straight up at Mark, and something stirred within him. She walked as if she were floating on water, as if the world moved

around her, and she was the anchor that kept it all together.

There was a look to her that appealed to him and something about the way that she carried herself that had him suddenly worried about his hair and worried that the buttons on his waistcoat were done incorrectly.

She smiled at him, and it was as if she'd blossomed. As she walked past, Mark fought the urge to turn his head and look after her. He wanted to, though. Just so that he could commit a little more of her to his memory.

"What about you?" Mark asked. "Would you like to take the dog? Perhaps then you could finally meet someone."

Hugh let out a light groan. "I feel so trapped in that, you know?"

Mark nodded. "Your uncle's rule is pretty clear, though," he said. "You get his entire estate, provided you find yourself a good woman to marry."

He turned to glance back at the woman who had passed him. Mark wanted just another look at her, but there were people between them.

"I know," Hugh said. "But I just don't want to rush things. Not even for the money. What good is all that wealth if I can't stand being at home?"

"You've got a point there," Mark said. "We're both feeling the pressure a bit, aren't we?"

Hugh laughed. "This feels like when we were younger, doesn't it? Figuring out ways to get the attention of pretty women?"

"Except now we're both avoiding it despite it being inevitable," Mark teased. "Your

uncle just wants to see you happy.”

“So does your mother,” Hugh retorted.

The two men fell quiet as they walked until, eventually, Mark let out a loud and laboured sigh.

“Things will work out,” he said. He wasn’t sure if he was trying to convince himself of that or Hugh.

“My aunt always used to say that the answers come when we’re not looking for them,” Hugh said with a smile. “She and my uncle were so close. I’ve never seen love like that. It’s no wonder he wants me to be married so eagerly.”

“Well, not all marriages are like that,” Mark said. “Trust me, I know.”

Hugh nodded. “Not all women are going to be like Violet, you know,” he said. “Some of them are going to make you as happy as my aunt made my uncle.”

“I hope so,” Mark said. “Otherwise, I don’t know what I’ll do. I can’t go through that again. Eva can’t, either.”

“I’m worried I’ll get married, and it’s like my mother and father,” Hugh said. “They have a terrible marriage. They hate each other.”

“They’re still together,” Mark offered.

“Out of spite,” Hugh joked. “Each is trying to outlive the other. I’m amazed my uncle still believes in a happy marriage after seeing the two of them together.”

“See?” Mark asked. “That’s what I’m worried about. I don’t want Eva to have the

experience that you had. I want her to see her father and mother happy. Not fighting.”

“Trust me,” Hugh said. “She’s better off without a mother than with two unhappy parents in the house.”

“I’m the second son in my family,” Hugh said. “I don’t need to be married. I could travel and see the world. But, as you said, my uncle has a pretty strict rule.”

“Maybe you get lucky and find a woman who wants to travel with you,” Mark said with a smirk.

“We have a lot ahead of us, don’t we?” Hugh asked.

Mark nodded, and the men walked in silence for a while. Neither of them had the answers, and neither of them wanted to face what was necessary.

“I’ve learned that even the most intricate plans are torn apart by fate,” Mark said. “I think we’re just going to have to let this play itself out.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:20 am*

### Chapter 3

“Father!” Eva’s scream cut through the summer air.

Mark’s heart dropped into his stomach as he searched the park for his daughter. When he found them, the two young girls and Julia were running towards them. Julia was the only one without tears on her face.

Mark bent down to meet his crying daughter.

“What is it? What’s happened?” he asked in a panic.

She tried to tell him, but he could barely hear a word she said. Eva was crying so hard that every word came out as a stammered mess. So, Mark looked to Julia, who looked worried beyond belief.

“A dog came by, Your Grace, and growled at Spot,” she explained. “Spot got so afraid that he pulled out of his collar and ran away. The—the bigger dog gave chase, and we’ve lost sight of them.”

“What if Spot gets hurt?” Eva cried loudly.

“Which way did they go?” Mark asked.

All three girls pointed in the direction that the dogs ran in, and Mark took off after them.

“Wait here. We’ll make sure we get them back safely,” Hugh assured them.

Mark ran. He had no idea if Spot would be alright or if he’d even find the dogs. All he knew was that he couldn’t stand the sight of his daughter so distraught. And he knew which direction they’d run in.

He could hear Hugh’s steps behind him as they gave chase.

The wind whipped against their cheeks as he finally caught sight of the dogs at the other end of the park. They were moving fast, but at least they were still alright. He picked up the pace as he jumped some short bushes and kept up the chase.

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Diana and Anna walked until they found the perfect shady spot beneath a tree to place their picnic down. Diana had been eager to get away from the house. The fighting between the family was getting out of hand, and she just wanted to have a moment of peace.

What was meant to be a pleasant birthday dinner for her cousin had turned into a ball. And Diana had been the last to find out about it. It had made her furious, and now nobody in the house was talking to her.

Everywhere she looked, party decorations were being made, and furniture was being rearranged.

“Those were some handsome men earlier, don’t you think?” Anna asked. “One of them was giving you a rather keen eye.”

Diana groaned. “Don’t get me started on that,” she warned.

But Anna was right. Diana didn't often feel so taken by a passing greeting. Perhaps it was the thought of marriage that her aunt had inadvertently planted in her head that had her suddenly noticing more about the men around her than before. Or perhaps the man she'd seen had simply been a very attractive one.

In fact, she had been so taken by him that she had lost track of what Anna was saying.

"Your family needs to leave," Anna said.

"I know," Diana answered. "But I've already paid for the party. We might as well host it, and I'll figure out what to do with them after that."

"They'll spend all your money," Anna warned her. "Just like they spent their own. They have no respect for you or your kindness."

"Enough about that," Diana requested as she covered her eyes. "I want to escape it for a while. Let's just enjoy this picnic, and you can tell me about the suitor that visited you last week."

"Oh," Anna said. "That."

"Yes. That ." Diana flashed her friend a knowing smile.

Anna winced. "I wish I could tell you what we spoke about," she said. "But I can't. I didn't listen to a word of it."

"Anna!" Diana reprimanded her.

The girls had been close friends for as long as Diana could remember. In fact, Anna had become the only person that Diana could confide in since her parents had died. She didn't know what she would do without her.

“He was so boring.” Anna laughed as she covered her eyes. “And he never stopped talking about himself. I barely got a word in. My mother and I just sat in silence as he spoke for hours.”

“Oh dear.” Diana laughed. “That sounds awful.”

They unpacked some of their picnic foods, and Diana felt the strain of her day fall from her shoulders. She turned her face to the sun and took a deep breath, holding it a moment before releasing it slowly.

It was a quieter day at the park, but around them, a few families walked and played. Anna always knew how to get her mind off things. She spoke about her suitor and how he had told them everything about his childhood.

Diana laughed at a lot of it, and it felt as if she was far away from her troubles then. Anna had known her for the longest time. She’d seen her through the worst of her life and had been a pillar of support to her after her parents died.

“He had the worst manners, too,” Anna said. “At one point, he used his finger to scoop up some of the icing and licked it off!”

“He didn’t,” Diana gasped.

“My mother just pretended as if she didn’t see anything.” Anna laughed. “Oh Diana, there was barely a hair on his head that wasn’t grey. He’s almost as old as my father.”

“Why is your mother so set on this man?” Diana asked.

“He’s older,” Anna explained. “She wants me to find an older suitor. Someone with money. They like his title. They think it will improve my place in society.”



“It could,” Diana said. “But that’s not always the most important thing, is it?”

“Well, I might not have a choice,” Anna said.

Diana frowned. Her friend suddenly looked sullen and defeated.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“My parents have left me with a choice,” Anna said. “I can find a suitable man who meets their criteria, or I must marry the baron by next summer.”

That was a tough ultimatum. And Diana knew it wouldn’t be easy for her friend to accept it. Whoever she married would be in her life until either of them died. It was a big decision.

“You could do everything without a husband,” Anna said. “Except have children, of course. Your father taught you everything. How to manage the business and the finances, and your mother taught you how to manage the house. You don’t need a husband.”

“I don’t,” Diana agreed. “But I don’t want to be alone. I rather like the idea of the company. A warm embrace, a laugh over breakfast. But those are not enough criteria for a good husband search.”

It made Diana think of what her aunt had said before about finding her a husband to distract her from their spending. That was the only criteria they had for her. Someone who could keep her busy enough that she wouldn’t notice what they were doing.

That wasn’t enough for Diana. But she did dream of having a family one day. So that she could raise a daughter to have a good life like the one she’d had with her parents. But they had met by chance.

Diana had been so busy keeping everything together after her parents died that it felt as though nothing happened by chance anymore. Everything was planned and scrutinized carefully so that she could have enough time to do it all.

She had hoped her aunt and uncle and cousins would have helped her when they moved in, but so far, all they'd done was party planning and hosting teas.

"It's crazy to think we'll be married and having families," Diana said. "I still feel like that young girl who used to climb trees when her parents weren't looking."

"Me too," Anna said. "I fear I've read too many books. Perhaps my idea of love and marriage has been skewed by fiction."

Diana knew what she meant. She'd read the same kinds of books. Young, handsome men would show up when they were most needed. In those books, the men would provide the women with something they desperately longed for.

"I asked my parents once how they'd met," Diana said.

"What did they say?" Anna asked.

"They bumped into each other while crossing the road," Diana said. "My mother stumbled, and my father stopped her from falling. They were headed to the same coffee shop. Months later, they were getting married."

"They had a wonderful marriage," Anna said. "And they made such a success of themselves."

"That they did," Diana said. "But they made me believe that finding love was an easy task."

Anna nodded in agreement. “My parents met because my grandmother decided my father would be a good match. That’s where my mother gets her ideas from.”

“Well, if it worked for her, then she’d surely believe it would work for you,” Diana said in agreement.

“This is very complicated,” Anna said, sounding defeated.

The two women enjoyed lunch as they contemplated all the ways they might run away from a life where they would have to marry someone they weren’t interested in. It was a pleasant afternoon.

One of the most pleasant that Diana had enjoyed in some time.

“I finally read some of my letters,” she confessed.

“Oh?” Anna asked, excited.

“It wasn’t as bad as I thought,” Diana confessed. “I even responded to some of them. I had thought they’d be filled with painful memories and sadness.”

“And?” Anna asked.

“They were filled with memories that people had shared with my parents. Beautiful ones. I might read the rest of them when I get back later.”

“I told you,” Anna said, swatting Diana. “I’m glad you did that.”

Soon, the pair were doubled over laughing as they recalled the time her father was chased by a lively chicken one weekend when their families had gone away to the countryside for a week.

It was good to laugh again. Diana no longer laughed in her own home. There, she merely fought with people, and they fought back. At home, she was having orders barked at her to fold and paint decorations and prepare items for a party that was costing her a lot of money.

It left a bitter taste in her mouth, and she hoped to stay at the park with Anna for as long as she possibly could.

“Am I invited to the party?” Anna asked.

“If you don’t come, then I’m not going,” Diana warned her. “I’ll walk away from that house and into the dark night if you’re not there to keep me sane.”

The afternoon came around, and the sun cooled just slightly. The breeze washed over them, and Diana accepted it gratefully. Her father had always told her that the breeze could wash away worries and replace them with peace.

She hoped for that now. That the breeze would blow peace into her heart and mind and leave it there. So that when she returned home, she could continue to enjoy it and find a way to live the life she had then.

“We can’t sit here forever,” Anna said.

“I know, but we can sit a few more hours, can’t we?” Diana asked.

“A few,” Anna said with a smile. “I have nowhere else to be today.”

“Good,” Diana said, making herself comfortable. “Hopefully, when I get home, I can just eat and retreat to my room. The house feels so full lately.”

“To the rafters,” Anna agreed. “I tell you. It’s not a lot of family you’ve got there, but

they certainly do take up a lot of room, don't they?"

Anna was right. There were only four of them, and the house was large. And yet, it felt as though every time Diana turned around, one of them was standing right there. It felt as though she was being smothered in her own home.

She hoped that once the party was over, it would quieten down again. Would it be the same thing when her other cousin, Emma, turned twenty-one, too? Would she be forced to match the extravagance of the party?

Just then, two dogs came flying past them. A small one that yelped as it ran and a larger one that barked and growled. Diana had spent many years with her mother and father, working with animals. She knew that the large dog would soon catch up with the smaller one. They ran at a speed, kicking up dust behind them as they went. The women turned to look just as the two men they'd passed earlier came chasing past them.

"Spot!" the one man called out as they ran. "Get back here! Spot!"

Anna and Diana looked at each other with amusement.

"You better go help them," Anna said. "They look like they have no idea what they're doing."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:20 am*

### Chapter 4

Diana grabbed a piece of ham and smiled at Anna. She got up from her seat and rushed after the dogs. Instead of chasing after them, she took a look at where they were headed. She knew they were likely to take a curve away from the water, and the little dog leaned to the left.

So, she headed in the direction she knew they were likely to go. She had predicted it perfectly. Diana waited for the first small dog to pass her, then held the ham out for the larger dog to see.

It came to a quick halt. The dog had his full attention on her as she held the ham just out of its reach. She placed her hand over the dog's head, and it sat just as she knew it would.

A large man, completely out of breath, arrived and took up the dog's lead.

"This is a large dog," Diana said sternly.

"And he seems to like you," the man said between gasps.

"You are no match for this dog, clearly," Diana reprimanded him. "I'm sure you're smart enough to know that this could have ended differently."

The large man smiled at her, and it made her skin crawl. "Thankfully, you were here Miss..."

“You need to do better,” she said sternly. “Get your dog under control so that I don’t have to chase after it again.”

With that, she spun around and headed in the direction that the smaller dog was going. She stopped a moment to scout the park out for a sign of where it might have gone just as another breathless man appeared behind her.

It was the handsome man who’d had her mind in a chokehold earlier. And, he was even more attractive than he’d seemed in passing, despite the now redness of his cheeks.

He was even more dapper than he’d seemed in passing. His eyes seemed to hold a world as deep as the oceans, and when he spoke, the sound of his voice crashed over her and dampened the harshness of the world around her.

“Thank you,” he said, trying not to gasp.

She turned to face him and found herself at a loss for words. A tall blond man with eyes as blue as ice looked back at her. His normally pale skin was pink from the running. He wore a neat suit, and something about him stunned her.

She pushed thoughts of her attraction to him out of her mind. She was certain a man like that had to be married. After all, he had a child, and thoughts like that were hardly appropriate. She couldn’t hazard a blush, giving her away. Reputations spread faster than fire in a place like that, and she couldn’t risk it.

“The smaller dog, Spot,” he said. “Did you see where it went?”

Diana shook her head. “Sorry,” she said kindly. “But it should be safe now.”

The gentleman looked distraught. His blue eyes looked past her as she searched the

park for signs of Spot.

“It’s my daughter’s dog,” he said. “I don’t know how I will console her.”

Diana smiled kindly. “There’s no need for consoling yet,” she said. “We’ll find Spot. He must be tired by now, so he won’t have run too far. As soon as he notices the threat is gone, he’ll have stopped.”

The man nodded and took a deep breath.

“Let’s go this way,” Diana suggested.

They walked the park, searching for Spot. As they walked and the man caught his breath, he seemed to calm down a little. He walked more upright, and the pink in his cheeks had subsided to flaunt his perfect complexion.

Diana tried not to look at him too often. Every time she did, she felt an inappropriate flutter in her chest. One that she tried desperately to subside, hoping it wasn’t evident in her voice or face.

“Spot!” the man called.

“Not so urgently,” she suggested. “If you hope to get his attention, you need to sound excited. He’s a puppy. He’ll respond.”

The man nodded, and she shifted her voice into a higher pitch, a more excitable tone.

“Come, Spot!” Diana called the dog, clapping her hands lightly as she listened for a response from somewhere. They strolled, searching anywhere they could for a sight of the puppy.



Just then, Diana saw some disturbed dirt beneath a hedge. It was clear that something had crawled underneath it. She pointed it out to the man, and they approached slowly.

“Spot?” she called out. “Come Spotty! Here!”

Just then, the hedge rustled and shook, and she saw just the tip of a nose sticking out from between the leaves. Diana stepped into the flower bed and crouched down to look between the branches of the hedge.

There, she saw the puppy. It whined a little before he started to wag his tail just slightly. A beautiful black puppy with one white patch over its left eye. She reached in with a smile and pulled the dog out. It was panting heavily and squirmed excitedly at the sight of the man.

She wrapped her arms around it and smiled. “I’m assuming this is Spot?”

The man gave her a relieved smile. “It is, indeed,” he said. “Again, I don’t know how to thank you enough. Evangeline, she must be worried sick about him.”

Diana lifted the puppy to check it for any injuries or stress. It allowed her to carry it, and then she brought it back and scratched it behind the ear. She was aware of the man’s eyes on her and the nerves that fluttered through her every time she glanced at him.

“Despite being a little dirty and thirsty, Spot is just fine,” Diana announced cheerfully.

“I think Spot has had enough of the park today,” the man said. “Let’s get him back to Eva and get him home.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to give him some water first,” Diana said. “He’s had quite

the run, and I'm sure it is a short trip home."

"Certainly, the man said."

"I have some water where I was sitting," she said. "He can have a drink, and then he can go home and get some rest."

He smiled at her, and she felt an excited lump form in her throat. "Lead the way," he suggested.

She smirked and turned her face away so that he would not see her blush. They walked side-by-side back to where Anna was awaiting her return.

The air had a chill to it then as the sun was lower in the sky. Thankfully, Spot was warm as he snuggled into her arms. For the first time in her life, she found herself worried if she was walking upright or speaking properly.

She kept her head steady on her neck and watched the horizon as she walked. She couldn't risk looking in his direction again in case he could read her thoughts. It wasn't fair to his wife and daughter for her to have such inappropriate ideas about the man.

What she didn't consider was that, while she was looking at the horizon, she missed the branch that jutted out in front of her foot. It hooked her, and she stumbled forward.

"Woah," the man said as he reached for her.

He wrapped both arms around Diana to steady her and stop her from hitting the ground. He was warm and strong. He steadied her with a laugh that sounded like honey.

“Thank you,” she said.

When he released her, a shiver washed over her body that she could not control. His touch had caused a chill to run over her skin. She had hoped it wouldn't be so obvious, but he looked at her and smiled.

Her hands worked quickly to straighten the muslin fabric of her dress and make sure that her stay had remained in place. The last thing she wanted was to appear even more unruly in front of him.

“You're cold,” he said kindly.

She was going to protest, but he was already slipping his jacket off, and her attraction to him had dried up the words she had hoped to speak. He wrapped his jacket around her body, and she accepted it gratefully.

When she inhaled again, she noted that it smelled of liquorice. That was one of her favourite scents in the world. So, without being too obvious, she inhaled deeply again.

“Thank you,” she said.

She looked at him and knew instantly that it was a mistake. Their eyes locked, and she felt instantly trapped in the blueness of them. He halted a moment in her gaze before he gave her a kind smile.

“You've saved the day,” he said. “I should be thanking you.”

They walked again in agonizing silence. Diana found herself, for the first time ever, unable to decide how to start a conversation with the man. Thankfully, a group of people approached, each calling eagerly out to Spot.

There was another man and two girls, followed by a woman whose behaviour Diana recognized as the nanny.

“Spot!” a young blonde girl cried as she came running. “Is he alright?”

Her face was red from crying, and so was the face of the other girl. The blonde girl shoved her face into the blond man’s stomach and hugged him.

“He’s alright, Eva,” he said, identifying the girl as his daughter. “He simply got a little scare.”

The young girl sniffed. “I want to go home,” she said.

The other man shook his head. “I tried to keep up with you, but you were too quick. I figured I should stay with the girls.”

The blond man beside her laughed. “You’ve always had a hard time with sport.”

Eva reached out her hands and asked for Spot.

“I’m afraid I’m going to carry him for a little while longer,” Diana said.

“No!” Eva argued. “Give him back.”

“She’s just going to hold him for a little while,” her father explained. “Just until he’s had some water. Then you can have him back.”

Eva’s lower lip quivered as tears threatened her. The last thing Diana wanted was to be the reason that the handsome man’s daughter burst into tears for the second time that day.

“Tell you what,” Diana said to Eva. “Why don’t you all come with me? I have a picnic set up nearby, and my friend is waiting for me. There’s plenty of space on the blanket.”

The group all looked at each other as they waited for the girl to answer. There was a long silence as the girl thought it over. She looked between Spot and Diana as she thought it over.

“I might still have some chocolate left,” Diana added to sweeten the deal.

“Okay,” Eva answered energetically.

Once again, the girl’s father flashed her a dashing smile and said, “Lead the way.”

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Mark hardly had time to feel the relief of Spot’s safe return before that feeling was replaced by another one. He marvelled at the woman who had taken control of a dog that had moments before been entirely unruly.

What were the chances it would be the same woman who’d struck him earlier during their walk. The only thing that had stopped him from turning his head to get another look at her was the thought that they would likely never see each other again. How wrong he’d been.

There was something about her that just breathed control into everything. She did not seem concerned or on edge. Rather, she seemed to know exactly where Spot would go after being chased.

All the chaos that had occurred within the last few minutes had seemed to run right into her and break into a million manageable shards.

And Spot had become her number one priority. Even though he had caused her dress to be covered in dirt and grass, she didn't seem to mind that one bit. Rather, she focused only on whether Spot was alright.

She'd done an excellent job of soothing Eva's concerns as well. The woman was ever the lady, despite there being something different about her. Something exciting and mysterious that had him glancing at her a little too often.

Mark wondered what he might learn about her as they made their way towards the picnic that had so rudely been interrupted by his chase after Spot. He must have run right past her, he realized.

He felt embarrassed then. To think she had seen him in such a state about his puppy. Hugh, the kids, and Julia chatted merrily as they made their way back towards her friend on the blanket.

It was as if they'd all known each other for some time as they laughed and exchanged light-hearted teases.

"Anna," the woman said as they approached her picnic blanket. "These lovely people are going to join us for a while so that Spot here can have a drink of water."

"Lovely," Anna said with a wide smile, shuffling over to make some space. "I knew you were the right person for the job, Diana."

He finally knew her name. And he felt that it suited her perfectly.

Diana.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:20 am*

### Chapter 5

Mark and Hugh remained standing while the girls filled most of the picnic blanket. Eva and her friend had received the chocolate they had been promised. He was sure it was far too late in the afternoon for the young girls to be consuming so much sugar, but he wasn't going to put a stop to it.

After everything that had happened, Eva could use a little excitement.

"That was quite the chase," Hugh said.

"It was," Mark said. "I was worried that he was going to get hurt. I don't know what I would have said to Eva if that had happened."

They were talking quietly so that Eva wouldn't hear them. But something Diana had said sent Eva into a laughing spiral. She laughed until she gasped for air and then coughed.

Diana handed her some water to drink and helped her calm down.

"Come here," Diana said with a laugh. "Your hair's completely come undone. Let me fix it for you."

Eva hopped onto Diana's lap with ease. It pulled at something in Mark's chest. He hadn't seen Eva that comfortable around other women in a long time. It was a stark difference between how she had been when Lady Elizabeth had been visiting.

Diana loosened her hair and braided it into two braids that were then twirled into little buns. Eva chuckled and chatted the entire time. Not once did the smile fall from her face. When Diana was done, Eva touched her hair and thanked her.

Even when Diana interacted with Eva, she did so with so much elegance and grace that it was as if she was moving in sync with the elements around her.

“That’s a pretty necklace,” Eva said, pointing at the locket on Diana’s neck.

“Thank you,” Diana said, opening it up. “This is a picture of my parents.”

Eva reached out and ran her finger along the image in the locket. She looked at it for a short while.

“My mummy is in heaven,” she said.

Mark’s heart stopped for many reasons. Not only had it been years since he’d heard Eva mention her mother in front of anybody instead of him. He had no reason why she would be so comfortable with Diana, but he was glad that she was.

The other reason his heart had stopped was because he couldn’t predict how Diana would react to such tragic information being shared so openly. He waited for Diana to glance in his direction and use her eyes to beg him to get her out of it.

Instead, she smiled. “My mummy and daddy are in heaven, too.”

Eva hugged Diana tightly, and she hugged back. Mark had to clench his jaw to stop himself from tearing up.

“Maybe your mummy and daddy and my mummy are friends in heaven,” Eva said when she released her.



“I think they’d get along just fine,” Diana said kindly.

Diana only looked at him then, though. But it wasn’t with pity, as most people did. There was curiosity in her eyes. It occurred to him then that he’d never formally introduced himself.

“My name is Mark Goldenthorn,” he finally introduced himself.

“Ah,” Anna said. “The Duke of Blackwood!”

“Yes,” Mark said bashfully. “And this is my friend, Hugh Winterbourne. And this is Eva’s nanny, Julia.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Hugh said with a bow of his head. Julia nodded in greeting.

Diana smiled. “My name is Miss Diana Fairchild, and this is my friend, Miss Anna Dubois. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“The pleasure is ours,” Hugh said with a wide smile.

“This young lady is Mary, and her wonderful nanny here is Georgia,” Mark continued, introducing Eva’s little friend.

“I must admit, this has turned into a very pleasant day,” Anna said, smiling widely. “And from now on, a very good reason to always have some extra chocolate on hand.”

“I agree,” Diana said.

“You saved Spot!” Eva sang as she patted her puppy on the head. “I’m never going to let him go again.”

“If he gets out of your grasp again,” Diana said. “Run the other way. Spot knows that you are the most important person in his life. He was only trying to get the big dog away from you. If Spot runs, and you run in the other direction, he’ll follow you. I promise.”

“You’re so smart,” Eva said eagerly. “Was he really trying to save me from the big dog?”

“Yes,” Diana said with a smile.

Eva leapt up and went to hug her puppy. “Thank you, Spot.”

Mark watched, his eyes focused on Diana. She wasn’t married. It seemed difficult to believe given how beautiful and pleasant she was.

Her strawberry blonde hair wisped around her face as the breeze blew. Her friend Anna smiled at them widely.

“Miss Diana Fairchild,” Eva repeated. “And Miss Anna Dubois. I am Lady Evangeline Goldenthorn.”

“And it is a great pleasure to meet you,” Diana said with a smile.

Spot lay curled up and fast asleep on the blanket next to them. It seemed for a moment that even Spot was smiling in her company.

A strange sensation washed over Mark. Something he was unfamiliar with. But every time Eva laughed, or they played a game together, the feeling grew stronger. He could not take his eyes off the woman.

The way her hazel eyes sparkled every time she laughed and the way that every move

she made was like a dance, filled with grace and purpose. All of it had put him into a trance, and he had a hard time taking his eyes off her.

He knew then that he was in trouble. More trouble than he could have ever expected. Mark didn't want to have to end what was happening between Diana and his daughter. He wanted his daughter to laugh that easily every day.

And more than anything, he wanted to find a reason for Diana to look up and smile at him because every time she did, it set him ablaze in a new kind of way. It made him want to watch his manners and be a better man in every way.

That's how he determined he was, without a doubt, falling for her.

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It took some time, but eventually, Mark and Hugh joined them on the blanket. The conversation seemed to flow comfortably. There were hardly any silences between them. They spoke about anything and everything. From literature to the way that architecture had shaped society over the last decades.

It was some of the most exciting conversation that Diana had enjoyed in a long time. Most men only spoke to her about superficial subjects. Others would brush her off as if a woman couldn't possibly be interested in intelligent subjects.

But when she spoke, Mark and Hugh listened and contributed. It made for fascinating conversations and topics.

"I'm telling you," Mark said with a chuckle. "Technology is advancing at such a rapid pace, I worry I won't be able to keep up with it all."

"I agree," Diana added. "I think the world needs to slow down. What more do we

need?”

“The human race is a hungry one,” Mark responded. “I’m afraid asking it to slow down might not work.”

“Well, then I’m perfectly happy if I get left behind,” Diana commented in response. “As long as I have what I need, I’ll be just fine. The world and all its ways can leave me right here to enjoy the sun and live out my life in peace.”

When she wasn’t looking his way, Diana was aware of Mark’s eyes on her. She could feel them burn against her skin, and it made her feel a certain way. Knowing that he was no longer married made her feel less guilty about the inappropriate thoughts she’d had when she’d first seen him.

There was no wife to worry about.

It was clear he was a good father. He had run halfway across the park to get to Spot so that his daughter wouldn’t have to worry. Eva loved him dearly. The moment he sat down, she moved from Diana to him, and she wouldn’t leave him alone.

He was not frustrated by her and did not try to get her to leave him alone. Instead, he seemed to cherish every moment that she was in his company. It was a sweet sight to see.

The duke seemed like a man who was comfortable with himself. When he spoke, he did it with an enviable confidence.

It also did not go unnoticed by Diana that every time Hugh spoke to Anna, she blushed profusely. Her entire face turned pink, and she could not stop the giggling from bubbling up within her.

Anna had never had quite as much control over her emotions as Diana did. It was clear that she liked Hugh's attention. Anna laughed louder at his jokes and smiled widely every time he looked at her.

It was sweet to see.

Their day had quickly become something completely different. All Diana had wanted was an escape from her stress and her family, and that's certainly what she had. Spot curled up in her lap, and she scratched his ear.

"We come to this park every week," Mark said. "I've never seen you here before."

"We come here from time-to-time," Diana said. "But not nearly as often as you do."

"Besides, you know how we're all just in our own worlds," Anna added. "I barely look around at others when I'm here. I'm too busy looking at the trees and the park around me."

"That's fair," Hugh said. "Do you enjoy nature?"

Anna gave him a devilish look and a smirk. "I really do," she said. "It helps me unwind."

"Same," Hugh responded.

They were staring into each other's eyes then. When Diana and Mark caught each other's eyes, they flashed each other a knowing look. Both had to stifle a laugh. Hugh and Anna were clearly attracted.

Just then, Eva gave a wide yawn.

“It should be nearing dinner time,” Julia said, reminding them all of how much time had passed. “And these girls could really do with a bath.”

The girls laughed as they wiped their faces. They had chocolate and dust on their cheeks and hands. They looked like two girls who were having a lot of fun.

“We should be heading back,” Mark said kindly. “Unfortunately, the day will only grow later.”

Eva woke Spot up and got him ready to leave.

“I’m not letting you go again, Spotty,” Eva said cheerfully. “Ever! Just you and me.”

Diana remembered when her dad had come home with a puppy. Her first dog. It had become her first best friend in life. She would cry into the dog’s fur when she was angry or sad. And when she was happy, she and the dog would play in the garden.

She hoped that Eva and Spot would have the same friendship.

“This has been lovely,” Hugh said as he readied to get up and leave.

“Thank you again for rescuing Spot,” Mark said.

“Of course,” Diana responded with a smile.

She wanted to linger on his looks a moment longer. Every time he looked into her eyes, she searched for her place within them. He did not break their gaze. Instead, he held it until she could feel herself burning up for him. Until the warmth in her cheeks threatened to embarrass her.

Diana glanced away just in time to see Eva rush in to hug her. She caught the girl and

laughed.

“I’m so glad we met you all,” Eva said. “This has been a lot of fun. It’s nice to laugh like this sometimes.”

“And I’m happy to have met you, too,” Diana said. “You are a very bright girl, and Spot is lucky to have you as his friend.”

Eva sat still for a moment and then looked at her dad. Whatever smile she had been wearing before had fallen from her face.

“What’s the matter?” Mark asked, his face a look of concern then, too.

“I don’t want to leave yet,” Eva said with a pout. “I’m having fun with my new friends.”

“I don’t want to go either,” Eva’s friend cried out.

Mark looked at his daughter with such stress in his eyes that it broke Diana completely.

“I know, honey,” Mark said. “But as Julia reminded us. We need to get some dinner, and we’ll need to get some rest soon as well.”

“But I’m having so much fun,” Eva said with another pout. She crossed her arms and looked for a moment as if she might cry again.

“We need to be leaving soon, too,” Diana said. “But here’s an idea. Give us a moment to pack up our picnic, and we’ll walk you to your carriage. How does that sound?”

### Chapter 6

Evangeline did not stop talking as she held Diana's hand tightly all the way to their carriage. She spoke about the puppy and all of her favourite toys. In between, Mark made some comments, eager to get his say.

It had turned into just the distraction that Diana had wanted that day. And she had loved every minute of it. While Diana wasn't one who liked surprises, she thoroughly enjoyed the chance to be spontaneous.

Their carriage came into view a little sooner than she'd liked it to. Judging by the way the group slowed their pace slightly, the feeling was universal. Evangeline's friend was hanging onto Anna's hand and stopped her every few paces to look at another flower or bug that she liked.

The two girls were a pleasant reminder of the youth that Diana had experienced. She had been a whimsical, nature-loving girl just like they were. She had run through that park and chanted and sang merrily just like they had on that day.

When the carriage came into view, Evangeline's eyes watered again.

"I want to stay," she said with a pout.

"I know you do, but we all need some food," Diana said.

Evangeline tightened her grip on Diana's hand and tugged. Her heart melted. She hated to see the girl look so sad after everything they had done to cheer her up. But, it



gave Diana the perfect opening to make an offer she'd been biting on since they had packed up the picnic.

"I tell you what," she opened. "Why don't you come over to my home for a picnic sometime soon? Consider it an open invitation."

Evangeline's eyes stretched wide. "Do you mean that?" she asked.

"Of course!" Diana said. "It would be my privilege to have you there!"

What tears had once welled up in Evangeline's eyes disappeared and was replaced with an eager sparkle. "Okay," she agreed.

With that, she disappeared into the carriage, her friend at her side and Spot following closely behind.

"Thank you," Mark said softly. And she saw the gratitude in his eyes. He wore the look of an honest man with a complicated life. Diana responded with a kind smile.

"I mean it," she said.

Hugh and Anna finished their conversation, and the men prepared to enter the carriage. Diana was desperate for the day to drag on. It was a sensation she didn't recognize, that she hadn't had before.

"Ladies, it has been a wonderful afternoon," Hugh said with a slight bow.

"Yes," Mark agreed. "We are fortunate that you were here on this day."

"As are we," Anna said rather boldly.

With that, the men climbed in, and the carriage was on its way. Mark peered out the window just as the wheels turned, and his eyes lingered on Diana's for a moment before he was out of view.

"A picnic at your house?" Anna teased with a knowing look. "You'll have to let me know how that goes."

\*

The town was busy, and Diana was in no mood as her family dragged her from store to store, buying clothes with her money. Apparently they were necessary. The clothes her cousins wore no longer seemed good enough to them.

They chattered eagerly among themselves. Although Diana was the one paying for everything, they behaved as if she was hardly there. She trailed behind them.

While their arms were filled with shopping bags and parcels, Diana carried nothing. She didn't need anything. For as long as she could remember, she had everything she needed. Her parents had made a decent amount of money, but she had never lived above her means.

"We still need to replace our shoes with something more fitting," her cousin said as she veered off to their next merchant.

Diana sighed but knew better than to start a new argument. She had made them promise that if she paid for their new wardrobes, they would ease up on all future spending.

She knew that it would only increase her aunt's desire for her to find a husband who could keep her distracted. They crossed the street, and Diana immediately noticed a small crowd gathered.

They stood in a circle as they laughed and sneered, and she knew then that nothing good was happening there. Upon closer inspection, she saw the tired and desperate eyes of a street urchin as he searched for a way out of the crowd.

Her heart pulled towards him. She knew it would embarrass her family to get involved, but she could not allow a defenceless child to be bullied by those who had never even known of hardship.

She was a little too late, though. Just as she approached, one of the richer boys shoved the street urchin as they laughed. The young, malnourished boy fell over a nearby stone and tumbled into the street.

Diana lunged forward and raced into the street where he was. Carriages and horses flew past her. It sounded like a hurricane as she threw herself over the child and covered him from the chaos that surrounded them.

One of the carriages came by so close that the wheel brushed the hem of her dress. Diana closed her eyes as she waited for one of them to hit her. In her arms and cover, the street urchin held his breath.

Then, a carriage came to a halt beside them, and a man stepped out. He strode past them and into the line of traffic that headed their way. The man held out his hand.

“Stop!” the man voiced, and the world around them fell quiet.

Diana looked up and hurried the urchin back to the sidewalk. There, the richer kids who had been giving him a hard time watched with wide eyes.

“You lot better scatter,” Diana warned them. “Unless you wish your parents to know what you’ve done today.”

Diana was out of breath, and she kept her hand on the poor child's shoulder. The bullies scattered with mumbled apologies as Diana bent down to look the street urchin in the eyes.

"Are you alright?" she asked. "Are you hurt?"

The boy's eyes were wide, but he shook his head. "I'm fine," he answered quietly.

Diana smiled and reached into her pouch. She retrieved a coin and placed it in the boy's hand.

"Make sure you get something warm to eat," she said.

The boy looked at the coin as if it were the most beautiful thing he had ever seen before he rushed off towards the bakery. Diana brushed the dust from her dress and searched for her family, who looked at her with disgusted scowls.

But before they made it to her, the man who had stopped traffic came up to her.

"That was rather heroic of you," he said with a smile.

He was a tall man with raven black hair. He towered over her and peered down at her with beautiful brown eyes. Diana gave him a polite smile. She didn't like the way she felt standing next to him.

Diana knew the kind of smile he had given her. It was practiced and perfect. A little too perfect to be trustworthy.

"Not heroic," she corrected him. "I like to think of it as decent. Nobody deserved to be treated that way."

“You’re quite right,” the man agreed.

Diana was ready to brush him off when the rest of her family arrived. They wore bright, beaming smiles that immediately put her on edge. She saw her cousin fix her hair and straighten her dress, lowering it slightly over her chest.

“Viscount Starling,” her aunt greeted the man happily. “What a pleasure it is to see you in these parts.”

He looked at them and then back to Diana.

“This is my family,” Diana explained, introducing him to them.

They had told her who he was. She had heard rumours of him being a master at fencing. There were other stories about him, but she’d never paid enough attention to remember any of them.

“I’m not sure if you remember,” Jane said with a ghastly wide smile. “We met at church earlier this year.”

The viscount smiled. “I remember,” he said. “And now it seems I have met the entire family.”

He turned to Diana with a smile that made her skin crawl. Even if she wanted to respond, Diana would have no chance. Her family set their claws into him with bright smiles and polite chuckles as they made small talk.

They all but whisked him away as they told him all about what had happened with the street urchin as if they had cared about him at all. Diana allowed them to be distracted by him as she trailed behind yet again.

All she wanted was a moment of peace, but her family was like smoke, always around her, clinging to her every move and mood. Diana was beginning to feel smothered in her own home and life.

Their shopping carried on for a few more hours before they finally set foot in the only store she had any interest in. The bookstore.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:20 am*

### Chapter 7

Much to her disappointment, the viscount joined them for the remainder of their shopping trip. She wasn't sure he had much of a choice. Every time he tried to veer off, one of her family members dragged him back into what they were doing.

The bookstore was a quaint little place. Shelves, filled to the brim with books, created narrow passageways. It was easy to disappear in there between all the things that inspired Diana.

Even the ceiling of the store was painted with a scene of the night sky. It was a deep blue with bright stars painted on it. Diana took a deep breath, enjoying the scent of the paper, and exhaled slowly.

There was hope for her then that she would find some small amount of peace.

Her family and the viscount had not stopped talking since they'd met, and Diana had no idea what they had been talking about. She'd been paying them little attention in her attempt to remain invisible.

Diana separated herself for a while as she looked through some of the books she hadn't read. But it hadn't been far enough. The more time she spent in that man's presence, the more irritable she became. He oozed falsehood and pretence.

While her cousins were distracted, the viscount made his way over to her. He startled her when he spoke; she was busy reading the first chapter entry of a book that interested her.

“It was kind of you to give that child a coin,” he said. “Most people won’t do that.”

She shrugged. “I’ve always given to the poor,” she explained. “I am able to, so why shouldn’t I?”

She wasn’t lying. A portion of her money was given to orphanages every year with strict instructions to make sure that no children needed to live on the streets and that no child would go hungry.

It had been a while since Diana had checked in on those orphanages, and she made a mental note to do the rounds again soon. Seeing that child look so hungry and tired made her worried that her contributions were not being spent well enough.

The viscount was standing near to her. In the narrow passageway between the shelves, she could not move past him. When he spoke, he oozed an arrogant tone. It reminded her a little of her aunt. Diana had no choice but to have a conversation with him. She only had to be careful that Jane did not see them.

Her cousin had a jealous streak. Diana recalled one time when Jane had destroyed one of her dolls because it had been the better one. And she’d seen the way Jane had flaunted herself at the viscount. Her cousin was clearly interested in him, and the last thing Diana needed was for Jane to get the wrong idea.

“That’s very charitable of you,” he said.

“Well, My Lord,” Diana said plainly. “I think it should be a requirement for all households that earn over a certain amount. But I’m certain that opinion would not be popular with everyone.”

“Probably more than you know,” he said. “And my name is Colin Fitzgerald. Viscount Starling seems so proper for a bookstore.”



Diana gave a weak smile. Just as she did, Jane rounded the corner, clearly in search of the viscount. Jane's expression soured as Diana averted her eyes from both of them.

"I've seen nothing here of interest to me," Jane snapped.

Diana could hear the bitterness in her cousin's voice.

"We're leaving. Viscount, would you care to join us as we visit our last stop?"

Much to Diana's disappointment, he kept his eyes on her. "I'd love to," he said, not turning to look at Jane.

Diana had to do something if she wanted to avoid an unnecessary argument. She was in no way interested in Colin Fitzgerald despite his interest in her. And she needed to make sure that Jane understood that in some way.

"You lot go on ahead," she said. "There are some books I'm interested in here. I'll join you again in just a few minutes."

"Are you sure?" Colin asked. "I don't mind waiting for you."

Diana made sure not to look at her cousin. She didn't want her to get the wrong idea. But she could feel the burning of her gaze on her.

"Positive," Diana answered. "I won't be long."

"Well, we're going for tea. You can meet us at the tea house," Jane said before turning on her heels.

Colin gave Diana one last eager glance before following Jane out of the bookstore.

Diana breathed a sigh of relief. She wouldn't have long, but she could take a few minutes to herself and away from the madness.

In those few minutes, she chose a few new books to read and headed as slowly as she could towards the tea room. Some glanced at the damage to the hem of her dress that she'd got from running into the street after the street urchin.

She didn't care much about that. Other people's opinions had never bothered her much at all. Diana had a way of shrugging them off. When the tea house came into view, she slowed her pace again.

It was packed, and she was certain that her family had ordered a table full of cakes and tea. Diana wasn't hungry, and she wasn't in the mood for any kind of polite conversation, either.

Mostly, she was in no mood for her cousin's jealous stares and snarky remarks. By the time Diana made it to the table, the conversation was in full swing. Colin stood up to greet her as she took her seat.

"Do not let me interrupt the conversation," Diana said, making sure not to look the viscount in the eyes.

"I was just telling the Viscount Starling here about our trip last year," her aunt said.

"His name is Colin Fitzgerald," Diana announced.

Her family shot her a horrified look as if she had said something horrendous.

"Diana's right," Colin said. "You may address me by my name."

Jane looked as if she'd eaten something sour. Her mouth turned into a pout as she

pushed her cake away. Diana tried not to look at her on the off chance that her looks might be misunderstood.

“Do you enjoy the theatre?” Colin asked.

It took Diana a moment to realize that he was talking directly to her. Diana put down her tea and gave him a fleeting glance.

“Not particularly,” Diana lied. “But I know Jane has hardly ever missed a production. The ballet is her favourite.”

That was just what Diana needed to say. Jane took over the conversation happily then, recounting all her favourite theatre productions. Jane could talk about it for hours, and it wasn’t long before Colin looked as if he regretted ever mentioning it.

It didn’t matter. Jane was a perfectly charming woman. She puffed out her chest and fluttered her eyelashes. Then, she laughed at the right moments and never too loudly. Jane knew exactly what she was doing.

If Diana cared enough, she might have asked her for some pointers. Perhaps then she would have made a better impression in front of the duke the day before.

“Do you enjoy the theatre?” Jane asked him eagerly.

“Oh yes,” Colin answered. “I adore the drama.”

His eyes flicked over to Diana again, and she heard Jane audibly sigh. He had no idea what kind of trouble he was causing for her when he looked at her that way. Colin also didn’t realize that as long as Jane showed him any interest, he would be off-limits to the rest of them.

Her aunt jumped on board quickly, making sure that her daughter came across as the most fitting young woman ever to have walked those streets. Diana fought against rolling her eyes. She focused rather on the cake in front of her, which she happily ate.

The world around them was a buzz, and the conversation was in full swing, and Diana barely knew what they were talking about. She dreamed of her spot in the garden and the new books she had bought for herself.

She'd never been more eager to get home so that she could read and spend time on her own. It was as if she could already smell the flowers and feel the breeze on her face.

Diana also knew that when they got home, her aunt and cousins would make themselves busy going through the items they'd just bought and recalling every word spoken between them and the handsome viscount.

"Diana," her aunt said sternly.

When she looked up, her aunt was staring at her with an agitated look in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was elsewhere, and I've lost track of the conversation."

It was an impolite thing to have done, but she couldn't help it.

"The viscount was asking you if you've ever been to the children's theatre on the other side of town," Jane said bitterly.

"Oh," Diana said. "I go every year. The performances are rather remarkable, aren't they?"

Colin smiled knowingly at her. "Yes, they are. I was just telling your family about it

all.”

Diana nodded and smiled and was careful to pay attention to the rest of the conversation. Every now and then, her mind still pulled her away, but she clung to the conversation as if it were life itself so that she would not embarrass her family again.

Finally, the tea came to an end.

“Ladies, this has been lovely, but I’m afraid business awaits me,” Colin said as he prepared to greet them all.

“I think there are still hours worth of conversation to be had,” her aunt commented. “Why not come for dinner later this week? It will be our pleasure to host you.”

Colin smiled uneasily. He kept his eyes on Diana then as if to read her response to the invitation.

“Yes, you must come!” Jane said, stepping between them to avert his eyes.

“It’s the least we could do to thank you for your bravery today,” her aunt continued.

Colin shook his head. “It was Diana who showed true bravery today.”

Jane looked as if she wanted to be sick. “Without you, they both would have been trampled by the traffic. It was your bravery that saved them both. Come to dinner.”

It was sounding less like an invitation then and more like a demand. Her aunt looked at Diana with pleading eyes.

“Yes,” Diana said. “You are most welcome at our home.”

That seemed to be the response he was looking for. Colin straightened his back and his jacket.

“I’d be happy to,” he said.

“I’ll send word with the details,” her aunt added before dragging her daughters away.

Diana was the last to follow him, giving Colin a meagre smile as she made her way to the door of the tea room.

“I look forward to it,” he said in a low voice just as she passed.

It was quiet enough that Diana was the only one who heard it. Her cheeks threatened to turn pink, but she turned her mind to thoughts of something else to stop the blush from setting in.

As far as Jane was concerned, Diana was uninterested in Colin. And that was the truth, but she knew it would take some convincing anyway.

For their entire trip home, her aunt and cousins spoke about the handsome viscount and how he had not only saved the day but stumbled into their lives like a knight in shining armour.

By the time they got home, the other women rushed to tell her uncle all about it while Diana retreated to her sanctuary in the garden with her new books and tried her hardest to forget it all.

And that was where she stayed until the sun hung so low in the sky that she could hardly see the words before her. When she finally went back inside, she did not miss Jane’s silence.

Despite all her attempts to avoid it, Jane was jealous.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:20 am*

### Chapter 8

The viscount was entirely uninspired that day. He had gone to the same meetings he attended every week and seen the same people who gave him the same updates. Life seemed to be moving a little too slowly for his liking. He needed some excitement. Wanted it.

And, as if a higher power had been listening, a woman ran into the street to save a boy not worth saving. To say that it piqued his curiosity was an understatement. And it was all he could think about as he climbed back into his carriage to make it to his next appointment.

The day had taken a turn when he'd got out to meet her. Not only was she absolutely beautiful, but she was clearly of status. Her clothes consisted of fine material, and she didn't seem at all bothered about handing a coin over to the child.

Anybody else would have let the child fend for himself. Colin wouldn't have taken the risk of going after him. But that woman had saved him. And Colin, for the life of him, couldn't understand why.

He stayed with them for the afternoon in an attempt to answer the question that he had held in his mind. He wanted to get to know the woman. To understand what kind of a person she was. Colin wanted to know which family she came from and just how high-status she was.

It had been a while since an interesting woman had come into his life, and if he were honest, he was getting a little bored. It was purely bad luck that her aunt and cousins



had been there with her that day.

It certainly made it difficult for him to get a decent conversation with Diana. It was clear that she was avoiding it, too. Colin didn't mind. He enjoyed the chase. What he didn't enjoy was Jane's ruthless attempts at flirting with him.

It was clear that Jane would get in his way, but perhaps that would make it more fun. Whatever happened, he was sure he would enjoy its intricacies.

When they'd entered the bookshop, he'd had just a few moments alone with Diana. There, he learned of her caring nature towards the orphans. That was important information for him. That way, he knew exactly what to do and speak about if he wanted to get the right kind of attention from her.

If he wanted to impress her, he would have to do something that involved the orphans somehow. That should be easy enough. When it came to children who had nothing, he knew that he could give them something tiny, and it would still seem like a big deal.

He had readily accepted her aunt's invitation to dinner. That would give him the chance to see her estate and understand a little more about Diana. Colin found it difficult to find women who he felt were suitable enough for him. They either bored him half to death or embarrassed him greatly.

He had strong tastes and high expectations.

As they rode, he pulled a notebook out of his pocket and looked at the list he had written down. It was a list of the titles that Diana had been looking at while they were at the bookstore. He'd made note of them.

Colin didn't enjoy reading those kinds of books, but he would ask one of his servants

to read them and give him the key points to memorize. That way, when he saw Diana again, he would have something to talk to her about that she was interested in since she didn't seem too interested in the theatre.

When his carriage came to a stop, he gave the list to the driver.

“Go and buy these books,” he instructed him, handing him the relevant coin to do so. “And then meet me back here in an hour to take me home.”

“Alright,” the driver said.

“If there's any coin left, you can keep it,” Colin added. “For your troubles.”

That got an eager grin from his driver.

For the duration of the meeting, Colin barely focused. He hardly had anything to say and didn't really know what anybody else was saying, either. He could think only of Diana. About how she avoided his glances and palmed his questions off onto other family members. He knew well enough that she was trying to avoid him, trying to brush him off. That excited him.

Colin liked the chase. He yearned for it. The very fact that she wasn't interested in him only made him more determined. Without knowing it, Diana had turned herself into a prize for him to achieve.

And he looked forward to every minute of it.

She would stay in the forefront of his mind as he passed the following days. All Colin was trying to do was figure out a strategy for what he would do and say when the night of the dinner arrived so that he could finally win her favour.

That was how he liked to do things. Colin would mould himself into who she wanted him to be. Then he would win her, and he would take it as far as he could before he got bored of her, too.

But at least for the time being, he had a chase to enjoy. He would have a woman to conquer. It set his heart alight and his adrenaline rushing through his body. Life lit up for him then. He knew that to win Diana, he would have to break Jane's heart. And the thought of that only excited him even more.

There was nothing like breaking a woman's heart to give him the confidence boost he so desperately needed to keep his ego at large.

By the time evening rolled around for him, a servant in his home was presented with a stack of books, and he had a list of all the orphanages in the area.

\*

It was the day that the viscount was meant to join them for dinner. Diana sat in the parlour with a book in hand and tried hard to forget about it. She was desperate for a reason not to join them. Not only did she find him to be particularly uninteresting, but she didn't want to get between him and Jane again.

It had taken days before Jane was pleasant with her after their last meeting with Colin. Besides, only one man had captivated her thoughts.

Diana's mind was flooded with the memory of the duke. She would think back to when he put his jacket on her and how it felt for that brief moment that he had his arm around her. It had seemed so warm and kind, and she genuinely loved the feeling of it. It made her feel warm despite the cold weather outside.

She hoped that he would take her up on her offer for a picnic. It would be good to see

him and Evangeline again, even if just to bask in her childlike joy for a few more hours. Diana felt foolish thinking about him for so long.

It wasn't something that happened to her often. Other than Anna, she hardly spent time with other people. And when she did, she didn't really want to. However, she found herself eager to see him again.

To be in conversation with him and enjoy his company. Diana found herself hoping to get Evangeline's approval. Something about the thought of that made her feel like she could be important.

That's what it was. She wanted to be important to someone. And for reasons she had yet to work out in her mind, she wanted to be important to Evangeline. She saw so much of herself in Evangeline's fun spirit.

It reminded her of her youth when her worries were few and far between. When the most important part of her day was when she could go out into the garden and check on all her critter friends.

Just then, her aunt entered the room with a weaselly-looking man. He wore a brown suit that wasn't tailored to him quite right. What little hair he had left was combed over to hide the part of his head that was balding.

Diana looked at her aunt in confusion.

"Diana, I would like to introduce you to Mr Hoover," her aunt said with a pleased smile.

Immediately, Diana knew what her aunt was up to. Only her aunt had given her no warning that they were expecting another visitor that day.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Fairchild,” the man said nervously. “Your aunt has told me much about you.”

Diana gave her aunt an unamused look and got to her feet.

“It’s good to meet you, too, Mr Hoover,” she said before turning to her aunt. “Might I have a word with you outside?”

Her aunt looked nervously at Mr Hoover, forced a smile, and nodded. Diana excused them for a moment as they went out into the passage, far away enough that their guest could not hear it.

“What is the meaning of this?” Diana pressed. “I was not expecting another guest today.”

“I only ask that you have some tea with him,” her aunt said. “He is interested in marrying you, Diana. You need to start thinking about these things.”

Diana shook her head. “That is none of your concern,” she said. “That is a part of my life that required no interference from you.”

Her aunt sighed as her lips tightened. “He’s a wonderful man, Diana. If you’d only so much as to give him a chance. He is kind and gentlemanly. I can’t find one person who has a bad thing to say about him.”

“Is that how far your research has gone already?” Diana asked. “If Mr Hoover is such a wonderful man, then introduce him to one of your daughters. He will be a good enough husband for one of them, too. I am not interested.”

Diana was getting tired of arguing with her aunt, but no amount of fighting and tough conversations seemed to change her aunt’s behaviour. So, it was clear that there

would still be many more arguments in the future.

“Don’t be this way, Diana,” her aunt said. “He’s come all this way to see you. You might as well just have a cup of tea with him.”

“No,” Diana said. “And you cannot dictate these things for me.”

Her aunt pursed her lips and tried to fight back an angry scowl. “What am I supposed to tell Mr Hoover? Do you have any idea how much convincing it took to get him here? You’re not exactly an easy sell.”

“You got him here,” Diana said. “You can figure it out. I’m going upstairs. Enjoy your dinner with the viscount. I find myself suddenly in no mood to be social.”

“You have to have dinner,” her aunt argued. “Don’t you see that I only have your best interest at heart?”

“I’m sure I’ll survive,” Diana responded. “And might I remind you that you are not my mother. My best interests have nothing to do with you.”

Diana did not give her aunt the chance to respond to that. She turned on her heels and headed up the stairs and towards her room. She would not go back into the parlour to get her book.

And, she did not go downstairs to join them for dinner with the viscount. What politeness she still had stored within her that day had been tapped out by her aunt, and Diana feared that she had lost all sense of humour and would not be able to enjoy the conversation.

Besides, if she didn’t join them, both Jane and Colin would get the right idea, and Diana could at least spend her evening in peace.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:20 am*

### Chapter 9

Colin's night was not going as expected. Not even in the slightest. The one woman he had been hoping to see at the table did not join them for dinner. So, rather than work his way into Diana's mind, he was stuck with her aunt and cousins, who spoke only of matters he had no interest in, and her uncle, who had a hard time holding his liquor despite his eagerness to consume it.

They'd hardly made it past the first course before Diana's uncle started slurring his speech. Already, a ring of food had fallen around his plate, and he interrupted the conversation with pointless and false facts about the government.

The night didn't have to be a complete waste, though. Colin could, at the very least, use the opportunity to get some information about Diana.

"It is a pity your cousin couldn't join us for dinner," he said. "Is Diana unwell?"

Her uncle scoffed. "Yes, sure," he said unconvincingly. "She's down with a bad temper."

"Jack," her aunt reprimanded him. Then she turned her frown into a polite smile. "She's had a rather difficult day. I'm sure that under different circumstances, she would have loved to join us."

He knew by the tone of her voice that Henriette was eager to put the conversation about Diana to an end. But Colin still needed his information, and he was tired of allowing them to lead the discussion.

So far it had consisted of nothing but gossip and stories about the one vacation they had taken in their lives. He didn't want to hear another story about the country.

"Does she often have difficult days?" he asked, feigning concern.

Jane rolled her eyes. "Every day with her is difficult, isn't it?"

"What exactly do you mean by that?" he asked.

There was no joy in Jane's face when she spoke of her cousin.

"She doesn't know how to have any fun!" Jane accused her cousin. "All she does is sit out in the garden and read. At her rate, she'll die alone, and I don't know if I can stand to bear witness to it."

Jane's younger sister, Emma, also had something to say about Diana.

"She has one friend," Emma explained. "The only one she's ever had since she was a child. Diana does not socialize or go out to parties. I swear, it's as if she hardly exists."

"Is she a busy woman then? That she does not socialize?" Colin asked.

Both women burst out laughing. "She has no need to work," Jane explained. "She's got more money than she knows what to do with. In fact, she does nothing with it at all. All her parents' hard work for nothing."

"Where are her parents?" Colin asked.

"Unfortunately they are not with us," Henriette explained. "It's rather sad, isn't it? They'll never see their daughter marry or be with child."



“That’s if she ever marries,” Jack said with a slur. “And with her attitude, I don’t see that happening.”

“Forgive them,” Henriette tried to explain. “It’s only ... the reason Diana is so upset today is because I brought home a suitor for her, and she turned him away.”

“A good man,” Jack chimed in. “Turned on his heels and sent out the door! When will she realize that her options are limited?”

Colin didn’t like what he was hearing. He had seen Diana and how she had saved that street urchin. There was much about her that was endearing and desirable, yet her family seemed to have little good to say about her.

It was clear that he would not get very far with her family when it came to getting to know Diana. And, while Colin enjoyed a chase, he didn’t like to put in quite that much work. He still wanted to be desired in some way.

He liked the idea that Diana had other suitors knocking on her door. Usually that just made it more fun for him. Turned it all into a competition. And yet, her family was enough of a deterrent to make him wonder if he shouldn’t just cut his losses and find someone else to chase.

\*

Dear Miss Fairchild,

I am so pleased to have made your acquaintance at the park recently and would like to extend my gratitude for your help in rescuing Spot. Evangeline has not stopped speaking of you and would like to accept your invitation to a picnic. That is, of course, if the invitation still stands.

I hope that it does.

Let me know.

Kindest regards,

The Duke of Blackwood

Diana had read the letter at least three times, trailing the tips of her fingers over the official seal before she finally put it down. Part of her wanted to panic, while another part of her wanted to squeal with excitement. Even though she had hoped for a letter from him, she had not entirely expected it.

She sat at her large ebony desk as she tried to formulate a response. At an angle, her toes tapped against the balled foot of the desk leg, a habit she formed as a child that she'd never quite been able to kick. The foot itself had a scuff mark where her foot regularly tapped against it.

There was so much to consider as she thought about what she might say in response. Mostly, she had to think about her family and how she could enjoy a picnic with them without their interference or their attempts at spoiling her mood.

Diana would have preferred it if they had never known about her meeting with Mark at all. They had a habit of ruining good things for her, and she didn't want them to do the same with this.

But she also knew that she could not wait too long to respond, as she didn't want Mark to get the wrong idea. Most importantly, she didn't want Evangeline to get the wrong idea. It was, after all, an invitation to her and not to Mark. Finally, she decided not to think about it too long and to stick to facts.

Dear Duke of Blackwood,

I am so pleased to receive your letter. Of course, you are all welcome to have a picnic at my home with me. There is plenty for Evangeline to explore in the gardens. Let her bring her friend. Do make sure to bring Spot along with you, too.

On that note, I would like to request that Mr Winterbourne join us, and I will invite Anna. I am certain that she will be pleased to see him again.

Come Thursday. Bring only your good spirits and a hat.

Sincerely,

Diana Fairchild

She did not read the letter again out of fear that something might bother her, and she might later find herself surrounded by multiple versions of the same correspondence. Rather, she folded it and stuffed it in an envelope ready to be delivered to the Goldenthorn residence.

When Thursday came around, she was nervous. To her joy and surprise, her family had decided to leave for the day. Her cousin needed more supplies for the party, and Diana was more than happy, for the first time ever, for them to go out shopping. It would get her a few hours without them.

Anna checked her hair repeatedly and nervously as she bit her lip. Diana had known her since they were children and knew that it meant Anna was nervous.

“What’s got into you?” Diana asked.

“Are you not nervous?” Anna asked.

Diana thought about it for a moment. In truth, she had expected to be more nervous than she was. But she wasn't nervous at all. In fact, everything seemed calm and precisely how it should be.

"Do I have a reason to be?" Diana asked.

Anna shook her head and checked her hair again. Diana knew her friend too well.

"Are you going to tell me what's wrong, or am I going to have to draw it out of you? Because you know I will," Diana spoke.

Anna's shoulders slumped slightly. "My parents," she said. "They're putting pressure on me to be married. And they want me to marry that man they've chosen for me. I need to find someone else, and I'm hoping that Mr Winterbourne can be that. I don't know him very well, but I like what I do know. So, I'm nervous about it all."

"Ah," Diana said with a nod. "Well, being nervous is not a good way to catch a husband."

"Stop it," Anna said with a laugh.

There was no more time to contemplate any of it, though. Outside, she heard the sound of a carriage approaching. They were there, and she was more than ready for them.

"Let's go," Diana said with a wide smile while Anna's face only paled.

When they made it to the garden to greet their guests, Evangeline and her friend greeted them with their fingers wrapped tightly around two bunches of flowers. Spot jumped and leapt in greeting, too.

“These are for you two,” Evangeline said with a wide smile.

Diana and Anna eagerly accepted the flowers. And, before they went down into the garden, Diana plucked a few flowers from the bunch and decorated the girls’ hair with them.

“Don’t they look lovely?” Hugh asked, but his eyes were constantly glancing in Anna’s direction.

With that, it was time for the picnic to commence, and they made their way through the gardens. It was a perfectly sunny day that day, and everything was ready for them to enjoy the afternoon together.

The girls ran on ahead, excited about exploring a new place.

“You really know what they like,” Mark said as he walked beside her.

It did not go unnoticed by Diana that Anna and Hugh had dropped back a couple of paces. She let them, hoping it would ease Anna’s nerves and concerns.

“Look, Daddy!” Evangeline called, pointing. “Swans!”

At the bottom of the garden was a man-made pond built by Diana’s father. He had always wanted to keep swans, and that was how he had imagined doing it. It had worked despite the enormous amount of work it took to keep it all going.

Beside the pond was a large tree that Diana used to climb as a child. There, she had laid out a blanket with a small table. There were sandwiches and cakes and cold refreshments waiting for them already.

Mark smiled. “Oh, this is going to be a topic of discussion for years to come,” he said

happily. “Evangeline is over the moon. As am I.”

It was difficult not to blush then, but Diana simply allowed it. Something about Mark’s presence made her feel at ease in her own skin. Everything about him was endearing to her, and as he walked, admiring her garden, she hoped that he would simply never leave.

Over the pond was a small bridge that the two girls made quick work of. There, Diana had placed a basket with some food they could use to feed the swans. It had been one of her favourite things to do when she was Evangeline’s age.

When they caught up to the girls, she showed them how to throw the food. The swans glided over to them as the girls giggled with delight. The six of them fed the swans and watched the fish in the pond until they were hungry.

At which point, the adults sat down to enjoy a hearty lunch while the two young girls played on the lawn with Spot. For the first time in months, the property was filled with the sound of laughter and cheerful conversation.

To Diana, it was as if the entire world had fallen away. As if nothing bothered her anymore. They spoke about literature and new advancements in technology. They discussed theoretical concepts and the stars.

“So, you ever imagine what we must look like from up there?” the duke asked, pointing towards the skies.

“From the stars?” Diana asked.

He smiled. “Yes. I used to think about it sometimes as a child. We must be so small.”

“That’s a comforting thought, isn’t it?” Diana responded. “That perhaps we are lucky

enough to be insignificant after all.”

“Is that what you want?” he asked with a puzzled look. “To be insignificant?”

“In a way,” she answered. “I like to imagine a world where my choices aren’t so important. It would certainly help me sleep better at night.”

Diana laughed at herself then. She was a fool for thinking the duke would be interested in such thoughts.

“I hardly think a woman such as yourself could ever be insignificant,” he said, his eyes fixated on her.

Diana felt something flare within her as she tried to glance away. It was a greater compliment than she’d ever received, and she didn’t know how to respond. Thankfully, there were other people around to carry it out on her behalf, and the conversation continued.

It was the most riveting conversation Diana had enjoyed in a very long time, and she knew then that she was in trouble. Because when she looked at Mark, her gaze lingered a little too long, and her laugh bubbled up a little too loudly.

### Chapter 10

The afternoon rolled on, and so did the conversation. The only thing that changed was the sudden creeping in of nerves that Diana experienced. When the picnic had started, she hadn't been worried about it at all.

However, every time Mark glanced at her or teased her about something, she felt her nerves grow stronger. Then, problems that she never knew she had became apparent to her.

She was growing feelings for him, and it was apparent that she had no idea what to do about it. Or how to behave accordingly. Every time he looked at her, it made her belly flutter and her voice get caught in her throat.

And she was certain that he was aware of it, which only made her feel a little embarrassed.

Finally, the servants came down with a tray of more refreshments. For the men, they had glasses of cold beer and for the women, two small glasses of ratafia.

"Oh, this is pleasing to see, isn't it?" Mark asked. "It's precisely what I was in the mood for."

He flashed Diana a dazzling smile that set her stomach alight. She quickly took a sip of the ratafia to calm herself down.

"You spoil us," he said kindly.



Diana truly didn't know how to behave, and it was becoming clear that neither did Anna. That was a disappointment, as Diana was hoping to have taken some tips from her. That was a pointless endeavour.

It occurred to her then that she could not ask her mother what to do, either. And the last person on Earth that she wanted to ask about such things was her aunt. It would only open a channel of conversation that Diana couldn't stand the thought of.

It made her feel lonely and worried that she was doing something wrong or making a fool of herself. It created a tightness in her chest.

What carefree emotions she'd had when the picnic started were long gone. All she had then was anxiousness with a small amount of shame.

The shame came from not knowing what to do and never considering the possibility of such feelings before. Even the books she had read held no answers for her. In those books, she read about heroic women who saved lives and changed the world.

She did not see herself as one of those women, so she could not behave as such. Besides, she didn't know what would be attractive to men. Particularly men as wonderful as the duke.

The conversation from her end was starting to change, and she was aware of it. Diana was having a hard time formulating the proper responses or adding to the interesting conversation. It was as if something about Mark's presence had suddenly sucked what intelligence she once held, making her a bumbling fool.

Thankfully, the two girls came running towards them with picked flowers in hand to distract her. It was the perfect pull away from her conflicted emotions and feelings towards Mark.

“What kind of flowers are these?” Evangeline asked.

Diana smiled. Finally, something she could answer with absolute certainty.

“That is a daffodil,” she answered.

“I believe that’s a jonquil,” Anna corrected her.

Diana felt warmth blazing through her neck and face, then, and was certain that she was blushing a bright pink. She turned more towards the girls so that Mark would not see her embarrassment.

“That’s right,” she said. “I had it wrong. Those are jonquils.”

“They’re very pretty,” Evangeline said. “Are they your favourite? I think they’re my favourite.”

“Well, that’s a very good choice,” Diana responded with a kind smile. “My favourite flower is a daisy.”

Evangeline looked at her. “Not a rose? Or a lily?”

“No,” Diana said. “A daisy.”

“But they’re so common,” Evangeline said. “They’re everywhere! What’s so special about a daisy?”

Diana smiled. “When I was younger, my mother planted daisies outside my bedroom window. In the mornings, she would sing me awake and open the curtains, and I’d be met with a bright bloom of little flowers.”

Evangeline listened closely as she told her story.

“Some mornings, my mother would lean out and pick some for me to wear in my hair,” Diana continued. “It always made me feel so pretty.”

Evangeline reached up and touched the flowers that Diana had put in her hair. “Like you did for me?”

Diana nodded. “Yes, exactly,” she answered. “That’s where I learned it from.”

The young girl was thoughtful for a moment as she checked that the flowers in her hair were still in place.

“You’re right,” she said. “They do make me feel pretty. Like a princess.”

“You certainly look like one,” Diana said kindly.

Then Evangeline did something Diana could never have expected. She took the jonquils she had picked and made her way around to Diana’s back. Then, she slipped the flowers into Diana’s hair.

It tore at Diana’s heart as she fought back sweet tears. How could such a young girl have such a profound effect on her so unexpectedly?

“Thank you,” Diana said, doing her best not to cry.

“Now you are a princess, too!” Evangeline said.

“Anna needs some flowers, then we’ll all be princesses at this picnic,” Diana said quietly.

That excited the girls as they ran off to pick more flowers for Anna's hair.

With such a strong reminder of her mother's presence, Diana wondered how she could rejoin the conversation. But the sadness she had felt was fleeting, and suddenly, the joy that her mother had given her came flooding in, and it replaced the grief.

She reached back, touched the flowers in her hair, and smiled happily at herself. When she looked up, she saw that Mark was still watching her. He had a proud look on his face. One that he deserved to wear.

"You have the sweetest daughter," Diana said.

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Mark didn't know who was more happy to see Diana. He or Evangeline. Hugh had been talking his ear off in the carriage ride over to her manor, a sign to Mark that he was nervous. Mark found it endearing.

While he had a few nerves flying through him, it was overrun with an eagerness that he didn't know what to do with. The flowers had been the girls' idea. They wanted to do something to surprise Diana and Anna, and so they stopped to buy two bunches.

The carriage door had hardly been open when the girls jumped out and ran towards the house.

Mark was taking it easy. His intentions had been to get to know Diana before he decided how he might feel about her. She was, after all, a stranger, and the one conversation they'd shared couldn't possibly be enough to know what kind of woman she was.

He liked to pretend that he had accepted the invitation on behalf of Evangeline, but in

truth, he had been dying to see her again. To speak with her once more and understand just what made her happy and what made her sad.

She had occupied his mind more than he liked to admit. It didn't help that Evangeline kept asking about her and remembering their meeting at the park with such fondness.

In the end, it was a perfectly sunny and pleasant day at her home. The gardens were beautiful, they were comfortable, and Evangeline was having the time of her life.

Hugh had done his best, mentioning that he'd noticed Anna's beautiful eyes when they'd met the other day. But Anna had paled and was clearly too shy to respond in likeness. It was amusing to watch, to say the least.

Diana had been talking to Evangeline, and Mark had only caught the tail-end of the conversation, noting that daisies were her favourite flower. And, after he'd heard the story why, they had become his favourite flower, too. He wondered if he should plant some outside Evangeline's bedroom window.

He hadn't realized how long he'd been staring at Diana until she looked up at him with a small smile.

"You have the sweetest daughter," she said.

He opened his mouth to respond when Anna and Hugh's conversation cut through.

"What did your parents do?" Hugh asked in Diana's direction.

It drew her eyes away from him, and he felt some of the warmth within him cool.

"Her parents were artists in their own right," Anna answered on her behalf. "They were really good. Daniel and Victoria Fairchild."

“Is that so?” Hugh asked. “I am aware of their artistic ability. I saw one of your father’s works on display once and made a note of the name. It was completely thrilling. I must say, you had talented parents. I hope the talent runs in your blood, too. I’ve always found art to be a pillar of what society is today. Without it, I fear humanity would not be what it is.”

“My favourite sculpture that her father ever made is right here in this garden,” Anna said excitedly. “I can show it to you if you’d like?”

Hugh accepted eagerly. With that, he helped Anna to her feet, and they made their way to the far end of the garden. With the sun out, there were servants everywhere, so none of them would really be alone at any point.

So, there was no reason to dispute them going off together.

Julia and the children were on the hunt for butterflies after Anna had mentioned how many she had seen in the garden over the years. That left Mark and Diana being the only two on the picnic blanket.

Suddenly, he found that he did not know what to say. The words had dried up in his mouth, and his chest filled with a nervous energy.

“Would you like a tour of the gardens?” Diana offered, relieving him from his worry. “I’ve been sitting too long, and soon, I’ll lose feelings in my legs.”

“That sounds lovely,” Mark happily accepted.

He got to his feet and extended his hand to help her up. The moment she took it, he felt as if it softened him. What anxious and difficult thoughts he’d had before simply melted away along with the week’s stresses.

They walked as she told him eagerly about all the plants and animals they kept there. It was clear that she had knowledge of all of it, more than most people would have.

“Here are some of my favourites,” she said as they slowed down a little.

They were standing in front of a large aviary filled with various birds. They seemed to flutter with excitement when Diana arrived. She reached into a nearby box and pulled out some seed, scattering it through the cage.

All the birds descended upon the food, and Diana smiled.

“They’re beautiful,” he said.

“All of them are unable to live out in the wild,” she said, her eyes fixated on them. “They’re all birds that I’ve found who have been injured and ill. I’ve nursed them all back to health and put in here to keep them safe.”

“You’ve given them a new life,” he said. “One they might not have afforded otherwise.”

Diana nodded. “Some people have told me that it’s a waste of time. That I should have let nature run its course. But it was not nature that threatened them.”

She cast another handful of seed into the cage to feed them.

“Carriage wheels have injured some of them, while others have been ill from eating food left out by humans,” she explained. “All of these birds were injured and threatened by something made by humans. Something they were never meant to come across in nature. So it is only right that I help them.”

Mark knew at that moment that he was in more trouble than he thought. He was

falling head over heels with every aspect of her. And it would not be a slow descent. He was tumbling into his feelings for her as if he'd been knocked off a cliff.



### Chapter 11

“How do I look?” Diana asked, smoothing the front of her dress.

For her cousin’s birthday, Diana had picked out a lilac and lace dress that her mother had bought her years ago. To her merriment, it still fit. She didn’t often have a reason to get that dressed up. Anna came over and tucked a stray strand of hair back in place.

“You look ready,” Anna said. “What about me?”

Diana looked her up and down with a close eye. “Just about perfect,” she answered.

It had taken them well over an hour to get ready for the event. Diana was just eager to have it over with. There had been countless arguments over the details of it all, and the stress overwhelmed Diana.

“This entire party is outrageous,” Diana complained. “The cost alone is something to be embarrassed about. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a birthday be quite so expensive.”

“Never mind the guest list,” Anna added. “I caught a glimpse of it. It seems almost never-ending. How many people are expected exactly?”

Diana did her best not to roll her eyes. “I don’t know,” she answered. “I asked so many times for the details but could never get a clear answer from anybody. I eventually just got tired of it all.”

“My parents are pleased with the invitation,” Anna said. “It’s good for them to get

out of the house every once in a while. Hopefully, it will take their attention off me for a short while.”

Diana checked her appearance in the mirror one last time. She liked the woman she saw there. The lilac brightened her. Gold earrings in the shape of stars flickered as she moved. It wasn't often that she saw herself that way.

She didn't dare look too long, though. That would only make her self-conscious.

“I suppose we can't delay it forever,” Diana said. “We better join the party. If I miss Jane's big entrance, I will never be forgiven.”

Anna checked her reflection one last time and nodded. “After you,” she said with a laugh.

They could hear the party from down the hall as they approached the ballroom. It was no longer the peaceful home that Diana was used to.

“So many people,” Anna whispered as if to read her mind. “I've never seen this many people at your house before.”

“That's because it has never happened before,” Diana responded. “My parents would never have had such a great party.”

“They sure did know how to host a dinner, though,” Anna said with a chuckle. “My parents still talk about it. They miss those days.”

Diana smiled as she recalled the laughter and joy of the dinner parties. The house was so different then. She pushed the thought from her mind, though, as not to sour her mood entirely.

“This is quite the party, I must admit,” Anna teased. “It’s a little extravagant, don’t you agree?”

“I’ve been saying that all along,” Diana teased back. “But I eventually got tired of the arguing.”

The two women made it just in time for the party. Inside the ballroom was a large crowd, all waiting eagerly for the dancing to start. The chatter was loud and constant as Diana and Anna made their way to a far corner and helped themselves to some refreshments.

Just then, the music signalled Jane’s arrival, and the crowd turned to face the door in full attention.

“Here comes the big entrance,” Diana said with an amused smile.

Jane swept into the ballroom wearing a gold dress with rubies hanging on her ears. Her necklace was also laced with rubies, and there were jewels in her hair. Those were expenses that Diana hadn’t known she’d paid for.

The crowd murmured about her beauty and her age as she entered the room gracefully. Jane smiled brightly as if she was precisely where she belonged. Diana’s aunt and uncle followed closely behind with practiced smiles.

Once the entrance was made and the crowd had welcomed their hosts, the music changed, and the dancing could begin. Diana looked around at the people in the room.

“I don’t know any of these people,” she said quietly. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen any of them in my life.”

“I know a few of them, but not personally,” Anna answered. “Had I known these were the people on the guest list, I might have bought a new dress for the occasion.”

“What do you mean by that?” Diana pressed.

“These are all members of the ton,” Anna said quietly.

That explained why Diana didn’t know any of them. She had never been a member of the peerage, and so they were never in the same circles. Not that Diana had ever made an effort to. Those kinds of things didn’t bother her all that much.

Diana never had a season. Her parents weren’t big socialites. They kept to themselves, and the most important thing to them was that Diana felt prepared for the world and life. She tried to imagine what her father might have said if he had seen such a party being held in his house.

He would have thought it was feeble and pointless. Her father had always told her that a person’s value did not come from the weight of their pockets but rather from the kind of person they were.

Some of the richest men in the world had also been some of the cruellest. He had pushed that reminder onto her. She appreciated him for that and knew he was right. It made her an outlier in society, though.

Most of the women she knew were worried about the wealth of those in their circles or where they were within the societal hierarchy. Diana didn’t care about any of that. But that was easy to do when she didn’t surround herself with many people.

Diana had always suspected that it bothered her aunt. Jane and Emily were more concerned with their place in society than they were with anything else in the world. It made it difficult for Diana to relate to them. It’s why they didn’t always get along.

Now that she understood who the people at the ball were, she knew why her aunt had spent so much money. And why she had kept some of the details hidden from Diana. She must have known that Diana would have disagreed with a lot of the decisions.

Still, Diana didn't blame her aunt for the attempt. She understood then that her aunt was trying to provide her daughter with a better life through marriage. There were many eligible men at the party, all of which would have been a good match for Jane.

If she were lucky, Jane would meet a handsome and wealthy man, and her family would go live in his large manor and spend his fortune. Diana sipped her drink and watched as the crowds gathered in small circles to catch up. The room was warm and cheerful. Diana had to admit that her aunt knew how to throw a good party.

"This is kind of nice, don't you think?" Anna asked. "Everybody seems to be having a good time."

"I suppose so," Diana answered. "As long as Jane is happy and having a good time. It's her birthday, after all."

"Yes," Anna agreed. "And we'll enjoy it alongside her, won't we? Please promise me that you'll at least try to enjoy yourself."

"Of course," Diana promised. "I paid for it. I might as well."

The women burst into a small fit of giggles as Diana wondered where she should begin in the party. There were drinks and food, and the servants hurried around trying to keep everything organized and together.

An older woman was at one of the tables. She had a pin in her hair that looked like a flower, with small crystals serving as water droplets on the petals. It was easily one of the most beautiful hairpins that Diana had ever seen.

She was fixated on it as the woman helped herself to something to drink. Just then, another group of young women passed the old woman, not seeing her. They bumped her, and she stumbled into the table. They were the kind of women that Diana preferred to avoid. The kind who gossiped and liked to put other women down. She could tell by the way they looked down on everybody they passed.

The glasses on the table rattled as the older woman mumbled a few apologies to those who were startled by it. If it hadn't been for the table, the woman might have fallen over. It was clear that the woman who had been bumped was the most embarrassed by it when she had no reason to be. It hadn't been her fault.

A few people had stopped to turn, but none of them had seen what had happened, and so weren't too bothered about it. Something about it bothered Diana greatly, though.

Diana waited for the young women to stop and apologize. She expected them to turn around and all but beg for the woman's forgiveness. One woman turned. She had dark hair and a stern look on her face.

"You need to watch where you're going," she reprimanded the older woman. "This is an expensive dress, and I don't appreciate it being scuffed."

For a moment, Diana thought she'd heard wrong or imagined it. The older woman looked up at them with an appalled look in her eyes. It looked for a moment as if she might apologize to the young woman.

There was no way Diana would let that happen. She stepped forward between the young crowd and the older woman. She offered the woman her hand to help her and offered her a drink.

Then, she turned to the young woman.

“You should be ashamed,” she said. “It is you that needs to watch where you’re going. You might dress well, but you have no manners. If you ask me, that makes you and this dress entirely worthless.”

It had come out harsher than Diana had intended, and the woman’s face turned into a shocked scowl.

“You have no idea who you’re talking to,” the woman retorted.

“You’re right,” Diana said. “I don’t. But that doesn’t matter. It does not change the fact that you lack any kind of common decency.”

Diana did not care that she was being ruder than necessary. It was her house. The woman was simply lucky that she had not kicked her out of the party entirely. But that would only have angered her aunt and cousins and led to a larger fight.

With that, the group of young women left with their eyebrows arched and their lips pouted. Diana turned to the older woman.

“I am so sorry about them,” she said.

“Don’t be,” the woman said with a laugh. “You put them in their place.”

She looked around the room as if she was searching for something specific.

“I’ve lost my sister and nephew here somewhere,” she said. “I got too carried away looking at the art. Have you seen it all? It’s magnificent.”

“Most of it was done by my parents,” Diana said with a smile. “There’s more if you’d like a tour.”

The woman smiled brightly. “That would be lovely, thank you.”

Diana was happy to step out of the busy hall for a moment to give the woman a tour of the art.

“What is your name?” Diana asked.

“I am Mrs Ashburne,” she said, introducing herself with a warm smile.

She showed her all her favourite pieces. It was a pleasant walk and an interesting conversation. Anna added in the details that Diana forgot. She’d been around long enough to know it all.

“Your parents did all of this?” Mrs Ashburne eventually asked.

“Yes,” Diana answered. “I created some of it. But not nearly as much as I’d like.”

“Talent like this should never be wasted,” Mrs Ashburne said. “There can never be too much art in the world.”

Diana nodded quietly. She knew they would have to return to the ball eventually, but for the time being, she liked the company she had.

“You know something,” Mrs Ashburne said. “You’d be perfect for my nephew. He has a child, but I don’t think that would scare you away.”

Diana chuckled. “That is a compliment,” she said kindly.



### Chapter 12

Mark arrived outside the house, and it looked vastly different. Before, it had been a tranquil place with bright sunshine and a calm breeze blowing through the garden. That night, the light came from within the house as music filtered through the air.

It looked warm and inviting, but he didn't see much of Diana's touch there. Unless he simply didn't know her well enough. His mother and aunt had arrived at the party before him.

When his mother had originally invited him to come along, he had been hesitant. Until she told him that it was being hosted at the Fairchild manor. He had quickly changed his mind then and agreed to attend with them. But he had been nervous, which was why he had arrived a little late.

Mark had to make sure that he had a haircut and a fresh shave. Then he went in search of a well-fitted suit. And he made sure to do all that without his mother and aunt finding out about it so they would not grow suspicious.

Walking up to the house, though, it felt a little silly. Were his efforts too obvious? The last thing he wanted was for Diana to think he was being silly. Or for him to put effort in where it wasn't needed. Mark couldn't be certain that she was interested in him.

Their picnic had been one of the best afternoons he'd had in a very long time. It had been difficult to stop thinking about it.

He had learnt a lot about Diana that day. And what he had learnt, he had liked a lot. But in truth, they had not spent enough time together for him to be sure about how he felt when it came to her. Or about how she might have felt about him.

She was a perfect lady, so when she laughed, it might have simply been out of politeness and nothing else. His mother would never approve of her as she had no clear status. While that did not bother him at all, his mother wanted him to marry someone who was part of the aristocracy.

But he'd done that before, with his first wife, and he knew all too well that it wasn't nearly all it was cut out to be. It had not worked out for him before. But he'd had a hard time convincing his mother of that fact, and in the meantime, Evangeline had gone without a mother.

Diana's home was filled with talk and laughter. When he entered, he made sure to stop for refreshments first. A glass of champagne would help calm his nerves slightly. He wasn't even entirely sure what he was so nervous about.

The ballroom was decorated brightly in golds and greens. It didn't seem like the kind of event that Diana would host. Then again, he didn't know her very well. And he'd never been invited to a party at her home before.

His mother and aunt had never mentioned it before, either.

As if she had heard his thoughts, his mother appeared beside him.

"Glad you finally made it," she said sternly.

"I am sorry I'm late," Mark said with a smirk. "By the looks of things, I have not missed too much."

“You’d be correct there,” his mother said. “But I’ve already lost my sister. It took all of three minutes for her to wander off somewhere.”

“Did you see the direction?” he asked with a laugh.

“She mumbled something about the art,” his mother answered. “But who knows what that means.”

He knew. Diana had given him an extensive tour of the art, and the collection was large.

“Are you having a good time?” he asked.

“We will see,” she answered with a shrug. “The food and drink are good, at least. However, I am yet to be asked for a dance.”

“Well, the party has only just started,” he reminded her. “There is time yet for dancing.”

“First, I need to find that sister of mine,” she said. “Who knows what kind of trouble she’ll start if I don’t.”

“I’ll go find her,” he offered with a smile.

He strolled to the edges of the room and started making his way from piece to piece. While he looked for his aunt, he kept his eyes out for a sign of Diana as well. He felt a little nervous at the thought of finding her. Then again, that was why he had attended in the first place. To see her.

Mark didn’t often attend those kinds of events. He much preferred to spend his evenings with Evangeline. He didn’t have to worry too much about appearances, and

she often made him laugh.

When Evangeline learnt he was going back to the Fairchild house for a party, she begged to go with him. And she'd been heartbroken when he'd refused. He paused a moment to plan his next course on the search for his aunt.

Then, he caught the eye of Lady Elizabeth. She smiled and made her way towards him. He smiled, but a quiet groan escaped him. She was the last person he was in the mood to see. His mother had failed to tell him that she'd be there.

Of course, he would be friendly to her. She had done nothing wrong to him. He simply didn't enjoy her company that much.

They had no similar interests, and he found her priorities in life to be skewed according to his. She was right by him then and extended her hand for a greeting. Mark obliged.

"This night just got a whole lot better," she said with a smile. "If it weren't for your presence here, I might have left ages ago. This is hardly the kind of party I would normally attend; don't you think?"

"Sure," he answered, still scanning the room for a sign of his aunt or Diana.

"Your mother invited me to come along," Lady Elizabeth explained.

That made sense to him. The party had been nothing more than another attempt by his mother to get them in the same room together.

\*

Lady Elizabeth wasn't going to attend the party until the dowager duchess of

Blackwood had personally requested her presence there. She'd spent ages getting ready for the ball and prepared herself for a lavish party in his presence.

However, it had taken him ages to arrive, and in the meantime, she'd been bored out of her mind. Now that she had his attention, he seemed entirely uninterested in what she had to say. It insulted her more than she liked. She tried to tell him about her evening and the night she'd already experienced, but he only returned her stories with a groan or a nod.

"Excuse me," he eventually said, interrupting her mid-sentence. "I need to go find my aunt."

With that, he left her there, her mouth still slightly agape. It seemed like a feeble excuse to her, and it made her so angry that she huffed and straightened her back. Not only was the entire event more mediocre than she'd prepared for, but she'd hardly been there before a pretty lady had scolded her for having bad manners.

It hadn't been her fault that the old lady had stood behind her like that. She simply hadn't seen her there. It hadn't been her fault. The entire night was a failure in her mind. The only person she had hoped to see there wasn't interested in her at all.

She was about to leave when a familiar presence came to her side.

"Good evening, Lady Elizabeth," Viscount Starling said in his usual smooth voice. "You look like you could use some company."

He was the last person she was in the mood to see. There had been a time when they'd danced around the idea of courtship, but that had died out. In the end, Elizabeth had not given the viscount enough of a chase. He got bored, and she lost interest.

As of late, he remained a member of her friend circle. They got along perfectly fine, but she was in no mood for his teasing antics that night. And she could hear it lingering in his voice as he greeted her.

“Are you enjoying yourself this evening?” she asked with a knowing smile.

He looked around and shrugged. “Can’t give you an answer yet,” he said. “The night is still too young.”

She chuckled. “You always know how to make boring events fun, don’t you? It’s like a gift.”

“I always come with a plan; that’s my secret,” Lord Starling said with a cheeky smile.

Elizabeth shook her head and sighed. She had never been so bored and frustrated. Why the dowager duchess had insisted she attend was beyond her when the duke was uninterested in her entirely.

She watched him in the distance, walking through the crowd, greeting others as he went. It was difficult to hide the bitterness she felt from the rest of the room. It left a sour taste in her mouth.

“Ah, has the duke not been so eager for your company this evening?” Lord Starling teased. “I saw he was at least willing to give you a single minute of his time.”

“How could you tease me about that when you’ve never even successfully won over a woman who actually wants you?” Lady Elizabeth retorted.

He laughed his usual charming laugh and reached for another drink as it passed him by. Lord Starling glanced around before swallowing half the glass in one single sip.

“I like the chase,” he explained. “It keeps things more interesting. Women can come easily to me. It’s the tough ones that excite me.”

“That’s unreasonable,” she retorted. “I think you’re afraid of commitment, so you don’t bother yourself with anyone who you think might want to settle down.”

“You’re worse,” he said with a smile.

Lady Elizabeth shot a stern look up at him. “Nonsense,” she snapped.

“It’s true,” he added. “You’re pursuing a man who clearly has no interest in you at all. And yet, I don’t see you moving on. You’re stuck on the idea of him. I wonder why that is.”

“That is none of your business,” she argued.

“Isn’t it?” he pressed. “Perhaps it is because your standards are so high that you’ve limited your options to one man left.”

Lady Elizabeth scoffed. “That’s absurd,” she said. “My standards are not too high. I simply will not settle for less than I deserve.”

Her night was going from bad to worse. The last thing she needed was for the viscount to be making things worse.

“I have a better chance than you do,” Lady Elizabeth said.

“Better chance at what?” he asked.

“At getting the man I’m after,” she said. “I doubt you could ever attract a woman who actually likes you.”

“That sounds like you’re challenging me,” he said with a chuckle.

“What’s the prize?” she asked with a smirk.

“Dinner,” he offered. “If I win.”

“And if I win, I want a holiday,” she offered.

He thought it over for a moment. “I accept your terms.”

“Perfect,” she said with a sinister smile. “You need to get one woman to actually fall in love with you. And I need to prove to you that I can win the Duke of Blackwood’s heart.”

She fluttered with some excitement then at the thought of their little competition. Her eyes were already searching the room for the duke so that she could make a new attempt at getting his attention.

“I have a woman in mind,” the viscount said with a nod. “I will get her to fall for me. And once you’re satisfied that she is well and truly in love, I will reject her and move on to the next.”

“Sounds good to me,” Lady Elizabeth said with an eager smile.

With that, the viscount Starling made his way back into the crowd while Lady Elizabeth helped herself to another drink.



## Page 13

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### Chapter 13

Diana and the older woman were heading back to the ballroom. She had made it clear that eventually her sister would be searching for her.

“You have such a lovely home,” the lady said with a smile. “And how fortunate to have been brought up by such wonderful and talented people.”

“I am fortunate, yes,” Diana agreed. “My parents were wonderful.”

“They certainly raised you well,” Mrs Ashburne complimented.

The two women were making their final stretch towards the ballroom when another set of footsteps approached.

“There you are,” a familiar voice said in their direction.

Diana’s eyes shot up, and she looked directly into the eyes of the Duke of Blackwood. Her heart fluttered in her chest and threatened to make her dizzy. He was walking to them with a bright smile.

The room felt smaller then as if her world had closed in and wrapped her up in warmth. She wanted to run towards him, happy to see the one person who could cheer up her evening.

Suddenly, she wished she could check her hair and fix her dress one more time before he looked at her, but it was far too late for that. Thankfully, Anna had come looking

for her and could provide the moral comfort she needed.

“There you are!” Anna said with a smile. “And the duke of Blackwood! How good to see you again!”

Diana had not realized that the duke was on the guest list.

If she had known it, she would have bought a new dress rather than wear an older one. Her palms were clammy. How could one person cause such a physical reaction within her? It seemed ridiculous. And yet, she could not stop it from happening.

“Ah, here’s that nephew I was telling you about,” Mrs Ashburne said.

Mrs Ashburne winked at Diana as she tried not to blush. The duke started laughing.

“Only good things, I hope,” he said jokingly. “Miss Fairchild, how lovely to see you.”

“You two know each other,” Mrs Ashburne said with surprise. “Well, that saves me the introductions, doesn’t it?”

“We’ve been giving your aunt the tour,” Anna added. “She knows a lot about art.”

“Taught me everything I know,” the duke explained.

Diana was having a hard time even formulating words. Her heart was pounding, and she could feel nerves bubbling up inside her.

“These two young ladies saved me from a bit of a situation, and they’ve been such lovely company,” his aunt explained. “But I think I’ve taken enough of their time.”

“Oh please, I am thoroughly enjoying myself. Do not get it wrong,” Diana explained with a smile. “This party is not my kind of setting.”

“Well, you blend in well enough,” Mrs Ashburne assured her.

Diana tried to suppress yet another blush from rising to her cheeks.

“What happened?” the duke asked.

“A group of women bumped into her and were less than polite,” Anna explained. “Sure made Diana put them in their place. I thought she would kick them right out of her house. I’m surprised she didn’t.”

“It’s not my party,” Diana reminded Anna. “Besides, I don’t think those women will be a bother again.”

“Oh no, certainly not,” his aunt added. “But you sure would have liked to see their faces, Mark. It’s precisely the kind of thing that you’d get a kick out of.”

“Who were they?” the duke demanded.

He looked back towards the ballroom with anger in his eyes. Diana found it charming that he cared so much for his family. That he was so protective of his aunt. It was an endearing quality. But the last thing she needed was for him to cause a scene. Her family would be furious, and she didn’t know him well enough to know how he might behave.

“Don’t bother yourself with that,” his aunt brushed him off. “Miss Fairchild here made good work of them. They won’t be a bother. She handled it just fine.”

“Well then, I owe you thanks,” the duke said, bowing slightly in her direction. “And I

do hope you'll allow me to make it up to you.”

With that, they headed back to the ballroom as a group. Anna continued to tell the duke's aunt about the artworks as they walked. It had been some of the most pleasant conversation that Diana had enjoyed in some time. He and his aunt were a lot alike in the way they spoke and laughed.

Diana and the duke walked side by side together as they made their way back to the sound of the music and the dancing.

“I'm glad you came,” she said softly.

“As am I,” he answered. “That is a beautiful dress.”

“Thank you,” she stuttered.

She knew for sure that she was blushing then, and she did her best to avoid eye contact with him in case it would only make her blush worse.

They made it through the doors of the ballroom once again and were back into the swing of things.

“This is quite the party with an impressive guest list,” the duke said.

“I had nothing to do with it,” Diana confessed. “My aunt and cousins did all the planning. I'm not one for such lavish events.”

She wondered if that was the right thing to say to him. Did that make her unattractive? Diana didn't know how it worked well enough yet to understand what she was doing.

“I’m not usually one for large parties, either,” the duke confessed. “But I’m certainly glad to attend this one.”

Diana smiled and cast her gaze downward. When he wasn’t looking, she fixed her hair and dress.

Suddenly, he turned to her and held out his hand.

“Would you like to dance, Miss Fairchild?” he asked.

Her breath caught in her throat, and she felt dizzy again.

“Absolutely,” she answered in a near whisper.

She took his hand, and immediately, it was as if the room burst into bright colour. Her heart beat in time with the music as they made their way to the dance floor. Diana had been thinking about him the entire time since the picnic. She’d been confused about her feelings towards him.

She had thought about him often and wanted so desperately to see him again. When she was in his presence, it made her feel as if she was finally at home again. But when he left, she could convince herself that it wasn’t so. That she had simply had a good time and enjoyed having a new friend around.

Besides, she was not a woman of the ton, and Diana didn’t feel worthy.

But now that her hand rested in his, she had no doubts that she was interested in him as more than just a friend. She tried to calm her heart down by taking slow and steady breaths. But every time he looked at her again, it seemed as though the air was sucked from her lungs.

When they took their places on the dance floor, she recalled what his aunt had said. That she'd be a good woman for him and a good mother to his child. She hadn't known that it was the duke in question then. Otherwise, she might have made a better attempt to make a good impression.

The man before her was little more than a stranger. They'd only spent time together twice, and that shouldn't have been enough time to develop such strong feelings. She barely knew him, yet it felt as if she did.

The previous song ended, and the next one was about to begin. It meant it was time to dance. At least, that was one thing her parents had taught her. Her father loved to dance, so he made sure that Diana knew all the steps.

They took their positions and readied themselves for a waltz. He was standing so close to her then that it almost made her dizzy. Her feet felt as though they were miles beneath her, and her knees weakened.

But the music did not wait for them. They took their first steps, and just like that, they were moving around the dance floor, their hands on each other.

The first bit of their dance was silent. She didn't know what to say to him. Nothing that she had in her mind made any sense.

"You're an excellent dancer," he said, finally breaking the silence.

She was relieved that he had said something. The silence was starting to get uncomfortable for her, and she was beginning to second-guess every movement.

"Thank you," she whispered. "So are you."

"My mother made sure of it," he said with a laugh. "I used to think it was silly before,

but now I'm glad for all those lessons."

"Me too," Diana agreed.

\*

The duke couldn't believe that he'd found the two women he had been looking for walking hand-in-hand down the hallway. His aunt had seemed so happy. Normally, she was nervous at parties like that. He had been concerned when his mother told him she'd wandered off.

She'd done that once and then went all the way home to avoid having to mingle with the crowds. But for the first time in a long time, his aunt had seemed totally at ease. The same way Evangeline felt when he was around Diana.

Mark was falling hard, and he knew it. It was a dangerous descent that he'd been trying to avoid in one way or another. But every time he was near Diana, it was as if he had forgotten all that was important and could think of nothing but her.

She had him feeling blank-minded and confused while also experiencing a fair amount of clarity. He wanted to be stronger and better when he was in her presence. That wasn't something he often felt at all.

As they moved along the dance floor, he did his best to inch slightly closer to her. Something about her made him want to behave recklessly. And that feeling was completely new to him.

But she deserved a gentleman, and so he would keep his manners.

"How is Evangeline?" Diana asked. "I've been thinking about her so often."

His chest tightened. Of all the women who had been in his circle, not one of them had ever bothered to check in on his daughter. Most of them hardly mentioned her at all.

“Well, she has not stopped talking about you,” he answered. “That picnic is clearly one of the best parties she’s ever had.”

“I feel the same way about it,” Diana confessed. “It was a superbly pleasant afternoon. Her laughter is contagious.”

“It is, isn’t it?” he asked with a chuckle.

He inched a little closer to her again. Every time he did that, she seemed flustered, and he got a kick out of it. Anybody who cared about his daughter meant the world to him. In an instant, he felt privileged to be around her and protective of her, as if he suddenly wished the night could carry on forever.

The world around him felt as if it was a million miles away. The laughter and the conversation got quieter, and all he could see and hear was her.

“Well would you extend an invitation from me?” Diana asked. “I’d like to invite Evangeline over for a tea party if that’s alright with you?”

“I will be sure to invite her, although I already know that the answer is yes,” he said with a smile.

“I look forward to it.” Diana blushed then, which made the duke feel warm inside.

The song came to an end, and just like that, they needed to part. Their hands lingered just a moment longer before they let go of each other. The duke was about to speak when another figure showed up at their side.



“May I have this next dance?” Viscount Starling asked with an extended hand.

Like that, she was whisked away from him, and he could do nothing but watch. Whenever she could, Diana glanced at him until he could not watch any longer. The idea that another man had interest in her made him angry. Anger was not a feeling that the duke was used to.

He felt threatened then. Viscount Starling was a handsome man from a powerful family. More than that, he had no child to take care of. He had no baggage to bring into her life. It felt bad to feel that way about himself.

Jealousy was not a feeling that the duke was accustomed to, and he had no idea what to do with it. All he knew was that it left a bitter taste in his mouth and was enough to make an enemy out of the viscount.

## Chapter 14

Finally, Colin had Diana alone. Even more to his benefit, the music slowed. It would be the perfect time for him to speak with her and start softening her up. He had never met a woman who hadn't eventually come around to his methods.

Being close to her, she was even more beautiful than he remembered from their first meeting.

“This is a beautiful home,” he said, using one of his best tricks.

He had learned early on that the best way to get a woman's attention was to compliment her. As long as she felt that he was talking about her, she would feel special enough.

“Thank you, but I can take no credit for it. My parents built it, and my mother

decorated it. I haven't changed much since their passing," she said. "I kept it the same."

His compliment had missed. That, or she'd been unwilling to accept it.

It did not go unnoticed by him that every time they turned, she was searching the crowd for someone else. And he had an idea of who that someone else could be.

The Duke of Blackwood had paid little attention to anybody else in the room but Diana. That only made her more intriguing to him. He could have had any woman in the room, but instead, he only had eyes for Diana.

"Why have I never been invited to one of these parties before?" he asked.

Finally, her eyes were back on him.

"I don't throw parties," she answered. "It's not something I particularly enjoy."

"Miss Fairchild," he teased her. "That is devastating news."

It was meant as a joke, but he didn't get as much as a smile out of her. There was something different about Diana compared to the other women he knew. Despite his low effort, she was already a tough one to crack.

He could feel Lady Elizabeth's eyes on him. Their bet was important to him. He didn't like to know that someone out there thought he might have lost a fight of some kind.

She was the only enjoyable part of that party. Truly, there was nothing else there of interest to him.

“You should have more parties,” he said softly. “I, for one, would do anything to see you often. I’m sure I’m not the only one.”

“Oh, okay,” was how she answered.

It was not at all what he was expecting. None of his usual charm was working on her. But there was still a bet in place, and he had no problem using riskier means to get to her. The song came to an end, and the instant the final note sounded out, her hands were off him again.

“Can I get you something to drink?” he offered.

“Oh, thank you, but no,” she answered. “I need some air. I think I’ll go for a walk.”

“Alone?” he asked with his best smile. “I don’t like that idea one bit. Let me accompany you. I insist.”

“That’s not necessary,” she declined. “Thank you.”

“I insist,” he pressed. “There are some men here I wouldn’t trust with a woman on her own. I’ll escort you to your destination and leave you there; I promise I won’t linger.”

\*

Diana let out a sigh of relief as Lord Starling left her. While he was perfectly charming, she had little interest in him. More so, she wanted to avoid a problem with her cousin. While she had paid for the entire party, she was sure that it wasn’t enough to smooth over any argument about the viscount.

The fresh outside air was precisely what she needed. The party had only just started,

and Diana already felt as if it was going on for too long. Her home was filled with people she didn't know, which felt like a major invasion of her space.

He was barely away from her when Jane arrived at her side.

"What are you playing at?" Jane asked.

"Excuse me?" Diana asked.

"Viscount Starling," her cousin snapped. "Don't pretend like you don't know what I'm referring to. I saw you two dancing and charming each other. You know I'm interested in him. Why are you doing this?"

"He asked me to dance," Diana said with a sigh.

"Then decline," her cousin snapped.

"It wasn't like that," Diana defended herself. "I didn't want to dance with him, but it wasn't the right time to decline either."

"Nonsense," Jane argued. "I saw what was happening. You can't lie to me about it."

Diana didn't answer. There was nothing she could say to calm her cousin down, and she was in no mood for the fight. She was already having a long night that she wanted nothing to do with.

"I know why you're doing this," Jane said.

"Please, enlighten me," Diana said.

"You want the viscount to yourself," Jane accused her. "I saw him escort you out

here. You can't stand that he might be interested in me instead of you. You're a selfish woman, Diana, and you always have been."

Fury coursed through Diana's veins then. "Selfish?" she asked. "Look around you. This entire party is something I paid for. You could never afford it without me, and I never wanted it to happen. But I've been footing the bill so that you can have some pointless special moment here tonight. How dare you accuse me of being selfish? How dare you slap me in the face like that."

Jane had nothing to say, just as Diana expected. Their argument was over, and she had won, and it still didn't matter to her at all.

"I am not interested in anyone at the moment," Diana said. "I couldn't care less about Viscount Starling. Do with him as you wish."

Diana walked away from her cousin then and into the garden to get some space. Thankfully, there weren't many people in her garden, and she could no longer hear the sound of the music and the talking going on.

Her heart was pounding hard from the socializing and the argument with Jane. She sat on her favourite bench and let out a loud sigh. With her eyes closed, she enjoyed a moment of silence.

After a few moments, a song popped into her head, which was the one her mother used to sing to her. She sang it quietly to herself, knowing that it would soothe the anxiety she felt. Diana was seriously considering not returning to the party at all.

Other than Anna, she wasn't sure there was anyone who would notice that she was missing. Her family had moved into her home and behaved as if she wasn't even there. They spent all her money and made her feel as if she didn't even have a space in her own home.

“There you are,” Anna said, stopping her singing. “I thought I might find you here.”

“I can’t go back,” Diana said. “The viscount is being pushy, and Jane is accusing me of trying to steal him from her.”

“Viscount Starling?” Anna asked. “I saw you two dancing together. I’ve never seen you look less interested.”

“Well, my family doesn’t know me as well as you do,” Diana said with a chuckle.

“I don’t think I can go back inside, either,” Anna said. “There’s a woman who keeps laughing louder than the music, and it’s driving me nuts.”

“I can’t believe I’ve paid for all of this, and Jane still has the nerve to tell me that I’m selfish,” Diana said. “I’ve never been so angry. It’s her birthday, so I can’t even be too mean.”

“I’m sorry,” Anna said sympathetically. “Perhaps later, I can accidentally spill my drink on her.”

“Don’t you dare,” Diana said with a laugh. “I paid for that dress, and it was expensive.”

“Of course,” Anna teased. “I won’t do that then. I suppose she’ll just have to enjoy her party.”

“She’ll probably say I’ve already ruined it for her,” Diana said. “I stole the man she had her heart set on, according to her. And disappointed her greatly.”

“I saw you were dancing with the duke, too,” Anna reminded her.

“Yes,” Diana said with a sigh. “I didn’t realize he’d been invited. I nearly stopped breathing when I saw him.”

The women both giggled. The party was outrageous and not something that either of them was into. So, they made themselves comfortable on the bench.

“Keep singing,” Anna said. “I like it when you sing. You sound just like your mother.”

Diana obliged and picked up where she left off. Anna was the only person she was comfortable singing in front of. The bench looked out over the lake with swans, and there, the two women found some peace among the chaos.

“You have a beautiful voice,” a voice spoke from behind them, causing them both to jump.

The women spun around to find the Duke of Blackwood smiling back at them.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said with a chuckle.

“I didn’t even hear you approach,” Diana said, smiling.

“I wasn’t trying to be sneaky; I promise you that,” he quickly responded. “I was merely coming to look at the swans and found myself pleasantly surprised.”

\*

Mark had gone in search of fresh air. He remembered the swans down at the pond and thought it would be the best place to get some space. The party seemed to be shrinking around him. Between Lady Elizabeth following him around the room, his mother keeping them together, and the way Viscount Starling had been looking at

Diana, he was finding it difficult to enjoy himself.

It didn't help that Lord Starling had escorted Diana out of the room, and he'd not seen her again. He had to escape it all.

The walk through the gardens was exactly what he needed. They were beautiful during the day but even more beautiful at night. The wind that had been blowing rough through the area earlier that day had died down, and so there was a stillness around him that made him feel somewhat comforted.

As he got closer to the pond, the sound of singing filtered through the air. It was an angelic voice that reminded him of how his mother used to sing to Eva when she was much younger.

He couldn't have been more surprised to find that the source of the voice was Miss Fairchild, the only reason he was even there that night.

"You have a beautiful voice," he said, startling them both.

He greeted both women again and joined them at the pond. Seeing her there was the only thing that could have made his walk any more peaceful.

"Do you mind if I join you ladies?" he asked with a smile.

"Of course not," Miss Fairchild answered.

Anna glanced between the two of them. "I need to stretch my legs," she said with a chuckle. "I'll be right over there."

It was obvious to Mark that she was giving them space to be by themselves while staying close enough that they couldn't be considered entirely alone. He sat down



next to Diana.

“I like that song you were singing,” he said.

“My mother taught it to me,” she answered. “I sing it sometimes when I need to calm down.”

“Calm down?”

“It’s a long story,” she explained. “I don’t often find myself in such large crowds of people.”

“Ah, I would never have guessed,” he said. “You seem to handle it with such grace.”

Her cheeks turned pink, and it sparked no small amount of pride in him. He could watch her smile for hours if the opportunity arose itself. But he also knew that he wasn’t the only man after her attention, so he needed to tread carefully.

Diana cleared her throat. “So, what kind of tea shall I prepare for my tea party with Eva?” she asked. “Does she have a favourite?”

“She does,” he answered. “And luckily, she and I have the same favourite tea.”

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Diana didn’t answer. There was nothing she could say to calm her cousin down, and she was in no mood for the fight. She was already having a long night that she wanted nothing to do with.

“I know why you’re doing this,” Jane said.

“Please, enlighten me,” Diana said.

“You want the viscount to yourself,” Jane accused her. “I saw him escort you out here. You can’t stand that he might be interested in me instead of you. You’re a selfish woman, Diana, and you always have been.”

Fury coursed through Diana’s veins then. “Selfish?” she asked. “Look around you. This entire party is something I paid for. You could never afford it without me, and I never wanted it to happen. But I’ve been footing the bill so that you can have some pointless special moment here tonight. How dare you accuse me of being selfish? How dare you slap me in the face like that.”

Jane had nothing to say, just as Diana expected. Their argument was over, and she had won, and it still didn’t matter to her at all.

“I am not interested in anyone at the moment,” Diana said. “I couldn’t care less about

Viscount Starling. Do with him as you wish.”

Diana walked away from her cousin then and into the garden to get some space. Thankfully, there weren’t many people in her garden, and she could no longer hear the sound of the music and the talking going on.

Her heart was pounding hard from the socializing and the argument with Jane. She sat on her favourite bench and let out a loud sigh. With her eyes closed, she enjoyed a moment of silence.

After a few moments, a song popped into her head, which was the one her mother used to sing to her. She sang it quietly to herself, knowing that it would soothe the anxiety she felt. Diana was seriously considering not returning to the party at all.

Other than Anna, she wasn’t sure there was anyone who would notice that she was missing. Her family had moved into her home and behaved as if she wasn’t even there. They spent all her money and made her feel as if she didn’t even have a space in her own home.

“There you are,” Anna said, stopping her singing. “I thought I might find you here.”

“I can’t go back,” Diana said. “The viscount is being pushy, and Jane is accusing me of trying to steal him from her.”

“Viscount Starling?” Anna asked. “I saw you two dancing together. I’ve never seen you look less interested.”

“Well, my family doesn’t know me as well as you do,” Diana said with a chuckle.

“I don’t think I can go back inside, either,” Anna said. “There’s a woman who keeps laughing louder than the music, and it’s driving me nuts.”

“I can’t believe I’ve paid for all of this, and Jane still has the nerve to tell me that I’m selfish,” Diana said. “I’ve never been so angry. It’s her birthday, so I can’t even be too mean.”

“I’m sorry,” Anna said sympathetically. “Perhaps later, I can accidentally spill my drink on her.”

“Don’t you dare,” Diana said with a laugh. “I paid for that dress, and it was expensive.”

“Of course,” Anna teased. “I won’t do that then. I suppose she’ll just have to enjoy her party.”

“She’ll probably say I’ve already ruined it for her,” Diana said. “I stole the man she had her heart set on, according to her. And disappointed her greatly.”

“I saw you were dancing with the duke, too,” Anna reminded her.

“Yes,” Diana said with a sigh. “I didn’t realize he’d been invited. I nearly stopped breathing when I saw him.”

The women both giggled. The party was outrageous and not something that either of them was into. So, they made themselves comfortable on the bench.

“Keep singing,” Anna said. “I like it when you sing. You sound just like your mother.”

Diana obliged and picked up where she left off. Anna was the only person she was comfortable singing in front of. The bench looked out over the lake with swans, and there, the two women found some peace among the chaos.

“You have a beautiful voice,” a voice spoke from behind them, causing them both to jump.

The women spun around to find the Duke of Blackwood smiling back at them.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said with a chuckle.

“I didn’t even hear you approach,” Diana said, smiling.

“I wasn’t trying to be sneaky; I promise you that,” he quickly responded. “I was merely coming to look at the swans and found myself pleasantly surprised.”

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Mark had gone in search of fresh air. He remembered the swans down at the pond and thought it would be the best place to get some space. The party seemed to be shrinking around him. Between Lady Elizabeth following him around the room, his mother keeping them together, and the way Viscount Starling had been looking at Diana, he was finding it difficult to enjoy himself.

It didn’t help that Lord Starling had escorted Diana out of the room, and he’d not seen her again. He had to escape it all.

The walk through the gardens was exactly what he needed. They were beautiful during the day but even more beautiful at night. The wind that had been blowing rough through the area earlier that day had died down, and so there was a stillness around him that made him feel somewhat comforted.

As he got closer to the pond, the sound of singing filtered through the air. It was an angelic voice that reminded him of how his mother used to sing to Eva when she was much younger.



He couldn't have been more surprised to find that the source of the voice was Miss Fairchild, the only reason he was even there that night.

"You have a beautiful voice," he said, startling them both.

He greeted both women again and joined them at the pond. Seeing her there was the only thing that could have made his walk any more peaceful.

"Do you mind if I join you ladies?" he asked with a smile.

"Of course not," Miss Fairchild answered.

Anna glanced between the two of them. "I need to stretch my legs," she said with a chuckle. "I'll be right over there."

It was obvious to Mark that she was giving them space to be by themselves while staying close enough that they couldn't be considered entirely alone. He sat down next to Diana.

"I like that song you were singing," he said.

"My mother taught it to me," she answered. "I sing it sometimes when I need to calm down."

"Calm down?"

"It's a long story," she explained. "I don't often find myself in such large crowds of people."

"Ah, I would never have guessed," he said. "You seem to handle it with such grace."

Her cheeks turned pink, and it sparked no small amount of pride in him. He could watch her smile for hours if the opportunity arose itself. But he also knew that he wasn't the only man after her attention, so he needed to tread carefully.

Diana cleared her throat. "So, what kind of tea shall I prepare for my tea party with Eva?" she asked. "Does she have a favourite?"

"She does," he answered. "And luckily, she and I have the same favourite tea."

### Chapter 15

It was like music to Mark's ears to know that Miss Fairchild took such an interest in his daughter. Within minutes of their conversation starting, she knew all of Eva's likes and dislikes as they planned the tea party of the century for his daughter.

Around them, the garden seemed to close in, tucking them away from the party and the chaos within the house walls. Anna kept near enough but not so close that she could listen in on their conversation.

"Eva will be so pleased to know you've taken an interest in her," Mark said. "She asks about you all the time, and I'm afraid I hardly ever have the answers."

"Is that so?" she asked. "Why don't you ask me some? Then, when you get home you can tell her the answers."

He liked that idea. There was no better way to get to know someone than to have the chance to simply fire some questions away.

"Alright," he said with a nervous chuckle. "The first thing she wanted to know was if you like to travel."

Diana sighed. "I haven't travelled much, I'm afraid. Although it is something I've always been interested in."

"Why haven't you?" he asked.

She motioned back towards the house. “I have a lot to keep track of here,” she said. “I don’t want to know what would happen if I left my family to take care of things here.”

Mark laughed. “If I left my mother at home, I’d come back, and nothing would look the same.”

“The next thing Eva really wanted to know was what your favourite colour is,” he said.

Diana leaned backward. “Ooh, that’s a tough question. I haven’t thought about this very often. I think I’d have to say blue.”

“Why blue?” he asked.

“I guess the colour holds a lot of feeling,” she answered. “It can be calm or deep like the scariest parts of the ocean. Blue can be the bright sunny sky or the dark night.”

“Spoken like a true artist,” he said.

Part of him was worried when he started asking questions. He worried that perhaps she would give him an answer that he didn’t like. Instead, he only liked her more.

Not only did she answer his questions, but she also gave him the information that the answer required. Diana really allowed him to get to know her.

“Right, next question,” he said.

She tilted her head back with laughter. “Alright.”

“These don’t come from me,” he said, removing responsibility. “These are directly

from Eva.”

“Fire away,” she said with a determined nod.

“Evangeline really wants to know what your favourite food is,” he said. “She’s been helping the cook in the kitchen and is deadly afraid that you might show up for dinner one night, and she won’t know what to cook.”

“Quail,” she answered quite plainly.

Mark nodded. “Thank you,” he said. “She will be very pleased with the results of this conversation, I think.”

The pair kept speaking about the things that interested them. She learned about him, too. Things that most people didn’t care about at all. They laughed easily, and the conversation flowed without any struggle.

“Thank you for cheering me up,” she eventually said. “This party has me a little nervous.”

“What could you possibly be nervous about?” he asked.

“I’m afraid I don’t belong in the members of society that are currently in my ballroom,” she confessed. “I don’t even know most of them.”

“Oh, don’t say that, Miss Fairchild,” he said with a smile. “You are more than worthy of their company. They would be lucky to get to know you as I have.”

She turned her face away so that he would not see her blush, but Mark could see it anyway. It bothered him that she felt she wasn’t worthy of the people in that room when she was significantly better than them.

“I’m serious,” he said. “I know the people in that room, and I’ve run away from them. I’d choose your company over theirs any day, at any time.”

“Thank you,” she said softly. “That’s very kind of you.”

“It’s not kindness,” he reminded her. “I mean every word of it.”

The silence that fell over them was a comfortable one as the swans glided over the pond water, casting a beautiful reflection of the moonlight.

“One last question,” he said.

“Go ahead,” she said with a chuckle.

“Why does a woman like you show such kindness to everyone around her when they do not always return the favour?” he asked.

Diana seemed taken aback by the question. “Are you sure that’s one of Eva’s questions?”

Mark shrugged. “Alright, so it’s one of mine,” he answered. “But I’d really like to know. You deserve only kindness in this life.”

“I don’t know,” she answered. “Isn’t that just the way the world works? People are people, I suppose. I can’t choose family. I can, thankfully, choose friends.”

“You know, family isn’t always everything,” he said. “The responsibilities you feel towards your other family members should also be returned by them. That’s what you deserve.”

She smiled. “That’s what my father used to say to my mother all the time,” she

confessed.

“He was a smart man,” Mark added.

With that, he ended the serious part of the conversation. The last thing he wanted was to push her away by getting too involved in her personal life. But he had overheard her cousin complaining about her and it had shocked him.

He was comfortable next to her, and when he adjusted his coat, Mark inched a little closer to her side. It wasn't like him to be so interested in someone so fast, but something about Diana made him feel like he was not the man he'd always been.

She made him want to take a few more risks in life, and he liked the way that felt.

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Lady Elizabeth marched back towards the house. The entire night had been a waste of time for her. She had not had a good time, and worse, the man she'd been there to see was sitting cosy next to a woman who wasn't even worth his time.

She had followed the duke into the gardens with the idea that they could finally spend some time alone together. She had never been more disappointed in her life. Her desires aside, she had a bet to win, and she would not let Lord Starling win that competition.

But now, it seemed as though they were both at risk of losing.

She burst into the crowded ballroom again and immediately was in a worse mood. It didn't take her long to find the viscount among the crowd. He was taller than most people there.

The dowager duchess of Blackwood seemed eager to get her attention again, but Elizabeth blew her off and carried on her path. She was far too concerned with what she'd seen to make any kind of small talk. She marched right up to Lord Starling and tapped him on the shoulder.

"We need to talk," she said sternly.

Elizabeth didn't even wait for him to respond before she started heading towards the balcony. She knew he would follow because he always did. She stopped at the railing on the balcony and took a deep breath to help her fix her composure.

"What?" he asked, sounding annoyed. "This better be important. I was having a perfectly pleasant conversation."

"That sad girl you were dancing with earlier," Elizabeth said. "Is that the one you're determined to win over?"

She wanted to spit out that it was the same woman who had embarrassed her earlier in the party. Elizabeth bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from scowling.

"It is," he said. "Is that important?"

Elizabeth scoffed. "We're both about to lose this bet if we're not careful," she said. "I've just seen your lady cosy up to my man in the garden. Sitting awfully close together, and I don't like it."

"I see. So, that's where she disappeared off to," Lord Starling said with a chuckle.

"You need to do something," Elizabeth said. "Go and get her back somehow before the two of them fall in love with each other."



“Why don’t you do something?” he asked. “You seem a lot more threatened by this than I do.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “You had her literally in her arms, and she couldn’t wait to run away from you. This was your fault, I’m certain of it.”

“You could work a little harder to win over the duke,” he argued. “Have you tried making yourself pleasant to be around?”

“You sound like a fool,” she snapped. “And this is not a joke, so what are we going to do about this?”

Lord Starling leaned against the railing and looked out over the starry night sky. She might have found him to be an attractive man if he didn’t annoy her so much.

“How do you feel about taking some more calculated measure in this bet?” he asked.

“What do you mean by that?”

A sly smile broke over his face as he turned to face her. She knew that look; she’d seen it once before when he was about to do something he wasn’t supposed to.

“Let’s change the game up a little,” he suggested. “Let’s allow some gossip and clever schemes to help us both out. It will up the stakes a little.”

It wasn’t like Lady Elizabeth to take such extreme measures, but she had her eyes on the duke, and she didn’t want anything to stand in her way. If there was one thing she truly hated, it was losing.

“I like that idea,” she said. “What did you have in mind?”

“I’m sure there were more than a few people who saw me leave this room with her,” he answered. “That could easily become a rumour on its own. But I can’t spread it myself.”

“I’m not spreading it,” she snapped. “I’ll do nothing to help you win this bet.”

“It will help you, too,” he said, amused. “The kind of rumour I’m talking about will almost certainly drive a wedge between Miss Fairchild and the Duke of Blackwood.”

She thought about it for a moment. It wasn’t the worst idea. Not only would it stop the duke from pursuing other avenues, but it would also make those other avenues look like a bad choice for just about anyone.

Miss Fairchild was not a member of the peerage, so nobody really cared anyway. Until that day, most of the people in the room didn’t even know who she was.

“Alright,” Elizabeth agreed. “I’ll do it. What do you want me to say?”

“Tell them what usually happens when I steal a woman away to the sidelines,” he said with a knowing look.

The conversation ended then, and he walked away from her. Lady Elizabeth thought about it for a while longer then. It was a lot to ask of her, and she wasn’t usually one to start rumours, only to spread them.

But how hard could that be?

She looked out over the garden and remembered how the duke had shuffled himself closer to her. They had seemed so comfortable with each other, and the conversation flowed. Meanwhile, Lady Elizabeth had to struggle to get even a few sentences from him.

It made her furious to know that a nobody like Miss Fairchild could not only get him to converse easily, but he laughed.

Elizabeth had never heard him laugh. Not at anything she had said anyway.

There was no doubt in her mind that she had to do something to part them. And she no longer cared if her method was the right or wrong thing to do. So, when she entered the party again, she had a new piece of fabricated gossip for anybody who would listen.

## Page 16

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### Chapter 16

Just enough days had passed to warrant a drop-in from Colin. His arms were filled with bunches of flowers for the women, and in his pocket, he had a cigar for the uncle, Mr Dickens. The family welcomed him in with much excitement, but he paid careful attention to how Diana had reacted to him.

“I had a wonderful time at the ball; this is just something to say thank you,” Colin said.

It was something his mother had taught him that had always worked for him. If he displayed gratitude of any kind, he would likely be rewarded with friendliness. It worked. The women welcomed him in with happy smiles.

“We’re so happy to see you,” Mrs Dickens said as she ushered him into the tea room.

Soon, there was tea and cakes for everyone. He kept hoping that Diana would look at him and smile or even let her eyes linger on him a little longer. To his dismay, she paid him little attention at all.

Their conversation was largely about the ball and everything that had happened. It was clear that Jane and Emma had enjoyed it. They spoke excitedly about everything that had happened and how much planning had gone into it.

For a moment, Colin thought he saw Diana roll her eyes. He was desperate to get her alone again and have a second chance at a conversation with her.

“Excuse me, I’m sorry to interrupt,” one of the maids said, quietening them. “There is a Mr Hoover here to see you.”

“Oh, how wonderful!” Mrs Dickens said with a smile. “That’s just perfect.”

Diana’s eyes shot up then, and her face paled. She clenched her jaw and gave her aunt a death stare to be afraid of.

“Excuse me, please,” she said.

She was out of the room before anybody else could even say a word. Colin looked after her with wonder. Not the good kind. How was it that she always managed to make herself unavailable?

“Just as her potential suitor arrives,” Mr Dickens said with a grumble. “What am I supposed to tell him now?”

A suitor? Colin had not even considered that there would be others. He was aware of the Duke of Blackwood’s interest in her. He’d seen it in the man’s eyes when he glanced at her from across the room.

Now, another man was in competition with him. With Diana out of the room, he had little reason to stay, but he wanted to eye out his competition. That would give him an idea of just how hard he needed to work.

Mr Hoover stepped into the room, and Colin had to work to fight back his laughter. There was truly no competition at all. The man already seemed nervous despite the fact that no conversation had started.

“Please, make yourself comfortable,” Mrs Dickens said, ushering him in. “Such poor timing. Diana has just returned to her room. But don’t let that deter you. She’s

interested; she just needs some time to think.”

“It’s an important decision to make, I suppose,” Mr Hoover said. “Are there other suitors to consider?”

“No,” Mrs Dickens said with a bursting chuckle.

It was quickly becoming clear to Colin that the Dickens family looked down upon Diana, and he could not understand why. But he knew it was the perfect time for him to make his next move.

“Mr Dickens,” Colin said. “If you don’t mind, might I have a word with you in private?”

It did not go unnoticed by Colin that Jane and Emma gave each other an excited look. Their reactions were the kind that he wanted from Diana. Mr Dickens gave him a nod, and the two men went out into another room.

“A drink?” Mr Dickens offered.

“No, thank you,” Colin said, knowing that it was still fairly early in the morning.

Mr Dickens poured himself a drink anyway and made himself comfortable in a nearby armchair.

“Now, what is it you wish to discuss?” he asked.

Colin cleared his throat and smiled. “I would normally have only brought this up a little later, but Mr Hoover’s presence here today has sped things along a little.”

“Oh?” Mr Dickens asked with raised eyebrows.

“I am here because I have an interest in courting your niece,” Colin explained. “Miss Fairchild caught my attention quite some time ago, and I’m afraid I’ve not been able to get her out of my mind.”

“That is surprising,” Mr Dickens said.

“It shouldn’t be,” Colin answered. “Why exactly is it a surprise?”

He could not understand why her family behaved as if she wasn’t as worthy as them. After all, it was her name associated with the manor, not theirs. But he breezed past that, eager not to step on any toes.

“That makes things a little complicated,” Mr Dickens said, twirling the glass in his hands.

“In which way?” Colin asked.

“Well, my daughter Jane has shown quite a fair amount of interest in you,” Mr Dickens explained.

Yes, that did make it complicated. But it didn’t surprise Colin. He had known the first day that he’d bumped into them while they were out shopping that Jane had eyed him closely.

“I’d simply like to get to know Miss Fairchild better,” Colin said. “I think that she and I can create a solid alliance. Of course, without a father, you’ll be the one to speak to. Maybe we could discuss this further over lunch. I have some people I think you’d be interested in meeting.”

Colin hoped he had read Mr Dickens right. Diana’s uncle struck her as the kind of man who valued status above all else. That meant that he would jump at the

opportunity to join Colin and meet some other men of higher standing in society.

Mr Dickens thought it over and sighed.

“I’ll have to discuss this with my wife,” he said. “But I understand what you’re saying. I’ll see if we can all come to some kind of agreement.”

“I’m afraid I’m going to be rather adamant,” Colin said with his best smile. “And I know you’re the kind of man who can make things happen. You certainly look the part.”

“Of course,” Mr Dickens said, his feathers sufficiently fluffed.

“Good, we’re in agreement then,” Colin confirmed.

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Diana’s family had left later than they’d planned, and it had caused her too much stress. Thankfully, they eventually went to run their errands, leaving her to wrap up the final details for her special guest, Evangeline, that day.

She hadn’t been that excited for a tea party in a long time. Diana had decorated the parlour with fresh flowers, and she’d weaved flower crowns to offer Evangeline, as well as matching crowns for her and Anna.

It wouldn’t be just them, either. Anna was invited, the duke’s friend Mr Winterbourne, too, and the duke’s aunt would be joining them. Diana knew that she was in for an excellent afternoon and was counting down the minutes.

Anna had already arrived and was checking her hair for the hundredth time when she heard the carriage arrive.



“They’re here!” Diana called, rushing to the front door.

First to meet them was Evangeline, who raced to her and gave her a big hug. Everybody was happy to see each other, and soon, laughter filled the home as Diana led them to the parlour.

Soon, they were decorated with flower crowns, and everybody had a warm cup of tea and a small cake to pair with it. Evangeline caught them up on everything that had happened since they’d last seen each other in great detail.

And Diana listened closely to every word of it.

Anna and Mr Winterbourne only had eyes for each other. Whenever Mr Winterbourne laughed, Anna flushed a little. The atmosphere in the house was the best it had been in very many months.

“Now, I believe that you’ve only shown me some of the art,” the duke’s aunt said with a smile.

“Yes, you’ve seen the art in the house,” Diana explained. “But there are a few sculptures out in the garden.”

“Oh, how marvellous!” the elderly lady said. “I’d love to see them!”

“Anna gives an excellent tour,” Mr Winterbourne said, glancing at the duke.

“I’d be happy to give you a tour,” Anna said warmly. “The gardens are lovely, and I could do it with a walk anyway.”

Evangeline fixed her flower crown. “Can I come?” she pleaded. “I’d like to show her the swans. Could we feed the swans?”

“Of course,” Anna said with a chuckle. “We’d be lucky to have you with us.”

With that, it was decided, and the room cleared out rather quickly. Neither Diana nor the duke had offered to join in on the tour. With the household staff around, they were perfectly fine to stay there alone.

It got quiet then.

“This is wonderful,” the duke said. “Thank you. I’m sure this is going to be Eva’s highlight of the month.”

“I’ve been so excited to host you all,” Diana said with a wide smile. “It’s just the perfect way to spend an afternoon.”

After the conversation, they sat side by side in the garden, comfortable around each other. Words flowed easily between them as they caught up with the last few days.

“Miss Dubois and Hugh seem to be getting along just fine,” the duke said. “If Hugh can figure out one meaningful compliment, he might get somewhere with her.”

Diana chuckled. “She’s always so nervous to see him,” she explained. “I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but her parents are putting pressure on her to find a husband. They have somebody in mind, but she can’t stand the man.”

“Oh?” the duke asked.

“Yes. They’ve told her that if she can’t find someone suitable soon, they’ll start making arrangements,” Diana confessed.

There was a reason for her to tell the duke what she knew.

“I will make sure to nudge him on then,” the duke said with a chuckle. “Marriage can be a scary thing to think about.”

“I suppose,” Diana said. “My parents had a really good marriage. They loved each other deeply and were each other’s best friends.”

“That must have been fantastic to be around,” the duke said.

“Gave me high standards, I suppose,” she confessed.

There was a pause in the conversation then. The duke tilted his head somewhat as he looked at her. There was so much depth to the look he gave her then that it stirred her.

“I would like to court you, Miss Fairchild,” he said suddenly. “If you would be interested, of course. I find myself drawn to you more each time we meet, and I’d really like to get to know all there is to know about you.”

Even though it was what she really wanted to hear, it still took her by surprise. She hadn’t expected it and wasn’t sure she deserved his attention. Her mouth dried from the nerves.

The duke was such a good man, and she was more than interested in courting him. However, faced with it, she wasn’t entirely sure if she was ready for it. Her heart raced as she tried to formulate an answer.

“Is it alright if I take some time to think about it?” she asked instead, feeling foolish almost immediately.

“Of course,” he said. “I’ve sort of sprung this on you, haven’t I?”

Diana chuckled. “A little.”

“Well, it hadn’t been my plan today, to be honest,” he confessed. “But I found I could not avoid it any longer.”

“I do like you a lot,” Diana said, offering him the same honesty he had offered her. “But I find that I do not have an answer for you just yet.”

And then, as if it hadn’t even happened, their conversation continued as if they were old friends. And by the time the rest of the group returned, the pair were laughing again.

### Chapter 17

“How was your day?” Mark’s mother asked as she peered at him over the edge of her book.

“It was pleasant,” Mark said. “Better than pleasant, actually.”

“Eva was tired when she got home from your tea party yesterday,” his mother said. “She went right to bed and slept through until morning.”

“I know, I’m starting to think she likes Fairchild Manor more than she likes our home here,” he joked.

His mother rested her book on her lap and eyed him closely.

“You never mentioned knowing Miss Fairchild before we went to the party. How did you make her acquaintance exactly?” she asked.

“She helped us with Spot one day in the park,” he answered. “She was friendly and charming, and we all had an enjoyable afternoon together.”

If he didn’t know any better, he would have thought his mother had just rolled her eyes. She had turned her face away as if to hide it, so he couldn’t be sure. But he knew his mother well enough to know that Diana was hardly the kind of woman she would approve of.

“Well, that surprises me, given how tedious that ball was,” his mother said with a

sigh.

“She had little to do with that, to be honest,” Mark said. “She is vastly different from the family of hers that you met.”

“You obviously know her better than I thought,” she commented.

Mark was going to leave that conversation for another day, but his mother had upset him then. Her remarks towards Diana and her home were entirely unfounded, and he didn’t want Eva to hear it.

More so, he didn’t want Eva to learn the behaviours that his mother had picked up during her life of lavish living and high status.

“Well, I would like to court her,” he said confidently.

“Court who?” his mother sighed, lifting her book again.

“Miss Fairchild, of course.”

The book slipped from her hand and tumbled to the ground. His mother scowled at him as the corners of her mouth downturned.

“I hope you’re joking,” she snapped.

“Far from it,” he answered. “In fact, I’m rather excited about it.”

She was up from her seat then and walking towards him. He knew then that he was in trouble, which he had expected to be. But judging by the redness of her face, it was more trouble than he’d been in for a long time.

“No,” she commanded. “I won’t stand for it. She is certainly not right for my son.”

“You don’t know what’s right for me,” he argued. “You never have.”

“Nonsense!” she cried. “I was the one who first got you married. If it weren’t for that, you’d never have Eva.”

“True,” he agreed. “But Violet was an adulterer. Eva was the only good thing that came out of that marriage. In fact, the wife you chose for me then made my life miserable.”

He knew he had insulted his mother then, but he needed her to back off. Mark was tired of his decisions constantly being made by other people. He wanted to take some control over his life, and he definitely didn’t want to go through the same thing he’d experienced in his first marriage.

“She does nothing to strengthen this family name,” his mother argued.

“Eva loves her,” he said plainly. “And she would be a wonderful mother. To be honest with you, I enjoy her company. It’s the best company I’ve had in years.”

“She is pretending,” his mother spat. “She’s only after the status and the money.”

“She doesn’t need the money,” Mark said. “And, if I’m honest, it took some convincing to get her to agree to a courtship anyway. So, I think you’re wrong in that regard, too.”

“I am never wrong. You mark my words.”

His mother had started to pace then, entirely flustered by the news, which gave Mark a small kick. Arguing with his mother was nothing new. There was a time when

they'd done it on a weekly basis. For a while, he'd been convinced that she enjoyed it.

"I've invited her for dinner tonight," he explained. "Along with her friend Miss Dubois and Hugh."

"Oh, so it's a party," his mother sneered.

"I suppose," he said with a laugh. "I'm hoping you can get to know her better. And I do hope you'll at least try. I'm serious when I say I'm interested in her."

"She's not right for you," his mother said.

"I happen to think she is," he argued. "But more than that, I think she's right for Eva. It's not just about me anymore. What's right for Eva will always take preference."

Mark knew that his mother couldn't argue with him about that. It would make her look bad, and if there was one thing she was afraid of, it was looking bad.

"You could have asked me before you made these arrangements," she said as a final push to fight with him.

"I knew you wouldn't want to do it," he said with a smile. "So, I've already invited them, and they've already agreed to come."

"Alright then," she said. "Don't worry, I'll make sure the dinner is perfectly pleasurable for all of us. You'll see that she does not belong here."

"You can continue to argue with me, Mother," he said with finality. "But I feel I must remind you that there are other estates in our name, and I'd be happy to set you up there for the rest of your days so that Eva and I can live here in peace."



Mark didn't like threatening his mother, and judging by the look on her face, she didn't like being threatened either. But he felt it had to be done to prove to her just how serious he was about Diana. That was the hardest part of his day, and now it was over, and all he still had to do was get ready for the dinner and enjoy Diana's company once more.

\*

Diana went to get ready for the dinner at Anna's house. The last thing she wanted was for her family to pry into her plans and do something to stop her or ruin it for her at the last minute.

As far as they were concerned, she had wanted some space and had arranged to stay at Anna's house for the night. If they found out about her and the duke courting, they would accuse her of trying to seduce him. Just as they had done with Viscount Starling.

Of course, they would have to find out about it eventually, but for as long as possible, she wanted to keep it to herself. That way, she could enjoy it the most.

"How are you and Mr Winterbourne getting along?" Diana asked with a smile.

"Well, I think," Anna said. "I don't know. How am I supposed to know?"

"Are you still enjoying his company?" Diana asked with a laugh.

"Yes."

"And is he enjoying your company?" Diana continued.

"I think so," Anna said. "But I can't be sure. Every time I think about it, I get so

nervous that it makes me feel dizzy.”

“Don’t be like that.” Diana laughed. “I’m sure he enjoys your company just as much as you enjoy his.”

The dinner was important to Diana. She was going to meet his mother, and that would determine whether or not she would accept a courtship between her and Mark. Her father had always told her that the mother was an important figure, particularly when choosing a husband.

He had said that even the strongest relationships could be torn apart by an overbearing mother.

The women checked their appearances one last time before heading for the carriage. Diana wore a pale blue dress that night with silver jewellery. For the first time in a long time, she had bought a new dress for the occasion.

“You look beautiful,” Anna said. “I still don’t understand what you’re hesitating about. The duke is such a good catch and you’ve been good in each other’s company since you met.”

“I don’t know him well enough yet,” Diana explained.

Soon, they had arrived at his home. It was a sprawling manor in perfect condition. The dowager duchess, the duke, and Mrs Ashburne all awaited her for a warm greeting. And, to her surprise, she met Lady Elizabeth and her parents there, too. Diana glanced at Mark’s aunt and wondered how their introduction had gone since the last time they’d seen each other when Lady Elizabeth had been rather rude.

“It’s so good to meet you,” Diana said as politely as possible, knowing that she and Lady Elizabeth had not got off on the right foot at Jane’s party.

They all sat down to enjoy dinner with each other. The conversation was interesting and enjoyable for the most part, but it changed whenever the dowager duchess or Lady Elizabeth got involved.

Diana could not ignore the tension that came from Dowager Duchess Blackwood towards her, and she did her best to try and win her over, but she feared she wasn't making much progress.

Still, she kept her back straight and her smile easy so that she appeared confident at all times.

"Did you see the art at Fairchild Manor, Mother?" the duke asked with a smile. "It really is all quite incredible. Some of that was done by our very own Miss Fairchild here."

"Lady Elizabeth can paint a gorgeous watercolour flower," the dowager duchess said. "You must let her show you sometime."

"That's true," Lady Elizabeth chimed in while her mother nodded. "I'd be more than happy to show you any time."

"She's been so good at it since she was a child," Lady Barker chimed in. "A real watercolour prodigy. And you should hear her play the piano! It's like something from a dream."

Diana had to stifle a chuckle. It was clear to her that his mother preferred Lady Elizabeth, and she didn't blame her. Lady Elizabeth had the right kind of status within society.

"I mean it," the duke pressed. "I've never seen anything like the art in Miss Fairchild's home. I could spend the entire day there admiring it all."

Lady Elizabeth's mouth pursed into a small pout. But she fixed it soon enough into a little smile. Her mother, on the other hand, had stopped smiling some time ago.

"Lady Elizabeth was just telling me yesterday about all the changes they're making to their home," the dowager duchess pressed on. "She's quite the homemaker. I mean, I haven't seen a more beautiful home."

"Nonsense," Lady Elizabeth said. "It can't be more beautiful than this one."

Diana caught Anna's eye as they both tried to stifle a laugh. She reached for her wine and used the glass to hide the smirk that had broken over her face.

"I'd be happy to host you this weekend," Lady Elizabeth said, her mother quickly agreeing to it.

"That would be wonderful!" the Duke of Essex added. "I've been wanting to do it for some time. It's so important to us that our families spend more time together."

"Unfortunately, I have plans this weekend," the Duke of Blackwood pressed.

"Surely you can move them or simply cancel?" the dowager duchess urged.

"I'm afraid not, but I'm sure the plans for all the changes at Barker Manor are just wonderful," the duke remarked.

Diana noted the disinterest in the duke's voice. Clearly, his mother had a favourite, and the duke did not share in that sentiment. Mr Winterbourne seemed supportive of Diana, which made her feel better.

It was good to see that the duke was willing to go up against his mother when she was pushing him like that. It meant that she had little control over him and his choices,

which met the criteria her father had given her all those years ago.

Still, there was a lot of doubt in her mind. At the end of the day, she could not compete with a lady. The Duke and Duchess of Essex had status and significant sway. She had often read about them in the news.

Diana was nothing compared to them, and it made her more nervous than she'd been in a long time.

### Chapter 18

The night ended, and Mark felt as if he'd hardly had any time to even speak with Diana. There hadn't been a single conversation that his mother or Lady Elizabeth and her family didn't ambush with their own agenda.

He didn't know that his mother had invited the Barker family until just a few minutes before their arrival. And he knew his mother had left it that late on purpose, knowing that he would have cancelled or fought with her about it.

By the time Diana had left, it felt as if she had only just arrived. There had been no chance for him to get a moment to speak with her alone. That made the dinner a great failure for him.

Worse still, it had been clear the entire night that Lady Elizabeth was the preferred woman for his mother, and he was certain that Diana had picked up on it. Mark needed to make things right before Diana was pushed away from him.

Just the thought of that angered him.

His mother didn't understand.

When Lady Elizabeth was around, Eva yawned and fiddled with stuff. His daughter's eyes would glaze over with boredom when Lady Elizabeth visited because she paid her hardly any attention.

When plans were made with Diana, Eva would be excited days in advance. And

whenever they were separated, she begged her father for when they could see each other again.

That was the biggest difference. Things were happy when Diana was involved. When it was Lady Elizabeth, time seemed to drag.

As soon as morning rolled around, Mark sat to write a note with the idea of making things right.

Dear Miss Fairchild,

Thank you so much for joining me for dinner at my home last night. I fear the night did not go as I had anticipated. I spent far too little time in your company. To make that right, I would like to invite you for a walk on the promenade with me and Evangeline this evening.

The park is simply beautiful this time of year.

Warmest regards, The Duke of Blackwood

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The note had arrived and served as a breath of relief after an unexpected visitor had turned up at her door. To make things worse, it seemed he was there to see her. Viscount Starling had arrived with a large bunch of flowers and a plate of cakes.

This time, none of the other women received flowers. Diana had been closing her eyes and taking a deep breath when the note arrived from the Duke of Blackwood. Whatever the problem was, she had to deal with it then.

“Just go in there and speak with him,” her uncle pressed as he joined her for a

moment in the kitchen.

“I don’t know him,” she argued. “Why is he here in the first place?”

“Well, your aunt prefers Mr Hoover as a potential suitor for you. But I think Lord Starling is a perfect choice. You know you can’t avoid marriage forever,” her uncle argued.

Diana knew why her aunt preferred Mr Hoover as a suitor. He was far more malleable than any other suitor around. If he were to marry Diana, her aunt would never have to ask to spend a single cent of her pennies again. Mr Hoover would merely let her have it to avoid conflict. Of that, Diana was certain.

“I’m not interested,” Diana said coldly.

“You’ve barely got to know him,” her uncle argued. “He’s here, and he’s brought you the flowers and cakes. The least you could do is have some tea with him.”

Diana sighed. “Alright, but one cup, and then he goes,” she said sternly.

She followed her uncle back to the parlour where tea already awaited them. Her aunt and Lord Starling were already deep in conversation. Lord Starling got up to greet her as she entered the room and sat down for tea.

“Thank you for the flowers,” Diana said politely. “They’re beautiful.”

“They made me think of you,” he said with a smile.

Whatever smile her aunt had been wearing before fell away then. Without the viscount noticing, she scowled in Diana’s direction.



“Henriette,” her uncle said. “Would you help me with these cakes, please? I can’t find the platter.”

He winked in Lord Starling’s direction, which did not go unnoticed by her already very displeased aunt. Diana knew well enough that her uncle was trying to get her and the viscount in the room alone together.

Diana shifted uncomfortably in her seat as she watched them leave. She took a sip of tea, hoping it would provide her with a reason not to speak.

“How are you?” Lord Starling asked.

“Just fine,” she answered. “I’ve been pretty busy.”

“You could use some help around here,” he offered.

“I enjoy it,” she said.

She was trying to make sure that she did not add to the conversation too much. Her hope was that the viscount would find her boring and never bother her again. But when he smiled at her, she had an idea that it wasn’t working.

“You’re a hard worker?” he asked.

Diana nodded as she took another sip of tea.

“You strike me more as a lady of leisure,” he said, amused. “That’s supposed to keep you young.”

Diana stared at him blankly. Was that meant to be a compliment or an insult? She wasn’t entirely sure. Either way, she didn’t like it one bit.

“My father taught me everything I need to know to do it all,” she explained. “It’s not as if it’s difficult.”

Lord Starling broke into a wide smile then. “I knew there was something special about you,” he said softly.

She bit her tongue to stop herself from pulling a face. Still, she was sure it was clear to him that he didn’t amuse her. Lord Starling moved to the edge of his seat then.

“Miss Fairchild, I have come here with a specific purpose in mind,” he confessed.

“Oh?” she asked, pretending to be surprised.

“It really struck me when you ran into the street to save that street urchin,” he said with a smile. “That really was something special.”

“That was what had to be done,” she said sternly. “Otherwise, that child might have been killed or badly injured.”

“Of course,” he said, sounding somewhat defeated.”

“I like to think I’m not the only person who had that idea,” she said. “And that I was just the first person to get to him.”

Lord Starling nodded and then let out a short sigh.

“I’ll get straight to it then,” he said. “I’m interested in you, Miss Fairchild, and I would like to court you.”

Her stomach flipped. She knew that, logically, it was a good offer. If she looked at it from the surface, it made sense. He was a man of status and could elevate her family

name. He was a handsome man, too, according to Jane.

But that was just the problem. He could be all those things for Jane, who was actually interested in him. Diana was not that person. Only one man had ever captured her attention enough to make her consider marriage. And his note was tucked away in her dress.

“I am flattered,” she started.

She had not yet finished her sentence, but Lord Starling smiled as if he’d won her over.

“But I’m afraid I’m not interested,” she continued. “There’s nothing wrong with you. I just think you should court someone who’s interested in you. You’re a good man, and anybody would be lucky to have you. I just don’t think we’re a good match.”

Lord Starling let out a surprised chuckle. “You’ve hardly given me a chance to change your mind.”

Diana smiled kindly at him. “Trust me when I say that I am not the woman for you,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

Lord Starling got up from his seat and straightened his jacket. His demeanour had changed completely then. There was no charming smile on his face. He seemed cold and irritated by her. Diana didn’t care.

“I can’t say I’m not upset,” he commented. “But do believe me when I say that I have not given up on you.”

As soon as Lord Starling was out of the door, she let out a sigh of relief.

“What is wrong with you?” her uncle asked, flying into the room. “That was a good offer. You must be mad.”

“I don’t like him,” she said with a shrug. “This is my decision. Might I remind you that you are not my father? While I’m pleased to know you care about me, this is my choice, and I am not interested in him.”

Her uncle shook his head as he made his way to the drink cabinet. Diana was in no mood to fight with them about it so she retreated to her study. There, she pried the duke’s note out of her dress and read it again.

It put a smile on her face. Their dinner had been a rough one when it came to the other guests who were there, but he still wanted to see her again, and that instilled some pride in her.

She penned her response.

Dear Duke of Blackwood,

The dinner was perfectly pleasant. Regardless of the time spent together, it is always enjoyable to be in your company. I will happily accept your invitation to walk with you and Eva. It will be the highlight of my day.

Kindest regards,

Miss Fairchild

She sent it off without consulting her aunt and uncle. They weren’t her parents, so she had no need to. But they had also proven to her that they did not have her best interests in mind. They had only their own interests in mind.

With that, she prepared for her walk later that day, eager to turn her bad mood into a better one.

\*

Jane had been listening since the moment she had heard Lord Starling's voice downstairs. But it had resulted in the most anger she'd ever felt in her life. As soon as Lord Starling had left, Jane marched to find her mother.

"How dare you let that happen?" she asked as tears burned behind her eyes.

"Don't look at me," her mother said. "Your father set up that arrangement. As far as I know, though, Diana has turned him away."

"She's making a fool out of us," Jane snapped. "You both know I want to marry him. You promised me a life of status if I put up with Diana and her antics."

"I'm doing my best," her mother sighed.

"Do something!" Jane cried out. "Make Lord Starling turn his attention back to me. She's ruining everything."

"I don't know what to do," her mother said with a shrug. "Mr Hoover is the perfect husband for her, and he's already agreed to give us full access to her money if they marry."

Jane sighed and rubbed her eyes. "Then we need to make sure that he's her only option. I'm not losing to her."

"What do you suppose we do?" her mother asked. "She is as stubborn as her father was."

“Reputation is everything in this life, and so far, Diana’s reputation is far better than she deserves,” Jane stated. “So let’s ruin it.”

“And how would you recommend we do that?” her mother asked with a smirk.

“We need to force her into a scandalous position until Mr Hoover becomes her only option,” Jane suggested. “I might have an idea.”

Her mother smiled. “Do what you must. As I said, I will make sure our lives are changed and we get what we deserve.”

Jane nodded and smiled. “I think I can pull it off,” she said. “I will trap her into a marriage that works for us. She will regret ever treating me this way.”

She retreated to her room to work on her plan as her hatred towards Diana grew stronger.

### Chapter 19

When Diana had reached out to Anna to come along on the walk, it had taken no convincing at all. Anna was wearing one of her favourite dresses and spoke eagerly of the dinner party as they made their way to the walk.

Diana thought that she would have to feel nervous, but she didn't. Instead, she felt excited. As if she was meant to be there rather than at home with her family. She and Anna arrived at the promenade, pleasantly surprised to see Mr Winterbourne waiting with the duke as well.

Evangeline cheered as their carriage pulled up. The young girl was wearing one of her best dresses with her blonde hair in tight curls and pigtails. The women were greeted happily and warmly.

Anna and Mr Winterbourne took a few paces ahead of Diana and the Duke as Evangeline and her nanny ran ahead to feed the ducks.

"I'm so glad you accepted," the duke said.

"It was an easy choice to make," she said with a smile.

The pair walked easily together along the pond. It was a beautiful day at the park, as he had promised. Their conversation flowed with ease, and they laughed a lot together.

When she was with him, she forgot all about the pressures of her aunt and uncle and

Colin's visit. It helped her forget about the ball that she'd spent so much money on. It was as if a new life started whenever she was around him.

They were in their own world as they walked. She didn't even know how much time was passing and didn't care, either.

Eventually, they came to a stop to watch the sunlight as it reflected off the water. Diana fell quiet for a while as she pondered the moment.

"Where is that mind of yours?" the duke asked with a laugh.

Diana smiled. "I'm thinking that I would like it very much for you to court me," she answered confidently.

The duke burst into excited laughter as he cheered the news.

"I'm so pleased to hear that," he said.

Diana could hardly stop herself from smiling.

"And here I thought my mother had scared you away," he teased.

"It would take a lot more than that." She laughed. "They're nothing compared to my family."

The duke shuffled a little closer to her. "They can't be that bad. I've not met them really."

"If I may," she said. "Could I ask that we keep our courtship quiet for a while? Please do not think that I am embarrassed at all. I simply want to enjoy this without any interference."



She worried that it would push him away. It seemed odd to ask something like that, but she had her reasons for it.

“I like that idea,” he said to her surprise.

That took some pressure off her. She knew then that she could carry on without telling anyone and that she and the duke were still in agreement.

“Of course, I’ll tell my family eventually,” Diana said. “And Anna will know. But for now, I just want to enjoy your company.”

“I must be the luckiest man in London,” the duke said with a smile.

The Duke of Blackwood took her hand in his then and she felt a stir of nervous excitement within her. He raised her hand and kissed it gently. Everything he did seemed to soften her, and she knew then that she hardly wanted to spend a minute without his company.

Just then, the sound of Eva’s excited laughter came racing towards them. She ran at them with the nanny in close pursuit. Eva ran right past the duke and into Diana’s arms.

“Will you carry me?” Eva asked. “Please? My feet are so tired.”

“Glady,” Diana said.

She lifted the young girl into her arms as they continued their walk. Eva chatted with her the entire way, and Diana had never felt so important in her life. It was as if Eva gave her a sense of purpose.

“I like your hair today,” Eva said, stroking it. “Every time I see you, you look even

prettier.”

“Thank you,” Diana said. “That was very kind of you.”

“I hope to be as pretty as you one day,” Eva said kindly.

Diana felt as if she could get used to that feeling. For the first time, she allowed herself to imagine being that way perfectly. Knowing that the duke was interested in her, she knew there was a chance to watch Eva grow up.

She wanted that badly. Diana could imagine her with long blonde locks and large eyes as a young woman being courted by a handsome man. Her heart tugged at the thought of that.

Eventually, their walk had to come to an end. Diana let out a sigh as she handed a then sleeping Eva back to the duke.

“She’s had a splendid time with you as usual,” the duke said with a smile.

“This is the perfect way to end a day,” Diana said softly.

“Why don’t you meet me here tomorrow evening again?” he said. “So that I can plan it better and start officially courting you.”

“I’d like that very much,” she said with a smile.

With that, she and Anna left the men and headed back to their houses. Anna spoke the entire way about the courtship that lay ahead of Diana with great excitement.

“You’re sworn to secrecy, though,” Diana said. “And you’ll have to chaperone me tomorrow.”

“Of course, and of course!” Anna teased. “I’ll be happy to. And I’ll be sure you two get some space.”

Diana blushed a little as she looked out the window at the darkening city.

“Eva loves you,” Anna said. “When we walked with her, she would not stop talking about you.”

“I like being around her,” Diana said. “She reminds me of how wonderful the world was when I was her age.”

Anna nodded in agreement. “I’m glad we met them all,” she said quietly. “I owe so much to Spot now.”

Diana chuckled. “I suppose,” she agreed. “Remind me to pamper that dog next time I see him.”

Diana slept well that night and had only pleasant dreams, and when she woke up, she was happy because she knew that she would see the duke again that evening.

\*

Mark had hardly slept at all from excitement. As agreed, he had not told his mother or anybody about their courtship, but it had been all he could think about. Eva had spoken about Diana until the moment her eyes had closed to sleep. He had thought of how Diana had carried Eva and how good and natural it had seemed.

That night, he had planned for them to go on another walk on the promenade, followed by refreshments at his manor afterward. His mother had promised to be on her best behaviour at the threat of moving to another house.

His mother had reluctantly agreed. He had also received word that Anna would be chaperoning, which meant that Hugh would be joining them, too. When his mother had learned that it would be four of them, she had eased. It made it seem like just a few friends having drinks together.

Anna and Hugh had walked ahead again, giving Mark and Diana some space. As always, their conversation flowed with ease. This time was different, though, because each of them knew the perception was different.

Instead of getting to know her better, he was considering her as a potential wife and mother to her child. And he knew that she was trying to decide if he would make a suitable husband.

It felt different to when he had courted his first wife. Then he had worried so much about how he behaved and what she thought. And he had felt a lot of pressure to make it work.

This time, while he really wanted it to work, he didn't feel the pressure. What he wanted was for them to be honest about who they were with each other. Mark wanted to go into his next marriage being and feeling truly like himself.

Their walk came to a brief pause when Lady Elizabeth approached them with her lady's maid. Mark and Diana shared an amused glance as they greeted her. It did not go unnoticed by Mark that Lady Elizabeth had paid Diana hardly any attention.

"How beautiful does this all look this evening?" Lady Elizabeth asked. "And just when I thought the evening couldn't get any better, I am graced by the handsome face and dashing smile of the Duke of Blackwood."

"This is the most beautiful time of year," Mark said plainly.

“Well, I was getting a little cold, but I’m certainly warmer now that I’ve seen you here,” Lady Elizabeth said with a smile.

Diana glanced at him again, and he had to work to stifle a laugh. Lady Elizabeth was blatantly flirting with him, blissfully unaware that it was meaningless and that the pair had entered a courtship.

It didn’t matter how many short answers Mark gave her, she didn’t seem to get the hint that he didn’t want to linger and talk.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me, Lady Elizabeth,” Mark eventually said. “It appears we’ve lost our friends up ahead, so we best catch up.”

Lady Elizabeth turned to look in Anna and Mr Winterbourne’s direction, and her facial expression soured.

“Oh, alright,” she said. “Well, it was pleasant to see you. We must make plans soon.”

“Have a lovely evening, Lady Elizabeth,” he said kindly.

Diana nodded at her quietly in greeting, and soon enough, it was just the two of them side by side again.

“I’m sorry about that,” Mark said with a laugh.

“Don’t mention it,” Diana said. “She means well.”

He was amazed at her confidence in him then. She trusted in his commitment to their courtship. That meant a lot to him. It made him feel comfortable with himself and around her. As if nothing had happened, their conversation started up again.

“Would you make more art?” he asked. “You really are very good.”

“I don’t have the time lately,” she said. “And when my family is home, I can barely think. It doesn’t matter where I go; I bump into one of them.”

Mark chuckled. “I hope that will change one day,” he said. “Do you enjoy it?”

“It’s in my blood,” she said with a laugh. “Of course I do. I used to paint with my parents all the time. They were happiest when they were making art.”

“Your parents would be very proud of you,” he said. “You’re doing so well on your own, you know?”

“I don’t know.” She laughed. “Some days, I feel so tired that all the hard work almost seems silly.”

“Your family doesn’t help?” he asked.

Diana shook her head. “I wouldn’t trust them with it,” she said with another laugh. “They don’t know what they’re doing. They’ve proven that a few times.”

“They sure can throw a party, though,” he said.

“Are you referring to the one we both ran away from?” she teased. “Yes, they know how to plan a party.”

Mark burst into excited laughter then. “Why not just kick them out if you don’t want them around.”

“They’re family,” she said. “Every time I mention it, they make me feel so guilty about it all. And then I just can’t do it. Besides, Jane and Emma will have a better life

out here.”

“Your kindness is too much for them,” Mark said kindly.

“Yes, it is,” she said and laughed.

The night seemed to go by slowly but also much too fast. It was as if the day fell away when he was with her, and he liked the way that felt. As they walked, they continuously inched closer together until there was hardly any space left between them.

Miss Dubois and Hugh pretended not to notice as they enjoyed their own evening together.

For the first time in a long while, things felt right in the world. And Mark felt sad because he knew that as soon as they parted, he would miss her and return to his life, which, since they’d met, just didn’t feel like enough anymore.

### Chapter 20

When Diana walked in the door, there was a fair amount of stress in the atmosphere. It didn't take much to know that her aunt and uncle had likely had a row. They were not in the same room. And even her cousins weren't in the room with them.

Jane and Emma sat in the living room by the fire as they read books and remained as quiet as possible.

Diana came in and sat down with them. "Everything alright?" she asked.

"Yes," Emma sighed. "Mother is upset with father because he drank too much and used some of her letters to stoke the fire."

Jane chuckled. "It was a little funny."

The three of them shared a chuckle together as her cousins told her what had happened. It was the first time in some time that she was not fighting with them. She wondered what had changed. In particular, something had changed with Jane. She no longer scowled and pouted in Diana's presence.

Diana wasn't worried; she was just happy that there was some peace between them for the first time in a while.

"You got a letter," Jane said, motioning towards a side table.

"Really? When did it arrive?" she asked.



“Not more than an hour ago,” Jane said. “Where were you anyway?”

“I was out with Anna,” Diana answered in short as she reached for the letter.

The handwriting on the front wasn’t one that she recognized. She tore it open and was surprised to see that the letter came from Lady Elizabeth.

Dear Miss Fairchild,

I am so pleased to have run into you at the park this evening. I fear that we have got off on rather the wrong foot, and I would love to make it up to you.

I am hosting a ball at Barker Manor this weekend, and it would mean a lot to me if you attended. It only seems fair. I just know that everyone will enjoy your company and graceful presence.

Regards, Lady Elizabeth Barker

Diana leaned back in her seat and opened her eyes wide as she read it again. Jane was peering at her from over the top of her book.

“What is it?” she asked. “You look like you’ve received bad news.”

“It’s from Lady Elizabeth,” Diana answered. “She’s invited me to a ball at her family’s manor this weekend.”

“Isn’t that nice?” Jane asked with a smile.

That bothered Diana. She expected Jane to be upset at not receiving an invitation, but instead, she seemed entirely unbothered by it.

“I’m not sure I should go,” Diana said. “When Lady Elizabeth and I first met, we weren’t exactly friendly with each other.”

“Well, perhaps she’s trying to make things right with you,” Jane offered.

“That’s what the letter says,” Diana sighed. “I still don’t think I’m going to go.”

“Oh, don’t be so boring,” Jane snapped, showing a snippet of her poor temper. “You could use some time out at a ball. Maybe you’ll meet someone important.”

Diana shook her head. “I just don’t like her. Why should I go if I don’t like her? That seems like a poor use of my time. Besides, you know I don’t enjoy parties.”

“That was clear when you disappeared at my birthday ball,” Jane commented.

She read the letter the third time to make sure that she had truly understood it correctly. Their meeting that evening had been nothing of importance to Diana. In fact, they had hardly spoken more than a few words to each other before Mark had excused him from her company.

“Just go,” Jane said. “What’s the worst that could happen? Who knows, maybe you and Lady Elizabeth can one day be friends. It wouldn’t hurt for you to have a few more friends.”

Diana thought about it, and it wasn’t the worst idea. If she and Lady Elizabeth could be on better terms, then perhaps the Dowager Duchess of Blackwood would be more open to her, too.

“Alright,” she relented. “I’ll go. But you must promise to help me get ready for it then.”

“Whatever you say,” Jane mumbled. “I’m sure I can help you with something.”

Diana didn’t want to overstay her welcome there and was eager to get some rest. So, she excused herself to write her response in which she accepted Lady Elizabeth’s invitation. She would send it out first thing in the morning.

As she readied herself for bed and unbraided her hair, she thought back to her walk with Mark. It had gone just as she’d hoped, but still something was missing. He had made her want to break the rules a little.

There had been a few times when she’d considered doing something reckless with him. When they’d said goodbye, she’d almost kissed him on the cheek. The very fact that she’d been having that thought was a problem.

It wasn’t like her to feel so reckless and free-spirited. Not since her parents had died, anyway. But she wanted to be a perfect lady for Mark. That seemed important to her so that they could start their relationship in the best way possible.

She crawled into bed and pulled the covers over herself. Her mind was racing with a multitude of thoughts. Did she really want to go to the ball? When would she see Mark again? And when would she be ready to make their courtship more public?

That, she suspected, would have a lot to do with how she would get along with Lady Elizabeth.

In a scary change of events, Diana found herself worried about how people might see her and if they would like her. It struck her then that if she were to marry the duke, she would become a woman of status. That scared her. However, she knew that having Mark and Eva in her life permanently would make it worthwhile.

That was what she told herself as she slowly dozed off to sleep, eager for what the

new day would bring.

\*

Lady Elizabeth tapped her fingers impatiently as she waited for Lord Starling to join her in the parlour. Her lady's maid waited outside for her.

"What are you doing here?" Lord Starling asked as he entered the room.

The top few buttons of his shirt were undone, revealing some of the muscular chest he hid underneath. Lady Elizabeth averted her eyes, offended that he would appear in front of her in that way.

"You won't believe who I saw this evening, walking tightly together on the promenade," she snapped.

"I don't know," he said, rubbing his eyes.

"Your Miss Fairchild and my Duke of Blackwood," she answered. "I am furious. It seems that everywhere I turn, there they are. I sat at dinner with them the other night, and he could barely take his eyes off her."

Lord Starling sighed. "Yes, it appears we're both going to have a hard time with this. I've been to see her twice now and got nothing out of her."

"Well, I have a plan, no thanks to you," she said.

"Please, enlighten me," Lord Starling said, his words closely followed by a yawn.

"I've invited her to a ball at my manor this weekend," she said. "Consider this your formal invitation, too."

“What?” he asked. “That’s the last thing I’m in the mood for.”

“Well, we need to fix this if either of us is going to get our person,” she said. “So, you’ll be there, and you’ll enjoy it, too.”

“So what is the plan?” he asked.

“This ball is the perfect place for the two of you to disappear somewhere together,” she said. “Then someone can find you both in a compromising position, perhaps. That should be more than enough to put an end to their attention to each other.”

“And that would be believable, given my reputation,” Lord Starling said with a smile.

Lady Elizabeth was growing rather tired of him. But they’d made a bet, and she wanted the duke for herself, but she wished there was a way to do it without Lord Starling.

“You only have to get her in a compromising position somewhere quiet,” Lady Elizabeth instructed. “I’ll make sure that you’ll be found.”

“Are you sure you’re up to the task?” he teased.

“I’d like to ask you the same,” she snapped. “Might I remind you that she’s rejected you multiple times? It might not be so easy to get her somewhere alone with you.”

“I have my way,” he said with a smirk.

“This woman is not like the other daft women who throw themselves at you,” she reminded him. “I don’t know what’s wrong with her, but she seems to be uninterested in most people.”

Lord Starling got up to pour himself a drink. Lady Elizabeth didn't have a lot of time. She had a ball to plan, and so far, she had only invited two people. Diana, and Lord Starling. There was much to do if she was going to pull it off.

"How compromising?" he asked.

"As bad as you can get it," she demanded. "Make it so bad that she will have to marry you."

"That bad?" he asked.

"As bad as you can get it," she said. "And if you don't pull this off, then do me a favour and make sure you're never in my presence again. If this doesn't work, there might not be any hope for either of us."

Lord Starling agreed, and with that, Lady Elizabeth left to continue her preparations. She hoped that Lord Starling would not let her down because she would be working very hard to pull the party together.

The hardest part was trusting Lord Starling to do his part. But she had no choice in that matter; he was all the help she had.

\*

Colin swigged his drink. His head was pounding, and he wanted nothing more than to spend a quiet night alone in his home to wallow in his feelings. He was feeling truly rotten from Diana's rejection.

Colin couldn't remember the last time he had been rejected at all. It simply never happened. Most of the time, women did as he asked of them without any question. He had never even bothered asking to court someone properly before. This time, he had,

and she hadn't been interested.

The last thing he had wanted was a visit from Lady Elizabeth so unexpectedly. He had hoped his somewhat dishevelled appearance would ease her along to leave sooner rather than later, but it hadn't seemed to bother her at all.

He thought about the ball. While Lady Elizabeth's request was easy enough to follow through on, he wasn't sure he was entirely happy with the outcome of it. He liked Diana and was interested in her, but he in no way had any desire to marry her.

Colin was only interested in winning the bet, proving Lady Elizabeth wrong, and he wanted to prove to Diana that he would not simply go away because she'd brushed him off.

He knew what he was willing to do, though. Colin would lead her on as if he intended to marry her, just to make sure that the plan worked as intended. Then, at the last minute, he would call off the wedding.

In the meantime, he would enjoy what he could with Diana, knowing that she would feel she had no choice but to be with him. It would not only help him win the bet, but it would teach Diana a lesson for rejecting him.

His weekend had become rather exciting then. Lord Starling liked the idea of being the victor in it all. If he were honest, Lady Elizabeth's plan impressed him. She'd clearly thought about it well and was eager to follow through on it.

He'd never seen Lady Elizabeth quite that fierce and determined before. It changed the way he saw her then. It almost made her seem less annoying to him.

### Chapter 21

Diana walked past Emma on her way to her room to get ready for their dinner party. Her aunt had surprised her with the news of dinner guests yet again. She had opted not to argue with her about it. Emma averted her eyes, something that had become a habit over the last few days.

She paused. “Emma, may I have a word?” she asked.

Emma seemed to swallow hard and turned to face her. “Of course,” she said with her voice barely above a whisper.

“Is everything alright?” Diana asked. “You’ve been quiet the last few days, and I’m growing increasingly concerned.”

Emma forced a meagre smile. “I’m just fine,” she said softly. “I haven’t been sleeping well lately.”

“Is there something you need to have better sleep?” Diana pressed. “A new pillow perhaps or heavier curtains?”

“No,” Emma answered. “I’ll be just fine.”

Emma scurried away before Diana had the chance to question her more about it. Emma’s behaviour made Diana feel nervous. When she spoke to Emma, her cousin barely made eye contact with her and fiddled nervously with her dress.



In fact, everybody had been behaving strangely the last few days. While Emma had been nervous, Jane had been unusually friendly and casual with her. Even her aunt had seemingly backed off her. While it was what she had wanted, she wasn't sure it was honest, and she didn't like it. But she didn't have the time to push Emma further.

She was in no mood for the dinner that night. It appeared to be largely her family's friends, and she didn't know them all that well. Her aunt had been preparing for it all day, and Jane was surprisingly excited about it.

It made Diana wonder if Lord Starling had been invited. If that were the case, she was in for a long night. She needed to get ready. So, she returned to her room. On her dresser lay a stack of letters between her and Mark.

They had grown so close. Closer than Diana had been to anyone other than Anna. She felt comfortable sharing with Mark, and when she wasn't around him, she could only think of when she would be around him again.

She knew what it felt like to hold his hand and stand so close to him that she could feel the warmth of his body against hers. Diana dreamed of a day when they could be completely alone together.

Her mind was so far away then that she'd hardly noticed how much time had passed until Emma knocked on her door.

"They'll be here any minute now," Emma said. "Are you ready?"

"I am," Diana said. "Do I look presentable?"

"Yes," Emma said with a smile.

"I'll walk with you," Diana suggested.

She and Emma had been close as children despite the age difference. Emma had inherited the same artistic gene that Diana's mother had, so they had often spent time together creating artwork and playing in the gardens. Diana missed those days.

They were almost at the end of the hall when Emma tugged Diana's arm.

"Please, help me with my hair," she said.

"Your hair? It looks fine!" Diana argued, but it went unheard.

Emma tugged her, and Diana was dragged into Emma's room where the door was quickly shut.

"What is the matter?" Diana asked. "This can't possibly be about your hair."

Emma swallowed hard. "It isn't," she confessed. "I have to tell you something, but I'm afraid to do so."

"Well, you better tell me now," Diana said. "You've been beside yourself for days. I'm worried about you. Now, please, spit it out."

Emma sat down on her bed and took a deep breath. Tears were building in her eyes, and Diana felt her heart sink. It was clear that whatever had been bothering Emma was bad. Bad enough that she looked afraid then.

Diana sat down next to her cousin and placed a hand on her arm. "Please, do not be afraid to speak with me. Whatever it is, I will not be angry with you."

"Yes, you will," Emma said. "And you should be, too."

Diana felt nauseous with worry then. But Emma had started the conversation, and it

had gone far enough that she could no longer put it off.

“Tonight is not a real dinner party,” Emma said. “My mother and sister intend to force you into a marriage with Mr Hoover tonight. I’ve been told to keep it a secret, but I can’t do this. It’s not right.”

“What?” Diana asked, her heart sinking into her stomach. “I don’t understand. How exactly do they intend to do this?”

“Mr Hoover knows about it, too. He’s part of the plan because he wants to marry you so desperately,” Emma continued. “Please know that I did not want to do it. I don’t want to. They have threatened me if I don’t help them.”

“Emma, what exactly is their plan?” Diana pressed. “Mr Hoover isn’t even invited tonight.”

“He is,” Emma said. “But he will not be at the table. They have tasked him with waiting in the garden. My mother knows that you’ll go out for a walk eventually. You hate parties. Jane will follow you with friends and find the two of you in a compromising position.”

It couldn’t be real. It seemed more like a nightmare to Diana. She felt as though she couldn’t breathe. Her family didn’t like her, but she had never expected it to be that scheming and horrific.

“Why are they so determined for me to marry this man?” Diana asked. “I already told Lord Starling that I wasn’t interested. I am no threat to Jane.”

“Anybody is a threat to my mother when it comes to your money,” Emma confessed. “Mr Hoover has agreed to grant them free access to the funds as soon as the two of you are married.”

It felt as though the blood was draining from Diana's body. Then her hands started to shake as the reality of the situation was setting in. It explained Emma's nervous behaviour, as well as Jane's happy behaviour. They had made a plan to get Diana out of their hair.

"Why would Mr Hoover agree to this?" Diana asked, struggling to get a decent breath.

"He's desperate to marry you," Emma said. "You're too good for him, and he knows it."

Diana took a deep breath and cooled her temper. There was no use in her throwing a tantrum or getting upset with Emma. None of this was Emma's fault.

"Who came up with this plan?" Diana asked.

"My mother and Jane," Emma answered. "I tried to talk them out of it, but my father is on their side as well."

"You understand that I will be kicking your family out of this house?" Diana asked. "I cannot forgive them for something so serious."

Emma nodded. "And they will never forgive me for telling you, but I cannot let this happen. You have done nothing to deserve it."

"You're right," Diana said. "Your family will hold this against you forever. They will not take the responsibility that they should."

Emma sniffed as the first tear rolled over her cheek. Diana put a comforting hand on her back.

“You will stay here, Em,” Diana said softly. “Thank you for telling me about this. I hope you know that you are better than them. I will not kick you out. Only them.”

“What are you going to do tonight?” Emma asked.

“I’m not going to go for a walk,” Diana answered honestly. “Their plan simply will not work, and Mr Hoover can stand out there all night and freeze if he wants to.”

Emma chuckled then. Diana helped her dry her tears and gave her a tight hug.

“Thank you again,” Diana said. “You have saved me from a very dangerous future. Now, let’s go down there and enjoy their plan failing miserably.”

That’s precisely what they did. Diana and Emma sat next to each other as the dinner commenced. Everybody had a pleasant time, and Diana remained in her seat. Normally, she would go for a walk between dessert and their last cup of coffee, but that night, she didn’t.

She stayed with the party and kept a close eye on her aunt and Jane as they cast each other concerned glances. It tickled Diana greatly as she and Emma tried to stifle their giggles.

Eventually, Jane was so worried that she shuffled in her seat a few times.

“Diana,” Jane said. “I fear I’ve been sitting too long, and I’d love to stretch my legs. Would you care to join me for a walk?”

That was the final straw for Diana. That her cousin and aunt could be so bold in trying to destroy her life made her furious, and what sense of humour she’d previously had shattered.

“No, I wouldn’t,” Diana said sternly. “But while you’re out there, you can tell Mr Hoover that the plan is cancelled, and he can go home.”

Her aunt choked on her coffee as the colour drained from Jane’s face. There was a confused silence among their guests.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jane said with a nervous laugh as she glanced to her mother for support.

“You don’t?” Diana asked. “It is your plan, isn’t it? To force me into a compromising position with that man so that I can be married off and you can have access to my funds?”

“What is she talking about?” one of their guests, Mr Poole, asked.

“Actually, Mr Poole, might you do me a favour?” Diana asked. “Would you head into the garden for me, find Mr Hoover down by the pond, and bring him back to join us?”

Mr Poole seemed confused but agreed and headed out into the garden.

“This is ridiculous,” Diana’s aunt spat. “You’re making a fool of us all.”

“You are, not me,” Diana remarked. “This has gone too far.”

After a minute or two, Mr Poole arrived with a shocked expression. An embarrassed and concerned Mr Hoover followed closely behind.

“I found him waiting behind a tree,” Mr Poole said. “Whatever is the meaning of this?”

“My family intended to force me into a marriage with this man,” Diana said. “A man who has agreed to give them full access to my money as soon as the marriage is official. A man I have no interest in marrying.”

“Is this true?” Mr Poole pressed.

“Yes,” Emma answered on her family’s behalf. “You, our guests, were meant to be the witnesses. They have invited you here under false pretences.”

“You have betrayed us,” Jane accused her sister. “How dare you go against us? Do you not understand the cost of this?”

“This is an outrage,” Mr Poole said in anger.

He reached for his wife, who had remained silent and shocked the entire time. They got to their feet as her aunt scrambled to come up with some reasonable explanation for it all.

“She has not betrayed you,” Diana said. “You have betrayed me. I have invited you here, and I have been very patient so far as you burned a hole through my finances. I will stand for it no longer. All of you have crossed the boundary and broken my trust for the last time.”

“Don’t be that way, Diana,” her aunt said smoothly. “We’re just doing what’s best for you. You don’t have your parents here to help you anymore. We’re merely trying to make sure that you’re taken care of.”

“No,” Diana said. “You are trying to take over my life. I will not stand for it.”

Her aunt was red in the face with a combination of anger and embarrassment.

“This is just a misunderstanding,” her uncle said, trying to save their reputation in front of their friends.

“No,” Mr Poole said. “I found Mr Hoover hiding in waiting. I believe that what Miss Fairchild says is true, and I am horrified that you’d bring my wife and I into such a scandal.”

“You will all pack your belongings tonight,” Diana said with certainty. “And you will leave my home in the morning. It is clear to me now that you have overstayed your welcome.”

“You’ll regret this,” her aunt said. “We were only trying to help.”

“Look at what you’ve done,” Jane hissed at her sister. “You have ruined us!”

“Emma will stay here,” Diana explained. “She has not done anything wrong. If it had not been for her, I would not have known about this scheme, and things could have gone horribly wrong. She has earned my trust and will, therefore, always have a home at Fairchild Manor.”

Her aunt gasped. “You did this on purpose,” she accused Emma.

“No, she did not,” Diana said. “Emma did this because it is the right thing to do.”

Mr Poole and his wife excused themselves as they left in a huff.

“You’ll pay for this,” Diana’s uncle said as he took a step closer to Emma.

Diana pushed her way between them, shielding Emma from her angry father.

“You have bags to pack,” Diana warned him. “Whatever is not packed by morning



will be left behind. None of you are ever allowed to step foot on this property again. I hope I have made myself clear.”

### Chapter 22

It was unlike Mark to be that excited for a party at Lady Elizabeth's house. Normally, he might have come up with any excuse not to have to suffer through it. That night, though, he was eager. Diana would be there, and every second away from her, he felt as though he was clinging to his last breath.

"Good evening," Hugh greeted him outside the Barker manor with a wide smirk on his face. "You look way more dressed up than usual. Special night?"

Hugh knew him well enough. Mark wanted to spill all and tell him everything that had happened, but Diana wanted to keep it a secret for a while. Besides, Hugh would likely spend the rest of the night teasing him about it.

"It's a good night for a ball," Mark replied. "The rain has stopped, and I'm in the mood for good music."

They entered the ball together. Lady Elizabeth hardly ever spared any detail when she planned parties like that one. There were servants everywhere with trays of wine and brandy. The room smelled of lavender, and all around them, people greeted each other merrily.

Mark cared only about one person there that night. He searched the crowd for her, a nervous knot forming in his stomach. It was an excited kind of nervous. As if he was preparing to do something important, as if the ground beneath his feet might fall away at any moment and send him tumbling.

It took him only a few moments to spot her. She was a vision in crimson. The red fabric complemented the red colour on her lips and the rubies that decorated her hair. The knot in his stomach tightened and made it difficult to breathe as he took in the sight of her.

Thoughtlessly, his feet carried him in her direction. He fought against it, eager for just another moment to see her there and enjoy the sight of her in her own world.

Every part of him wanted the world to know that they were courting. Mark wanted to walk with her on his arm and flaunt her to everyone he knew. Then, he wanted to spend every minute of that night with her until he was certain that she was perfect for the rest of his life.

He thought of Eva and how much she would have liked Diana's dress that night. Red was her favourite colour.

He wondered if she would spot him as he approached. She did not seem to be looking around and rather kept her eyes fixated on the ground in front of her while her cousin talked continuously.

It was clear that her mind was far away.

She stared as if the world around her was barely there as her glass rested in her hand, making a few trips up to her lips. It wasn't until he saw her force a smile at a greeting friend that he understood something was bothering her.

It was as if her eyes had lost some of their vibrancy. Her posture seemed practised, and she took a deep breath and sighed when she thought nobody was looking. But it was something beyond merely being tired.

There was a solemnness to her. She was sad about something.

Mark's mind flooded with thoughts then. What had been the cause of her sadness?

Immediately, he worried that it was something he'd done. A sharp pain seared through his chest as he recounted every conversation they'd had, wondering if it had been something he said.

Whatever it was, he needed to make it up to her.

He was only a few more steps away. Within seconds, he would be there with her, and he could find out what bothered her. He could help her; he could fix it.

"There you are!" a voice spoke from the sidelines.

"Evening, Mother," Mark said, stopping a moment to smile at her.

"Isn't this just lovely?" she asked with a smile. "Lady Elizabeth certainly knows how to host a party, doesn't she? She is popular among the crowd."

"I'm rather interested in someone else here tonight," he said plainly. "And I'm eager to get to her. If you'll excuse me a moment."

His mother pursed her lips but stepped aside. When Mark looked towards Diana again, he saw that another man graced her presence. Viscount Starling shadowed over her with a smile that masked his unpleasant but true nature.

Mark watched as he held out his hand and knew that he was inviting her to dance with him. The viscount stood between him and Diana so that she would not see Mark making his way over to her. When she agreed and took his hand, Mark felt something break inside of him.

Viscount Starling had regularly proven himself to be a horrible man. A cruel man

with only his own best intentions in his mind. Someone who cared not who he hurt and who he used for his own personal gain.

They had never got along particularly well. Not even as children when their families had been in the same circles. It was the way the viscount spoke that bothered him most. He had a way of saying the wrong things in the right way.

He could convince a man that dying was a pleasurable experience just by choosing the right string of words and pairing it with a well-practised and devilish smile. His family had power and were known to just about everyone.

On the few occasions when the viscount had been caught doing something untoward or starting trouble, his parents had simply made sure that it was swept under the rug, and before one knew it, a new scandal occurred, and everyone promptly forgot.

Mark usually made an effort to avoid him at all costs.

He watched as the viscount led Diana to the dance floor and placed his hands on her. It made him hot with anger and jealousy. He knew there was no reason to feel such envy. Diana had agreed to court him, and he was happy at that.

But he wanted her to himself so desperately. He cared for her so much that he simply didn't care about any other man being near or around her. Especially not a man like Viscount Starling.

"They're lovely together, aren't they?" Lady Elizabeth said, interrupting his thoughts. "I'm glad to see you came."

"He'll dance with every woman here tonight," Mark answered. "And I'm sure all of them will look just as lovely next to him."

Lady Elizabeth shook her head. “They’re about to start courting, didn’t you know?”

It took Mark a moment to understand that he had, in fact, heard correctly. While Lady Elizabeth had strung together a perfectly worded sentence, it made no sense whatsoever.

“That can’t be true,” Mark responded. “Whoever told you that told you wrong.”

“Impossible,” she argued. “I heard it from the viscount himself. The viscount has been over there a few times now with flowers and things. He’s really taken his time to win her aunt over.”

Mark said nothing. He knew that she was wrong because he knew the truth. But he could not say that because he had promised to keep it quiet, and he respected Diana’s wishes.

“Her aunt wasn’t too pleased about it, of course,” Lady Elizabeth continued. “She wanted the viscount for her own daughter. I forget her name, but she hosted that boring birthday ball not too long ago.”

He watched as the viscount led Diana around the dance floor. He had seen his interest in her but had not realized that it was quite that serious. He had assumed that the viscount had merely been interested in her the way he was interested in most other women.

He could not take his eyes off them then, scrutinizing the way his hands were on her body. He wanted to know what the viscount was saying to her and just how close together they were to each other.

“Surely none of this is your business,” Mark said sharply.

“No, but Miss Fairchild’s aunt came over to our house and complained about it so much that I couldn’t help hearing,” Lady Elizabeth said with a laugh. “They’ll be the talk of the town, you know. A couple like that one.”

“It’s not as interesting as you think,” Mark said, trying not to sound obviously bitter about it all.

The last thing he needed was for Lady Elizabeth to hear the disappointment in his voice. It didn’t make sense for him to feel that way, considering he knew the truth. He and Diana were officially courting, and it seemed impossible to him that Diana would keep such a secret.

Besides, a secret like that would be nearly impossible to keep. Particularly while attending a party where both men would be present.

“What will we wear to the wedding?” Lady Elizabeth said teasingly. “Miss Fairchild has no idea how much her life is going to improve with Viscount Starling as her husband. She’ll be part of proper society. Real parties and events to attend, not just over-the-top birthday parties.”

The more Lady Elizabeth spoke, the more he wished he could drown out her voice. He simply didn’t want to hear what she was saying. He didn’t like the way it felt.

Jealousy was creeping in, a familiar feeling to him. Then, there was the anger he felt towards Lady Elizabeth for speaking about Diana in that way. Lady Elizabeth was far too much like his own mother.

“I’m sure they’ll reveal it tonight,” Lady Elizabeth said. “It’s as good a place as any to make such an announcement.”

He wondered why it was so important to Lady Elizabeth that the viscount and Diana

were seemingly courting. She had always been a bit of a gossip, but she seemed to really be pushing the subject of Diana and her courtship plans.

“You know, I was wondering if you’d like to bring the dowager duchess here for a picnic sometime,” Lady Elizabeth said, finally changing the subject. “The weather seems to be improving, and I haven’t had a good picnic in some time.”

“No, thank you,” Mark said plainly. “I’m too busy.”

“But I haven’t even told you when,” Lady Elizabeth argued.

Mark didn’t have time for it. The dance would soon be ending, and he had something important to discuss with Diana.

“Excuse me,” he said, stepping away from Lady Elizabeth and towards a nearby table of refreshments.

He reached for a glass of whisky, eagerly taking a large sip and hoping nobody would notice. Mark didn’t want to be at the party anymore. Nobody other than Diana there even interested him.

He wanted to take her away from there and spend the night talking like they had done so many times before. Mark wanted to get to know her better and hear her laugh again. They would speak about things important to them. Things of meaning.

Mark wanted the rest of the world to fall away, and he wanted only Diana to be left there with him then. More than that, he wanted her to feel the same way. He wanted to sweep her off her feet and take her away from the world that spoke so poorly of her.

She was better than all of them, and nobody had ever told her that. Mark decided,



with another sip of whisky, that he would be the first. The music had ended a few moments before, so he turned to search for her in the room.

Diana was not among those who were still on the dance floor, and she was not at any of the refreshment tables. He searched for red in the room and found little of it. When he found Anna and saw that Diana was not beside her, he felt a pit in his stomach.

And that pit only felt heavier when he noticed that Viscount Starling also appeared to be missing from the room.

### Chapter 23

A familiar feeling stirred within Mark. The same feeling he'd often felt when his wife was still alive. The worry that she had found solace in the arms of a man other than him. Mark had not felt that way for some time and had wished never to feel that way again.

The fact that he did made him furious. He knew Viscount Starling and how he operated. If he wanted Diana badly enough, he would have found a way to make it happen. And his methods were not always the most suitable.

"Something bothering you?" his mother asked, once again, interrupting his thoughts.

"Don't fret about it," he said plainly.

"That Miss Fairchild of yours seems to be awfully interested in dancing with Viscount Starling," she said. "Are you sure she's interested in you? If that's her taste in men, then I don't know."

"Don't do this, Mother," Mark warned her. "I've told you what you need to know. And I ask you to leave it at that if you intend to remain in my London Manor."

His mother pouted. "You're so stern with me, do you know that? I only want what's best for you."

"You want what looks best for me," he corrected her. "Not what is."

His mother had been the one to push him towards his first wife. Their marriage had been a disaster. It wasn't all bad. Mark had Evangeline because of it, and he would not change that for the world.

But he did not know if he could face another relationship like that one in his life. They had been happy for only a year before the fighting had started. Then, it felt as if it never ended. They barely shared pleasant meals together or laughed loudly when in each other's company.

What hurt most was that Mark never truly learned the extent of her adultery. He only knew what he'd discovered on his own. His ex-wife had never confessed to anything. It made it difficult for him to trust anybody.

While he had been certain that he'd found that kind of trust with Diana, a small seed of doubt had been planted there by Lady Elizabeth. And it was rapidly blossoming into a nasty feeling he knew he would not easily escape.

"You're going to learn that I'm right someday," his mother said with a shrug.

"You've had until now to prove it to me," he answered. "I think from now on, I'm going to trust myself instead."

He knew it was not the time or place to get into an argument with his mother, but she was keeping him from more pressing matters. And he knew that she would likely interrupt him a few more times that night.

If she were upset enough with him, she would leave him alone that night. Then, all he needed to do was find Diana and make things right.

"Excuse me," he said sternly. "There is someone I must speak with."

His mother gave him a displeased look and said nothing. Most of the time, he tried to be patient with his mother, but it was difficult when he had so many other problems on his mind. Something was going on that was beyond his field of view, and he didn't trust it for a moment.

Mark made his way over to Anna, who was in deep conversation with Hugh.

"Good evening," he said kindly, hoping to act naturally.

He was greeted with a warm welcome and the offer of another drink. One which he accepted gladly. Hugh and Anna seemed to be disappointed by his interruption of their conversation, but Mark didn't care. He wasn't going to stay there long.

The longer he was there, the more his own mind tortured him. He had to know what was going on and if there was any truth to what Lady Elizabeth had said to him earlier. It stressed him out so much that even the sip of whisky he took then threatened to return on him.

"Are you aware of the reason for this celebration?" Anna asked. "I received the invitation but have no idea what it's for."

"Lady Elizabeth is a social woman," Hugh explained. "She doesn't need a reason to host a party. It's a good place for her to flaunt who she is."

Anna and Hugh burst into a quiet laughter, but Mark could not laugh. He was starting to feel raw with jealousy. He kept expecting to find Diana's face in the crowd somewhere he had not been able to spot it before.

He checked to see if she was seated somewhere or perhaps just standing on the other side of a particularly large person. But as the guests walked and moved through the room, he still had no sight of her.

“Are you with us?” Hugh asked, playfully bumping him.

Mark wasn't sure when he'd stopped listening to their conversation and got so carried away in his own mind. But he felt chaos grow inside him and knew that he could not hide those feelings away much longer.

If he did not find Diana soon and speak with her, then his emotions might make him unpleasant and disheartened. That was something he simply couldn't risk. Not when she was so important to him.

Not when Evangeline was at home, hoping that some day he would provide her with the perfect mother.

“I'm looking for Miss Fairchild and seem to have missed her,” Mark said. “Do you have any idea where she might be? There is something important I must discuss with her.”

Anna and Hugh glanced at each other with knowing looks.

“She's out in the garden,” Anna explained. “Lady Elizabeth asked to speak with her out there. It seems she has many important discussions this evening.”

“Lady Elizabeth?” Mark asked. “Are you certain?”

“Yes,” Anna answered. “They left only moments ago.”

Something wasn't right. Lady Elizabeth had been speaking poorly about her only minutes before, and now she was asking her to go out into the garden with her? It just didn't seem right, and Mark didn't like anything about it.

Something was going on, and he was determined to get to the bottom of it. He tried to

piece it all together. The party, Lady Elizabeth's comments, Diana and the viscount dancing together. None of it made sense, yet it had to all be connected somehow. There was a scheme at play. Of that, he was certain.

"I must find her," he said urgently. "I don't like this. I'm worried about her."

"I'll help you," Anna offered. "I know in which direction they went. We'll go find them."

Mark agreed, and they made their way outside. It was a relief to be out of the party noise and away from the crowd. There, Mark could think a little clearer.

He wanted to trust Diana, and the only way he could do that was simply to allow it. Until such a time as she had proven to betray his trust, he would behave as if she hadn't. That was the only thing that would be fair to both of them.

He knew that his nervous energy was noticeable. He had seen the way Anna's face had changed earlier before she'd offered to help him. He could no longer smile and pretend as if everything was normal and alright.

Mark was worried and growing only more concerned with each passing minute. He wasn't having any fun and couldn't shake the feeling that he'd missed some important piece of information somewhere.

"Do you have any inclination of what they might need to discuss so urgently?" Mark asked.

"No idea," she answered. "Perhaps Lady Elizabeth wants to apologize for how she behaved at the party last time."

That didn't seem like her at all. Mark had not known Lady Elizabeth to be the

apologizing kind. It simply wasn't in her nature or her upbringing.

"I don't like this," he voiced out loud. "I know Lady Elizabeth. Something isn't right here."

"What do you think it could be?" Anna asked.

"I don't know, but I think we should find her," he answered. "Then we can find out for ourselves."

He picked up the pace until Anna was all but jogging to keep up with him.

"You said they went this way?" he asked.

"Yes, but that was minutes ago," Anna said. Slightly out of breath. "They could be anywhere in this garden."

She was right, and that did nothing to ease his nerves. The garden was massive, with many areas separated by small balconies and hedges. And the more he searched for her, the more it started to feel like a maze.

Finally, he rounded a corner and caught a glimpse of her silhouette. But there was no sign of Lady Elizabeth.

He stopped to admire her for a moment and gave Anna some time to catch up with him.

"What is going on?" Anna asked. "You're basically running. I'm sure they're just talking. Look at me! I'm out of breath."

"Where's Lady Elizabeth?" He voiced his concern.

He pointed in the direction of where Diana was standing. She waited by a bench surrounded by plant pots and flowers. As she searched around her, she seemed to be equally as confused.

Anna looked around them for a sign of any other person and frowned. "This is odd," she whispered. "You're right."

Something moved beyond one of the bushes, just behind Diana. A shadow, tall and dark. Mark knew just who it belonged to. Viscount Starling lurked where Diana could not see him and crept closer to her.

"Lord Starling," Anna said softly.

"I see him," he assured her. "I don't like the look of this."

"Me neither," she answered.

They were right. Before Mark could make a move, Viscount Starling lurched forward and wrapped his arms around Diana. He raised her off her feet and pushed her up against the nearby wall. She struggled against him.

Diana shrieked, her eyes wild with fear.



### Chapter 24

Adrenaline carried Mark through the gardens and over the plant pots. The viscount's hand was holding Diana in place as he told her to keep her mouth shut. It was as if the entire world had fallen away then and there, with only them in his field of view.

“Colin!” Mark shouted as he approached.

The viscount dropped his hands and turned to look in his direction. He took a step away, fixing his hair, but it was too late to fix things. Mark knew what he had seen, and he was hot with anger.

When he made it to them mere seconds later, Mark reached out and shoved the Viscount Starling as hard as he could. The Viscount stumbled backwards into the wall and let out a pained yelp.

It seemed as if the viscount wanted to make a run for it, but Mark reached out and grabbed him by the shirt, pinning him in place. The fear in the viscount's eyes made Mark feel happy.

Something else had taken over him then. He could still hear the way Diana had shrieked when the viscount had put his hands on her. Just mere seconds before, she'd been pressed up against that same wall and in fear.

Mark was so angry that he forgot the world around him existed for a moment. He wanted the viscount to squirm. He wanted to hurt him, to make him pay for what he did with pain and blood. But first, the viscount needed to answer some questions.

“What is the meaning of this?” Mark demanded, putting himself in position so that the viscount could not move.

Diana ran from them and towards Anna, who met her with a warm embrace. Mark wanted desperately to go to her side and make sure that she was alright, but he didn't. He had to deal with her attacker first.

“Explain yourself,” Mark demanded again. “I will not be patient with you.”

He was shaking with anger and knew that if it had not been for the fact that two women were behind him, watching it all unfold, the viscount would have left there bloodied.

“There's nothing to explain,” the viscount said in his usual cheeky manner. “Miss Fairchild here asked me to meet her in the garden. You can only imagine my surprise when her intentions were made clear. I'm as surprised by this as you are.”

The viscount's eyes shifted a moment, a sign to Mark that even he was having a hard time making that story believable.

“That's a lie,” Mark accused him. “I saw what happened. The two of you were not as alone as you thought. You will not talk your way out of this one.”

Mark heard a sniff from behind him and knew that Diana was likely in tears. He wanted to go to her. He wanted to take her in his arms and tell her that she had nothing to fear as long as he was there with her.

Rather than doing that, though, he decided to prove it to her. He decided to show her just how safe she was with him around. He would never let anything hurt her.

“You saw her here alone and decided to use that to your advantage,” Mark said. His

voice trembled with anger. “You’ve never played by the rules, but this time, you’ve gone too far.”

“I don’t know what you think you saw,” the viscount protested, stumbling over his words. “I assure you it is not what you think. Everyone knows that Diana has shown interest in me lately. I suppose she was eager to show it.”

Mark took a step closer to the viscount as thoughts of slamming his head into the stone wall filled his mind. It would be satisfying, but he was not that kind of man. Instead, he stared the viscount down.

“Again. Lies,” Mark accused him. “That is all you have. Lies. That makes you a worthless man.”

“Do you really think I would take such risks?” the viscount asked. “I am an honourable man, just as my father is.”

“Honourable?” Mark asked. “Miss Fairchild is afraid. She is crying. I can hear her. You did that to her. You made her afraid. Your intentions were far from honourable.”

The viscount swallowed as he glanced in Diana’s direction.

“Don’t you dare look at her,” Mark warned him. “You don’t deserve to.”

“You’re making yourself look like a fool,” the viscount said. “I suggest you let this go before things get worse.”

“I’m the fool?” Mark asked. “There are two witnesses who saw what you did here tonight. It doesn’t matter what story you come up with. The truth will be revealed, and you will come tumbling down.”

The viscount swallowed hard.

Mark had known the viscount was a dangerous character, but he could never have guessed that he would be quite that dangerous. It seemed even too extreme for him. And it was clear in the look in the man's eyes that he felt foolish for it.

But he would not back down. Not until he knew exactly what was going on. Not until he found the clarity he needed.

He thought of everything Lady Elizabeth had said to him earlier that night. Had the viscount lied to her about his courtship with Diana? Initially, Mark had thought that perhaps Lady Elizabeth had merely made it all up.

Now, he wondered if it wasn't the viscount that had been lying to Lady Elizabeth all along. Either way, something was wrong here. Lady Elizabeth was, after all, the one to bring Diana out into the gardens.

They were in it together somehow. They were both the kinds of people to do something like that. But there was just one part of it that Mark didn't understand.

"You lured her here," Mark accused. "She was alone and an easy target. You wanted to get her into a compromising position. Tell me why."

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Diana felt weak with fear. Everything had happened so quickly. That day had been one of the worst days of her life. Diana had never felt so alone. Until Mark arrived.

"Are you alright?" Anna asked.

"No," she whispered as the first tears began to roll over her cheek.

Mark had the viscount pinned against the wall. Diana knew how harsh and cold that wall was because, just moments before, she had been the one pressed up against it. She could still feel where the viscount's hands had touched her. It burned.

"Are you hurt?" Anna asked quickly.

"No," Diana answered. "You got here just in time."

"What is going on?" Anna pressed.

It was the same line of questioning that Mark had for the viscount, but Anna was caring and trying to help.

Diana watched as the duke demanded answers from the viscount, and she listened to hear them. Only, he gave no truthful explanation.

When he suggested that it had been Diana's idea all along, she felt as if she would be sick. Her stomach turned, and her head pounded. She was already having a bad day, and it had only got worse.

"What happened?" Anna asked again.

Where would Diana begin? She had lost her family because they had tried to marry her off to a man she wasn't interested in. That was after they had twisted her arm into going to the ball in the first place. Diana hadn't wanted to be there.

She had gone because she wanted to see the duke. She wanted to spend time with him. She needed his comfort. After everything that had happened with her family, she had hoped that he would have a listening ear. That he might make her feel better about it all.

But before she had found him, the viscount had approached her. He asked her to dance, claiming that he had important information about The Duke of Blackwood. She didn't want to accept, but he had claimed it was the only way he would give her the information.

When she had accepted the dance, he had done nothing but feed her lies. He had told her how the duke and Lady Elizabeth had agreed to a courtship. It had been so pathetic that she'd almost ended the dance early.

But she didn't. Instead, she kept listening and allowed him to talk himself into a deeper hole. Her plan had been to call him out on it later.

"You're alright now," Anna said, wrapping an arm around her.

The cold air did a good job of sobering Diana up. Then the reality of how close she had come to something awful truly dawned on her. She cried more, her tears stinging her cheeks. If Mark hadn't been there, who knows what might have happened to her?

Mark was angry, angrier than she ever expected he could be. She noted the tremble in his voice and hands. He had a grip on the viscount's shirt so tight that his knuckles had whitened.

Diana had never needed rescuing before. While she was grateful for it, it felt nothing like it had been described in novels. There was no major wave of relief. Only a sigh, followed by lingering horror.

It did not suddenly take the danger away to be rescued, either. The viscount was still there, and Mark was so angry that at any point, it might have become a dangerous altercation between them. The danger was far from over.

Lady Elizabeth had asked to speak with her in the garden, and Diana had gladly

accepted. She needed to know why the viscount was under the impression that she and the Duke of Blackwood were courting. She wanted to get to the bottom of it.

But as soon as they had made it to that part of the garden, Lady Elizabeth claimed that there was something important she needed to fetch. Something for Diana. She should have been smart enough to know that it likely wasn't true.

She and Lady Elizabeth had nothing in common. In fact, Diana didn't like Lady Elizabeth very much. Not after how poorly she had behaved at her cousin's birthday ball.

Diana had already been feeling poorly by the time she'd arrived at the ball, too. Her family had tried to trick her into marrying someone she had no interest in. All to get access to her money and status.

It had sickened Diana and kept her from sleep. She hadn't liked the way it felt when she'd kicked them out of her house. It had been a disastrous time, and Diana had already shed enough tears about it.

Not only that, but she had felt foolish and embarrassed. Her mother was no longer around, and she had no motherly guidance. It made her feel dim-witted when it came to the world of love and marriage, and up until Viscount Starling had laid his hands on her, she had never felt worse in her life.

"You're safe," Anna reminded her.

And she was right. Mark had been there when she'd needed him most. What he and Anna had been doing there, she didn't know, and she didn't care. He was the only person she wanted to see, and she felt safe for the first time in months.

He had protected her when she had not been able to protect herself. When protection

should not have been needed. Diana had merely gone to speak with Lady Elizabeth in the gardens. There had been nothing to imply that she was unsafe. That she was defenceless.

And when she thought all hope was lost, Mark was there. She loved him for it. She loved him so deeply for it that she wanted to pull him away from the viscount and fall into his arms and demand that he never let her go again.

She wanted to feel the safety of his presence for the rest of her life, knowing that she would never be alone again.



### Chapter 25

Everything fell apart. Their plan had been well thought through, to the minute. And both Lady Elizabeth and Viscount Starling had done their roles perfectly. They had not anticipated that the Duke of Blackwood would be so eager to keep up with Miss Fairchild.

Their plan was costing her a lot of money. It was the only reason she was even hosting the ball. How could it possibly fail? That just didn't seem fair or possible at all.

Lady Elizabeth raced back towards the party. She needed to do some damage control if their plan was going to work. Her head was spinning with ideas of what to do to make sure it all still went ahead. There was a new plan in her mind within a matter of moments.

She would carry on as if nothing had gone wrong. That was the best plan. Nobody had seen her hiding there, and so they could not stop her from doing it. Lady Elizabeth would not give up. She was determined to be the new Duchess of Blackwood, and nothing would get in her way.

Lady Elizabeth picked up the pace. She wanted to seem out of breath and shocked when she made it back to the crowds of friends she'd invited that night. They needed to think that something was wrong. It was the only way her story could become convincing.

She paused just outside the doors to the ballroom and composed herself. It was time

to put on her show and follow through with her end of the bargain. It was time to be rid of Miss Fairchild once and for all.

Lady Elizabeth entered the room, her back straight and poised but breathing deeply.

She searched for the nearest friend to her and approached quickly.

“We must speak,” Lady Elizabeth informed her. “Come with me, Martha. It is important.”

She made sure to look shocked enough that the woman couldn’t possibly refuse the conversation.

“You won’t believe what I’ve just seen,” Lady Elizabeth started. In the meantime, she ushered other friends over to her. “I have to tell someone, or I’m afraid it will simply burst out of me.”

“What is it?” someone asked. “What’s happened?”

“I’ve just spotted something rather shocking in the garden,” Lady Elizabeth explained. “Viscount Starling and Miss Fairchild. They were in a rather compromising position. I don’t know what to think!”

There was a light gasp around them. “You mean ...”

“Yes,” Lady Elizabeth answered without letting them finish their question. “Who knows how long it has been going on like that? But it’s clear that they know each other far better than any of us previously assumed.”

“Miss Fairchild?” one of the women asked. “But nobody even knows her.”

“He does,” Lady Elizabeth said quickly. “In all manner of ways, it would seem.”

“This is going to be quite the scandal,” one of her other friends said. She was already breaking away from the group.

That was all Lady Elizabeth needed to do. She had chosen her friends carefully. She knew who would be quick to spread information and who would be inclined to elaborate on it, too. In fact, she was counting on it.

Then, all she had to do was sit back and let the chaos create itself. Word of mouth was all they could rely on then. That, and she had to assume that the viscount would find a way to talk himself out of the trouble he was in.

It didn’t matter. By the time they all returned to the party, it would be their words against every guest in attendance. Lady Elizabeth smiled and helped herself to a celebratory glass of wine as she watched the story spread.

She knew where it was, as smiling faces quickly dropped their smiles and gasped and searched around for others with whom they could share the news. It reminded Lady Elizabeth a little of disease. Once one person had it, everybody in the room was at risk of catching it, too.

That was how her story would spread. Miss Fairchild would be out of her hair in no time, and she would be free to take The Duke of Blackwood as her husband. Something she’d been working on for some time already.

“Have you heard?” The Dowager Duchess of Blackwood said, coming up to her. “I always knew that Miss Fairchild was trouble. I knew it!”

“I more than heard,” Lady Elizabeth explained. “I’m the one who caught them in the act. I can’t believe they would behave themselves that way as guests of my home and

party.”

The pair shook their heads.

“Well, that’s settled then, I suppose,” the dowager duchess added. “This will be tough for my son, but I tried to warn him about her. She isn’t good enough for him.”

Lady Elizabeth struggled to hide her smile then. That was precisely what she wanted to hear. Miss Fairchild’s reputation would be ruined beyond repair, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

All she had to do was wait for them to return. There was no way the duke would be interested in Miss Fairchild anymore. It didn’t matter what he’d interrupted; the damage had already been done to her name and reputation.

That mattered in their society. In fact, for most families, it was all that mattered. Status meant power, and Miss Fairchild was quickly losing status in their world. She would be worth nothing in a matter of minutes, and she’d be stuck with Viscount Starling, too.

Lady Elizabeth felt proud of herself then. What she’d done had made her feel like a powerful woman, someone who could achieve anything by merely uttering a few words. It was magical.

By the time she reached for her next glass of wine, she’d heard the news from several people, and each time, the situation was more dramatic. Someone had even come to tell her that the viscount and Miss Fairchild had been found without any clothes on at all.

All she had to do was wait for the rest of the drama to unfold. Her party was going to be the talk of the town for some time. Already, she could picture her large wedding

when she married the duke. The title simply suited her better. She'd already proven herself to be the more powerful woman.

Miss Fairchild simply didn't understand how the world worked. She was naïve and not used to the circles she moved in recently. That would be her downfall.

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Mark let go of the viscount's shirt. But he did not move from his spot. Miss Fairchild and Anna approached then. One look at Diana and Mark's heart seized in his chest. She was pale, and her cheeks were red from crying.

Even so, she looked so beautiful. It took every ounce of willpower in him then not to hurt the viscount for making the woman he cared about so afraid and in tears.

But there was also determination in her eyes then. She was angry at him.

"Speak," Diana demanded as she stared the viscount down. "You refuse to leave me alone despite my constant asking you to. Why have you done this?"

The viscount's face fell then. Shame took over him, and rightfully so. Mark still couldn't be sure that he wasn't going to hurt the man. But he was entirely certain that he wasn't going to move from that spot until the truth was revealed.

"Tell the truth now, or I'll make sure that you are seen for who you truly are," Mark warned him. "Your family name will not be able to protect you from me."

It was a real threat, one that the viscount would take seriously; Mark knew that. And it showed in the viscount's body language, too. His shoulders sank as he relented to it.

“We had a deal. Lady Elizabeth and me,” he explained. “Miss Fairchild is a threat to her, you see.”

“A threat?” Diana asked. “I have done nothing to her.”

“You caught the attention of the duke,” the viscount explained. “That’s enough.”

Mark’s stomach twisted. He had known that Lady Elizabeth was bad news, but he could never have imagined that she would be so conniving and sneaky.

“She is behind this?” he asked.

“We both are,” the viscount explained. “It was just a bet that got out of hand. I was to win over Miss Fairchild, and Lady Elizabeth was meant to capture you, Duke.”

Diana’s hand shot up to cover her mouth as her other hand cradled her stomach. It looked as though she was going to be sick. Mark turned to her a moment.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

Diana nodded. “Shocked,” she answered. “And I don’t understand.”

“You did nothing wrong,” the viscount confessed. “Lady Elizabeth is a determined woman, and she wanted the duke no matter what it cost.”

“So, what was the plan?” Mark pressed.

The viscount clenched his jaw as his eyes darted to find a way out. There was no way Mark was going to let him get out of there.

“You should take this up with Lady Elizabeth,” he said.

“She is not here,” Mark said. “It is not her hands I saw on Miss Fairchild’s body. It was yours. We are not leaving here until I know exactly what is going on.”

“She just doesn’t see me,” the viscount said. “I tried to win Miss Fairchild over; I really did. But she simply isn’t interested. That doesn’t bode well for Lady Elizabeth. So, we thought we’d force the courtship in some way.”

Mark could hardly believe what he was hearing. It didn’t seem real; it seemed too ridiculous to be real. It was difficult to believe that anybody could behave in such a way and speak of it as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Miss Fairchild and I would be caught in a compromising position,” the viscount continued. “You know how that would go. Word spreads like fire out here. She’d have no choice but to be with me.”

“You make me sick,” Diana spat. “How dare you.”

“She’s right,” Mark added. “You are a sickening man. And you’ll not set foot near Miss Fairchild ever again. Do I make myself clear?”

The viscount looked directly at Diana then. “This entire ball was thrown for this very purpose. Miss Fairchild was the target.”

“Me?” she asked. “All of this just to embarrass me and ruin my name? Do you not have anything better to do?”

“Apparently not,” Mark said.

“This is unbelievable,” Diana said quietly.

She stared the viscount down. “What was in it for you?” she asked.

The viscount shrugged. "I would prove Lady Elizabeth wrong."

Before another word could be spoken, Diana's arm raised, and she slapped the viscount across the face. Her open palm landed on his cheek, leaving behind a red mark and a very embarrassed man.

"You are a pig," she accused him. "Anna, I'd like to go home, please. I don't want to be here a moment longer."

"Of course," Anna agreed.

"I'll walk you to your carriage," Mark offered. "It seems we cannot trust the company you are in tonight."

The walk was quiet, but Mark kept close to Diana. He could see the heartbreak in her. She did not stand tall the way she had when he'd first arrived there. Rather, she seemed smaller.

"I'm just having a terrible time," she said as she approached the carriage. "All this trickery. I must be a fool."

"Don't speak that way," Mark said kindly. "There is nothing wrong with you. They are bad people. Don't forget that. Bad people are not a reflection of you."

"Thank you," she answered.

Anna hopped into the carriage, granting them a moment to share some words.

"I promise you, I will make this right," Mark said. "I want you to get some rest, knowing that I will look out for you."



“You are kind,” Diana said. “And I am so sorry for all of this. I don’t know what I would have done if you weren’t there.”

“We don’t need to worry about that,” he answered. “I was there. That’s all that matters. And we know the truth now.”

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“Goodnight, Miss Fairchild,” Mark said with a smile.

“Goodnight, Duke of Blackwood,” she answered with a smirk.

It was the first time that night he’d seen anything close to a smile on her face. It filled him with warmth and tenderness then. She looked more like the Diana that he had come to know.

“I’ll come and see you soon,” he promised. “For now, I have a party to ruin.”

### Chapter 26

Mark prepared himself to enter the ball again. He was still shaking with anger and wanted to make sure that he dealt with the matter calmly. He would need to. It was the only way to make sure he kept his credibility in it all.

It would be impossible to know just how far the rumour about Diana and the viscount had already spread. He wouldn't put it past Lady Elizabeth to already have told a few people about the incident, despite it never having been an incident to begin with.

He was barely through the door when his mother grabbed him by the sleeve and pulled him to one side.

"If you value the reputation of this family, you will be rid of that Miss Fairchild immediately," she said.

"Miss Fairchild has gone home," Mark explained. "And I will do no such thing."

"I know how you like to argue with me," his mother said. "But I promise you I have your best intentions at heart. I have heard something rather shocking about that Miss Fairchild, and it risks embarrassing our good name."

So, the information had spread quickly then. Out of curiosity, he asked his mother, "What exactly did you hear?"

His mother ushered him to one side of the ballroom and spoke under her breath.

“Miss Fairchild has been stringing you along,” she said. “She’s just been caught doing something truly scandalous with that Viscount Starling. I’ve never trusted him.”

“Me neither,” Mark agreed.

“Everyone is talking about it,” she continued. “Please tell me you haven’t told anybody about your courtship yet. That way, this can still be saved.”

“Where is Viscount Starling?” Mark asked. “Have you seen him?”

“No,” his mother answered. “No sign of that Miss Fairchild either. Who knows what they’re up to together.”

It was no surprise to Mark that the viscount would not stay to watch his plan fall apart. He had likely left shortly after Mark had sent Diana’s carriage away.

“And Lady Elizabeth?” Mark asked. “Where is she? I must have a word.”

“She’s rather shaken up, you know,” his mother explained. “She’s the one who caught them in the act! It’s all rather terrible. Her party is just about ruined. It’s all anybody can talk about.”

“Oh, trust me, they’ll be talking about this for some time,” Mark said bitterly.

“I’m sorry you had to learn about it this way,” his mother said. “I know you cared for Miss Fairchild. I don’t know why she has hurt you this way. Perhaps you’ll reconsider my recommendations. Lady Elizabeth would never behave so poorly.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about, Mother,” Mark said. “What’s worse is that you do it so confidently.”

“If it’s the scandal you’re worried about, don’t be,” his mother said. “Nobody knows you were courting. Your name is clear.”

“Not for long,” Mark warned.

“I tried to warn you,” his mother continued as if she hadn’t heard him at all.

He scanned the room and saw how closely people were standing to talk. There were barely any people on the dance floor, too. On the opposite end of the room, he spotted Lady Elizabeth. She was whispering into someone’s ear, a proud smirk plastered on her face.

“Mother, I want you to know that I have no intention of ending my courtship with Miss Fairchild,” Mark said, turning to face her. “And I’d be grateful if you never mention something like that again.”

“She is lying to you,” his mother said plainly. “Do you not understand what I’m saying? Why she’s doing it, I can’t figure out. She’s bad news.”

“Lady Elizabeth is bad news, Mother,” Mark said. “Miss Fairchild is on her way home to safety. And she will never set foot in this room again.”

“I wouldn’t if I were her,” his mother said. “But honestly, you can’t possibly continue to court her. She’s made such a mess of her name and reputation.”

“She has done nothing wrong,” Mark said sternly.

“Where have you been, Mark?” his mother asked. “Do you ever listen to a word I say? I swear, you’re worse than your father.”

“Perhaps you should leave, Mother,” he said. “I am almost certain you are not going

to like what is about to happen at this party.”

“What?” she asked, suddenly concerned. “What do you have planned, Mark? Oh, please don’t do something silly. These things stick to a name forever. Remember when your grandfather accidentally destroyed that painting? It wasn’t even his fault, but he was always seated furthest from the art after that.”

“I am here to set a record straight,” Mark said. “And then I will join Miss Fairchild in never setting another foot in this house.”

He couldn’t take it any longer. He could hear the whispers and murmurs and knew they were all tearing Diana apart. Some of them laughed, while others looked around the room for a sign of her or Viscount Starling.

He wanted to set things right. More than that, though, he wanted to do something that would make the smile on Lady Elizabeth’s face fall away completely. He wanted to watch as her plan fell apart around her and backfired, causing her distress instead of Diana.

Mark tapped a spoon against his glass and didn’t stop until he had the attention of every person in there.

“I trust you’re all having a good time,” he said, opening the conversation.

Most of the people around him nodded. Then, he held out his hand and smiled at Lady Elizabeth.

“If Lady Elizabeth could please join me here, it would be wonderful,” Mark said. “I have something to say, and I think she’s going to want to hear it.”

She gave him a nervous smile, but others were looking at her expectantly, and she

didn't really have a choice. Lady Elizabeth made her way slowly through the crowd and came to stand at Mark's side.

"I think I speak for all of us, Lady Elizabeth, when I say that nobody can host a ball quite like you can," he said.

She thanked him, her cheeks turning light pink from the compliment. Everyone clapped and held up their glasses to her, and she readily accepted the praise.

"I'm sure all of you know what the purpose of this celebration is?" Mark said loudly. There was a confused look on all their faces then as the crowd turned to each other.

It was as if it was the first time they were questioning it.

"You see, I've been wondering since I arrived here what the purpose of this party is," Mark continued. "And, thanks to a recent conversation with Viscount Starling, I now understand."

"What are you doing?" Lady Elizabeth whispered through a smile.

He ignored her worry and carried on with his plan. She would soon learn what was happening anyway. Eyes watched him from the crowd.

Normally, Mark wouldn't enjoy that kind of attention. While it was often required, he wasn't much of a public speaker. However, he could not get Diana's frightened face out of his mind, so he pressed on.

"All of you have been invited here as part of an elaborate lie," Mark said.

"Don't do this," Lady Elizabeth warned.

“A lie planned and created by the very clever Lady Elizabeth here,” Mark said, motioning in her direction. The guests weren’t sure whether to applaud or not. Instead, they looked around at each other with unease.

“Most of you, if not all of you, have heard a story involving Miss Fairchild tonight,” Mark said. “A rather horrid and scandalous one. A story involving a witness.”

There was a quiet murmur among the guests as Lady Elizabeth looked proudly over the mess she had made.

“Lady Elizabeth here has witnessed something highly out of the ordinary and improper,” Mark said loudly. “But what Lady Elizabeth might not realize is that there were multiple witnesses. And that, in her absence, the truth was revealed.”

Her smile quickly faded from her face. She glanced through the room, likely searching for a sign of the viscount. He was nowhere to be seen then.

“Tonight, I witnessed something rather awful,” Mark said. “I was out in the gardens when I saw Viscount Starling sneak up behind Miss Fairchild. Whatever his intentions were, she did not see it coming. She screamed, and I rushed over to help her.”

The murmur grew louder then, and Mark could feel the tension brewing in the area where his mother stood.

“This party was thrown for the purpose of ruining Miss Fairchild’s reputation. It was a plan made between Viscount Starling and Lady Elizabeth to discredit Miss Fairchild.”

“That’s outrageous!” someone in the crowd called out. “Why would they do something like that?”

“I am merely telling you what I know to be the truth,” Mark said. “I feel inclined to do so, as you see, Miss Fairchild and I are courting. It is important to me that the truth be told and that the record be set straight.”

“Is that true?” Suddenly, Viscount Starling’s voice came from the sidelines. “You and Miss Fairchild?”

“It is true,” Mark said plainly. “It might not have been common knowledge, but it is official.”

Everyone in the room seemed to be taken over by a silent surprise. Lady Elizabeth fidgeted nervously with the fabric of her dress.

“I know what I saw,” she defended herself. “I have no reason to lie about it.”

Mark looked towards Viscount Starling then. The man seemed riddled with worry and remorse as he made his way further into the room.

“Do the right thing,” Mark urged him quietly.

“What the Duke of Blackwood says is true,” the viscount said loudly, causing a gasp to ripple through the room. “This has all been a plan. Whatever you have heard about me and Miss Fairchild is nothing more than a fabrication.”

For the first time ever, Mark saw the viscount as an honourable man, then. He had a lot to lose by telling the truth, but he’d done it anyway. He’d done what he needed to do to make things right.

“It was a plan put in motion in an attempt to ruin Miss Fairchild’s reputation,” the viscount continued. “And I am deeply ashamed by it. I can assure you that.”



The viscount looked as though he wished the world would swallow him. As if he could just disappear from the room entirely so that he wouldn't have to face the disgusted faces that stared back at him.

“What are you doing?” Lady Elizabeth snapped.

“Miss Fairchild has done nothing wrong tonight,” the viscount answered. “She is a young and beautiful woman and deserving of so much more than me.”

“What is going on?” Mark's mother said quietly from nearby. “How does something like this happen?”

“We made a bet,” the viscount explained. “It is complicated, but I suppose the Lady Elizabeth and I got far too carried away with it all.”

“Of that, I am certain,” Mark added. “Now, I would suggest you leave here with what dignity you have left, Viscount Starling. Perhaps someday, there will be a chance for redemption.”

The viscount shook his head. “No, I have made a mess of things. I must deal with this filth myself.”

The attention was on Lady Elizabeth then. The Dowager Duchess of Blackwood stepped towards her.

“How could you have done such a thing?” she asked Lady Elizabeth. “You have betrayed the trust of every guest here tonight.”

Lady Elizabeth seemed to try to form words, but her mouth simply opened and closed with empty words. It was the first time that Mark had ever seen her speechless.

“We all deserve to know,” Mark confronted her. “After all, you invited us here to this party so that we could be involved with it all.”

“I thought better of you, you know,” the dowager duchess snapped.

“This was all Lady Elizabeth’s idea,” the viscount accused her. “I was merely going along with it.”

### Chapter 27

“You cannot blame this on me!” Lady Elizabeth snapped. “You are just as guilty as I am!”

“You twisted my arm into this entire game in the first place!” the viscount argued against her.

Mark joined his mother’s side again as he watched the chaos unfold. Already, guests were leaving the party, uninterested in getting involved in such politics.

“I don’t understand how this could have happened,” the dowager duchess said quietly.

“You have always been easily swayed by a pretty face,” Mark explained. “You have made the mistake of believing that someone as well-mannered as Lady Elizabeth could never be responsible for something so terrible. “

“I could never have imagined,” his mother said quietly. “Is Miss Fairchild alright?”

“I hope that she will be,” Mark answered. “Although I am sure you can imagine this has rather swayed her trust in people.”

His mother nodded quietly. Mark could see how shaken up she was by it all. In the background, Lady Elizabeth and Viscount Starling had broken out into a loud argument for all to see. It was petty, ugly, and embarrassing.

Soon, Mark couldn't stand to hang around there either. Lady Elizabeth and Viscount Starling had turned on each other.

"Is there anybody trustworthy left in this world?" Mark's mother asked as he walked with her to their carriage.

"Of course there are," Mark assured her. "But you need to be more careful."

"I'm sorry," his mother said. "I feel like a fool. I should have listened to you."

"Do not blame yourself for anything," Mark assured her. "There is still time to make things right. However, I must ask that I never hear a bad word spoken against Diana ever again. Have I made myself clear?"

"Perfectly," his mother said with a blank stare.

Mark had a troubled sleep that night. With every toss and turn he thought about Diana and wondered if she was doing alright.

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The house was quiet since Diana had kicked most of her family out. She liked it that way. While she had not slept well, she welcomed the morning eagerly. It was a new day, and she knew that she would start to feel better in no time.

Anna had stayed the night with her. Diana appreciated it. And so, as soon as she was ready, she headed downstairs to find Anna in the kitchen and join her for some tea.

"Let's take it in the garden," Anna suggested.

Diana accepted that happily. The warm tea flowed down her throat and comforted

her. The women headed towards the swans where they made themselves comfortable on the bench.

“How are you doing?” Anna asked.

“Better,” Diana answered. “Although, I don’t think I ever want to go to another party again. I don’t think I’m cut out for the theatrics of it all.”

Anna chuckled. “I must admit, they do seem to get worse every time.”

“How did you know to come looking for me last night?” Diana asked.

“It was the duke’s idea,” she said. “He knew how Lady Elizabeth feels about you, and he didn’t like that she’d called you away like that.”

“Well, he’s clearly a better judge of character than I am.”

“Nobody could have predicted what would happen last night,” Anna assured her.

“The party was ruined, that’s for sure,” Diana said. “I’m sorry you didn’t get to spend time with Mr Winterbourne.”

Anna brushed her off. “There will be time for that I’m sure,” she said. “Besides, I think the duke needs his company at the moment.”

“I just don’t understand how someone could do such a thing,” Diana said. “And it wasn’t just Lady Elizabeth. My own family had come up with the same scheme against me. Makes one wonder how often it is really happening out there.”

“New rule,” Anna said. “We never take conversations in the garden without the other one present. Let’s just go everywhere together. It’s safer that way.”

“Agreed,” Diana said with a nod. “Although, I don’t think I’ll be attending any more parties ever again. I just don’t have it in me.”

Anna gave a quiet nod.

Everything at home felt different now that Diana wasn’t worried about her family members anymore. She could truly sit and unwind and not worry that they might be spending money or arguing with each other.

Or that perhaps they were angry at her for some reason. Her home felt like her safe space again. And it hadn’t felt that way in a very long time.

She watched as the swans glided on the lake and broke the serenity of the water. All her life, Diana had been somewhat jealous of the swans. Their lives seemed so simple and elegant in comparison to hers.

Even the ugliest of chicks would turn into a majestic and graceful creature. It was inevitable in their world. Nothing was inevitable in her world.

“What do you think happened after we left?” Anna asked.

“I have no way of knowing,” Diana answered. “The duke might have been too late to stop the gossip. My reputation might already be ruined.”

“What does that mean for you?” Anna asked.

“I don’t know.”

Diana didn’t want to think about it. She already disliked leaving the house for any reason. Now, she worried about what people would think or say on top of it all. She simply didn’t have the energy for something like that.

“What if the duke was too late and the stories had already spread?” Anna asked, causing a knot in Diana’s stomach.

“I don’t know about that either,” Diana said. “I fear I’ll have to take this as it comes.”

Anna nodded, and the women fell quiet a moment. They had been so invested in their conversation that they had not noticed the figure approach them from behind.

“You should have a little more faith in me,” the duke spoke with a laugh.

The women turned to greet him happily. Just seeing him there made it seem as if all Diana’s worries would simply melt away.

She got up to greet him.

“I’ll go feed the swans,” Anna excused herself, flashing Diana a knowing look.

“May I sit with you?” the duke asked.

“Please do,” Diana said kindly. “I’d like nothing more.”

His presence so near to her made her feel at ease again. Diana did not know what she did to deserve such kindness from him, but she knew that she would do anything in her power not to lose it.

“How are you?” he asked.

“I’m as alright as I can be,” she answered. “And I am very happy to see you.”

Mark smiled at her, and it felt as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. He truly was the only thing she cared about through all of it. Her greatest fear was that

the rumour had spread, and her reputation was ruined so badly that Mark would no longer be interested in courting her.

“What happened?” she asked. She was agonizing over it and needed to know so that she could sort out her mind.

“The truth has been told,” Mark explained with a smile. “Lady Elizabeth and Viscount Starling’s plan has been exposed. Dare I say it caused quite a scene.”

“Oh goodness, did anybody at that party have a good time?” Diana asked.

“I don’t think so,” Mark answered. “But that is what happens when people are lured to an event under false pretences.”

“So, it really is true?” she asked. “The party was just a way to get me in trouble?”

“It was,” Mark informed her. “But it had the opposite effect if you ask me.”

“I’m so sorry that any of this has happened,” Diana said. “How did you get them all to believe you.”

“I had help,” Mark explained. “Viscount Starling confessed in front of everyone.”

Her eyes widened as she turned to look at Mark. Part of her wondered if he was not making a joke with her. One look at him told her he was being deadly serious.

That was the last thing she would have expected from a man like Viscount Starling. He was many things, but honest, he wasn’t. Besides, reputation was everything to the viscount. Why would he risk that?

“How did you get him to do it?” she asked.



“I didn’t do it on purpose,” Mark said. “But here is where I need to apologize to you.”

Diana frowned. “Apologize?”

“As part of my effort to get the truth out there, I told everyone that we are courting,” he confessed. “The truth is out there now. When the viscount heard this, I guess guilt got the better of him.”

Diana tried to imagine what that might have been like. To watch the viscount confess his sins to a room full of people. She might have liked to see it, actually.

“That is surprising,” Diana said.

Mark nodded, and they sat there in silence for a while, contemplating all that had happened.

“I’m sorry,” Mark said. “This should not have happened. If I had known Lady Elizabeth could be capable of such insanity, I would have done something, I swear it.”

“Please, do not apologize,” Diana answered. “None of this is your fault. Nor is it mine. Bad people merely exist, don’t they?”

“And unfortunately, sometimes they find each other,” Mark added.

Diana wished that she could sit at that pond with him forever. They would just watch the swans come by and wait as time passed them by. It would be a quiet existence. A perfect one, at that.

“What do you think will happen to them?” Diana asked.

“Well, they’ll be the talk of the city,” Mark said. “Which I suspect Lady Elizabeth might enjoy. Despite the negativity of it, she’ll gain some popularity.”

Diana chuckled. What he said made sense. Even with the little she knew of Lady Elizabeth, it was clear that she needed and wanted a lot of attention.

“And the viscount?” she asked.

“If I were him, I’d be leaving the city by now,” Mark explained. “What little good reputation he had left has been badly squandered now. I don’t think Lady Elizabeth will ever host a successful ball again. I fear nobody will arrive.”

That seemed like a suitable punishment to Diana. While she did not want to see either of them get hurt, she wanted to make sure that they could never do the things they did to her to anybody else ever again.

“And how is Eva?” Diana asked.

She was eager to change the subject. Mark had helped, and they could do nothing more anyway. Diana wanted to get back to the very important part of her life, which was being courted by the Duke of Blackwood.

“Eager to see you again,” he answered.

Diana thought of young Eva and how similar she had been to her as a child. For a brief moment, a pang of worry flooded her. That perhaps Eva’s life would take the same course. Diana would do anything to stop her from feeling such fear and heartache.

“We will host a dinner here,” Diana said. “The usual crowd will suffice. Why don’t we make it formal? That way, Eva has an excuse to wear her best dress.”

“She’d like that a lot,” Mark said. “I’d like that even more.” Diana took a deep breath, leaning slightly closer to Mark, then.

He made her feel as if nothing bad in the world could ever get to her.

“I’m glad you came to see me today,” she said softly.

“I couldn’t possibly stay away,” he said. “Not after what had happened last night.”

Diana smiled. “Tell me you’ll stay for lunch?”

“Absolutely,” he promised her. “Better yet, we’ll get Miss Dubois to play the piano. That way, we can share the dance we missed last night.”

Diana smiled. “I’d like that,” she said. “That is only fair, isn’t it?”

### Chapter 28

“This is just a mess,” the dowager duchess said when Mark returned home.

“What is?” he asked.

He had spent a lovely afternoon with Diana where they had shared a meal and danced together and laughed as if nothing happened.

“I have journalists writing to me. They’re asking me to tell them what happened last night!” she explained.

“Do not worry yourself about it,” Mark said. “These things always blow over. This time will be no different.”

“The Duke and Duchess of Essex had to drag Lady Elizabeth away to get her to stop causing such a scene!” his mother continued. “And I’ve heard this morning that Viscount Starling has run off to his countryside manor.”

“I suppose he can’t face what he has done,” Mark said. “So, will you speak with the journalists?”

“Absolutely not,” his mother said. “I want nothing to do with that situation. They need to keep my name away from those people’s reputation.”

His mother took the small stack of papers and cast it into the fire. The pair watched it burn together.

Mark felt as if nothing in the world could possibly get him down then. He had spent the morning with a beautiful woman. Someone he only ever wanted to spend more time with. She had shown him how to laugh and dance freely again.

“Where have you been?” his mother asked.

“I’ve been to check in on Miss Fairchild,” Mark said plainly. “I needed to know how she is doing after last night.”

His mother remained quiet. Mark still wasn’t sure if she’d come around to the idea of Diana being his potential wife. His mother was a tough mind to change. At least Lady Elizabeth would no longer be an option. Although, he would not be surprised if his mother had another woman waiting to meet him.

“And?” his mother asked as he turned to leave. “Is she alright?”

There was genuine concern on her face then as she waited for him to answer. It would appear that his mother had softened to the idea of Diana.

“She’s doing just fine, Mother. Thank you for asking,” he said.

“It’s terrible what they did to her, isn’t it?” his mother asked, staring deep into the flames. “She does not deserve something like this.”

“She is stronger than most,” Mark answered. “I have confidence that she will not let something like this derail her.”

His mother nodded then. “I like that.”

Mark paused and walked back towards her. “Do you mean to say that you’re rather coming around to the idea of her?”

His mother went quiet again like she often did when she didn't want to lose an argument.

"Yes," she confessed. "I can see that you are happier when you've spent time with her. And Evangeline only speaks her praises. That's important, you know."

"I know," Mark said with a pleased smirk.

He left his mother then and returned to his study where he intended to catch up on some work. But it proved to be an impossible task that day. His mind was flooded with thoughts of Diana. It was all he could think about. All he could concentrate on.

By the end of the day, all he was left with was a list of places he wanted to take her and show her. If she would allow it, he would spend time with her every day. For as long as he possibly could.

With every new minute that he spent in her presence, their life together became a clearer image in his mind. A vision that he wanted to bring to fruition. He would stop at nothing to make it happen.

Already, he could hear her laughter fill his home. He could see Diana and Evangeline dancing and playing together in the house and garden. Mark could imagine the woman that Evangeline would grow up to be with a woman like Diana to guide her.

By that evening, he had sent out a letter inviting her to the next day's planned trip. He could think of nothing else. And he wanted nothing else from his life either.

That night, as he tucked Evangeline into bed, he promised her that he would do whatever it took to keep Miss Fairchild in his life. He told his daughter about their courtship, to which she jumped up to hug him and thank him.

It had been a long time since he'd felt such peace in his home. It seemed like a luxury that he did not really deserve. As though, at any point, he would wake up from the dream and spend the rest of his life longing for Diana.

As the days passed, their activities only became longer in length. One hour seemed like a minute when he was with Diana. She was the sweetest thing that had ever entered his life. He could be standing right at her side and still wish that he was standing nearer to her. Nothing like that had ever happened to him before.

The days seemed more beautiful and warmer when she was around.

Some days, she came to their house for dinner. Even his mother seemed to be enjoying her company more. His mother had even laughed one evening at dinner. She had laughed like she had always laughed when his father was still alive.

It had been genuine and enjoyed.

Anna and Hugh had also been spending their time together, and most days, they went places as a group. Everyone seemed to fit in perfectly as if it had always been meant to be.

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Diana woke up early as usual that day. This time, though, her work would wait until later. In an unusual turn of events, Mark had invited her for an early morning walk through the park. They had spent nearly every day together since the party, and she liked it that way more than she could express.

"You look pretty," Emma said, popping her head around the door.

"Thank you," Diana said. "I'm going for a walk with the duke."

“Of course, you’re seeing him today,” Emma said with a smile. “Things are going very well between the two of you, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” Diana said proudly. “Now, help me choose some jewellery.”

Emma did as she was asked, and Diana was soon kitted out with sapphire earrings and a pearl necklace.

“I actually came by because I wanted to speak with you,” Emma said.

“Oh?”

Emma sat down on the bed and sighed. “I want to thank you,” she explained. “For letting me stay here. I know that you did not have to do that, but you did anyway. You have no idea what it means to me.”

“You’re lovely to have around, Emma,” Diana assured her. “Please don’t tell me you’re thinking of leaving.”

“Heavens, no,” Emma said. “I wouldn’t know where to go if I did. I just wanted to say that I’m a different person without my family around. A better person. Someone I’m proud to be, and I have you to thank for that.”

“You do not need to thank me for anything,” Diana said. “You have always been a good person. Your family merely had you feeling otherwise. Now, don’t mention this again. This is your home now. Make the most of it.”

She had no more time to speak. Diana and Anna were going to meet Mark and Hugh at the park that morning. It had been a month since the party and finally, the talk of the drama that had happened was starting to die down.



Not that it had bothered Diana, but it had been difficult for them to go anywhere without hearing some mention of it.

Half an hour later, Diana and Anna were greeted by Hugh and Mark, and they started their walk. They walked all through the park, admiring the sights and sounds.

“Evangeline wanted to be here today,” Mark said.

“It would have been lovely to have her. Why did she stay?” she asked.

“At my request, I confess.” Mark tugged a leaf of a tree and tossed it into the wind.

“I thought it would be pleasant to spend the day as just the two of us today,” he said sweetly.

“There’s always tomorrow,” Diana said with a smile. “Perhaps I can have another tea party with her soon.”

“That would be wonderful.”

There was something different about Mark that day. He seemed to speed up and slow his pace without much rhyme or reason as they walked. He would stop to look at plants and admire their leaves and colours.

While it was enjoyable, it was unusual. Something was on his mind, but Diana decided she’d wait until the right moment to question him about it. He was distracted.

They rounded a bend, and soon, they were at the spot where they had first picnicked together. The day they had met. There, two large picnic blankets awaited them with food and refreshments. Anna and Hugh made their way over to one of them.

“This is a surprise!” Diana said with a wide smile. “And very thoughtful.”

“This is where we met,” Mark said happily.

They made themselves comfortable, and not long afterward, Mark became quieter than usual. Soon, it felt as if Diana was having a conversation with herself. Whatever was bothering him, she wanted to get to the bottom of it.

“Something is on your mind,” she said plainly. “And I’m eager to know what it is.”

“I know,” Mark said. “I am aware that I am not behaving quite like myself today. I apologize.”

“Is it something I’ve done?” she asked.

Mark smiled widely at her. “I suppose it is,” he answered.

Diana wasn’t sure what to make of it all. She scanned her memory to figure out what she had done to elicit such odd behaviour in him. Had she said something? Did he not like the way she had dressed that day?

“What is it then?” she asked. “I must know.”

“You’ve captured me entirely,” he answered. “Miss Fairchild, there is not a moment of the day when you are not on my mind. When we are not together, I spend my time waiting for when we will see each other again. I fear it feels a little like torture.”

Diana smiled. “It would seem that you and I share the same symptoms.”

“I don’t like the way I feel when I am not around you,” he confessed. “That feeling of emptiness, of longing. It consumes me.”

Mark took the glass from her hand and placed it on one side so that he could hold her hand in his. He looked into her eyes then and let out a defeated sigh.

“I must confess, Miss Fairchild, that I have come to love you.”

Her heart tightened in her chest. She wasn't sure whether she wanted to laugh or cry, jump into his arms, or run around and excitedly cheer. She wanted all those things and none of it.

“I have come to love you, too,” she said calmly instead.

Mark appeared as if he would crumble. His shoulders relaxed as he squeezed her hand.

“Then you have made me the happiest man alive,” he said with a smile.

Diana didn't know what to say or think. The words had been on her mind for so long. A love like that one she felt for him had always seemed so unattainable to her. But since the day she'd met Mark, he'd drawn her in, and she'd been unable to escape her feelings towards him since.

“If that is the case, Miss Fairchild,” Mark continued. “Then would you do me the honour of becoming my wife?”

Diana gasped. It was as if the world around her had stopped completely. Everything was warm, and the answer burst out of her like fireworks.

“Yes!” she cried. “I would love nothing more than to be yours for eternity.”

### Epilogue

The garden was in full swing as friends and servants rushed to get the preparations ready.

Benches were carried while dry leaves were swept up. Candles were being hung from trees while someone checked the lawn to make sure it was pristinely clean.

There had never been such commotion at the house before. It was the only party that Diana was interested in planning.

A year since their engagement, and finally, Diana was standing in front of the mirror, getting ready to be married. She had come a long way since she had met Mark, and he was largely to thank for that.

The people and things that used to bother her before were no longer an issue in her life. Diana had put in the effort to ease her workload so that she could be a present mother for Evangeline.

By the end of that day, Diana would have a family of her own. Something that had been missing from her for quite some time. And she wanted it more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life.

Emma and Anna were on hand to help her make sure that she looked as perfect as she possibly could. They had spent weeks planning the colour of her dress and accessories. It had become almost a weekly meeting between the women. They would get together for tea and cake and discuss another important part of the wedding

planning.

Her hair was done up with curls that tucked back, exposing her neck where a diamond necklace nestled into the contours. Anna was doing up the laces of her dress while Emma prepared the small decorations for her hair.

In another room, all of Diana's most favourite possessions were packed and ready to be moved to Blackwood Manor. She was truly leaving her old life behind.

It had taken Diana some time to get used to the idea that she would no longer live in the home she'd grown up in. She had simply always assumed that she would die there.

But as the days rolled on, she learned to let go. And it freed her from so many other emotional struggles in her life.

Mark had made her a healthier and happier person, and she could not wait to see what a lifetime at his side would do to her.

"You look incredible," Anna said. "Nobody could look better than I did, of course."

"I'm afraid that's an argument that neither of us will win," Diana said with a laugh.

"Just wait until I get married," Emma said. "I'll make a bet right now that I'll look better than both of you."

Anna was teasing Diana. She and Hugh had been married just the month before, and the two friends had been in some competition to see who could plan the better wedding. It didn't matter to Diana. Not really.

She had seen how happy married life had made Anna. Her friend glowed with pride

and purpose whenever they met and had taken to her role as a wife perfectly. And there was no denying that Hugh was madly in love with her, too.

What mattered was that at the end of it, she would be the wife of the Duke of Blackwood. That she and Mark would spend eternity in each other's company and in love. That was more than anybody could ever ask for.

"Wait here," Anna said. "I've left your shoes in the other room. I'll be right back."

Emma was quieter than expected that morning. Diana was happy to have the time to speak with her alone.

"What bothers you?" Diana asked, turning to face Emma directly.

"I don't know what will become of me once you are married," Emma finally confessed. "It is safe to assume that you will be living at Blackwood Manor?"

"Yes," Diana said. "That will become my new home."

Emma's eyes fell to the ground as she bit back words that she was too afraid to say. Diana wondered just how long the concerns had been bothering her.

"Emma, you know that this will always be your home," Diana said. "I would never put you out."

Her cousin nodded but remained silent.

"I want you to stay on here," Diana said more sternly. "You know the house. I'd like for you to live here and take care of it as if it were your own. I trust you."

Emma looked up at her. "Is that really what you want?"

“Definitely,” Diana said. “It would make me so happy if you’d stay here.”

“Of course I will!” Emma said with a sigh of relief. “I couldn’t imagine leaving this place. In fact, the very thought of it has depressed me for weeks!”

Diana laughed. “I have only one rule. Your parents and sister may not come back here. I do not trust them to be good to this house, and I do not trust them to be good to you.”

Over the last year as Diana had been preparing to become a wife and mother, she had trained Emma to be in her employ and help her run the properties. Emma had proven herself to be trustworthy, and it was the best way for Diana to ensure a successful life for her cousin.

They had grown close.

“I’m here!” Anna said, bursting through the door. “And we better hurry. We don’t have much time left until they expect you.”

Diana had often thought of her wedding day as a child. She had imagined many large and extravagant things, like the weddings she had often read about in books. Mostly, though, Diana had expected to feel nervous.

In every book she read where the character was married, they spoke about being absolutely riddled with nerves, so much so that they felt as though they couldn’t go through with it.

That was far from how Diana felt that day. She felt confident in herself and determined. More than that, she was excited to meet Mark down the aisle.

Evangeline entered the room in her dress. She held a basket with rose petals in her

hand.

“Will you put these in my hair, please?” Evangeline asked. “I want to look pretty.”

“Of course,” Diana said kindly.

She sat Evangeline up on the bed and tucked the rose petals in with pins everywhere that she could.

“How are things looking out there?” Diana asked the child.

“Perfect!” Evangeline said. “They even have the right kinds of daisies!”

Evangeline had been involved in the planning where she could. On the day that she’d learnt of their engagement to be married, Evangeline had been so excited that she’d cried. Then, she immediately ran to her room to draw down an altar at the pond. She’d even included the swans floating by in the background.

That’s precisely what Diana had done. With some clever planning, she’d got a licence from the church to be married in her own garden. And they’d constructed an altar just like the one in Evangeline’s drawing.

A small crowd was invited to attend the ceremony. That was how Diana liked it. That was how she was comfortable with it all.

Emma and Anna had already prepared to head down and stand in wait for her. Diana had asked Evangeline to accompany her down the aisle, considering her own father could not do it. The young girl had gladly accepted.

“Are you ready?” Diana asked.



Evangeline checked her appearance once more and nodded. “Yes.”

Diana held out her hand and led Evangeline down the stairs and towards the garden. Her footsteps were slow despite the fact that she really wanted to run.

Diana was so eager to be Mark’s wife that every passing second was like agony to her. It felt as if it had taken a lifetime to get to that day.

Finally, she made her way down the garden and towards the pond. There, accompanied by the perfect backdrop of blue skies and gliding swans, the Duke of Blackwood awaited her in his best suit. The sight of it took Diana’s breath away.

On rows of benches, their closest friends and family waited eagerly for her to make her way down to him. She did not see them. All Diana could see was him and the future they were so close to having.

Evangeline held her hand tightly as they made their way to the altar. Once there, the young girl found Anna, who stood with her as they watched what would be the happiest day of Diana and Mark’s life.

The ceremony started, and Diana barely heard a thing. She stared into Mark’s eyes and felt her entire world fall away.

She waited out the moments, holding still so that she could not possibly do anything to delay it. Then she prayed that she would not wake up from the dream she was in then. It felt as if it couldn’t possibly be real and true.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

The words rang in her head as a small applause rang out around them. That was it. They were bound together forever then. She would be known as the Duchess of

Blackwood, wife to Mark Goldenthorn.

Diana smiled so much that day that her cheeks hurt. They had a small reception in the garden, too, where food and drinks were passed around while everybody celebrated. And when they were finally on the dance floor, Diana snapped out of it.

They were married; there was nothing more to wait for. Her new life would begin right then.

Mark held her so close to him that there was no gap between their bodies as they danced then.

“You have made me the happiest man alive today, Mrs Goldenthorn,” he said softly in her ear.

“I like the sound of that,” she teased.

Every table at the reception was filled with daisies grown in her garden. Servants carried out continuous plates of food while they danced and enjoyed each other’s company. Evangeline danced, too, and told everybody stories about the wedding planning and the plans she had now that she had a new mother. It was far from what Diana had always imagined as a child, but it was the perfect wedding for her.

And he was the perfect husband.

“What do you say we sneak away from here?” he finally asked.

“I say that sounds like an excellent idea,” she answered.

Mark took her hand and led her into the house. They could go where they pleased now and without a chaperone. They could do what they pleased as well. Diana

laughed as Mark pulled her into the sunroom and closed the door behind them.

She collapsed onto a chair and sighed. “I think I’ve danced too much already,” she confessed. “Either that or these are just terrible shoes.”

Mark bent down near her and reached under the hem of her dress, where he slipped her shoes off her feet.

“Oh, we’re barely married, and already you spoil me,” she teased. “I’d be careful if I were you. I’ll expect you to keep this up, you know.”

Mark laughed and joined her on the seat. She sat together, hand in hand, until he wrapped his arm around her. So close to him she felt as if a warm glow blossomed inside her. She felt safe in his arms, as if nothing in the world could ever touch her.

“Remind me to buy Spot a steak,” he said as she nestled into him. “If it weren’t for him running off, none of this would have happened.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Diana agreed.

“You know you leave me with a predicament now,” he said. “How am I ever supposed to get any work done knowing that you’re constantly in the house?”

Diana laughed. “That’s for you to figure out. Because if you think even for a moment that I’ll be leaving you alone, you’ve misunderstood me entirely then.

They then shared a moment of peaceful quiet as husband and wife. In each other’s arms, they could say nothing at all and yet understand each other perfectly. There was nobody around who had to keep an eye on them.

Mark and Diana were free to be together. From inside the sunroom, they could hear

the laughter and conversation from outside where the wedding guests celebrated their nuptials. It was the only party Diana had ever enjoyed attending.

The following day they were set to take a trip out to the countryside, just the two of them. There, they would celebrate in private together for a week. Diana very much looked forward to it. She had not been able to take a holiday in many years.

“I suppose we can’t sit here forever, can we?” Diana asked. “They’ll start to wonder where we went.”

“Let them wonder,” Mark said.

He placed a gentle finger underneath her chin and tilted her head up to face him. Then, he closed the distance between them until there was nothing at all. Mark pressed his lips against hers, and they shared their first kiss.

An excited, buzzing feeling burst through Diana’s stomach, and they kissed. His lips were soft, and he tasted ever so slightly of brandy. Her hand reached up to rest on his chest as they kissed deeply. It was a moment she wanted to cherish forever.

She took a deep breath, drinking him in as they pulled their bodies towards each other. There was a kindness, a gentleness to their kiss that seemed to soften the very fabric of reality around them.

“I don’t think I want to go back there anymore,” she finally whispered, breaking away from him for just a moment.

“Then let’s stay right here,” he suggested. “This is perfect.”

She leaned up to kiss him then, as gently as he’d kissed her. Their lips met, and again, she felt the excitement fill her up. What made her most excited was that she knew she

could be that way with him every day of their lives.

There, in the privacy of the sunroom, they kissed until the sun had long set on the horizon and most of the wedding guests had already left. Neither of them would ever be alone in their lives again.

THE END

### Chapter 1

“If you do not stop cackling like a madwoman, we are going to be found out!”

The smile on Claire Duncan’s face had not faded for the last hour. Her cheeks ached. Her ribs throbbed in pain, and she was genuinely surprised that her stomach was not cramping worse than it was at present. She had laughed more in the last four hours of dancing her feet off with the man currently pulling her by the hand than she had in the last year.

Claire resolved right then and there that she was going to marry that man.

Nothing else could make her happier for her future than a lifetime by his side. Dorian had a half-empty bottle of wine clutched in his free hand, the contents sloshing about as the young couple ran awkwardly in uneven lines toward the maze that had been constructed in the garden. A true maze. In a garden! Claire knew if she said out loud how impressed she was, he would mock her for it. Dorian would tease her yet again about her humble origins and low birth status as if it were not something he loved about her.

If there was one thing Claire knew for absolute certain, all of the way down to her bones, it was that Dorian loved every single part of her.

“Hurry now!” he urged as he nearly skipped further into the hedge maze.

The cool night air bit at any exposed bit of flesh that it could find. Her skirt snagged and pulled on the edges of the manicured hedges as they ran forward. The sounds of

the ball faded into nothing in the background. Nobody to happen upon them.

If they had not just nearly been discovered in what was supposed to be a private hallway, they would not have had to find somewhere else to seclude themselves. Though, Claire knew for a fact that Dorian's sister was going to be most cross with her for daring to sneak away instead of spending all of her time with her. Soon, they would be sisters, and they would have all of the time in the world to foster their friendship.

She did her best to wrap her skirts around her legs without being too immodest. Should Dorian be distracted by her shapely legs while running, he was likely to barrel face-first into a bush. That would not serve either one of them.

"How am I supposed to both be quiet and hurry! My lord, I can hardly breathe for my constant panting!" Claire huffed with a laugh.

Dorian whirled on her, stopping suddenly and grabbing her by the waist. "Fear not, my love, for I have more than enough stamina for us both."

Emotion welled within her, fluttering up her chest as her body seemed to warm for him. The heat turned to a tingle as Dorian bent at the waist and scooped her into his arms.

"If you wanted to be in my arms, you ought to have just said as much."

"Are you ever capable of being serious? Even for a moment?" Claire giggled as she wrapped her arms around his neck and ran the fingers of one hand through his perfect auburn locks.

She could look into his deep hazel-green eyes forever. She could live within every stolen moment with him for the rest of eternity and be perfectly content. It was not

possible to ever tire of him for he was perfection itself.

Every young girl dreamed of the man she might meet someday. Her own mother used to love nothing more than reading her fantasy stories to coax her into sleep. Wonderful tales of love and adventure filled with dragons and dashing nights, kings and princes who would do anything at all for those that they loved—and Claire had loved them all.

She had finally found one for herself. A man who quite literally swept her off of her feet.

At some point in their shared childhood, the stories her mother had read to her all became about Dorian. She would imagine his face in the stead of any prince. To her, he was perfect.

“I should have known your delicate feet would be tired from all of the dancing.” Dorian kissed the tip of her nose.

“Then perhaps you ought to kiss them, too, to make them feel better,” Claire mused wickedly.

“I would, should you desire it. I would worship at your feet until the end of days.” Dorian’s voice softened, love in his eyes as the atmosphere around them shifted.

The air between them was charged with the spark they had been dancing around for the better part of a year now. The stolen moments and feverish kisses were all leading to a final step that could not be taken back. She was ready to take that step. But only with him. He was the object of all of her desires.

The spaces between the topiaries were fewer and farther between as Dorian wound them through the maze as if he knew it like the back of his hand. He moved swiftly,



as if her additional weight in his arms was not a burden to him in the slightest. She did not know where he was taking her, but it hardly mattered. Anywhere was perfect so long as they were together.

“Would you like that, my love?” Dorian’s voice darkened as he leaned to kiss her cheek, then to whisper in her ear. “Would you like to see me on my knees before you?”

The heat in her core pressed lower as she imagined exactly that: Dorian’s tall, muscular frame on his knees, surrendering himself to her without pride or sinister ambition. Her face reddened from her passion, she could feel the warmth in her cheeks.

“I would rather you worship between my thighs, my lord.”

Dorian stumbled over a rock in their path. He cleared his throat hastily and course-corrected to their destination. “Anything that my love wants, she will get in abundance.”

“Such lofty promises from a man who does not seem nearly eager enough,” Claire teased him right back. She lifted, her teeth closing over his earlobe in hopes of spurring him on faster.

“I shall take you right here in this maze if you do not stop.” Dorian groaned.

She liked that best. Claire loved nothing more than knowing she alone held the power to make him feel this way. When they were married, they would no longer have to sneak off like this. She would be on his arm at all times and in all circumstances.

Once they were wed, she would be able to touch him in public—and have her way with him each and every night. However she wanted and as many times as she

wanted. She could become the most proud wife to have ever been.

The modest ring on her hand would be replaced by something larger that nobody would be able to deny. It was a good placeholder for what would come once Dorian was able to tell his parents about them.

He would announce their love and they would have a beautiful fall wedding. She longed to see the leaves changing colors as she married. If they had to run away together to accomplish that goal, she was willing to elope with him. But she was not the one with so much to lose should any oppose their union.

There was no denying that she was looking forward to their wedding night. If they made it that long. They had yet to cross that last threshold, but she had a feeling that tonight would be the night, as he seemed to be just as eager to be with her as she was with him.

“Where are you taking me, yo—”

“Dorian. I shall reprimand you swiftly if you insist on calling me by my title while we are alone,” Dorian corrected her with a soft bite against her cheek.

“I thought you liked it when I recognized your... authority,” Claire answered as she trailed a hand down the cut line of his jaw.

“Such wicked words from such a pretty, pretty mouth.”

“My words could be far more wicked.” Claire smirked as Dorian finally started to slow.

No longer could she hear the loud music of the ballroom or the general hubbub of the guests. Instead, those lively sounds were fading in favor of crickets and the soft scent

of fresh hay that always tended to remind her of tea leaves before they steeped.

“Or perhaps you would prefer I do other things with my pretty mouth, Dorian?” She purred his name in time with her nails scraping gently against his scalp. He shuddered in pleasure.

“When you are my wife, we are going to have to have an extended honeymoon just so I can have you all to myself long enough to do at least half of the things that I wish to do to you, my love,” Dorian promised ominously as he set her on the ground.

Only then did she turn long enough to see where he’d brought her. She snorted in laughter. “Did you truly bring me to a stable ? How cliché you are. Truly, I marvel at your creativity, my lord.”

Dorian raked a hand through his hair. She could not help but to be charmed by the way the apples of his cheeks seemed to redden with embarrassment. “I wished for privacy, and all of the house staff are occupied in attendance and service to the ball.”

Claire laughed again brightly and sauntered forward, indulging in the way the cool night wrapped around her heated skin. She did not truly care where they went or what they did, so long as they were together. But she would not deny that she relished the way his nose scrunched in humiliation when she teased him.

“Shall I find somewhere else?” Dorian asked softly.

He would, too, if she asked it of him. He would take her somewhere else if she only said the word.

Claire chose to ignore him, bouncing on the balls of her feet down the worn dirt path toward the stables as she clasped her hands behind her back. She slipped in through the small side door to the warm yellow glow of glowing lanterns. A modest enough

stable, considering that Dorian's father had never truly had much interest in horses or gambling at the races. Just enough to house the horses to pull their carriages and work on the fields.

At least inside here it was warm. And he was right—most importantly, it was private. She did not care to venture a guess as to how long it would be before their absence was noted at the party, but that was a matter to worry about later.

For now, she only wished to be in his arms.

He wasted no time in closing the door behind him and pulling her close. Even less before his lips found hers and left her breathless. The scent of him washed over her, pine and green apple. Intoxicating. Bright and crisp, and he tasted even better. It did not occur to her to protest—they would be married soon.

Claire giggled softly as Dorian pushed her gently up against a support beam, his hands bracketing her hips and pulling her closer to him. It was not close enough. The time was right, and she knew it. It was such a perfect evening. This final step of intimacy that they had been dancing around and around—she was ready.

“So forward,” she teased as Dorian's full lips kissed down the side of her neck.

“I thought you liked it,” he answered, teeth scraping over the soft skin as he kissed lower. The capped sleeve of the stunning gown that he had bought for her slipped off her shoulder, leaving it for him to kiss as well.

“I like you,” she said softly, feeling somewhat vulnerable. It was not the word that she wanted to say, something she whispered to him so sparingly. Her heart was rarely worn on her sleeve. “I want to show you.”

Dorian swallowed heavily and nodded once. “Are you certain?”

“More than anything.” Claire grinned, exposing her teeth and the soft dimples in her cheeks that were only ever visible when she was truly, blissfully happy.

Dorian took her hand and helped her up the ladder to the loft where the hay was still soft and unbundled. Even as he lay over her on the soft surface, he hesitated for but a moment. “Soon, we will not have to hide our love any longer. Soon, we shall always be together. Come what may, no matter who sees.”

Claire’s heart felt so full it might burst. It was all that she wanted. More than anything. He was the man she wished to stand beside for the rest of her years. She hoped they would be many.

“We can have children and a life together. A whole future filled with just as much happiness as I feel right now,” Dorian said sweetly as Claire’s fingers traced the line of his jaw. She knew it was the truth. She had managed to find such a good man. Even with the hardships they would face, he was worth it. “I-I love you, Claire.”

Her smile brightened impossibly. “I know that, my lord.”

Before he could protest her snarky comment, she kissed him again and pulled him down on top of her.

### Chapter 2

#### Seven Years Later

In Dorian's opinion, it ought to rain at funerals.

The fact that the sun was shining brightly in the sky over his head was offensive to him. The soft breeze, the scent of flowers carried on the wind—it did not match the somber energy of the group of mourning friends and family members all slowly shuffling into their carriages.

Today, they would visit the prepared burial site. The church mass preceding it had been long, but it was nice to have somebody to occupy his thoughts with for the time it lasted.

Anything other than dwell on all of the ways that his life had just been violently changed.

He was too young to be earl. It was not that Dorian did not wish to have the title or the responsibilities that came with it. No, he had been raised to step into the role from a young age. Rather, he had not intended to bury his father for a great many years.

The older man's health had been failing for a handful of years now, but perhaps it was simply foolish optimism that had had him hoping a benevolent twist of fate might miraculously ease his suffering and save him.

It would come and go, the lung fits where he could not breathe. Father had delegated

most of his physical tasks to those on his employ and had been sending most of the paperwork by carrier to Dorian himself. In secret. Dorian had only been too happy to play dutiful heir and handle anything his father had asked of him.

He should have done more. Dorian had been selfish—a burden that he would have to carry alongside his broken heart for the rest of his life.

At least Father was no longer in pain.

Dorian moved through the motions of escorting his younger sister, Dolores, and his mother, Mary, into the carriage. He did not stop to express his gratitude for the turnout at the mass. He could not find it within himself to speak to anyone.

Mother's veil covered most of her face, keeping her obscured from view. It was better that way. He knew she would not want others to see that she could not seem to stop crying. Even his usually stoic sister had shed a tear.

Something he could not seem to do.

It was not duty or simple obligation that held his sorrow out of his reach. No, it was something that he could not place. Though, he did not know if he truly wished to.

The footman closed the door behind them and the carriage pulled them back in the direction of the cemetery. Soon, time would be up and they would have to return to the estate he knew he should run.

Things would have to change. Dorian could not fathom if either of the women in his life would approve of the changes that would have to happen. But all they needed to do for now was focus on their mourning. Dorian would handle everything else. If only his mind would stop spinning so rapidly.

Moving back to the estate at all would be an adjustment. If anything, the dread that formed in the pit of his stomach at the thought was enough to overcome nearly all other worries.

Dorian had kept as far away from the estate as possible for the last six years. He had not been back since.

His eyes drifted shut for a moment as he passed his mother his handkerchief. She accepted it silently until her nose honked as she struggled to clear it.

“When are your things due to arrive back at the estate, brother?” Dolores said. Her eyes were red-rimmed, but she was likely to face the situation more pragmatically than their mother.

“I do believe they should be unpacked while we are at the funeral. Do not worry, Mother, I have not removed you from the main rooms. I thought it improper,” Dorian added gently.

His mother nodded gratefully, but another wave of tears started. It was only half an act of benevolence that he had not unseated her from those rooms. They were his now by rights, as he was the head of the household. But he simply did not want them.

There was a time when he longed to have the estate for himself, a distant time long since passed when he had envisioned a wholly other life for himself. Back in those days, he had been foolish enough to think that true love was a force capable of overcoming any obstacle.

He was not nearly so delusional any longer.

Dolores fidgeted in her seat. “I suppose this means you are going to start making changes?”



“I have no interest in disrupting your life, Dolores.” Dorian sighed. Though, he knew she was well past the age that she ought to have found a husband for herself and moved into her own home. Dolores was a woman prone to fits of cruelty and stubborn as a mule. It went without saying that should she resume her old antics, he would have no issue finding a husband on her behalf and finally being rid of her.

“Well, I suppose that is some comfort then. Mother shall be pleased,” Dolores said as she wrung her own handkerchief between her hands.

“Mother is more than capable of speaking for herself,” Dorian admonished sharply.

Only a few moments had passed and he already regretted not taking a separate carriage back to the house. Perhaps he ought to have walked. It would have been better to face the experience of the estate again after so many years traveling on his own.

Dolores had better be intelligent enough to keep her commentary about the past to herself.

“You did not have to return home at all, you know,” Dolores added unhelpfully.

“Do not start this again. I am not in the mood.” Dorian pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Well, it is true. We have not needed your company for the last six years and I do not think father’s death is nearly a sufficient reason for you to have returned home. I think it would be far better that you made your appearance, set affairs back on the track they have already been on, and then disappear again. That is what you do best, after all, is it not?”

“Enough,” he warned.

“Have I struck a nerve, brother? Something bothering you? I am only stating facts,” Dolores continued smugly.

“And you would have looked after you and Mother? Who would have chaperoned you or handled Father’s affairs? Certainly you do not expect that you shall be left to oversee the books by yourself!” Dorian laughed bitterly.

Dolores started to answer. He could see the angry words right there on the tip of her tongue, but she wisely swallowed them back. Her teeth shut with a snap so loud that it might have echoed in the small space.

They both knew very well of Dolores’ ambitions. She believed she had been helping father run the estate for years. She had no idea how little she had actually been involved in.

“I managed just fine. Besides, who do you think cared for Father during his times of need?” Dolores sat forward stubbornly. “I do not recall seeing you at his bedside!”

“Do not fight. Please,” their mother interrupted gently.

Dorian eased back into his seat. Mother was right, this was neither the time nor the place for such things. He knew the truth. It was out of the residual scraps of respect and affection that he still held for his sister that he did not say anything else. If Dolores had had her way, she would have become mistress and official spinster of the estate. She would have haunted the walls of the estate with father’s fortune at her personal disposal until she died.

“You cannot be all right with this, Mother. Please tell me that you understand your son is far too soft to be what we need him to be! If we are to leave our fates in his weak hands, we are certain to be doomed!” Desperation edged into her voice.

Dorian had to bite his tongue to keep from fighting with his sister. There was no reasoning with her when she was like this, and everyone in the carriage knew it. The pair of them had hardly spoken in the last few years, aside from the obligatory letter.

While she had apparently stayed the same, he had not. He did not expect her to take his word for it—she would see in time. The lofty, idealistic, and lovestruck young man that she had known before was no longer. His time apart had changed him. It was the reason he had left.

Many times over the years, he had debated if he could handle coming back, if he would endure being back here without her. The vibrant young woman had been his whole reason to live—she was all he had thought he needed for his happiness.

He wondered where the years had taken her, the sweet, adventurous, and wild woman who had stolen his heart all those years ago. The woman he had let slip through his fingers. He had fumbled, and he had lost her. He had no one to blame but himself.

Silence fell over the carriage as he continued to look out the window. The landscape had not changed since his last visit. All the same markers. The large arching trees, the same shrubs and bushes had all been perfectly maintained. Just as beautiful as ever. Life had gone on. It was only him who still felt stuck in the past.

The farther the carriage pulled him through the outskirts of London to the cemetery, the more the memories assaulted him. The pond that the carriage pulled past reminded him of Claire with her skirts hiked up around her knees, legs caked in mud and her hair flopping on her head as she tried—and often succeeded in—plucking a fish from the pond with her bare hands. It was the only time she could stand still.

The rolling landscape that surrounded them as they left the city reminded him of her love of art and playing in the woods around his family's estate. She could always talk for hours about her passions, and Claire was passionate about absolutely everything.

How she lived every day with such bright vibrancy had always stunned him—that she had allowed him to exist in her orbit, a further shock and privilege.

He had thought time and distance would be enough to soothe the aching, festering wound in his heart, but he knew now that it had done nothing to help him fall out of love with her. Her voice was still in the back of his mind. It was still her face that haunted his dreams.

His reason to breathe and wake each morning had been to share time with her. Even now, he was just as much in love with that brilliant woman. Still, for the sake of all involved, he hoped to never see her again.

It was better that way.

### Chapter 3

“Shall I bother offering a copper for your thoughts, brother? Though, perhaps I should keep my coin to myself as it is painfully obvious what must be consuming your mind at a time like this,” Dolores started, her voice full of acerbic snark. “Is it thoughts of our dearly departed father? No, I do not think it is. I would bet that it is about a person, though, is it not?”

When Dorian chose to roll his head in her direction and give his younger sister the attention she was so desperate for, she wore her smug satisfaction proudly. She would do anything to cut him down.

She had been allowed to run rampant for far too long, and it was obvious. Dolores was far too accustomed to getting her way. Mother, for as dearly as he loved her, lacked the strength to contain her willful daughter.

“No, I think I could imagine that you have a particular maiden in mind. One with cornsilk hair and porcelain skin. Is that not what you used to write her? Eyes brighter than any emerald? I do hope you have grown out of those horribly poetic days and managed to become a real man in your absence. Though, I also know better than to set my hopes too high.”

Dorian smirked coldly, for he could not stop it. He would not stoop to her level. He had plans for how he was going to handle her and now was neither the time nor the place. Dolores would have a very cold awakening tomorrow morning.

She had no manner of respect for the drastic changes that his presence would bring

upon her life yet, but he would ensure that she learned quickly. The surest way of irritating her further would be to pay her no attention whatsoever.

Today was for Mother, and he would not add further to her pain.

“Oh, come now! Can we dispense with the melancholy? Pull yourself together at the very least and make an attempt to not seem so damned forlorn!” Dolores continued, her voice bordering on theatrical hysteria.

“Lower your tone; you are upsetting Mother,” Dorian warned as he noticed Mary sit up even straighter. Today was difficult enough. “Or do I need to remind you that we have buried her husband today? Our father? The one whom you are claiming sole affection for?”

“Oh, come off of it, brother. You never cared for Father. Where were you during his days of illness? Mother and I were the ones by his side while you traipsed around Greece and India and who knows where else! We were the ones here to care for him! Not you!”

“Ah, is that the heart of the issue, then? You are jealous, once again, that I was permitted to travel and that you were required to stay home by Father’s command?” Dorian said calmly.

Dolores blanched. She had begged and pleaded with Father to be allowed to travel with Dorian. She had thought he would be her ticket out of London, as she had had no desire to be a part of the marriage mart. She had not been inclined to find a husband nor to run a house of her own at the time, and now it seemed one of those two statements was still true.

Over the years, as her hatred for society’s rigid standards had shifted to Dorian, she must have decided that she could simply become a man in her own rights.

“I-I am not the one who abandoned his family after an improper match!” Dolores tried.

“No, you have simply had no matches at all.” Dorian sighed.

“She did not love you!” Dolores yelled.

Silence fell. For a moment, just a small sliver of a moment, it almost seemed as if she developed a conscience to scold her for the hurtful words that she said to her brother.

Even Mary seemed to hold her breath as she placed a gentle hand on her daughter’s knee, a warning that she ought to be careful how she proceeded. The birds persisted in their chirping outside of the carriage and their journey to the cemetery did not slow, but it did nothing to ease the hurt.

Of course she did not love him. He had accepted that a long time ago.

“Are you quite finished?” Dorian said through his teeth, his voice tight.

“S-she...” Dolores swallowed. She turned her focus to the black fabric of her mourning gown and spoke more softly. “She married not long after you left. You know this. And I just... you have responsibilities now, brother, and I am afraid. I... Mother and I cannot afford for your focus to be split during this transition.”

While her words were still selfishly motivated, Dorian understood. “I have no intentions of—”

“You cannot go to see her. Let her live her life. I know you might be tempted to pay her a visit. But she married a clergyman, Dorian; she lived a whole life after you. Nobody even speaks of it any longer. Please, you cannot be distracted,” Dolores pleaded.

A clergyman. Lower than him in rank and title.

Emotion tightened in Dorian's throat. "I know my duties, Dolores, and I am perfectly capable of fulfilling them. I do urge you not to continue to underestimate me."

He could feel her eyes on her as if appraising him. There was no softness left in him. He did not wish to see her. He had no desire to see Claire happy with this clergyman or to know of the way she chose to spend her life. Seeing her could only result in further pain for him, and he was in no hurry to bring that upon himself. He would be plenty busy with other matters.

"No, I suppose that I should not," Dolores concluded with a final look.

The carriage rolled to a stop and the footman opened the door. The scent of wet grass and freshly turned earth greeted him. The sun was punishingly warm over their all-black mourning garb as Dorian gracefully slipped from the carriage and held his hand out for his mother. She wobbled on her feet for a moment, but summoned her courage to lead the procession at his side to their family plot.

Dolores refused his help and trailed silently after them as they headed through the wrought-iron gates with "Blanchard" in cursive scrawled across the top. The Earl of Windham was a title that had been held in their family for the last five generations.

Mother hesitated at the threshold of the gate and inhaled sharply to summon her courage. The procession of mourners behind them all copied her movements as they approached the vicar who would read the last rites over the freshly buried coffin.

Dorian could hardly hear the words as they were read.

He wondered if his sister was correct. Did he have the right to mourn when he had been away? It mattered not the circumstances that prevented his return even a day earlier. His sister would think it was due only to his broken heart and he was willing



to allow her to think him the villain. He knew the truth. The man in the ground knew the truth. That was enough.

Mother pressed herself into his side as he held her. She wept for the loss of her true love and the years that they ought to have still had together. Dorian? He felt nothing. He felt as if there was an emptiness inside of him. Something hollow that he could not fathom a bottom to. A chasm that could never again be filled, no matter how he tried.

All he could do was to go through the motions. He rubbed Mother's upper arm as she cried. The other guests looked on with pity.

And the damned sun still shone bright and steady overhead.

Dorian turned his head to the side; he could not hear the rites anyway. He had thought they were the only funeral in this cemetery today, but in the distance stood a woman and a young girl. She could not be more than five years old for how she shifted herself anxiously from foot to foot and pulled at her mother's skirts.

The woman did not wear funeral black. It would seem whoever she was visiting was not newly deceased. She wore a soft pink gown, perfectly complementary to the powder blue of her daughter's. The young girl had twin braids of golden blond hair that caught the sunlight as if she were a magnet for all things happy and light.

It was a strange thought, but perhaps the sun shone so brightly today because the young girl was here. She smiled up at her mother—and only then did Dorian realize who it was that he was looking at.

Claire.

Still so much the same—her hair the same golden shade as her daughter's, still the same as ever. The natural dusty-rose shade to her full lips, the natural blush to her

otherwise fair cheek. A face that never needed the enhancement of cosmetics. She had a mole just under her right eye and a kind smile as she squatted down to point something out to her daughter on the headstone they stood before.

What cruel twist of fate must it be to bring her here today of all days? Why was it that one of the first people that he was destined to encounter happened to be one of the very people he was sworn to stay far away from?

It took Dolores half a second to notice Claire's presence. She grabbed his hand subtly, holding firmly in silent warning that he ought to stay away. As if she had any right to command anything of him whatsoever.

He turned back to the vicar and watched the man's mouth move, though there was now a steady ringing in his ears. His pulse thundered as his mind supplied everything that it ought not to. It should not tell him that it could have been his daughter—that it should have been his own small family together today. If she had to be here, it ought to have been at his side.

No, Claire had made her choice.

She could rot with it.