



# An Unlikely Countess (Those Very Bad Fairbanks #13)

**Author:** *Alyssa Clarke*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** #opposite attracts

#Accidental compromising

Miss Julia Fairbanks feels adrift as her siblings marry and find their happily ever after, leaving her yearning for a love that sets her soul on fire. Determined to savor her season, she quickly grows disillusioned—until a dangerously tempting encounter in Hyde Park with Rafe, the Earl of Ashton, changes everything.

Rafe awakens a desire in Julia she never anticipated, but he has his own ideas about the perfect wife, and she doesn't fit the mold. However, when a compromising situation forces them together in the most unexpected way, Julia finds herself waging a bold campaign for the aloof earl's heart.

**Total Pages (Source):** 19

# Page 1

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

## CHAPTER 1

Miss Julia Fairbanks watched in fascinated horror as a gentleman shrugged from his fine evening jacket and allowed it to drop on the verdant grass below the tree in which she was perched. The darkness shrouded them both, but the silver moonlight highlighted his remarkably handsome features, casting shadows that gave him an enigmatic air. His hair, dark and slightly tousled, added to the air of careless elegance, while his sharply slanted cheekbones lent him an appearance of savage sensuality. Julia's heartbeat faltered and then quickened, a reaction so foreign it startled her. She had always been able to appreciate the beauty of others, but never had she felt this kind of visceral reaction to one's handsomeness.

How unusual .

The gentleman, unfamiliar to her, held himself with a posture that suggested he was one of those lords who wielded power and was assured of his privileged place within the ton . Julia blinked, her eyes widening as he casually rolled up his sleeve, revealing a muscled forearm. He sighed a deep, ponderous sound that seemed to float on the cool night air before lifting a hand to the back of his neck and rubbing it as if releasing the tension of the day. The sight made Julia's heart lurch, and she wondered what his worries were.

Pushing aside the errant thought, she shrank back, pressing herself closer to the trunk of the tree, desperate not to be seen.

This is just my ill-luck! Of all the places in Hyde Park he could go, why here?

She held herself remarkably still on the large branch, flexing her ankle so the dancing slipper she had been toeing off before the unknown gentleman stepped into her awareness did not fall and alert him to her presence. Her mind raced, imagining the scandal that would erupt if she were discovered. How could she explain escaping away from a ball to Hyde Park and climbing a tree to stargaze?

The very notion was absurd, scandalous even.

Though her family might understand, the rest of society surely would not. She could practically hear her mother's stern reprimand and feel the sting of her grandaunt Lady Celdon's cutting words.

“ You must always remember that chastity, modesty, and obedience are the pre-eminent female virtues! ”

Those strident words from the old dragon had been said to Julia so many times that she should not have been here.

Please, sir, move along , she silently pleaded, or my shoe will fall on your head!

All her siblings had secured respectable positions within the ton , their past as the no-good, dissolute, very bad Fairbanks nearly forgotten. Should her dancing slipper fall and strike this gentleman, surely all of their efforts to reform the family's reputation would be for naught. The mere thought of it made her wince. The scandal sheets would have a field day with such a tale, even though no one else was around to witness her impending disaster. Somehow, they would find out. They always seemed to own the most astounding ability to ferret out scandals. At first, she admired this tenacity from the reporters, and then she grew to deplore it.

Julia sighed quietly, her calf starting to cramp from the effort of keeping her shoe on. But it was no use. Despite her best efforts, the dratted slipper inched off her foot,

teetering precariously on the edge of her toes.

Oh dear!

The slipper slipped from her foot, and Julia held her breath as it seemed to fall far too slowly. She watched, horrified and fascinated, as it barely tapped the gentleman's shoulder as he turned away. Her heart pounded so hard she thought she might faint. The man halted, his body going utterly still as he peered at the unexpected object resting on the ground. For a long, agonizing moment, he stared at her slipper as if it were a puzzle to be solved, then stooped to pick it up.

Finally, he tilted his head up, and with unnerving precision, his gaze landed on hers. Julia hardly dared to breathe. Could he see her? Or was it too dark for him to discern her presence?

"Well, this is a first," he drawled, his voice smooth and low, tinged with amusement. "A very good surprise, indeed."

Julia bit her lower lip, refusing to speak. Surely, he could not see her! She remained as still as a statue, willing herself to disappear into the shadows.

"I do not imagine that this oak tree suddenly started growing ladies' apparel," he continued, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Would you like your shoe back?"

Her heart stuttered. He did not sound angry or shocked, merely intrigued. The calmness in his voice made her feel both relieved and unnerved. Julia debated her options, realizing with a sinking heart that she had none. Should she attempt to descend from the tree with any semblance of dignity, she would surely lose what little remained of it. Julia knew she should not respond, should pretend to be an illusion of the night, but something about him drew her in, tempting her to engage in this

unexpected encounter.

“Perhaps the tree is magical,” she replied softly, her voice barely more than a whisper, surprising even herself with the audacity to respond.

Goodness!

Julia could hardly believe she was speaking to this stranger, yet his presence seemed to demand a response.

“Ah, a whimsical soul; how novel.”

How jaded you sound, sir . Yet she did not say the words aloud, at a loss as to why she had not remained silent.

“Are you in need of rescue?” His voice was low, almost intimate, as if they were sharing a secret in the stillness of the night.

Most peculiarly, her pulse quickened. “I do not need rescuing, my good sir, as I am not a damsel in distress,” she said, lifting her chin ever so slightly, the rebellious streak within her refusing to be entirely quelled.

He raised a brow, clearly amused. “Very well. Inarguably, you climbed this tree by yourself and are capable of descending. Permit me to ask, what brings a lady to a perch on a branch in Hyde Park at this hour? Surely, the comfort of a bedchamber offers more comfort and delight than an oak branch.”

His voice had no mockery, only a teasing that made her pulse race even faster. Surely, there was a hint of something far too carnal in his tone that stirred a deep, unfamiliar longing within Julia—perhaps a yearning to laugh and chat freely as she did as a young girl.

“Will you come down and keep me company?”

Company? What company? Dazedly, she realized he might not presume her to be a lady of quality, given that it was past midnight and she was alone. The thought unsettled her, but not as much as the awareness she felt toward him—a sensation as alarming as intoxicating. At least the thought that she was somehow defective, different from other ladies who seemed giddy and enamored with flattering attention, could now be put to rest. It seemed Julia had been waiting for the right gentleman to provoke her. She almost snorted at her fanciful thoughts.

“If you have no wish to speak of it, I understand.”

Julia hesitated, searching for a response that would not betray her impulsive nature that she had been taming for over five years, ever since her brother became the Earl of Celdon, tossing them into a life they never anticipated. The weight of propriety and duty had since been heavy on her shoulders, yet here in the darkness, with this enigmatic man, she felt a dangerous freedom that both thrilled and frightened her.

“I was bored at the place I fled from,” she said after another few beats.

“Why?”

“I wanted to watch the stars and be reminded of a time when I climbed trees and daringly jumped from their branches into a lake.”

“Was the restlessness inside of you quieted?”

Julia sighed. “No.” Perhaps she needed to be like her brother James, who married the woman the entire family knew he loved only a week ago but was too foolish to see and retired to the country. Julia had been so tempted to travel and visit but did not wish to intrude on their happiness. “I was only made keenly aware that something

was missing because I had been stargazing for over an hour, and I ...”

I still feel unmoored and at a loss for what I need .

Yet she could not confide something so remarkably intimate to a stranger.

“Allow me to delight your senses; perhaps the emptiness will flee.”

Julia gasped, her heart clenching. “I mentioned nothing about emptiness, my good sir.”

“No, but I heard it.”

Something in his tone suggested he was familiar with the state. Julia bit her lower lip, at a loss as to what to reply. Allow me to delight your senses ...

Had he meant to sound so provocative?

“Have I robbed the lady of speech?” he asked, his voice dipping lower.

Yes . “I merely find the company of trees and the stars more appealing than that of the ballroom,” she finally replied, refusing to say anything about bedchambers. “There is nothing deeper and introspective to my presence here.”

Her words were more defiant than she intended, but she could not help herself.

“Hmm. I daresay the trees are less likely to offer dance and companionship,” he said, his tone still laced with that infuriatingly teasing note.

Julia laughed, the sound surprising even herself. It had been so long since she had felt this lightness, this sense of playfulness. As if he understood her need to retreat, he did

not probe more about what empty feeling she might need to be filled.

This gentleman was ... interesting.

“That is exactly why I prefer them,” she said, allowing another smile to curl at the corners of her mouth. “They do not speak when I prefer silence, nor do they rant at me when I am indifferent.”

“Ah, so I unintentionally intruded on your solace. Should I depart and leave you alone?”

“A gentleman would act without putting a lady in the position to make a choice,” she replied, her voice steady though her heart was racing.

He canted his head, his expression half in the shadows, making it impossible for her to read him entirely.

“That is to say you wish for me to remain with you; however, for you to boldly say so, you fear it would make me think less of you. How ungentlemanly of me, indeed. I will remain and accompany you, and when the time is right, I shall ascertain when my company is no longer needed.”

The part of his mouth that she could see was sensually curved, and something hot and frightening surged through Julia’s belly. Her eyes widened at the sensation, a mix of fear and excitement coursing through her veins.

He lifted a hand. “Allow me to assist you down so we might better delight in each other’s company.”

Oh!



She hesitated, sensing that her life would be altered if she climbed down. This notion felt insistent even as she thought it ridiculous. It was as if the very air around them hummed with possibility, with a change that she could neither predict nor control. Perhaps she should refuse and tell him she wished to be alone. Yet Julia recalled the pain of aloneness she had felt before his arrival. She had stared at the stars and asked her papa if he was truly listening in the heavens as her mother often suggested.

Had she not confessed to the stars only a few moments ago that she wanted to meet the man she would marry this season? Had she not confessed she longed for the kind of love and connection her sisters had with their husbands? Had she not also confessed she wished at twenty years, she knew what a kiss felt like?

Perhaps this was fate and not ill-luck. Smiling at her thoughts, she said, “Your assistance would be most appreciated, sir.”

With a graceful bow, he extended his hand, waiting patiently. Julia felt for the small hidden blade her brother James had gifted her inside the small special pocket of her gloves as she carefully maneuvered herself to the edge of the branch. She hesitated only briefly before placing her hand in his, the warmth of his touch stirring strange, unfamiliar sensations deep within her.

With surprising strength, he guided her down, his grip steady and sure. She felt the muscles of his arm tense as he supported her. Once her feet touched the ground, she glanced up at him, her breath catching again as she stood so close. Her heart raced, not from fear but from the proximity of this stranger, whose presence seemed to fill the air around them. The moonlight cast a soft glow over his features, and she could see now the sharp intelligence in his deep silver eyes, the humor that danced there, and the shattering awareness that passed between them.

“Your eyes are the most beautiful I have ever seen,” he said, his voice rougher now. A quick frown touched his brow as if he loathed his own observation. He lowered her

hand but did not move away, the space between them crackling with sudden tension. You are ... breathtakingly lovely.”

Julia hardly knew what to say. She felt the heat rise to her cheeks, acutely aware of how her appearance must look to him—unladylike. After all, she had removed the pins from her hair, and her blonde tresses tumbled over her shoulders and back in wild abandon. Julia had found the summer evening stifling, so she wore no shawl, her ballgown of deep red, a stark defiance to the old dragon’s insistence that she continue wearing pastel colors. Something in the way he looked at her made Julia feel as if she were the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

He lifted her slipper, his expression hidden in the shadows of the night. “I believe this belongs to you, my lady.”

Julia took the slipper, her fingers brushing against his, the brief contact sending another wave of warmth through her. “Thank you ...” she began, her voice catching in her throat.

“Sinclair,” he supplied smoothly. “Rafe Sinclair.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sinclair.”

“Will you permit me your name?”

“I do not think it wise to own to it.” Her response was a quick, instinctive need to protect her family’s reputation.

A small sound came from him, one she thought revealed his amusement, though it was tempered by something darker, more intense.

“Are you here alone?” he asked, his tone deceptively casual, though his gaze was

anything but.

“Yes,” she replied, her voice steady even as her heart pounded.

“Are you afraid that I am here with you?”

“No,” Julia answered, surprising herself with the truth of it. She was not afraid—not of him, not of this moment.

“Are you so confident I am not a villain or a blackguard?”

“Have you perhaps thought, Mr. Sinclair, I am a villainess?”

Another low laugh pulsed from him. “A villainess?”

“What else could I be, given that you do not seem to be familiar with women who own my confidence?” The words left her lips before she could think better of them.

His low laugh sounded far too appreciative, resonating in the quiet night.

“What gives you this ... boldness?”

“I have four brothers who have never hesitated to teach me the skills needed when ... speaking with villains,” she murmured, oddly delighted by their back and forth.

Julia took a step closer, wondering at the madness of her actions. It was then she placed the slim stiletto blade at his side, the cool metal pressing lightly against him. “I am terribly skilled in using this.”

His quick inhalation felt like a groan, the sound stirring something unknown within her. I am being too reckless.

“It seems fortune has indeed favored me tonight.”

Julia felt a strange flutter in her chest at his words, as if the night had suddenly become something magical, something filled with possibility. “An odd thing to say, Mr. Sinclair. How have you been favored?”

Suddenly, whatever space was left between them vanished, and Julia was hauled tightly against his chest, his mouth capturing hers in a kiss that stole her breath away. The slim blade dropped from her suddenly nerveless fingers. His touch and actions were entirely unexpected, yet she did not pull away, held in place by the beguiling warmth of his mouth on hers. A soft sound escaped Julia, her lips parted, and his tongue darted into her mouth. Her world caught fire and she sagged against him, caught in a breathless, evocative moment.

### CHAPTER 2

Every thought seemed to disappear, leaving only the feeling of pleasure. The kiss was everything Julia had imagined and nothing like she had expected—gentle and fierce, tender and consuming as if he were claiming a part of her she had not known was his to take. Julia's hands crept to his shoulders and tightened as if they belonged to another creature. She did not push Mr. Sinclair away, nor did she hug him any closer. Instead, she let herself be swept away, caught in the tide of sensations she had never known she could feel. Perhaps this was how it should be, her first kiss with a stranger who had no expectations of ladylike perfection.

At first, his mouth on hers was soft ... soothing even. His tongue barely ghosted over her mouth and then he was coaxing her lips open more. Then his tongue slipped inside her mouth to tangle with hers with sensuality until he was taking her mouth with deep, arousing kisses. A wicked heat flared low in Julia's belly. She whimpered and he swallowed the sound, holding her even tighter against his body. There was a hardness between their bodies, which she knew to be his arousal. When he finally pulled back, they were both breathless, the night air cool against her flushed skin.

"By God, you taste so damn sweet," he murmured, his voice rough and low against her lips. "Come home with me."

Shock cascaded over her senses, and Julia stared at him almost helplessly. "Your home?"

He smoothed a thumb along the curve of her lower lip. "I promise for the rest of the night you will not feel empty or bored. I will make you scream and writhe with

pleasure. And when it is over, I will start again until dawn.”

“You scoundrel,” she gasped, hating that it sounded more like a breathless, aroused murmur. Inexplicably, tears burned her throat. “Please, release me, sir.”

Mr. Sinclair’s arms vanished from around her waist, and he stepped back, raking his fingers through his hair. “You want me, and I want you.”

Julia shook her head, still feeling dazed by her reaction to his kiss and closeness. “Is this ... is this how trysts are formed? A chance encounter, a moment, and then you expect a woman to tumble into your bed and hand over her virtue. You, sir, are a rake !”

He reared back as if she had slapped him, and she felt the slash of his gaze over her body as he stared at her.

“By God, you are a lady of quality.”

The disbelief in his tone stung. Julia sniffed. “You sound as if you have seen a mythical creature. Is it a notion that is improbable that I might be a lady, Mr. Sinclair?”

“Bloody hell,” he growled. “You are here alone at night in Hyde Park. Being so free-spirited ... I assumed ... you to be a lady with experience.”

Julia swallowed tightly, sudden mortification burning through her. “I suppose that confirms I am a woman of questionable morals who should be invited for a romp?”

She gasped at his silence. “You insufferable prig ! You were the one that kissed me, Mr. Sinclair. I did not invite your embrace.”

“Your very presence is an invitation to wickedness,” he snapped, his tone low and hard. “Your enthusiasm for my embrace pushed me to make my foolish assumption that you would be willing to indulge in a night of hot passion. I am sorry.”

Hating the prick of tears behind her eyes, and that her first kiss—so gloriously pleasurable—now felt as if she had done something wrong, she cloaked her dignity around her like armor, whirled around, picked up her knife and walked away from him. Mr. Sinclair did not stop Julia or call out to her, and she was grateful. Still, she felt his stare upon her shoulders until the shadows of the night swallowed her.

Several minutes later, she walked to the parked carriage. The coachman straightened, knocked down the steps, and opened the door. Julia climbed into the equipage, resting her head against the squabs. It was nonsensical to feel so wretched over their encounter when she might never see Mr. Sinclair again. Closing her eyes, she determinedly refused to think about him, and directed her thoughts to her darling niece Lily whom she would spend the day with tomorrow.

When the carriage finally arrived at her brother Colin’s townhouse, despite her best efforts, Julia’s heart still raced with the memory of the kiss, mingled with the confusion and embarrassment of how it had ended. She slipped out of the carriage and into the house, moving quietly through the dimly lit hallway, hoping not to disturb anyone. She could only hope that Colin was not still awake.

Her hopes were dashed when she saw the light seeping out from beneath the library door. With a soft sigh, she walked to the slightly ajar door, pushed it open and stepped inside, where she found her brother seated in an armchair, a book resting in his hands. At least it was not like how she found him this morning with her sister-in-law Hermina wrapped in his arms as they passionately kissed.

“I thought you would be at your White’s?”

Colin's gaze lifted. "You are finally home," he said, his tone even but his eyes sharp. "Richard and Poppy only left a few minutes ago. It seemed you escaped their chaperonage and did not let your brother know where you were going. Such actions are quite unlike yourself. I was beginning to worry."

"I ..." Julia sighed and tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear. "I shall explain when I understand it myself."

Her brother's eyes narrowed slightly as he took in her appearance. "Is all well, Julia? Are you hurt?"

Colin's voice was gentle, but there was an edge of concern that made her heart twist with guilt. Julia fidgeted with the folds of her gown, knowing she must look a sight, with her hair tumbling down and her gown wrinkled from her adventurous trek up and down the tree.

"No, I am not hurt. I apologize, Colin. I coaxed the coachman to take me to the park instead of coming straight home after the ball. I should not have departed Lady Nelson's home as if the devil chased me. Well, perhaps he did," she said with a self-deprecating laugh. "I felt the walls of the crushed ballroom closing in on me, and I thought I would scream at the inanity of the conversation I was a part of. Rushing away seemed the sensible choice at the moment. Only, once I started running, I did not stop until I was high on a branch in the park staring at the stars."

A sigh escaped him, and Colin leaned back in his chair, rubbing a hand over his face. "Julia, you know how dangerous that could have been. Hyde Park is not a place for a lady to wander alone at night. I or Richard or Nicholas would have been happy to accompany you."

His tone was not harsh, but there was a weariness in it that made her feel even worse. She nodded, her throat tightening with a mix of emotions she couldn't quite name.



“I am sorry, Colin. However, my sisters got to be a little bit wicked without you hovering. Allow me the same freedom.”

Shock slackened his jaw. “What?”

Her mouth quirked. “Did you believe I had not realized all the time Lizzy, Ester, Emma, Ellie, Fanny or Penny and Phoebe snuck from this house?” Julia laughed, shaking her head. “I am soon to be one and twenty, Colin. I have my good wits about me, and all the lessons on how to disarm a rogue, and my blade that James gifted me. I am safe. Though I promise I will not run away like that again.”

Once, their family teased her older sister Ellie that she was only slightly wicked for she never had any scandals following her. Julia thought as the youngest sibling out of twelve, they protected and cosseted her far too much, without any expectations that she would behave in the manner that pushed some from society to refer to them as bad Fairbanks.

Colin rose from the chair and crossed the room to her, his expression softening as he cupped her cheek with one hand.

“I beg you to spare my heart from too much naughtiness.”

She laughed. “I shall try. I make no promises.”

His eyes widened, and she understood because it was very unlike her. Of all her brothers and sisters, Julia was the only person who enjoyed Hermina and the old dragon’s lessons on etiquette and propriety.

He pressed a light kiss to her forehead, the gesture filled with the quiet affection that had always existed between them. “Goodnight, little sister.”

“Goodnight, Colin,” she murmured.

She watched him leave the library, the door closing softly behind him, before she let out a long, shuddering breath. The guilt that had been gnawing at her since she left Mr. Sinclair in the park seemed to ebb slightly. Julia’s feet carried her almost of their own accord to the music room, a place where she often found solace. The soft glow of the moonlight filtering through the curtains cast a peaceful light over the pianoforte, and she moved toward it, her fingers trailing lightly over the keys before she sat down on the bench.

She hesitated only for a moment before beginning to play, the familiar notes soothing her frayed nerves. The melody she chose was soft and wistful, reflecting the longing that had been keeping her awake for the last few weeks.

What if she were the only one of the Fairbanks siblings to never find love?

As her fingers moved over the keys, her thoughts drifted back to the park, to Mr. Sinclair, and to the kiss that had left her breathless and shaken. Despite everything—the confusion, the hurt, the mortification—the memory of Mr. Sinclair’s kiss, the feel of his lips on hers, was imprinted on her mind, and she knew it was something she would not easily forget.

As the final notes of the melody faded into the stillness of the room, Julia let out a long, shaky breath. She closed the lid of the pianoforte gently, rising from the bench. A quick glance at the clock on the mantle revealed it was three in the morning. The night had felt especially long, and she was utterly exhausted. Julia moved slowly, almost dreamlike, as she made her way to her room. Once inside, she stripped off her clothes and tumbled into bed, the cool sheets soothing her tired body. She lay there, naked, hugging the pillow to her chest as she closed her eyes, letting out a soft sigh.

The silence of her brother’s townhouse enveloped her, a stark contrast to the lively

home it had once been. For so long, the halls had vibrated with laughter, shouts, and even the occasional bark of a mischievous puppy when they had all resided there. She remembered the nights when she shared a room with Penny and Phoebe, their whispered conversations stretching late into the night as they shared dreams, secrets, and hopes for the future.

A lump formed in Julia's throat as the memories washed over her, and she found herself wishing desperately that one of her sisters was with her now. If only she could confide in them, ask them if the promise of something more she had felt in Mr. Sinclair's kiss—something she could neither grasp nor fully understand—was real. Was it that indefinable spark in her imagination, or was there truly something deeper that she had let disappear before she truly understood?

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to banish the thoughts that swirled in her mind. Julia hoped that sleep would come quickly, that it would pull her under and offer some respite from the heated memories of the night. Perhaps in the morning she would have the answers she sought, and that kiss and all that it implied would make more sense.

### CHAPTER 3

Rafe walked along the quiet streets of Mayfair, his footsteps echoing softly in the stillness of the night. The journey to his townhouse in Russell Square felt longer than usual. He had watched the carriage pull away with the woman he had wanted to take to his bed, to slake the loneliness that had been ripping his damn soul apart for far too long. She had not noticed that he followed her, keeping to the darkness and shadows, only wanting to ensure her safety without troubling her further.

The carriage had been too far away for him to discern any crest, but perhaps it was for the best. He had clearly mortified her with his behavior, and it would be best if they never met again. Yet, Rafe wondered how likely that would be, given that he had stayed in town beyond his duties to the House of Lords for the first time in years, with the express purpose of attending social events. They had been covered in more shadows than moonlight and might not recognize each other again.

Except, he would never forget the brilliant beauty of her dark blue eyes.

“I was a damn fool,” Rafe muttered, tipping his head to the sky as if the stars might offer some solace.

Should she see him again and recognize him, the lady might be tempted to slap his face. He shook his head, chastising himself for the impulsive actions that had led him to this point. Clearly, he had been away from polite society for far too long, and it seemed he had forgotten how to treat women with the courtesy they deserved, no matter their social standing. All the signs that his mysterious woman was a lady of quality had been present, but the part of him that had not engaged with someone of

the opposite sex—who was not family—in years had been woefully blinded.

And that kiss .

Rafe slammed his eyes shut, the memory flooding his senses. He had never felt such pleasure from the meeting of mouths in all his nine and twenty years alive. The taste of her, the softness of her lips, the way she had responded to him—it was all imprinted on his mind, a tormenting reminder of what he could not have.

The uncharacteristic recklessness that had driven him to want to bed a complete stranger felt foreign, as if some hidden part of himself had momentarily broken free. It was a part he wasn't sure he recognized or welcomed.

“Bloody hell,” he swore under his breath, his frustration mounting as he continued walking.

His feet were beginning to ache, a reminder of the long, aimless walk that had led him to Hyde Park. Earlier, he had attended his first ball in years, a dismal affair that had only deepened his sense of disenchantment. The oppressive atmosphere of the ballroom had driven him outside, and somehow, he had kept walking until he found himself in Hyde Park.

What were the odds that two people who had never met would do something so capricious on the same night?

“Now I am the one who is fanciful.” The corner of his mouth twitched in a wry smile as he turned the final corner toward his townhouse. The gas lamps cast a soft glow over the cobblestone street. His townhouse, with its tall windows and stately facade, loomed ahead. Rafe ascended the steps, unlocked the door, and stepped inside. The warmth of the house embraced him, and he made his way toward the drawing room where a light shone from beneath the door.

It was perhaps his newly affianced sister Rebecca who had declared that she would not sleep for the rest of the year, after accepting Viscount Sutcliffe's proposal only a few days prior. Rafe opened the door to the drawing room and found his mother seated on a settee, a book resting in her lap.

Hell, I am caught!

He must have made a sound, for her head snapped up from her book. The countess, at the age of fifty, was a woman of refined beauty, her dark hair elegantly coiffed, her gaze sharp as it settled on her son. She closed the book with a soft thud and looked at him expectantly.

"You have the appearance of a man about to face the gallows," she remarked, her tone holding a hint of reproach though her eyes were warm with concern.

He laughed, venturing further into the room to close the door. "Upon realizing it was not Rebecca who awaited me, I had the fleeting awareness that I should have continued to my bedchamber and not investigated."

She harrumphed but smiled. "I trust the evening was ... productive?"

Rafe frowned, rubbing a hand over his face as he settled into an armchair opposite her. His mother's air of inquisitiveness reminded him of his first season as a young swain eager to court a debutante, and she would eagerly probe his reaction to each young lady he met. A marriage-minded mother was indeed a ruthless opponent. "It was ... fine."

His mother raised an eyebrow, clearly expecting more. "Did you see anyone of interest at the ball?"

He hesitated, the memory of the encounter in Hyde Park still shadowing his thoughts.

“I ... may have encountered someone, though not at the ball,” he admitted, the admission feeling strangely intimate and unlike himself.

Though his mother always pried into his affairs, Rafe had always been reserved and pragmatic. He was a man who measured his words and actions carefully, preferring logic and restraint over spontaneity. It was simply his nature, ingrained in him from years of shouldering the responsibilities of his title and family. This was one of the reasons his actions at the park so bemused him; he was never impulsive.

His mother’s eyes narrowed slightly. “If not at the ball, where did you meet her? And who might this person be?”

Rafe shook his head. “A lady I met by chance in Hyde Park. It was ... unexpected.”

The countess’s brows furrowed slightly. “A lady, you say? At this hour?”

“Yes,” Rafe replied, his tone guarded. “It was a brief encounter, and it’s unlikely we will meet again. I should not have mentioned it.”

His mother studied him for a moment, clearly sensing there was more to the story.

“I cannot ascertain if you told me this to merely unsettle my nerves.” She sighed. “Perhaps I did the right thing in making a list.”

“What list?”

She hesitated. “Do not glower so. It is very important for you to find your countess this season.”

“I know, Mother. I recall being the person who told you of my intention this season,” he said drily. “Now, what is this list you are talking about?”

She straightened her spine, and Rafe sensed he might not like the direction in which she was heading.

“I have decided to take a more proactive approach in helping you find a wife.”

“Even more active than you were years ago?” he asked with a caustic bite. “I shudder at the thought.”

She cast him another reproving glare, and he merely lifted a brow and waited.

“I’ve taken the liberty of compiling a list of eligible ladies I believe would make suitable wives and mothers for Emma and Grace. You need someone with grace, poise, and an impeccable reputation—someone who can help raise your daughters with the care they deserve. I have outlined characteristics that I believe your next countess should possess. I am sure you will agree.”

Next countess .

A heavy feeling pressed against his chest. The sensation no longer had the bitter taste of grief and pain, but this heavy press always made itself evident whenever he was reminded that he had lost his young wife in childbirth. Shock sliced through him with the sharpness of a scalpel when he realized he had not thought of Anna once since that damn dancing shoe had dropped at his feet. Rafe stood and walked over to the window overlooking the gardens. He tugged open the heavy drapes, peering out into the darkness.

At his silence, his mother continued, “There are a few names on the list that you may find familiar, and others that are newer to society. There is also one name I want you to avoid at all costs.”

Frowning, he turned around to see that his mother now had a sheaf of paper in her



hand.

“What are you saying, Mother?”

“I want you to avoid any lady who bears the surname Fairbanks,” she said stridently.

“Fairbanks?” Rafe said, a frown creasing his brow. “Why?”

His mother’s lips pressed into a thin line. “The Fairbanks family has been plagued by scandal for some number of years. The eldest brother only came into the title six years ago. They were simple, country people who lacked the manners or grace to mingle with polite society. Their reputation is hardly what it should be, and their family has been the subject of more gossip than I care to recount. Even years later stories of their indiscretions and missteps are whispered in drawing rooms across London. Can you imagine one of the sisters even had a child out of wedlock? Another was rumored to take part in a ghastly duel! As if she were a gentleman with affronted honor. My nerves are unsettled from simply recalling the horrid tales. I would strongly advise against any connection with the Fairbanks. Anna ... she would never want her children to be associated with anyone from that family.”

Her voice softened at the mention of Anna, as if invoking the memory of his late wife lent her argument a moral weight that could not be ignored. Rafe’s chest tightened. Anna had been the most elegant and demure lady he had ever met. While some had mockingly called her ‘the Paragon,’ she had only ever won his admiration with her sweet kindness and charm.

“Even without the thought of what Anna would have wanted for our girls, I would not align our names and reputation with a family so unsuitable in their conduct,” he said with chilling politeness.

His mother gave him a small, approving nod. “Good. You have been away from

society for a few years. I merely thought it wise to offer a word of caution. The ladies in the family are rather beautiful, and somehow they have made astounding matches that have upset many. Though they strengthened their connections through these advantageous marriages, my dear Walter would turn in his grave should I ever allow such disgraces into our family.”

Rafe had been a young lad of eight years when his father, with a gravity that belied the usual warmth in their relationship, had expressed his deepest desire: that when Rafe took the reins of his inheritance, he should never taint the earldom or their family name with fecklessness, debt, or scandal. The Sinclair legacy was to be preserved with honor, dignity, and unyielding responsibility.

These words had etched themselves into Rafe’s very being, shaping the man he would become. He had never visited a gambling house, set up a woman as a mistress, or embroiled himself in the reckless pursuits that many men of his rank indulged in without a second thought. His father had guided the honor and responsibility that was now second nature, and as his mother spoke, Rafe understood she was gently reminding him of those same lessons and expectations.

He smiled at his mother. “I would never disgrace my father’s memory or the teachings that he imparted with such care.”

One day, he hoped to pass the same sense of duty and integrity onto his son. The stark dread of losing someone again in childbirth—a fear that had haunted him and one he had faced and conquered—tried to pierce his chest once more, but he ruthlessly suppressed it.

He walked over to her and took the paper she held out. “Thank you for the list, Mother. I will take the names under consideration.”

The countess gave him a soft smile, rising as well. “I only want what’s best for you,

Rafe. And for Emma and Grace.”

He leaned down and kissed her cheek. “I know. Goodnight.”

Rafe left the drawing room and made his way to his study, feeling unusually restless. Once in his study, he went to the mantle, poured whisky into a glass, and took a healthy swallow. Sitting in the armchair by the fire, he indolently sprawled and stared into the flames, his thoughts whirling.

Another wife .

The decision to marry again had been borne from the ashes of his loneliness and the need to provide his daughters with more stable female influences. His sister would soon marry and start her own family, and his mother had been speaking more of visiting Europe for an extended stay. The girls needed something that he was not providing, though he showered them with his love and attention. Rafe glanced at the list, a wry smile touching his mouth. The ton was peppered with many eligible debutantes, widows, and a few ladies of advanced years who had not yet wed, and somehow, his mother had only found three ladies who met her approval.

Lady Millicent Belgrave is very lovely and with a charming wit. Paints very well.

Lady Roslyn Baldwin is very gentle and patient. She also paints marvelous watercolors and is an incredible horsewoman. She has had two seasons, so there must be careful consideration as to why she is still unmarried.

Lady Dinah Tomlinson, a most charming widow of only four and twenty. She has a very calming spirit and a spotless reputation and is on the board of Lady Angel’s orphanage.

Absolutely no one from the Fairbanks family . It would be a travesty!

That bit was even underlined for more emphasis. Rafe chuckled, shaking his head. Irritatingly, the image of the mysterious woman in the park flashed through his mind—her defiant spirit, fiery retorts, and the kiss that had left him reeling. Could she have been one of the Fairbanks? The thought was unsettling and quite a leap in logic, or perhaps not so.

Given what his mother said, how likely was it that a lady from another family could dare to be so free-spirited within the constraints of the ton ? The idea intrigued him more than he cared to admit. Rafe sighed, emptying his glass in a long swallow. The path ahead seemed clear, but the detour he had taken tonight, that impulsive kiss, must not happen again with anyone. At all times he would be mindful in his courtship of a lady's sensibilities and honor. Rafe glanced at the list once more, but somehow, he was still distracted.

By God, he could still taste her sweetness on his tongue and feel her soft curves pressed against his body. This season was going to be torturous, and he would never see her again.

### CHAPTER 4

Almost a week after her daring encounter in Hyde Park, Julia stood on the edges of Lady Wychelle's ballroom, humming softly along with the orchestra. She had danced several sets with good-natured and amiable young men, who unfortunately only stirred the need to indulge in mild pleasantries.

"You wear that look again," her sister Penny, now the Duchess of Shrewsbury, said, walking up to her with a smile.

Penny was resplendent in a gown of deep sapphire blue, the color bringing out the striking clarity of her blue eyes. The dress, made of rich silk, clung to her figure in a way that was both elegant and subtly provocative, with delicate lace trim at the bodice and sleeves. A matching ribbon was woven through her dark hair, which was styled in a fashionable twist that showed off the long column of her neck. The duchess carried herself with the effortless grace that came from being deeply in love and completely at ease with her place in the world.

"Penny," Julia cried, laughing. "I had not thought you would attend. When did you arrive in town? Your letter said you would arrive tomorrow!"

Her sister's blue eyes gleamed with mischief. "We traveled faster than anticipated. I rode alongside my love instead of in the carriage. You know he indulges me so."

"I do," Julia said, smiling warmly, that pang of hunger going through her chest.

Penny lifted a brow. "What is that sadness I see in your gaze?"

Julia waved her fan dismissively. “There is nothing.”

“Do not misdirect me,” her sister said gently. “When have we ever done so with each other?”

A lump formed in her throat, and Julia looked away for a moment. She snagged a glass of champagne from a passing footman who deftly made his way through the crowd with a silver salver. “I feel silly to even admit it,” she said softly.

“I shall tell you if it is,” Penny said, her voice full of sisterly concern. “Though I doubt you could ever be silly. Though you were the youngest, you always seemed practical.”

Julia wrinkled her nose and then sighed. “I have this deep fear that I will be the only one of us to never marry for love.”

Penny’s eyes widened, and she placed a hand on her sister’s arm, her voice full of reassurance. “Oh, Julia. That will never happen.”

“You cannot know.”

Her sister grabbed her gloved fingers and squeezed. “I can know. I know who you are, and you would never settle for anything that does not bring you happiness. We would never allow you to do so.”

“Even if I do not find my love until I am thirty?” she said drily, though warmth unspooled through her at Penny’s words. Before Penny could reply, Julia continued, “I miss you so much, Penny.”

“Then stay with me for the season at our home in Berkeley Square. I will allow you to indulge in more naughtiness than Colin or mama would ever permit.”

Julia laughed. “I think—” The words were snatched from her as a gentleman caught her attention.

Her heart lurched, and she swallowed tightly. There was something familiar about him. He was dressed in a well-tailored, black evening coat that accentuated his broad shoulders and lean frame. His crisp, white cravat was tied impeccably, and his waistcoat, a deep burgundy, added a subtle dash of color that contrasted with his dark attire. A few strands of his dark hair curled over his forehead, accentuating his handsome and resolute appearance.

Did he perhaps own silver eyes?

The unknown gentleman’s gaze swept across the crowd, pausing on her for only a fleeting moment before moving on. As more people noticed his presence, a ripple of whispers and curious glances spread through the ballroom.

“He is so terribly handsome,” a voice murmured nearby, filled with awe.

Julia instinctively moved further behind the large Corinthian column, shamelessly eavesdropping on the conversation. Penny drifted closer as well, a sparkle of amusement in her deep blue eyes.

“Who are they talking about?” Penny whispered, leaning in to share the secretive air.

“I do not know his name,” Julia replied, trying to keep her voice steady despite the sudden racing of her heart.

The memory of the encounter in Hyde Park lingered, unbidden and unsettling.

Penny followed the direction of Julia’s discreet gaze, and her lips curved into a knowing smile. “Oh, he is handsome. And Julia, your cheeks are flushed, and I can

see the pulse fluttering at your throat. You do know him.”

“I do not!” Julia protested, her voice dropping to a whisper as she quickly relayed the encounter in the park, not omitting a single detail. The words tumbled out, betraying the effect the meeting had on her. “I am uncertain if Mr. Sinclair and this gentleman are the same. I cannot say why the thought they might have entered my thoughts ... but the breadth of his shoulders and how he angles his head feels ...”

“Familiar,” Penny murmured.

“Yes.”

“They say the earl is a widower,” one of the ladies nearby said in a hushed tone, drawing both sisters’ attention.

“A widower?” another voice echoed, the word tinged with curiosity.

“Yes, and he is seeking a new bride this season,” a third voice added, sounding breathless. “My mother said he is very illustrious and ...”

“And what?” the first voice pressed, eager for more gossip.

“Wealthy,” the second voice replied, even lower. “Lord Ashton’s family has some relations to the throne. The countess is very influential and formidable.”

Julia’s breath hitched as she unfurled her fan, discreetly watching the man they spoke of. The Earl of Ashton, now identified, moved through the crowd with an air of quiet confidence and authority, escorting a beautiful young lady to a matron who was likely a chaperone or relative. His presence commanded attention, and it was clear he was a man accustomed to control.



Perhaps she had been mistaken—could this Earl of Ashton really be Mr. Sinclair? Their moment in the park had been cloaked in shadows, making it unlikely they would easily recognize each other in the full light of the ballroom.

“Come, let us not gawk,” Penny said, tugging gently on Julia’s arm. “Phoebe is here tonight, and I miss her so. I planned to spend the day with her tomorrow. Why don’t you join us?”

Julia nodded though her mind was elsewhere. “I confess I was about to visit the retiring room. Please, go find Phoebe, and I shall join you both shortly. Oh, I believe Fanny is here as well!”

Penny smiled, giving her sister’s hand a reassuring squeeze before moving away to seek out their sisters. As soon as Penny disappeared into the throng, Julia felt the weight of the crowded room pressing down on her, the whispers and laughter blurring into a single overwhelming noise. She walked from the ballroom to the retiring room and sighed at the noise heard from within.

She wished to be alone, not surrounded by more people. Julia was tempted to explore and find another empty room, perhaps a study or a library. Only she wanted to be outdoors. Should she inform Penny of her decision? Julia hesitated and then turned and made her way toward the open doors that led to the gardens. The cool night air was a welcome relief as she stepped outside, the sounds of the ballroom fading into the background.

She followed the stone path that wound through the garden, her dancing slippers crunching softly on the gravel. The moonlight bathed the flowers and shrubs in a silvery glow, creating a peaceful atmosphere that was a stark contrast to the bustling ballroom she had just left. She wandered until she found a secluded alcove, partially hidden by a curtain of ivy. Julia sat down on a stone bench, her gaze lifting to the stars that dotted the clear night sky—a remarkable thing given how many nights she

wished the stars were as visible in town as they were in the countryside.

The beauty of the evening should have soothed her, but a deep sense of disenchantment lingered, heavy and unyielding. Julia hated this sense of heaviness that would not leave her. She had thought attending the season's events would bring her joy, but instead, she felt as if she were merely going through the motions, waiting for something—or someone—that would never come.

“When will this feeling end?” she whispered, her voice barely audible as she hugged her arms around herself. “Why is it so persistent?”

She wondered if Penny was right and if she would eventually find the kind of love that her sisters had or was destined to live a life of polite pleasantries and empty dances. A faint rustling sound reached her ears. Julia tensed, her heart leaping into her throat as she looked down. Standing at the entrance of the alcove, partially obscured by shadows, was the very man who had haunted her thoughts for days—Mr. Sinclair.

Though she could not see him fully, the impression of him, the width of his shoulders, his scent and his face half in the shadows were the same.

He stepped forward, the moonlight revealing his face, and Julia's heart trembled. There was no mistaking it this time—this was the man from Hyde Park, the one who had left her breathless and bewildered, and he was unquestionably the Earl of Ashton.

Julia rose to her feet, her mind racing as she tried to compose herself. She had not expected to see him again, least of all here, and the coincidence left her both unsettled and intrigued. “My lord, we meet again.”

He jerked, then faltered into stillness. At that moment, Julia realized he had not seen her in the shadows.

“You have the most extraordinary ability to be at the same places I seek solitude,” he drawled, his voice low and rich, carrying a hint of the same intrigue that had colored their first meeting.

The same icy silver eyes that had captivated her before now met hers with an intensity that made her nervous. “Inarguably, you now realize I am the Earl of Ashton.”

“Yes.”

“May I join you?” he asked, his tone respectful, yet there was a glint in his eyes that suggested he had not forgotten their last encounter. “There are not many places at a ball where one can seek privacy without being discovered.”

Julia hesitated for only a moment before nodding. “Of course,” she said, gesturing to the bench beside her.

She was acutely aware of the tension between them and that, once again, she should be fleeing this encounter instead of lingering in his presence. Good sense had only left her with this unfilled longing that she didn’t quite understand.

“Permit me to know your name.”

Julia hesitated for a fraction of a second, then decided to let the moment carry her.

“Miss Julia Fairbanks,” she said with a small curtsy, watching as recognition flickered across his face, though not in the way she expected.

He laughed then, a deep, genuine sound. “Ah, a lady from the bad Fairbanks.”

### CHAPTER 5

“A lady from the infamous Fairbanks family,” Miss Fairbanks said with a cool smile, her blue eyes gleaming with challenge. “I am astonished you know something about me when I know nothing about you, my lord.”

Rafe felt a dark wash of humor at her words. This woman, with her sharp wit and the memory of their encounter, had plagued him for several nights, forcing him to reassess what he thought he understood about himself. The cold pragmatism that had governed his life for so long seemed to have been consumed by a foolish part of him that hungered for something more—something that had no place in his carefully planned life.

“Someone close to me believed it necessary to explain why I must stay away from women with your name in my search for a wife,” he replied, his tone dry but laced with a hint of regret.

A soft sound of outrage slipped from her lips, her eyes narrowing slightly. “What prejudice!”

“Was it wrong to mention that your family has been embroiled in countless scandals?” he asked.

She sniffed disdainfully, lifting her chin. “Hardly a dozen; how were you warned about countless ? That suggested unbridled natures and hundreds of scandals.”

Rafe chuckled, surprised by her audacity. “One is enough to ruin a family’s

reputation, Miss Fairbanks.”

“I daresay we are simply too ... delightful for that,” she said sweetly, her tone dripping with playful defiance.

He stared at her, the memory of their encounter in Hyde Park flashing in his mind. Rafe wondered if she was alluding to his impulsive offer to delight her for the night. The thought made him rake his fingers through his hair, frustration warring with desire. Perhaps he should return to the ballroom and rejoin his sister Rebecca. Something deep inside warned him that any future entanglement with this hellion would be unwise.

And yet, everything in his body had come alive the moment he recognized Miss Fairbanks as the woman from the park. The sensible, disciplined man he had always prided himself on being was suddenly at war with an unfamiliar but powerful desire. He stared at her, wondering if this interest was a mere anomaly that would eventually ease. But there was enough moonlight for him to see her clearly, and the sight only fueled the fire within him.

By God, the lady was ravishing. She wore a dark green evening gown trimmed with gold lace and ribbons, the rich color contrasting beautifully with her fair skin. Black gloves clung to her elbows, adding a touch of mystery, and delicate dancing slippers peeked out from beneath her skirts. The gown bared the creamy swell of her shoulders, accentuating her exquisite shape, while her strawberry blonde hair was piled atop her head in artful curls that framed her face with an elegant yet slightly untamed air. Her choice of attire was unlike that of a typical debutante, and he sensed it was a deliberate choice, revealing a hint of her rebellious spirit.

“You are staring, Lord Ashton.”

“You are lovely.”

“I know I am. However, there are many lovely ladies inside the ballroom. I did not observe you staring in this scandalous manner.”

“You were watching me.”

Her shoulder lifted in an elegant shrug. “Your entrance did cause quite a stir. I also have a habit of eavesdropping on those who love to gossip.”

Rafe chuckled. Her forthright manner was refreshing and endearing. “And what have you learned about me.”

“You have been away from society for a number of years. I have been out for a couple of seasons, and we have never met.”

Her voice had a curious lilt as she shifted a bit closer, dipping slightly to pick a flower and bring it to her nose.

“I have only visited London for my duties in the House of Lords and investment matters.”

“Do you not long for the frivolities London has to offer?”

“No.”

“How ... unusual.” She smiled. “You will not find a bride out here in the gardens, my lord. They are in the ballroom eagerly waiting to drop their handkerchiefs before you and have you escort them to the dance floor.”

There was a wistful ache in her tone as if a suitor had never flattered her with courtship.

“I am certain I will be reminded of this from my mother,” he said with dry fondness. “I suspect you and I sought the gardens for the same reason.”

She canted her head, inhaling the flower. He could sense her acute attention to every move he made, even though she wasn’t looking directly at him. The strains of the waltz floated on the air and before he could stop himself, the words slipped out. “May I have this dance, Miss Fairbanks?”

The invitation was as impulsive as the kiss they’d shared in Hyde Park, and the moment the words left his mouth, he regretted them. Miss Fairbanks’s eyes widened, but the hesitation lasted only a second before she nodded, her lips curving into a glorious smile.

“Yes,” she said, and with a graceful movement, she stepped forward and placed her hand in his, walking into his arms.

Rafe’s damn heart shook as he drew her scandalously close, far more improper than he would if the eyes of the ton were upon them. The warmth of her body pressed against him, and she did not pull away. The heady scent of her perfume enveloped him, a mix of jasmine and something indefinable.

Shocked and aroused by her fearless response, he closed his eyes briefly. Miss Fairbanks was quite unlike any lady he’d ever met. However, this was neither the time nor place for such an entanglement, and yet he found himself unable to resist the allure of holding her close. The orchestra’s music drifted out from the ballroom, and with smooth precision, he led her into a waltz right there in the hidden alcove. The soft strains of the melody mingled with the night air as they moved together.

“This feels so exhilarating ... and yet so dangerous,” she said softly.

Ah, so the lady was indeed aware of how inexcusably scandalous they were being.

Her piercing blue eyes held his gaze, and he felt the stirrings of desire. Rafe knew he should pull away, should end this dance before it led to something neither of them could take back, but the thought of releasing her now felt like a loss too great to bear. The sound of their footsteps on the grass, the rustle of her skirts as they moved, the steady beat of the waltz—it all melded into a sensual harmony that he found himself loath to disrupt.

Finally, as the music from the ballroom began to fade, he reluctantly slowed their steps, bringing the dance to an end. For a moment, they simply stood there, their breaths mingling in the cool night air, neither evidently willing to break the spell that had woven itself around them.

Bloody hell. I am turning into a fanciful idiot.

“I should go,” she whispered, then smiled. “Though this was lovely, perhaps one day we might dance inside the ballroom, Lord Ashton.”

“Do not leave.” Not yet.

Miss Fairbanks looked up at him, her eyes softening. “Why not?”

His chest tightened at the question, and he struggled to find the words. “I enjoy your company,” he admitted, his honesty surprising even himself.

A slow smile spread across her lips, one that sent a jolt of desire through him.

Before he could stop himself, he leaned in closer, his lips brushing against her mouth in the lightest kiss. “For seven nights, you visited me in my dreams.”

“I am pleased you suffered a similar fate.”



The tension between them crackled, but this time, it was laced with something else—an understanding, perhaps, or the beginning of something neither of them could quite name.

“Shall we return to the ballroom?” he asked, though every part of him wanted to stay here with her, away from the prying eyes of society.

“I bid you good—” Miss Fairbanks began, but before she could finish, Rafe yielded to the temptation that had been gnawing at him.

He lowered his head and pressed his mouth to hers. Her soft gasp was swallowed by the intensity of his kiss as he slid his tongue into her mouth, groaning as her sweet taste rushed to his head like the strongest whisky. Miss Fairbanks’s hands pressed against his arms, but instead of pushing him away, she curled her fingers into his coat, gripping him as if she needed to steady herself.

Rafe felt a surge of triumph as she returned his rousing kiss, her response as passionate as his own. For what felt like endless minutes, they remained locked in that embrace. When Miss Fairbanks finally pulled her mouth from his, her chest heaved with ragged breaths. Her eyes were wide and searching as she peered up at him, her expression a mix of shock and desire.

“You are here searching for a wife,” she said huskily, her voice barely more than a whisper. “Was that kiss an offer of marriage, my lord? Should I anticipate that you will present yourself tomorrow to my brother, the Earl of Celdon?”

Her words struck him like a cold plunge into an icy lake. Rafe stiffened, his pulse racing as her meaning sank in. She stepped back, hiding her expression in the shadows.

“It was not an offer of marriage,” he said gruffly, reaching for her instinctively before

ruthlessly forcing himself to lower his hand. “It is an invitation to be my lover.”

Her gasp pierced his chest, and immediate regret coursed through him. This was not like him—he was a man of restraint, a man of honor. Bloody hell . Something about this woman unraveled him, made him forget the boundaries he had always maintained. Perhaps he had been too long without a lover, too long without speaking to a lady with such fire.

Rafe felt like a damn bounder. “Miss Fairbanks—” he began, trying to repair the damage he had done.

“I am tempted to slap you,” she interrupted, her voice soft yet fierce, laced with fury. “However, I have never been a hypocrite, and I wanted to kiss you. Still, I do believe should you even fall on your knees one day and beg me to marry you, I would never accept you!”

With that, she skirted past him and walked away, her back stiff with wounded pride.

“Miss Fairbanks, please allow me to apologize—”

“The only thing I will allow you, Lord Ashton, is the understanding that you are my enemy. Be warned.”

She paused and glanced over her shoulder. The fire in her beautiful eyes robbed him of breath. Sheer admiration pulsed through him—no one else would dare speak to him or look at him so boldly.

“You are aware I am the Earl of Ashton,” he said with an arrogant tilt of his head, unable to suppress a smile at her audacity. “Who are you to threaten me? Have you also never heard that to forewarn is to be forearmed?”

She lifted a brow, a smirk playing on her lips. “Ahh, I thought you understood I was Julia Fairbanks, one of the bad Fairbanks.”

Without awaiting his reply, she whirled around and walked away. Rafe watched her go, a smile tugging at his mouth.

By God, he was hopelessly enchanted.

### CHAPTER 6

Rafe lifted his face to the sky, pinched the bridge of his nose, and took a deep breath. After several minutes, he reentered the ballroom discreetly. His gaze immediately sought out Rebecca, who was dancing the quadrille with her fiancé, Viscount Sutcliffe. His sister's face was animated with affection, her tendre for the viscount evident to all. Sutcliffe's expression mirrored Rebecca's adoration, and for a moment, Rafe felt a pang of envy.

Marriages in the ton were hardly love matches, but he was glad his sister liked and admired the viscount. Rafe scanned the room until his eyes landed on Lady Roslyn Baldwin, the young lady their hostess had pointed out earlier. The daughter of a marquess who shared Rafe's political leanings, Lady Roslyn was everything one could expect in a future countess. She possessed a delicate beauty, with soft chestnut hair and eyes the color of warm honey. Her gown, a pale lavender silk, complemented her fair complexion, and her demure grace and elegance were evident in the way she held herself.

Rafe approached her, ignoring the many ladies who lifted their fans to their mouths and started whispering. When he reached her side, he bowed slightly, offering his hand. "Lady Roslyn, I believe the dance you promised earlier is next. May I have the honor?"

She lowered into a curtsy before she smiled and placed her gloved hand in his. "I am delighted, Lord Ashton."

They moved to the dance floor as the second waltz of the evening started. Rafe

twirled with her across the expanse of the ballroom. Lady Roslyn was light on her feet, graceful and composed, her movements perfectly attuned to his.

“You are a wonderful dancer, my lord,” she said with a smile.

“A skill only made evident because of the gracefulness of my partner,” he said with polite civility.

Her cheeks pinkened, and she smiled prettily at him. Over her head, he saw his mother in conversation with Lady Roslyn’s mother. The two matrons were beaming and whispering to each other. Rafe kept his expression inscrutable as he danced and conversed with the lady. Their conversation was light, touching on the expected topics of the season’s events, mutual acquaintances, and the latest ondits . Lady Roslyn spoke with a charming wit, and her laughter was soft and pleasing to the ear.

Yet, as they danced, Rafe couldn’t help but notice he was not curious to know more about her. Lady Roslyn was lovely and well-mannered, the epitome of what he should be seeking in a countess, but as he held her in his arms, he felt no sense of attraction, no quickening of his pulse as he had with Miss Fairbanks.

He ruthlessly closed out thoughts of that minx. When the dance ended, he escorted Lady Roslyn back to her chaperone with polite words of thanks. She curtsied gracefully, and Rafe bowed, acknowledging the propriety of the exchange.

Rafe remained at the ball for another hour, fulfilling his duties as an eligible bachelor of the ton by making small talk with several other young ladies and gentlemen of his set. But his thoughts kept drifting back to the gardens, to the kiss he had shared with Miss Fairbanks, and the way she had made him feel—alive, impulsive, utterly captivated.

Eventually, he found Rebecca and his mother, and together they departed the ball. As

their carriage rattled through the darkened streets of London, Rebecca glanced at him, her brow furrowed slightly in concern. “You seemed very reserved when you danced with Lady Roslyn,” she remarked. “What did you think of her?”

His mother’s gaze sharpened with interest.

Rafe leaned back against the squabs and lifted a brow. “Am I to suffer an interrogation each time I dance with a lady?”

His mother sighed. “I love you, but there are times you are truly insufferable. Do not leave us in suspense, Ashton!”

“I have no particular thoughts,” he replied after a moment, his tone carefully neutral.

Rebecca arched a brow, her expression skeptical. “No thoughts at all?”

“She is lovely and well-mannered,” Rafe said, though there was little enthusiasm in his tone.

His mother nodded approvingly. “Lady Roslyn made the same impression on me. This is her second season, and she received several offers last year, but none were deemed suitable by her mother. They are clearly looking for a match that is worthy of her station. I would urge you to call upon her tomorrow with flowers and invite her on a phaeton ride in Hyde Park.”

Rafe made a noncommittal sound. Lady Roslyn had been perfectly charming, yet she barely stirred his interest. There was no sense in calling upon her. He frowned, recalling the first few times he met Anna, where only mild pleasantries had existed between them. She had been similarly reserved and very graceful, often blushing whenever she met his gaze. Their attachment had grown, and they loved each other. Perhaps he was being hasty in thinking to remove Lady Roslyn from the list.

He sighed. Courtship had always been damn complicated. Rafe's thoughts drifted as his mother and sister continued their conversation about bridal trousseaus and wedding preparations. His mind, however, was elsewhere—specifically on Miss Julia Fairbanks. How had a woman like her, with all her fiery spirit and boldness, managed to unsettle him so completely? The question gnawed at him, refusing to be ignored.

Should he explore this connection he felt with her? Amusement sparked through him when he recalled the last line on his mother's list.

Absolutely no one from the Fairbanks family . It would be a travesty !

As the carriage rolled to a stop in front of their townhouse, Rafe felt a sense of disquiet that he could not shake. It was an unfamiliar feeling, and he didn't like it. Once inside, Rebecca and his mother bid him goodnight and retired to their chambers, leaving Rafe to his thoughts. He made his way to the library, where a fire blazed in the hearth, casting a warm glow over the room. The familiar scent of leather and parchment greeted him, and a glance at the clock on the mantle revealed it was almost three in the morning.

With a sigh, Rafe poured himself a glass of whisky and sat in the armchair by the fire. He took several swallows, the burn of the alcohol doing little to ease the tension coiled within him. Setting his glass down, he reached for the small stack of letters placed on the walnut table beside him. There were three in total, all from his daughters, Emma and Grace, written in the careful, slanted script of young girls.

As he unfolded the first letter, a small smile tugged at his lips, and a fierce wave of love washed over him.

Dearest Papa,

We miss you so very much and hope your important work is not keeping you away

from us for too long. Emma says she hopes you will bring us a present when you return, and I must admit, I would love one too—perhaps some sweets or a new book. We have been good girls, doing our best to heed Mrs. Tilby's lessons, though we do wish she would let us have them outside sometimes. She says young ladies should not cavort in the grass, but it looks so lovely and inviting!

Grace is trying her best to enjoy the riding lessons, but she finds the side saddle terribly irritating. I must agree with her. Why must we sit in such a silly way? But we promise to keep practicing so we can show you how well we have done when you return.

We cannot wait for you to come back home, Papa.

With all our love,

Emma and Grace

Rafe chuckled softly, picturing their earnest faces as they wrote the letter. It had only been three weeks since he traveled from his country estate in Hertfordshire to town, but it felt like much longer. He missed them fiercely. Reaching for the next letter, he opened it, his heart squeezing as he read.

Dearest Papa,

Grace and I received a letter from Grandmama, and she told us the exciting news that you will be coming home with a new mama for us. We were so thrilled we could not sleep! Do you think she will love us, Papa? Please tell her that we just celebrated our seventh birthday and that we are very pleasant and well-mannered. Mrs. Tilby says those are qualities that mamas enjoy in their daughters. Oh, Papa, I feel like there are butterflies in my heart and belly. Emma feels the same.



We love and miss you very much.

Grace and Emma

Rafe quickly read the third letter, which outlined the candies they anticipated, before setting them aside. He inhaled deeply, closing his eyes as he absorbed the weight of their words. His mother had been deliberately cunning, telling the girls of his intentions. Had she no fear of disappointing them, of breaking their hearts? What if he did not find a wife this season? He raked his fingers through his hair, icy anger snapping through him. This was precisely why his mother had preempted him, writing to the girls to ensure that he followed through on his intentions this time.

But it was not necessary. His mother should have known his character better. Once he committed to a plan, he always saw it through. There was no need to manipulate him into action. Yet, deep down, Rafe understood that her interference came from a place of love and concern. She had been urging him to remarry for more than three years now, but he had ignored her pleas, content to focus on his daughters and his duties.

It wasn't until he saw the longing in Emma and Grace's eyes whenever they interacted with Mrs. Tilby, their governess, that he realized he could no longer ignore the void in their lives. They needed a mother, and he could no longer deprive them of that.

Rafe folded the letters carefully and placed them in his top drawer. He finished his whisky in one long swallow. Rising from the armchair, he made his way upstairs to his bedchamber, his footsteps echoing in the silent house. Once inside his room, he did not bother to call for his valet. Instead, he removed his clothes himself, the cool air brushing against his skin.

Finally, he lay down on the bed, his body sinking into the soft mattress. The weight of the day pressed down on him, but sleep did not come easily. Rafe was a man of

duty. He had made a promise to himself and to his daughters and was determined to do what was necessary to make his family whole again—find a suitable wife, a woman who could be a mother to his daughters.

He would not allow Julia Fairbanks to enter his dreams and disrupt the carefully laid plans he had set for himself. It was time for him to excise this desire Miss Fairbanks provoked within him. With a final, resolute breath, he banished her from his thoughts.

### CHAPTER 7

Julia froze in astonishment, her fingers tightening around her glass of champagne as she listened to three ladies casually outline a devious trap they had in mind—for the Earl of Ashton! What was even more inconceivable was that the lady orchestrating the scheme was the sweetly demure Lady Roslyn. Julia instinctively drew back into the shadows of the conservatory as the women drifted closer, their voices barely above a whisper.

What rotten luck that she would encounter them. Julia lowered the glass to the stone bench. Only a few minutes ago she had decided to leave for Penporth for the rest of the season. She could not bear the feeling of listlessness anymore and wanted to return to her home in the countryside. What was the point of attending balls if she would merely sneak away to sit somewhere alone?

“Are you certain the earl is in the library on the second floor?” Lady Roslyn asked, her tone filled with excitement.

“Yes,” another voice, unfamiliar to Julia, replied eagerly. “I saw him enter it myself. The earl always slips away from the ballroom and disappears for an hour or two. I must say it was rather brilliant of me to discreetly follow him this time. This is the perfect moment, Ros. You must not let it slip away from you.”

Julia felt a sinking feeling in her chest as she realized they were truly committing to their reckless plan. It had been a little over a week since Lord Ashton kissed her in the gardens at another ball, a kiss that had lingered in her thoughts far more than she cared to admit. She had seen him at a picnic in Kensington Gardens and at another

ball, where they had carefully ignored each other. Though Julia considered him her enemy, she couldn't bring herself to exact petty revenge as her sister Penny might have done to those who wronged them.

Instead, Julia had simply tried not to stare at the earl or acknowledge the confusing ache in her chest whenever he was near.

"Are you certain you should do this, Lady Roslyn?" a third voice interjected, hesitating. "Perhaps it does not mean anything that he took Lady Millicent out in his phaeton. She is very lovely, and—"

"He also danced with her twice this week and only once with me," Lady Roslyn snapped, her tone sharp with jealousy. "It was enough to garner a mention in the scandal sheet."

Julia bit her lip, recalling the scandal sheet's speculation on the earl's interest in Lady Millicent, a woman many gentlemen found captivating. It seemed this potential interest threatened whatever tendre Lady Roslyn had developed for Lord Ashton.

How silly . How could Lady Roslyn long for a gentleman who might be attached to another? Julia wondered if she should find the hostess of tonight's midnight ball, the Marchioness of Rigsby, and inform her of the plot afoot under her roof.

"I will do it," Lady Roslyn said with excited determination.

Julia shook her head, truly shocked at their audacity. As the ladies dispersed, Julia found herself dithering.

"I have no need to warn him; he is my enemy!" she muttered crossly to herself.

Yet, the notion that the earl might be forced to marry Lady Roslyn sent a pang

through her heart. Huffing in frustration, Julia rushed back inside, scanning the ballroom. Relief washed through her when she spotted her sister Fanny holding court with a few friends. Julia discreetly beckoned her over, and Fanny left her friends and walked over.

“Julia, what’s wrong? Your cheeks are flushed, and you appear very out of sorts,” Fanny said, her brow creased with concern.

“I have an urgent matter to attend to,” Julia replied quickly, glancing around to ensure no one was listening. “Please, keep Lady Roslyn from leaving the ballroom. I will explain everything when I return.”

Fanny’s eyes widened in alarm. “Julia, what is happening?”

“I will explain soon,” Julia insisted.

Without waiting for a response, she turned and slipped out of the ballroom. She hurried down the hallway, her shoes barely making a sound on the polished floor. She reached the staircase and ascended it quickly, her breath coming in short bursts. The second floor was dimly lit, and Julia felt a flicker of unease as she moved through the shadowy corridors, searching for the library. She knew she had little time to waste—Lady Roslyn and her co-conspirators could be on their way at any moment.

Finally, she found the library, its door slightly ajar. She pushed it open and stepped inside, sweeping her gaze around the room until it landed on the earl, who was seated in a leather armchair near the fire, a book in his hands. The flickering flames cast a warm glow over his features, but his expression was one of deep concentration, entirely absorbed in his reading.

“Lord Ashton,” Julia said urgently as she approached him. “You must leave at once.”

The earl, startled by her sudden appearance, lowered his book and stood, his eyes narrowing. “Miss Fairbanks? What are you doing here?”

“There’s no time to explain everything,” Julia said, her words rushing out in a breathless stream. “Lady Roslyn is planning to enter this very room and compromise you. Witnesses will arrive, including a notorious gossip. You need to leave now—”

Before she could finish, they both heard a faint click , followed by the unmistakable sound of the door locking from the outside. Shocked, Julia whirled around, staring at the door in disbelief. Her heart sank as the reality of the situation set in—they were trapped.

Lord Ashton’s expression darkened, and he moved swiftly toward the door, testing the handle. It didn’t budge. He jerked it hard, frustration flashing in his eyes as he coldly snapped, “Open this door. Lady Roslyn is not inside here with me. It is someone else.”

Silence met his demand, and Julia realized whoever had locked them in had likely already fled.

The earl turned back to her, his gaze sharp with understanding. “You overheard Lady Roslyn planning to compromise me and came to warn me.”

“Yes,” Julia replied, her voice barely above a whisper, her fear and anger mingling in equal measure. “Another lady was supposed to close the door the moment Lady Roslyn entered. I cannot fathom why it was closed now !”

“That accomplice must have been right on your heels and presumed you were ... Lady Roslyn,” he said, his tone unreadable as he took a step closer. “Why did you come to warn me? I thought we were enemies.”

She met his gaze, her heart pounding in her chest. “I have the silly belief that no one should be forced or pressured into a lifelong union.”

His expression grew inscrutable. “I see.”

An awful heaviness pressed against Julia’s heart. “I tried to save you, and now we are trapped together.” She sniffed, the absurdity of the situation dawning on her. “I don’t understand this kind of ill-luck.”

A dark brow winged upward. “Ill-luck?”

“What else could it be?”

“Fate,” he drawled, his voice tinged with a sarcastic bite.

“I thought you a man who didn’t believe in something as whimsical as fate.”

“You are indeed correct,” he said softly, a small frown touching his face before his expression once again turned impenetrable.

“There is a window. One of us could climb out.”

“Has it escaped your notice that we are on the second floor?” he replied dryly.

“We could search for something to tie together and lower me down.”

Lord Ashton laughed, but the sound held no humor. Nevertheless, he obligingly started to look around the library. Julia was painfully aware of him and the ever-present dread that, at any moment, the door could open, and they would be discovered. Perhaps Lady Roslyn had changed her ridiculous plan.

“There are no sheets here, and no one will be climbing out the windows and risking their limbs and lives,” he said tightly.

Julia could hardly control the panic thumping through her heart. “Perhaps there is a way to pick the lock from the inside?”

“Are these skills part of your repertoire?”

Julia flushed at the caustic remark. “No. I thought you might have some hidden knowledge.”

A soft grunt of irritation left him. He parted his lips to say something, then snapped his mouth shut, canting his head as the sound of approaching footsteps echoed down the hallway. Panic flared in her chest, and she instinctively moved closer to the earl, her mind racing for a way out of their predicament. But with the door locked and the key held by someone on the other side, their options were limited.

Lord Ashton’s jaw tightened, and he glanced around the room, his mind clearly working through the situation.

“We need to think quickly,” he muttered, his voice low and urgent. “Stand at the far end of the room. It is best we are found with considerable distance between us.”

Julia hurried to the other side, pressing herself against the wall as her heart raced. The doorknob rattled, signaling that whoever was on the other side was about to enter. She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin, bracing herself for what was to come. The door creaked open, and five ladies framed the doorway, all wearing varying degrees of scandalized shock.

“Ashton!” a voice cried out.



Julia's heart clenched painfully. It was the earl's mother, the formidable Countess of Ashton.

"Ah, Mother, you've come to the rescue," Rafe said with chilling indifference as he stepped forward. "Allow me to escort you downstairs, where I will attempt to explain this ridiculous farce."

The ladies crowded the doorway, and his mother and two others ventured further into the room. The countess's gaze swept the library, unerringly finding Julia. A shocked gasp escaped her before she stiffened her spine, peering down her elegant, aristocratic nose at Julia as if she had seen something most disdainful.

"It always befuddles me that some people have such low breeding as to plan these obvious compromise traps and expect to triumph."

"Do not be silly," Julia drawled, pushing aside the hurt to her pride. "I am far too delightful to ever want to trap myself with an undeserving wretch like your son."

A garbled sound of outrage came from the countess. "Brazen and impudent!"

"Is there any other way to be with those who make erroneous judgments toward people they do not know?" Julia retorted, her tone equally sharp.

"You upstart—"

"Mother," Rafe snapped, his tone so cold that Julia winced.

"You will always speak to Miss Fairbanks with civility, or you will hold your tongue."

Julia stared at him in helpless shock, quickly averting her gaze when the other ladies

tittered. The countess's eyes narrowed dangerously, but Rafe continued, unperturbed.

"This was a plan meant for me to be found with Lady Roslyn."

"I do not believe such nonsense," his mother said tightly, her voice quivering with controlled anger.

"Your belief does not change the truth of the matter," Rafe replied, his voice hardening. He walked forward without sparing Julia another glance, making it clear he intended to prove there was no tendre between them.

"I do not expect any of this to be made into a scandal or gossip," he said, pinning the ladies with a glare that could cut glass. "If anything is done to ruin Miss Fairbanks's reputation, my anger will not be checked."

Warmth bloomed in Julia's chest, and she folded her hands before her to disguise their trembling. The earl escorted the ladies from the room, his presence commanding and unwavering. Once in the doorway, he paused and glanced over his shoulder. For a moment, it seemed as if he was about to speak, but he merely dipped his head in a short bow and vanished down the hall.

Trembling, Julia leaned against the bookcase, pressing a hand over her chest as she struggled to calm her racing heart. Somehow, she knew that her mad dash to warn the earl had altered her life irrevocably; she just didn't know how yet. But an instinctive sense warned her that whatever lay ahead, it would not be without its challenges—and perhaps, its disasters.

### CHAPTER 8

It took only three days for the whispers to start circulating through the ton. Julia had been staying with her mother at her new home ever since her mother remarried and became the Countess of Ashworth. She split her time between her mother's house and her brother Colin's, trying to maintain a semblance of normalcy. But on this particular morning, after finishing breakfast, a servant informed her that her mother requested her presence in the smaller drawing room.

A sense of dread settled in Julia's stomach as she made her way down the hallway. She had a sinking feeling that the news of her being alone with the Earl of Ashton behind a locked door had spread. When she entered the room, her heart dropped at the sight of her grandaunt.

Lady Celdon was sitting on the sofa, her spine rigid, her pale blue eyes narrowed in vibrant disapproval.

Julia mustered a smile and sank into a curtsy. "Lady Celdon, Mama."

Her mother, looking worried, patted the cushion beside her. Julia walked over and sat down on the sofa, bracing herself for the inevitable.

"You have ruined yourself," Lady Celdon said without any preamble, thumping her cane on the floor, her eyes flashing with anger.

Julia lifted her chin, forcing herself to remain calm as she serenely folded her hands in her lap. "I did no such thing."

“Julia,” her mother began. “I was riding in the park earlier when several ladies were whispering and pointing. My good friend Lady Metcalf, with great mortification, informed me that you were in a locked room with Lord Ashton for over an hour. Why did you not inform us of this matter?”

“It was only a few minutes,” Julia corrected, her voice steady. “And I was saving him from a compromising plot.”

Quickly but calmly, she relayed the entire matter, explaining how she had overheard Lady Roslyn’s scheme and rushed to warn the earl.

“Goodness,” her mother breathed, her eyes widening with shock. “What outrageous conduct from Lady Roslyn.”

“The only thing that matters,” Lady Celdon snapped, her voice sharp, “is that now you yourself are ruined . The only way to save you is to arrange a marriage with someone respectable.”

“I do not need saving,” Julia replied tightly, her jaw clenched.

“I beg your pardon?” Lady Celdon demanded, her tone incredulous.

Julia tried to maintain an air of dignified calm. “Am I to concern myself with the opinions of people who have an overblown sense of their own importance? There is a new scandal every day. I am certain this one will blow over soon.”

Her mother’s expression softened. She took Julia’s hands in hers, squeezing them gently. “No, my dear, you need not care about their opinions. But you should care about your own happiness in this life. I see the longing in your eyes when you look at your sisters with their husbands. You feel alone ... so alone after growing up in a rowdy, boisterous family that was always coddling and loving you. We are all

scattered across England now, and when you do visit, you think you see that everyone is happy without you in their lives.”

Her mother’s words pierced Julia’s heart with a sharp pain laced with guilt. Had she been so transparent? “Mama—”

“Do you think I do not know my own children, how they think and feel?” her mother asked, smiling gently at her. “I assure you, we all love you, and we want the same happiness for you that we’ve found. Our family now belongs to high society, and living outside of it would be very challenging. You do not wish to carry a tarnished reputation, Julia. Even if you attend balls with your most influential siblings, there will be those who whisper, point, and spread rumors that you ... have been despoiled.”

Julia’s chest tightened with anxiety, making it difficult to breathe. “I ... the earl did nothing of the sort.”

Her cheeks burned with embarrassment as she fought not to think about the hot, passionate kisses she had shared with him or his bold suggestion that she become his lover.

Oh, God, it’s all a disaster .

“Lord Ashton is unlikely to marry you,” Lady Celdon said. “Given that it has been three full days and he has not presented himself to the family, I am certain he will not make an offer. Despite having two sisters who are duchesses with very influential connections within the ton , they will not be able to force a family as powerful as the Sinclairs. There is no threat that can pressure such a family.”

Julia’s heart twisted with both anger and despair at her grandaunt’s words, but Lady Celdon was not finished.

“Therefore, you must marry one of the gentlemen who have shown you attention for the last couple of seasons,” the old dragon declared. “Viscount Bently has been persistent in his regard, and he comes from a respectable family.

Julia blinked, unable to form an impression of the young viscount. He had stirred nothing but friendship within her heart.

“We will increase your dowry by ten thousand pounds to soften the blow of the scandal. It is the only way to salvage your reputation and ensure a secure future.”

Julia stared at her grandaunt in disbelief, her hands trembling with the force of her emotions. “I will do no such thing,” she said, her voice rising with fury. “I refuse to be forced into a marriage I do not want, to live a life I did not choose!”

“Julia, be reasonable,” her mother said, her tone filled with concern. “Lady Celdon is not advising you to your detriment. We can think of someone else that you admire—”

“Bloody hell, no!”

“Julia,” her mother cried, her tone sharp with rebuke. “You will mind your words and manners.”

But Julia had heard enough. She shot to her feet, her heart pounding in her chest. “I will not let anyone force me into a life I do not wish to lead,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “Are we not the very bad Fairbanks who have weathered countless scandals and still emerge with grace? Why am I not allowed a bit of wickedness, too, and not be pressured against my heart?”

“You know the reason,” Lady Celdon said coldly. “Your family is no longer Fairbanks! There is the Earl of Celdon, the Viscountess Havisham, the Duchess of Ravenswood, the Duchess of Shrewsbury. Do I need to continue?”

Julia trembled. Without answering, she turned and fled from the room, her vision blurred by the tears she refused to shed. She rushed up the stairs to her bedchamber, her mind a whirlwind of sorrow, pain, guilt, and defiance. Once inside, she slammed the door shut and threw herself onto her bed, burying her face in the pillows. She had fought so hard to hold back her tears, but now they flowed freely, soaking the soft fabric beneath her. She was furious with herself for crying, for allowing her family's words to hurt her so deeply. But the thought of being trapped in a marriage with a man she didn't love, all because of a scandal she had tried to prevent, was unbearable.

No. She was not some pawn to be sacrificed for the sake of appearances. Wiping her tears away, Julia sat up, her resolve hardening with every passing second. She would escape this madness, this ridiculous world of the ton and her grandaunt's expectations. But how?

Her gaze drifted to the wardrobe, where she had a set of gentlemen's clothes. She often wore them when she sneaked out to ride astride in the park. A daring, reckless plan began to form in her mind. She would dress as a gentleman, take one of her mother's husband's horses from the mews, and ride down to Penporth. It was a place far removed from the suffocating confines of London society, where she could be free to live on her terms.

She walked to the small writing desk in her bedchamber, sat and took a sheaf of paper from the drawer. Dipping the quill in the ink, she wrote.

Dearest Colin,

I know I promised not to run away again when I felt overwhelmed and confused, but today, I must break that promise, and I hope you can forgive me. I am leaving town and heading to Penporth, where I plan to stay for the remainder of the season. I have taken one of the horses from Lord Ashworth's stables and assumed the guise of a young gentleman, dressing the part convincingly. I assure you, no one will suspect

that I am a lady traveling alone. I also have my allowance and have enough money for my travel. Do not frown. I could not bear the thought of being cooped up in a carriage for the journey—I want to feel the sun on my face and the wind in my hair, to experience a sense of freedom.

By now, you must have heard about the scandal that has befallen me. I comprehend the intentions of our dear mother and even the old dragon's, but I refuse to succumb to societal pressure. I am more than a mere pawn in the game of reputation, and I will not enter a marriage that is not of my own choosing just to avoid disgrace.

I daresay I shall see you and Hermina soon in Penporth for our yearly family Christmas gathering. Please, Colin, do not chase after me. Once I have reached home, I will send a letter to let you know I arrived safely.

With all my love,

Julia

She wrote another to her mother and stepfather, informing him she had taken one of his horses and would arrange for the animal's return. She rang the bell for a servant. When the maid arrived, Julia instructed when the letters would be delivered. Once the maid departed, Julia hurried to the wardrobe. She pulled out the clothes, discarding her gown and dressing quickly in the trousers, shirt, waistcoat and riding jacket. The fit was perfect, even if her curves were slightly more pronounced than she would like. Julia wrapped her hair tightly and tucked it under a cap, securing it in place before donning a pair of boots. Her blade and a pouch with money were placed in her pocket.

She silently slipped out of her room. The house was shrouded in stillness, and Julia swiftly navigated the hallways, ensuring her movements were soundless. Her heart pounded in her chest as she made her way to the back entrance and out to the mews.



The afternoon air was a refreshing caress against her skin as she saddled one of the horses, a sturdy bay mare. Julia mounted with grace and urged the horse into a brisk trot, steering away from London and toward the tranquility she craved.

Rafe's eyes bore into the scandal sheet, a chilling fury igniting in his chest. The investment reports he had been meticulously studying were forgotten, the newssheet crinkling under the force of his grip. The words on the page seemed to sneer at him, their implications as piercing as daggers.

Dearest readers,

This author has it on the highest authority that the only Miss F who remains unmarried has scandalously set her cap at the illustrious and most sought-after Earl of A.

Refusing to read another word, he tossed the sheet aside, his jaw clenched in anger. He lifted his gaze to his sister Rebecca, who watched him with concern and curiosity.

"Why have you shown this to me?" Rafe demanded.

"Everyone is talking about it," Rebecca replied softly. "Is ... is the Earl of A you? My friends seem certain of it and have plagued me with many questions."

"Do not listen to idle gossip," he said curtly, standing up from his desk.

Before Rafe could say more, the door to his study opened, and his mother entered, her expression stubborn and persistent. Her gaze flicked to the discarded scandal sheet, and her lips tightened in disapproval.

"I see you are already aware of what is happening," she said, her tone measured but firm. "You might feel some sense of responsibility for this chit, Ashton. However, let

me warn you, there is no need for you to rush to her rescue and offer marriage.”

He lifted a brow, his irritation barely masked. “I was not planning to rush anywhere.” No, when he acted it would be with calm pragmatism.

Relief flooded his mother’s eyes, and she sighed heavily as she sank into an armchair, smoothing the skirts of her gown. “Good. I had a conversation with Lady Celdon earlier, and it seems the family intends to resolve this matter on their own. I implore you, son, do not interfere. Lady Roslyn has written to me, asking for an audience with you. She has written to you several times but received no response.”

“I burned them without opening the envelopes,” Rafe replied icily, his tone leaving no room for doubt about his feelings.

His mother flinched at the harshness in his voice but pressed on, her concern evident. “Ashton, I ask that you not be too harsh. Listen to Lady Roslyn’s apology, at least. She is young and misguided. We all make mistakes; perhaps she deserves a chance to explain herself.”

He scoffed, his anger flaring anew. “I have no desire to listen to anyone who could be so conniving and spiteful. There is nothing Lady Roslyn can say that would justify her actions. She set out to trap me, and in doing so, she endangered the reputation of another.”

“But she is remorseful,” his mother insisted, pleading. “Roslyn understands the gravity of what she has done. Perhaps, with time, she could—”

“Could what, Mother?” Rafe interrupted, his tone sharp. “Redeem herself in my eyes? Lady Roslyn is no concern of mine. How has Miss Fairbanks’s family solved the matter?”

His mother hesitated, her eyes flickering with unease before she spoke. “Lady Celdon, who has remained a good friend despite the Fairbanks joining her family, informed me that Miss Julia will marry someone to restore her respectability. Lady Celdon has already begun making arrangements, a young viscount who showed interest in the young chit for the last two seasons.”

Rafe felt as if the ground had been pulled from under him. Unexpected denial gripped him, making it hard to think. He thought of the woman he had kissed, the fire in her eyes when she had spoken of her belief that no one should be forced into a lifelong union. He recalled her charm, spark, the essence of her that had intrigued him from the moment they met.

The idea of that spark being dimmed, of her being forced into a marriage to save her reputation—because she had tried to save him—was unbearable. Worse still was the thought of her in another man’s arms, in another man’s bed.

No. He couldn’t even damn well think of it.

Without another word, Rafe turned and strode from the room, ignoring his mother’s startled call. His footsteps echoed in the hallway as he hurried down the stairs, his mind racing with a singular purpose. He had to find Miss Fairbanks before she was pushed into a marriage she didn’t want.

Rafe had no clear plan, only the overwhelming need to stop what was happening. He called for his stallion from the mews. The footman, sensing the urgency, quickly went to relay the message. A few minutes later, his sleek black stallion, Orion, was brought around. Rafe mounted the horse and urged it into a swift gallop as he headed straight for the Earl of Celdon’s house.

When he arrived at the grand townhouse, he dismounted and tossed the reins to a waiting groom. His heart pounded as he strode up the steps, his boots striking the

cobbled stone with purpose.

Rafe knocked and, as the door opened, clipped, “Inform Lord Celdon, the Earl of Ashton has called.”

The butler led him directly to the drawing room without question. Rafe wondered if his presence was anticipated.

“Wait here, my lord. I will inform his lordship that you wish to speak with him.”

Rafe nodded, his thoughts already focused on the conversation ahead. He barely registered the elegant furnishings of the drawing room. A few minutes passed, the door opened, and Lord Celdon entered the room. Rafe immediately noticed the resemblance between the earl and his sister—the same brilliant blue eyes, the same defined beauty. There was no mistaking that they were siblings.

“Lord Ashton,” Lord Celdon greeted him, his voice steady as he regarded Rafe with a measured gaze. “To what do I owe the pleasure of this unexpected visit?”

Rafe wasted no time. “I am sure you know the scandal linking my name with your sister, Miss Julia. Before further conversation, I wish to speak with her.”

Lord Celdon stared at him for several beats, his expression unreadable. Then, without a word, he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a folded letter. He handed it to Rafe, his gaze never leaving his face.

Rafe took the letter, his eyes scanning the handwriting. As he read Julia’s words, a mix of emotions surged within him—relief, amusement, and something deeper that made his heart clench.

I refuse to succumb to societal pressure. I am more than a mere pawn in the game of

reputation, and I will not enter a marriage that is not of my own choosing just to avoid disgrace.

He read those lines twice before lowering his gaze to the rest of her words.

Rafe couldn't help the laugh that escaped him as he finished reading. Of course, Julia had run away. The little spitfire had taken matters into her own hands. He handed the letter back to Lord Celdon. "Thank you, Celdon. I appreciate you sharing this with me. Will you chase her?"

Lord Celdon studied him carefully, his expression softening just slightly. "No. Julia has always been headstrong but hides it well beneath her sweetness. Will you chase after her, Ashton?"

Rafe hid his surprise. "You do not seem afraid that I might do so."

A rather enigmatic smile curved Lord Celdon's mouth, and he made no reply. Without another word, Rafe turned and strode from the house, his mind already planning his next move.

### CHAPTER 9

After riding for several hours, Julia's body ached, especially her buttocks, from being in the saddle for so long. The previous night, she had stopped at a small inn nestled in the rolling hills of the countryside, enjoying a hearty supper of steak and potatoes accompanied by a tankard of ale. She had grinned at the thought of someone from the ton seeing her disguised as a gentleman, her behavior entirely unbecoming of a lady. The inn had been cozy, with a roaring fire in the hearth and fresh bread wafting through the air. She had taken a room and rested, leaving early this morning as the sun rose over the horizon.

The countryside around her was breathtaking, with lush green fields stretching as far as the eye could see. The late afternoon sun cast a warm, golden glow over the landscape, and the gentle breeze carried the scent of wildflowers and fresh earth. Small clusters of trees dotted the hills, their leaves rustling softly in the wind.

This was what she loved the most. Nature. Julia tugged on the reins and slipped from the horse, groaning at the ache in her muscles. She allowed the horse to wander freely as she stretched her legs, feeling the stiffness in her limbs begin to ease. It would be another four days before she reached Penporth, but for now, she reveled in the freedom of the open road.

She lifted her face to the evening sun, smiling as the warm rays caressed her skin. The world around her felt peaceful, serene—until a hard arm suddenly swept around her waist and lifted her off her feet. Shock rippled down her spine, and Julia screamed, only to have the sound abruptly smothered by a large hand covering her mouth.

“You might startle the horse into running,” a familiar voice murmured in her ear.

As if on cue, the horse suddenly bolted, leaving her alone with the man who held her so effortlessly. Her mouth was freed, but before she could react, she was scooped up into his arms as if she weighed nothing at all. He whirled her around, and Julia found herself staring up into stormy silver eyes that were both furious and intense.

“You reckless hellion,” Rafe snapped, his voice low and harsh. “Do you know what could have happened to you, traveling alone like this?”

“I have my blade,” she retorted fiercely, struggling to gather her wits. “Why are you here? How did you—”

Before she could finish, he slammed his mouth onto hers, kissing her with a ravenous greed that immediately drowned her senses in a flood of shocking heat. The world around them vanished as her body responded to his, her heart racing, her breasts aching. When he finally lifted his head, her lips felt bruised, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

“My lord—”

“I think it’s time you called me Rafe ... Julia,” he said, his voice rough and possessive.

He lifted her effortlessly without warning and slung her atop his powerful black stallion. With impressive skill, Rafe vaulted up behind her, his strong arms slipping tightly around her waist as he urged the horse into a gallop. They didn’t head toward Penporth but took a different path entirely.

“What are you doing?” she gasped, trying to calm her pounding heart.

“Kidnapping you,” he replied, his tone dangerously calm.

Julia twisted in the saddle, turning her head to look up at him. The Earl of Ashton was as handsome as ever, his features chiseled and resolute, his eyes dark with determination. The wind tousled his dark hair, and the setting sun cast a golden hue over his tanned skin, highlighting the sharp angles of his face. There was an intensity about him, a raw energy that frightened and excited her.

“Do you mean to debauch me?” she asked, her voice trembling with a mixture of fear and anticipation.

This is madness. I have lost all of my good sense and forgotten all the lessons my sister-in-law taught me.

“Thoroughly,” he said, his gaze unwavering.

She gasped, her eyes widening at his boldness. His expression had no humor, only a hard edge that told her he was deadly serious. Yet, beneath the anger, she sensed something more akin to desperation, as if he were fighting a battle within himself.

“If you force me,” she said furiously, “to be your mistress, I will have my revenge. You won’t see it coming, my lord, but you’ll feel the pain of it.”

A low, rough chuckle escaped him, vibrating through her body where they were pressed together.

“I believe you, Julia. But there will be no force. You will enjoy every bit of pleasure I give you—with my mouth, my fingers, and my cock.”

His wicked, crude words were so arousing, so provocative, that they left her speechless. But not emotionless. A heated flush spread through her body, and she felt



something hot and delicious coil low in her belly at the thought of his mouth on hers once more. She dared not think about what his fingers might do, though her body betrayed her, tingling with anticipation. Her sisters Penny and Phoebe had given her enough information about bedding to know exactly what he meant by “cock,” and the thought of him using it on her sent a shiver down her spine.

“Bloody hell,” she whispered, almost to herself.

“Why am I not surprised you curse?” he said dryly, amusement lacing his words.

Julia sniffed, refusing to dignify his comment with a response. Instead, she focused on the revenge thoughts swirling in her mind, taking some measure of comfort in them. Exhaustion crept over her, the long hours of travel finally taking their toll. Surely, that was the only reason she relaxed against his broad chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath her cheek. Slowly, the tension drained from her body, and before she knew it, she had slipped into a deep, comforting sleep, lulled by the rhythm of the horse’s gallop and the warmth of the man holding her.

“Wake up,” a soft voice murmured near her ear.

Julia stirred, blinking groggily as she stared up at a magnificent four-story manor that stood proudly against the night sky. The manor, both majestic and charming, was bathed in the soft glow of moonlight, casting long shadows over the stone walls and ivy-covered turrets. The night was dark, but the sky above was sprinkled with stars, twinkling like diamonds in the vast expanse. As the cool night air brushed against her skin, recollection rushed through her, and with a gasp, she straightened, moaning softly as she felt the stiffness in her body.

“How long was I sleeping?” she asked, her voice laced with disbelief.

“More than four hours,” Rafe replied, his tone gentle. “I stopped a few times, and you

didn't stir. You were exhausted."

"That's not possible," she murmured, though the evidence of her fatigue and trust in him was clear.

"Come, let me help you down."

Rafe dismounted and then reached up to assist her. As her feet touched the ground, her legs wobbled slightly, and he steadied her, his strong hands on her hips, pulling her gently against his solid frame. Julia's cheeks flushed at the closeness, the heat of his body seeping into her as she tried to regain her bearings. She looked up at the imposing manor, its tall windows reflecting the moonlight, casting a serene glow over the rolling lands that stretched out behind it. A large, still lake lay beyond the house, its surface like glass, reflecting the stars above. The estate was vast, with gently sloping hills and neatly trimmed hedges that framed the drive. It was the very picture of tranquility and power combined.

"Where are we?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper as she took in the beauty around her.

"At my principal estate in Hertfordshire," Rafe replied, his tone calm yet holding an undertone of something more.

She jerked away from him, turning to face him fully. His expression remained composed, but there was a rather provoking gleam in his eyes, one that made her heart skip a beat. "We're at your country estate?"

"Yes."

"Why?" she asked, her heart beginning to race, her mind swirling with confusion and anticipation.

Rafe took a step closer, his gaze never leaving hers. “To meet my daughters,” he said, his voice steady and sure.

Julia’s breath caught in her throat, shock rendering her speechless for a moment. She stared at him helplessly, her mind reeling. Before she could gather her thoughts, he gently brushed his mouth over hers, a tender, almost teasing kiss that sent a shiver of warmth through her.

“Julia,” he murmured, his lips still close to hers, “will you marry me?”

Her eyes widened, and she stepped back slightly, trying to make sense of the sudden proposal.

“We hardly know each other,” she whispered, her voice trembling with uncertainty, yet a fierce joy leaped inside her chest.

Rafe’s gaze softened, though his resolve remained unshaken. “I entered the marriage mart because I wanted a mother for my daughters,” he said, his tone persuasive yet sincere. “My father grew me to be an honorable man. What kind of cretin would I be to let you face society’s unfair contempt after you so fearlessly rushed to save me. I cannot woo someone else while you reside in the ashes of ruin. Scandal is already roaring through the ton , and we are already inexplicably linked. Our marriage will make our families happy, and it will preserve their reputations—and ours.”

“I doubt your family will be happy . Have you forgotten I am a Fairbanks?” Julia demanded shakily. Her throat felt tight, and Julia loathed the heaviness pressing against her heart. “So I understand you, the only reason you want to marry me is because of your duty to your children and your honor.”

He took a step closer, his gaze never leaving hers, and Julia felt the space between them shrink, the air charged with something she could not name. Rafe gently cradled

her cheek, his touch warm and comforting.

“No. I like and admire you, Julia. I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anyone. I desire you with such an intensity that even wooing another would be a discredit to myself and to that lady, for you are always in my thoughts.”

“Can passion be the basis for any marriage?” she whispered aching, wanting to lean into him and simply let him hold her.

“Many have married for less. If you agree, we will get married in the morning after you meet my daughters.”

Julia’s heart pounded as she looked up at him, her emotions a whirlwind she could barely comprehend. “How is that even possible?” she asked, her voice trembling. “How can we be married in the morning?”

Rafe’s lips curved into a small, knowing smile. “I have a marriage license in my pocket,” he revealed, his eyes gleaming with a mixture of determination and affection.

Her breath caught as realization dawned on her. Julia knew it took a few days to procure a special license, and it would have her name on it as it was not a common marriage license. The earl planned to marry her even before she had run from London, even before the scandal broke in society. Even if it was to save her reputation, he had taken the necessary steps. Her heart lodged in her throat, and emotions she barely understood burned through her, leaving her feeling both vulnerable and exhilarated.

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice filled with a quiet intensity. “Yes, I will marry you.”

Julia leaned into him and brushed her lips over the underside of his jaw. A soft

shudder went through his frame, and she heard him swallow. Smiling, she turned around and walked toward the glorious manor that would soon be her new home.

### CHAPTER 10

Julia felt stares upon her face before she heard the whispers.

“Miss Fairbanks is like a princess,” an awed, small voice said. “I wish papa woke us when they arrived last night!”

“She is more beautiful than a princess,” another voice refuted. “Should we hurry and sneak away before Mrs. Tilby notices we are missing from the schoolroom?”

“I do not know. I want to wake her, but papa says we must allow Miss Fairbanks to sleep as she has had a h ... h ... I cannot recall the word.”

“Harrowing,” the other sister supplied.

“Yes, a harrowing time these last few days.”

“What do you think papa meant?”

“Perhaps she ate too many candies like we did that time and we got ill.”

Julia tried her best not to chuckle as she listened to the soft, earnest voices. After she entered the manor last night, exhaustion had overwhelmed her so she had refused a dinner tray, followed the housekeeper to a bedchamber, stripped off her clothes, and promptly fell asleep. Now, as the whispers continued, she struggled to keep a smile from her lips, charmed by the innocence and curiosity of the children. They already reminded her of her darling niece, Lily.

Slowly, Julia allowed her eyes to flutter open, pretending to wake naturally. Two small figures stood at the foot of the bed, their wide, curious eyes fixed on her.

“Hullo,” Julia said softly, a smile tugging at her lips.

The girls gasped, their eyes widening further in surprise and delight. They were remarkably like their father, with the same striking silver eyes that gleamed with intelligence and mischief. However, unlike Rafe’s dark hair, theirs was a soft, golden blonde, neatly tied back with ribbons that matched the pale blue of their dresses. The dresses themselves were charming—simple yet elegant, with lace trimming the collars and hems. The girls vibrated; their excitement barely contained.

“You must be Lady Grace and Lady Emma,” Julia said, her smile widening. “You are the ones who look like princesses.”

The girls giggled in unison. They beamed at her, clearly thrilled by the notion, their youthful energy filling the room with warmth.

“We were waiting for you to wake up,” Grace said, her voice a mixture of shyness and excitement.

“So we could watch you marry papa!” Emma added, her eyes shining with anticipation. “But Mrs. Tilby said we have to do our studies until you’re ready.”

Julia chuckled softly, charmed by their enthusiasm. Mrs. Tilby sounded strict. Conscious she was naked beneath the coverlets, Julia held it against her and sat up in bed. “I promise I won’t keep you waiting long,” she said, reaching out to gently touch their hands. “I will hurry with my preparations and meet you both in a few minutes.”

The girls exchanged delighted looks before dashing from the room, their laughter trailing behind them like a melody. Julia watched them go, her heart swelling with

warmth. They were utterly endearing, and the thought of becoming a part of their lives filled her with a sense of both responsibility and joy.

Julia slipped from the bed and rang the bell for a servant. Her gentleman's clothes from the previous day had been freshly laundered and folded neatly on a chair by the window. A bath was prepared for her, and she lowered herself into the large copper tub, the heated, rose-scented water soothing her muscles as she reflected on the unexpected turn her life had taken.

"Why do I not feel scared at the thought of marrying Rafe?" she murmured, collecting the water with her palm and tipping it over her face. "What if I am making a mistake?"

Though she asked herself the question, no doubt or uncertainty crept into her heart. Julia realized it was perhaps because she was so drawn to him, and if he had wooed her, she would have been endlessly delighted. Also, their marriage would make her mother and Lady Celdon quite pleased and no longer worried about her being ruined.

After her bath, Julia sat at the vanity, allowing the maid to brush her hair until it shone lustrously in the morning light. The maid seemed shocked by her choice of attire, but helped her dress in the trousers, shirt, and waistcoat. Julia chose to let her hair remain free, rippling over her shoulders and back.

Just as she was finishing, the door opened, and Rafe entered the room. Her heart fluttered, or maybe it was her stomach. He paused for a moment, smiling at the sight of her dressed once again as a gentleman.

"I apologize," he said, his voice laced with amusement. "I was so impulsive last night that I did even think about the clothes you would need for a wedding. We can wait until you have something more appropriate."



“No, I am perfectly happy to marry you in trousers.”

Rafe stared at her as if she were the most fascinating creature he had ever encountered, a look of admiration and something deeper flickering in his gaze.

“Have you no dreams of a grand wedding or bridal trousseau?” he asked with soft intensity. “I can give them to you.”

That warmth spread throughout her body again. “I do not want to wait. I have been to many weddings these last few years. I have eleven siblings, and I am the only one that is unmarried. I confess I have never thought about having a large wedding, only the man that would one day move my heart to marry.”

“Your family—”

“Will understand that this is my moment to be a little bit wicked and will celebrate with me however I wish in the future.”

“An unusual family dynamic,” he murmured.

Julia smiled. “We love and support each other in all that we do.”

Without another word, he extended his hand to her, and she took it, feeling a flutter of excitement in her chest. He led her downstairs, where the girls were waiting eagerly in the hallway.

“Julia, I’d like you to formally meet Lady Grace and Lady Emma,” Rafe said, his voice warm with affection as he introduced his daughters. “And this is Mrs. Tilby, their governess.”

Mrs. Tilby, a stern-looking woman with kind eyes, offered a polite nod. “Miss

Fairbanks, a pleasure to meet you.”

Julia returned the gesture, her attention quickly shifting back to the girls, who were practically bouncing on their toes with excitement.

“We picked these for you,” Grace exclaimed, holding out a small bouquet of wildflowers.

The flowers were a cheerful mix of colors—daisies, buttercups, and lavender, their delicate petals still glistening with dew.

Julia accepted the flowers with a smile, deeply touched by the gesture. “Thank you, they are beautiful,” she said, her heart swelling with affection for the two little girls.

Together, they walked into the library, which had been transformed. Julia gasped.

“Papa has been working with the staff to have this perfect for you, Miss Fairbanks,” Emma chirped.

Rafe scowled and tugged his cravat as if it were tightening around his throat. Julia lowered her head, so he did not see her smile and ventured deeper into the room. Flowers were everywhere, filling the room with a sweet, fragrant aroma. The sunlight streamed through the tall windows, casting a golden glow over the scene. It was simple, yet so lovely and perfect.

The local vicar stood ready, a gentle smile on his face as Rafe and Julia approached. Rafe’s hand remained firmly in hers, and as they exchanged vows, she felt a deep sense of rightness, as though this was exactly where she was meant to be.

When the ceremony was over, Rafe kissed Julia on the cheek, a tender yet fleeting touch that sent a tremor through her heart. The reality of it all—the vows they had

exchanged, the new title she now bore—washed over her in a dizzying wave. She was now the Countess of Ashton. The weight of it settled on her shoulders, making her feel both exhilarated and faint, as if the enormity of the situation was only just registering with her senses.

Grace and Emma beamed up at her with radiant smiles, their joy infectious, and even Mrs. Tilby smiled.

“The girls must return to their lessons, my lord,” Mrs. Tilby said, her tone gentle yet firm. “My lady, if you will excuse us.”

The girls’ faces fell, their excitement dimming as they obediently shuffled away, casting longing glances back at Julia. For a moment, she almost called them back, wanting to hold onto the warmth of their presence, but she bit her lower lip and resisted the urge. She glanced up at Rafe to find him staring at her with an intensity that made her breath catch.

His gaze was dark and consuming, as if he wanted to devour her whole. Her belly chose that moment to grumble loudly, and she laughed, the sound breaking the tension.

“Allow me to escort you to the breakfast room,” he said, with a wry smile.

He led her from the library, down a grand hallway lined with impressive paintings, each frame telling the story of his lineage, his heritage. The house was vast and imposing, and so very lovely.

As they entered, Julia noticed the servants casting startled glances her way, a few eyes lingering on her attire with barely concealed curiosity. The smell that wafted from the breakfast room was warm and inviting.

Rafe inclined his head in a small bow. “I have matters to attend to. I will not join you, as I have already eaten.”

Was it her imagination, or was there an air of awkwardness about him?

“I understand,” she replied, trying to keep her voice steady.

He hesitated for just a moment, his eyes lingering on her before he turned and walked away, leaving her alone in the breakfast room. Julia sat down and was soon presented with a delicious array of food and ate toasted bread slathered with strawberry preserves, crispy bacon, eggs, sponge cake, thinly sliced ham, and three steaming cups of hot chocolate. The meal was divine, but she could not dismiss the niggling sense of aloneness that settled in the pit of her stomach.

Julia lingered at the table long after she had finished eating, her thoughts drifting to the man who was now her husband. Rafe had already returned to his duties, as if their marriage was just another task on his agenda. Perhaps, for him, it was. Julia inhaled deeply, trying to think practically, not letting her emotions guide her.

We are only just wedded , she reminded herself. This match was unexpected for both of us. It’s natural that he would return to his daily routine .

But the truth was, Rafe was not in love with her. And she was not yet in love with him—though she was already endlessly fascinated by him. But fascination was not enough. Julia wanted more. She wanted their bond to grow into something deeper. She wanted them to love each other, truly and passionately.

“And that cannot happen without knowing who my husband is, and Rafe knowing who his wife is,” she whispered to herself.

Julia had always dreamed of marrying for love, and just because she had been thrust

into this marriage by a compromising trap gone wrong did not mean she had to resign herself to a life of mere respectability and politeness. She wanted more than just a pleasant, companionable marriage—she wanted his heart. And she had never been one to shy away from reaching for what she desired.

Her thoughts drifted to the night ahead—their wedding night. The mere thought made her pulse quicken, and a blush spread across her cheeks. She had no notion of what to expect, only vague ideas from whispered conversations with her sisters. But one thing was clear: if she was to win Rafe's heart, it would begin tonight.

### CHAPTER 11

Rafe stood before the connecting door that led to his wife's bedchamber, a rueful laugh escaping him. He had been tormented with want since the first night he kissed her in Hyde Park, yet here he was, hesitating. Despite the burning desire that had simmered within him all day, the reality of their marriage still felt surreal.

He had seen Julia only in passing since their brief, simple ceremony that morning—a ceremony so understated it had stunned him. His previous marriage had been a grand affair, held in a London cathedral packed with hundreds of guests from the ton, many of whom he had no real connection with.

But this ... this was different. Julia had not seemed unhappy with the simplicity of it all, but Rafe couldn't shake the feeling that he wanted to do more for her, delight her senses, and show her the depth of his intentions. Even if he himself hardly understood the driving need to see her smile and her eyes sparkle with unmatched joy.

After the ceremony, he retreated to his office and spent several hours dealing with estate matters and writing letters. One to her brother, Lord Celdon, and another to her mother, Countess Ashworth, informing them of the marriage. He had also written to his mother and sister, sharing the news. Instructions were sent to his solicitor and man of affairs to set aside one hundred thousand pounds, an estate in Berkshire, and a townhouse in London as Julia's widow's portion. He ensured the news of their marriage was sent to *The Morning Chronicle*, *The Times*, and several other newspapers. By tomorrow, all of London would be abuzz with the announcement that Miss Fairbanks was now the Countess of Ashton.

Later in the afternoon, after meeting with his steward and man of affairs, Rafe went to the dining room, eager to see his wife. Instead, he found her in the smaller dining room where the girls usually had their supper. They hadn't noticed him at first, and Rafe stood in the shadows, watching in astonishment as Julia engaged Grace and Emma, her presence lighting up the room.

"Grandmother never allows us to eat with the adults," Grace had gasped. "We've always wanted to!"

"It's not very proper," Emma had added, though her tone was wistful.

"Well, I have never been all that proper," Julia had declared with a wink, making the girls giggle.

A pang of alarm had jolted Rafe. He had melted away, eating alone in the larger dining room, a part of him wishing he was with Julia and his daughters. A rigorous ride had done nothing to temper the temptation beating at him. He wondered if she awaited him now, ready to consummate their wedding night.

Perhaps he should wait ... give her more time.

Even as he reasoned this, his feet moved independently, propelling him toward the door. Rafe knocked once, then opened the connecting door. Julia was seated before her vanity, a brush in her hand as she worked it through her glorious tresses. Her head was bent forward, revealing the delicate curve of the nape of her neck. A surge of heart-pounding awareness burned through his body with fiery intensity. Rafe wanted nothing more than to walk over, press his mouth to that exposed skin, and wrap his arms around her, shielding her from everything but him.

She was wrapped in one of his banyans, the silk fabric far too large for her slender frame. The hem dragged on the floor, and though she had knotted the belt several

times, the front still gaped slightly, offering tantalizing glimpses of the sensual shape of her body beneath. The flickering firelight and candles cast a warm glow over her, highlighting every curve.

“I borrowed your banyan,” she said softly, setting the brush down. Then she stood and turned to face him.

Her hair cascaded over her shoulders, the soft waves framing her face and spilling over the front of the robe, teasingly hiding the shadowed cleavage beneath. Rafe’s breath caught in his throat. She was so beautiful it was almost painful to look at her.

“I’ve been thoughtless,” he said hoarsely, closing the door behind him. “I forgot to summon a modiste to create a new wardrobe for you.”

Julia’s gaze gleamed with something that sent his pulse racing. “I’ve already sent instructions for my trunks, portmanteau, valises, and hat boxes to be delivered here. They should arrive in a few days. For this season, I had a new wardrobe made with more exciting and bold colors. They were more suitable for a married lady, so I don’t need to procure new clothes.”

Rafe smiled. “Do you plan to wear my robes until your trunks and valises arrive?”

She gave him a considering glance, her lips curving into a playful smile. “I allowed for the possibility that you might keep me naked for a few days.” Julia tilted her head, a teasing glint in her eyes. “My sister Penny said that was her experience.”

It felt like the ground had been pulled from beneath Rafe’s feet. The gentle simmer of desire he’d felt upon seeing her blazed into hot, powerful lust with those provocative words. His body ached with need, his cock throbbing painfully. Her gaze lowered to the front of his banyan, and she blushed before quickly looking away.



His wife smoothed her palms down the front of the robe, the slight tremble in her fingers betraying her nerves. She was anxious and trying to hide it. The awareness rushed through him, dampening his desire. Rafe raked his fingers through his hair, fighting the sudden restriction in his chest.

This must be so hard for her.

“Sleep well, Julia. We will speak in the morning.” Rafe whirled around, forcing himself to walk back to the connecting door, every step a battle against his instincts.

“Stop.”

Her voice was soft, but it hooked into his chest and froze him in place.

“Why do you leave?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

“You’re afraid,” he said gruffly, his back still to her.

“I am nervous ,” she said. “There is a distinction.”

“I will give you time,” he replied, his voice rough with the effort of restraint.

There was a considering pause, and he forced himself not to look over his shoulder at her, afraid that one glance would undo his resolve.

“Time for what, Rafe?”

“We need time to get to know each other,” he said. “I didn’t properly woo you, and you didn’t get the chance to know me—”

His words faltered when he felt her slim, elegant hands slip around his waist from

behind. A shudder worked through him at the unexpected touch. He hadn't heard her approach, and now, with her body pressed against his back, Rafe was acutely aware of Julia's scent and the shape of her soft body against his while everything else around him lost its focus and meaning.

"I don't wish to wait," she whispered, her breath warm against his skin. "That will make me more nervous."

Her hands fell from around his waist, and she stepped back. Rafe turned to face her, and a curse slipped from him. She stood gloriously naked, the banyan a pool of silk at her feet. Her breasts were small but firm and round, topped with pink, diamond-hard nipples. His mouth watered just looking at them.

"I believe it is your turn," she murmured, even as red stained her cheeks.

When he did not move, Julia reached out and tugged at the knot which held his robe closed. The tie loosened and his robe parted. Her gaze immediately went to his cock which was hard and throbbing.

"Oh," she said on a soft gasp, her eyes widening.

Rafe reached for her, flushing her against his chest, lowered his head and caught her mouth with his in a greedy kiss.

He dragged his mouth from her lips down to her arched throat. Rafe paused to feel the wild flutter of her pulse in the small hollow at the base, pressing his tongue against her skin. He kissed the arch of her collarbone, and his cock ached at the sweet murmurs and gasps of delight she made.

Rafe lifted her and stumbled with her onto the bed. She giggled when her body bounced, and he climbed over her, brushing his mouth over her quivering belly.

Though he was desperate to take her, Rafe felt the artless innocence in her responses and heard it in her low, aroused moans of wonder. Her slender body twisted and arched as he kissed and touched her body, stoking her pleasure until she trembled. He molded the full mounds of her breasts, his thumbs and forefingers capturing her peaked nipples and rolling them. She gasped, thrusting her fingers through his hair when he sucked a nipple into his mouth. The taste of her was intoxicating, as hot and sweet as wild honey, and she was crying out sharp, breathless sounds of pleasure.

Julia felt as if she drowned in pleasure. She moaned, barely able to breathe. There was a frantic passion and desperation in their coming together, yet there was also tenderness. Rafe continued sucking her nipple while one of his hands was between her legs, touching her sex, slowly circling his finger around the small nub at the top of her sex, and she would have screamed if she'd had enough breath.

He slid his fingers down and slid one deep. He pressed his leg between hers and shifted his foot, widening her more to his intimate caress. Julia cried out, a sound of breathless arousal, and her entire body blushed at her overwhelming wetness. The sensations filling her were like nothing she could have imagined.

Rafe's fingers left her body, and he shifted down, and lifted one of her legs over his muscled shoulder. He opened her legs even wider and before she even had an inkling about Rafe's intentions his mouth was hot on her exposed female flesh.

She went rigid from an unbearable surge of pleasure. He kissed her sex, flicking his tongue over her clitoris. Julia jerked and he gripped her buttocks firmer, angling her closer to the stroke of his tongue.

She cried out, helpless to stop the lustful sounds spilling from her throat. Her entire body clenched unbearably, the tension coiling tighter and tighter, the heat engulfing her. Rafe moved up her body and a hard, blunt pressure nudged her entrance. Julia clutched his shoulders as he flexed his hips and thrust his cock deep inside her body.

That hot coil of tension abruptly snapped at his deep invasion, and she convulsed, as ecstasy blew her apart.

“Fucking hell,” he gasped, withdrew once, surged forward and then groaned.

They both breathed raggedly, and Julia whispered, “Is it over?”

He laughed, dropping his forehead on hers. “Yes.”

“Oh.”

“I assure you, it should have lasted much longer,” he said gruffly. “It has been a while.”

“Hmm, I think it is simply because I am wonderful.”

His chuckle sank into her body and filled her with warmth.

“Is that so, countess?”

“Yes.” She slipped her hand around his nape, aware of the deep ache between her legs and that their bodies were still joined. “How long has it been since you took a lover?”

He inhaled sharply. “Bloody hell.”

“Why the surprise?”

“A gentleman does not discuss something as delicate as past lovers with his wife.”

“Truly?”

“Yes.”

She nudged forward and brushed her mouth against his. “I am certain by now you know that I am quite different.”

“I do know,” he murmured, capturing her mouth to deepen the kiss. Rafe released her from his drugging kiss and said, “It was three years ago. I had a brief ... interlude.”

There was a throb of something raw in his tone. Julia pressed a finger along his jaw. “Why do you sound guilty?”

His eyes peered into hers for several beats.

“Are you to know my most intimate thoughts, wife?”

“Yes.”

He jerked, and Julia knew she had surprised him with her answer. “I shall not hide mine from you ever,” she murmured.

“That interlude was the first such intimacy I shared after the death of my first wife. Though four years had passed, somehow ... I felt as if I violated our vows.”

Empathy scythed through her heart, and she gently pressed her mouth to his. He groaned and deepened their kiss for several moments. She gasped when he gently withdrew from her body. Rafe padded further into her bedchamber, and she watched the play of muscles on his shoulders and back as he walked. He was delineated with lithe muscles, and Julia never imagined the naked body could be this beautiful.

Rafe returned with a washcloth and gently cleaned her. Then to Julia’s aroused surprise, he came over her body, nudged her thighs wide and slid his cock deep into

her sex, his satisfied grunt and her moan of pleasure echoing in the bedchamber.

“Rafe,” she gasped, her nails sinking into his shoulders. “I thought ...”

He kissed the corner of her mouth. “That our loving was over?”

“Yes.”

“That was to take the edge off. I plan to love you for the entire night until you ask me to stop.”

“Why would I ever ask you to stop?” she all but purred, dragging her legs up his muscled calves until they were hooked around his hips. “This is glorious.”

“You will ask when you are too sore to take any more.”

Julia’s eyes widened and a blush coasted over her body. She felt slightly achy now, but the feeling of him so hard and deep within her was also rousing, rekindling the pleasures Julia experienced earlier.

Rafe started to move inside her body with long, deep strokes, devastating all her senses with pleasure. She clutched his shoulders helplessly and buried her face in the curve of his neck as that wanton heat spread low in her belly once more. She lifted into his thrusts, her thighs falling open wider. Soon she was crying out, sharp, breathless sounds as he plunged into her sex, hard and deep. A heavy ache coiled low in her stomach, drawing tighter as the piercing sensations intensified. Pleasure swept through her in a hot, unrelenting rush, and Julia unraveled several times before he found his release.

They took a hot bath together, the warmth of the water soothing away all the aches in Julia’s body. She quickly realized that Rafe was not a talkative man; he seemed to

find comfort in contemplative silence. Julia didn't mind, enjoying the quiet moments where she could relish his kisses and simply lie atop his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath her.

He was insatiable in his hunger for her, and Julia matched his passion with her own, savoring every moment of their intimate connection. He made love to her three times that night, each time more intense than the last. When she finally yawned, exhausted, Rafe tenderly tugged the coverlets over her, his touch gentle.

She was drifting into a contented sleep when she felt the bed dip with his movements. Rafe pressed a soft kiss to her forehead and then began to walk toward the connecting door. Julia opened her eyes, sat up, and stared at his retreating form.

"Where are you going?" she asked, her voice husky with sleep.

He paused, then turned around to face her. "To my bedchamber."

A jolt of confusion and something deeper—disappointment—went through her heart. "Why?"

She sensed his surprise more than she saw it.

"As husband and wife, we have different bedchambers," he replied, his tone matter-of-fact.

Julia blinked, trying to make sense of it. "Do you have odious sleeping habits?"

"No," he said, a faint smile touching his lips.

She tilted her head slightly, curiosity burning in her chest. "Did you sleep apart from your first wife, my lord?"

“She preferred it that way, and I enjoy sleeping alone.”

Julia bit her lower lip hard, trying to center herself against the unfamiliar sensation twisting inside her chest. “I’ve never been married before ... but I always presumed that a married couple slept in each other’s arms.”

She was certain all her sisters did so with their husbands. The thought of sleeping alone after the closeness they had just shared felt ... wrong. Julia delicately cleared her throat, trying to hide the vulnerability she felt. “I bid you good night, Rafe.”

“Sleep well, Julia,” he said softly, then stepped through the connecting door, closing it quietly behind him.

Julia sat there, gripping the sheets pooled at her sides until her fingers ached. That peculiar sense of loneliness crept through her body once again, a feeling she had hoped to leave behind now that she was married. She stared at the closed door for several long moments. Finally, unable to ignore the pull in her heart, she shoved the covers aside, marched to the connecting door, and wrenched it open.

Oh!

Rafe was standing there, as if he had been waiting for her. A slow, knowing smile curved his lips, and without a word, he reached for her, lifting her against his chest as if she weighed nothing. His mouth claimed hers in a kiss that was both tender and possessive, and Julia’s heart fluttered wildly in response.

Rafe carried her back into his bedchamber, laying her gently on his bed. They slipped under the covers together, and he tugged her into his arms so that she lay atop him, her face resting against his chest. The warmth of his body, the steady rise and fall of his breathing, brought a deep sense of comfort.



In that moment, Julia knew she had made the right choice. As she drifted off to sleep, she felt a quiet resolve take root within her. She wasn't going to let the distance between them grow—not tonight, not ever.

### CHAPTER 12

Rafe was endlessly fascinated by his wife. Last night, for the first time in his nine and twenty years, he had slept with a woman sprawled atop his chest—one who mumbled in her sleep, telling someone named Lizzy that it was her turn to feed the hens. He had been so astonished by her endearing sleep talk that he had chuckled, but she had remained deeply asleep, utterly unperturbed. When he woke this morning, it had taken every ounce of his willpower not to make love to her again. Julia was passionate and wild, a woman who stirred something deep within him.

His daughters had been disappointed to be sent off to their lessons instead of spending the day with Julia, but he assured them they had all the time in the world to enjoy her company. Now, as the afternoon sun cast a warm glow over the landscape, Rafe and Julia rode side by side into the village. She wore her gentleman's attire, her hair caught up in a loose chignon, giving her an effortlessly elegant yet slightly rebellious look that he found captivating.

Their journey to the village had started by chance. He had encountered her heading toward the stables, and to his surprise, she had smiled brightly, walked up to him, and kissed him on the mouth as if the stable master and his assistant weren't milling about. Her cheeks had been rosy with the flush of the morning air, and her eyes gleamed with sensual awareness and delight.

When she mentioned wanting to visit the village to make a few purchases while waiting for her trunks to arrive, Rafe had offered to accompany her. The way her entire face lit up with a smile had sent a tender warmth spreading through his chest, and he had nearly pulled her into his arms to kiss her again right then and there.

As they approached the village, Julia turned to him with a mischievous glint in her eye. “How about a race, my lord?”

Rafe raised an eyebrow. “A race?”

“Yes,” she said, grinning. “First one to the village square wins. I must be given a boon once I win.”

“A boon?”

“Of course, if you will, I shall also grant you one.”

He couldn’t resist the competitive gleam in her eyes. “Very well, wife. Prepare to be left in the dust.”

With that, they both spurred their horses into action, galloping side by side across the open fields. The wind whipped through Julia’s hair, and Rafe found himself impressed by her skill as she handled her horse with ease and confidence. She matched him stride for stride, her laughter echoing in the air, full of pure joy and exhilaration. When they reached the village square, Rafe had to admit she had beaten him by a narrow margin.

As they slowed their horses, he noticed the curious stares of the villagers, particularly the ladies, who were clearly taken aback by Julia’s men’s clothes. His wife seemed unconcerned with their stares and whispers, riding with the grace and confidence of a woman who was utterly unconcerned by the opinions of others.

Rafe recalled that his wife had been willing to face the ton’s wrath to live life on her own terms. Admiration welled inside his chest. She was unlike anyone he had ever known—fearless, independent, and utterly captivating.

Julia waved her hand toward a sign as they approached the local modiste's shop. They dismounted and tied the horses' reins to the hitching post before entering the quaint establishment. Inside, the dressmaker greeted them warmly and presented Julia with a few dresses and pelisses that had been ordered but never collected. Julia examined the options, selecting several pieces and arranging for alterations while they toured the other shops, purchasing small items and enjoying the leisurely pace of the afternoon.

As they exited a sweets shop, Julia turned to Rafe with a smile that held a hint of mischief. "I'm ready to discuss my boon," she said.

His eyebrows lifted in surprise as he slanted a curious look at her. He had almost forgotten about that boon. "I'm listening, wife."

"I would like to oversee Grace and Emma's lessons for two or three days out of the week. Also, they spend too much time in the schoolroom—six days per week is excessive."

His heart jolted, and he carefully considered her request. "Why do you feel this is necessary?"

"They are unhappy," she said simply.

A cold wave of anger surged through him. "My girls are not unhappy."

Julia lifted her chin, meeting his gaze with unwavering resolve. "I was their age once. I was never made to attend lessons from Monday to Saturday without any real break. After their lessons, they retreat to the library to read and practice their needlepoint, then have supper and retire to bed. They may not voice their dissatisfaction, but I've seen the longing in their eyes during the few times we've spoken. They hunger for something more, something different. They are now a part of my life, and they are

wonderful girls who deserve to experience more.”

Rafe’s jaw tightened as he processed her words. “This routine was established by their mother long before they were even born, countess.”

Julia’s eyes widened slightly before she frowned thoughtfully. “I see. Of course, what their mother wanted is very important.”

Rafe nodded. “Their grandmother also approved their curriculum and has added to it over the years.”

“The Dowager Countess of Ashton?”

“Yes.”

Julia held his gaze for a long moment, her expression contemplative. “What role do you envision I should play in Grace and Emma’s lives, my lord?”

His heart squeezed at the careful, almost hesitant look in her eyes.

“You are ... you are their new mother,” he said gruffly, the words feeling both strange and right on his tongue.

A radiant smile spread across Julia’s face, striking his heart with unexpected force.

“Good,” she said softly. “As their mother, I will not take my role lightly. Family has always been precious and important to me, Rafe. I shall oversee their education for three days out of the week. I will always honor what their mother wanted. But I am now also responsible for their care and happiness. Do you understand, my husband?”

My husband .

A knot formed in Rafe's throat, and for a moment, he could only stare at her, a sense of wonder unfurling in his chest. He recalled his daughters' letters mentioning how they wished they could take lessons outside sometimes, but Mrs. Tilby strictly forbade it. Though his girls had never deeply complained or expressed their unhappiness, he now realized that they had simply accepted the rigid structure of their lives, much like his first countess, Anna, who had been a model of ladylike decorum. But Julia ... Julia was different. Her cultured tones spoke of a fine education, her manners were exemplary, yet there was an undeniable hint of wildness about her that he found intoxicating.

"I will trust your judgment, countess," he said.

A sheen of tears glistened in her eyes, and she ducked her head to hide her expression. Rafe's gut tightened as he realized she had feared he would refuse her request, understanding now why she had challenged him to a race in exchange for this boon.

"Julia," he murmured.

She looked up at him, her eyes still bright with unshed tears.

Unable to resist, he stepped closer and cupped her cheeks, his thumb brushing away a stray tear. Her eyes widened slightly, but she didn't pull away. "Thank you for marrying me," he said gruffly. "Thank you for taking my girls' happiness into your care. And thank you for leaving everything you knew behind ... to be with me."

Rafe leaned in and pressed a tender, light kiss to her lips. He knew gossip might spread through the countryside about his inability to keep his hands off his new countess, but in that moment, he didn't care. All that mattered was the woman in his arms.

When they finally returned to the dressmaker's shop, Julia's new dresses were ready. She thanked the seamstress with a gracious smile, her earlier apprehension replaced with contentment. As they rode back to their estate, thunder rumbled overhead, and the first drops of rain began to fall. Julia laughed, lifting her face to the sky as the droplets rolled down her forehead and neck, her joy infectious.

She felt Rafe's gaze on her and glanced at him, her eyes sparkling with mischief. Without a word, he dismounted from his horse, reached for her, and pulled her against his body. Their lips met in a passionate kiss, one that ignited the fire that always seemed to simmer between them. It took so little—a kiss, a touch—to bring their desire to full flame, like cinders catching in dry grass.

Rafe's fingers threaded through her hair, loosening the pins and letting the soft, fine strands tumble over his hands. He reveled in the sensation, in the sight of her hair cascading down her back, reaching almost to her waist. Her subtle, delicate scent surrounded him, and he inhaled deeply.

In that moment, as the rain poured down around them, Rafe knew he had found something precious—something he hadn't even realized he was missing. Another elusive sensation whispered through him, but it was warm and heady. The rain poured harder, and he broke their kiss, grabbing her hand and running into the thick copse of trees.

### CHAPTER 13

Julia's laugh turned into a moan when her husband pressed her against the thick trunk of a large oak, taking her mouth in a deep kiss. Rain still pummeled their bodies, but she did not feel cold, only a staggering heat as desire burned through her body. She fisted her fingers through the thick strands of his hair, responding with helpless greed, sucking at his tongue.

One of his hands coasted down her body, tugged at the flap of her trousers and delved deep, his fingers unerringly finding her clitoris.

"How can I be so desperate for you when I made love with you three times last night," Rafe said against her mouth.

She trembled, and whimpers of need escaped her as he dragged his mouth over the arch of her neck and bit into her throat ... right above her fluttering pulse. He eased from her, tugged the shirt loose, opened her trousers, and shoved them down. Then he dropped to his knees, cupped her buttocks and pulled her forward.

She trembled at the first feel of his mouth on her sex and then cried out when he sucked her clitoris into his mouth. He licked and tormented her sex with his tongue until she was a trembling mess. Julia never thought arousal could be this all-consuming. A desperate moan left her lips when he raked his teeth over her clitoris, sliding two fingers deep inside her sex. Her fingers slid slowly into his hair, tangling into the wet strands. Pressure built in sharp, wicked spikes until ecstasy burst over her senses.



He rose, gripped her hips and turned her to face the tree. His powerful form was almost flushed to her back. He opened her legs wider, but the trousers at her ankles prevented it from going too wide. There was a dip behind her, her hips were arched and his cock pressed against her sex.

Rafe shoved inside, and Julia cried out as her flesh burned at the heavy invasion. One hand stayed at her hip, while the other snaked around her belly and down to her mound. Two of his fingers pinched and rubbed her nub as he started stroking his cock inside her.

His body slid into hers with piercing depth and strength, filling her with pain and pleasure. He was not gentle, and she did not want him to be. Wicked sensation coiled low in her belly and against the nub that he still rubbed. She felt every inch of him as he withdrew and plunged inside her to the hilt. Though it still rained, Julia felt molten heat had invaded her body.

He rolled his hips, plunging into her over and over. With every stroke, the pleasure built inside her until it broke, splintering the pleasure that had coiled so tightly inside of her. It felt as if ecstasy blew her apart, and with a groan, he thrust hard three times, then found his own release. Rafe gently eased from her body, and he pressed what felt like a handkerchief against her sex, cleaning her. He stopped and tugged her trousers up and closed the flaps.

Julia weakly dropped her hands from the tree and slumped against Rafe's chest, feeling the steady thrum of his heartbeat against her back. Her pulse was still racing, her breath coming in soft, ragged gasps.

"I do not know who I am when I am with you," he murmured.

Her husband sounded rattled, as if the passionate intensity of their loving had shaken him to his core.

She turned around to face him. “Is that a bad thing?” she whispered, gently brushing a wet lock of hair from his forehead, her fingers lingering on his skin.

“I just made love to you here in the woodlands,” he replied. “Madness.”

Julia laughed. “And it was wonderful.”

Rafe stared at her for a moment, and then a slow smile spread across his lips. He tightened his arms around her, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

She smiled, feeling a warmth spread through her chest. Why did it feel so wonderful to be in his arms?

“Come, you look like a drowned kitten,” Rafe teased.

“As long as you didn’t say rat,” Julia replied fondly, her smile warm despite the rain.

They mounted their horses and raced back to the manor. Once they arrived, Julia hurried to her bedchamber to freshen up after their adventure. The clothes she had bought at the local modiste were soaked through, and she handed them to a servant to be dried and ironed. She then took a long, soothing bath, letting the warm water ease away the lingering aches in her muscles. As she soaked, her thoughts drifted to Grace and Emma. She remembered the rigid structure of their daily lives and how their eyes had lit up when she spent time with them the previous day.

Julia wanted to show the girls that life wasn’t always about strict rules and propriety. However, she was mindful not to undermine the values Rafe had instilled in them or their positions as daughters of a powerful and influential earl.

After her bath, Julia dressed in one of the new, dried day gowns, which flattered her figure remarkably well. She dried her hair and brushed out the tangles, allowing it to

flow freely over her shoulders.

When she descended the grand staircase, she was greeted by the sight of dozens of servants lined up along the prodigious hallway, along with the butler and housekeeper. Rafe waited for her at the bottom of the stairs, and once she reached his side, he introduced her as their new mistress, the Countess of Ashton. Julia selected a young girl from among the staff and promoted her to be her lady's maid, then spent some time with the housekeeper and cook going over the menu for the rest of the week.

The manor was run with a wonderful efficiency that needed little input from her, a testament to the capable housekeeper, Mrs. Davidson. Julia made her way to the schoolroom after her brief tour of the household operations. Grace and Emma were seated at their desks, working diligently on their lessons under Mrs. Tilby's watchful eye. Julia smiled as she entered the room, immediately drawing the girls' attention.

"Mrs. Tilby," she greeted warmly, glancing at the ornate clock on the wall. "I thought Grace and Emma's lessons ended at five each afternoon?"

The governess rose and offered a quick curtsy. "Sometimes we go over the allotted time, my lady. Today is one of those days."

"I see." Julia ventured further into the room. "Their lessons run from ten in the morning to five, with an hour break for luncheon. Please ensure they are excused promptly and do not remain in the schoolroom longer than necessary. I will also be overseeing three of their lessons each week."

"My lady!" Mrs. Tilby exclaimed, her voice tinged with alarm. "This will be a disadvantage for the girls. I must respectfully disagree."

Julia's smile remained. "I wasn't negotiating, Mrs. Tilby. Rest assured; I will always

keep their curriculum in mind.”

The governess appeared taken aback but quickly dipped into a small curtsy.

Turning to Grace and Emma, Julia’s expression softened. “Ladies, how would you like to dine with your father and me this evening?”

Emma’s eyes widened in surprise. “In the main dining room? With the adults?”

Julia’s smile deepened. “Yes, in the main dining room. Would you like that?”

Before the girls could respond, Mrs. Tilby interjected, her tone respectful but firm. “It is not proper, my lady.”

Julia turned to her, maintaining her calm demeanor. “Thank you for your input, Mrs. Tilby, but this decision lies with me. The girls will dine with us tonight.”

Mrs. Tilby hesitated, clearly uncertain about this breach of tradition and decorum, but after a moment, she curtsied and said, “Yes, your ladyship,” before quietly leaving the room.

Julia turned back to Grace and Emma, her smile returning as she saw the excitement in their eyes. “Go and get ready. We’ll dine together, just the four of us.”

The girls beamed with delight, practically bouncing in their seats as they hurried off to prepare. Almost an hour later, Julia walked into the dining room with Grace and Emma by her side. Rafe looked up from his seat, his expression one of mild surprise. He stood and bowed to them, his eyes lingering on Julia with a hint of admiration.

The girls charmed her by lowering into perfect curtsies, a testament to their impeccable upbringing.

They sat down to dine, and the atmosphere was warm and relaxed. The girls were clearly thrilled to be included, their laughter ringing through the room as they shared stories of their day. Julia couldn't help but feel a deep sense of satisfaction as she watched them. As she glanced at Rafe, she saw a faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, and she knew she was on the right path to bringing their family closer together.

The following day Grace and Emma lounged on a blanket with Julia close by the lake, nestled beneath the sheltering branches of a towering elm. The shade provided a cool respite from the noonday sun, and the gentle rustle of leaves created a peaceful backdrop to their conversation.

Grace shook her head as if she couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "Learning to ride astride?" she asked, her voice a mixture of shock and excitement.

"It's an invaluable skill all Fairbanks ladies must possess," Julia replied with a playful smile. "I'm now part of your family, and you're part of mine."

Emma, who had been studying the list Julia had written, looked up with widened eyes. "Flying kites?"

"Another essential skill," Julia confirmed. "Especially when we visit our extended family. There will be lots of competition, and we must win!"

The girls exchanged determined nods, their young faces alight with anticipation.

"Swimming lessons?" Grace added.

"Climbing trees," Emma chimed in.

"Fishing," Julia continued, her tone conspiratorial.

The two girls looked at her with a mixture of awe and disbelief.

“You’re going to teach us all of this?” they asked in unison.

“Of course,” Julia said with a wink.

Their response was immediate—excited shrieks of delight that they quickly tried to silence by clapping their hands over their mouths.

Julia leaned in, lowering her voice to a whisper. “The most important lesson you’ll learn,” she said, “is that when you’re at home with those who love you, you can be yourself. So laugh, shriek, and shout your happiness.”

With that, she playfully dived toward them, wiggling her fingers as she started tickling their underarms. The girls squealed with laughter, their joy infectious as they wriggled and squirmed beneath her teasing.

That’s how Rafe found them—his wife and daughters in a heap of laughter and unbridled joy. He cleared his throat, the sound rough but not unkind. All three of them froze and scrambled to their feet, their laughter fading as they dipped into curtsies.

### CHAPTER 14

Rafe took in their disheveled appearance with a bemused expression. Their hair had come loose and tumbled down to their waists, their hems bore telltale mud stains, and neither Grace nor Emma wore shoes. In the distance, Julia spotted Mrs. Tilby hovering with a look of resigned disapproval.

“Ah,” Julia said dryly. “We have been tattled on.”

Rafe’s lips twitched. “Mrs. Tilby expressed her concern about the girls taking their lessons outdoors.”

“We love the outdoors!” Grace cried, her voice full of excitement. “Please, Papa, can we stay?”

“Of course, we can stay,” Julia said, meeting Rafe’s gaze with a playful challenge. “Your papa didn’t come to scold us but to join our lessons.”

Rafe raised his eyebrows. “I did?”

“Yes,” Julia said with a grin. “We’re going to catch frogs today.”

“Catch frogs?” Rafe echoed, casting her a glance of disbelief.

Emma smiled up at him, her eyes bright. “Yes, Papa! We will learn to catch them without hurting them. It will help us with our problem-solving skills and teach us to be gentle.”

Rafe cleared his throat. "I must admit, I've long had a ... certain hesitation when it comes to frogs."

The girls giggled, clearly amused by the idea. Julia smiled at him, powerful emotions clutching her heart.

"My papa is not afraid of anything," Grace declared staunchly, looking at Rafe with adoration in her eyes.

Julia smiled at the exchange, then clapped her hands. "Well, shall we go and find some frogs, then?"

With eager nods from the girls, the group made their way into the woods, following a narrow path that wound through the trees. The sunlight filtered through the leaves, casting dappled shadows on the forest floor. The air was filled with the sounds of birdsong and the rustling of leaves as they ventured deeper into the woods.

Before long, they reached a small clearing where the grass grew thick and lush. Julia dropped to her belly in the grass, her eyes scanning the area for any signs of frogs. The girls, delighted by her enthusiasm, immediately followed suit, their faces inches from the ground as they searched for their elusive quarry.

Julia glanced over her shoulder and grinned. Rafe stood back, watching with a mixture of amusement and admiration. She winked at him, and he chuckled. She lifted her chin, beckoning him closer. Unable to resist, he joined them on the ground, much to the girls' delight.

"There is one!" Emma whispered excitedly, pointing to a small frog hidden among the blades of grass.

Julia carefully reached out, cupping her hands around the tiny creature. She gently



lifted it, showing it to the girls, who stared in wide-eyed wonder.

“See? No harm done,” she said softly before releasing the frog back into the grass.

“Do you know what classification of living things a frog belongs to?”

Grace’s eyes widened, and she nodded. “Amphibians.”

Emma gasped, clearly impressed with her sister.

“That is wonderful, Grace. The word originates from the Greek word *amphibia*, which means living a double life. Why do you think they used this origination to name this class.”

“I think because the frog has two lives,” Emma said, “one in the water and one on the land.”

“Perfect,” Julia said. “We have small and large frogs that can move over ten times their body length in a single hop. Look at his eyes. Do you see how it bulges? The bulging eyes of frogs allow them to see in many directions—above, below, in front, and to the sides, all simultaneously.”

The girls gasped their awe, and as the lesson continued, clapped their hands in excitement whenever a piece of knowledge delighted them, their laughter filling the clearing. They continued their search, finding a few more frogs as they made their way toward a nearby brook.

When they reached the brook, Julia jumped into the shallow water, splashing the girls as she landed. Grace and Emma shrieked with delight and quickly followed her into the water, their giggles echoing through the trees.

Rafe sat on a boulder and watched them, a warm smile spreading across his face.

“Will you not join us, my lord?” Julia called.

He stood and waded into the brook to join them. There was a look in his eyes with which she was unfamiliar, but something inside her heart responded with a violent ache. As if he couldn’t help himself, Rafe reached for Julia, pulling her close and pressing his lips to hers in a tender kiss.

He lifted his head, raking his fingers through his hair. “I do not know what came over me,” he said.

Then he kissed her again, his mouth lingering a bit longer. Julia leaned back and splashed him, quite aware that she blushed.

The girls gasped, their eyes wide. “Papa!” they cried in unison.

Rafe laughed, the sound deep and warm. He grabbed both girls without hesitation and kissed their cheeks, much to their delight.

“Now we are all kissed,” Julia said with a laugh.

The girls giggled, clearly pleased with this turn of events. They spent the next hour playing in the brook, catching frogs, and splashing each other until they were all thoroughly soaked and breathless with laughter.

As they returned to the manor, their clothes wet and their spirits high, Julia felt profound contentment and a longing for her sisters and brothers. This method of teaching was how their parents had taught them in Penporth before her father died.

“Your lessons are not over for the day,” Julia said, laughing at their eager nods. “Mrs. Tilby will help you girls tidy, and we will meet in the smaller drawing room for luncheon. After our luncheon, I will give you pianoforte lessons. I shall tidy myself

and meet you both shortly.”

The girls ran off, and Julia gasped when Rafe grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the stairs. Given the lustful gleam in his eyes, she knew why he climbed the stairs so rapidly.

“You would not dare,” she spluttered, trying to pull her hand from his. “I have my duties to attend, my lord, and you have yours.”

She laughed when he swung her into his arms at the top of the stairs and walked her to his bedchamber. Once inside, he closed the door and slammed his mouth against hers, kissing her with deep passion.

“By God, I cannot get enough of you,” he said raggedly.

The lustful desperation in his voice caught her by surprise, and then the knowledge of her feminine power flooded through her. It was shocking how swiftly molten heat rushed through Julia, and she hurriedly helped him strip off his wet clothes. He trailed his fingers up the length of her leg. Then he explored farther, letting his hand drift up the sensitive skin of her inner thigh. His diabolical fingers slipped between the juncture of her thighs and speared deep inside her sex.

Julia cried out into his kiss, and her hands tightened around his nape. They did not reach the bed, tumbling onto the lush Aubusson carpet. Somehow, they kept kissing, with deep, lingering glides of their tongues and short nips that allowed them to breathe. He nudged her thighs wide with his and surged his cock deep inside her.

She sobbed against his mouth, lifting her legs high to hook around his back. Their loving was fast and passionate, and soon, she was clawing his back and unraveling. Rafe swallowed the wild cry with a kiss, and his deep groan reverberated inside her as he also found his pleasure.

It took a few seconds before he rolled off her onto his back. Julia giggled, then slapped her hand over her mouth to contain the sound. He slipped his hand beneath her and lifted her so most of her was atop his body.

“You were wonderful with the girls,” he said after a few beats. “They had an entire lesson and loved every minute of it.”

Julia laced her fingers with his and stared at their clasped hands, a lump in her throat. “That was how my papa taught me. I ... I was the youngest of twelve children and hated lessons.”

“Twelve children is rather amazing.”

“Hmm,” she said, laughing. “I now realize the passion my father and mother must have owned for each other.”

“Why did you hate the lessons?”

“I just hated being indoors. My mama said it was because everyone doted on me, and I was spoilt.” Julia chuckled. “Perhaps there was some truth to her words. Papa would take me on many adventures in the woods, teaching me about birds and frogs, making fire, and telling the north from the south. Papa loved to travel and would tell me such tales of the cities he visited.”

“He sounds like a good man,” Rafe said. “I can hear the echoes of longing and grief in your voice.”

“Papa died when I was not yet ten years. My eldest brother Colin, my sister Lizzy, Fanny, and James all took turns taking me outside and teaching me after papa died. I think ... I think it was their way of keeping his memory alive.”

“How did your brother become the Earl of Celdon?”

“He was a distant cousin, perhaps thrice removed. He inherited it when I was fourteen years old, and ... it seemed like overnight, our lives changed.” Julia shifted so she could see his face. “Will you tell me about your first wife?”

“Anna?”

“Yes.”

A quick frown settled on his brow as he seemed to retreat within himself. “I met Anna when I was only twenty and she was nineteen, enjoying her first season. At first, I did not notice her, but my mother arranged for us to be introduced. She was very sweet, beautiful, shy, but honest, kind, and charming. I courted her for three months before I made an offer, and she accepted.”

“Were you and Anna happy?”

“Yes. I had only inherited the earldom three years before we met, but I understood my duties and responsibilities. When she got pregnant, Anna was radiant. She spoke about her hopes and dreams for our children every day. She only saw them for a few minutes, but I have never seen her happier in those few minutes. Anna kissed their foreheads, said she was exhausted, closed her eyes and never woke.”

Sorrow clutched Julia’s throat. “Oh, Rafe, I am so sorry. Anna’s family must have been devastated.”

“They are still trying to heal,” he said, slipping his arms around her waist and pressing his palms flat on Julia’s belly.

Her heartbeat quickened, and she realized he was thinking she, too, would one day

have their child. It felt like the air had been snatched from Julia's lungs. Their gazes collided, and with a sense of shock, she noticed nothing warm in his eyes, only a cool reserve. She lowered her lashes and rolled from his body.

“Will you join us for luncheon?”

“Not today. I have estate matters to attend to.”

She nodded without looking at him, wondering why her heart felt suddenly and unexpectedly heavy.

### CHAPTER 15

Rafe had never known his home could be so filled with joy. The girls' laughter and the sound of their feet skipping down the hallways echoed through the manor, infusing the old house with a new, vibrant energy. Even the servants seemed different—always smiling as they went about their work, their eyes lighting up whenever they saw the girls or his wife. Mrs. Tilby, who had once been a staunch guardian of propriety, even remarked that the girls were more attentive in the schoolroom, crediting it to the positive influence of her ladyship.

Perhaps there was something to be said for a bit of rule-breaking after all.

Rafe and Julia had only been married eight days, and already his wife seemed to know the names of every staff member she encountered. She graciously thanked them for their work, and the beaming smiles they returned made Rafe realize how accustomed he had become to merely commanding and expecting obedience.

The days and nights had passed in a sensual blur. It sometimes seemed to Rafe that they spent more time naked than clothed, and he found himself endlessly fascinated by Julia's passion and the way she matched his desire. Unlike his time with Anna, where he had always been mindful of her delicate sensibilities and kept their encounters few and gentle, with Julia, there was an intoxicating intensity that he couldn't resist. She provoked feelings in him that he wasn't entirely comfortable with—feelings that made him feel out of control, something he wasn't used to.

He realized how deeply she had affected him when he found himself abandoning his duties just to watch her teach his daughters how to swim in the lake. Julia had also

taken them out in a rowboat, listening to them read as they drifted along the water. Later, they spent the day building a kite, turning it into a lesson on patience and diligence. The girls had been rewarded with the sight of the kite soaring high in the sky, their laughter filling the air.

Julia was an astonishingly talented pianoforte player, even impressing the hard-to-please Mrs. Tilby with her ability. The girls, who had previously dreaded their music lessons, now begged to have them daily. Even when he knew he had work to attend to, Rafe found it impossible to keep away from Julia. She was turning his life upside down, and he wasn't sure how to handle it.

That evening, Rafe opened the connecting door to Julia's bedchamber and was surprised to find the room brightly lit, with a roaring fire in the hearth. Julia sat in the center of the bed with Emma and Grace, surrounded by letters. He blinked, momentarily taken aback by seeing his daughters out of bed at such a late hour.

"Who is this one from?" Emma chirped as Julia pried open a letter.

"Ah, this one is from my sister Lizzy, also known as the Duchess of Ravenswood."

"Your sister is a duchess?" Grace gasped, her eyes wide with amazement.

"Yes," Julia replied with a grin.

"Is she very proper?" Emma asked, clearly curious.

Julia laughed. "Oh, dear me, no. Lizzy is a right hellion. Once, she even challenged a gentleman to a duel."

Rafe nearly choked on the air at that revelation. Somehow, he had thought his mother repeated unfounded gossip.



“What does her letter say?” Grace asked, her excitement bubbling over.

“Let me see,” Julia said, clearing her throat. “Dearest Julia, I am not at all surprised you are now the Countess of Ashton. Fanny told me she suspected you owned a tendre for the earl. I shall listen to your plea and not descend on your home for a visit—yet. I am delighted to have two more nieces to adore. Please let Grace and Emma know I cannot wait to meet them and teach them how to hunt.”

The girls gasped in unison. “Hunt?”

“Oh, yes,” Julia said, her eyes twinkling. “Lizzy taught me, and she is rather brilliant at it.”

She finished reading the letter and reached for another. “Oh, girls, this one is from my sister Emma—your namesake, Emma. She says, ‘Dearest Jules, Grace, and Emma, we are thrilled to learn we have two more darling girls in our family. I’m already preparing gifts for when we see you this Christmas in Penporth.’”

“Penporth?” Emma asked, tilting her head in curiosity.

“It’s the small village where we grew up,” Julia explained, affectionately running the back of her finger over Emma’s nose. “We always spend a couple of weeks in December there. All my siblings with their husbands and wives and children.”

“Will we go too? To meet all our aunts and uncles?” Grace asked, her voice full of hope.

Julia hesitated. “I shall speak to your papa about it. What do you and your father usually do for Christmas?”

“We go to church with Aunt Rebecca and grandma,” Emma said. “Then we have a

feast, and after that, we go to bed.”

Julia’s expression softened. “Your grandma and Aunt Rebecca will miss you dreadfully if we leave for Christmas.”

“But we want to meet the rest of our Fairbanks family,” Grace cried. “We want to meet Lily and our other cousins!”

Rafe lifted a brow. Our Fairbanks family? It seemed his daughters were already seeing themselves as part of Julia’s extended family, an idea that brought a surprising warmth to his chest.

Bloody hell. It would infuriate his mother. He also smiled, imagining her outrage.

“Very well,” Julia said with a smile. “We shall invite your grandmother and Aunt Rebecca to accompany us.”

Rafe nearly groaned. His mother would never consider visiting a place like Penporth. But before he could voice his thoughts, the girls began to laugh and chatter about all the new things they would learn and the family they would meet. As Rafe watched them, he couldn’t help but smile. Julia glanced up, and when their eyes met, the sweetest smile touched her lips, freezing him in place.

His heart thundered in his chest—how was it possible to feel so much just from a smile?

“Your father is here,” Julia said, her voice warm, “and I think he’s ready for our chess game.”

“Can we play too?” Emma asked eagerly.

Julia laughed. "It's time for bed, little ladies. Tomorrow, I'll start teaching you."

The girls hugged her tightly, their faces glowing with love and happiness. The sight brought a lump to Rafe's throat. He knew, with absolute certainty, that if he had married any of the women on his mother's list, his daughters wouldn't be as delighted or content as they were now. A cold realization settled in his chest, and he sent a silent prayer of thanks to the heavens that Julia had been the one to end up as his wife, even if it had been through an accidental compromise.

He could not imagine any other woman sleeping in his arms each night, crying out her pleasure so wantonly, or laughing and talking to him so freely without worrying about propriety. Their nightly conversation covered all sorts of topics from gossip, farming techniques, politics, and how they could delight in each other while making love.

He tried to close out the memory of her sweet, lush lips closing over his cock last night as she learned to please him that way.

The girls ran to their rooms, their excitement barely contained, and Rafe moved toward the bed where Julia waited. Without a word, he lifted her into his arms and carried her to his bedchamber. She looked around, noticing the chess set already placed on the bed, and smiled at him.

"You already won four out of our six games," she said, her voice filled with amused accusation.

"Sore loser," he replied with a grin, placing her gently in the center of the bed.

They settled in for a rousing game of chess, the playful competition at times saw his wife grabbing a pillow to teasingly hit him.

“Who taught you?” she cried, biting her lip in fierce concentration. “You are too good.”

“It was my father,” he said with a chuckle. “He had a routine where he would spend two hours with me each day before he started his day. He would teach me about my inheritance, how to be strategic and practical, how to think with my mind and not my heart.”

“What is wrong with thinking with your heart?”

“It makes fools of us men. Emotions cannot be trusted. Only pragmatism that is calmly reached.

She wrinkled her nose. “Have you ever thought with your heart and not your logic?”

“When I married you,” he answered before thinking. Hell. It revealed far too much to his countess.

Her eyes widened, and then she gave a delighted shout of laughter. Bemusement filled Rafe’s chest, and then he smiled.

“We need to hurry and finish this game so I can ravish you,” she said, leaning over to pluck up a knight.

Julia was quick-witted and strategic, making the game a thrilling challenge. Rafe was more impressed with each move she made, and her intelligence and sharp mind matched her beauty in a way that captivated him completely.

After several intense plays, Rafe finally won the game. Julia laughed, clearly enjoying the challenge despite her loss. He reached out, drawing her into his arms, and their playful banter melted into a kiss—soft at first, then deepening into

something more passionate.

As the fire crackled in the hearth, casting a warm glow around the room, Rafe made love to his wife, cherishing every moment of their connection. Although his feelings for her were overwhelming, he embraced them fully instead of forcefully shoving them aside.

Almost an hour later, Julia lay peacefully against his chest, her breathing soft and even as she slept. Rafe gazed at her lovely face, but as he did, a familiar dread began to stir within him. The old fear clawed at his heart—what if he lost her the way he lost Anna? The thought twisted inside him, spreading like a slow poison. How could he have been so careless, taking her to his bed almost every day since their first night together?

Rafe frowned, trying to shake off the dark thoughts. Why am I even thinking about this now? He had faced these fears before and battled them with logic and reason. Only after conquering those nightmares did he decide he was ready to marry again. When his mother urged him to remarry three years ago, he had been plagued by terrible dreams—visions of a faceless new wife dying as she struggled to give him an heir.

But he had conquered those emotional thoughts. Rafe had spoken to doctors and midwives and read countless articles by noted physicians on the reasons some women lost their lives in childbirth. He understood that it didn't happen to every woman, that death, while inevitable, was not something to live in fear of.

His heart had healed, and he believed himself ready to move forward. Yet now, as he looked at the sweet contentment on Julia's face, the thought of her pregnant and possibly losing her life brought a cold wave of terror crashing through him.

By God, she already means so much to me .

Ruthlessly, Rafe pushed those insidious fears aside, refusing to let them take root. He tightened his arms around her, drawing comfort from the warmth of her body against his. Slowly, he allowed himself to relax, focusing on the steady rise and fall of her breathing until he, too, drifted into sleep, holding her close.

### CHAPTER 16

Julia and the girls were enjoying a leisurely riding lesson on the estate grounds when the sudden sound of a carriage rolling to a stop nearby caught her attention. Before she could react, a shrill voice pierced the air, filled with indignation and fury.

“What is going on here? How dare you have my granddaughters behaving in this manner!”

Julia looked up, her heart lurching in her chest as she recognized the source of the voice—Rafe’s mother, the Dowager Countess of Ashton. The lady descended from the carriage, her face flushed with outrage and her finger trembling as she pointed accusingly at the girls.

“What is this nonsense?” the dowager countess demanded, her voice sharp as a whip. “Why are my granddaughters riding astride?” She all but screamed the last word, her usual decorum forgotten in the face of what she clearly considered an unforgivable breach of propriety.

Julia quickly glanced at Grace and Emma, who sat astride their ponies with trousers peeking out from beneath their dresses—trousers that Julia had stayed up late the last few nights sewing for them. The girls’ eyes were wide with worry, tears beginning to gleam in their gaze as they looked at their grandmother, clearly distressed by her reaction.

Lifting her chin, Julia met the dowager’s fierce gaze with calm resolve. “They are learning to ride astride, Lady Ashton, for their own safety and confidence.”

“Riding astride?” the dowager countess repeated, her voice incredulous. “In boys’ trousers? This is unacceptable!”

Without another word, the dowager turned sharply on her heel, her skirts rustling as she whirled around and marched toward the main house, her outrage palpable.

Julia felt a pang in her heart as she saw the distress on the girls’ faces. Emma and Grace looked as if their world had just been shaken, their usual joy replaced by uncertainty and fear. Julia reached out, helping them dismount their ponies, and placed a reassuring hand on each of their shoulders.

“Do not worry, my darlings,” she said softly, giving them a comforting smile. “There is nothing to fear. You have done nothing wrong. Why don’t you head inside, change into your dresses, and spend the rest of the day reading? I will join you as soon as I can.”

The girls hesitated, still clearly upset, but they nodded and obediently walked, their small faces reflecting a mix of worry and trust in Julia’s words. As they returned to the house, Julia took a deep breath, steeling herself for the confrontation she knew was coming.

Once the girls were out of sight, Julia followed the path the dowager had taken, her heart beating faster with each step. When she reached Rafe’s study, she paused for a moment outside the door, gathering her thoughts. She knew this would be a difficult conversation but was determined to stand her ground.

Julia lifted her hand to knock on the study door but froze when she heard Lady Ashton’s voice, sharp with anger.

“How could you marry a Fairbanks ?” the dowager countess demanded, her tone dripping with disdain. “When I got your letter, I fainted. I thought this must be some



jest, then saw the announcement in the papers. Why did you not take her as your mistress instead? Everything about her is unsuitable to be your wife and the Countess of Ashton.”

Julia’s breath caught in her throat, her hand trembling as she pressed it to her mouth to stifle a gasp. He thought me unsuitable in every way, she thought, feeling her heart sink.

“I considered those reasons,” Rafe replied calmly, though there was a hint of tension in his voice, “and that was why I determined to stay away from her until circumstances forced our hand.”

Julia’s heart clenched painfully. So, he truly believed it.

“How can you see how that woman cares for my granddaughters and allow it? She had them parading around like common boys?”

“They were learning to ride in a way that will make them stronger and more confident riders, Mother I believe it’s important for them to have skills that will serve them well throughout their lives.”

Rafe’s defense loosened some of the cold knot of doubt inside Julia’s chest.

“Skills?” The dowager countess scoffed, her tone dripping with disdain. “What nonsense . Girls of their standing should be learning grace, poise, and proper decorum, not gallivanting about like wildlings. Have you forgotten they are Lady Anna’s children? Have you forgotten what she wanted for them?”

Those harsh words pierced Julia’s heart with pain.

The dowager countess did not give him a chance to reply.

“ Why did you do it?” Lady Ashton pressed, her voice rising in outrage. “Lady Celdon had arranged a suitable match for her. Why would you risk everything—your position, your daughters—by tying yourself to someone so beneath you? Just today, I witnessed a horrid breach of propriety. The girls wearing trousers, riding astride? One would expect such behavior from the lowborn, not from someone of your standing. I cannot imagine what other travesty she has done. Were you foolish enough to believe you had some affection for her? Is that why you acted so rashly?”

“No, I cannot explain as you would not understand. I hardly understand myself,” Rafe said, his tone icy and indifferent.

“You do have your reservations,” his mother cried, her voice triumphant as if she’d found the chink in his armor.

There was a long, heavy silence, and then Rafe spoke, his tone low and measured, “I do have reservations. A part of me hopes I might never fall in love with her. But those reasons are my own and have nothing to do with the nonsense you speak.”

Julia felt as though a dagger had been driven into her heart. Whirling around, she fled down the hallway, her footsteps echoing through the quiet manor as she raced up the stairs to her room. The tears she had been holding back now flowed freely, and she slammed the door shut behind her, leaning against it as sobs wracked her body.

How could I have been so foolish? she thought, her heart aching with the weight of her emotions. Every day spent with Rafe had been a wonder, filled with passion, respect, and a deepening love she had never expected simply because she had not known love could be like this before him.

And yet, he hoped he wouldn’t fall in love with her. He thought her unsuitable to be his countess. The raw, wounded sound that slipped from Julia’s throat shocked her. She pressed her hand to her chest, trying to calm the storm of emotions raging within

her. She tried to tell herself that they were just words, but the words had cut deep, wounding her in ways she hadn't anticipated.

What kind of marriage is this? she thought, feeling a heavy sense of despair settle over her. A marriage is lifelong and irrevocable. And yet, how can I endure this if he doesn't believe in me, in us?

Julia wiped away her tears and squared her shoulders. She would not allow herself to be broken by this. If Rafe couldn't see her worth, then she would show him. She would prove to him and everyone that she was more than capable of being the Countess of Ashton.

Moving to the wardrobe, she pulled out one of her most elegant dresses—a gorgeous deep emerald gown. She rang for her lady's maid and, with her aid, stripped off her gentleman's clothes, tossing them aside, and dressed with meticulous care. A fierce determination burned within her as she smoothed the fabric over her body.

Her hair was styled with precision, every curl in place, and when she looked at herself in the mirror, she saw the epitome of a countess staring back at her. The woman in the reflection was composed, poised, and ready to face her husband and the dowager countess.

With a final deep breath, Julia left her room and descended the stairs, her heart pounding. She walked with purpose, every step measured and graceful until she reached the kitchen, where the servants bustled about with their duties.

"Mrs. Davidson," Julia called, her voice steady and calm as she addressed the housekeeper.

The older woman turned, her eyes widening slightly as she saw Julia's appearance. "Yes, my lady?"

“The dowager countess has called and will perhaps visit for a few days. Please see that her chamber is ready. I would like to go over the dinner menu for tonight,” Julia said. “Let’s make sure everything is in order.”

“Yes, of course, my lady,” Mrs. Davidson replied, nodding as she led Julia to the kitchen table where the menu was laid out.

As they discussed the evening’s arrangements, Julia’s mind was focused on the task at hand, but a part of her was already planning her next steps. She would be the perfect countess in every way and make Rafe see that she was not only suitable but the only woman who could stand by his side.

If only she did not feel so hollow inside.

### CHAPTER 17

“What did you say?” his mother demanded, pressing a hand to her chest as if she had been struck.

Rafe bit back a sigh of impatience. “You will not interfere with Julia’s interactions with Grace and Emma,” he said, his tone firm and unwavering. “I will not tolerate any disobedience on this matter, Mother. If you cannot respect my wishes, you may cut your stay here short.”

The dowager countess shook her head as if trying to clear a fog. “What has happened to you? Where is the man of logic and reason that I raised?”

Rafe arched a brow, rising from his seat with deliberate calm. “I am standing before you, Mother. Since Julia entered their lives, Grace and Emma have been happier than I have ever seen them. They are still taught the proper niceties, but there’s now a balance—a sense of allowing them to discover who they are as individuals. It’s something I never realized they needed until Julia showed me.”

“You’re bewitched,” his mother said faintly, her voice tinged with disbelief.

“No, Mother,” Rafe replied, his tone sharpening. “I am simply seeing things with new eyes. If you cannot respect my decisions, you should prepare to return to town.”

As the tension hung thick in the air, the door to the study opened quietly, and Julia stepped inside. The housekeeper, Mrs. Davidson, followed close behind with a tea trolley laden with a pot of tea, delicate china cups, and a selection of cakes. Julia

moved with effortless grace, her every movement exuding composure and poise. She was dressed in a gown that accentuated her figure, and her hair was styled in soft waves that framed her radiant face.

His mother gaped, her eyes widening in surprise at the transformation before her. Even Rafe, who had always admired his wife's beauty, had a sharp intake of breath as he took in her appearance. She was the very picture of a countess—elegant, refined, and utterly composed. But as he met her gaze, a wrenching feeling twisted in his chest; behind the calm exterior, her eyes held a deep, unmistakable hurt.

“Julia,” he began, his voice thick with concern, but she only offered him a polite smile, one that didn't quite reach her eyes.

“Thank you, Mrs. Davidson,” Julia said softly to the housekeeper, who curtsied and then discreetly left the room, leaving the tea trolley behind.

Rafe's mother remained seated, her expression a mixture of shock and something else—perhaps even a hint of reluctant admiration. Julia approached the tea trolley and began to pour, her movements measured and graceful.

“Shall I pour you a cup, Lady Ashton?” she asked, her tone courteous yet distant.

The dowager countess hesitated for a moment before nodding. “Yes, thank you.”

Rafe watched the exchange, his unease growing. “Julia,” he said again, more insistent this time. “I would like to speak with you alone.”

Julia's gaze flicked to him, her polite smile never wavering. “Surely it can wait. You have not seen your mother in a while. I am sure she is eager to catch up with you, my lord. I also have duties to attend to this afternoon. I will oversee the rest of Grace and Emma's lessons with their governess and attend to urgent correspondence.”

The formality in her tone stung, and Rafe found himself at a loss for words. Before he could respond, Julia turned to his mother, her expression polite but firm.

“Lady Ashton,” she said, “the girls will join us for supper this evening. It will be served promptly at six.”

With that, Julia inclined her head gracefully, her every movement composed, before she turned and swept out of the room, his mother stunned.

Rafe stared after her, his heart heavy with mixed emotions he couldn’t quite untangle. He had never seen Julia like this before—so distant, so guarded. The warmth and openness he had come to cherish in her seemed to have retreated behind a wall, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was responsible.

What the hell is going on?

“Her poise is remarkable,” his mother finally murmured, breaking the silence. There was no mistaking the reluctant admiration in her voice.

Rafe didn’t reply. His thoughts were too tangled, too full of the image of Julia’s wounded eyes, the sound of her measured voice. “Excuse me, Mother, I have some business to finish. I am sure you wish to freshen after your long journey.”

His mother frowned, her gaze thoughtful as she considered her son before leaving the room. Rafe finished the letters to be delivered to his solicitor and steward tomorrow and then went to his chamber to prepare for supper.

An hour later, Rafe entered the dining room, immediately drawn to the lavish spread before them. The table was laden with an array of sumptuous dishes—roasted quail, pork glistening with a rich glaze, prawns drenched in a fragrant garlic sauce, a golden pudding, baked potatoes swimming in a creamy sauce, braised oxtail, and honey-

glazed ham, all meticulously prepared by the cook. The room was bathed in the warm glow of candlelight, the soft clinking of silverware adding a serene undertone to the evening.

As he sat at the head of the table, his eyes lingered on Julia. She was seated to his right, with her posture impeccably straight and serene expression. But that polite reserve was still there, an invisible barrier that separated her from the warmth she usually exuded. It gnawed at him, for he did not understand what had happened.

Grace and Emma sat across from him, their faces alight with excitement as they beamed at their grandmother. Rafe's mother looked surprised, almost disconcerted, by the joy emanating from the girls. It was clear she wasn't used to seeing them so animated.

"Grandmother," Grace began, her voice bubbling with excitement. We learned how to swim! Julia—I mean mama," she corrected herself with a proud smile, "has been teaching us in the lake. It's so much fun!"

Julia gasped, and her eyes gleamed with tears. Rafe also felt a sense of shock and realized this might be the first time the girls called her so.

His mother blinked, her expression faltering for a moment before she regained her composure. "Swimming lessons, you say? In the lake?"

"Yes!" Emma chimed in, her enthusiasm unmistakable. "And we also learned how to fly kites! We made our own kites and everything. And, oh, we've been catching frogs too. You should see how good we are at it now, Grandmother. We're gentle, just like Julia taught us."

The dowager countess seemed momentarily at a loss for words, her gaze shifting to Rafe as if seeking confirmation. He nodded slightly, and she turned her attention back



to the girls, her expression softening despite herself.

“And we can identify so many different types of birds now,” Grace added, her eyes shining. “Julia says it’s important to know the world around us.”

Rafe watched his mother carefully, noting the flicker of surprise that crossed her features. She had always been a stickler for tradition, for propriety and decorum, and the idea of her granddaughters taking part in such unconventional activities must have been jarring. But there was no denying the happiness in Grace and Emma’s eyes, the way they radiated joy as they spoke of their new experiences.

“Yes, it is important,” his mother said tightly. However, this is not the proper way to learn it as young ladies.”

“Lady Ashton,” Julia said, her voice steady, “I understand your concerns, but I assure you, nothing I do is ever meant to harm the girls’ upbringing. I only wish to give them a broader view of the world, to allow them the freedom to explore and grow in ways that will make them strong, capable women.”

The dowager countess’s eyes flashed with anger, but there was a flicker of something else—perhaps uncertainty or even grudging respect for Julia’s poise.

“They are Sinclair girls,” the dowager said, her voice still stern but less sharp. “And they must be raised with the dignity and decorum befitting their name.”

Julia nodded. “And they will be. But they will also be raised with love, understanding, and the opportunity to become their true selves, not just the roles society dictates for them.”

After a tense silence, the dowager countess finally spoke, her voice somewhat softer though still firm. “We shall see how this progresses. But mark my words, I will not

tolerate anything that brings shame to this family.”

Julia inclined her head, accepting the dowager’s words with grace. “I would never wish to shame this family, Lady Ashton. I only want what is best for Grace and Emma.”

His mother flicked her gaze to the girls. “Your recent accomplishments are ... quite impressive, girls.”

“Thank you, Grandmother,” Grace replied, her smile widening.

“Thank you, Grandmother,” Emma chimed in.

Rafe’s gaze shifted back to Julia, who quietly served herself a small portion of the roasted quail. Her movements were deliberate and graceful, yet the polite reserve in her demeanor persisted. Anna was like this; he suddenly realized, the memory unbidden and unwelcome. His first wife had always been composed, always reserved, never allowing herself to break from the rigid mold of propriety that society demanded of her. But Julia ... Julia had never been one to hide behind a mask of politeness. She had been a force of nature, unpredictable and wild, and he was falling in love with her because of that very unpredictability.

Seeing her like this ... so damn proper made him ache in a way that he hadn’t anticipated.

The dinner continued, with lively conversation filling the room, but an undercurrent of unease gnawed at Rafe. The meal was exquisite, the wine flowed freely, and his daughters were more radiant than he had ever seen them. Yet, as he watched Julia interact with everyone, the sense that something was amiss only deepened.

When the meal ended, his mother cheerfully led Grace and Emma to the music room,

eager to hear their progress on the pianoforte. Rafe lingered, his gaze fixed on Julia. He crossed the room to her, gently taking her hands in his.

“You were impressive tonight,” he said softly.

Julia offered him a smile, but there was something in her eyes—something distant and difficult to decipher.

“I just want Emma, Grace, and any other children we might have to experience a childhood filled with joy and love,” she replied.

Rafe felt a pang in his chest as he pulled her into his arms, pressing a tender kiss to her forehead. But even in his embrace, he sensed a tension in her body.

“You do not seem yourself. What is wrong?”

Her eyes widened. “There is nothing wrong. It is as it should be.”

Rafe frowned. “Julia—”

“There is nothing to speak about, my lord.”

Later that night, as he took her into his arms and made love to her, Rafe felt a sadness in her response that he couldn’t ignore. Despite his best efforts to bring her pleasure, he sensed that she was holding back, and for the first time, he feared she wouldn’t find release in his arms.

When the moment passed, he rolled away, his chest tightening with an unfamiliar sensation. Before he could speak, Julia reached out, cupping his jaw with her hand. She kissed him softly, a gesture that held more tenderness than passion, then slipped from his bed without a word and padded silently to the connecting door.

Rafe watched her go, a deep ache settling in his chest as she disappeared into her room, closing the door softly behind her. It was the first night since their marriage that he found himself alone, without Julia's warmth beside him.

### CHAPTER 18

Dearest Rafe,

I have decided to visit my home in Penporth for a few days. I am certain you have realized I have been unsettled. I regret that I could not confide in you about the wounds in my heart, but I hope that with some time apart, I will gain the clarity I need to move forward.

I realize that I was the most unlikely choice to be your countess. I know that marrying me went against your logic, your position in society, and everything you have been taught. I have been trying to be the proper countess—someone you would like and admire—but in doing so, I have been slowly drowning in sadness.

I explained to the girls that I was visiting Penporth for a while and will be home soon. I assured them that you and their grandmother would take care of them until I returned.

Your countess.

Julia rode into Penporth, the familiar sight of her childhood home coming into view after five long days riding and overnight at inns. The ache in her muscles was a distant companion to the deeper ache in her heart. She had ridden hard, determined to escape the unhappiness wrapped around her like a shroud, but with each passing mile, the clarity she sought had begun to emerge.

As she rode, memories of her life with Rafe flooded her mind. She recalled every

moment they had shared—the way he laughed, the quiet consideration in his eyes when he made love to her, how he sometimes joined her during the girls' lessons, and the freedom he allowed her to be herself. In those moments, she had felt the most alive, the most herself.

In her attempt to be the perfect countess, to fit into the mold that she believed Rafe wanted, she had begun to smother the very essence of who she was. And now, riding through the familiar streets of Penporth, she realized the tragic mistake she had made. She missed Rafe with an intensity that startled her. The thought of him—his laughter, his touch, the way he allowed her to be free—filled her with a longing that was impossible to ignore.

It was then that she understood the truth she had been avoiding. She couldn't pretend to be someone she wasn't. That was not the way to win her husband's love, nor was it the life she wanted to lead. She could be the perfect countess when needed, but within her home, especially in her husband's arms, she needed to be herself—the woman who laughed loudly, wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty and found joy in life's simple pleasures.

I should have shared my pain and fear with you, Rafe, not run from you .

Julia felt a bittersweet pang of nostalgia as the old stone house she grew up in came into view. This was where she had spent her childhood, where she had dreamed of love and adventure. As she reined in her horse in front of the house, a sense of peace washed over her. She knew what she needed to do. She needed to go back to Rafe, to be honest with him, to show him who she truly was, and to trust that it would be enough. She wouldn't try to fit into a mold that didn't belong to her.

She would be the woman he had married, not out of obligation, but because he saw something in her that he couldn't resist.

For me, he was not logical but acted with his heart; that must have meant something .

Taking a deep breath, she dismounted, her decision made. She would spend a few days here, gathering her thoughts, and then she would return to Rafe and fight for the life they could have together.

Julia greeted their housekeeper, who hugged her tightly. She laughed and said, “Are James and Sarah here?”

“Oh, Miss Julia, yes. They were out riding earlier, and I cannot say if they have returned.”

“I will check the library,” she said warmly.

Julia walked down the hallway and entered the library, her steps soft on the plush carpet as she approached the heavy drape blocking the evening sun. A loud noise startled her as she lifted her hand to pull it back. She turned quickly, her heart leaping as the door burst open.

“ Rafe? ” she gasped, blinking in disbelief.

Her husband stood in the doorway, looking like he had not slept in days. His normally composed appearance was disheveled, his dark hair tousled, and his eyes filled with an intensity she had never seen before.

“How ... how are you here?” she stammered, her voice trembling with shock.

“Is that what you have to say?” he snapped, his tone raw with emotion. “You left! You only left a blasted one-page letter. I saddled my stallion and rode after you the moment I saw it. Why did you leave me?”

A wounded edge to his voice made Julia's heart twist painfully. She couldn't hold back the truth any longer.

"I'm shattered at the thought that you didn't choose me," she admitted, her voice cracking. "You agree with your mother, don't you? If not for our compromise, you would have avoided me because I was unsuitable in every way to be your countess. I tried to be the perfect countess, the one you would be proud of, but I lasted only four bloody days. And when I couldn't keep up the pretense, it gutted me because it meant if I wasn't your choice and couldn't keep pretending; how could you ever love me? How can you love me?"

The pain she had buried for days now poured out, raw and unfiltered. Tears welled in her eyes as she finally gave voice to the fears that had been consuming her.

Within moments, Rafe crossed the room, dragging her against his chest. "Julia, I did choose you," he said urgently, his hands trembling as they cupped her face. "I could have walked away and left you to the ashes of your ruin, but I didn't—"

"Your honor made you marry me," she cried, her fist thudding against his chest in frustration.

"No, my hunger made me choose you!" Rafe interrupted, his voice rough with desperation. "The fact that I couldn't stop thinking of you made me choose you. Even in my sleep, I could hear your laughter and see the way you tilt your head, the mischievous glint in your eyes. That your kiss erased all others from my memory made me choose you. And the hunger ... the longing I feel to have you in my arms made me damn well choose you!"

Julia stared at him, her mind reeling, unable to process the words that spilled from his lips.



“I went to London searching for a mother for my girls ... and a countess,” he continued, his voice low and intense. “But I never thought about finding a partner, a lover, a friend. And you—by God, you’re all those things to me. I’m damn ashamed that I never showed you how much you mean to me. Somehow, I thought the many times we made love conveyed the depth of my feelings—”

A rough clearing of a throat interrupted his words, and Julia’s eyes widened in surprise.

A low voice drawled from the shadows, “I suspect I am not needed for the rest of this conversation.”

Julia blinked, her shock turning to mortification as she noticed her brother James sitting in a shadowy corner of the room.

“James!” she cried, her cheeks flaming with embarrassment, wrenching from Rafe’s embrace. Oh, no, Rafe just mentioned how often they made love. Her cheeks burned hotter.

Her brother chuckled, standing and lifting his hands in surrender. “I will leave you two to it,” he said with a grin, dipping his head in a small bow before slipping out of the room.

A seething silence lingered after his departure, and Julia fought the urge to dash into Rafe’s arms. Instead, she met his gaze, her voice soft but filled with pain she could no longer hide.

“You hurt me,” she whispered, her heart pounding so forcefully against her ribs that it made breathing difficult. “It felt like a blade cutting through my heart when you said you didn’t want to fall in love with me.”

“I was a damn fool,” Rafe said hoarsely, his eyes closing as if the admission pained him. “Please ... forgive me.”

The sincerity in his voice touched something deep within her, and tears welled in her eyes. “Rafe ...”

He leaned in, resting his forehead against hers. “I love you,” he confessed, his voice rough with emotion. “I realized I was falling in love with you, and with that realization, my old fears resurfaced.”

He reached out, gently placing a hand on her belly. “The thought of losing you like I lost Anna ... it would break me. I decided to fight that fear, but that’s what I was thinking about when my mother walked into my study. It was why I made such a foolish, asinine comment. I love you, Julia, like I’ve never loved anyone.”

With a choked sob, Julia threw herself against his chest, wrapping her arms around him. “I love you too, Rafe. So very much.”

He hugged her tightly, holding her like he never wanted to let go. They stood like that for long moments.

“We must return home soon,” Rafe murmured against her hair. “I saw your letter on my desk, grabbed my hat and coat, and rushed out of the house like a madman, calling for my horse. My mother shouted after me, and the girls jumped and screamed that I would find you. Somehow, they knew.”

Julia laughed, her shoulders shaking with relief and joy. “Oh, dear.”

“I’ve been in these clothes for days,” Rafe admitted with a rueful smile. “I didn’t have the presence of mind to pack a valise. I kept thinking you wouldn’t come back, that your siblings would hide you from me, and I’d never damn well find you again.”

Love and good humor burst inside her heart. “Forgive me for running and not communicating my fears, Rafe. I vow it will never happen again.”

He kissed her hard and deeply, then whispered against her mouth, “And I vow I will never let you down again. I will ensure my mother and everyone knows how much I adore you.”

She giggled softly, her heart feeling light and free. “That’s not necessary. I only need to know it.”

He cupped her cheeks and lightly kissed her mouth, yet it conveyed many emotions. Smiling, Julia said, “Let us spend the night and leave tomorrow to return to our girls.”

Tugging his arms, she led him to her bedchamber. Rafe removed his clothes and tugged her into his arms. She anticipated he would thoroughly ravish her. Instead, he curved his body around hers and promptly fell asleep. Laughing, she whispered, “I love you.” Then rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

### EPILOGUE

Two weeks later ...

Rafe strolled down the grand hallway of his country estate, cradling a large wicker basket. Inside, three tiny puppies wriggled over one another, their soft whimpers and playful growls mingling with the occasional peep of a few small chicks nestled beneath them. A curious piglet poked its snout through the wicker, snuffling at the air. The sight was as charming as it was chaotic, and Rafe chuckled at the thought of the mayhem about to descend upon his household.

The unmistakable sound of a carriage drawing up outside reached his ears. His mother was on her way back to town after an extended visit. His mother came down the last step of the staircase, her hat perfectly poised on her head, her expression one of genteel composure—until her eyes fell upon the basket in Rafe's arms.

Her lips parted in shock. "What on earth is happening, Rafe?" she asked, her voice tinged with incredulity. "Why are you carrying a basket filled with puppies, chicks, and ... a piglet?"

Rafe smiled down at the wriggling animals before meeting his mother's gaze. "Julia had a pet hen, a piglet, and dogs at her family's home in Penporth. She loved them dearly and spoke often of how much happiness they brought her. I wanted to create the same happy memories for her here."

Lady Ashton's eyes widened in disbelief. "You do realize, Rafe, that I am allergic to animals?" she said faintly.

Rafe leaned in and kissed her cheek. "I know, Mother. But I also know you'll survive it. If you cannot, we will visit you in town or Bath when we can," he said with a wink, then added, "Safe journey back to London."

She stood momentarily speechless, watching him as he continued down the hallway, whistling a merry tune.

"Rafe ... do you love her?"

He stopped, the weight of her question settling between them. Turning slowly, he looked at his mother with a seriousness that cut through the lighthearted moment. "I love her with every emotion in my soul," he said, his voice steady and sincere.

Lady Ashton nodded, a small smile touching her lips. "I believe you do," she whispered, then walked to the front door.

Rafe watched her until his butler closed the door behind her departure. He resumed his journey down the hallway, the puppies eagerly trying to clamber out of the basket. He chuckled, shaking his head at their exuberance, and went to the drawing room where he knew he would find his girls and Julia.

As he entered, the scene before him made his heart swell. Julia and the girls were seated around a large canvas, their heads bent together in concentration as they worked on a painting. They didn't notice his arrival, so absorbed were they in their task. Rafe stepped closer, curious to see what had captivated them so thoroughly. As he peered over their shoulders, his breath caught in his throat. The painting depicted Grace and Emma running through a sunlit field, their faces alight with joy. And there, in the distance, was Anna, laughing and waving at them, her presence ethereal and tender, like a cherished memory brought to life on canvas.

Emotions welled inside him, a mixture of sorrow and gratitude, love and peace. He must have made a sound, for, at that moment, Julia and the girls looked up, their eyes

shining excitedly when they saw what he held.

“Puppies!” they screamed in unison, their voices ringing with pure, unbridled joy.

The basket tipped, and the puppies tumbled out, darting across the room with wagging tails and playful barks. The girls scrambled to catch them, their laughter filling the room with warmth.

Julia rose from her seat, her eyes meeting Rafe’s with a softness that made his heart ache in the best way. He crossed the room in a few strides, reaching out to her, and she took his hand without hesitation.

As the girls chased after the puppies, Rafe pulled Julia close, pressing a tender kiss to her forehead. “Thank you,” he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. “Thank you for bringing this joy into my life, for loving me and our girls, and for giving us this happiness.”

Julia smiled up at him, her eyes brimming with love. “I love you.”

They stood together, watching their daughters delight over the chicks and piglet.

“I am so glad you climbed that tree in Hyde Park and kicked your shoe at me.”

“I did not deliberately kick at you.”

“Sure,” he said drolly. “Undoubtedly, you saw my handsomeness and wanted to flirt.”

Julia laughed and walked over to play with the girls. Rafe vowed his family would always be filled with laughter, life, and love.

Thank you for reading Julia and Rafe’s journey to happy ever after.